



NEWSLETTER – Vol. 4, nr. 2, December 2008

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A word from our President:

Small country, big history: I think this describes Belgium perfectly. In this issue we focus on the great influence of the Belgian priests on U.S. history, particularly here in the Midwest as it was becoming part of our country. Their efforts – be it exploration, education, spreading the faith, or keeping the peace – were critical to the successful absorption of this vast land into the civilized fabric of the nation. We hope this issue enhances your knowledge of Belgians in America, and their rightful place in its history. Thank you, Bart and David, for your great work!

To all, have a happy and healthy 2009.

Jim Vertenten

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Belgian missionaries in the American Midwest

It has been quite well documented that Jesuits and Franciscans played a very important role in early American life in the region between the Alleghenies and the Rockies. That most of them were Belgian is a lesser-known fact. From the early 1800s on, they opened schools to educate the Native Americans, established parishes for the newly arrived immigrants settling along the Missouri, Mississippi and Ohio rivers, opened universities along their banks and in rugged, more inland Midwestern frontier towns, and heavily influenced American thinking for almost 150 years.

French Jesuit Jacques Marquette had surveyed the Mississippi river basin with his travel companion Louis Joliet in 1673, making the portage between Lake Michigan and the Illinois River, which made them realize the tremendous potential for this strategic location.

Father Louis Hennepin (1626 – c. 1705)

Just a few years after the Marquette-Joliet survey of the Mississippi-Illinois area, the Franciscan priest Father **Louis Hennepin** explored additional areas of the interior of North America, between 1679 and 1683. Hennepin was born in the town of Ath, Hainaut in Belgium in 1626, but is sometimes considered French since the town of Bethune, where he later lived, was captured by the army of King Louis XIV (the Sun King) in 1659. Educated in Ghent, Belgium, Hennepin referred to himself consistently as Flemish*. He was the first person to bring the world's attention to two great waterfalls: Niagara near Buffalo, NY and the St. Anthony Falls in what is now Minneapolis, the only waterfalls on the Mississippi. During his explorations, together with Frenchman Robert Cavalier De La Salle**, Hennepin was among the first Europeans to set foot on what are now the locations of Detroit, Green Bay, Minneapolis, and Hannibal, Missouri.



Among the priests who accompanied father Hennepin in 1679-1683 in Illinois and beyond were fellow Flemish Recollet priests Zenobe Membre and Gabriel Ribourde, neither of whom survived the trip. After returning to Europe Father Hennepin wrote exhaustively about his adventures and discoveries, but never returned to America. He died in Rome around 1705.

The county in which Minneapolis is located was named Hennepin County in 1852, and counts over

a million inhabitants nowadays. One of the main streets in downtown Minneapolis bears the name Hennepin Avenue, and the town of Champlin, MN holds an annual Father Hennepin festival with reenactments of the crossing of the Mississippi river. In Illinois we find Hennepin, a small town along the Illinois River, about 60 miles north of Peoria, also named after Father Louis Hennepin.

Notes: * Geographically speaking, Ath is located in the Wallonia part of Belgium, not in Flanders. Hennepin was basically raised by his sister in Ghent, and went to school there, hence his self-identification as Flemish.

**** A bronze statue of Robert Cavalier De La Salle, erected in Chicago's Lincoln Park in 1889, was made by the Belgian sculptor Jacques de La Laing. It can be found near the intersection of North Avenue and La Salle Street.**

In the middle of the 18th century Catholicism in the Americas underwent a period of suppression, culminating in the banning of Jesuit missions in 1773. Right when this ban was lifted in 1804, the Belgian Jesuit missionary Father **Charles Nerinckx**, later nicknamed the Apostle of Kentucky, arrived in the United States, followed by many other young priests who answered the call to cross the Atlantic Ocean. Most of them initially settled in Maryland around 1817.

Father Charles Nerinckx (1761 – 1824)

Charles Nerinckx was born in 1761 in Herffelingen, Brabant, in Belgium, oldest of fourteen children. His parents moved to Ninove when he was one year old. He entered the seminary of Mechelen in 1781, and was ordained a priest in 1785. After eight years as vicar of St. Rombouts in Mechelen, he was appointed pastor near his parents' home in Everberg-Meerbeke. When the French Revolutionary rulers began targeting the Catholic clergy in 1797, he had to abandon his parish duties and went underground for seven years, hiding in the chicken coop of the St. Blasius Hospital in Dendermonde, where his aunt was a hospital nun.



