



Rik Coolsaet

# Voyage to America

**Rik Coolsaet**

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### **Cover illustrations**

Manifest of the SS Lapland, sailing from Antwerp to New York, 9 May 1914, with Emiel Coolsaet as passenger; logo of the Dutch-language newspaper *Gazette van Detroit* (1914-2018); handwritten genealogy of the Coolsaet family by Maurice Vandenberghe (1958); logo of the Belgian-American Century Club n° 1 (1913); street sign of Coolsaet Ln on Grosse Ile; Alice Coolsaet and Charley Holvoet with family (ca. 1920) in Delta County, Colorado; poster Red Star Line (ca. 1923); headline in the November 1923 issue of *World's Work*.

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## Preface

**A**t the turn of the twentieth century, thousands of Belgians left their native country and crossed the Atlantic. The American Dream was their beacon. 1906 and 1907 were the peak years of this wave of Belgian migration. Several individuals as well as families with Coolsaet as their common surname took part in this journey. They were few in number, but they had some things in common: a humble background, the same place of birth, and, of course, their last name.

What's in a name ?

As is often the case with family names, the origin of the name *Coolsaet* disappears into the mist of time. Certainty is relative. According to etymologists, however, the word 'Coolsaet' is the Middle-Dutch precursor to the modern-day Dutch word 'koolzaad'. It derives from the Old High German word *kolsaat* and its later modifications *kôlsât* and *kôlsâme* and refers to rapeseed, a bright yellow flower, used to produce oil (hence it is sometimes called 'field mustard'). The French word *colza* derives from its Dutch equivalent. Middle-Dutch was the collective name for a series of related dialects spoken between 1150 and 1500 in an area stretching from Dunkirk in the west over Maastricht in the east to Groningen in the north.

Around the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when the use of surnames became standard practice in Flemish cities, the name was probably introduced to refer to a trader in grains and seeds, in particular of coleseed (the seed of the common rape or cole), but also more specifically to a producer or supplier of rapeseed. Varying spellings of the name have always co-existed: *Coelsaet*, *Coolzaet*, *Koolzaed*, *Colsaet*, *Colzaerts*, *Kohlsaet*, *Coolsaët*. Even within the same family branch, spelling often varied, depending on time and circumstances. For as long as illiteracy was widespread, patronyms were indeed confined to the acts based upon their pronunciation.

The oldest mention of an actual individual carrying this name dates to 1285. A document of the City of Bruges mentions a "*Coelsaed's farmstead*" in nearby Dudzele, possibly belonging to a person called Boudin (Baldwin) Coelsaet. In subsequent centuries, the name begins to circulate, in particular in the historic County of Flanders, spanning from Dunkerque (in present-day France) over Courtrai to Bruges.

This is also where all Americans named Coolsaet come from. Available historical evidence indeed confirms that the roots of all of them reach back to the plains of Flanders, the northwestern part of what is now Belgium.

*Voyage to America* tells their story. What pushed them to go overseas, to a far-away country of which they knew next to nothing ? What happened to them once they set foot ashore ? Some quickly turned back, others hesitated for some time between the old and the new country, still others settled permanently. The numbers of individuals involved is limited, compared to more widely disseminated surnames. But their life stories are no less fascinating for that because they teach us about the pains, pitfalls and successes of people migrating to new horizons since time immemorial.

Just over a decade ago, the first edition of *Voyage to America* was published following a visit to the sole remaining Coolsaet family in the United States. Over the decade, much more genealogy

records and new information have become available. Digitization has advanced at a rapid pace. The current edition has made grateful use of all this evidence. It corrects some factual errors in the previous edition, adds significantly to the family backgrounds in the home villages of the Coolsaet emigrants and completes the information on their integration in their new country.

*Voyage to America* is the first step in what ultimately will become the *Chronicles of the Coolsaet families* – the life stories of a collection of families that share the same family name. Its goal is to trace the journey of these families, swept along by the flow of time, to feel the pulse of their journey and to project their personal voyage into the wider background of the events of their time. History through the eyes of the Coolsaet tribe, so to speak.

And a very last, personal, note on the kinship of the author with the American Coolsaet families. When my father learned of the existence of a Coolsaet family in the United States through an article in the January 1989 issue of *Pipeline and Gas Journal*, we spontaneously assumed we were related to our American cousins. That assumption, however, proved incorrect. The American Coolsaet families trace their lineage back to an area that is now West Flanders in Belgium, while my family has its roots in East Flanders, as far as the archives tell us. We share the same (rare) surname, but not our ancestors – at least not since the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Rik Coolsaet  
*April 2024*



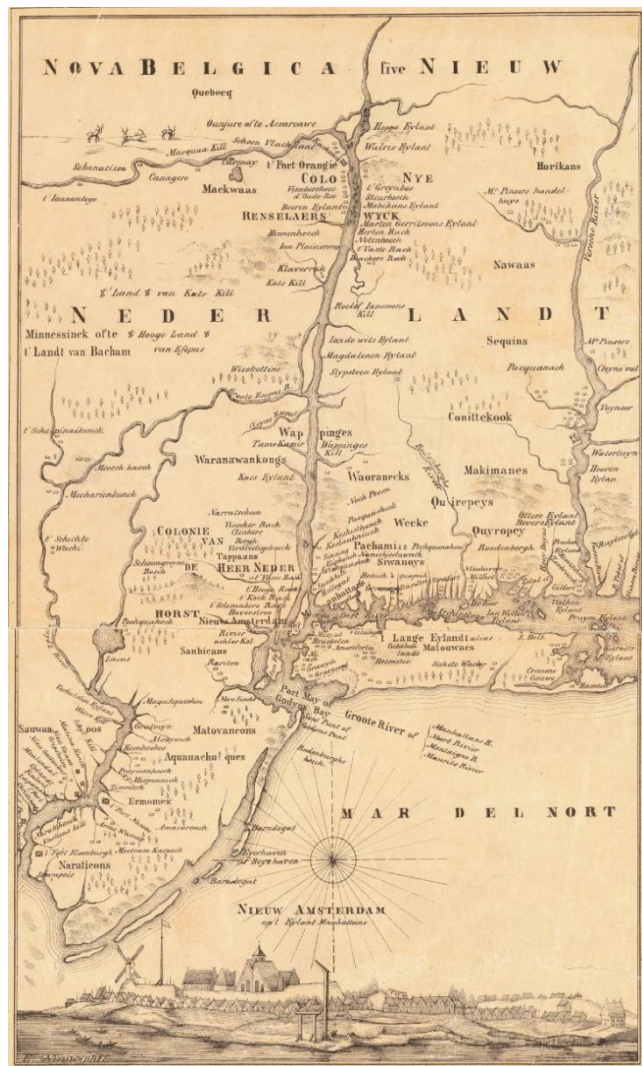
## Sailing to America

Long before there was a country called Belgium, people originating from this part of the world landed on the shores of North America. Some took part in the first organized attempts at colonizing North America. Others were Catholic missionaries. Still others were individuals looking for a new home and a future, hoping to leave behind a poverty-stricken life in the old country.

In the early 1600s, a group of 30 families, mostly Walloons, were undoubtedly among the very first from what would later become Belgium to reach North America.<sup>1</sup> Escaping poverty was not their main preoccupation, however. Setting up an autonomous colony was. The Walloon participants were Protestants who had fled from religious persecution in the Spanish Netherlands (which included present-day Belgium) and had moved to safety in the Netherlands in the late 1500s. There they formed a Walloon Protestant community of their own that still exists in today's Netherlands.

Representing an interesting mix of professions – from carpenters and farmers to coppersmiths and even a surgeon – they offered their services to the newly created West India Company, a Dutch chartered company, which was considering plans to organize expeditions to establish permanent settlements on the east coast of North America and the Manhattan peninsula. In 1614, independent traders had named the region 'Nieuw Nederlandt' or, in its Latin translation, 'Novum Belgicum' or 'Nova Belgica'. They had established a lucrative fur trade with Holland, that the new company wanted to take over. The development of agriculture was the Company's other main goal.

In May 1624, the first expedition with the thirty, mostly Walloon, families on board set foot ashore on Manhattan. They claimed the land in the name of the Netherlands, or, more correctly, of the West India Company. Some were dispatched to Albany, the center of the fur trade and a prime agricultural spot. A few remained on Manhattan Island to establish the foundations of the new colony. They were soon joined by a second group of settlers, also mostly Walloons. And rapidly others followed. These early settlers can rightly be considered the founding fathers of New York.



