

The Press-Gazette Visits:

Champion

The Death of a Little Boy Near Kaukauna
Caused Belgians To Settle This Community



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CHAMPION — No man can ever know what grim fate had in mind when a little boy died somewhere near the budding city of Kaukauna back in 1853, but one thing is known as a certainty:

If the child had not died the communities of Kaukauna, Little Chute, Kimberly, Combined Locks and others nearby would have been settled by Belgians and not Hollanders as has been the case. Here's how fate stepped in to change the orderly events which might have taken place.

Wisconsin's first Belgian immigrants sailed from their homeland in the ship *Quennebec* on May 18, 1853. On board, they fell in with some Hollanders who had arranged to make their home in the new land in the vicinity of Sheboygan. The Belgians, always a happy, extroverted people, listened to the tales and enjoyed the Hollanders and finally decided to make their home with them near Sheboygan.

But, at Sheboygan, they learned that the Hollanders had already spoken for their lands and had naturally chosen most of the best. The Belgians, somewhat akin to the Hollanders, decided to try elsewhere in Wisconsin, somewhere where people spoke the language they best understood.

Bond of Kinship Exists Between the Two

It is important to know that most of the Wisconsin Belgians are from the southern provinces of Belgium and therefore are of Latin origin and speak Walloon, a French patois which is really a very old form of French. The Flemish Belgians, from the northern provinces in the old country, are of German origin and speak Flemish, a Dutch or Hollandish tongue. Belgium does not have a language of its own.

Nevertheless, there is a bond of kinship between Hollanders and the Belgians and so it was that the Belgians of 1853 often sought out Hollanders as neighbors.

But when the earliest of our Belgian friends came to settle at Sheboygan, the better sections of the land there had been taken and—since the Hollanders did not speak the

French patois—the Belgians decided to move elsewhere.

They began a trek toward Kaukauna where, they had heard, the settlers were Hollanders. They reached the area of today's Kaukauna when a small boy, the son of Philip Hannon, grew ill. Here they paused while the distraught immigrants sought land, some of which they purchased.

Group Heeded Advice Of Friendly Priest

But to the little encampment came a priest of Bay Settlement to attend the dying boy. He was Father Daems, a Flemish Belgian. He urged the little caravan not to settle in the Kaukauna region nor in the Green Bay region (where the Belgians looked hopefully because of the French-speaking settlers there). Instead, he said, they should settle near Bay Settlement, a French-speaking community where they would be near their own church.

Happily, the little group did so, coming to rest near what was called generally Aux Premier S. Belges but which came to be called Robinsonville, after Charles D. Robinson, editor of the Green Bay Advocate, an early newspaper which started in 1846.

The name Robinsonville, given some degree of permanence by a little girl, Adele Brice, who reportedly had visitations from the Holy Virgin. One result was that a shrine and then a church was erected there and is still a mecca for many.

Name Resulted From Battle for Post Office

But Robinsonville really lost its name because of a minor disagreement over the place of the post office. The first was a bit too far for the citizens to travel to (the first postmaster was Xavier Martin), and there came a bit of disgruntlement until two postoffices were established for a brief period to see which place was best. The best one won, naturally, and for that reason, according to Arthur Delvaux, 78, whose great-grand-

father was one of Champion's earliest settlers, the change of the name from Robinsonville to Champion came before the turn of the century.

Champion today sits quietly alongside County Trunk K, where within the immediate area, some 35 persons live in aging farmhouses which line the road. Many of them are second, third and fourth generation farms like that of Delvaux's. It was there that he was born and farmed for some 50 years, and it was from there that he retired.

Although the trade area of Champion comes from roughly a three-square mile area, it contains only one general store, two taverns, two churches (St. Joseph's and the Robinsonville Presbyterian).

Delvaux himself built the community's two taverns, one of them in 1900 when he was 17 years old, and the other just 25 years ago.

Stone Blacksmith Shop Is an Old Landmark

"I can remember," he said, "in the days just after prohibition when it was hard to get enough beer to serve customers. The boys used to come in and say, 'Let's drink Arthur dry,' and they'd do it."