While thousands of priests were killed or imprisoned in French-occupied territories throughout Europe, Father Nerinckx began contemplating dedicating his life to the overseas missions of the church. He wrote long, beautiful letters in Latin, describing the “Reign of Satan” to many correspondents, among whom, in 1803, was Archbishop Carroll of Baltimore. Bishop Carroll immediately replied by inviting Nerinckx to join him in Baltimore, where he arrived in late 1804. He went on to Georgetown in Washington, DC and joined the Jesuit order at age 43.

After he learned English sufficiently, Bishop Carroll assigned him to Kentucky, a new diocese the size of Belgium, on the Western frontier. He lived in the saddle; every year he organized a new congregation or built a new church. Soon he became known as the “Apostle of Kentucky.” His well-deserved fame reached Baltimore and Bishop Carroll asked Rome to appoint Nerinckx Bishop of New Orleans, but Father Nerinckx refused the honor, preferring to stay on the frontier. He rather spent his time among the settlers and Native American tribes, focusing on the education and welfare of all their children. With that intent in 1812 he founded the Congregation of the Sisters of Loretto.

He crossed the ocean twice to secure financial help and to recruit laborers and additional missionaries for the American missions. Among the ones who followed him were Father DeSmet, Father Verreydt and Bishop VandeVelde. Father Nerinckx passed away in St. Genevieve, MO in 1824. Nerinckx Hall, a high school in Webster, MO is named for Father Nerinkx and is run by the Sisters of Loretto.

The St. Stanislaus Seminary in Florissant, Missouri.

In 1823 eight young Belgian Jesuit missionaries, following the advice of U.S. President James Monroe and Bishop Louis DuBourg of the Louisiana Territory, left the mission of White Marsh, Maryland. They made the arduous journey west, and crossed the Mississippi to build a log house and Indian school in what is now Florissant, MO, 10 miles upstream from St. Louis. Soon replaced by a classical brick building, this settlement developed into the St. Stanislaus Seminary, a 1,000 acre self sustaining educational and vocational community



with an orchard, chicken ranch, cattle farm, vineyards, bakery, butcher shop, etc.

From this Jesuit house the missionaries rode out to service the pioneer settlers and introduce Christianity to the natives all over the Midwest. They were experts in resolving disputes and negotiated treaties between the US Government and the native tribes, always attempting to preserve and respect the Indians' rights and traditions. They also started up schools and organized parishes, providing education and some sense of community life. The Seminary closed in 1971, at which point all historical artifacts were moved to nearby St. Louis University. The cemetery became the last resting place of some of these Flemish priests:

Rev. Peter J. Timmermans, S.J., born 20 July, 1783; died 31 May, 1824

Rev. Charles F. Van Quickenborne, S.J., born 21 June 1788; died 17 Aug. 1837

Rev. Aegidius De Bruyn, S.J., born 18 Jan 1803; died 10 Sept 1838

Rev. Bartholomew Krynen, S.J., born 11 Jun 1808; died 31 Dec, 1838

Mr. Mark Boex, S.J., born 13 Dec 1803; died 26 Nov. 1840

Rev. Jude Van Sweevelt, S.J., born 29 Feb, 1804; died 10 May 1841

Bishop Jacques Olivier VandeVelde, S.J., born April 3, 1795; died Nov. 13, 1855

Rev. Peter-Jan De Smet, S.J., born 30 Jan 1801; died 23 May, 1873

In 2003, all remains of the Jesuits at the Florissant cemetery were moved to the Calvary Cemetery near St. Louis.

Some of the missionaries of Florissant became legendary, larger-than-life figures in the central part of the United States:

Father Charles Felix Van Quickenborne (1788 – 1837)

Born in Petegem, near Deinze, Belgium on January 21, 1788, Charles Van Quickenborne is best known as the founder of St. Louis University. He became a Jesuit in Ghent in 1815, and at his request was sent to the American Missions in 1817. He was appointed Superior of the Jesuit novitiate in White Marsh, Maryland in 1919. He moved west to Florissant, Missouri in 1823. In 1824 Father Van Quickenborne wrote to the Father General of the Jesuits about opening a college in St. Louis. Work on it was actually started in 1828. After it opened, Father Van Quickenborne served as its first president. He also did a tremendous amount of missionary

work among the Osage Indians, the Iowas, the Kickapoos, and the Potawatomi in Kansas, Missouri, Illinois and Kentucky between 1823 and 1837. He died on August 17, 1837 at age 49.

