

History of Little Chute - prior to incorporation

(taken from a "Century of Progress 1899- 1999)

by Mike Hammen

Little Chute was incorporated as a village in 1899, there is the well-known arrival of three boatloads of Hollanders in 1848, and Father Van den Broek established the parish of St. John's in 1836. Before any of those celebrated events there were the French fur traders and the Native Americans.

There is a rich, well-documented history of the Native Americans presence in Wisconsin. The Winnebago and Menominee Indians were the original settlers of the lower Fox River Valley. The Winnebago were the people that met French explorer Jean Nicolet when he became the first European to arrive at Green Bay in 1634. The two tribes lived peacefully near each other, often hunting together. They both established seasonal villages on the banks of the Fox River, taking advantage of its abundant fish and game.

The Menominee had a village at the present site of Little Chute called "Ooukicitiming" which means "causeway." "Menominee" means "wild rice people." The Menominee would harvest the wild rice, which also attracted numerous waterfowl. The wild rice was so plentiful on the Fox River and other regional bodies of water, that it would sometimes restrict water travel.

Politics and economics resulted in several other tribes migrating to the area. The tribe that would come to dominate the lower Fox River Valley was called "les Renards" by the French, which means "the fox." The Menominee called that same tribe "Outagamie," meaning "dwellers on the other shore."

It was the end of the French and Indian War in 1663 that allowed the French fur traders to branch into Wisconsin. One of the earliest of these French to come to the area was Dominique Ducharme. He built a homestead and trading post at Grand Kakalin (Kaukauna) on the oldest deeded land in Wisconsin. Ducharme purchased most of what is now Kaukauna from the Menominee for eight barrels of rum in 1793.

By 1813, Dominique Ducharme's brother Paul had taken over and sold most of the land and its buildings to another French fur trader, Augustin Grignon. Augustin was married to Nancy McCrea, daughter of a Scotch Canadian fur trader and a Menominee woman closely related to Chief Tomah. Augustin was a grandson of half-Ottawa Charles de Langlade, nephew of King Nissowaquet. Augustin continued trading fur at his post, but also built a grist and saw mill nearby.

For many years, the Grignon homestead was the only house on the Fox River between Fort Howard (Green Bay) and Fort Winnebago (Portage). The territory was heavily wooded, with no roads and only a few Indian trails. Travel was done mainly by river, making the Grignons the center of "civilization" for travelers. Indians, soldiers, traders, and settlers would have to unload cargo before portaging their boats and canoes around the more treacherous spots along the river. These were the Grand Chute, the Petite Chute, and the Grand Kakalin rapids.

The first wedding in the future Outagamie County was Augustin's daughter Margaret, in 1824. Mary Brevoort Bristol describes the wedding in the Wisconsin Historical Collection.

"At that time there was nothing between Fort Howard and Fort Winnebago but Grand Kaukauna where stood one house occupied by Augustin Grignon where I was invited to attend his daughter's wedding. She married Ebenezer Childs, quite a large party attended; all came in a large boat called a botteau. The bride was dressed in white muslin; on the table were all kinds of wild meat - bear, deer, muskrat, raccoon, turkey, quail, pigeon, skunk and porcupine with all the quills on."

Augustin's brother Hippolyte "Paul" Grignon came to the area around 1835. Between Little Chute and Appleton, at the head of the Grand Chute, Paul built White Heron. For many

years, White Heron was the only building at the head of the rapids. It served as home, trading post, and hotel. Mary St. Louis of Little Chute was a frequent visitor there even before her marriage to Simon Grignon. She recalled in her later years how as a child she watched bearded trappers and woodsmen in front of White Heron. After supper was over, they would sing and wrestle around the blazing campfire. Indians were also frequent visitors, with Paul sometimes bringing home sick Indian children for his wife Lisette to nurse back to health.

The slow trickle of French and German settlers in and around the Grignons' was just a hint of what was to come. The U.S. Government had been systematically divesting the Native Americans of their lands for years. Chief Oshkosh once said, "The only time Americans shook hands was when they wanted another piece of Menominee land." In 1836, the Menominee sold four million acres to the federal government for \$700,000. The Treaty of the Cedars was signed at Little Chute, opening the Fox River Valley and much of Wisconsin to white settlers.

