

Belgian Culture Visible in Outdoor Ovens

At
Namur, Rosiere, and Heritage Hill

By

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Gregory Derozier Photograph

The summer kitchen and attached oven, originally built in 1902 on the Massart farm in Rosiere, have been moved to the Belgian farmstead at Heritage Hill State Park. In the restoration, the stones were numbered as they were dismantled so they could be reassembled with fidelity to the original.

Located a few miles northeast of Green Bay in portions of Brown, Kewaunee, and Door Counties lies an area settled between 1853 and 1857 by Walloon speaking Belgians (Holand, 1933; Lempereur, 1976; Tlachac, 1974).

After over 120 years of settlement the Belgians' attachment to this land on the back slope of the Niagara cuesta remains firm. During these years a unique cultural landscape has evolved that is evident to even the casual observer.

Some of the place names — Brussels, Namur, and Rosiere — add a strong European flavor. The modest red brick farmhouses and adjacent log barns appear distinctive. Even to the untrained ear the English spoken by the locals can be recognized as being different from most "mid-westerneze." If one were to visit a Belgian home or join in an area church picnic, some of the foods such as *jutt*, *trippe*, and *kaset* would be unfamiliar to most. The more observant visitor may spot the characteristic Belgian roadside chapels, which are frequently mistaken for misplaced outhouses. Clearly, these features provide many research opportunities for the historical-cultural geographer.

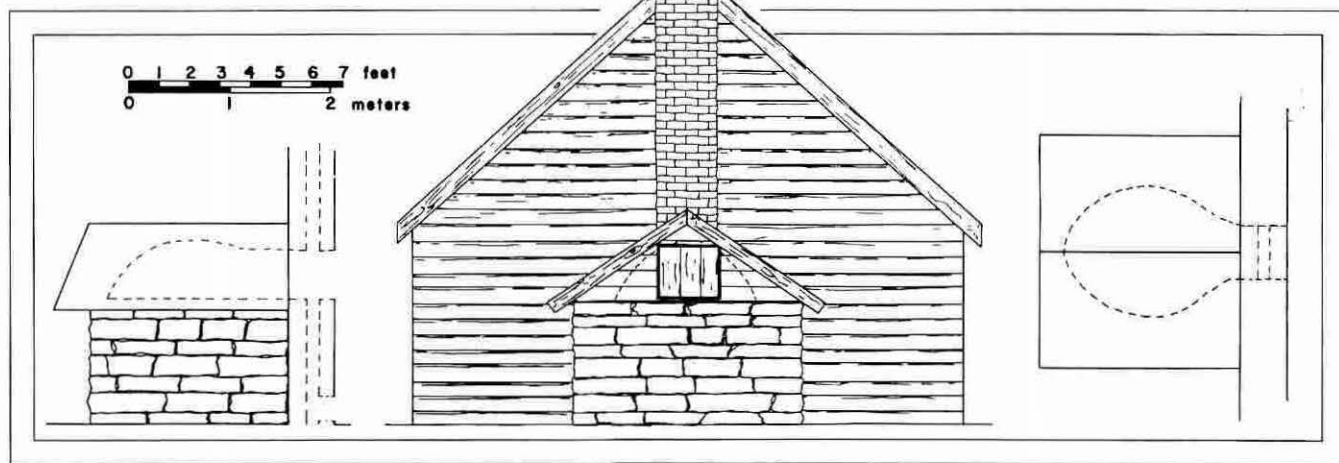
This article focuses on yet another component of the Belgian settlement area — the outdoor bake oven. This small relic feature is often obscured by more imposing farmstead structures, and is virtually ignored. It is the intent of the authors to eventually analyze other aspects of Belgian settlement in detail, but we have been stimulated by Yoder to investigate the oven first. Yoder (1972: 343) reminds us that "research into the bake oven should be of immediate concern.... They need to be photographed, measured, and carefully described." This admonition certainly applies to the ovens of northeastern Wisconsin, because they are disappearing rapidly from the rural scene. The published work on ovens is modest. The authors found the works by Kniffen (1960: 25–35) and Long (1962–3: 11–32 and 1972: 134–155) most useful.