Father John Felix Verreydt (1798-1883)

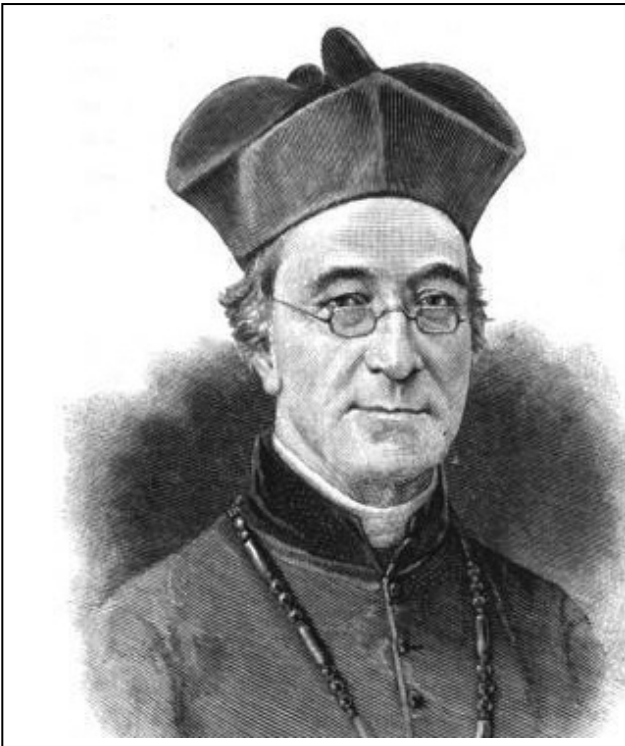
Born in Diest, Belgium, Father Verreydt founded St. Mary's Academy and College in Kansas in 1848. He was the first Superior of the College, and was succeeded in that position by another Belgian, Father **Jean Baptiste Deurinck**. Father Verreydt died in St. Louis in 1883, at age 85.

Father Deurinck drowned in 1857, after a boating accident on the Missouri, near Kansas City. His body was never found. Shortly after, in 1862, another Belgian priest, Father **John F. Diels**, became the Rector of St. Mary's. He was later followed by yet two other Belgians, Father **Aloysius Van der Eerden** and Father **Charles Coppens**.

Note: One of the students at St. Mary's in the 1870s was Charles Komiskey (Comiskey), who would go on to become the owner of the Chicago White Sox.

Bishop Jacques Olivier VandeVelde (1795 – 1855)

Bishop Vandevelde was born April 3, 1795, near Dendermonde in Belgium. While at the seminary of Mechelen, he responded to the visiting Father Nerinckx of Kentucky's appeal for more priests for the American missions. He crossed the Atlantic Ocean and entered the Jesuit novitiate at Georgetown, in Washington, DC. He was ordained priest in Baltimore in 1827, did some missionary work in Maryland, and became professor of mathematics and rhetoric at the newly founded Jesuit College in St. Louis, Missouri. He became president of that institution in 1840, and represented the Missouri province at a general congregation of the Jesuit order held in Rome the next year. He was consecrated Bishop of Chicago on February 11, 1849, and assumed his post on April 1 of that year. At that time there were only four Catholic churches in Chicago.



Immediately he founded an orphan asylum on Wabash Avenue and Jackson Street, to help out little children whose parents had succumbed to the cholera epidemic of 1849. He started up twelve parish schools during his tenure, and was also very instrumental in the erection of the General Hospital of the Lake, which later became Rush Hospital. Bishop VandeVelde assigned the Sisters of Mercy to manage all the nursing responsibilities, while the Rush Medical College faculty took care of all diagnoses, surgery and other medical procedures.

In 1853 Bishop VandeVelde encountered serious health problems, which he thought to be in part caused by Chicago's harsh climate. He asked Rome to be allowed to retire, but was instead transferred to the diocese of Natchez, Mississippi, where he assumed his duties of Bishop in December of 1853. He died of yellow fever on November 13, 1855. His remains were first buried under the main altar of the cathedral of Natchez, but removed to the cemetery of the St. Stanislaus Jesuit Novitiate in Florissant, Missouri in 1874.

