

## THE FIRST KIRMESS

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**B**ECAUSE there is no current holiday so distinctly Belgian as the "kirmess," I decided to use that for my theme. The decision crystallized with Louis Rubens last fall by advertising on his kirmess poster "1858 to 1930." In our neighborhood these harvest festivals are a tradition. They begin in late August at Grandlez now Lincoln and spread from community to community—Brussels, Walhain, Rosière, Thiry Daems, Duvall, Sansouver, Tonet, Dyckesville, Namur.

My data has been gathered from many homes, so many older friends assisting that I dare not begin to name them. Even Professor M. J. Heynen, Belgian consul for Wisconsin and contiguous states, came to my rescue. When I was a little shaver Ike Karel, Pat Grimmer, George and Eli Duvall, Charley Slama and other gay young blades were just stepping out into society. Whenever they wanted to put on something really big in the dance line, they would hire Duvall's Hall, and Heynen's orchestra had to provide the music. Candidly now, those old boys haven't changed much and by the same token, neither has Mr. Heynen. He is a little grayer now, a little more dignified, but at heart he is as jovial and friendly as ever—and what is more important, he still

<sup>1</sup> I dedicate this article to my friends of Belgian descent wherever they may be; and, incidentally, put the responsibility for it on Carl W. André, who asked me to write on something characteristic of "his people." Reprinted from the *Kewaunee Enterprise*.

commands leadership in Green Bay's music circles through sheer ability.

In attempting this article I felt my limitations keenly. If you could sit with me, for instance, near the stove in a cozy farm kitchen and listen to Joe LaCrosse Sr., sing the "Marseillaise," you would realize how difficult it is to interpret the spirit of that early kirmess in cold print.

The names I have used are of men who were actually present and though I have used without permission, and in a figurative sense only, the name of Amia Champaign as my leading character, he actually existed and homesteaded what is now the Felix Massart farm. He was the father-in-law of the late E. F. Massart, himself prominent in the early days of Lincoln township's political history. I hope the article will prove interesting and give as much pleasure to your readers as I got in being welcomed into the family circle of these friends of mine.

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"All that waste, or unimproved country northward along the peninsula extending through Kewaunee and Door counties, is being rapidly settled up, principally by Belgians. Our citizens, who have been accustomed to regard that region as an unbroken wilderness, would be astonished to see the change which has been wrought within a year or two. We have noticed it along shore, in the clearings which are being made, and the houses which begin to peep out, one after another, among the trees; and many of those who have been inland tell us that from Rosseau's Tavern northward to Little Sturgeon Bay, there is a constant succession of substantial farms of from five to forty acres, with excellent crops growing."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Excerpt from an article in the *Green Bay Advocate*, edition of July 23, 1857.

*The First Kirmess*—It was late August, the year—1858. On the western rim of that unbroken sea of forest that dipped down toward La Baye Verte, a ruddy, opulent looking sun was just tangling itself among the leafy branches of the taller tree tops. Young, broad-shouldered Amia Champaign paused at the edge of the little clearing that extended a few acres about his log cabin and his eyes lit up with satisfaction as he contemplated the scene. It was a little over two years now since he had left his home in Grandlez in the province of Brabant, Belgium, to test his mettle in this new country. It was exactly two years since he had staked his claim in this wilderness of Wisconsin, in a country whose very name—Kewaunee—still sounded barbaric to his unaccustomed ears. He pridefully viewed the results of those two years' labor in retrospect now—his log home with the adjacent well-sweep, the clearing, the little stable of cedar uprights chinked with moss that housed his oxen and a couple of hogs and lastly, the purposely neat and symmetrical straw stack that he carefully guarded by means of a birch pole *cloture*. This was his first real harvest and the earth had yielded with an abundance that was almost breath-taking. He paused to multiply his yield by his still virgin acres and the result made him fairly dizzy. Slowly then his gaze wandered back to his dwelling again and oddly enough his countenance fell and the glad light in his eyes gave way to a vaguely disturbing gloom. He turned abruptly into the forest on the impulse of a suddenly remembered errand and pointed his *sabots* in a northeasterly direction.

