

ESTABLISHING AN ETHNIC COLLECTION IN A SMALL INSTITUTION

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How does an institution with a limited staff establish an ethnic collection? Using our Belgian-American Ethnic Resource Collection as an example, I will explain how we at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay (UWGB) became involved and carried out the project.

We are a small institution. Our university has about 3,000 students and at the time we began thinking about establishing a collection I was working one-half time in the Area Research Center. The Center is a cooperative project of the University and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin to collect local and regional archival materials. Another person also worked eight hours per week in the Center.

The idea for the collection originated at the Midwest Archives Conference meeting in Saint Paul in November, 1974, when Dr. Rudolph Vecoli of the Center for Immigration Studies at the University of Minnesota spoke to the group. As an example he used the Italian-Americans who seem to be attracted to radical movements. Dr. Vecoli feels that in order to understand why a particular nationality reacts in a given way in certain instances you must see them as whole human beings, not just as statistics in an industrial labor force.

As I sat and listened to Dr. Vecoli, I thought immediately of the Belgian settlement in Brown, Door, and Kewaunee Counties in northeastern Wisconsin. In this area these people are often referred to as the "Dumbbellians" (one word). They also are the subject of the ethnic

joke—with many jokes more cruel than amusing.

In considering the establishment of a Belgian collection the first step was to find out if a repository already existed. We found none, and the existing histories and accounts dealing with the Northeastern Wisconsin Belgians were generally judged to be very subjective. It was apparent from this initial research that a need existed for this collecting effort. Before funding could be sought, basic information had to be gathered. Some of the findings follow.

The first ten Belgian families to settle in Northeastern Wisconsin left Brabant province, Belgium, in 1853. As evidenced by the U. S. Census figures, the greatest number arrived between 1855 and 1858:

PERSONS OF BELGIAN DESCENT IN WISCONSIN

1850.....	45
1860.....	4647
1870.....	4804
1880.....	5267
1890.....	4567

Of the 4,567 Belgians in Wisconsin in 1890, the U. S. Census shows that 3,742 (over 81%) lived in Brown, Door, and Kewaunee Counties. Many of their descendents still reside in these three counties, forming a homogeneous group in an area approximately 35 miles square. In many cases farms have been in the same family over 100 years. Fourth and fifth generation Belgians still speak together in Walloon, a French patois, and many people now in their fifties did not learn to speak English until they started school. While Walloon is a written language, the Belgians in this area generally believe that it is only an oral language and because it has been passed down orally in this part of the country it may be regarded as a folk language. Early records are in French or a phonetic French, depending upon the education of the persons involved. The first Belgian settlers made a living making shingles and farming small plots of land until the fall of 1871 when a fire caused by an extreme drought swept parts of the three counties where they had settled, virtually destroying the shingle industry. After the fire, farming became the major industry, but because the farms were small, income often was supplemented in the winter by commercial fishing. Some men also migrated to the lumber camps in northern Wisconsin about Thanksgiving time and returned home in April; during this period the women and children assumed responsibility for feeding and caring for the livestock.

The Belgians traditionally celebrated the kermis, a harvest festival, and the first American kermis is said to have been held in Kewaunee County to appease the women who missed the annual harvest celebration of their homeland. Celebrations followed at six other locations in the area throughout September and October. Each kermis started with the observance of Mass to give thanks for a bountiful harvest, followed by dancing and games until the early hours of the next day. Beer, Belgian pie, and what is known as "booyah" (from the word bouillon) were consumed in quantity. Today much of the meaning is lost with every tavern holding a kermis. However, it is still a time when the women make hundreds of pies and other special treats, and Belgian families and friends come together.

With the above information in mind, we looked for grant funding appropriate to our needs. The Wisconsin American Revolution Bicentennial Commission grants appeared to be the logical source. Once we identified this source, we proceeded to establish objectives for our proposed activities with the grant guidelines in mind. Our affiliation with the State Historical Society of Wisconsin and connection with the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay enabled us to draw upon the expertise of specialists from both institutions to insure collecting in a scholarly manner.

We established these objectives:

1. Collect original documents reflecting the character of the Belgian Community, including legal papers, diaries, letters, papers of organizations, and local governmental records. Visual material such as photographs were also sought.
2. Record oral histories (on audio-tape when appropriate or in a written report).
3. Document the Walloon language spoken in Brown, Door, and Kewaunee Counties.
4. Conduct an architectural survey to identify typical Belgian architecture including log, stone, and brick houses, small chapels, outdoor ovens, and summer kitchens.
5. Compile an annotated bibliography of resources, at UWGB and elsewhere, relating to the Belgians of northeastern Wisconsin.
6. Prepare travelling exhibits of material collected to be displayed in schools, libraries, and other public places.