The origins of New York: Nieuw Nederlandt or Nova Belgica.  
(map by Adriaen van der Donck, 1656)





The so-called purchase of Manhattan by Peter Minuit in 1626  
(drawing from 1892)

According to many accounts (but not supported by historical evidence), two years later, a 'Belgian' bought Manhattan Island. Pierre Minuit was by then governor of 'Nieuw Nederlandt'. His parents were Walloon Protestants from Tournai. Spanish persecution had driven them out there, however, after which they had found refuge in Wesel (Germany). It is alleged that in 1626 he extracted the island from its indigenous people for 60 guilders of trinkets: some glass beads, brass ornaments, and strips of colored cloth.

In the early 1800s, enterprising individuals and families too started to venture to America.<sup>2</sup> Walloon families set up *Nouvelle-Liège*, the first, albeit small, Belgian community in Missouri. This Belgian presence was short-lived, as after 1833 all traces of its existence had disappeared. Other attempts at Belgian settlements were also made. They were mostly the work of farmers, including from Belgium's southernmost province of Luxemburg. Often, they settled in Michigan and Ohio. Conditions in the new country were harsh.<sup>3</sup>

As their journey was often an individual decision, only very small and scattered Belgian communities resulted. Only rarely did these early settlements leave a trace to this day, such as Belgium in Ozaukee County, Wisconsin.

In 1830, Belgium gained its independence. For most Belgians, daily life remained hard. By the mid-1840s, Belgian authorities started to encourage the creation of overseas Belgian colonies to alleviate the pressures of poverty and misery in the Flemish countryside. But to be candid, among those who left few really volunteered. The authorities paid for their crossing to get rid of undesirables, such as beggars, vagabonds, and ex-convicts. The American authorities did not appreciate the quality of the Belgian newcomers. Not surprisingly, all attempts at subsidized overseas settlements failed miserably, leading the Belgian government to abandon in 1856 its active involvement in the emigration of countrymen.

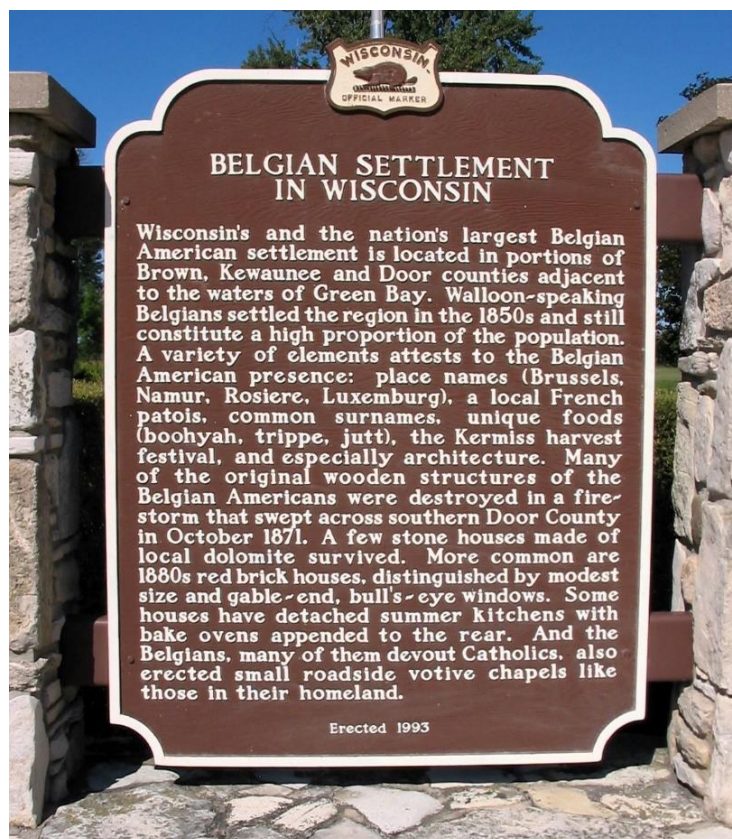
All in all, then, the Belgian presence in the United States was not overwhelming. In 1850, the American census recorded only slightly more than 1300 persons from Belgian origin in the United States. Overseas migration pales in comparison to the much more significant number of Belgians going to neighboring France. According to French records for the year 1851, no fewer than 128.000 Belgians lived there at the time.<sup>4</sup>

So, the saying that Belgians stick to their steeple, is not correct. Migrations have been part and parcel of Belgium's history too. But it is certainly accurate to say that, in many cases, Belgians moved within a stone's throw of their familiar surroundings. Few ventured over the horizon.

By the mid-1800s, emigration rapidly became a poignant reality for an increasing number of Belgian households. Between 1850 and 1856, Belgians started to travel in slightly greater numbers. The collapse of the once important linen industry, bad harvests and epidemics

resulting in blatant poverty and famine in West and East Flanders and in Hainaut, pushed their inhabitants out of their homesteads, looking for an escape from misery. Most moved to the industrial south of the country, to the capital Brussels, or to neighboring France. In some cities and villages of northern France, they soon even outnumbered the native French. This fueled nativist reactions and riots against the newcomers. Flemish emigrants in France (and in Wallonia) enjoyed a dreadful reputation. Clichés abounded about Flemings as prone to violence, crime, and drunkenness.

A much smaller number of Belgians set course for North America. Wisconsin in the U.S. became in these years a magnet for Walloon-speaking Belgians from Brabant and Hesbaye.<sup>5</sup> Several thousand settled around Green Bay, transforming it into the largest Belgian colony of the United States. In 1885, the Belgian consul in Green Bay estimated the overall number of Belgians in Wisconsin at some 20,000 (women and children included). Most of them were farmers and did fine, owning horses and cattle. Some merchants even made modest fortunes.<sup>6</sup>



Some of the settlements were accompanied, even inspired, by Catholic missionaries, who had started to travel to the North America in increasing numbers. As early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a few pioneering missionaries from the 'Belgian' provinces of the Spanish Netherlands had already been on a solitary mission in North America. Some went to Christianize Native Americans, while others remained with the European settlers. At first, they often faced the hostility from local Protestant authorities.<sup>7</sup> But soon, their numbers increased. Among the missionaries and priests, there were Flemings as well as Walloons. In 1828, an Association for the Propagation of the Faith was even established in support of the Belgian missionaries in the United States. Some decades later, an American College was set up in Leuven (Belgium) for seminarians preparing for a priesthood in the United States. But in the second half of the century, the numbers of Belgian missionaries and priests started to decline.<sup>8</sup>



Globally though, the Belgian migration to America remained modest, compared to the Irish, the Italian, the German – and even to tiny Luxemburg.

Only in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a third and larger Belgian migration movement to the U.S. started, now mostly made up of Flemish-speaking Belgians from the north of the country. A general agricultural crisis because of the import of cheap American grain, combined with extremely low wages in the Flemish flax industry, and a lack of prospects were the main engine of this migratory boom.



America became a tempting destination to some. Job opportunities were legion, accession to land ownership relatively easy, transportation costs rapidly decreased and a new transatlantic passenger line from Antwerp, the Red Star Line, started operating in 1873, reinforcing the role of Antwerp as a port of departure.

From 1889 onwards, Belgian migration to the U.S. steadily increased. No certainty exists on the exact numbers of Belgians migrating to the U.S. in this period. In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it reached its peak, with some 3000 Belgians arriving each year (reaching almost 5000 in 1907). Overall numbers between 133.000 and 200.000 Belgian migrants to the United States are often suggested. But these numbers cover the first timers who decided to permanently move to the U.S., as well as so-called return migrants, who travelled back and forth between America and

Belgium. The 1900 US Federal Census recorded 29.848 American inhabitants who were born in Belgium. Twenty years later the number had climbed to 62.687. Both numbers probably underestimate the actual number of Belgian-born Americans.

Most Belgians traveled to America via Antwerp, but some preferred Rotterdam or Le Havre. Some choose to travel via Canada to avoid the harassing and increasingly restrictive controls at Ellis Island. The Grand Trunk Railway then brought them to their destiny, either in Canada itself or in the United States.



The region of origin heavily influenced their destination, primarily because of their professional background, but also out of a desire to join parents and friends, thus establishing local Belgian communities. Sometimes, they named their new home after their region of origin (Ghent in Minnesota and Kentucky, Brussels in Wisconsin and Illinois, Antwerp in New York and Ohio, Hoboken in New Jersey, and so on). Belgians with an industrial background (miners, weavers, and glass workers) often originated from Wallonia and went to the industrial areas of the East, such as of Pennsylvania, but also to Indiana and its glass industry. At that time, this state experienced an industrial boom, that required a steadily increasing labor force. The availability of jobs acted as a magnet for industrial workers from abroad.

