



PROMOTERS, PLANTERS, AND PIONEERS: THE COURSE AND CONTEXT OF BELGIAN SETTLEMENT IN WESTERN CANADA

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Scheppers College, Swan Lake, MB, 1919-32. (Author's files)
An agricultural college for Flemish boys operated by the
Brothers of Our Lady of Mercy from Mechelen, Belgium.

THE MANITOBA BASE

The first Belgian settlers arrived in Manitoba in the 1880s, St. Boniface becoming their initial base for settlement in the surrounding French-Canadian parishes. It became the industrial centre for many decades and remained the centre of Francophone Catholic institutions. Skilled and unskilled workers and trades people were concentrated in the eastern enclave, popularly known as Belgian Town, but it never became an ethnic ghetto. Shopkeepers, office workers and a few professionals were concentrated in the upwardly mobile sector around the cathedral and classical college. The Belgian Club, founded in 1905, was strategically located between these two urban sectors, as was the Sacred Heart Flemish parish erected later. Employment was available initially in grain processing, meat packing, in the railway yards and production of building materials. By the inter-war years, the second generation and new arrivals aspired to economic mobility through enterprises modelled on interactive business development. As Winnipeg surpassed St. Boniface, Belgians were attracted to its suburbs where they became successful dairymen, market gardeners, and after 1940, sugar beet growers and factory workers.

Those who took up agriculture, the main thrust of immigration efforts, became partners in the national development of the West as the wheat economy evolved. Families took up farms in the southern area of the province, notably around St. Alphonse, Bruxelles and Deloraine, seeking a familiar landscape as much as possible. St. Boniface remained the point of entry to the Prairies for Belgians even when Winnipeg asserted itself as the “gateway” to the West. A chain migration of Flemings used Deloraine as an interior outpost to fan out onto the second and third prairies levels.

Similarly, Walloons recruited especially by the abbé Jean Gaire moved westwards from Grande Clairière to form a short chain of Francophone rural parishes. Flemings blended into Francophone communities as easily as the Walloons, not only in St. Boniface and environs, but also in rural areas such as Ste. Rose-du-Lac and Ste. Amélie. Thus the pattern of main Belgian settlement was established – basically it was rural agricultural with some business entrepreneurship in smaller urban centres. Individuals and family units came initially and they were reinforced through chain migration. Clerical colonization projects were of minor importance in Manitoba. Internal migration resulted in dispersal over a wider area, notably the northern parklands.

Context of Initial Settlement

Settlement on the first Prairie steppe, roughly the present province of Manitoba, was stimulated by three factors. These were the building of railway lines that provided access to the vast plains; the Crow's Nest Pass Agreement of 1897 which provided access to rich mineral resources while reducing freight rates on grain destined for export and on incoming settlers' construction materials and implements; and the laissez-faire immigration policies. Federal government intervention in the settlement of Western Canada is often presented as part of a national policy, a visionary nation-building plan that is a convenient academic creation.¹ Belgians were interested in Western Canada by the time the region successfully entered the rising world wheat trade, soon ranking with the United States and Argentina in wheat exports.² James Trow, chair of the House of Commons immigration and colonization committee, visited Manitoba in 1877. In a series of thirteen letters, he confirmed the suitability of the North-West as a field of immigration and concluded that Manitoba was ideal for intensive agriculture.³ The Rowell-Sirois Commission concluded decades later that because of this development after 1896, "Canadians began to believe themselves to be a great people. Their work in creating the West gave them that sense of common achievement which marks a nation."⁴ After 1871, Manitoba could appoint its own agents in Europe and elsewhere "duly accredited by the General Government".⁵ Implementation of the agreement was another matter, prompting the *Manitoba Free Press* to editorialize: "Nothing more, surely, need be urged than to make a good demand upon Canada to select at least one resident of Manitoba

to represent our case in Europe.”⁶ In fact, in August 1871, young J.A.N. Provencher was appointed by Ottawa agent for the North-West and during a three-month tour of Europe visited Belgium. His efforts were somewhat hampered by two factors: first, the lack of co-ordinated efforts by various interested government departments; second, the lack of confidence in this agent on the part of the Manitoba Francophone community.⁷ Settlement was rather disappointing at first. In many years there were nearly as many cancellations of homestead entries as new entries.⁸

A second federal initiative was the provision by Order-in-Council of the Department of the Interior for bloc settlements. Among the Francophones, a few Belgians settled at Letellier, St. Pierre-Jolys, St. Malo and Ste. Anne-des-Chênes. An entrepreneur from Oudenaarde in Flanders, Louis Verhaegen, wrote to Msgr. Ireland in St. Paul, Minnesota, inquiring about the possibility of launching a bloc settlement in Manitoba. The letter was sent on to St. Boniface for a reply and action.⁹ Seven years later, Métis land bought up by the Catholic Church was still available to form a Belgian bloc. By 1880 the church opposed any such settlement beyond the Red River valley parishes.¹⁰

The year after Trow’s visit, the railway from Minnesota reached St. Boniface, the oldest Canadian settlement in the West, more important than Fort Garry [Winnipeg], and destined to become the centre of Belgian concentration and activity. The rerouting of the Canadian Pacific Railway to Winnipeg/St. Boniface instead of Selkirk, in return for a generous cash subsidy, free land for a large railway yard and buildings, and a property tax exemption set off a boom on the left bank of the river. In 1871, St. Boniface had about four times the population of Fort Garry, but by 1881 Winnipeg had a population seven times larger than St. Boniface. Nevertheless, Joseph Royal, leader of the minority Francophone legislators, attempted to maintain the traditional Red River duality in government and reassured Archbishop Taché that Belgium would send out three to four hundred thousand settlers, a fanciful view taken up in the pages of *Le Manitoba*.¹¹ Although the clergy were impressed by the industry and rapid adaptation of the few Belgians settled near St. Alphonse and Deloraine, the archbishop was becoming aware that most Belgian immigrants spoke Flemish.¹²

Winnipeg was the “gateway” geographically where the Canadian Shield had given way to fertile flat prairie land just east of the junction of the Red and Assiniboine rivers. By 1881 the CPR had reached

beyond Winnipeg along the Assiniboine valley. Brandon was the western passenger terminal, but at Flat Creek [Oak Lake/Lac des Chênes] there was an important siding for outfitting incoming settlers. Abbé Gaire, a colonizing priest, identified it as his base for a triangular settlement to launch a chain of western parishes. Building material of all descriptions was stockpiled there. Two large boarding houses accommodated the railway construction crews, including a few Belgian workers. A land agency was opened at "Turtle Mountain" [Deloraine], a staging point for westward-bound Belgians.

Belgians settled in widely dispersed areas from the hub of St. Boniface, including Ile des Chênes, St. Norbert, St. Léon, Pine Falls and Ninette. The abbé G. Clouthier, a colonizing agent explained: "The whole of these places are regularly organized parishes, having schools which are kept under the immediate control of the ecclesiastical authority."¹³ La Broquerie, where Jean-Baptiste Tauffenbach and Mathias Pierson settled, attracted the attention of Auguste Bodard, the colonizing agent, who entered into negotiations for a housing development for up to four hundred Belgian families. The project was probably related to the proposal of the Countess de Bruges de Gerpinne and based on the model village plan of Viscount Jules de Cuverville.¹⁴ It was only in 1888 that the Bruneau Verhaeghe family settled in St. Boniface. Within two decades St. Boniface could claim the chief concentration of Belgians in the province.

