

The Peninsula Belgian-American Club: A Brief History

by Mary Ann Defnet

A dream—it all began with a dream. There in the heart of the Belgian settlement was a church dedicated to Our Lady of the Snows, an old school, and an abandoned hotel. How could these comprise a dream?

The descendants of Belgians who settled in southern Door County one hundred years earlier wanted to preserve their area for future generations and to make their heritage come alive. They dreamed of using the old buildings and the church as a nucleus for a Belgian village—one where visitors could see how the pioneers lived, worshiped, and carved out their futures from the wilderness of Northeastern Wisconsin.

Many informal get-togethers were held in 1962 and 1963 before the Peninsula Belgian-American Club was finally organized, with forty-nine members, on May 27, 1964. It was soon determined that the old schoolhouse in Namur had to be moved from the church property. The Baudhuin family, whose land was adjacent to the church, accepted this undertaking. They eventually offered the schoolhouse to the club for its meetings. Of significant historical value, the school had been built under the direction of the Rev. Bernard H. Pennings (O. Praem.), a Norbertine priest who had come from Holland in 1893 to minister to the needs of the Belgian community.

The club held many activities to raise funds for renovation and maintenance of the old schoolhouse. The group participated in an annual *kermisse* (a celebration of the harvest), picnics, sales of Belgian booyah, and card parties, all the while holding onto the dream of a Belgian village.

In spring 1972, Austin Allard, a club trustee, made a trip to Belgium with a Knights of Columbus group. His account of the trip and the encouragement of Dr. Joseph Binard, a native of Belgium living in the area, met with enthusiasm for a club trip to the old country. By this time, club membership was at 415, and there were enough participants to fill a chartered plane. The group left on October 3, 1972.

They stayed at a resort village on the North Sea. Several ventured into the center of Belgium, where they knew their ancestors had lived. A chance meeting with a retired Belgian army colonel, Lucien Leonard, planted the seed for the organization of a sister society in Belgium and future trips by both organizations. The Peninsula Belgian-American Club members made another visit to Belgium in 1974.



Steve Levin/Press-Gazette

Ingrid Bertrand, who lives in a small village near Namur, Belgium, poses next to the sign for Namur, an unincorporated community in Door County. She came to Green Bay in 1999 to make a video about Belgian immigration to Northeast Wisconsin for a class at the University of Brussels. But this wasn't her first visit. Mary Ann Defnet, a local expert on Belgian-American family history and the author of this article, years before had connected the Bertrand family with Gerald Tilot, a Green Bay cousin. The Tilot's since then traveled to Belgium, where they were honored at a party in the village. Similar international exchanges have resulted for others of Belgian descent because of ties between the Peninsula Belgian-American Club and its Belgian counterpart, the Wallonie-Wisconsin Society.

The first group of Wallonie-Wisconsin Society members arrived in Wisconsin in 1975. Since that time, biennial exchange visits have continued. Newly discovered cousins have been found, and new friends have been made. Being able to converse in the old Walloon dialect has been advantageous for club members. It is not a requirement for membership, however, as many converse in French and in English. Club members have visited the birthplaces of their Belgian ancestors who left their homeland and settled in Northeastern Wisconsin in the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s.

Over the years the club has participated in many multi-cultural ethnic events. Each year the club assists the Brussels Lions Club with its annual Belgian Days celebration and has a day-long display of Belgian artifacts at the annual Brussels *kermisse* each September. The club has a *kermisse* at Champion in Brown County, the site of the first Belgian-American Rural Historic District. Members, representing the club, also give presentations in area schools, churches, and ethnic fairs where people are given the opportunity to learn about Belgian heritage. The club has now formed a small genealogical research group.

While the dream of a Belgian village has faded, family history has come to life.