

Drawn Home: The Immigrant Journey to Winona County, Minnesota 1850-2010

In the summer issue of LACC's Business Journal we published an article on an exhibition arranged by Prof. Mary Nilles and Luxembourg historian Jean Ensich on the immigration history of Winona County, Minnesota between 1850 and 2010.

"Drawn Home" showed the waves of immigration that have swept over Winona County, southeastern Minnesota, 1850-2010; the homes abandoned, the new homes built by a series of "immigrants," including the native People, a group of utopians from New York City (members of the Western Farm and Village Association), various European settlers, and, within the past three decades, the newcomers, including families from Bosnia, Cambodia, Mexico, Vietnam, Russia and Somalia.

"Drawn Home" represented a portion of a larger exhibition by Mary Nilles and Jean Ensich (entitled "The Homes They Left Behind"); this display was arranged in galleries in Winona, Minnesota and at the National Luxembourg Cultural Center in Belgium, Wisconsin during 2009.

We were pleased to have the opportunity to conduct an interview with Prof. Nilles to learn more about the project and her research on the immigration of Luxembourgers to the United States.

Enjoy the following interview:

Q: You began researching the Luxembourg immigration story while attending the College of Saint Teresa in Winona, Minnesota. What sparked your interest in the subject?

A: A number of factors.

Very importantly, I was exposed to Lëtzebuergesch in my childhood. I grew up in a house where it was spoken (along with Low Dutch, High German and English), and where my great-uncle John, the son of immigrant parents, spoke often about his parents leaving Luxembourg and settling in Rollingstone. He was our Luxembourg oral historian (every family needs one). My mother's native languages were Low Dutch and German, but she also spoke Lëtzebuergesch. Sometime she would answer a Lëtzebuergesch question in Low Dutch! I lost use of Lëtzebuergesch after I started school, but regained some facility when I lived in the Grand Duchy as a Fulbright scholar.

My parents and teachers also encouraged me from an early age to research and write about immigration history. I recall taking notes as Uncle John and other elders in the community told their stories. I heard from several Rollingstone citizens, still fluent in Lëtzebuergesch, how they had fought with General Patton in Luxembourg. These

stories raised my curiosity about life “out there.” In college I wrote papers on Minnesota history, and took courses in German.

I also was influenced by family members and teachers devoted to keeping oral history alive. I recall how Holy Trinity High School teachers in Rollingstone worked with local citizens to arrange a 1958 Minnesota State Centennial exhibition of family memorabilia in the church hall (that 1869 stone church is now on the National Register of Historic Places). Even though we were very young, my brother Myron and I attended that exhibit, listened to speeches about the “old days,” and wrote “reflections” for our school magazine. That event was a powerful example of a community uniting to celebrate its history. Years later Myron published on the history of the Dakotas; I focused on the Luxembourgers.

And Luxembourgers sometimes visited our home. For example, Matthew Beckius, an immigrant from Wormeldange, Luxembourg, helped my parents with seasonal farm work. My mother would prepare specialties like “treipen,” bou’neschlupp, and stürzelen when he stayed with us; he would tell us stories about growing up in the Grand Duchy. And Roger and Henriette Krieps stopped in Rollingstone when they made their long trip across the States to research the 1962 book, *Luxemburger in Amerika*. Roger later re-connected us to relatives in Fischbach (Mersch) and Heffingen, thereby beginning a new chapter in my relationship to Luxembourg. After I began studying at New York University, I met Albert and Alice Nilles; he was a transplant from Esch-Alzette who helped me begin to access various Luxembourgish documents related to immigration.

The Fulbright Grant to Luxembourg, 1973-1975, most profoundly changed my life. It afforded me the good fortune of living in the Grand Duchy and teaching American Literature at the Cours Universitaires. During this time I began to research the families that had settled in Rollingstone, MN, 1855-1920. I met many mentors who supported my work, too many to list. With them I researched at the National Library, taught at the Cours; I traveled around the countryside with my Luxembourgish cousins and other friends and grew to love it, especially the villages from which my ancestors had come. We had wonderful times together, and I formed deep friendships with many persons in many different walks of life.