Immigrants travelling by train from the eastern seaports were discouraged by the endless uninhabited stretches of forests and lakes between Montreal and Winnipeg, followed by the seemingly vacant prairies. But some found a familiar landscape that became a part of their identity and memory, such as those from the Ardennes who settled at Bruxelles. Others, like those at St. Alphonse or Grande Clairière created a familiar landscape with the church and its adjacent cemetery and grotto.¹⁵ For Belgians it was important to maintain communication with a centre such as St. Boniface, to have access to wood and water, and soil suitable for mixed farming. If a familiar landscape such as Bruxelles were available, this added an emotional attachment to economic considerations.¹⁶

Farming in the "old country" and in the new land were both occupations designed to make nature produce marketable commodities as well as subsistence for the family. The difference was that in Belgium nature had long been domesticated and cultivated but in Manitoba it was undomesticated, wild and sometimes resistant. The immigrant

farmer became a partner in the process of national development, at least economically, if not immediately in the political sense.¹⁷

In 1881 there appeared a strange tall building in Gretna, a grain elevator, a storage and loading facility that could save farmers the back-breaking work of hoisting nearly seven hundred sacks of wheat needed to fill a railway boxcar. Soon these vertical grain elevators appeared in all the railway towns and hamlets. In 1889–90, following cancellation of the CPR monopoly, the Pacific Northern Railway laid a line through Somerset, Swan Lake and Mariapolis, an important boost to settlement of the area where numerous Belgians were among the newcomers. The West began exporting wheat through Winnipeg and in St. Boniface flour mills went into operation. The stage was set for the implantation drama.

Early Colonization Reports

By the end of the nineteenth century, favourable reports had confirmed the suitability of the keystone province for both agricultural and working class immigrants. J.E. Têtu, immigration agent at Emerson, where immigrants entered the West arriving via the United States, reported in 1888:

The past year, too, has witnessed a fair immigration of French and Belgian settlers, about whom I am entitled to speak as I have conducted the French correspondence for the Winnipeg Agency as well as my own at Emerson. These immigrants are of the well-to-do class, with means sufficient to purchase farms.... They are extremely self-reliant, requesting help only in one particular; of an interpreter and this but in isolated cases.¹⁸

In 1890, Louis Hacault, a conservative Catholic journalist from Brussels, visited the rural settlement of Bruxelles through courtesy of a free railway pass from the Canadian Pacific Railways in the interests of the St. Raphaël Society for the Protection of Emigrants. He marvelled at the warm reception by French-Canadians who had preceded them:

The Canadians showed themselves to be perfect with respect to our compatriots. When the first contingent of Belgians arrived at Cypress River, two or three years ago, all the French Canadians were on hand to receive them. A single farmer, M.

Bernardin, lodged 45 during several weeks. That alone speaks. Canadian hospitality and generosity are beyond all praise.¹⁹

He met about one hundred and fifty immigrants from Luxembourg and Namur provinces and a few Flemings. All spoke optimistically of their lot; one housewife exclaimed in Flemish: "Oh, sir, we are here in heaven itself." From the highest hill in the district known as Lookout Hill, the future homestead of the Lebrun family from Marcinelle, he viewed the countryside of wooded hills and valleys and decided that he would personally take up land in the area and recruit a number of compatriots to do likewise.²⁰

Hacault's enthusiasm was echoed a few years later by Georges Kaiser, an engineer who visited Western Canada in the company of Auguste Bodard, the secretary of the Société d'immigration française. In a subsequent publication, Kaiser noted that three objections to western settlement – the scarcity of wood, the lack of water, the severe climate – should not deter prospective immigrants. He underscored that the soil was fertile and natural disasters were infrequent.²¹

The consul general in Canada, Fernand Van Bruyssel, reported in detail to his embassy in Great Britain on soil conditions in Manitoba. He described it as extremely fertile, attaining a depth of several metres, the result of centuries of vegetal decomposition enhanced by the ashes of prairie fires and animal deposits. From this he concluded:

It is, moreover, easy to cultivate; the settlers in Bruxelles and St. Alphonse assured me that one man alone can manage without extraordinary effort to cultivate, seed and harvest 50 acres of land. He only requires help for about ten days during harvesting. Add to this the fact that very well-developed agricultural machinery is in almost general use.²²

In fact, M. De Volver, a former minister in the Belgian government, had a twenty-two-year-old son whom he wanted to send to Manitoba "to familiarize himself with the layout of large farms, cattle raising and generally all aspects of agriculture."²³

Auguste de Pape, a pioneer in southern Manitoba, sounded a warning about sending a young member of the family to scout out possibilities

abroad and the possible irremediable breaking of family and community ties.

I find myself in a country not too convenient for young men who arrive here without parents and families, as many among them live in winter off earnings they gathered in the summer. Some go to extremes, spending the money by moving from place to place rather than becoming serious and settling down on a homestead. They have become wanderers and drink a lot, something which this country can do without, especially here in Manitoba.²⁴

His opinion was published in *Les Belges au Manitoba: Lettres authentiques* alongside testimonials gathered from compatriots who had begun to clear land, plant crops and raise their families in the pioneer environment.

The immigration agent in Winnipeg reported in 1889: “there arrived during the season about two hundred Belgians, some of whom have been settled through the efforts of Rev. Father Clouthier; others, have found employment in various parts of the country.”²⁵ On the other hand, Thomas Gelley, French interpreter for the immigration service in Winnipeg, reported that arrivals from France and Belgium were “dissatisfied men who had no agricultural tastes, but were of a roaming disposition, and who without money or the first principles of economy, came to Canada and returned home dissatisfied with our country.”²⁶ Two years later, Gelley was commended for his efforts: “Eighty-five persons came from Belgium and have been located at St. Norbert, Deleau and St. Alphonse in Manitoba, and in Lethbridge and Calgary in Alberta.”²⁷ Henri d’Hellencourt, a French army lieutenant who came to Manitoba in 1891 and became the editor of *L’Echo du Manitoba* in 1895, was sent by Clifford Sifton on a mission to France and Belgium, following differences that had developed between the government and its agent, Auguste Bodard. D’Hellencourt reported favourably on emigration prospects and began sending copies of *L’Echo du Manitoba* to Belgium each week.²⁸

The narrow vision of the federal government, shared by the Manitoba government, appealed specifically to the aspirations of British dispossessed urban workers. Belgians had different motives for emigrating, which the Manitoba authorities failed to capitalize upon.²⁹ The issue resurfaced in 1907 when Armand Lavergne and Henri Bourassa attacked the Laurier

government for not funding agencies in Belgium and France on the same basis as England. It reflected, they said, the personal bias of the deputy minister, James Smart, who was reported in the *Northern Express* of Liverpool on 10 February 1902 as saying that more British emigrants were required to prevent any “francisation” of Canada, an opinion often repeated in later years.³⁰

On the other hand, Belgian vice-consul Robert De Vos recorded a favourable impression of early implantation: “When colonists establish themselves in groups under the guidance of an experienced person who knows English, or under the direction of a priest, as was done with success at Bruxelles and at St. Alphonse in Manitoba, it is preferable that they go farther West where it is easier to obtain good land, easy to clear and to cultivate.”³¹

In his 1901 report of his western tour, he documented a number of successful farm operations: Niverville could readily accommodate another fifteen or more Belgian families; at Ile des Chênes, families who came with no capital were able in a few years to become financially independent; at Otterburne, several Flemings came with no capital, worked as farm and city labourers, accumulated sufficient cash to start their own farms, and were now securely established.

They distinguished themselves by their behaviour, their steadiness at work, their perseverance, and their orderliness. The Immigration office classes them among the best settlers and sees with satisfaction their numbers increase. They all succeed and among the families that have prospered they cite the Bossuyt family of St. Boniface.³²

This justified further recruitment in Belgium.

