

Book tells Belgians' war story

by PAM RAY

KEWAUNEE — If you've ever wondered if one of your Belgian ancestors served in the American Civil War, you may be able to find out thanks to John Mertens of Kewaunee who recently completed writing a book on Belgians in the war.

"The Second Battle, A Story of Our Belgian Ancestors in the American Civil War 1861-1865" is being printed at Algoma Printing and should be ready for sale the first part of February.

"The book is all about Belgians in northeast Wisconsin," Mertens said. "Those that were drafted in the Army and those who volunteered."

The book begins by telling how the Belgians immigrated to northeast Wisconsin during the 1850's and what work had to be done to settle the area.

Mertens then relates what Belgians were either drafted or volunteered for the war, what companies and regiments they entered and describes what battles they fought in.

"I did a tremendous amount of research to place the men in the right place at the right time," he said.

Mertens follows the Belgian soldiers from this area as they go through the months and years of the Civil War.

"I tried to tell a continuous story," he explained. "The major part of the book describes the draft and fighting."

"I placed these men and used their regiment history to show what they were doing. It was very time consuming."

After the war, Mertens follows the men as they return home and tells what the area was like when they arrived. The book ends with the 1871 Peshtigo fire, relating what area Belgians were affected by this event.

Mertens, 36, said he had been working on the book for several years and because of his full time job at General Housewares in Kewaunee, he could only work on it a little at a time.

Writing the book involved extensive research. Mertens used resources from area libraries, the Belgian collection at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, the Wisconsin Historical Society, a state Veterans group, the State Adjutant General Report for 1864-65, the National Archives and back issues of area newspapers.

"I tried to really do thorough research," Mertens said. "One of my main concerns was accuracy."



AUTHOR — John Mertens, Kewaunee, is shown explaining what his book, "The Second Battle, A Story of Our Belgian Ancestors in the American Civil War 1861-1865," is about.

The photograph hanging be-

hind him is of his great-grandfather, Felix Englebert, who lived in Door County during the war years. Mertens' interest in his Belgian ancestors prompted him to write the book.

— photo by PAM RAY

Over 200 Belgians from northeast Wisconsin served in the Civil War, and Mertens has documentation in the book on these men as to where they or their families immigrated from, where they settled, family information, war records and dates of birth and death. He said this information will be very valuable for genealogy purposes.

"I did as much as I could do to identify the men so people could relate to them," he said. "I found a lot of people in the area are going to find they are a descendant from someone who was in the Civil War."

Mertens could pinpoint what soldiers were Belgian and which Belgians were from northeast Wisconsin through area census directories from the 1850's, 1860's, and 1870's, which he became very familiar with. Other cross references were also used to ensure correct identification, he explained.

Mertens invested a considerable amount of money to get some of the information he needed.

For example, when he couldn't find anywhere what happened to about 40 Belgians after the war, he had to send \$5 a name to the National Archives in order to receive the men's pension records.

These records listed much of the information Mertens needed including where the men moved, which enabled Mertens to write a small chapter about those men who moved out of the state after the war. Mertens donated the pension records to UWGB.

Mertens said he has always been interested in learning more about his mother's family who lived in Door County during the Civil War. He began researching his family through newspaper clippings and

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Belgians . . .

the Belgian collection at UWGB.

During this time he ran across stories on Belgians serving in the war and others relating how some protested the draft.

At first he wanted to write about all the Belgians who settled in northeast Wisconsin, but realized it was too general of a subject and instead focused on those who fought in the Civil War.

This book is Mertens' first big writing project. Future plans include writing a paper which he will give to UWGB, about brothers Xavier and Constant Martin, two Belgian political leaders in the area who had much influence on Belgian immigrants.

Xavier wrote an article in the 1890's for the Wisconsin Historical Society that described how hundreds of Belgians served in the war. This article is what really stirred Mertens' interest on who these Belgians were.

Included in the book are photographs of many of the individuals Mertens writes about. These photographs came from the Neville Public Museum in Green Bay, UWGB and from individuals Mertens began corresponding with through the Belgian Researchers Club.

Mertens said he is having 100 copies of the softcover, 8½ inch by 11 inch book printed. It will sell for

around \$20, he said.

Mertens said he has about 20 copies of the book already sold to people he contacted through his research and plans to market the book through word-of-mouth.

Mertens grew up in the Algoma area and graduated from Algoma High School. His parents, Richard and Bertine Mertens, farm in Rio Creek and are both of Belgian descent.

He and his wife, Carol, have four children, Amy, Angela, Annie and Alex. An employee of General Housewares for 15 years, Mertens is president of Local 175 Aluminum, Brick, Glass Workers International Union.