The U.S. Ambassador to Luxembourg at that time, Dr. Ruth Farkas, kindly supported my work. And after returning to my position in the City University of New York, I was encouraged by the office of Luxembourg’s consul general in New York and a series of consuls, and Anne Bastian; by Dr. Ursula Schwerin and Dr. Tilden Lemelle, presidents of my City University of New York campus; as well as CUNY Graduate Center urban historian and mentor, Dr. Richard Wade.

In 1979 I was honored by an invitation to arrange an exhibition on the Luxembourgers of Rollingstone at the National Library of Luxembourg, and by the visit of His Highness Grand Duke Jean to that exhibition. Radio Télé Luxembourg covered that story. Later I worked briefly with Jean Octave, Menn Bodson and others

as they produced a 5-part series on Luxembourgers in the Midwest. I also met Jean Ensch at that exhibition; he and I have collaborated on various research projects since then.

Meeting Georges Calteux at a 1988 Old World Wisconsin conference encouraged my interest in historic preservation, specifically as it was related to Luxembourg-USA immigration sites like the Marnach House. He and many others in Luxembourg, notably Guy and Roberta Thomas, and Thomas' crew, collaborated with many in Winona County to save that now-famous home, 1990-1993.

Other influences were the founding of the Rollingstone Museum, the re-invigoration of the Rollingstone Luxembourg Society and the annual January Träipefest, the establishment of the Rollingstone-Bertrange, Luxembourg Sister City program, and support from family and friends in Minnesota and elsewhere in the United States.

Finally, I cannot emphasize enough how positive support from colleagues on my City University of New York downtown Brooklyn campus (New York City College of Technology), including current College president Dr. Russ Hotzler, has fostered my connections to the Grand Duchy. The University has awarded me several grants, as well as Gallery space for exhibitions and conferences on Luxembourger immigration. My many talented students have joined in Luxembourger research endeavors.

Q: What is your own family history? When did your family immigrate to the U.S. and from where?

A: Paternal family members immigrated from Fischbach (Mersch) and Heffingen in the mid-1850s. My great-grandfather, Jean-Baptiste Nilles, came over the Atlantic first, and then returned to marry a neighbor from Reuland, Elisabeth Seiwert. They had settled in Rollingstone by December 1865. J-B crossed the ocean one more time, to bring his mother, Susanna Schell Nilles and two siblings to Minnesota. For two generations after that, for various reasons, including the demands of families and two great wars, no one in my family traveled "over there." However, we spoke often about the Europe, and retained the language. I was the first to return.

My maternal ancestors arrived from villages in Germany close to the Dutch border in the 1840s, settled first in Ohio, moved to the Luxembourg and Petersburg, Iowa region, and finally bought a farm near Rollingstone.

Q: In the second half of the 19th century approximately 1/3 of Luxembourgers left the country and immigrated to the United States. Is there a specific pattern to their immigration? Does it differ from other nationalities?

A: The Luxembourgers of Winona County, Minnesota arrived in waves, beginning in 1855. Prior to this date, only a few Luxembourgers had visited briefly, as explorers, missionaries, and scouts, but they could not claim property.

When the Winona County land office opened in 1855, the floodgates opened. Some Luxembourger families had been waiting in Milwaukee; now they could move into the land that would become the State of Minnesota on May 11, 1858. Many of the first immigrants became farmers. Typically, once the path was cut by the first “scouts,” others could follow. The first wave peaked about 1900.

The second wave, 1900-1914, included relatives of the Luxembourgers already established in Rollingstone. However, World War I interrupted frequent traveling, and within many families, cut ties between families in Luxembourg and the States.