Rural Provincial Settlements

The largest rural concentration of Belgians, both Flemings and Walloons, developed rapidly in the southern area of the province. The first newcomers, François Debleekaere and five other families, Flemings who also could speak French, settled at St. Alphonse in 1882. By 1890 there were about fifty homesteads in the area registered in Belgian names. They built their first homes from poplar logs, which did not shrink when drying,

quickly learned how to “make land”, or use a two-bladed grub-hoe like a mattock to cut tree roots and clear away the soil. The poplar trees were cut into cordwood and hauled by oxen to the railway in Holland. Oxen were cheaper than horses, were incredibly strong, lived off the land, and when too old for such hard labour could be butchered and eaten. Many of the men, needing cash for supplies, found immediate employment on the railways.³³ The community suffered a major setback when the Northern Pacific Railway bypassed the town, giving rise to the hamlet of Mariaville, later renamed Mariapolis, five miles to the south.³⁴ Nevertheless, the community included a church, four schools, two sawmills, a flour mill, a couple grocery stores, a post office and a rectory. Land was selling at from \$2 to \$10 an acre because crop yields were already reaching thirty-six bushels to an acre.³⁵

A second nucleus called Bruxelles developed north of St. Alphonse after Alphonse Bacchus took up a homestead in 1887. He opened a grocery store and obtained the franchise of the post office, a central meeting place for the community. A chain migration of Bacchus and Sauvelet relatives and neighbours ensued from the province of Luxembourg, enchanted by the panoramic views that reminded them of their homeland, its good farmland, and its abundance of wood and water. Adolescent and adult sons of thirteen families hired out to neighbouring farmers to augment family income. Little by little, family units were reconstituted. The advantage of having strong youths who could supplement family income sent a clear message to those contemplating emigrating.³⁶ The customary practices of unmarried children turning over earnings to the head of the household until such time as they married, coupled with the tradition for families of both the bride and groom to establish the new household fully equipped according to their means, were transplanted to the new land. The patriarchal family and the practice of pooled family resources were an asset in pioneering on the prairies.³⁷ The area around Bruxelles and St. Alphonse was heavily wooded. Men, especially young newcomers who had been accustomed to back-breaking work in sugar beet fields in Flanders and northern France, hired out as “grubbers” cutting bush and breaking land with a grub-hoe. They worked for board and room and a modest wage per acre cleared. They started at six o’clock in the morning, took lunch breaks at nine o’clock and four o’clock, then resumed work after the evening meal until darkness forced them to quit. In winter, they worked until the snow became too deep.³⁸ Joseph Hutlet was very

disillusioned during his first year in Manitoba, convinced his sons had not given an accurate report of conditions, but lack of funds prevented him from returning to Halanzy. As family finances improved so did his attachment to the new homeland.³⁹ The Medar Glorieux family at first found that the district was “nothing but hills, stones, snakes and small lakes,” thought of going farther west to Alberta or returning to Belgium, but eventually became quite satisfied with life in southern Manitoba.⁴⁰

When Louis Hacault visited Bruxelles in 1890, he found there approximately 150 Walloons and thirty Flemings. This number was soon augmented by the arrival of more Walloon families from Luxembourg and Hainaut and Flemings from East Flanders. In 1892, he returned with his own family and a small contingent of new settlers and filed for a homestead in dense bushland. While his wife and sons assumed many of the burdens of farming, he busied himself with community and church affairs as a justice of the peace and a churchwarden.⁴¹ August De Pape, his brother Clement and uncle John and their families hired single men, nine of whom brought their families to settle in the area, an impressive colonization success.⁴² Auguste De Pape concluded that “hard work is rewarded, we can achieve a good fortune in this country by applying the same zeal and care as in Belgium.”⁴³ He soon emerged as a community leader, serving as a churchwarden, school trustee, justice of the peace, and eventually a municipal councillor.⁴⁴ In Swan Lake, the Francis De Roo family assumed a similar leadership role soon after arriving there from Bruxelles in 1898. In Swan Lake and St. Alphonse, the Flemish group would remain predominant, spilling over into adjacent Somerset and Mariapolis.

Bruxelles remained predominantly Walloon, with a Flemish minority, and represented a wide range of occupations and talents. Louis Hacault was a journalist and man of letters who espoused conservative Catholic causes. Omer Knockaert operated a dairy farm, Julien Froidart a sawmill in the village, Ernest Deurbrouek a general store, and Joseph Hutlet was a woodworker and cabinet maker. The Hutlet clan included the Sauvelet, Mangin and Poncelet families, all from Halanzy, in the province of Luxembourg. The Poncelets operated a grocery store and lumber yard in the village. Mme Louise Nerinckx, a devout, self-effacing lady from a distinguished middle-class family, freely offered her services as *gouvernante* of the rectory for forty-five years, taught the local students their music lessons, inspired the parishioners to organize a choir and town band, and

encouraged the Ursuline nuns to come to Bruxelles to open a convent school.⁴⁵ Another prominent citizen was Dr. Alphonse Van Wilghen, a graduate of the University of Louvain, who moved his medical practice to Mariapolis to be more accessible to a larger Belgian clientele in the south central region. He treated all whether they were able to pay him for his services or not.⁴⁶

In St. Alphonse, as in Bruxelles, most were farmers but a few combined other occupations with agriculture. Alberic Schamp operated a seed business, Triphon De Pauw was a builder and accomplished beekeeper, while Francis Deschouwer was local photographer, watch repairman and also operated a sawmill on his farm. Camiel Wittenvrongel had a general store and the post office. Rural communities required this kind of self-sufficiency. There were scattered Belgian families in Notre-Dame de Lourdes, St. Léon, St. Lupicien and Holland.⁴⁷ In Swan Lake, for example, Belgians had come from southwestern Ontario, Minnesota, and even Chile, where they had initially emigrated.⁴⁸ Unlike their neighbours, the Belgians removed their children from school at age thirteen or fourteen to help on the farm. Consequently, the second generation remained on the farm, only a few going on to further education or a religious vocation. In this way, a “family farm tradition” was established with a second generation generally fluent in Flemish, French and English. A close-knit community developed as families intermarried. Eventually, Belgians became involved in business in the village itself as Pierre Jean Halleman opened a general store, Alphonse Nerynck operated a blacksmith shop, and Raymond Van Woensel started a lumber yard and hardware store. A church was built in 1913 and Brothers of Our Lady of Mercy from Malines opened Sacred Heart College in 1919, a boarding school for boys where some instruction was given in Flemish. Swan Lake had a population by 1976 that was 79 per cent Catholic of which 80 per cent of the families were of Belgian origin.

The De Vos report of 1901 provided a good summary of conditions in the early settlement period for the southern region. None of the Belgian farmers were very prosperous, but all were reasonably comfortable and satisfied. The lakes had plenty of fish and there was abundant wildlife for hunters.⁴⁹ Families corresponded with relatives in the homeland and sometimes received newspapers from overseas. The Manitoba Francophone press controlled by the clergy was accessible. In 1912, Emile Bogaert assumed the task of local reporter for the *Gazette van Detroit* that,

along with the *Gazette van Moline*, circulated throughout the Flemish-speaking communities in North America, a position he held for a record forty-five years.