Most migrants from West and East Flanders had a farming background and often settled in Michigan (Detroit in particular) and Illinois (Moline), or Kansas for farmers from Hainaut. To them the United States indeed offered unique opportunities: fertile land was abundant, and ownership was easily within reach, especially when they became U.S. citizens. This attractive perspective contrasted favorably with the heavy rents and taxes they had to pay in Belgium for exploiting land they didn't own.

Once the pioneers had settled in, their families joined them.<sup>9</sup> In 1895, the Belgian consul in Detroit described how Belgian farmers planned their overseas "*colony*". In their village of origin, several families jointly decided to send one of them to Michigan, to scout for good agricultural land, to enquire about procedures and materials. Armed with his information they then came over in group to exploit the land. According to the Belgian consul, farmers and craftsmen had the best chances to succeed. There was no real need for them to speak fluently English. By contrast, the highly educated individual, the consul warned, would face enormous difficulties settling in Detroit, often ending in misery.<sup>10</sup>

The consul also warned newcomers to act discreetly. And indeed, contrary to their rather ill-famed reputation in France, Belgian migrants to the U.S. do not seem to have suffered the same rebuff. Quite the contrary, it seems. In 1906, a considerate journalist of the *Detroit News Tribune* described the Belgians of Detroit as "*picturesque people*":

*"With their characteristic unobtrusiveness the Belgian immigrants are slipping into the city almost unobserved. [...] While the German, Italian, Polish and half a dozen other nationalities are almost constantly talked about, and*

*while the parts they play in civic and social life are frequently discussed, one seldom hears a word spoken about the Belgians. They are almost never found in the police court."*<sup>11</sup>

**Life of the Picturesque People Who Are Coming to This City in Unprecedented Numbers From the Land of King Leopold, and Who Have Made Detroit's Belgian Colony The Fourth Largest in the United States.**

*Detroit News Tribune, 5 August 1906*

What distinguishes the Belgian colony in Detroit, according to the same journalist, was their observable desire to adhere to their ancestors' customs:

*"[...] most Belgians are filled with an inherent love for old country customs, and [...] many still live as they did in the little towns or on the tiny farms of the fatherland. [...] Their games date back for hundreds of years; scores of them wear wooden shoes, the form of which were designed centuries ago, and many still cling to the clothes in vogue only in the picturesque little towns of the fatherland."*

Most of the Belgians in Detroit seemed to live in comfortable conditions, except for the recent newcomers. According to our journalist, Belgian migrants had a clear advantage over other nationalities, their language skills:

*"Scores of them not only speak Belgian [he probably meant a Flemish dialect], but French and German, and it is not uncommon to hear a rough-visaged, curiously clad man who labors upon Detroit streets converse in three languages."*

Our journalist undoubtedly overestimated the language skills of the Belgian newcomers, but in a clear reference to the tensions created by the mass migration of that time, he concludes his article with a remark by the city's chief immigration inspector:

*"If all the immigrants who came to this country were Belgians, such phrases as 'the danger of immigration', 'immigrant crime' and 'immigrant taint' would be practically unknown in the United States."*

But Belgians' reputation was not always beyond criticism. This occurred on only a few occasions, though. In November 1923, the *News Messenger* – the local newspaper of Lyon County, Minnesota – had reproduced a portrayal of the people of Ghent in Minnesota by Gino Speranza, published in *World's Work*, a pro-business monthly from New York:

*"Not are the de-nationalizing forces of alienation operative only in the large cities [...] The little town of Ghent, Minn., is predominantly Belgian. Such alien inhabitants are, as a local teacher reports, almost absolutely illiterate, they speak no language but their own, and bear children who grow up wholly ignorant of English."*<sup>12</sup>



*World's Work*, November 1923

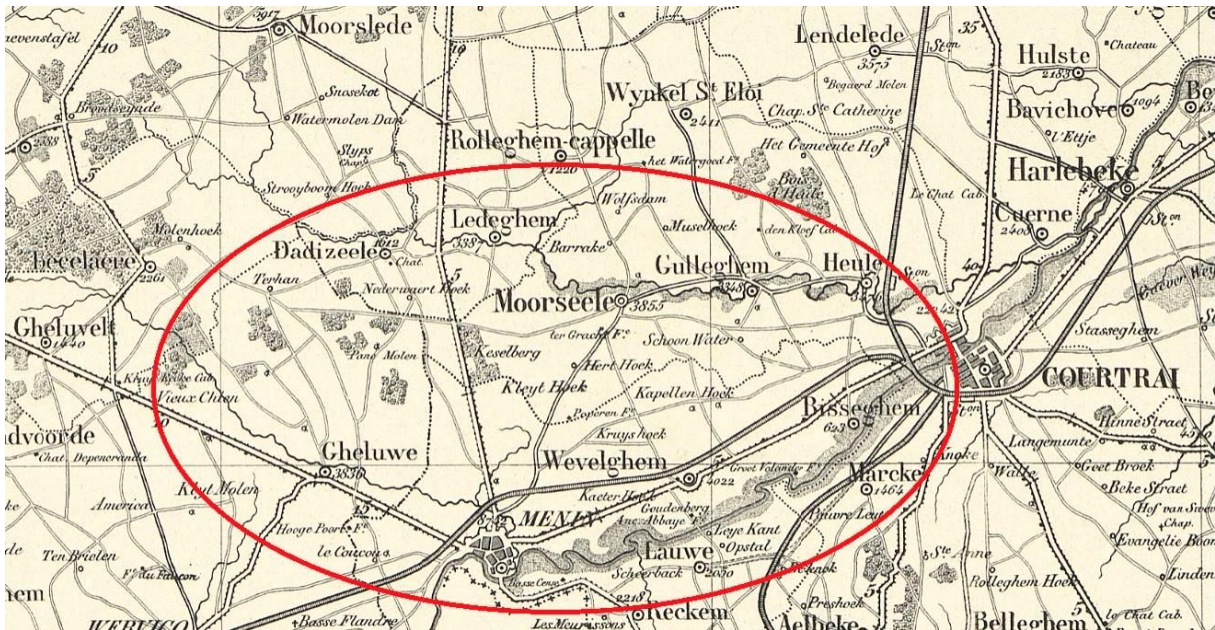
The monthly was known for its anti-Catholic and anti-migration bias, which explains the vileness of its characterization of the Belgian immigrant community in Ghent, which was staunchly Catholic. Local newspapers took the defense of Ghent: *"Ghent may have a population of citizens of foreign birth, but the facts show that they have the right American spirit,"* one of them wrote. And contrary to what *World's Work* pretended, the old mother tongue was rapidly disappearing, in particular among young people.<sup>13</sup>

On another occasion, in June 1940, at the beginning of World War II, a column in a Chicago newspaper suggested that Belgians might not be *"100 per cent Americans and quite possibly a subversive element"* in American society. The *Chicago Tribune* received several readers' letters denouncing the insinuation. In a later article, the newspaper corrected its stance. It now counted the Belgians among the *"Patriots from the Low Countries"*. Noting that their main diversion was pigeon training, the paper informed its readers that the American Belgians had *"furnished many carrier pigeons for the army"*.<sup>14</sup>



## The Coolsaet emigrants

Before the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, no person with the name Coolsaet ever went to the United States. It is not until 1920 that the U.S. census lists the name Coolsaet. Yet, this does not quite turn out to reflect reality, as will be seen in the life stories of the Coolsaets that left Belgium in search for a better life in America. They were few – no more than a dozen. They also came from just a few villages between Ypres and Courtrai. And their family backgrounds were very similar to those of their Belgian fellow-emigrants at the time.



**Dadizele.** Available historical evidence points to **Hector Coolsaet** as the very first Coolsaet to set foot on American soil. He was born in a large farmers' family in Dadizele, that had moved to nearby Menen ('Menin' in French) at the border with France. When he left Belgium for the U.S. in 1902, he was 25. In Menen's population registers, the municipality clerk recorded: "*leaving for Marinette, Wisconsin*". Marinette's population was then peaking, due to a lumber boom and other thriving industrial plants that took advantage of Marinette's location at the confluence of several waterways. After leaving Antwerp, Hector seems to have changed his mind. There is no indication that he ever went to Marinette. Instead, according to what he himself stated, he went to Marshall, the county seat of Lyon County, Minnesota. Most probably, he lived in Ghent, a tiny village of less than 200 souls, 7 miles northwest of Marshall. After all, that was the destination his younger brother **Remi** mentioned when joining his brother two year later. Remi was barely 15 at the time.