Possibly the earliest description of the site of Little Chute was written in 1830. James McCall was sent to the region to settle land disputes among the Menominee, Winnebago, and New York Indians. He wrote the following observations:

"The Little Chute is (a) perpendicular fall of one foot and continued rapids of more than a mile, and falls about 24 feet on the west side of which is an island of considerable size and convenient for hydrauliks. Opposite the island is a bottom of 200 or 300 acres of open land or prairie. On the backside is a handsome elevation of about 30 feet with scattering white oak."

This is what Father Theodore Van den Broek saw when he arrived to establish his Catholic mission. Theodore Van den Broek was born of wealthy parents in Amsterdam, on November 5th, 1783. When he finished school, he was fluent in Greek, Latin, German, French, and Dutch. Father Van den Broek entered the Dominican order and served as assistant priest at Groningen, until being appointed pastor at Alkmaar. He was nearly 50 years old when given permission to become a missionary for America, leaving Holland in 1832.

It took him nine weeks to reach his first destination of St. Rose Convent, near Springfield, Kentucky. While there, he studied English and learned of American culture. Father Van den Broek was soon called to St. Joseph's parish in Somerset, Ohio. Their growing German population did not have a priest that spoke their language. Soon after hearing of how eager the Indians were to hear the Gospel, he left to go among them. He spent time in Detroit and on Mackinac Island before being transferred to Green Bay, arriving there on July 4th, 1834.

In an 1843 letter to a Holland newspaper, Father Van den Broek described his early work. "In the beginning my mission was a continual journeying to and fro, preaching to the Indians who are settled between Lake Michigan and Lake Superior, and the Mississippi, called Menominee, Otchipwes, and Winnebagos, to convert them to the Faith."

Mary Elizabeth Meade, the soon-to-be-wife of Charles Grignon, quickly contacted Father Van den Broek. She was attending the Dominican Academy while he was at Somerset. Theodore Van den Broek's zeal for converting souls and overall quality of character were well known. She sent her future husband with a delegation of Indians to invite him to Little Chute. Mary Elizabeth Meade married Charles Grignon in 1837 and within a year had the 12 room "Mansion in the Woods" built to take the place of the Ducharme-Grignon log cabin. Father Van Den Broek accepted the invitation with a promise to do so as soon as another priest could take his place in Green Bay.

While waiting for his replacement, Father Van den Broek began regular trips to the various missions throughout Wisconsin. Neither Green Bay nor Milwaukee had a dozen white families each. A short list of Catholic missions he founded and visited includes: Appleton, Butte de Morts, Darboy, Fond du Lac, Freedom, Green Lake, Kaukauna, Kimberly, Mackville, Milwaukee, Neenah, Oshkosh, Poygan, Prairie de Chien, and Wrightstown. Theodore Van den Broek was teacher, doctor, and priest to Native Americans and scattered settlers wherever they needed him.

Though Little Chute became his primary congregation, Father Van den Broek attended

those other sites regularly for general pastoral services. While still living in Green Bay, he would often say two masses on Sundays. The first was said in Green Bay and then he would walk the twenty-four miles of Indian trails to perform the second in Little Chute. One time his feet were bleeding so badly from the pegs in his boots, that he had to stop to have them pulled out. Another time he simply lost his boots in the thick mud, having to walk the rest of the way barefoot.

Father Van den Broek's replacements arrived December 6th, 1835, ". . . and I betook myself 24 miles higher up the river into the woods, to the Indians, at a place called La Petite Chute, a small waterfall near Grand Cocalin - an Indian name meaning rapids. An Indian woman at once built me a hut or wigwam, about fifteen feet long and six feet high, it was finished in half a day."

Father Van den Broek's relocation to La Petite Chute was planned out in advance with the help of the Grignons. Unfortunately, those that were to carry his baggage did not show up because of the cold weather. After a late start, he had to spend the night still seven miles from the mission. When he arrived the next day, nobody was there to meet him.

The first to come to his assistance was the Indian woman Little Wolf, baptized Marianna. Margarith Grignon arrived soon afterward bringing food and other supplies. Both women were acquainted with each other and helped Father Van den Broek with more than just domestic chores. Together, the three of them fed the Indians, taught them the alphabet, and instructed them in Christianity. It was this mid-December in 1835 that saw the birth of Little Chute as a permanent settlement.

The first known white family to settle in Little Chute was Ephraim and Des Agnes St. Louis. "I landed at Green Bay October 26, A.D. 1836. From reports and information there, I concluded at once to move further up on the Fox River. I bought a canoe, trusted all my property, family and all, in one cargo. With so much freight, the river was then very difficult to ascent and in about four days I landed at the place where I have since lived, then called Petite Chute.