Settlement in southwestern Manitoba was retarded for three reasons: because of earlier warnings that “the country west of the Souris [river] is a treeless desert, in dry seasons destitute of water, and without shrub or bush thicker than a willow twig”⁵⁰; the slow pace of the land survey; and the comparative inaccessibility until a railway reached Souris in 1886, and Hartney in 1890. Two communities served as focal points, and in some cases as halfway centres, for Belgians moving westwards from St. Boniface: Deloraine for Flemings and Grande Clairière for Walloons. The first Belgian families of Alberic Deschief, Charles Beernaert and Emile Haeven arrived in Deloraine in 1894. Two years later, five extended families arrived, followed soon thereafter by six more families from Zedelgam. Some settled in the surrounding districts west of the Turtle Mountains – Goodlands and Waskada to the south, Hartney to the north, Medora and Napinka to the west, and Boissevain to the east.⁵¹

Not all came as family units after this initial implantation. Single labourers married in the community and took up farming. Family histories illustrate a considerable degree of early mobility. Raymond Carels of Oostcamp, for example, homesteaded at Benson for a few years, spent two years working in lumber camps around Lethbridge, farmed at Deloraine, then worked for the Manitoba Telephone System as weed inspector and town bailiff for Deloraine. Also from Oostcamp was Jules Cuvelier who with his brother came to work on the railways in Ontario, joined a harvest excursion to Deloraine, stayed on to work as farm labourers, and finally settled on their own farms. Hector Lepoudre supplemented his income by working in Chicago during the winter months and Alfons Verbrugghe worked at the John Deere plant in Moline, Illinois, during the off-season. Likewise, Henri Kreckelburgh of Ruddervoorde came to work on a farm as a “hired man,” then in a lumber camp, finally on the construction of the Hudson Bay Railway before returning to Belgium just prior to the outbreak of World War I. After the war, he and his wife returned to Canada to rejoin other families who had come from Ruddervoorde.⁵² This migratory pattern was further stimulated by drought and depression. The drought in 1934 forced some to move to Foxwarren, where several other Belgians from their area had moved with cattle and horses. Others went east to the Elie, Fannystelle and Starbuck areas to cut feed and ship it back

in boxcars to Medora and vicinity. A few moved to Belgian settlements in Ontario. There was also a notable change of occupation among those who came initially as farmers or farm labourers. These new occupations included operating a service station or garage, selling automobiles and selling farm implements, installing furnaces and plumbing, and working in nearby coal mines.

Deloraine also served as a halfway centre for Flemings coming from southwestern Ontario communities and St. Boniface with the intention of moving on westwards. These immigrants succeeded as individual farmers and business entrepreneurs. They also succeeded in maintaining a sense of ethnic consciousness through endogamous marriages in the first generation, social interaction and in-group preference in employment. New immigrants were always assured of a warm welcome and practical assistance when they arrived from the “old country.” Another dozen families arrived in Deloraine after World War I, weary of the hostilities and foreign occupation, but unsuspecting of the drought and economic trials that awaited them in southwestern Manitoba in the 1930s. They settled into agriculture, except for a mechanic who briefly continued his trade by operating a repair shop and then sold farm equipment before becoming the town’s liquor agent when prohibition was lifted. All these families integrated rapidly into the larger community following the advice and support of compatriots who had preceded them.⁵³

Another nucleus of immigrants, largely Walloons in this case, formed north of Hartney in the Grande Clairière and Deleau districts. This movement from Luxembourg and Hainaut provinces was initiated through the efforts of abbé Jean Gaire, a French priest who was in communication with French Canadian clerical leaders and politicians anxious to promote Francophone immigration in the West. His objective was to found a series of parishes populated by Francophone European settlers beyond the area of concentration of Francophone parishes in the Red River valley. In a letter to the archbishop in St. Boniface, he explained:

But the western part of the province that possessed only a few Catholics lost among the Protestants of Oak Lake and Deloraine seemed to me to be absolutely empty. Between the two places there was a vast solitude. I easily obtained permission to settle there. It was thought in high places that I had illusions so they let me proceed believing that I would soon recognize

my own helplessness; but they waited in vain for my return discouraged.⁵⁴

His project was to provide settlers upon arrival with land, farm animals, implements, seed grains, etc. This would overcome two great drawbacks to immigration – lack of capital and lack of security.⁵⁵ In the spring of 1890 he brought out eighty settlers to the “vast solitude” north of Deloraine. Recruitment of settlers was soon left to “return men” who posed as immigration agents, although they were not officially recognized as such. Edmond Fasseaux and Sebastien Deleau were quite successful in attracting forty or fifty immigrants on each expedition to Belgium and France. Fasseaux made three trips to Belgium, published articles in the press claiming he was “officially delegated by the Canadian government to inform and escort free of charge all who would like to accompany him to Manitoba.”⁵⁶ In 1892, 110 Belgians came, destined mostly for Grande Clairière, but a few went to St. Alphonse, St. Léon and Lake Dauphin.⁵⁷ It was important to be near a railway line, or an anticipated line, and near to a service centre. The abbé Gaire’s settlers chose homesteads near water and tall grass lands.⁵⁸ Unfortunately, Grande Clairière was bypassed by the Pipestone branch of the Canadian Pacific Railway. The consular report of 1901 remarked that besides the sandy soil, there was poor vegetation cover and only a few trees, therefore a poor choice for a new community. De Vos went on to warn against placing too much faith in clerical settlement projects because these were often inspired by narrow, even bigoted, religious objectives rather than sound economic and social judgments.⁵⁹

Deleau, named after Sebastien Deleau who with six other families arrived from the province of Luxembourg in 1889, provided a link between the southern Belgian communities and the abbé Gaire’s colonists. In 1892 the branch line of the Canadian Pacific from Souris reached the hamlet and erected a water tower at the nearby creek to service its steam locomotives. Sebastien Deleau had two sons: Désiré who went west to farm in a district later called Redvers and Gaston who raised prize Percheron and Belgian horses, beef and dairy cattle, and was elected a school trustee and a member of the Sifton municipal council.⁶⁰ Sebastien Deleau and Edouard Colleaux became “return men,” in the pay of the Canadian government, whose activities were closely watched by the Belgian authorities that were alerted to fraudulent schemes and infractions of emigration regulations.⁶¹

Among their recruits were families who operated the general store, were the “threshermen” of the region, and were the unofficial local historians.⁶² As early as 1892, Alexandre Colleaux, Joseph Nannon and Joseph Gatin pooled their resources to found a brick works that produced bricks for the construction of many fine farm homes, the local Catholic mission and the schoolhouse. Two grain elevators and a loading platform on the railway marked the economic activity of the small community. It produced fine cattle, excellent cereal crops and superb hay. The conversion of the local blacksmith shop to a garage marked a significant change that led to the decline of the village. A good highway resulted in increased car traffic to larger centres. Railway engines changed from steam to diesel and “diesel meant speed and became an express with no reason to stop in the hamlet of Deleau.” This decline was also marked by a local amnesia regarding its Belgian origins.⁶³

A few Belgians were interspersed in the Francophone settlements of north central Manitoba, especially around Lake Dauphin. Edmond-Marcel Didion, a successful merchant in Antwerp, became interested in Western Canada during a banquet of the chamber of commerce in Brussels. A person seated next to him, who had just returned from a trip to Western Canada in the interests of some shareholders of the Canadian Pacific Railway, depicted the region in glowing terms. In 1891, Didion pulled up stakes and headed for Ste. Rose-du-Lac. The family travelled to the end of steel and then crossed flooded swamp-land another 90 kilometres by oxcart. In scrub forest they cleared a plot and built a log cabin that served both as home and general store. The first years in this remote northern region were years of privation and loneliness, but they persevered living off the land and streams.