To you and me that walk along the forest trail in the northwestern corner of what is now Lincoln township would be a pleasant, novel and exciting experience. Tall maples and basswoods lifted their clean boles up twenty feet to a leafy, matted arbor. In the gathering dusk startled deer

gazed transfixed a moment and then scampered suddenly in panicky flight. There was a faintly perceptible coolness in the hollows now and the tang of wood smoke from settlers' clearings—those thin smoke spirals that bend back to earth on the damp, cool air of evening. If Amia were aware of Nature's bounty or beauty, there was no hint of it in his expression. Something had happened at home that upset, temporarily, all his hopes and ambitions, something that was all the more serious because it was so intangible. It was his wife this time who was causing him concern. As he trudged stolidly forward, his troubled mind took up again that fruitless and wearying circle of the worried. True they had both been homesick the first year, and a little frightened the time their first born had arrived, what with no doctor available at any price. However, those matters had quickly righted themselves. Now with a splendid harvest, closer neighbors, and an opportunity to take things easier, his Marie had suddenly become listless toward his plans and what was worse had developed the temper of a tigress. For two weeks already she was irritable and cross and today had come the climax. He paused to recharge his pipe and he had to smile again in spite of his forebodings. Maybe it was only the laziness due to the heat of midday, but his ox team had stalled in dragging a felled maple. Marie was driving at the time. Suddenly, with an outburst that would have jolted a mule skinner, his good wife had grabbed the ox goad and belabored the animals so lustily that they were glad to run bellowing for their lives. He had to chuckle when he thought of it. The surprised cattle appeared to have actually forgotten about the log that trailed behind them. That wasn't all. Because he had dared to laugh, his wife had turned the batteries of her wrath on him and when she had completely exhausted his lineage, had stalked away to the house and

stayed there. At first he had thought to consult his neighbor, Clement Joly, young like himself, but then he prudently decided to seek elder counsel instead. He was heading now for his old friend, Jean B. Maceaux. In double harness old Jean Baptiste was a veteran, and incidentally he ran a little tavern, also, up on the county line. Amia was in no mood to visit with others, so he shaped his course to avoid the Kinart homestead and again the Spinette, Delfosse, and Groufcoeur clearings. Now he was skirting the boundary lines of the Denis homestead and here at last the trail widened and he knew he approached his destination. He was on a well defined road, traversing east and west through the dense forest—the forerunner of the road his grandson snappily describes as “County C.”

The baying of a dog broke the stillness of the evening and a gruff voice admonished, “Allez, Shep!”

“Good, the old man is home,” said Amia to himself.

Any lingering doubt he may have had was dispelled a moment later by the loud, “*Bien voila, Amia!*” bellowed in Maceaux’s jovial voice. “Is it really you, my friend, or do I dream? *Quelles nouvelles?*” Then without waiting for an answer, “*Sacré bleu*, but you are welcome.” He came forward in greeting and now with a friendly slap on the back, he invited “*Venons, Amia, un petit goûter—que?* Then we will visit—that bench outside—a pipe—a friend—it is a different evening already. But, Amia, you look tired, you drive yourself too—”

“No, no, Baptiste, it is not the work that wearies me. That is why I have come to ask your counsel—but let us drink first to our health—my trouble will wait.”

“You see, Baptiste,” he concluded later as they sat together on the bench in the darkness, “I come to you with this problem because I know you can help me. You have

been married these many years, you. To myself I have said, 'He has a wife and five daughters; surely such a one will understand women.' "

"Mais, Amia," rejoined Baptiste sadly, "you do not comprehend. A wife and five daughters, true and that makes six reasons why I cannot help you. Me understand women? No, no, Amia, I am too honest to accept the compliment. At first I had thought to do so, but now—truly I do not expect to live that long. Let me call my Odile. Possibly she can describe the malady. Odile! Odile! Venez ici!"

Obedient to his summons came "la femme Macceaux" from her kitchen to listen, in turn, to Amia's recital of his domestic difficulties.

When he had finished, she said sadly, "Me, I have not been myself either since the harvest. A heavy heart does not make light work. In our old homeland, in Grandlez, they are making ready for the kirmess. In every home they are preparing a feast to welcome the old friends. And here," she paused to grimace, "here for two years no kirmess; not even 'traiter mon pourceau.' No! after a bountiful harvest we get ready to clear more land."

"True," rejoined Amia, "but do not forget, also, the poverty that was our lot in the old country. Here we grow rich. This," and he gestured eloquently, "this is the land of plenty."