Father Peter-Jan DeSmet (1801-1873)

The best known Flemish missionary on the US mainland is undoubtedly **Father Peter-Jan DeSmet**.

Peter-Jan (a.k.a. Pierre) DeSmet was born in Dendermonde on January 30, 1801. After listening to Father Nerinckx' inspirational speeches and appeal for help, DeSmet came to America in 1821 and entered the Jesuit Noviciate in White Marsh, Maryland, before joining other young Jesuits on the mission to Florissant. He was ordained in 1827. Between 1824 and 1830 he studied various Native American customs, traditions and languages. A serious illness made him return to Belgium between 1833 and 1837, but upon his once he made his way back to America he embarked on his three decades long work with in the West.



From Vancouver to Alberta, Washington, Idaho, Oregon, Montana, Wyoming, the Dakotas, Colorado, Minnesota, and beyond, Father DeSmet was known as “Blackrobe,” the man who could settle disputes like nobody else. He worked out long lasting peace agreements between the Blackfeet and the Crows, worked with the Flatheads, Nez Perce, Kalispel Crees, Chippewas, and many other tribes to establish peace between them and also with the increasing number of white settlers. His biggest accomplishment was arguably in 1868, when DeSmet, at the height of the Indian Wars, succeeded in convincing Sitting Bull and his five thousand Sioux warriors, as well as the other chiefs, to agree to the Treaty of Fort Laramie, thereby narrowly avoiding a certain bloodbath with the approaching US Army. He made several visits to Washington, D.C. to

plead for the plight of the Native American tribes.

DeSmet's horseback and canoe trips to serve Native American tribes in the Midwest and West covered more than 200,000 miles. While traveling, he often had the company of medical doctors, linguists and even a



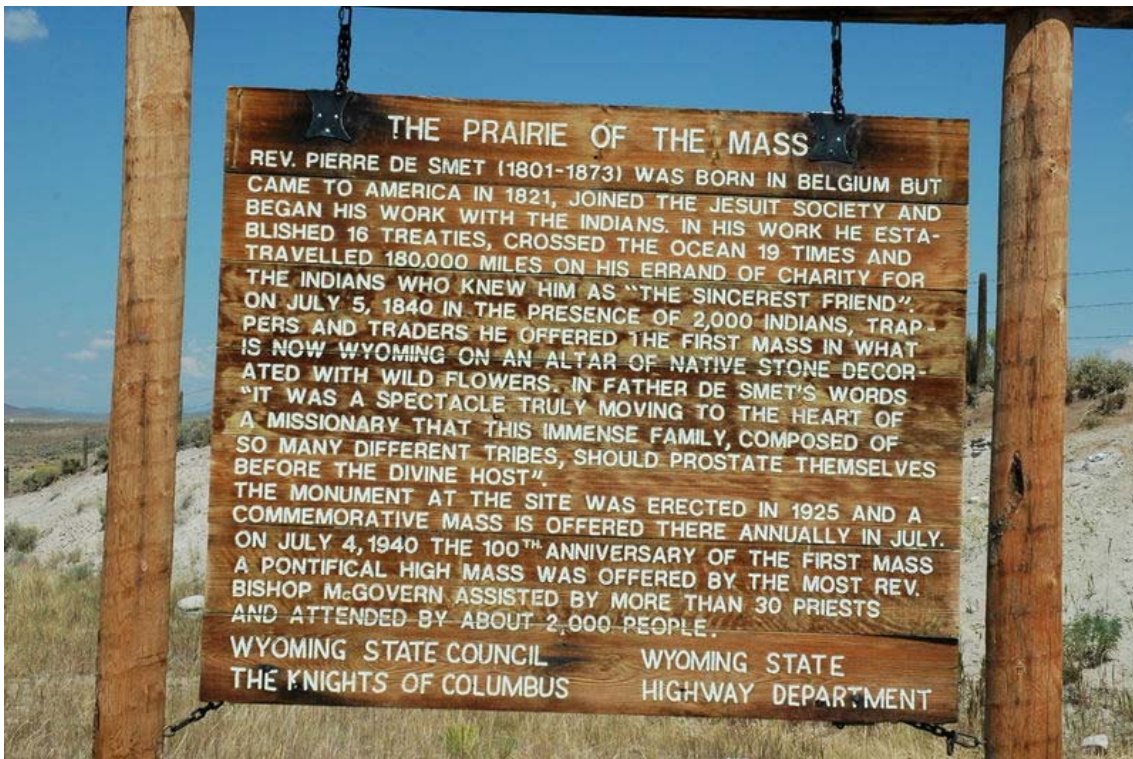
musician. He often helped tribes and settlers acquire plating seed from far away locations, and helped in numerous other ways, wherever he saw a need. Father DeSmet traveled nineteen times from the United States to Europe and back to gather financial support from friends across the Atlantic. He met with popes, kings and presidents, pleading his case very eloquently. He received the medal of the Order of Leopold from the Belgian king in 1865. Father DeSmet passed away on May 23, 1873, at age 72, at the Jesuit house in St. Louis, Missouri.

