

Interview

SUBJECT: St. Nicholas Colony (Delta-Marquette counties)  
INTERVIEWEE: Joseph Heirman, 1216 8th Ave South, Escanaba, MI.  
INTERVIEWER: Russell M. Magnaghi  
DATE: June 10, 1978.

Concerning the Belgian colony near Seney, Heirman recalled that one family in particular, the Jules Van Damme family settled there, found the farming poor and through the urgings of Fr. Mathias Jodocy settled in St. Nicholas.

The name, St. Nicholas came from a community in Belgium.

The first settlers in the area were woodsmen of French Canadian background. In the early part of the century they cleared the virgin timber. By the time the St. Nicholas colony was established a tense second growth was up.

One of the first settlers was Joseph Heirman who had settled in Dickinson County working in the iron mines and then left this job to farm. He came to the area in 1912.

The colony was promoted in Belgium through newspaper ads which did bring people.

Usually the men came first and then once established they sent for their families.

Peter Jodocy was the brother of Fr. M. Jodocy. Peter was the father of Marcel Jodocy a farmer (dairy) in the area.

The Belgians who settled in Norway and worked in the mines created "Belgiantown."

Paul Deden is of Belgian ancestry and lives in Bark River and probably superintendent of the school system.

The Belgians carried on general purpose farming. When the older farmers retired their neighbors usually bought them out and expanded their units. Today there are fewer families because the farms have been consolidated into larger units. The settlers did not bring over any livestock so large Belgian horses were not a feature of the community. The people farming there today are extremely prosperous although they do not erect elaborate structures. In the last 10-15 years they have changed over from strictly dairy farming to potato farming. Joseph Heirman, MSU Extension Service representative in the area gave the farmers tremendous assistance in their operations. Today they produce probably 100 acres of potatoes, which produce 500 bushels to the acre. They take out 50 semitruck loads per season. The Belgian first generation farmers are good operators. Listening to the agricultural experts they used certified seed, pesticides, insecticides, etc.

When they first arrived they lived in whatever was available. The Joseph Heriman family lived in an abandoned logging camp. Others lived in "shacks" which were usually made of tarpaper of anything else which would be four-sided, roofed and would keep them warm. After they got settled they build more substantial

structures. By 1925 the community including the houses and separate barns would have been a scene from Belgium. Although some farmers in the Old Country sometimes attach their barns to the house these people did not do this.

A church was planned and the basement foundations made of poured concrete. A roof was added and for many years a priest from Perkins (St. Joseph's) visited the community on a monthly basis and said Mass. When the church foundation was being poured, a future rectory was also poured. Fr. Jodocy was influential in the construction of this structure whose walls stand along side a stream. The concrete walls were extremely cold during the winter. Around 1918-1920 John Jardin who had married Fr. Jodocy's sister moved to the community from Gladstone and moved into the structure. They established a general store on the premises. Finally the foundation structure was abandoned and today has been filled with earth. The foundation stood to the south of the cemetery.

*Basement  
a cement  
floor  
Roofed*

The Heirman farm stood south of the church.

The culture and traditions were maintained to a degree by the immigrants. The youngsters learned Flemish and the culture. Joseph Heirman understands Flemish but cannot speak it although he did speak it fluently in the past. The immigrants learned English quickly although they spoke with accents. Today one old lady still speaks Belgian. In the 1920's groups met regularly and held dances and picnics to raise money for the church. At these affairs they had accordian music and sang Belgian songs. Many of these people intermarried and the second generation does not know the traditions. The neighbors of the Heirmans are interesting examples of what happened. On one side there was a family with seven youngsters. The five boys all became farmers but this was the exception rather than the rule. On the other side the family had 7-8 youngsters. The three boys became: school teacher, took over the farm when dad died, and United Airlines in San Francisco. The girls usually left with their husbands. For instance some live in Escanaba and their husbands work at Mead Paper. Quite a few are out of the area.

Fr. Jodocy would visit the community. Peter his brother told Joseph Heirman that Mathias had an architectural background and he used some of the expertise in the building of St. John's church.

Cheese factory located near the stream (so that the whey could be thrown out) was developed by outsiders and then was operated as a store by a fellow from Perkins. This creamery was necessary because of horse-drawn transportation. However large cheese factories are more efficient and today the milk is taken to Rock, Perkins and Escanaba. Today the former factory is a private residence.

There was no electricity until 1925.

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Joseph Heirman was born in St, Nicholas and from 1944 until his retirement in 1972. He greatly assisted the first generation and even immigrants develop their prosperous farms. He has written an 8 page study of the community which is deposited with the Delta County Historical Society.

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World War I caught many of the settlers. Their wives were in Belgium and had to wait out the war. The war also halted immigration which probably hurt the colony as its growth halted.

At its peak the colony had 35 families.