"The waters teemed with life, the river was then unobstructed by dams, and all kinds of fish had free access from lake to river to lake again. I may here add that the abundance of fish in the river, and the various game in the adjoining valley or woods, were valuable substitutes to the pioneer farmers in the early days."

Another pioneer that recorded early life on the lower Fox River was George W. Lawe. Mr. Lawe was born in Green Bay in 1810 and educated later in New York. He returned in 1832 to assist his father's fur trade, traveling up and down the Fox River. He came into possession of the remainder of Paul Ducharme's property and was instrumental in the development of Kaukauna into a city. In his later years, he wrote the following:

"In 1839 I moved with my family from Green Bay to Kaukauna. I found living here with their families: Charles A. Grignon and brother Alexander, who traded produce with the Indians for hides; also Mr. St. Louis and his family, Joseph Lamure, Paul A. Beaubien, and some Germans whose names I do not remember. . .

"In the year 1843, when I was Indian agent under President W. Harrison, I moved the Indians from Little Chute to Lake Poygan, and in 1850 they were moved again by Colonel Ewing and myself to the Keshena Reservation, their present home in Shawano County.

"About the year 1847, Rev. Father Van den Broek, Catholic Missionary at Little Chute, went to Holland to visit his relatives and friends. When he returned, he brought with him a great many Hollanders, who have prospered so well, that they own almost every inch of ground around Little Chute. The Hollanders have made great improvements here; the old settlers can well remember how wild the region was, with its tamarack swamps and morasses, and now the land is as fine as the best in the state."

George Lawe is also responsible for the first road to go from Wrightstown, through Kaukauna and Little Chute to Appleton. He did this with the help of Menominee Chief Iometah at Little Chute. He convinced him that as good Catholics and as citizens of the United States, they needed to work two days every year on the roads. George Lawe tells one other story about the

Indians at the time of the road construction.

"At that time a contract was to be made with the Indians, in order to secure a considerable tract of land at the Cedars; we had great difficulty in getting them together, not that they were opposed to it, but every morning the greatest number of them were dead drunk. This greatly displeased Governor Dodge, and George Boyd, the Indian agent. All efforts to find out where the Red Skins got the liquor were in vain, until finally one of the interpreters met a drunken Indian at the so-called Grand Chute, between Little Chute and Appleton. By coaxing and bribes, this son of the woods let himself be persuaded to show the white man where the Indians obtained the whiskey. The interpreter went with him and this informer, who was still under the influence of liquor, led him to the waterfall."

They found the liquor dealer at a section of the falls where you could stand under the falling water without getting wet. George Lawe's final comments are accurate even today.

"The country then, was full of game and the waters teeming with fish that increased almost undisturbed. All this is changed, everything now is better for civilized man but not for an admirer of free nature."

Father Van den Broek replaced his wigwam church with a wooden one. During the first handful of years the building was either under construction or being added on to. The iron cross that was placed atop the tower was made from sleigh runners. At 69 years old, Father Van den Broek showed no signs of slowing.

"The Indians come to school to me every day, to learn to read and write, as well as the different trades. I must often make a journey of two hundred miles to visit the Winnebago Indians. Last winter (1842) on one of these journeys, I was nearly frozen, because in a range of sixty or seventy miles there is not a house to be met with. At Fort Winnebago near Portage, Wisconsin, I baptized twenty Indians, among them were some 90, 100, and 110 years old.

"Wisconsin is gradually becoming more and more populated; chiefly by Germans and Irish. Last year I built two churches, one is twenty-three miles from here. . .

"My labor is incredibly great; Sunday forenoon I preach in French, English, and German; in the afternoon in the Indian language. Moreover I have school every day besides visiting the sick and making numberless journeys to distant missions. Nevertheless, I enjoy good health, and everything through God's help is easy."

Even after the Menominee were moved from Little Chute in 1843, Father Van den Broek would regularly visit them and other tribes for ministering. Milwaukee had grown from about 20 whites to over 4000 since his first visits there. Milwaukee and some of the more distant missions now had their own priests, freeing Father Van den Broek to concentrate on his growing local congregation.

Little Chute was now more than just a bend in the river. In addition to the church, it possessed a few roads, a handful of long cabins, and a hotel. The first hotel was built by French-Canadian Benjamin Doné, who arrived in Little Chute around 1840. In platting out the village, Father Van den Broek chose the name Nepomuc, which was seldom used even when he was still alive. By 1844 a formal school was organized and was attended by about six students.