Father DeSmet (back row) with Chief Charlo (front left) and others of the Bitterroot Salish tribe near Missoula, Montana.

At least three towns were named in honor of Father DeSmet: DeSmet, Idaho, DeSmet Montana and DeSmet, South Dakota. Five of Laura Ingels' books (*Little House on the Prairie*) took place in DeSmet, South Dakota. There is also a DeSmet Jesuit High School in Creve Coeur, Missouri and a DeSmet Hall at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington.



Father DeSmet Memorial in Green River, Wyoming. Photograph by Vera Kennedy-Braeckman, 2008.



Father DeSmet Memorial in Green River, Wyoming. Photograph by Vera Kennedy-Braeckman, 2008.

Sources: Fr. E. Laveille, S.J. *The Life of Father De Smet S.J: Apostle of the Rocky Mountains*, Rockford; Chittenden and Richardson, *Life, Letters and Travels of Pierre Jean De Smet, S.J.*, New York, 1905; William Fanning, "Pierre-Jean DeSmet" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, New York, 1908.

Father Arnold Damen (1815-1890)

Born on March 20, 1815, just a few miles north of the Belgian-Dutch border, at a time when these two countries were united, Arnold Damen can - if not technically than certainly by association and in spirit - be counted as one of the pioneer Flemish Jesuits in the American Midwest. Recruited by Father DeSmet during one of his fundraising trips in Belgium, Damen accompanied Father DeSmet on his trip back to the Americas in 1837. With several other, Flemish, recruits he entered the Jesuit Novitiate at Florissant, Missouri. He was ordained in 1844, and served for the next few years as the pastor of the St. Francis Xavier parish in St. Louis, Missouri.

Bishop VandeVelde's successor in Chicago, Bishop Anthony O'Regan, succeeded in getting **Fr. Arnold Damen** to begin full-time work in Chicago in 1857. He built the Holy Family Church on Roosevelt Road in 1860, and became the new parish' first pastor. From Fr. Damen's vision and energy grew a Jesuit school on Chicago's west side, St. Ignatius College. From St. Ignatius College, opened in 1869, grew Loyola Academy on the north side of the city in 1909 and Loyola University, in 1922; Loyola Academy moved to Wilmette in 1957. St. Ignatius parish was begun around the Loyola University campus in 1907, with substantial financial support from the De Jonghe family, the famous Belgian-American restaurant owners.



Holy Family Church



Father Arnold Damen, S.J.

Father Arnold Damen died on New Year's Day in 1890, in Creighton, Nebraska, five months after suffering a stroke in Cheyenne, Wyoming and becoming paralyzed. His obituary in the Chicago Tribune lists him as being born in Belgium. He was buried in the St. Stanislaus cemetery in Florissant, Missouri. Local legend believes his ghost continues to haunt Holy Family Church and nearby St. Ignatius school. Numerous people over the years have reported seeing a man dressed in clerical garb wandering the halls of the school at night or passing through the church.

Damen Avenue in Chicago, formerly Robey Street, was officially renamed for Father Arnold Damen in 1927.

Bart Ryckbosch

I want to express my most sincere thanks to David Baeckelandt, who provided immeasurable support and information for this issue. Also thanks to Vera Kennedy for the DeSmet Memorial photographs.