Compatriots soon followed. Five families arrived at Ste. Amélie, three families at Canadaville, three others at Laurier, and one at Lac Rond. At this time, the Société d’immigration française became aware of this new settlement area and directed a number of families to the region, including G. Watelet in 1897, where they became integrated in a French Canadian society. Also, Father Eugène Lecoq’s recruitment efforts were rewarding, especially because of “the amount of capital brought into the country by those who have come. With hardly an exception, these colonists had sufficient money for their establishment.”⁶⁴ In 1902 and 1906, in spite of opposition from some Belgian parish priests and landowners, he brought out eight Flemish families, followed by three families from Wallonia.⁶⁵ In

the 1920s, the process resumed as the Klaus, Piret, Denys, Petillon, Nitelet and Pauwels families arrived from Brabant and Flanders. Ste. Rose-du-Lac soon had a certain air of prosperity, possessing several general stores, a few dealerships, lumber yard, livery barn, hotel, schools, power plant, cheese factory and creamery. Immigrants continued to trickle in until 1928.⁶⁶

In 1931, Belgian Capuchin monks from St. Boniface accepted a missionary assignment at Toutes Aides, where nine Belgian families formed the core of the parish served by Father Willibrord, born Pierre-Henri Van Elslander, son of a St. Boniface alderman. Attempts to impose a tithe to raise necessary funds encountered stubborn resistance because in Belgium tithing was not a church commandment. In 1935, Archbishop Sinnott of Winnipeg approved the erection of a Capuchin monastery required to serve five mission stations on the northern fringe – Meadow Portage, Water Hen, Ginemar, Eddystone, and Cayer. Most of the parishioners were Indians and Métis, except at Cayer where seven Belgian families were the mainstay of the mission. The Capuchins remained in charge for forty-two years.⁶⁷

What evidence is there that these planters and pioneers were successful in rural Manitoba? The original families not only have remained but also they have contributed enormously to the development of their communities. Secondly, there are indications of enlarged farms, of movement into service industries, and a degree of upward social mobility. Thirdly, members of the Belgian community have served on school boards, municipal boards, farm organizations, parish councils, business associations, service clubs and recreational groups. A few have won prestigious awards and others have managed stellar operations, as indicted in other sections of this study. Lucien de Burlet wrote in 1909: "It is certain that Manitoba offers important advantages to whoever wants to come to work, and to invest his money. But one must have moral strength, determination, to resign oneself to live in isolation and especially to get along with the English element in whose midst one is virtually submerged."⁶⁸

St. Boniface Urban Hub

St. Boniface was the urban centre to which the immigrants gravitated upon arrival and where their few distinctive ethnic institutions developed. As the first rail link to the outside world, the city became noted for grain

processing, meat packing and the production of construction materials when east-west transportation lines funnelled through it. By 1908, over 90,000 head of cattle passed through its stockyards in the export trade. It was this concentration of the cattle trade that led to the building of large abattoirs and meat-packing plants, with their complement of plants for the utilization of by-products. These all offered modest wages for new arrivals who required immediate employment, or who wanted time to survey the possibilities for permanent settlement. Joseph Vermander and Marcien De Leeuw observed that the clerical policy of controlling real estate transactions in order to exclude Protestants and non-practising Catholics proved harmful to the development and expansion of the city. Consul Robert De Vos also noted that by 1901 the business core had become concentrated in Winnipeg.⁶⁹ Among the first arrivals in St. Boniface in 1879 were three Bossuyt brothers – Charles, Peter, Constant – who exemplified the dual attraction of agricultural and urban life. Charles decided to launch a city enterprise while his brothers decided to take up dairying in the suburbs. By 1895, Charles had a successful stockyard and abattoir in Winnipeg. Six other families from Passchendaele and Wingene constituted the “pioneer” Belgian group.⁷⁰ In the 1890s, single men, usually farmers and labourers, began arriving at the “gateway” and if they remained in the city they found employment at Western Canada Flour Mills, in the brickyards and lumber yards. They lived at one of several boarding houses kept by compatriots. According to Joseph Vermander, very few of these immigrants before World War I were office workers.⁷¹ On a visit back to Belgium in 1895, Charles and Constant Bossuyt convinced Edmund and Octavia Nuyttens, who were on the point of emigrating to Argentina, following what they believed to be an unjust fine for having exceeded their allowable domestic tobacco production, to accompany them back to St. Boniface. The Nuyttens started a dairy farm off Dugald Road in an area popularly known as “the Dump” which eventually was part of “Belgian Town,” allegedly a centre for home-brewing of domestic beer. The Nuyttens large barn-like house became a meeting place for newcomers, as later recalled by a descendant of those pioneers:

There were always people arriving from Belgium. Room was made for them in the different farms and houses in the neighbourhood until they were able to buy or build a house of their own in East St. Boniface or Belgian Town, as it was

known. The Belgians would relieve the drudgery of hard work in their first years in their adopted country with their own kind of fun and their own kind of music.⁷²

When Edmund Nuytten died, his widow married a local widower, Victor Wijndels, whose son Firmin made a reputation in the Belgian community as a builder and architect. Firmin's grandson, James B. Wyndels, became the community's historian.⁷³

The experience of Marcien De Leeuw and three young companions in 1906 was not unusual. The four young men had been sold cabin space on a CPR steamship by Treau de Coeli's office, but at Antwerp the agent took them to the steerage section which was filled with central and east European emigrants, jammed into the most unhygienic, foul-smelling and overcrowded conditions imaginable. They protested vociferously and paid a small bribe before they were able to occupy the cabin reserved for them. The fare from Antwerp to Quebec was \$45, but the crossing could be even more costly when agents took advantage of vulnerable emigrants.⁷⁴ Marcien De Leeuw was only twenty years old when he arrived in St. Boniface, an apprentice wheelwright able to set himself up as a carpenter. Since there was no organized artisanal hierarchy, De Leeuw soon styled himself a contractor. He obtained important contracts for the erection of towers on the local city hall and fire station, the gymnasium of Provencher School where many Belgian children attended classes, and the first section of the Belgian Club on Provencher Avenue. His success continued during the inter-war years and he survived the Depression and World War II, then launched a sawmill, lumber yard, large hardware store and a prosperous home, car and fire insurance business.⁷⁵

Others contributed at the time in less noticeable ways to the development of the urban community. Among them, for example, were Peter Van Der Veken as a house builder, Antoine Neyron in the plumbing business, and Jules Decaigny in the painting and decorating business. These entrepreneurs and some of their workmen met socially at the Belgian Club, where housing and job information was available to new arrivals, where business deals were concluded, and where economic and political strategies were discussed.⁷⁶ At the time, St. Boniface was still the leading western manufacturing centre and consequently there were employment opportunities for those who did not wish to take up a homestead in a rural area. Some pursued a migrant or seasonal worker pattern at construction

during the summer months and at the Ford plant in Detroit in the winter. In addition to the meat-packing plants, stockyards, flour mills, eight brick kilns, three large grain elevators including the imposing Soubry Grain Company, several lumber yards, there were other industrial enterprises that hired immigrant workers. Louis Pauwels launched his own enterprise and the family made a name for itself in the manufacturing sector. Theodore Bockstael's family continued his business venture with success in construction management and design building.

The immigrants who arrived during the inter-war years found immediate employment in the new meat-packing plants, abattoirs and foundries. Others opened a variety of businesses, such as de Buck's travel and insurance business, De Wandel's confectionary, and the Van Belleghem brothers' purchase of the Tourist Hotel, an important rendezvous for Belgians.⁷⁷ William English organized the Belgian-Canadian Chamber of Commerce in 1932 to cement relations with Belgian firms, but the outbreak of World War II in 1939 brought these activities to a close.⁷⁸

The Red River flood of 1950 wrought havoc in St. Boniface, particularly in the old "Belgian Town" area. However, rehabilitation projects provided renewed opportunities for small construction companies, specialists in roofing, concrete work, plumbing, heating and electrical work to establish themselves.⁷⁹ Gerard Baert arrived in 1928, and by 1933 his Baert Construction Company was on a sound footing. Flood rehabilitation projects gave the company a considerable boost so that for the ensuing twenty years it was the largest construction company in Manitoba. Bockstael Construction also enjoyed some expansion of its business as a result of the great flood. These Belgian enterprises fit the model of interactive business development. They obviously took a number of risks and were willing to accept low profits initially. Their owners aspired more to economic mobility than to social status. They did use their ethnic ties but they relied also on the French Canadian social network in St. Boniface and environs.⁸⁰

Winnipeg also attracted some Belgians. The immigration hall through which all newcomers passed was located next to the Canadian Pacific Railway station.⁸¹

Belgian immigrants descending at Winnipeg, as nearly all did, would often seek out compatriots before proceeding westwards, if that were their intention.⁸² The Belgian Club became an indispensable information centre after 1905. It met originally in a boarding house on Lombard Street,

located next to several hotels and not very far from the Provencher Bridge across the Red River to St. Boniface. This boarding house, reminiscent of the role played by Belgian boarding houses in mining communities in Nova Scotia, remained an important ethnic focal point into the 1930s.⁸³ Equally attractive to immigrants was the Tourist Hotel [originally the Quebec Hotel operated by M. Van Daele] on the St. Boniface side of the Provencher Bridge. Thus, the itinerary for many an immigrant, whether single or accompanied by the family, was from the immigration hall to the boarding house or the designated hotel, and later to the Belgian Club.