*Hector Oscar Coolsaet      Remi Leon Coolsaet*



**Gullegem.** In the summer of 1905, **Polydoor Coolsaet**, born in Gullegem, 5 miles from Menen, embarked in Antwerp as a third-class passenger on board of the SS Zeeland of the Red Star Line, destination New York. He too was 25 and in possession of 15 \$. He declared to join his cousin Albert Billiet, who had come to the U.S. in 1901 and was now working as a gardener in Kansas City, Missouri. By then, some 500 Belgians were living in the city. Polydoor was accompanied by Théodore Laisnez, 43, a farmer from Gullegem, who also referred to Arthur Billiet as the person he was going to join. But Polydoor also seems to have changed his plans, as he soon turns up in Superior, Wisconsin

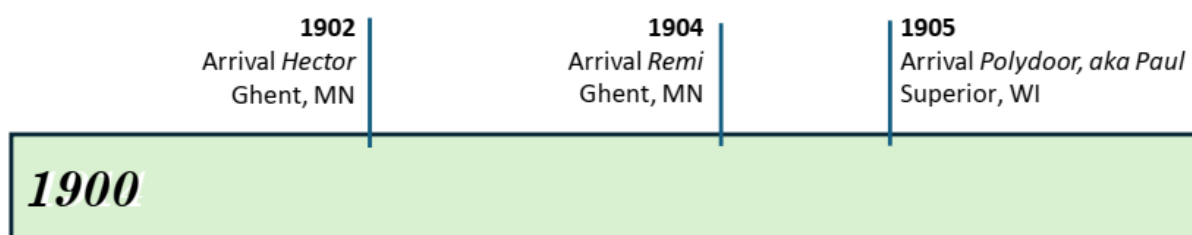
*Paul Coolsaet*

**Bissegem.** In August 1907, **Cyriel Coolsaet**, born in Bissegem in 1873, but by then living in nearby Wevelgem, left for Quebec on board of the Mount Royal of the Canadian Pacific Line. Used as a troop transporter during the Boer War in South Africa, the ship was now used to ferry 1500 third-class passengers between Antwerp and Quebec. The vessel's manifest stamps him as "tourist". Moline, Illinois, however, was his real destination. His elder brother **Camiel** was staying there at the time. Moline was then an important industrial city with a constant demand for new labor. It attracted large numbers of foreign workers, including Belgians.

*Cyriel Coolsaet*

Cyriel's niece **Alice Coolsaet**, 25, arrived in New York in September 1911, as a third-class passenger on board of the SS Lapland, with 20 \$ in her purse. Alice too was born in Bissegem. She had married to **Odile Holvoet**, after which the couple had moved to nearby Lauwe. They had one son when Odile decided to travel to Canada. He stayed for some time in Wallaceburg, Ontario. But it looks as if he soon returned to Belgium. Two more sons were born to the couple. In May 1910, Odile again returned to North America. Detroit, Michigan, was now his destination. He stated that he was joining a cousin there. At that time, more than 2600 Belgians or descendants from Belgian immigrants were living in Michigan. It was second only to the state of Wisconsin, which had 4400. But as in the rest of the country, their numbers were rising rapidly in the first decades of the 20th century.

At some point in time, Odile adopted a more American-sounding name: **Charley**. Alice joined him more than a year later. By then, he was living in Omaha, Nebraska. For lack of money, the couple had to leave their children for some more years with relatives in Belgium. In 1919, the youngest of them, **Odilon (Maurice)**, who had a weak heart and was frail all his life, died. With their savings (and a loan), Alice and Charley were finally able to send for the remaining boys. In November 1919, **Joseph** and **Gilbert** embarked on the SS France in Le Havre, destination NY.



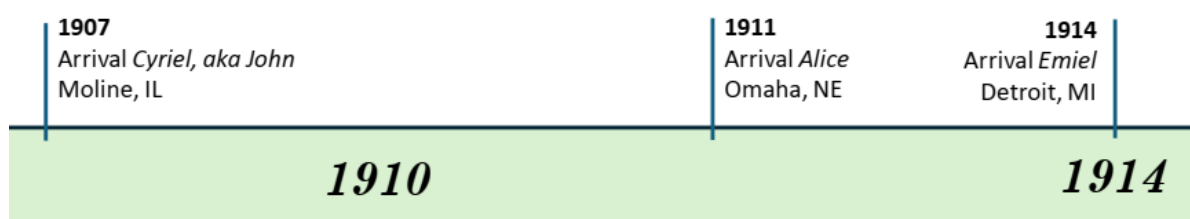
**Emiel Coolsaet**, 23, a native of Bissegem too, left Antwerp on board of the SS Lapland on 9 May 1914 – three months before the German army invaded Belgium. The capture of the port of Antwerp by the German army interrupted the activities of the Red Star Line (its sailings only resumed in 1919). The ship's passenger list mentions "*farm laborer*" as Emiel's occupation. He indicated that he was joining his "*brother*" (in fact his half-brother, as we shall see later) **Alfons Haezebrouck** in Detroit. He was accompanied, incidentally, by **René**, Alfons' younger brother, who occasionally visited him in Detroit.

*Emiel Coolsaet*

**Kruishoutem.** A final, mysterious, individual should be mentioned. According to a family story, a Coolsaet originating from a brewery family in Kruishoutem, East Flanders, migrated to the U.S. during the Prohibition in the 1920s. He allegedly pursued brewery activities despite the ban on such activity. But none of the children of **Marcel Coolsaet** (1900-1966) – who indeed operated a brewery in Kruishoutem until 1963 (with locally renowned table and cherry beers) – was able to confirm this story.



So, leaving aside this enigmatic Coolsaet from Kruishoutem, early 20<sup>th</sup> century migration to the United States involved four families with Coolsaet as their common surname. But in fact, only two families were involved. Except for Hector and Remi, all other Coolsaet emigrants were, albeit very distant, relatives of each other. They all belonged to the same large West-Flemish Coolsaet branch, of which Jacob Coolsaet (est. 1660-1691) and Joanna Vandewinkele (1658-1743) were the common ancestors. They might have been unaware of each other's departure. But since they all came from adjacent villages in southwest Flanders, close to Kortrijk (Courtrai), by word of mouth the departure of some may have influenced the others to consider a similar move. We just don't know, and we probably never will.





## Their ancestors' life in the Old Country

The region the Coolsaet emigrants came from, is nowadays commonly known as the 'Texas of Flanders' for its entrepreneurial spirit. But it was once an area of deprivation. Life was hard for the ancestors. Since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, they had witnessed a never-ending string of wars, which took a heavy toll on the inhabitants: looting, destruction, requisitions, military taxes, foreign occupation, compulsory conscription. Most worked the land, sometimes in combination with weaving and spinning of flax to supplement their income and provide work during winter. But, as everywhere, working the land was a constant struggle against the forces and uncertainties of nature.

The Belgian independence of 1830 brought no immediate relief. Poverty was everywhere, despite the long working hours. In the mid-1800s, a deep crisis in the flax industry combined with failed potato crops because of their infection by blight, led to abject misery, enduring deprivation, famine, and diseases.

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some farming families left the small-scale flax work at home behind and started to concentrate instead on the transformation of flax into flax fibers.<sup>15</sup> This was still an activity closer to agriculture and farming than to modern industry, but it nevertheless represented a step towards the mechanization and industrialization of flax



Soaking flax in the 'Golden River' (photo credit: Beeldbank Kortrijk)

work. The Leie (Lys) valley in southwest Flanders – home to many of the Coolsaet-families – was transformed into a giant flax processing area. British traders called the Leie the 'Golden River', referring to the color and the quality of the flax. The river ensured both the constant supply of fresh water needed for the preparation of flax fibers and the discharge of sewage.

The villages along the river were transformed by the ever-increasing number of flax factories. Some factories were small family businesses. But gradually ever larger flax factories sprang up, requiring a growing number of workers to support their increasing production of fibers. At the end of the century, almost half of the population in this region was working in the flax industry.

This evolution did not put an end to abuse. The sharp increase of the population put heavy pressure on wages, that even started to decrease while the cost of living sharply increased. Flax workers in the large factories were the worst off. Job security was non-existent. Working conditions for women and children were dreadful. Making ends meet remained a challenge for many families – while the factory owners became blatantly richer and richer. By the end of the century, social unrest was on the rise. In 1875, the first labor union of flax workers was formed.