It is to Arthur that one must go to learn much of the community's history. He will tell you, for example, that the general store was built some 52 years ago by Desire DePrey but since then only two other persons have owned it—Louis Vincent and its present proprietor, John Ropson, who has kept it the past 31 years.

One of the oldest buildings in the little strip community is the old stone blacksmith shop of two remembered past owners, one Boulanger and another, Arthur Petenoit.

Perhaps the oldest house in the community is that of Alvin and Russell Dekaster whose great grandmother, Theresa, stepped from the ship which had carried her family from Belgium, but she disembarked a widow with a tiny baby in her arms. Ship cholera had decimated her family. Ultimately, she and the child found their way to Champion where she wed her second husband, William Dekaster.

Drank Gallon of Whiskey On Leaving for Army

William, a sturdy fellow and also a Belgian, gave the little community something to talk about for years and years the day he left to become a soldier in the Civil War. On that long, busy day, old William drank a gallon of whiskey and carried 80 bags of potatoes, each about 100 pounds, from the field to the house. The accomplishment, still a family story, may not have impressed great-grandmother Dekaster for she was a sturdy one, too.

She had walked to Neenah to clear the deeds of her property, then 40 acres, which she purchased for about \$1.25 per acre, and she often walked to the De Pere mills to have her feed ground.

The farm, now grown to 140 acres

plus 70 acres of woodland, is more than a hundred years old. The house, however, which is the second one built on the site, is made of red brick and replaced the original log dwelling. Its age is guessed at about 80 years.

Russell, a bachelor and a bartender at the *Zuider Zee* restaurant, lives in the old family home with his mother and his brother Alvin and family.

Grandfather Ran Farm As Well as Tavern

It's pretty much "home" for the pair. The big box elder trees in the front lawn were planted by Alvin as a small boy ("He helped to stamp the earth around the roots.") Alvin is 53; Russell is 49.

The farm came to them from their great-grandfather, their grandfather and their father. Grandfather Jules was a busy man, for he ran his farm as well as a tavern across Highway K, which is no longer a tavern but the home of David DePeau. But once, long ago, the boys remember, there was an outside bowling alley there, a dance hall and a big, oval race track. It was at that tavern where many a Belgian Kermis began, the big, gaudy harvest celebration which the gay Belgians love so much.

"We still have Kermis," said Alvin, "but they're not as hearty as they used to be. I can remember when they'd start on a Sunday and never end until the following Tuesday. At the end, even the pigs would be drunk from the wasted, stale beer folks would give them."

Among the gay and happy people of Champion are Mr. and Mrs. William Hannon. Hannon, a handsome, tousle haired man of 72, came by his unlikely Irish name because, he said, "Long ago, two Irish boys came to work in Antwerp and they married some of the girls in my family."

The name Hannon, indisputably relates William to the Philip whose



—Sketches by Bill Juhre

William Hannon, 72, a relative of the boy who was the reason for Champion

dying son tempted fate to move the early Belgians to this region.

William, a gentleman of great dignity, lives in an old and lovely farm home with his cheerful wife. Sincere and friendly, as are all the people of this pleasant community, William turns an apt phrase. When asked how folks took their recreation in the years long gone, he smiled and said, "By looking at each other and by walking from here to there."

Century-Old Tree Still Produces Crop of Apples

On his front lawn is an apple tree of which the Hannon are very proud. Over a century old, it was planted by his father and to this day the apples it produces are tasty and plentiful.

William remembers well. He points to another tree on his lawn and he says, "I planted that from a seed

more than 60 years ago. My cousin, Vital Hannon, came back from a trip to Madison at that time. When he was there, he found a couple of seeds and put them in his vest pocket. He gave them to me and I planted them. Now we have plenty of shade."

William still has the first tractor he ever bought and, after 14 years, it is still operative. But he remembers well the many horses they used for farming on his old farm. The last horse was sold "for fox food" ten years ago.

And so it is with this latter day Belgian village which was the virtual beginning of the Wisconsin Belgian families who spread far into Wisconsin and Door County. Not so very much has changed, and, surely not the innate grace and personal charm of the good Belgians who came here because a little boy died more than a century ago.



Alvin DeKaster — lifetime resident