Like other ethnic groups, Flemings and Walloons did not all move on to rural communities or the open prairies. By 1921, of 5,230 Belgians in Manitoba identified in the census, 1,912, or 36.6 per cent lived in the St. Boniface/Winnipeg area. A decade later the urban proportion reached 40 per cent of Belgian-origin Manitobans.⁸⁴ In Winnipeg, they were scattered throughout the city and its suburbs and were engaged in a variety of occupations. In 1887, Jerome Verhaege was employed as a locomotive engineer by the CPR, one of the few immigrants from Belgium who had some professional credentials. In 1890, Edmond Missiaen opened a bakery in the city and provided initial employment for compatriots. The itinerary of Joseph Vermander, first child of Flemish origin born in Manitoba, only fourteen years old and without a trade or experience, had to start work in a downtown overall factory to supplement his family's income. He soon found more attractive employment as an office boy in a real estate office, joined the post office department in 1909 and slowly moved up the ranks, until in 1934 he was promoted to regional post office inspector, a position which entailed extensive travel throughout Manitoba and northwestern Ontario until his retirement in 1955. His may not have been the typical career, but it augured well for his compatriots who arrived with meagre educational qualifications and occupational skills.⁸⁵

Employment opportunities with the railways, either laying steel or making ties, attracted immigrant workers as branch lines fanned out across the prairies. In April 1928, a Belgian contractor brought two hundred workers through Winnipeg bound for The Pas. They were divided into four groups and placed on trains for Nelson, from where they were required to walk more than a hundred kilometres to the work site of the Hudson Bay Railway destined to serve the port of Churchill.⁸⁶ In addition, Winnipeg rapidly became the centre of the grain trade, including export of cereals, with an active grain exchange. At one point,

the Manitoba government ventured into the elevator business but soon sold its holdings to the United Grain Growers. Local board members of this company included Remi De Roo in Swan Lake, Octave Brandt in Somerset and Emile Roeland in Mariapolis.⁸⁷ Winnipeg also became known for its garment factories turning out men's clothes, overalls, shirts, blouses etc., and offering employment to women in particular. The H.H. Stevens parliamentary committee was appointed in 1934 to investigate the spread between production costs and consumer prices in the framework of the operations of large corporations in the midst of a severe depression. It found sweatshop working conditions in Winnipeg, even at the prominent retailer, the T. Eaton Company, whose catalogues were to be found in every western Canadian household. Seamstresses, including a few Belgians, who did piece work were paid only a few pennies for dresses that sold for a several hundred percent mark-up in department stores.⁸⁸ In these conditions, there was incentive to move on to some form of self-employment such as dairying or horticulture.

Manitoba Dairy Industry

Although the Icelanders were the first to set up dairy farms in Manitoba, the Flemings soon distinguished themselves in this branch of agriculture. In 1886 there were already twenty-four cheese factories in the province, including the St. Pierre-Jolys cheese factory, opened in 1884, operated by S.M. Barre and Charles Mignault, that featured the first Danish centrifugal system installed in North America. Cheddar was the common cheese in North America but in 1892 Gruyère cheese was being produced by Belgians at St. Hubert in Assiniboia District of the North-West Territories.⁸⁹

The Manitoba dairies exhibited some unique features compared to those in Ontario and Quebec. The Belgian dairies near Montreal, for example, were smaller, located closer to creameries and cheese factories, and enjoyed a more intensive production of milk than their western counterparts. In Manitoba, farmers who lived a distance from a large centre shipped cream by rail to the creameries and kept the skim milk for their animals, especially calves and hogs. In St. Pierre-Jolys the two cheese factories were kept well supplied by the farmers, the Belgians in particular being pleased that when they sent their whole milk to the creamery, the skim milk was returned to them to feed their animals. From

1907 onwards, special dairy trains, complete with agricultural college instructors, dairying experts and demonstration equipment, began visiting rural centres to encourage better management and production.⁹⁰

Constant Bossuyt was one of the first Belgians to take up dairying in the region, starting a small dairy south of St. Vital with twenty cows in production, then moving to Kingston Row. He delivered milk across the Red River by barge in summer and by horse-drawn vehicle in winter to boarding houses and hotels in Winnipeg.⁹¹ In 1892 he moved again to Fort Garry, bought the New Dairy (renamed Manitoba Dairy), then bought the Northwest Dairy and relocated in Oak Bluff, to the southwest of the city. His herd consisted of “range cattle,” or interbreds, not purebreds. The Bossuyt family also had a farm in St. Pierre-Jolys, where their compatriots De Jongh and Delbecque were singled out as “practical farmers with considerable means, and can safely be classed as the most desirable class of immigrants.” In St. Malo three families took up dairying and this led to the establishment of a creamery there. Louis Hacault on a fact-finding tour left a favourable report of these farms in his emigration publication.⁹²

An official from the Winnipeg Health Department sang the praises of the Nuys brothers who, though both still in their twenties, unable to speak English and with no capital, had immigrated with their mother in 1889 and become established.

They worked three years as labourers and saved \$700. They bought a dairy man out and purchased his 28 cattle for \$1,600, making the \$700 as first payment and rented his premises for \$25 a month. The first year they paid off their debt of \$900 and purchased 5 acres of land of their own. The second year they built a modern house and stable on plans supplied by the Dairy Inspector. The new stable was built to hold 80 cows. All modern improvements, concrete floors, steel stanchions, individual water basins, and litter carriers were installed. Then [1895] the herd had been increased to sixty-six.⁹³

After receiving this favourable report, thirty-three head of cattle had to be taken out of production following testing for tuberculosis. The Nuys brothers persevered, added tested cows to their herd, built a second dairy barn, and increased their acreage of coarse grains and potatoes.