The possibility of a lock system on the Fox River had been talked about by Green Bay businessmen as early as 1820. It wasn't until 1846 that the Territorial Congress took action. The project took ten more years to complete. It was burdened with politics, land sale problems, and more politics. The new state of Wisconsin attempted to manage the construction as a public works project. Local pioneer (and substantial land owner) Morgan L. Martin obtained permission in 1850 to privately manage the job. After several delays the project was turned over to the newly organized Fox and Wisconsin Improvement Company. The steam ship "Aquila" made the first trip on the completed system connecting Green Bay to the Mississippi in 1856.

The building of the canals along the Fox River was a real impetus for Father Van den Broek. He saw this as a great chance for his countrymen to take advantage of the resources and opportunities available in Wisconsin. The Fox and Wisconsin Improvement Co was looking for a

large number of workers, offering free transportation to all foreigners who would emigrate to the valley and help build the locks. They provided Father Van den Broek one sailing vessel, and appointed Morgan L. Martin, Col. Theodore Conkey, and Joseph Lawton to assist in arranging the trip.

Father Van den Broek returned to Holland in 1847 for the first time since leaving to preach among the Native Americans. His mother had since passed away and he was hoping to collect the remainder of his inheritance. While living as a missionary, his only real source of income was drawing on that inheritance. Soon after arriving in Amsterdam, he found out that the money was gone. The man responsible for managing his inheritance absconded with his money and that of "widows and orphans."

While wintering in Holland, Father Van den Broek published an account of his stay in America. He described the beautiful country and fertile soil in a way that convinced three shiploads of families to help create a Catholic colony in America. Many were already considering emigration because of restricted worship, high unemployment, high taxes and limited farmland.

Under the leadership of Father Van den Broek and a few other priests, more than 300 Roman Catholics filled three sailing ships chartered from the Hugo and Blokhuisen sailing firm. The Maria Magdalena, the America, and the Libra all left Rotterdam in March of 1848. Entire families carrying everything they owned were cramped together for the next six to eight weeks at sea. The only thing provided by the shipping company was drinking water.

Despite problems with storms, all three ships arrived safely at their designated ports. From New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, the emigrants rode the railroad to Buffalo. A lake steamer would transport them through the Great Lakes to Green Bay. From there a flat boat took them up the Fox River to Kaukauna, finally arriving at Little Chute by wagon.

It can only be guessed what these new arrivals thought of the small frame church and handful of log huts that were now their home. There were a few French in the area, a handful of Germans across the river, and Indians nearby. The woods were wild and the only things familiar were what they brought along. Arnold Verstegen arrived only two years after the three original boatloads and described Little Chute then as " . . . The country appeared too wild - woods, woods, nothing but woods, and only a small clearing here and there with a ramshackle building upon it." But there is no record of anybody going back. Many of the men would sign a Declaration of Intent renouncing their allegiance to any foreign sovereignty and formally announcing their intent to become American citizens.

Nine families set off from that original group to establish Fransiscus Bosch, later called Hollandtown. Dividing up the land was probably in favor of those that first booked passage on the Maria Magdalena with Father Van den Broek. Apparently dissatisfied with the available lots in Little Chute, they went about fifteen miles southeast before finding a clearing in the woods. Within two days they had their church built, which served as everybody's dwelling until individual houses could be finished.

The new arrivals in Little Chute quickly began clearing the land and building their log houses. Arnold Verstegen wrote regularly to his family in Holland describing daily life in those pioneer years, saying in 1851, "In Winter the young people, and especially the French, have parties and dance to the music of the violin. In summer everyone is too busy, and meeting at the church on Sundays and exchanging the news of the week is about our only pastime." But despite the toil, the next few years showed a continual flow of Hollanders into the village as the Appleton Crescent would report.

"Little Chute - This village six miles east of Appleton, is the focus of a large settlement of Hollanders who are improving the country and acquiring a competency. Some twenty-five families have been added to the population of Little Chute and vicinity within the past month and we are informed that they expect at least fifty families to join them during the summer:" (June 19, 1851)

"A party of forty-three Hollanders passed through our village on Thursday afternoon,

bound for the neighboring township of Kaukauna. We suppose they have located near the village of Little Chute." (August 1854)

1851 became a year of landmarks: Outagamie County was officially formed from a portion of Brown County, a telegraph line connecting Milwaukee to Green Bay was completed that passed directly through Little Chute, the final addition to the wooden church was completed, and Father Van den Broek had passed away.