Emigration offered a way out of a life with bleak prospects, and dire living conditions. The textile factories in Roubaix and Tourcoing, in northern France, were often the chosen destination. Seasonal farming in France was another obvious option. The United States was an option too, but to a much lesser extent.

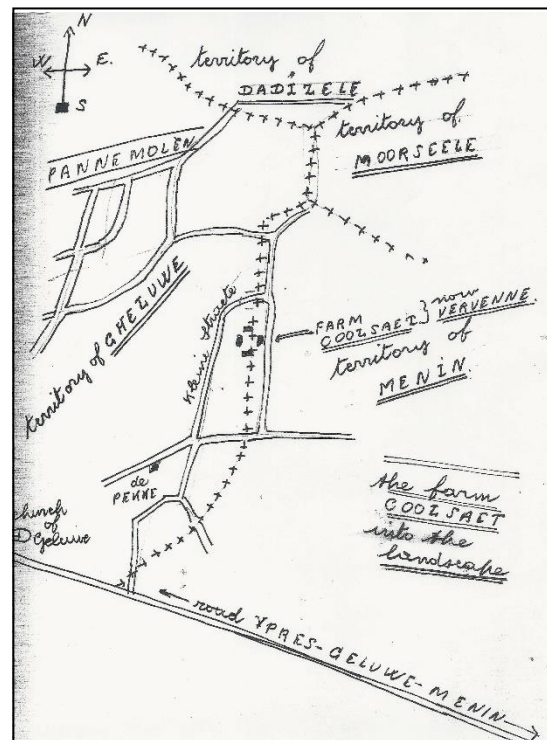
### *Family life in Dadizele*

Hector and Remi were born into a large farmers' family. Their grandfather **Charles Coolsaet** had left his home village of Ledegem for nearby Dadizele, probably shortly after his marriage to **Adelaide Grymonpon** in 1834. The generations before them had all lived off the land. The work was hard and unpredictable, at the mercy of weather conditions. None of them owned the fields they cultivated. When Charles and Adelaide moved to Dadizele, it was obvious that farming would continue to be their life. Farming and small-scale flax work were the main economic activities in Dadizele at the time. Charles and Adelaide opted for their ancestors' way of life. They lived on a farmstead with three other families.

Charles, however, nurtured political ambitions. Three times, in 1854, 1860 and again in 1866, he figured on the electoral lists for the municipality of Dadizele and even made it to the town council. Their life improved. In 1872, the family owned its own homestead at the Bakkerhoekstraat n° 71, in Dadizele. The village then had about 1600 inhabitants.

Charles and Adelaide had three sons and three daughters. They all kept to the land, most of them in their native Dadizele. One of their sons, **Constant**, however, left for Geluwe, some 4 miles to the south of Dadizele. He was to become the father of Hector and Remi.

In August 1872, Constant married **Marie Louise Vanderpe** from Geluwe. They started farming at the Vanderpe family farm in the Cleene Straete (nowadays Kleinestraat), on the border of Geluwe and Menen, in a neighborhood called Slingerhoek (formally Wijk D, 52 in Geluwe). This farm had been exploited by the Vanderpe family since 1747. But probably the Vanderpe family never owned it themselves (since at least between 1815 and 1830, the farm was owned by a Persyn from Tournai). They raised cattle and yearlings. Also living in their family home was Marie Louise's mother and uncle; Paul Louage, a young cowboy; and Stephanie Dewitte, a young nanny – who had to watch after the couple's nine children. But unfortunately, most did not live long: all their daughters and four of their sons died before the age of 4. Only two sons survived. **Hector** was born just before Christmas 1876. More than a decade later, in July 1889, **Remi** was their last child.



Situation of the farm exploited by Constant Coolsaet  
(drawing by Maurice Vandenberghe, 1958)

At home, French was commonly spoken. France was indeed only a couple of miles away from where they lived. In October 1900, after the death of his wife Marie Louise, Constant sold all their



belongings, animals, and farm materiel and with his two surviving sons, Hector and Remi, he moved to Menen, right on the border with France. There they lived on a homestead in the Bruggepoort 53, at the outskirts of the city. It is from here that Hector and Remi left for America.

Constant's younger brother **Louis**, uncle of Hector and Remi, had remained in Dadizele. He married **Octavie Vandorpe**, Marie Louise's younger sister. At the time of his marriage, he worked on a farm, perhaps on his father's farm in the Bakkerhoekstraat. But soon after, he left the land. He became an innkeeper, first at 'Het Paradijs' in de Ledegemstraat and later at 'De Velodrome' in the Beselarestaat (nowadays n° 2). Here, Louis and Octavie lived above the café, with their family of ten.

Unfortunately, once again some of their children too died young. None of the boys kept to the land. Moving up the social ladder gradually began to become real. **August Oscar**, Louis' first-born, became painter and clog maker. His younger brother **Leon** – Hector and Remi's cousin, born in 1886 – became a trusted plumber and mechanic, inheriting their father's house in the Beselarijstraat in Dadizele. There, Leon's wife **Madeleine** ran a high-quality earthenware and cutlery shop.

Both loved music. They had a piano at home, where the neighbors' children exercised their piano skills. Leon himself was a confirmed musician. He played bugle in the local band 'Met Vlijt en Eendracht' ('With Diligence and Harmony'). But for Hector and Remi's cousin, family life was tragic. Five of his seven children were stillborn. When Leon's daughter Marie-Louise died at age 15 and his wife Madeleine less than two years later, Leon couldn't cope with the sorrow over the death of his beloved. Soon after Christmas day 1945, he put an end to his own life. Their surviving daughter, **Christiane**, was taken care of by one of her aunts. She passed away in 2009 in Aalst, East Flanders, 76 years old.



The Dadizele 'Met Vlijt en Eendracht' band.  
Leon Coolsaet, cousin of Hector and Remi, is the second from the right in the top row.



We now return to the early 1900s, at the time Constant's sons Hector and Remi left their homestead for America. Menen, where Constant and his sons were living, was witnessing then a new emigration flow – not so much to the U.S., but to France. Enduring hardship in the countryside combined with cheap railway transport allowed farm laborers to remain living in Flanders while working in the thriving textile industry in northern France. Menen had become a transit point for this seasonal migration to France. Its population rapidly increased and gave rise to a new district, where the cross-border commuters and their families settled down.

A few, however, went overseas to the United States. Migration to the U.S. was somewhat less popular in West Flanders than in East Flanders. In 1902 – the year Hector left for America – some 600 West-Flemings did the same, out of a total of almost 3000 Belgians that year.<sup>16</sup> The majority of them were farmers – just like Hector.

### ***Family life in Gullegem***

**Polydoor** was born in a typical family of West Flanders.<sup>17</sup> His father was a weaver who had become a flax dresser. His grandfather was a journeyman and afterwards a weaver. His ancestors had constantly moved back and forth between Bissegem and Gullegem, less than 2 miles apart. Gullegem had been particularly hard hit during the multiple crises of the mid-1800s. Poverty, diseases and starvation were rampant.

Gullegem, cette commune que le typhus avait rendu l'année dernière la terreur de tous les villages environnants, souffre cette année encore de la manière la plus affreuse. Voici ce qu'on nous écrit de ce malheureux village :

« Grâce à Dieu, je n'ai plus à vous parler du typhus ; mais la mortalité qui frappe nos pauvres exténués, est effrayante : les cas de décès surpassent de plus du double ceux des naissances. Le paupérisme a envahi les deux tiers des habitants ; l'autre tiers est en partie épuisé soit par les aumônes, soit par les pertes qu'elle a éprouvées.

» Le bureau de bienfaisance est impuissant à subvenir à tant de misère.

» Les veuves et les orphelins abondent, et leur dénûment fait saigner le cœur.

» Votre bonne ville de Gand, qui, l'an dernier, a consolé tant d'infortunes à Gullegem, ne nous tendra-t-elle pas encore une main généreuse ? »

Vivid description of the dramatic sanitary situation in Gullegem in 1848  
(*Organe des Flandres*, 13 February 1848)

As many in that area, Polydoor was a flax worker and his sisters lacemakers. When he was 11, his family left Gullegem and moved to Bissegem. Although the latter village was only a few miles from his home village of Gullegem, its position on the banks of the Leie river and its flourishing flax fiber industry, made it a magnet for the surrounding villages. For flax workers' families, Bissegem offered better prospects than Gullegem. Only by the time of Polydoor's family relocation to Bissegem in 1892, did Gullegem begin to catch up.

