

# Walloon Belgians create 'ethnic island,' prof says

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PRESS-GAZETTE

The well-manicured farms and votive chapels of Southern Belgium aren't too far away from Northeastern Wisconsin, a University of Wisconsin-Green Bay professor says.

Southern Belgians usually speak a French dialect known as Walloon, geography professor William

Laatsch told the State Historical Society, which met Saturday at the Holiday Inn-City Centre in Green Bay.

Several Walloon Belgians settled in Brown, Door and Kewaunee counties, creating the largest Walloon Belgian population center in the country.

Walloon is a quickly diminishing dialect in the United States because few

can speak it and even fewer can write it. Laatsch said Wisconsin's Belgian settlers were largely uneducated and probably could not write the language.

What separates Northeastern Wisconsin's Belgian community from others, besides its density, is a persistent, rarely changing culture.

"As families grew in this area, that coincided with the

growth of industry (in the area)," Laatsch said. "Young people left the farm, but they didn't leave the area."

Because of the "ethnic island" the Walloon Belgians created here, Northeastern Wisconsin is dotted with ethnic-named towns — such as Brussels in Door County — summer kitchens and votive chapels.

The strong ethnicity in Northeastern Wisconsin is

something unseen in other areas of the country, Laatsch said. Eighty percent of the area's agricultural population is Walloon Belgian, based on an ethnicity map Laatsch made in the 1970s.

"This is an incredible density of one ethnic group," he said. "Nowhere else did I find this kind of density."

He noted that only American Indian reservations and religious-based communes

had higher ethnic densities.

The Walloons first settled in Milwaukee and Sheboygan, but they moved north because a Walloon-speaking priest lived in the area. Walloons were encouraged to settle in Wisconsin from 1853 to 1857, through unrelenting promotion.

Gov. "Tommy Thompson would have been great at the job, there's no doubt in my mind," Laatsch said.