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Reminiscences of Mrs. George W. Diepenbrock

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The settlement of Belgians in Belvidere is an interesting chapter in the history of Goodhue County. These people did not come direct from the old country but their ancestors were Walloons, living near the French border and speaking a dialect in which both French and German words were used. This part of Belgium was a farming region but the people did not live on their farms. They lived in villages, the men going out to the fields each day to work. For their trading they went across the border into France.

The parents of Mrs. George Diepenbrock were Peter and Anna Mary George. The mother of Peter George was born in Masaucee and his father was born in Hushee. Anna Mary's maiden name was Thill and her mother's maiden name was Wagner.

Peter and Mary Anna George came to the New World and made their home in Wyoming County, New York, which at that time was fine farm land. Their names are on tombstones in the old cemetery at Sheldenville, where they lived. Other families from the same part of Belgium were there, and many customs of their former home were continued, including the Harvest Dance, held about St. Michael's Day, and the dances on New Year's Eve and Easter Monday.

In this little community Mrs. Diepenbrock (Catherine George) was born on August 15th, 1845. The farms were on the edge of the village and she remembers that her father had a fine cherry orchard and there was an abundance of all sorts of fruits, including black and red raspberries. Miss Clara Diepenbrock visited the farm in 1920 and saw the orchard planted by her grandfather.

Among the friends of the George family in Sheldenville was Joseph Batlo, who was born in France and married a woman whose ancestors came from Belgium. In 1859 Joseph Batlo and his wife came to Red Wing and their letters told of the broad prairies of Minnesota. The first settlers in what is now Belvidere were English (or "Americans") who took up land there in 1855, but the Belgians began to come in 1861, and among the first of the group was Peter George, father of Mrs. Diepenbrock. A Mr. Jewell had a claim that he wanted to exchange for land in the east and a transaction was made by which Peter George acquired this uncultivated land.

The George family travelled by train from Buffalo to Chicago and from Chicago to La Crosse, where they took the boat for Red Wing, arriving in May, 1861. The Batlos welcomed them, and there was a great deal to talk over; family news was exchanged, Mrs. Batlo's grandfather and Mrs. Diepenbrock's grandfather being cousins.

At that time the Batlos kept the Franklin Hotel, on the south side of Main Street beyond Plum, where the Red Wing Creamery Building now stands, and the Georges stayed there until they could rent a house. Summer came, and the men went out to break the land and begin work on the new farm. Mrs. Diepenbrock remembers the wild roses, the red prairie lilies and the lady slippers that grew among the bushes, but far and wide there was a wilderness, with great quantities of hazel brush.

The Georges stayed in their rented house in Red Wing the next winter, but when spring came the men put up a shanty on the farm and they lived in that until the house was built. That house is still standing, as part of a larger dwelling, and is occupied by

a grandson of the original owner, who operates the old farm.

One of the first things that Peter George did was to have a well drilled (not dug) and a wooden pump installed, so that his family had good water. There were wild plums, and an abundance of delicious wild strawberries came up after the ground had been broken. Mrs. Diepenbrock does not recall the planting of fruit trees, yet she remembers that they had apples and plenty of fruit to eat, and that vegetables were stored in the commodious cellar under the house. The principal crop was wheat, but they raised a little barley and enough oats for their horses. They had cows and other stock, and the farm was well equipped with machinery. The wheat was taken to Red Wing to be ground and at a later time they took it to Gaylord's mill which was nearer. One farmer might take the wheat from several families, wait until it was ground, and bring back the proper amount of flour to each. The flour is said to have been excellent in quality.

Joseph Batlo and his wife were the first to come from Wyoming County to Minnesota, but Charlie Roberts seems to have been the first to settle in Belvidere. Later the Stetlers came and lived opposite the Georges, and the Pratts joined the colony but did not stay long. Mrs. Diepenbrock remembers the following families who came to Belvidere from the same part of New York as herself -- Lippert, Wagner, Redding, Befort, Mustie, Tuck and Magerus. Among those of Belgian descent who did not come from New York were the families of Zorn, Gregorie (pronounced Gregwar) and Bartholomew (pronounced Bartolmy). These people attended the Roman Catholic Church in Bellechester, as the settlement of the country developed.

The French-German dialect brought from Belgium was spoken by the older members of the group.