Form, Material and Function

The oven is a separate structure, although it does share a common gable end with the familiar summer kitchen. The kitchen, also a relic structure, is generally located a few steps from the back door of the house. Access to the oven's

fire/baking chamber was gained through the summer kitchen. The oven rested on a platform constructed of local dolomite and stood 4 feet (1.25 m) high, measured 7 1/2 feet (2.3 m) wide and extended 6 1/2 feet (2.1 m) beyond the gable end of the summer kitchen. On top of this platform the oven was constructed. The oven was oval, resembling the shape of an egg that has been halved lengthwise and laid flat down on the platform. The interior of the oval-domed fire/baking chamber measured 2 feet (.6 m) at the highest part, 4 1/3 feet (1.3 m) wide, and 5 3/4 feet (1.7 m) deep or long. A small door, approximately 20 inches (50 cm) square, located 28 inches (71 cm) above the kitchen floor level provided access to the oven.

Bricks made from local clays were used in constructing the fire/baking chamber and the chimney, which was built into the gable end of the summer kitchen. After the base was laid, wet sand was heaped on the platform, packed and molded until the required domed shape was attained. Using the sand core as a form, bricks were laid to produce the required shape. The same lime mortar used for bonding the brick was applied to the entire



The oven itself is oval, resembling the shape of an egg that has been halved lengthwise and laid flat-side down. To protect the oven from damage, a roof was built over the entire structure. Access to the oven's fire/baking chamber was gained through the summer kitchen.

surface of the structure, thus sealing it. After the mortar hardened, the sand core was removed, and the interior of the fire/baking chamber was given the same treatment. Since baking was accomplished by radiated heat, the dimensions of the oven were critical. If the oven was too small the bread burned, and if it was too large, baking would be slow and uneven. To protect the oven from damage, a roof was constructed over the entire structure. The roof was frame and extended down to the platform. A square door, 22 inches (56 cm) on a side, in the gable gave access to the oven's domed exterior for periodic repair to the mortar.

Baking was done weekly, usually on a Saturday, and more often at harvest-time, the day preceding holidays, and the *kirmess* (Jeanquart, 1976). The *kirmess* (literally church mass) is an autumn festival celebrating the harvest season. A fire was started in the fire/baking chamber and allowed to burn until the desired baking temperature was attained. Smoke from the fire was drawn up a chimney

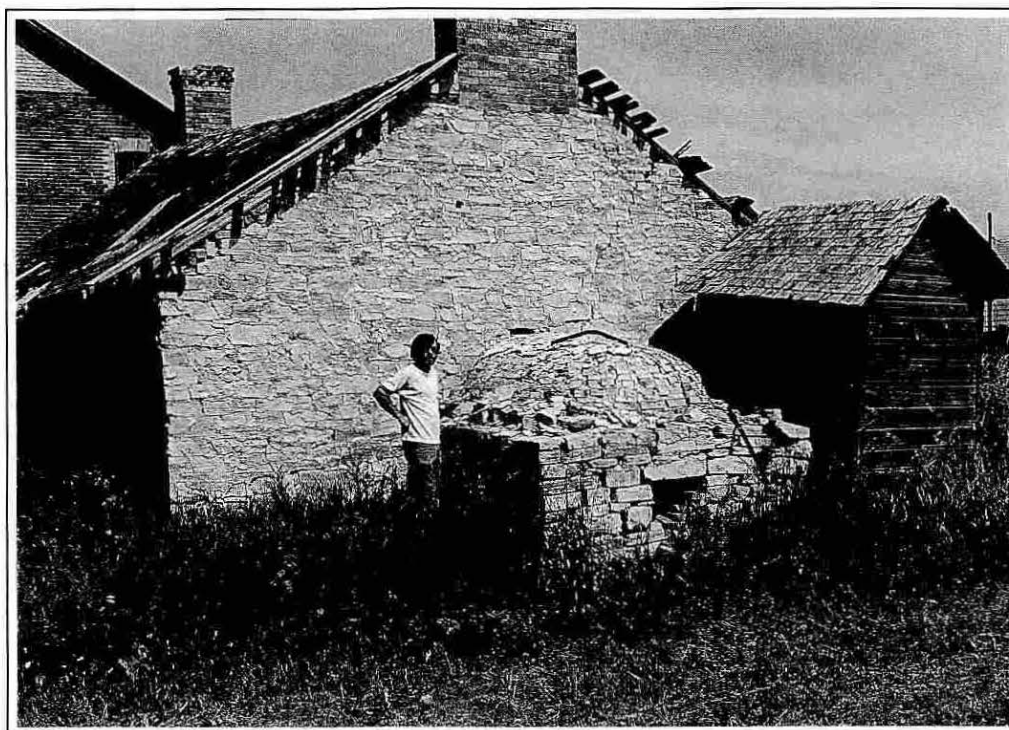
situated in the wall common to the oven and kitchen. Two measurements were used to determine the actual baking temperature. The baker, usually the experienced farm wife, would watch the oven's interior. When a white powder coated the chamber walls, it was felt that the oven was ready for baking. The second method was probably used less frequently. This required an arm to be placed in the oven. If the arm hair was singed, the oven was ready. Then unburned wood, coals, and ashes were raked into a cavity immediately below the chimney. Rectangular baking pans of bread dough were placed into the oven with a large paddle. As many as 24 loaves could be baked at one time. After the pans were inserted, a heavy iron door, mounted on hinges or designed to fit brackets, was put in place; the oven was sealed and baking commenced. The exact baking time remains a mystery. A typical respondent replied that the "bread was baked until done" (LeMense, 1978). After the bread was baked and removed from the oven, the residual heat was used to bake pies. The typical Belgian pie,