"Plenty," snapped the good woman shrilly, "Oui, beaucoup d'ouvrage—deraciner des chicots—ramasser des pierres! Plenty, you are right and if that is all we may look forward to, I, for one, am ready to depart this accursed wilderness," and she strode back angrily to her work.

"C'est le diable ça!" murmured Amia when she had gone. "But that came from the heart." He turned toward the silent Baptiste who had been listening intently and clucked his

tongue sympathetically. "It seems the contagion spreads, Baptiste. How now, friend? What next is to be done?"

Baptiste shook an admonitory finger.

"Écoutez, Amia!" There was a growing excitement in Maceaux's voice as he talked. "Just two weeks from last Sunday the good Father Daems will be with us again. That is splendid. On that day will begin our kirmess; our first kirmess in America! Think of that, Amia! You must appoint the committee (les jeunesses), and if you will permit the offer, my poor place is at your service. I think I have found the remedy you seek, at least it is worth trying. Now then, it is growing late; depart friend to your home and apply it. Portez vous bien, Amia!"

"Bon soir, Baptiste!"

The succeeding days were busy ones in that new and sparsely settled community. Our friend Maceaux had judged the situation shrewdly. Your true Belgian makes a thrifty, patient, hard working pioneer, but he has the volatile nature of a Frenchman. He works hard and he insists on a little pleasure being sandwiched in occasionally. "Venez manger avec nous!" Quickly the good news spread from clearing to clearing to leave a happy excitement in its wake. In every home preparations for the event went on apace. Old trunks were dragged out from under puncheon beds or lifted down from rafters and lofts. There was a feverish overhauling of contents to see if they would yield some bit of finery for the coming event. Leather shoes, long set aside for a special occasion, were re-oiled and made flexible. Fresh evergreen boughs were cut and brought in to replace the old ones that served in lieu of a mattress. Earthen floors were newly sanded and there were long pilgrimages to Dyckesville and Green Bay to replenish larders with those materials so necessary to that kirmess delicacy, Belgian pie. There was

many a friendly argument over these trips and who should make them.

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"It was considered a vacation of a sort in itself," one of my old friends tells me.

"A treat?" I ask a little skeptically. "A treat to walk sixty miles with a fifty pound sack of flour, to say nothing of the weight of the other purchases?"

"Well," was his reply, "it was either that or lifting logs and swinging a grub hoe. It was before my time but my mother told me she made the trip often and I honestly believe she was glad to go. It was a change of motion. The grist mill was at De Pere and when you once got to Dyckesville, you could always count on falling in with some acquaintance who was walking your way. She thought nothing of it."

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At last the great day arrived. In the morning Father Daems celebrated Mass for his congregation in the new settlement, already called Rosière, and now, in the afternoon, the committee were foregathered at Macceaux's conspicuous in the blue and white ribbon decorations across their broad chests, the insignia of their office. It was a trying day for our host. In his anxiety to have events pass off smoothly, he tried to be everywhere at once and to oversee all personally. Once he thoughtlessly invaded the kitchen to see how things in that important quarter were progressing. The day was warm and his face was flushed and there was a singular brightness to his eye that to you or me would simply denote extreme agitation.

"How then, *chère amie*?" he addressed his wife. "Is all in readiness?"

It had been a busy week for her, and I believe she was ready to give him a verbal broadside for his intrusion when she noted that telltale gleam in his eye.

"Listen to me," she said slowly and emphatically, with a touch of that suspicion that somehow lurks in every wifely breast. "Listen to me, Monsieur Macceaux. Because they have nicknamed you 'Mouchons,' a bird, must you then choose to become a boiled owl? I don't ask or need instruction from you on my job: see to it that you do as well on your end—and—remember what I say—stay sober!"

A shout outside provided timely interruption to our host and out he went, glad to retreat. The guests were arriving—and what a hubbub. All the pent-up emotions of two years' suppression exploding in a joyous acclaim at this public reunion of friends and countrymen. Clad in wide trousers and the loose fitting *saurot* or blouse are the men, while the women and girls wear the tight bodice and voluminous skirts of the period, with always a white apron added on holidays.