In 1898, the French interpreter for the Department of Agriculture reported that the creamery at La Rochelle had made 50,000 pounds of butter over the summer, specifying that it “was packed in small tins of 1, 2 and 5 pounds weight for sale in the mining districts of British Columbia.” This creamery was also engaged in manufacturing condensed milk and evaporated cream.⁹⁴ Consul De Vos cautioned that prospects for exporting condensed milk were limited because Europe produced vast quantities of raw milk and sugar was cheaper in Europe than in Canada, as were metal containers after visiting the condensed milk factory at St. Malo, operated by the Manitoba Dairy Company. The cheese factory at St. Pierre-Jolys produced annually 125,000 pounds of excellent cheese which found an assured market in Winnipeg and in the mining centres of British Columbia and the Yukon. Skimmed milk could be shipped in from as far distant as 350 kilometres in the railway refrigerated coaches. De Vos noted that co-operatives for butter and cheese-making had not replaced private entrepreneurs because of the small population and the restricted market. It was a situation in which Belgian entrepreneurs and producers felt comfortable.⁹⁵

Most dairymen were doing well in the early 1900s. At Isle-des-Chênes those who had arrived virtually penniless were quickly well established. At Otterburne, Flemings worked first as day labourers and accumulated sufficient capital in a few years to engage in mixed farming, selling their milk to the creamery.⁹⁶ In his report, the Canadian immigration agent for the region was in complete agreement with the laudatory evaluation. He wrote: “Our immigration from these sources is fairly satisfactory, and the class of people coming are much to be desired.... Eighty-five people came from Belgium and have been located at St. Norbert, Deleau and St. Alphonse in Manitoba.”⁹⁷ During this first wave of Belgian immigration, which came to a close with the outbreak of World War I in 1914, at least eleven Flemish dairies had begun operations in the Fort Whyte district. This rapid expansion prompted the provincial authorities to appoint a dairy inspector for what they called the “New Canadian districts.” There is no indication on record whether the Belgians appreciated this presumption that they required special instruction or supervision.⁹⁸

Who were some of these early dairymen? Boudewyn Van Wynsberghe started a dairy farm in Tuxedo in 1906 and he continued to operate it until his retirement in 1966. Jules Van Haute started a dairy farm on the eastern outskirts of St. Boniface in 1912 and continued in business until

1951. Tryphoon Anseeuw operated his dairy in Fort Whyte from 1914 to 1954. His family also operated dairies in Fort Garry and Oak Bluff. The Flanders Farm in Oak Bluff, for example, started by Hector Anseeuw, was a showpiece for the industry from the 1950s until the end of the century. These examples indicate that there was a certain stability in the industry.

There are indications that these pioneer dairymen were respected in their community. Constant Bossuyt, for example, lent money in the 1910s and 1920s simply on trust, without proper legal contracts, according to the traditional Flemish rural system of neighbourly trust. During the Depression he charged only seven cents a quart (ten cents being the normal price) and he paid his hired help twenty-five dollars a month rather than the government subsidized rate of ten dollars. His recollection was that the working-class families, who lived on very tight budgets, were the most conscientious in trying to meet their obligations.⁹⁹ In 1921, the provincial government ordered the testing of all dairy herds for tuberculosis. Unfortunately, as a result of this compulsory testing, the Bossuyts lost the majority of their herd. When the testing was found to have been inaccurate, the only compensation was that the animals that had been slaughtered were judged fit for human consumption by meat inspectors. Another challenge was change in the delivery of milk. From being loaded onto the delivery wagon from eight-gallon cans, poured into two-gallon cans from which a quart was measured out by means of a deep lid into the customer's jug or container, it was delivered in glass bottles as a more sanitary measure after 1930. In 1943, their barns burned down and some dairy cows perished in the blaze. There was inadequate insurance coverage but the rival Crescent Creamery gave generous help to the Bossuyt brothers enabling them to rebuild. Their production now went to bulk milk sales and the rebuilt farm became a showpiece for the industry. In 1971 the father and four sons were still proud to show delegations arriving from such distant places as Denmark, France, Scotland, Japan, Pakistan and Cuba an efficient and attractive dairy operation.¹⁰⁰ They never won awards for their milk production or breeding practices, but they developed practical advantages such as a compact barn with good feeding arrangements, above-average output per man, and good use of unpaid farm labour. Success was attributable in good measure to the business lasting longer than one lifetime and keeping the family farm intact despite some discouraging setbacks.¹⁰¹

Another success story was that of the six Van Walleghem brothers who arrived at the turn of the century. Andries Van Walleghem started the Royal Dairy in the River Heights district south of the city of Winnipeg. In 1932, this hard-working family still held to “old country ways” and they felt that twelve-year-old Walter should be contributing to the family income rather than attending school regularly. During an eight-hour day, young Walter made more than 175 door-to-door deliveries on average. In winter, milk was kept from freezing in the closed-in wagon by charcoal burners, while the driver sat outside unprotected from the elements. In 1936 a motor truck replaced the horse-drawn vehicle to deliver both raw and pasteurized milk. Belgians preferred non-pasteurized or “natural” milk but in 1950, following the disastrous Red River flood that resulted in widespread contamination of water and food supplies, health authorities made pasteurization of milk mandatory. When small dairies found compliance difficult, the Royal Dairies (as it was now called), now relocated in Elm Creek, took in the raw milk from these farms for pasteurization and delivery.¹⁰²

There were a number of more modest Belgian dairy farms in Fort Garry, St. Norbert, Fort Whyte, Stoney Mountain, St. James, East Kildonan, and Lilyfield. The Varlez-Brunin report in 1932 remarked on the vitality of this dairy industry in the Winnipeg/St. Boniface region:

... at Fort Garry, proximate to Winnipeg, a cluster of Belgians has won a virtual monopoly of home deliveries of milk in the urban area. They possess large barns built on the most modern lines that each house 50 to 100 cows. All whom we questioned seemed very satisfied with their lot.... They are all Flemish, many of them related and from the same village [Wingene], having encouraged each other to take up the same occupation in the belief there was room for all here.¹⁰³

In 1959, Jean De Mytternaere came from Belgium to interview some recent immigrants. He began at Joseph Anseeuw’s dairy in Fort Whyte where immigrant workers were initiated into the concepts of agro-business and he proceeded to interview families that had managed eventually to purchase their own farms. He concluded that Belgians continued to be successful when they came with some capital, were willing to adapt to new conditions, and remained frugal and hard-working.¹⁰⁴

Between 1890 and 1975, Belgians operated at least forty-six dairy farms in the Winnipeg/Fort Garry/Oak Bluff area, seventeen in the St. Vital/St. Boniface region, and fourteen in North Winnipeg/East Kildonan. The small dairies were largely phased out in the 1970s as large, modern and centrally located production facilities were constructed in the urban centre. This transformation resulted from improvement in delivery services, changes in packaging and processing techniques, rising farm costs, and the other employment opportunities that presented themselves to farmers' children after World War II. Most of the Belgian suburban dairying community simply became absorbed into the urban life of Greater Winnipeg. Dairying by 2000 was scattered throughout the province. Among the dairymen recognized for exceptional milk quality were Gabriel Fifi and Derek Devos of Bruxelles, George Roels and George Michiels of Holland, J. Deblonde of Swan Lake and Bryan DeBaets of St. Alphonse.

Market Gardening

In 1900, Gustaff Vermeulen planted a large vegetable garden on Clarence Avenue in Fort Garry, the beginning of a market gardening career extending more than fifty years. Others joined him to form a series of market gardens stretching from the Pembina Highway to the east to the cement plant in Fort Whyte on the west. Initially, most gardeners sold their produce door-to-door from horse-drawn carts, an enterprise denounced by retail grocers as "peddling." Vermeulen's team and wagon were commandeered in 1915 to haul the statue of the Golden Boy from the Canadian National Railway station to the Legislative Building from the dome of which it would dominate the surroundings. Eventually, gardeners in Fort Garry, Fort Whyte and St. Vital sold their produce from stands at the front of their lots.¹⁰⁵

The heavy black soil of the Red River flood plain was ideal for gardening. The federal Department of Agriculture endorsed this use of suburban land:

Where fertile soil occurs in close proximity to a large city, or if the transportation facilities are good and costs are low, the most economical use of such land is generally the growing of

vegetables and small fruits. A small acreage is usually sufficient for the market gardener.¹⁰⁶

The Red River valley escaped the brunt of the drought that struck the prairies in the 1930s. But in 1932 the worst plague of grasshoppers in decades devastated the market gardens and fodder crops of the dairy farmers in the Winnipeg region. Probably the last market garden established was the Mission Gardens in Transcona in 1940, the former farm of St. Boniface College purchased by Theophile and Augusta De Baets. It was the type of farming to which many Flemings had been accustomed in their homeland i.e. self-sufficient holdings consisting of small acreages, organic fertilization, sizeable vegetable and small fruit gardens, and coarse grain plots to feed their draught horses and a few cows. In suburban Fort Garry, St. Vital and Charlewood they relied on family labour with some seasonal help and small mechanical implements.