A generation later, a third wave was initiated by a combination of forces: among them, visits of Americans to Luxembourg during World War II, the development of faster ships, reliable airplanes and telephones, and renewed interest in study abroad and tourism.

The immigration of Luxembourgers to the United States has much in common with that of other groups of about the same size who left Europe about the same time; in particular, with those who settled mostly in smaller towns, as opposed to those who went to the large cities of New York and Chicago. For example, Winona County Luxembourgers share common experiences with the Norwegians and Germans of southeastern Minnesota.

Q: The exhibition “Drawn Home” was supported by selected City Tech faculty members, and students in English and Art and Advertising Design classes, who have helped to shape this presentation. They have worked with you to write Exhibition Guides and create posters to advertise the display. Since many of these students are themselves immigrants, how did this project resonate with them?

A: The students “get it,” because they themselves have had to face a “push” and “pull” that brought them to New York, and to this campus.

The Power Point presentations on their immigration stories are often very moving. They have arrived seeking the American Dream—to get a good job, and make money, but more than that, to have the opportunity to do what they want in life, to exceed boundaries that other nations, and cultures and traditions may set for them. They want “freedom” on many levels. They sacrifice a great deal to experience that freedom, often leaving behind a beloved country, family and possessions.

Sometimes they work extremely hard in the Big Apple to support a host of others back home. Most work full time, and then attend school as well. Others back home may regard the immigrant as leading a glamorous life here in New York, one depicted in a sit com. However, the reality often is quite different; they are NOT the “rich uncle or aunt from America.” And, of course, some of my students have fled for their lives from places where they experienced ethnic cleansing,

wars and natural disasters. Yet, the human spirit is strong, and most do graduate and achieve various types of success.

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A: They know that almost all “Americans” are immigrants. And that immigration is an ongoing, complicated, nuanced and powerful reality, affecting everyone in the community. The “new” immigrants settle in and through a complex process, eventually become the “old.”

They also realize that culture is lived and preserved in complex ways. They understand that the Luxembourg culture is not “dead,” as some have feared. Instead, it is evolving, re-defining and re-discovering itself, both in the Midwest and in the Grand Duchy. The study of this mutual process of cultural retention and change is exciting, and can be shared now in digital format.

Q: Are there still cultural links between the Luxembourgish families settling in New York or the Midwest and the Grand Duchy?

A: Yes. Speaking specifically about Winona County, many living there today have traveled to Luxembourg, a Rollingstone-Bertrange, Luxembourg Sister City Program promotes exchanges of various kinds, and a few students from Luxembourg have studied at St. Mary’s University of Minnesota in Winona (Jean Rivers from Heffingen and Laura Becker from Bettendorf, to name two).

The Rollingstone Community Elementary School teachers have created many projects linking local children to kids in the Grand Duchy, and the Rollingstone Society and Museum and local families have done a wonderful job of welcoming visitors. The placement of Holy Trinity Catholic Church of Rollingstone and the Marnach House near Elba on the National Register of Historic Places, and celebrations like the annual January Träipefest, also honor our history.

Q: What are your special current “Luxembourg interests”?

A: Sustainability of the many Luxembourg-American institutions created within the past several decades, institutions that include the Luxembourg Society and Museum of Rollingstone, noted properties like the Marnach House and Holy Trinity Church; and the creation and sustainability of linkages of these institutions with the beautiful new Luxembourg American Cultural Center in Belgium, Wisconsin, as well as with institutions and friends in the Grand Duchy.

Sustainability in architecture is of particular interest. The Marnach House near Elba and Holy Trinity Church in Rollingstone have been honored by placement on the National Register of Historic Places. Yet they must be maintained, as must other buildings that reveal the life of the immigrants.

These include the Nilles barn, built in 1888. I am now looking for funding to assist in using it as the centerpiece of a living history site devoted to agriculture and education. The process of planning this site involves students and various craftspeople every step of the way, and is being filmed for future Lessons on Luxembourger Life.

Prof. Nilles, thank you for the interview!