We will just walk over quietly and stand near the committee and try to catch some of the names of those settlers as they arrive. I don't believe there is another nationality that is so prone to nicknaming friends as the Belgians are, so we will have to ask someone to decipher the names or identify the parties as they come. We will have to depend on our ears now to interpret the syllables into English.

"Bon jour 'Katchet' and 'Mustok,' and Pierre and John 'Del Fronsee'—and 'Mee an sha sha'—well, well—this will be a day." And in the order named Prosper and Amand Naze come into view and Joe Bouchonville and then two lithe young emigrants from the Lorraine border in old Namur, designated therefore as "Peter and John, the Frenchmen" who are none other than Peter and John André and lastly, their neighbor, John J. Charles. And now from

the west comes Clement Barrett and his friends "Gatto" (Frank J. Wendricks) and "Virlee" (Joseph Dantoin). Here are Pierre Mathie, Eugene Groufcoeur, August Denis, Eugene Delwiche, Charley Spinette, Victor Lesmonde, and William and J. B. Kinnart. They are all neighboring homesteaders but their joy is none the less great at being together once more in this festival transplanted from the homeland. When a great shout goes up, we inquire the cause but we can't make ourselves heard in the din. We soon learn the reason.

These later arrivals have come from Grandlez and Sansouver—not in Belgium—in Kewaunee County—and here are Joseph Duchesne, Isadore Gilson, Jean B. Noel, Jean J. Gaspard, Pierre Houart, Joseph de Bauche, Jean Gigot, Pierre J. Pinchart, Jean J. Dhuey, Lambert Higuët, Jean and Joseph Maceaux and Emanuel Defnet. All that early afternoon old friends pour in from every forest trail and in the crowd we see Joseph Wautlet, Jacques J. Frepont, Edmund and August Malfroid, Jean J. Lorge, Xavier Herrally and many others. And they do not come alone. Marie and Odile and Octavie and Melanie and Desirée and Emerence are there too, and in the excitement their cheeks take on a higher color and their eyes sparkle and I find myself hoping that the music and dancing will soon commence.

"Just look at those men and women," said a descendant of one of those Belgian pioneers to me. Straight, strong, clean limbed, splendid physical types. In every pioneer American settlement, too, regardless of nationality, they can be duplicated. How often we hear the statement, "America is great because of her natural resources." Here is the pick of a nation's manhood and womanhood. It took courage to break old ties and brave the dangers of a new land. It is true that America had an abundance of natural resources but re-

member that she also got the men and women that were capable of developing them. It was the combination that made her great.

They are getting ready for the first dance now—that grand march in the open that traditionally opens the festivities. Joe Lumaye has his cornet out. Carle Massey is giving a few preliminary slides on his trombone, François Legreve works the keys on his bass horn and Norbert Mignon is testing out the strings on his violin. I notice though a worried look on the faces of several of the committeemen and Amia Champaign tries to calm their misgivings.

“Theophile Lebut?” he says, “No, friends, he never disappoints. He and his clarinet will be here presently. You may depend on that.”

As if in answer, there comes from the forest, apparently afar off, the faint, clear notes of a familiar melody. A hush falls on the assemblage then as the strains of “La Brabançonne” come softly floating on the late summer air—“La Brabançonne”—the national song of the valiant little homeland—“La Brabançonne” with its age old, gripping appeal to all faithful Belgian hearts.

Après des siècles d’esclavage,  
Le Belge, sortant du tombeau,  
A reconquis, par son courage,  
Son nom, ses droits, et son drapeau.

As I watch those young people in an alien land, manfully struggling to control the flood of emotions that surge up within them, there is an unexpected tightening of my own throat in response. True enough they are exiles from choice but the severing of family ties, to many it meant forever, was none the less poignant. The song ends and the music slowly dies away in the distance. There is a pause while faces remain averted and then, abruptly, there comes again from the forest

another tune, this time that zestful, inspiring, marching song of Republican France—the “Marseillaise.” Out from behind a tree steps Monsieur Lebut, clarinet to lips, and with soldierly stride approaches his audience. He is clothed in the blue *capot* of the Belgian military, brass buttons resplendent in the afternoon sun. With that buoyant Belgian spirit again in evidence, radiant smiles break through the tears and with a mighty shout the assemblage gives utterance to that unquenchable spirit of a liberty-loving people, fairly drowning out our friend Lebut’s beloved instrument.