Did Polydoor's departure to America inspire others? In April 1910, his brother-in-law **Jeroom Vandewalle**, who was married to Polydoor's sister **Marie**, in turn left for Detroit. Like many of his fellow travelers on the vessel, he gave as his occupation "*farm laborer*". Unlike Polydoor, however, Jeroom did not stay. At the start of the First World War, he was back in Bissegem, where he resumed his flax work job.

### ***Family life in Bissegem***

**Cyriel** and **Camiel** were the last two sons born to **Ignatius Coolsaet** and **Ida Samyn**. The family had been living in Bissegem for at least five generations. Like everywhere else in the region, life has been harsh for their ancestors.<sup>18</sup> Ignatius witnessed the rapid mutation of his village due to the mechanization and industrialization of flax work. Bissegem was indeed one of the leading centers of the flax fiber production. The first flax factory in Bissegem, by the way, was established by **Henri Coolsaet**, a distant relative of Ignatius (so distant that they probably were not aware of the exact nature of their family relationship).

As many others in that part of West Flanders, Ignatius worked as a flax dresser – as his father had done. Mother Leonie was lacemaker. They had a large offspring of ten – but four of them died before the age of two. Ignatius' sons Camiel and Cyriel, born in 1869 and 1873 respectively, had followed in their father's and grandfather's footsteps and had become flax workers too.



Henri Coolsaet, Bissegem's first flax manufacturer (1866-1945)

His daughter **Leonie**, the eldest sister of Cyriel and Camiel, had a daughter of an unknown father – **Alice**, born in her grandfathers' house in the summer of 1886. Leonie indeed shared the parental house with her parents Ignatius and Ida. It took Leonie more than twenty years to acknowledge her daughter. Alice never learned to write nor read and worked as a maid, as so many girls of her age. In late April 1905, she married **Odile Holvoet**, a farmer, like her born of an unknown father. A year later, Alice and Odile, together with their first son and Alice's mother Leonie, left Bissegem for Lauwe, 3,5 miles to the east. From here, Odile went to North America, more than a year later to be followed by his wife. Alice's mother Leonie passed away in Lauwe, West Flanders, at age 62.

**Emiel Theophiel** Coolsaet was the last Coolsaet to leave for America prior to the First World War. Though also originating from Bissegem, his family nevertheless had no direct ties to Ignatius' family in the same village. Both families were only very distant relatives of each other. But the live story of Emiel's family too was intimately linked to the flax work. Both his father and his grandfather had been flax workers in Bissegem.

His father **Louis** died in 1904, 60 years old. Louis had been married twice, first to **Sylvia Cardon**, with whom he had six children, and then to **Florence Depoot**, a barrier operator, with whom he also had six children, among them Emiel. Florence, for her part, was married twice before marrying Louis. Her first husband was **Eduard Haezebrouck**, with whom she had two sons,

**Alfons**, and **René**. Alfons Haezebrouck was none other than Emiel's half-brother, he referred to as the relative he was going to join in Detroit.

When Eduard passed away, Florence had remarried to **Henri Vercoutere** and, after Henri's death in 1888, to Louis Coolsaet. Louis was thus her third husband. They raised six children. Emiel, born in 1898, was their second son. Both sons worked in the flax industry. The daughters either worked as a lacemaker or as a maid. Ten years after his father's death, Emiel left for America, 23 years old. His half-brother Alfons, who had been living intermittently in Detroit since 1904, welcomed him to his place at 620½ Monroe Avenue. It is not clear whether Alfons ever intended to settle permanently in America, but soon after Emiel's arrival, he seems to have returned to Belgium for good.



Monroe Avenue, Detroit, at the time of Emiel's arrival (photo credit: Library of Congress & Shorpy)



## Settling in a new home country

All the Coolsaet immigrants came from a modest, even poor, family. By migrating overseas, they certainly hoped to improve their lot and escape the hardships of life in their homeland. The glowing descriptions of life in America from earlier migrants and the propaganda of recruiting agents played an important part in their motivation to try their luck overseas. But did their dreams come true?

Upon leaving, most probably considered their departure to be final. Some, however, returned to Belgium, probably disappointed. What about the remaining ones, who decided to persist and settle in their new home country? How long did it take them and their offspring to become mainstream Americans? Migration history indicates as a rule of thumb that it usually takes three generations for migrant families to blend into their new environment and to be accepted by it as full-fledged citizens and no longer as immigrants. The grandchildren of the original immigrants are thus said to close the integration cycle. How long did it take for the Coolsaet families to feel completely American?

### *The Dadizele branch – The life stories of the Coolsaet brothers*

**The wanderyears.** After his arrival in the U.S., Hector most likely settled in Ghent, Lyon County, in the southwestern corner of Minnesota. His 15-year-old brother Remi joins him there in June 1904. Originally, the place was called 'Grandview'. In the early 1880s, the Bishop of St Paul, Minnesota, called for Catholics to establish a Catholic settlement in the fertile plains around Grandview. French-Canadians were the first to heed the call, soon to be followed by Flemish and Dutch Catholic families. They quickly took root and purchased more and more acres of land. To attract even more Flemish settlers, 'Grandview' was changed into 'Ghent'. Rivalry erupted between the French-Canadian and the Flemish communities. In the end, the Belgians prevailed. By 1914, Belgians possessed almost half the land of the county. When Hector and Remi settles in the village, it was still a tiny farming village of 193 inhabitants, almost all Belgian and Dutch.<sup>19</sup>



Ghent, MN, in 1909 (photo credit: Lyon County Museum)

The brothers did not stay long in Ghent, at least Remi did not. In August 1905, he moves to Hanna, Alberta in Canada. Why Hanna ? We don't have a clue. At that time, it is a sparsely populated area with no more than a few scattered homesteads. The town itself will only come into existence in 1912 as divisional point on the Great Northern Railway. (It got its name from D.B. Hanna who was president of the railway at the time.) Before the arrival of the railway, the only methods of travel were by ox or horse team or on horseback.<sup>20</sup> The pioneers were mostly Americans, Canadians, and Germans – no Belgians (except for one individual with Irish roots, who became manager of the local bank – but that was some time after Remi's arrival in town).

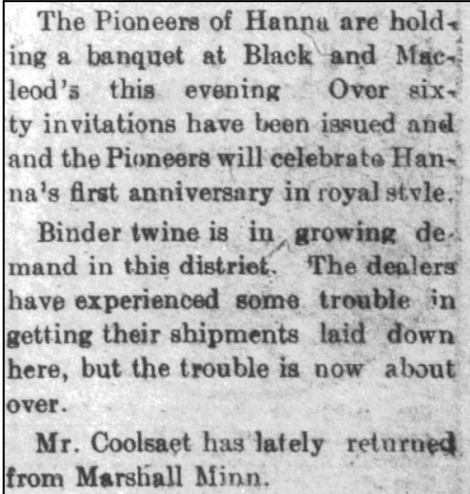
It is a very fertile farming territory and Remi works as a “*self-employed farmer*”, probably meaning a seasonal farmer. Did Hector accompany his brother ? After all, it would be strange for him to let his young brother make that trip all by himself. He probably accompanied his brother to Canada, but once there they each go their separate ways. There is nothing to suggest that Hector lived in Hanna. It is rumored that he went for a time gold digging in Canada and/or in Fairbanks, Alaska. Or did he also go to Alberta, but instead of farming choose coal mining ? At the turn of the century miners from Wallonia began arriving at the coal mines in southwest Alberta to work for West Canadian Collieries, founded in 1903 by a group of French and Belgian entrepreneurs.<sup>21</sup> Hector's obituary in the Dutch-language newspaper *Gazette van Detroit* will only suggest that he had indeed been in Canada and Alaska before returning to the U.S. in 1910.

We are in the dark about Hector's precise whereabouts between 1905 and 1910. He himself has stated that he had been staying in Marshall, Minnesota all those years – which is unlikely. But it is indeed in Marshall that we find him again in 1911. On 1 June 1911, he not only becomes an American citizen before the District Court of Lyon County at Marshall, MN. He is also awarded his first contract for laying pipes and water mains in the city. This is the activity he is going to pursue from now on. But he obviously also possesses his own farm near Milroy, MN, some twenty miles to the east of Marshall.