George W. Diepenbrock was of Dutch descent, his father having been born in East Friesland which was taken from Holland by Germany. His father's name was Jann Gergets Diepenbrock. The family coat of arms is a shield with crossed swords, surmounted by a helmet. This (here insert detailed description). This coat of arms dates from 1096 when it was borne by a Sir Knight Crusader whose name was Johan von Diepenbrock, the coat of arms being recorded in the books of arms of German nobility (insert title of the principal book). There were two branches of the family, one Lutheran and the other Roman Catholic, George coming from the Lutheran branch.

Jann Gergets Diepenbrock suffered from cholera when young and never regained his health. He owned extensive lime kilns in St. Louis and, hearing the fame of Minnesota's climate, he decided to sell his lime kilns and come here, in the hope that it might benefit his health. He sold his lime kilns for gold, when gold was at a premium, and so brought a considerable fortune to his new home. He added to this by mortgages on farms, but did not stress these to the point of causing hardship by foreclosure.

George P. Diepenbrock came with his father in May 1860, being 12 years old at the time. An older brother came also, and the family lived on Main Street, next to the Music Hall Block which stands at the corner of Main and Bluff Streets. Their dwelling was a two-story house, the inside of the walls being of brick and the outside of wood. Across the front was a porch which formed a balcony for the second story. The older Diepenbrock opened a general store and, in accordance with the custom of the period, his store was on

the ground floor and the family lived upstairs. Next this building, toward Barn Bluff, was a one-story brick building in which Mr. Diepenbrock had a shoe store, this connecting by a door with his general store.

Hamline University was a flourishing institution, and George Diepenbrock was one of its students. He was too young to go to war, and he and his brother helped their father in the store, succeeding to the business after his death.

Meantime the settlement at Belvidere was growing. The young people had good times among themselves and came to Red Wing for various occasions. There were gay little parties at the farmhouses, the music being furnished by "fiddlers". Only square dances were used, and the rooms were so small that only one "set" could dance at a time. There were usually about 12 at a party, and when the young men came in they were each given a number. The person in charge of the dancing would call the numbers of the boys allowed to dance, whereupon they would get their partners and the "set" would be made up. This gave all an equal chance and proved an excellent arrangement.

In Red Wing the parties were larger and there was an orchestra for the dancing. The first dance that Mrs. Diepenbrock remembers was at Harmony Hall, in what was later known as the Healy house, (Hille)
at the southwest corner of Main and Fulton Streets.

Mr. and Mrs. Diepenbrock were married in 1867 and went to Menkato to live, returning to this city in 1871 and taking up their abode in the house still occupied by Mrs. Diepenbrock, at Potter Street. The house has been remodelled and greatly enlarged. In the eighties -- perhaps in 1886 -- Mr. Diepenbrock sold his store

and became Justice of the Peace; he also had a collection and insurance agency.

Through her marriage, Mrs. Diepenbrock became affiliated with the German group of early Red Wing residents, comprising, among others, the families of Reichert, Hack; Friedrich, Kuhn, Wolf, Heising, L. C. Smith, Hille, Brunner, Christ, Kappel, two families of Remsharts, more than one family of Hickmans, Philip Hoffman whose widow married Jacob Christ, and also Harry Hoffman who was a bachelor and known as a "cut-up." Mollie Hempftling was also in this group, and Mr. Reese.

With a common bond of language and cultural taste, this German group was sufficient unto itself. Two large societies were organized, the Turnverien and the Gesangverein, and these societies built the "old Opera House" at the northwest corner of Third and Broadway, where the Public Library now stands. There was also the Turnwart, with Diepenbrock, Brunner and Reese as its leaders, which trained the young boys in calisthenics and gymnastics. Pictures of these men in their training suits are still in the old albums. Both men and women belonged to the Gesangverien.

Theatricals in German formed one of the principal activities of this group, and Mrs. Remshart was prominent in these theatricals. Mrs. Diepenbrock's name was usually in the cast. Many plays were given in this way, and were greatly enjoyed by the German-speaking people. Dances were given by the German group and attended by many residents of the town, but meetings and memberships of the societies and theatricals were limited to the Germans themselves. About three times a year the Turnverien had exhibitions and sold tickets.

Mrs. Diepenbrock said that the first German Lutheran minister in Red Wing was Dr. Blecken, and that the church was on the next

lot to the corner of Fifth Street and East Avenue, facing East Avenue. The first Roman Catholic priest that she could remember was Father Knauf.

(Was not Mr. Diepenbrock a Knight Templar? This should be inserted, with any other memberships). Mr. Diepenbrock died in Red Wing in (?). The children of Mr. and Mrs. Diepenbrock are William, Clara, Julia, George, Albert and Clarence, all living and residents.