Father Theodore Van den Broek was singing the High Mass on All Saints Day when he was struck with apoplexy. He remained unconscious until dying a few days later on his 69th birthday. His last will and testament gave all of his personal property to the church, including numerous parcels of land. It was his singular vision and selfless labor that birthed our community. St. John Nepomucene Catholic Church would maintain a central place in the life of the village and its surrounding area.

Little Chute was now more than just a mission. A village began to take shape as more roads were cut, a downtown was being defined, and the locks were being completed. The main street through Little Chute was covered with planks from Menasha to Kaukauna. The post office that was established in 1849 had Peter Maas as its first "Dutch" postmaster in 1854. The first public school was also established in 1854 with the earliest teachers being C. A. Hamer, Martin Gerrits, and John Jansen.

Despite all of the improvements of roads and canals, Little Chute was still in the middle of the wilderness and life was dangerous. A cholera epidemic in the area killed 17 people in the village in 1854. Outagamie County's budget in 1855 contained \$270.00 for wolf and bear bounties. In May of 1856, seven Germans were crossing the Fox River just above the dam when their boat capsized. Only three survived as they were carried over the dam. Those that drowned were Andrew Hart and his son Michael, Jack Snyder, and Philip Palm.

The onset of the Civil War did little to slow growth in the area. The railroad made it to Little Chute in 1816. Prices and wages rose sharply, but new construction of two major buildings was started.

John and Arnold Verstegen were two of the most successful businessmen of Little Chute pioneer days. John had opened a general store shortly after his arrival in 1849 and Arnold had been concentrating on farming since coming the year after. Both invested heavily in land and were willing to take risks. In 1862, they began construction of a flour mill on the Fox River at Little Chute. Arnold briefly considered a windmill, but his brother John convinced him that water power would be more reliable. Near the site of Father Van den Broek's first wigwam church, the Verstegens constructed a 36 by 50 foot, four-story building with a substantial stone foundation.

It was named Zeeland Mill, after their hometown. John Verstegen was instrumental in having a bridge constructed across the river in September of 1864. It was adjacent to the mill and was the first bridge at Little Chute.

St. John's congregation had quickly outgrown the old wooden church building. Plans for a new stone church were made as early as 1860, but actual construction didn't begin until 1863 or 1864. The stones were hauled from the river and most of the labor was done by parishioners. The completion ceremony was led by Bishop Melcher of Green Bay in August of 1868.

The new church needed a new bell. John Verstegen gave \$200.00 and another donor \$150.00. Ironically, the new bell tolled for the first time at John's funeral in 1870. His death resulted in Arnold being the sole owner of Zeeland Mills. Ownership of the mill left the Verstegen family shortly after Arnold's death in 1900 and it burned down around 1930.

That first generation of Hollanders saw a lot of changes in Little Chute. Arnold Verstegen wrote the following in November of 1870:

"I have lived in this country now for twenty years, and the progress that I have seen in that short space of time is like a dream. Little Chute was then a hamlet with one store, where only the most necessary household articles could be obtained. The news from the outside world was weeks old before it would reach us. Traveling any distance was slow and hazardous. Now

passengers arrive here in the afternoon, who in the morning were still in Chicago. Daily papers gather news by telegraph from distant parts of the country, and it reaches the readers when it is still fresh. The hamlets of the 'fifties" have become cities with factories and fine churches and schools, and beautiful stores and office buildings. When I first came here I felt as if I was fated to lead the life of a hermit the rest of my living days, and now I am surrounded with more luxuries than I have ever seen before."

There were numerous opportunities for employment in and around Little Chute. Farms continued to be prosperous, Zeeland Mills and other businesses continued to do well, and the lumber industry provided jobs for years. The next big boon to the area was the coming of the paper mills.

Kimberly-Clark was build across the river in 1882. The village of Kimberly grew up around this mill, which provided steady employment for Little Chute residents as well. The Thilmany Pulp and Paper Co. was built in Kaukauna the next year. Around the same time, the Combined Locks Paper Co. started. Directly across the river from Zeeland Mills was the Little Chute Pulp Company.

Around 1882, the building at the Northwest corner of Main and Grand was erected. It was known for years as Verstegen & Hartjes Hardware. It was also the first building in Little Chute to have electricity, having Meter #1. The first telephone installed in Little Chute was in 1884 by the Fox River Valley Telephone and Telegraph Company.

The village continued to grow. Buildings were being enlarged or replaced. Roads were added and improved. Businesses that would last into the twentieth century were becoming more numerous. Gloudeman Bros. General store and the original Hammen Hotel were both built in 1895.