A newspaper report suggests that Remi visited him at least once in Marshall, in 1913. Remi probably did not always live in Hanna, since the 1911 Census of Canada identifies Medicine Hat in southeast Alberta as his place of habitation. In it, he is no longer described as “*self-employed*” but as “*laborer*”. Anyway, Hanna was definitely the place where he lived the longest during his stay in Canada.

*Hanna Herald*, 7 August 1913

**Joining forces.** In July 1914, Remi leaves Canada and joins his brother in Marshall. But they are living apart and pursuing separate careers as contractors, albeit in the same business: sewer systems and water mains. And they are living close to one another. Hector works as a self-employed pile ditch contractor in Lucan, Redwood, MN (while living in Marshall) and Remi as a self-employed laborer, working in Kintire, Redwood, MN (while living in Belview, MN). In 1918 Remi moves to Marshall, perhaps to live with his brother.



The Pioneers of Hanna are holding a banquet at Black and Macleod's this evening. Over sixty invitations have been issued and the Pioneers will celebrate Hanna's first anniversary in royal style.

Binder twine is in growing demand in this district. The dealers have experienced some trouble in getting their shipments laid down here, but the trouble is now about over.

Mr. Coolsaet has lately returned from Marshall Minn.

In the late 1910s, they hooked up and set up a joint company, Coolsaet Brothers & Drees, that starts bidding for public contracts in tile work and water mains. They soon change the company name to: 'Coolsaet Bros Co – Sewer and Waterworks Contractors', based in Marshall. By the end

of the decade, the company seat is transferred to Dearborn at the outskirts of Detroit. The company address is: 7608 Williamson Avenue, Dearborn, Michigan.

By then, Remi is married to **Amanda Molla** in Detroit. Amanda was born in 1877 in Eastman, Minnesota. Her grandparents originated from Germany. Amanda was previously married to Joseph Pavsek, who, however, died in 1918, barely a year after their marriage. In March 1920, she gave birth to a daughter, **Marvel**, from an unknown father. Remi adopted Marvel when he married Amanda in 1923. Three boys are born to the couple: **Allan** in 1926, and **Remi Leo Jr.** ten years later. **Hector**, called after Remi's brother, sadly died at birth, in 1931. In August of that year, Remi too had become an American citizen before the District Court of Detroit.



Hector Coolsaet in 1921

The company's move to Dearborn closes the Marshall chapter of Hector and Remi's life. Hector and Remi's family went to live in 7629 Morrow Circle W in Dearborn. Remi's mother-in-law also lived with them, as well as a maid, Lillie Domnie.

Their business is running well. They secure many contracts. The brothers also enter in yet another company, Miller Metal Products Corp, with Hector as Vice-President and Remi as sec-treas. Remi, for his part, buys a ten per cent share in 'The Peoples State Bank of Trenton', becoming one of its Vice-Presidents. He will serve on the Board of Directors of its Rockwood branch until at least 1960, when the bank merges with another bank.

**\*PEOPLES STATE BANK, TRENTON.**  
Organized September 2, 1929.

SCOTT E. LAMB, *President*; F. C. KRUSELL, *Vice President and Cashier*; REMI COOLSAET, MEYER ELLIAS, *Vice Presidents*.

DIRECTORS.—Scott E. Lamb, Chas. W. Lee, F. C. Krusell, Remi Coolsaet, H. C. Knickerbocker, Aaron Simmons, Frank C. Frantz, Meyer Ellias, Leonard Frebes, R. W. Ballantine.

Statement September 24, 1930.

**Divided brothers.** But then suddenly their partnership breaks down. In 1936, Remi starts his own company: R.L. Coolsaet Co (General Contractors), based at 7600 Middlesex, Dearborn. He and Amanda both act as President. Hector is not involved. He continues sewerage activities by himself. He also moves out of Morrow Circle and shifts his address to Williamson Ave, the company address, while Remi and his family continue to live at Morrow Circle.



Remi Coolsaet



Amanda Coolsaet, née Molle



Why did the brothers part ways ? We don't really know. Did they disagree about how to run their company ? Was it the introduction in 1932 of Amanda in Coolsaet Brothers as vice-president, with which Hector did not agree, as is rumored in Dadizele, the family's village of origin ? Were there financial reasons at play ? Anyway, from this point on, they each go their separate ways, as they had done before in Canada.

During the Second World War, Remi and Amanda leave Morrow Circle for 5656 W Jefferson in Trenton, some twenty miles to the south of Dearborn. In 1955, they definitively settle down in Grosse Ile, a township situated on several islands in the Detroit River, opposite Trenton. Once a remote residential and farming community, Grosse Ile (from the French 'grosse île' or big island) had become a popular vacation spot. In the mid-1950s, when Remi and Amanda arrive on the island, Grosse Ile is experiencing a significant residential development and subsequent housing boom. They already possess farmland on the west side of the island. When they decide to build three single-family homes on these grounds, Remi becomes the namesake for the private road that is going to become their home address: Coolsaet Ln. This is one of only two places in the world where a city has 'Coolsaet' among its street names – the other being Bissegem, the village of origin of some of the other Coolsaets emigrants. Remi and Amanda moved in at 23247, Coolsaet Ln, Grosse Ile and their eldest son Allan at 23191.



Remi pursues a successful business career. After the creation of R.L. Coolsaet Construction Co. of Romulus in 1936, he subsequently launches several subsidiaries: R.L. Coolsaet & Sons Contractors Inc. of Trenton and the Woodhaven Equipment & Rental Co. of Trenton. His companies secure a host of local governmental contracts for gas and oil pipelines in Michigan, which form the backbone of the company's success. Remi also starts a third subsidiary in Canada, R.L. Coolsaet of Canada Ltd. in Windsor (opposite Detroit).

Remi, his son Allan recalled in 2013, was proud of his Belgian origins. He even arranged for the Belgian Reverend Marcel Josson to live at the family home, from where he supported genealogical research into the Belgian community in Detroit, including research on the Coolsaet families in Belgium. This resulted in two handwritten albums with a detailed reconstruction of the Coolsaet ancestry reaching back to the early 1700s.

Hector too continues to cultivate the connection with his homeland. He often travels back and forth to Belgium, at least until the mid-1960s. One voyage, in 1921, is related to the necessity to arrange for the estate of their deceased father Constant.

His sewer activities are on a smaller scale than his brother's. He only has one or two associates. He remains based at Williamson Street until 1961, when he sells his remaining equipment. Hector remained single and maybe even somewhat forlorn. He passes away in January 1969 at the Balmoral Nursing Home in Trenton at age 92. He lies buried at Our Lady of Hope Cemetery, Brownstown Twp., Michigan.

Six years after his brother, Remi passes away. He is 86. He lies buried at the Holy Sepulchre Cemetery in Southfield, MI.

Already during his lifetime, Remi's sons Allan and Remi Jr. became associated with the company created by their father. After his death, they took over the companies. But they didn't share their father's attachment to Belgium. Allan was too occupied developing R.L. Coolsaet Co and had too large a family to raise – nine children – to cultivate his Belgian roots. In 1948, he married **Edween Haven**, whose family had migrated from Western England to America in the mid-1600s. Allan was to remain at the helm of the company until age 70. He continued to develop the company into a solid player in the pipeline construction sector. Allan passed away in 2015. Edween two years later. His brother Remi Jr married **Patty Miller** from Wyandotte, Michigan. They had no children. Remi and Patty passed away in 2006 and 2013 respectively.

*Detroit Free Press, 30 September 1975*

**Remi Coolsaet Sr., Suburban Builder**  
Services for Remi L. Coolsaet Sr., a contractor, will be at 10 a.m. Wednesday at Sacred Heart Church, 21701 Parke Lane in Grosse Ile. Mr. Coolsaet, 87, of Grosse Ile, died Sunday at Seaway Hospital in Trenton after a short illness. He founded the R.L. Coolsaet Construction Co. of Romulus in 1936, the R.L. Coolsaet & Sons Contractors Inc. of Trenton, R.L. Coolsaet of Canada Ltd. of Windsor and the Woodhaven Equipment & Rental Co. of Trenton. He was an honorary member of the Dearborn Council of the Knights of Columbus and a member of the Grosse Ile Golf and Country Club. He is survived by his wife, Amanda; two sons, Allan and Remi Jr.; nine grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren. Visiting hours will be from noon until 9 p.m. Tuesday at the Ralph W. Ridge Funeral Home, 2272 W. Jefferson in Trenton. Memorial tributes may be sent to the Michigan Heart Association or the Michigan Cancer Foundation. Burial will be private at Holy Sepulchre Cemetery in Southfield.