Our aim in selecting these objectives was to use several different approaches in an effort to reflect the real character of the people.

We also had to consider our own expertise and limitations, the time we had to accomplish our objectives, and the personnel available for consultation. We found that we were a bit unrealistic in what could be accomplished with the money, time, and know-how which we had, and at times were very hard-pressed to fulfill all that we set out to do. It is extremely easy to formulate a set of objectives, but it is another matter to carry them out! Objectives should be ambitious enough to make the project worthwhile, but at the same time should be realistic.

Once the objectives were defined, a budget was worked out and the total cost set at \$12,200. Employees were then selected. My services could not be considered in the budget although I acted as director. One part-time employee and two student assistants were budgeted to work a total of 48 hours per week. The part-time employee had worked with me during the planning stage and the two students had been aware of our plan and had asked to work with us. Thus we knew we had people interested in the project. None of us were of Belgian heritage and this had both advantages and disadvantages in working with an ethnic group. An ethnic group member tends to take for granted some characteristics of the group which would be of interest to researchers while the person who is not of the ethnic group may fail to ask the proper questions to bring these characteristics to light. The person outside the ethnic group also tends to be more aware of unique qualities of the group.

Bicentennial grants required dollar-for-dollar matching funds and my first big surprise came when I asked our library director for \$6,100 to match the Bicentennial funds. His reply was, "Go back to your office and call the Belgian Consul and ask the Belgian government for the money." I could not believe my ears! But that is what I did after first writing the Consul and telling him what I wanted and when I would telephone. We talked together and he was interested in our plan but said that it would take about six weeks to get a reply from his government. We had less than a month, however, to locate the money and the University eventually provided the matching funds. Although we did not receive funds from Belgian government, the contact was important. Through the Consul, the Belgian government later gave us a collection of very fine art books and has promised additional material on other subjects.

In order for this type of project to be a success, publicity is essential. We used the press, radio talk shows, and personal contact. We also presented papers at the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters annual meeting and at an American Library Association conference. Opportunities such as this should not be overlooked because they provide contacts with scholars who might not otherwise learn about your efforts.

There is a large Belgian-American club in Door County and we obtained permission to attend some of their meetings. Also, arrangements were made for the club to meet at the University, giving us an opportunity to show the members what had been collected and to explain the types of material which we sought. Periodically we also presented programs at schools, libraries, and other institutions, using the tapes and other resources collected to support our talks.

Decisions on the order in which to fulfill objectives are sometimes difficult to make. If demands will be made on other people's time, their occupation and free time must be considered. In the case of farmers, the planting and harvesting seasons are very busy and absolutely no one in the Belgian community wants to be bothered during the kermis celebration. The season of the year also has to be considered when photographing architecture and mapping.

We chose oral history for the first phase, and at the same time seized the opportunity to solicit manuscript material and photographs to copy. Subjects covered on the tapes included social life, folk music, religious activities, life style, and fishing. We concentrated on the older members of the community for our interviews, and these interviews afforded a means of becoming better acquainted with the Belgian community so that when we went out later to do the photographing and mapping, the people already knew us.

As soon as weather permitted in the spring, we began the architectural survey and at that time defined the area to be covered and types of buildings to be documented. A number of wayside chapels, many log buildings, and a few summer kitchens and outdoor ovens are extant and we made an effort to include all of them in the survey, as well as the brick and stone houses. Whenever a photograph was taken we attempted to learn the name of the builder, the date of construction, and the original purpose of the building. Dr. William Laatsch, a cultural geographer at UWGB, and Mark Knipping from the Preservation Division of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, were our con-

sultants. We decided it would be valuable to identify at least five or six farms on which most of the original buildings still stand and map each farm showing existing buildings, gardens, roads, fields, fences, etc. Photographs of all sides of the buildings accompany these studies. Interviews with current and previous owners were taped, making it possible to map changes in land and building use over the years.

In documenting the Walloon language, we consulted professors of French and linguistics. Conversational tapes were made in Walloon and translated, and students of linguistics also made studies of the language. Dictionaries and works of literature in the Walloon language have been added to the collection so there is enough material available to teach a class in Walloon.