unlike the familiar fruit pie, was small (7 inches or 18 cm, in diameter), thin, and lacked a top crust. The common fillings were either prune, raisin, rice, or dried apple. The pie was covered with a thin layer of cottage cheese. As many as thirty pies were baked at one time.

Number, Distribution and Origin

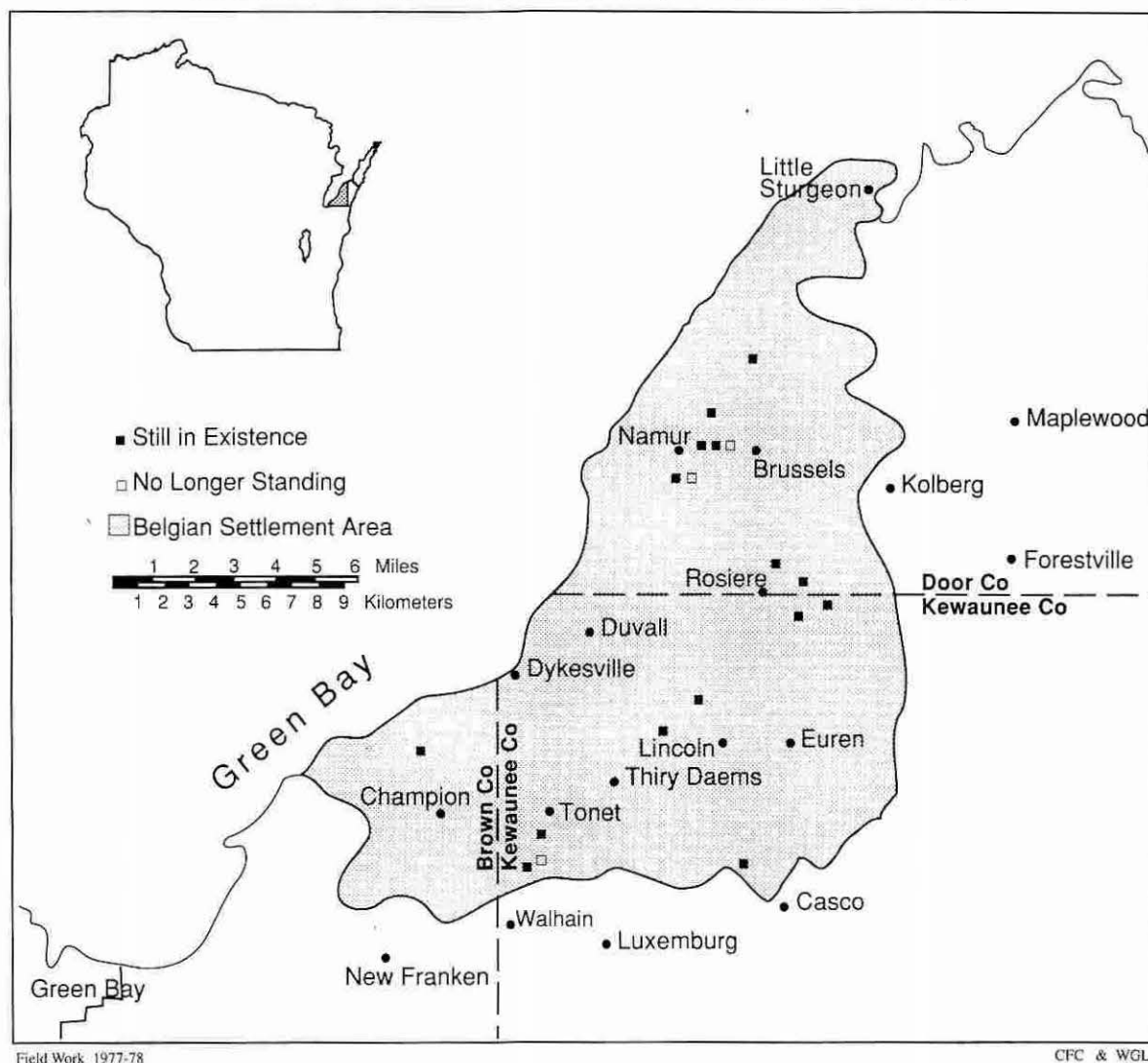
The locations of 18 ovens have been confirmed. Of the 18, only three are no longer standing, but their existence and precise sites have been corroborated. The remaining fifteen, while standing and clearly visible, are in various states of repair. With a modest amount of attention three or four of the ovens could be placed in working condition. Belgians interviewed in the field indicated that at one time nearly every farm in the area had an outdoor oven. Most of them were attached to the summer kitchen as described above. In addition, informants suggested that the free-standing oven was built and utilized by some area farmers. Unfortunately none of this type has been found through field research or

