

Carver County's link to Napoleon, Limburger cheese

What does the defeat of Napoleon in 1814 have to do with the history of Carver County? More than you might think.

After Napoleon's surrender and the breakup of the French Empire, the provinces of the Netherlands were united for the first time in more than 300 years. But not for long. The province of Limburg, the southernmost peninsula of the Netherlands, squeezed next to Germany, stayed with the Netherlands when the southern provinces formed the Kingdom of Belgium in 1830.

Limburger cheese came from this area. And a good many of Carver County's early settlers came from Limburg, too — Catholics who spoke German, but who were from the Netherlands. The extensively researched Web site of Irma Lommen-Salden of Sittard, Netherlands, shows the emigration records and stories of hundreds of Limburgers who came to Carver County — 140 families in 1863 alone.

As is often the case in the geographical shifts after war, life got better for some and worse for others after Napoleon's surrender. Ms. Lommen-Salden's study shows that it got harder for the Limburgers. Too many people for too little land, and too few jobs. Farms were small, under five acres, and hardly produced enough to feed a family, let alone the next generation coming to adulthood around 1860.

Enter the U.S. Homestead Act of 1862 with promises of 160 acres of land to heads of households who were willing to occupy and work the land for five years. Limburgers wasted no time. The local papers there were full of household sales in 1862 and 1863, people trying to sell their meager belongings to pay their passage to America. Newspapers printed letters from the first emigrants, who extolled the beauty and abundance of their new home.

Oh, the bounty of Carver County in the 1860s! Here is Jacob van Mulken, writing home to the Netherlands soon after his safe arrival in Carver County in 1862: "We have all



Judy
BUDREAU

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completed the crossing in good health, although some were a bit longer sick than others... nobody was stronger than father Jeurissen ... now he is even stronger as he was at home with you, he doesn't complain no more about his stomachache, every morning he drinks a good glass of whisky, that is brandy, and each day eggs, meat and white bread..."

Peter Jeurissen emigrated to Carver County with his son and daughter-in-law in 1862, when he was 73 years old. He seems to have enjoyed a few years of comfortable living here, and lots of good food, before passing away in 1868. He's buried in St. Victoria's Cemetery in Victoria. Peter left behind a hardy family — many of the Jeurissen's lived into their eighties if they survived childhood. Jeurissen descendants married into the Kerber and Powers families.

Irma Lommen-Salden's emigration and ship passenger lists show the transfer of family

names, and families, to Carver County — Becker, Bongard and Van den Bongard, Dols, Heutmecker, Kerkhofs, Kurvers, Maes, Paulussen, Rademacher, Roufs, Savelkoul, Sieben, Stassen, Timmerman, Van Heel, Wurm.

These Limburgers used the services of lawyers and shipping agents to secure the necessary immigration papers and purchased "packets" to their destinations in America. Sort of like all-inclusive travel packages for vacationers now. But this was serious business, a one-way ticket to a new life. Sometimes the travel arrangements included food, sometimes not. Recent immigrants wrote home with their emigration stories, recommending ships, captains, and sailing firms who had treated them well. The German company Strauss advertised "large three-masted clippers" traveling twice each month from Antwerp, Belgium. By 1863, the Strauss company had ships making the journey every week. And the ships were full. Emigrants were routinely given 30 percent to 50 percent off established fares.

Letters home to Limburg are full of the wonder of lushly growing fields, and readily available food. Many report that the stomach ailments they and their families suffered at home in Limburg were miraculously cured in Carver County. Not a miracle, really. They'd been starving, and now they had enough to eat.

As Ms. Lommen-Salden notes, the state and U.S. census records

may help to explain why so many Dutch Limburgers were classified as German. If they spoke German, the census takers probably recorded them as German. Census records also show that most of the adult immigrants learned to speak English, but not to read or write in English. They made certain their children could, though, and most homes were tri-lingual, speaking German, Dutch and English.

The Limburgers brought their traditions to Carver County. A Dutch shoemaker offered wooden clogs at his Chaska shop. Basket weavers settled in Victoria. Outdoor ovens called "bakkus" were built. And the Limburgers incorporated Carver County traditions into their lives. They learned to make maple syrup.

The church was important to Limburgers, one of the few things unchanged from home. Catholic priests were a rarity in early Carver County, but Catholic churches were not. Almost every town built at least one. The elegantly simple lines and expert craftsmanship of these still-standing churches are testament to their faith.

Jacob van Mulken brought his wife and youngest children to Carver County, then wrote home to convince his eldest son to join them: "Never forget the lectures I taught you, and never leave the house before you thank the Lord, never go to bed without saying your prayers, follow the laws of the Lord and the holy Church, never listen to a loose woman,



Irma Lommen-Salden of Sittard, Limburg Province, Netherlands, became fascinated with Carver County after discovering many Limburgers emigrated here in 1862-63

their words are sweet like honey, and the outcome is bitter like gall ... your beloved sister lives one hour from us in a town called Schaacobi (Shakopee). She earns \$5 monthly. In this town there are six churches, three Catholic priests, and they are in the process of building a new church ... I stop now and think that you soon will follow me, Your loving father, P.J. Van Mulken."

The worries of parents are

universal. And the worries of emigrants and immigrants are universal, too. The story of the Limburgers is unique to Carver County, but not unique to human history. People emigrate to places where there are others like them, where their language is spoken. Places with enough jobs, and enough food, and a reasonable chance of welcome.

The Limburger emigration raises some interesting questions: Why did they cross an ocean, and half of the North American continent to settle in our particular Minnesota county? What incentive did a German shipping company have to offer greatly reduced fares to Dutch emigrants? How much of our county's heritage would be missing if they hadn't come?

Maybe now is a good time, on the threshold of our state's sesquicentennial, to discover the intimately human stories of Carver County people, whoever we are, and wherever we came from.

This column is based on the Web site of Irma Lommen-Salden. Please visit her web site in English at <http://members.home.nl/irmalommen/> see below

Ms. Lommen-Salden also participates in an online discussion group for members of Carver County Historical Society at cchs-members@googlegroups.com

Judy Budreau writes a monthly column for the Chanhassen Villager. She can be reached at judybudreau@aol.com.

website: www.limburgemigrant.nl