Even small institutions have many people with particular expertise. For example, a member of our French Department helped to translate foreign language materials we discovered. In most areas state historical societies would be willing to advise institutions trying to establish collections. We discussed details of acquisition with State Historical Society of Wisconsin archivists and the Society's oral historian gave us an intensive one-day training session. We found that many other people responded to our appeals for help and I feel our collection is more valuable as a result of their assistance.

Staff meetings are sometimes difficult to arrange when working around field calls, student schedules, and part-time employees. However, they are an absolute necessity. Staff meetings provide an opportunity to evaluate what has been done, set priorities, share information, and exchange ideas on how to proceed. Looking back, I feel we should have had more meetings and started evaluating earlier.

We had neither staff time nor money to transcribe our audio tapes so we abstracted from them instead. In most cases the interviewer prepared the abstract by selecting the main topics covered in the tape and then indicating on the abstract the approximate location of that information on the tape. A community volunteer prepared a subject index from the abstracts to bring together the subject areas for all of the tapes. Two copies of each tape are kept — the master copy and a user copy.

Coordinate indexing, a system of assigning a number to each photograph and then recording this number on name, place or subject cards, is used for the photograph collection. It is time consuming but worthwhile in that it allows for flexibility in retrieval by subject,...

name, place, or object.

Our last task was the bibliography and the displays. A collection is of little value without a bibliography as it is a vehicle for pulling everything together and for letting other people know about your resources. Our bibliography has been distributed to libraries in the Green Bay area, to other Wisconsin communities where Belgian-Americans reside, to selected universities and, through the Belgian Consul, to institutions in Belgium. Our faculty also has been helpful in putting the bibliography into the hands of interested researchers.

The preparation of displays to be exhibited by other institutions has been a problem for us that has never been completely resolved. The proper kinds of display stands are extremely expensive and those which we could construct allowed for little flexibility in material displayed. However, there are ample resources in the collection to use for display purposes and some day the problem may be solved.

Manuscript materials and government records gathered by the project became the property of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin for permanent deposit in the Area Research Center. Society archivists organized and cataloged the collections in Madison and returned them to us. We were especially successful in obtaining records of Town governments in areas heavily populated by Belgians. These included minutes of Town Board meetings, assessment rolls, chattel mortgage records, election records, and financial materials. We also acquired, either in the original or for copying, collections of family papers, church records, and other archival materials.

On October 31, 1976, we held an open house at the Center. Material which had been collected was displayed and people had a chance to listen to the oral tapes, to examine maps and photographs, and to join us in a piece of Belgian pie. It was a way of thanking the Belgian community for helping to make the project a success. About 300 community members, university staff, and the Belgian Consuls from both Chicago and Milwaukee were there. Many people came early in the afternoon and stayed until we closed, visiting with old friends.

Collecting continues, though less actively. An effort is being made to maintain contact with members of the Belgian community and to participate in programs and classroom presentations whenever possible. Most of our time was spent in rural Walloon Belgian communities. We hope eventually to examine the urban Belgian population of Green Bay, because many Belgian-Americans have figured prominently in

the political, financial, and industrial history of the city. Lambeau Stadium, the Packer football field, is named for Curly Lambeau whose grandfather came to Green Bay from Belgium in the 1870s. We also would like to spend more time investigating the Flemish Belgians, many of whom settled on the west side of Green Bay and were truck gardeners.

For those of us carrying out the project the experience was great. We gained new friends, valuable experience, and we feel a kinship with the Belgian community which is our greatest reward.

An ethnic collection can provide researchers with the necessary information to rewrite history from an ethnic point of view, and in the case of small ethnic groups, to include their contribution to society. Each group has brought with it certain cultural qualities and experiences and, in turn, they have selected from American culture those aspects which are compatible with their own. An ethnic group can be understood only by looking at the individuals who make up that group — their aspirations, successes and frustrations — and only then will they be revealed to us as whole human beings. Collections which contain material of a personal nature will lead us to a better understanding of one another.

One of our greatest problems at first was convincing the average individual — the farmer, fisherman, or housewife — that he or she had something to offer. Their lives seem commonplace to them and they are surprised to learn that someone is interested in their activities and attitudes. When the Belgian people understood what we were doing, they were warm and helpful. It was through their generosity in time and material that we were able to identify and bring together information for the future historian. Last, but not least, the Belgian-Americans feel an added pride in their heritage.