The roof over the baking chamber has been removed, revealing the domed exterior of this oven on its original site. The local dolomite used for construction of the kitchen and oven base is also evident. The presence of Dr. Calkins suggests some sense of scale.



William G. Laatsch Photograph

BAKE OVENS IN NORTHEASTERN WISCONSIN



identified through old photographs.

Whereas the current distributional pattern does not show any strong tendencies, there appears to be some clustering near the communities of Namur and Rosiere. The adjacent areas surrounding these two villages form the core of the Belgian settlement area.

It is clear that the Wisconsin oven had its origin in Belgium. In a comprehensive monograph Weyns (1963) details the old world Belgian antecedent. Photographs and sketches provided by Weyns reveal a great deal of similarity in the form, building

materials, and junction of the ovens on both sides of the Atlantic. However, some exceptions to these generalizations are apparent. In Belgium the free-standing oven was not a rarity as it was in the United States. The presence of the free-standing oven there may be attributed to the moderate marine west coast climate, the fear of fire, and the fact that some of the ovens in Belgium were communal. Several families utilized one oven, which was, as a result, in almost constant use. Dispersed rural settlement in Wisconsin made the communal use of the oven impractical.

Another difference is found in

construction materials. In the old country, brick was used consistently for the fire/baking chamber and for the platform upon which it rested. Among Wisconsin Belgians local limestone was used for the latter purpose, because early on limestone was more readily available and less expensive than large quantities of brick.

A more limited use — exclusively for baking — was characteristic of the Wisconsin oven. Weyns (1963) reported a greater variety of uses including drying small fruits and seeds, roasting large quantities of

meat, baking herring, and disinfecting feather beds and the clothes of the dead.

Summary and Conclusions

The outdoor oven was once a common feature in the ensemble of farm structures in northeastern Wisconsin. Its location was restricted to the portion of the state densely settled by Belgians during the 1850s. Continued use of the outdoor oven diminished with the introduction of the stove. As a consequence only a few ovens remain. Although modest in size and simple in form and function, the structure was essential to the rural household. It is hoped that some of the typical Belgian farmsteads, with their brick houses, log barns, chapels, ovens, and other elements of material culture will be preserved *in situ*. Failing that, steps should be taken immediately to incorporate such a farmstead into Old World Wisconsin, an outdoor ethnic museum focusing on architecture, located near Milwaukee, and sponsored by the State Historical Society.

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Epilogue

This article originally appeared in *Pioneer America Society Transactions, Volume II* (The Society, University of Akron, 1979), as "The Belgian Outdoor Ovens of Northeastern Wisconsin." It is reprinted here with the permission of the *Transactions* editor.

Since the article was first published, the authors' concluding wish has come true, not in Old World Wisconsin but at Heritage Hill State Park in Green Bay. Today at this park, the reader can see not only a Belgian bake oven but an entire Belgian farmstead as it may have appeared around 1905.

According to literature provided by the park, the buildings that make up the farm are original, although they come from different farms in northeastern Wisconsin. The Massart family of Rosiere, Wisconsin, donated the summer kitchen to which the oven was attached. The kitchen was built with limestone walls, cedar logs to hold the roof in place, and cedar shingles. In the restoration, the stones were numbered as they were dismantled so they could be reassembled with fidelity to the original. Built in 1902, the summer kitchen was used by the Massart family until 1932.