Aux Armes. Citoyens!  
Formez vos bataillons!  
Marchons! Marchons!  
Qu’un sang impur  
Abreuve nos sillons!

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“I knew Theophile Lebut well,” Louis Rubens told me. “He was a splendid musician and he gave freely of his time and talent. He had a flair for the dramatic too. I recall distinctly when he passed away. He had a crony, a fellow musician, living down near Bottkols, by the name of Bernard Steinbach. Herr Steinbach played the requiem mass for his friend on the clarinet. It was very impressive: so much so that it stands clearly in my memory even today.”

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And now Monsieur Lebut is among his friends and he is receiving their salutations and acclaims. His sympathies and thoughts are with the young folks though and when he sees them pairing off, he halts the greetings quickly and signals his fellow musicians to be ready. With apparent satisfaction his glance rests on stalwart young August Delfosse and he walks over to confront him.

“*Bien Gustin! Why do you keep us waiting? Has your right arm lost its cunning or think you, you can still wield the flag baton?*”

August blushes modestly and haltingly consents to try, and instantly an American flag appears, apparently from nowhere, and is thrust into his waiting hand. His bearing changes. He is no longer one of the merry-makers. He is their leader. His spine stiffens. He orders the young gallants to choose their partners for the first dance. Let me say here that that is one command that seems to me superfluous. If I am any judge at all, this had been done two hours ago. Again he commands, this time to attention and with a flourish of the flag the music starts and the dancers are off. There follow the many intricate figures of the dance with August signalling the changes in a penetrating bass. Coming down from the dim past they come to me only sketchily but I catch his, “*Grand rond! Chaines des dames! Quatres par quatres! A la main gauche! A la main droit! Les dames en avant! Les cavaliers á l’entours! Balance tout! Marchons tout a la comptoir!*”

I am interested in young Delfosse’s technique as a conductor. With that first flourish of the flag, not once has the bunting drooped or wavered. Up and down, side to side, weaving numberless figures, always to the beat of the music it travels. It crackles and snaps with the vigor of his movements like shots from a pistol.

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“I will always believe that August Delfosse never had an equal as flag man,” said an old-timer. “He was a heavy set man and he used his tremendous energy in keeping that flag taut. It seems to me, as I look back, that he kept those danc-

ers speeded up on his own vitality. When August called off, you knew you were dancing.”

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The music ends and with much laughing and good-natured bantering, the crowd moves towards the improvised hall for the balance of the day's and evening's entertainment.

Not yet are these new settlers prepared for that second day of celebration, when the young men contend for a bridle prize or the girls run for handkerchiefs. It will be many years before the horse supplants the ox as beast of burden. “*Courir la bride*,” they called that bridle race and many an old farm nag unwittingly jousted for his own ensnarement. Too early also was it for the “*Courir l'oie*,” in which a live goose was the victim. The goose was anchored forty paces away from the contestant. Blindfolded and equipped with a scythe blade, the end of which was wrapped in burlap, his task was to decapitate the goose. But wait. Before he starts, he is whirled around and when released, the crowd gives him a wide berth because his sense of direction is rather blurred.

“They had to discontinue the goose hunt in windy weather,” my informant adds. “A canny young fellow discovered that no matter how balled up his sense of direction was, the direction of the wind was constant and he almost bankrupted the first kirmess in which he put his idea into practice.”

Late evening. The dancers reluctantly bid each other good bye and start on their long walks homeward. In single file, southwestward through the forest, travel young Amia and his wife Marie. They stride along silently, Amia deeply engrossed in thought. The kirmess was over. Were his troubles over too? He pondered how to broach the subject of

health to his wife but he need not have worried. Refreshed in mind and body by the day of reunion and dancing, the young woman's practical mind was already looking forward to the morrow.

"*Bien Amia,*" she says, "we have had our feast day and a pleasant time it has proved. The weather continues favorable but one must not tempt Providence. The oxen have rested too and to-morrow we must start early so that we may add new land to our tilled acres before the snow flies."

It was fortunate for Amia that the night was dark, else would his face have betrayed his great astonishment and joy. His mind moved rapidly framing a suitable reply.

When he did answer, it was only by great effort that he managed to keep out of his voice any hint of the elation that he felt. Quietly, with all the instinctive, accumulated wisdom of generations of benedicts, he merely grunted, "*Bon!*"