
Chapter 19

Wallonie en Porte: Door County Belgians

Program 19 Performances

1. Alfred Vandertie, "Nos-estans quittés po l'Amérique" / "Au ciel i n'a pon.y bire." 2. Gladys Etienne Feron, "Mi feye, mi feye elle (av)ot frwed ses pids." 3. Alvina Fontaine, "Le jardin de Martin Plicotin." 4. Alfred Vandertie, "C'est l'café, l'café." 5. Alfred Vandertie, "I Went to Market with a *pania volant*." 6. Arthur "Zeke" Renard, "Dji m'fou d'ça." 7. Three Sharps, "Elle est byin trop crausse por mi." 8. Gene LeBotte, "Black Gypsy Waltz." 9. Ray Dorschner and the Rainbow Valley Dutchmen, "Kermis Waltz." 10. Cletus Bellin, "La vieux gris caval."

Through Five Generations

On the southern end of Wisconsin's Door peninsula cluster small farm towns—Brussels, Rosiere, Namur, Duval, Missiere—dominated by century-old structures of brick fired from a local red clay. Their names as well as the predilection for brick attest to the local Belgian culture, which five generations have retained to an unusual degree.

While visiting an Antwerp tavern in 1852, a farmer from Brabant in central Belgium, François Petinoit, chanced to get hold of a pamphlet prepared by the then newly created Wisconsin Office of the Immigration Commissioner. The booklet was in Flemish and touted the availability of Wisconsin farmland for \$1.25 an acre.

Belgium is the homeland of two distinct nationalities: the Flemish, whose language is closely related to Dutch, and the Walloons, who speak a French dialect. Petinoit, a Walloon who apparently could read and understand Flemish, convinced the heads of nine neighboring Brabant households to join him in founding a Wisconsin Walloon colony.

The colonists set out in May 1853, weathering seven stormy weeks at sea before finally settling on land in southern Door County. More Belgian immigrants followed, but by 1857 unfavorable reports of the hardships in the Wisconsin wilderness stemmed the tide of new arrivals. Nonetheless, natural growth eventually swelled the population of the Wisconsin Walloon colony to more than thirty thousand in Door and neighboring Kewaunee counties (Holmes 1944).

Fire destroyed the pioneer settlement of log buildings in October 1871; a thousand persons died and three thousand were left homeless. But the Walloons persevered, rebuilt in brick, and eventually prospered.

Through their good times and their trials, traditions have buoyed the Belgian community, especially religious traditions connected to their Catholic faith. A shrine at Robinsonville, known to the Walloons as Aux Premiers Belges, commemorates the apparition of the Blessed Virgin to a young Walloon, Adele Brice, in 1858. Well-attended processions are still held there on Rogation Day, in late May, to pray to the Virgin for abundant crops, and on Assumption Day, August 15, the anniversary of the apparition. But no holiday means more to the Wisconsin Walloons than the annual harvest festival, Kermis, still celebrated in Rosiere and Brussels. In each town, on consecutive Sundays, after a special mass is celebrated in church, a procession with musicians moves down the street, pausing to dance in the dusty crossroads. Then, at a hall, the serious business of celebrating begins—dancing and consuming Walloon delicacies, especially the hundreds of Belgian pies prepared for the event. The Belgian prune and apple pies are unique. They contain custard and are topped with a thick layer of cottage cheese (Tlahac 1974).

Belgian pork sausages known as *trippe, kaset* (a seasoned and cured cottage cheese spread), and *jut* (a cabbage and potato concoction) are among the specialties. Nowadays, *booyah* (a thick chicken soup) is the best-known food symbolizing Belgian identity in Wisconsin. Booyah dinners at church halls and fireman's parks still raise funds for all sorts of charitable causes.

The Belgian fondness for traditional foods has been matched by their love of music, particularly the old Walloon songs. Although after five generations in America few fluent Walloon speakers are left, the Wisconsin Walloons nonetheless have produced some outstanding singers, several of whom were recorded for the Library of Congress in the 1940s. But for decades thereafter, Walloon singing received scant attention from outside the community.

Singing the Old Songs

In 1972, musicologist Françoise Lempereur journeyed from Belgium to north-eastern Wisconsin. Her mission was to visit and record the traditional music of the far-flung colony of her compatriots. Upon her arrival in Green Bay, she set out for the rural Wisconsin village of Namur, the namesake of her home city. There she visited the Peninsula Belgian-American Club, meeting some of her own distant cousins in the process. When she inquired about singers of old Walloon songs, the club members directed her to their best singer: in the nearby port town of Algoma, tavern keeper Alfred Vandertie proved to be a song keeper as well (Vandertie 1989 I).

Alfred, who was born in 1911 on a dairy farm in southern Door County, spoke no English until he started school. The Walloon dialect of French was his first language. Alfred was always drawn to singing. During his childhood, singing was a constant part of socializing—around a farm kitchen table, in the church and church hall, on everyday occasions, and at grand feast days like the Kermis harvest festival.

His taverns, at first in the rural crossroads town of Brussels and later in Algoma, were unofficial Walloon cultural centers. Until it closed in 1989, his Algoma bar had Belgian posters and crests and a large map of Belgium covering its walls. Interactions with his customers were occasions to learn and sing in the Walloon tradition. Françoise Lempereur recorded him and other Wisconsin Walloon singers, and back in Belgium produced radio programs and a record album of their songs. Alfred's powerful voice, acute pitch, and prodigious memory have made him admired in Belgium, where in the late 1970s he visited and had a chance to perform, and in Washington, D.C., where he appeared at the Festival of American Folklife in 1976, America's bicentennial. In 1989 he performed in a



Arthur "Zeke" Renard, Duval, 1989 Photo: Jim Leary

concert in Green Bay which was broadcast statewide over Wisconsin Public Radio to commemorate the anniversary of the "Simply Folk" folk music program.

There remain only a few younger fluent Walloon speakers, like Cletus Bellin, born in 1944, who also can sing the old songs. In instrumental music, the Belgians have generally adopted the Bohemian musical style of their numerous Czech neighbors. Bellin, the station manager of radio station WAUN in Kewaunee, plays piano and sings in Jerry Voelker's Czech-style orchestra, singing phonetically in Czech with a very accurate accent. Gene LeBotte, whose forebear Theophile LeBotte played clarinet in the Rosiere band in 1858 at the very first Wisconsin Kermis, is the leader of a Bohemian-style band which plays to a mostly Belgian crowd. Arthur "Zeke" Renard, whose one-man band employs button accordion, harmonica, kazoo, and bass drum, sings in Walloon and plays in a style all his own.

Their music has changed, but the customs and foodways have remained strong indicators of ethnic identity among the Walloons of Wisconsin.