Prior to World War II, production was limited to the requirements of local consumption: onions, leeks, carrots, tomatoes, celery, potatoes, cauliflower and cabbages. Large quantities of vegetables were still imported because of the degree of seasonality of production and the lack of adequate storage technology. Most market gardeners had root cellars where potatoes and root vegetables could be stored for winter use, but only a limited amount was offered for sale out of season to the public. A few specialized in selling their produce on contract. Victor De Roo in Swan Lake, for example, signed a contract with the T. Eaton Company store in Winnipeg to supply the entire crop of potatoes from a twenty-acre plot.

The arrival of over one thousand Japanese Canadian evacuees in 1942, unceremoniously displaced from their homes and businesses in coastal British Columbia, marked the beginning of a decline of small market garden operations. The Manitoba Department of Agriculture encouraged market gardeners to move their operations out of expanding Winnipeg into rural areas and encouraged diversified crops such as sugar beets, sunflowers, buckwheat, soybeans, canola and flax. In 1947, a Winnipeg Gardeners' Cooperative was formed to regulate the flow of produce in order to maximize returns to individual producers. This did not meet the needs or capacities of small Belgian producers who were unspecialized with limited output. Fortunately, participation was voluntary. In 1953 a Vegetable Growers Association of Manitoba was organized to export produce but small-scale Belgian market gardeners

were unable to compete with the medium producers of the association. Increasing provincial controls influenced many Belgians to withdraw from market gardening.¹⁰⁷ They were mostly small producers who were accustomed to selling directly from their property to the public and were not involved in commercial large-scale production. Even the medium producers became vulnerable when machinery and chemical suppliers and gigantic food processing companies began to control both input and output markets. The final stage in the demise of extensive small-scale market gardening was marked by the arrival of large corporations such as the Campbell Soup Company, Carnation Company and McCain Foods that entered into contractual agreements with agro-business farmers.

W.T. Macoun, Dominion horticulturalist, wrote in 1933 that southern Manitoba had a climate suitable for fruit growing. He cited sand cherries as being particularly drought-resistant. Of course, there were a few farmers such as A. Kool in Cromer, who specialized in wild fruits such as saskatoon, chokecherry, pembina cranberry, pin cherry and buffalo berry.¹⁰⁸ Theophile Gelaude in St. Vital, active in local politics and sporting events, had a particularly impressive garden featuring specialized varieties of small fruits as well as exotic flowers. His brother, Alphonse Gelaude, in rural Brunkild, cultivated a productive showcase garden and orchard that rivalled the best production of apples, pears, plums, Missouri currants and sand cherries that the Morden Experimental Farm could offer. Every Saturday and Sunday afternoon in late summer he proudly offered free tours of his property to scores of curious and admiring visitors.¹⁰⁹

Sugar Beet Industry

Belgians became involved in the sugar beet industry during the Napoleonic wars when a British blockade of French ports induced Napoleon Bonaparte to subsidize the beet sugar industry in northern France. The cultivation and harvesting of this crop required a large labour force so appeals for seasonal workers were made in neighbouring Flanders. In addition to relieving the dependence on imported cane sugar, beet sugar was believed to possess remarkable medicinal properties.¹¹⁰ The first refinery designed to extract sugar from beets in Canada was opened at Farnham, Quebec, in 1881. In 1901, the Ontario Agricultural College in Guelph set up test plots of sugar beets and the Berlin [Kitchener] Board of Trade sent a delegation to Caro in Michigan to recruit experienced growers, many of

them Belgians. From its inception in Canada, therefore, the beet sugar industry was associated with Belgians at the level of field workers, growers and factory workers.¹¹¹ The industry was highly recommended in the *Dominion Agricultural Bulletin* for cleaning the land of noxious weeds: "The testimony of farmers in Ontario is that no other crop so effectually cleans the land, or so well fits it for barley, oats, or wheat in the following season, as a well-tilled crop of sugar beets. It will kill out, they say, the tough-lived pest, the Canadian thistle."¹¹²

Many market gardeners and dairymen were attracted to growing sugar beets when the Manitoba Sugar Company built a processing plant in Fort Garry in October 1940. Some local farmers had experimented with beet growing as early as 1901 and a Manitoba Sugar Company Limited was incorporated in 1925 but no plant was built. There were problems to overcome: firstly, there was a popular preference for cane sugar over beet sugar; secondly, the manufacture of beet sugar was carried on only a quarter or third of the year; thirdly, stocks of refined sugar had to be carried for considerable time if supplies were to be available for trade most of the year. Then, in November 1939, Baron Paul Kronacher, a prominent Belgian refiner with widespread investments and business connections through the Czarnikow-Rionda Company, teamed up with Baron P. Neuman de Vegvar of New York to launch the Fort Garry plant equipped with machinery from Germany and financial guarantees from Belgium.

Belgians were quite enthusiastic about the prospects of the familiar beet culture, however, from the outset the share-cropping arrangements that were imposed deprived the farmers of substantial profits. The local Catholic priest, anxious to prevent the exploitation of his parishioners, publicly criticized the evils of the share-cropping contracts. As a result of his intervention on behalf of his exploited parishioners, many of them Belgians, he was summarily transferred to the remote parish of Sioux Lookout in 1942. There were some mutterings about the connection between the church and big business but the contracts remained unchanged. There was a shortage of farm labour at the time, so the opening of the school year was postponed two weeks in order that three thousand high schools students could help harvesting grain and sugar beets.¹¹³

There were some serious problems by the 1950s with the business structure of the Manitoba Sugar Company. Local investors moved to prevent Baron Neuman from acquiring too much stock when Kronacker

planned to expand operations into Saskatchewan after the St. Lawrence Seaway became operative in order to compete with the British Columbia refiners. In April 1954, the Beet Growers Association pointed to friction between the Belgian, American and Canadian owners:

We believe there is considerable friction between these three interests, and the first two mentioned are doing all in their power to acquire a controlling interest in the company. We feel this would be definitely detrimental to the people of Manitoba and to the beet growers in particular.¹¹⁴

This association had little stake in the industry, however, because the growers produced under contract with the processor.

Neither the Belgian nor American investors gained a controlling interest because in 1955 the B.C. Sugar Refining Company acquired control. This came about when Neuman sold his shares to the Canadian group and Baron Kronacher was left with only four thousand of the thirty-four thousand shares. Chief Justice Rhodes Smith was appointed by the Restrictive Trade Practices Commission to investigate charges of monopoly control and collusion. The fear of competition from Ontario sugar refineries, which had for many decades hired workers directly in Belgium, especially following the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway, induced the B.C. Sugar Refining Company to buy up all the shares, so ending the feud. This move closed off for the future “any opportunity for the public to benefit from lower prices brought about by competition.”¹¹⁵ Sugar beet growing continued to operate on the share-cropping arrangement but it went into decline as other cash crops on what were increasingly larger farms became more attractive.¹¹⁶ Once again, Belgians were “on their own” as individuals and families in a changing capitalistic society.

Despite many gradual societal changes the urban hub remained important for the Belgian community. The new technologies, changing economic relationships, institutional evolution, and cultural heterogeneity resulted in failure of the sugar beet industry and market gardening to bring together an enduring cohesive economic ethnic bloc. Even the Flemish dairy operators eventually relinquished their dominant role. Nevertheless, these developments in no way diminished the important contribution of the group to the viability of the larger community.