*Gazette van Detroit, 7 February 1969*

## In Memoriam

### HECTOR COOLSAET

Hector Coolsaet was een van onze Vlaamse pioniers, een van die wroeters die zijn slag zou slaan en zou doorwerken tot hij zijn doel bereikt had.

Hij werd geboren te Geluwe W. Vl. op 20 december, 1876 als zoon van Constant Coolsaet en Luise Van Dorpe.

Hector kwam naar Amerika in 1910. Hij bracht zijn eerste jaren in de nieuwe wereld door in Canada en Alaska. Daarna ging hij naar Marshall, Minnesota waar hij als contractor samen met zijn broer Remi, de riolen van de stad aanlegde.

Later kwamen beide naar Dearborn, Mich., en stichtten er de Coolsaet Construction Co. voor het aanleggen van pijplines meest voor olie en gas.

Remi L. Coolsaet is tegenwoordig nog de president van de Company en woont op Grosse Ile. De offices en yards zijn in Romulus, Trenton en Dearborn. Remi is de enige overlevende broer. Hector was ongetrouwd.

Hector was een harde en taale werker. Hij was tevens een diep kristelijk mens gebleven. Zijn tijdelijke goederen gaf hij ook in ruime mate ten dienst van zijn naaste en van de kerk.

Deze die hem hebben gekend zullen hem steeds gedenken als een goed mens. Ze zullen zijn gedachtenis in ere houden als die van een vlaams pionier getrouw aan zijn geloof en getrouw aan zijn land.

Hij stierf in Trenton, Mich. op 21 januari, 1969 in de ouderdom van 92 jaar. Hij werd begraven in St. Timothy's kerk in Trenton, Mich. op 23 st. januari, 1969.

Moge hij in vrede rusten.

## ***The Gullegem branch – The disappearance of Polydoor, aka Paul***

Upon arriving in the United States in 1905, Polydoor shortens his first name to make it sound more American: **Paul**. It is not known if he ever went to Kansas City, Missouri, as he had stated when he embarked. Anyhow, he settles in Superior, Douglas County, at the western end of Lake Superior in northwestern Wisconsin. Strangely enough, Superior's city directory includes the

name 'Coolseed, Paul' already in its 1902 issue, at the address he would later move into. Since his name does not appear in 1900, 1901 and in 1903, we can only assume that in 1902 he stayed briefly in Superior, perhaps on reconnaissance.

The state of Wisconsin was home to the largest Belgian community in North America. Most established Belgian communities in Wisconsin lay scattered around Green Bay, some 300 miles to the southeast of Superior. But at the turn of the twentieth century, the latter city too witnessed a significant influx of immigrants, drawn to the booming shipyards and the docks of Superior, the largest of the Great Lakes. Many came from the United Kingdom and Scandinavia. But hundreds of Belgians too chose Superior, and particularly the Allouez neighborhood of the city, in the shadow of the Great Northern ore docks, where many of them found employment as unskilled laborers.<sup>22</sup>

Paul is one of them.

Life must not have been easy for him. For Paul, America was probably not a dream come true. He often changes jobs and addresses and never owned his own house. In 1910, he lives with other Belgians in the 10<sup>th</sup> Ward, Superior. Mary Hendricks, 26 years old, is the head of the household. She was a widowed mother of a seven-year son, who had come to the U.S. in the same year as Paul. In the same house also lives Cusenier Gerschelder, 42 years old, who had migrated to the U.S. two decades earlier. Cusenier and Paul both work as laborers at the Cedar Docks in Superior. Two years later, Paul moves out, but continues to live in Allouez.

We don't know if he frequented the Belgian Club, but probably he did, as it was located in the same neighborhood where he lived. This men-only club was created in 1912, seven years after Paul's arrival. Its main objective was to maintain ancestral traditions and ties to the homeland, including through its library of Dutch-language books. But the Club also intended to help Superior's Belgians to settle in their new homeland, by assisting them to find employment and by getting them ready to pass their citizenship exams. To this end, it organized a five-month training course. Two evenings a week, the participants studied English, American history, and the duties of an American citizen. In October 1917, Paul obtains U.S. citizenship. (The Belgian Club is still active today as a social venue of Americans with Belgian roots in Superior.)

At the time he becomes an American citizen, Paul had worked for five years as a bartender. Before that, like many Belgians, he worked in the docks. In 1918, he returns there to work for the Pittsburgh Coal Co, including as a crane operator.

In Superior's city directories, his name undergoes different spellings: Colsted, Coolsote, Coolzaet and Coolzaert. But in 1928, his name is no longer included in the directory. From this point on, we lose his trail. He probably was still single and certainly did not return to his home village in Belgium. No traces of his peregrinations were found in the Superior records nor in any other American archive. Paul vanished in the fog of history.

### ***The Bissegem branches (1) – The farming life of Cyriel, aka John, and the Holvoets***

Cyriel joins his elder brother Camiel in Moline, Illinois. The city had grown substantially in recent decades, originally because of its lumber mills (hence the word 'Moline', derived from the French *moulin*, mill) and the adjoining Mississippi river that made transportation and waterpower cheap and easy, but even more so by its agricultural machinery (launched by John Deere).

Factories lined the Mississippi. For decades, the city had drawn great numbers of foreigners, including many from Belgium. It had experienced some social conflicts as a result, due to the arrival of such large waves of newcomers. But the sustained demand for labor and the ever-increasing job opportunities prevented social tensions to linger. The Belgian community in Moline ranked among the biggest of the United States. Many Belgians worked in Moline's young automotive industry.

Cyriel's brother Camiel might have been one of them – or, at least, for a short while. Camiel had started as a flax worker. In 1898, he married **Euphrasie Vannieuwenhuyze**. They went on to have nine children between 1899 and 1912. In 1905, he abandoned flax work and became inn keeper. Given the dates of birth of his children, it is possible that Camiel was present in Moline when Cyriel arrived in September 1907, but we have no information about his presence there other than his brother's words. The only thing that we know for certain, is that he did not stay in the United States. After his return to Belgium, two more children were born.

Cyriel, for his part, remained in America. At some point in time, he too changes his given name – **John**. In Moline, he works as a laborer, perhaps in the ever-expanding John Deere factories. In the spring of 1908, he lives for several months in Berlin (now Kitchener), Ontario (Canada), then returns to Moline. Perhaps he does what many other Belgians in Moline do: factory work during winter, farm work in summer.

But in 1915, he leaves Moline and heads west to Delta County, Colorado. In Colorado, some small Belgian communities already exist, all concentrated around Denver. The state had never attracted a lot of Belgians. In a 1908 leaflet for aspiring settlers the Belgian government emphasized that the state nevertheless offers good job prospects at the smelter (during winter) and in the beetroot fields during summer.<sup>23</sup> According to the leaflet, individuals with farming experience in particular were most likely to succeed. That is probably what John intended to do, like the rest of the small Belgian community there, who worked the land or in the fruit orchards in Delta, Fruita and Hotchkiss.

But probably even more important: his niece Alice and her family had preceded him there.

Alice had finally arrived in New York in August 1911, more than a year after her husband Charley. Had he willfully delayed the arrival of his wife and children, as family rumors allege? At Alice's request, John seems to have pressured Charley to let Alice come over. By then, Charley is living in Omaha, Nebraska. Why he went to Omaha is not known. Only very few Belgians were living there. Alice starts to work as a domestic, saving every penny she earns. Charley works in a meat-packing plant, a hard and dirty job, but it pays well. They hope that one day their dream – acquiring a parcel of land of their own – will come true.

In Omaha, their fourth child, Lena, is born. Their first three children are still in Belgium. When Alice came to America, she had had to leave them with relatives for lack of money. With their savings (and a loan), Alice and Charley are finally able to send for the boys. In November 1919, **Joseph (Joe)** and **Gilbert (Bert)** embark on the SS France in Le Havre, destination New York.

By then, however, they have left Omaha. In 1913, they had moved to Colorado, living successively in Paonia, Orchard, finally settling in the North Fork Valley near Hotchkiss. Nearby live other farming families from Belgium, the Steelandts and the Vanseverens. Four more children are born to Alice and Charley, making it a typical large 'Belgian' family.





Alice Coolsaet and Charley Holvoet with children (back: Gilbert Maurice, Joseph Henry holding Maurice Albert; middle left to right: Stella, Alice, Charley, Lena; front: Mary Alice, Martha)



Charley and Alice

Alice around 1968, in her kitchen in Hotchkiss  
(photo credit: Dr. Jennifer Holvoet)

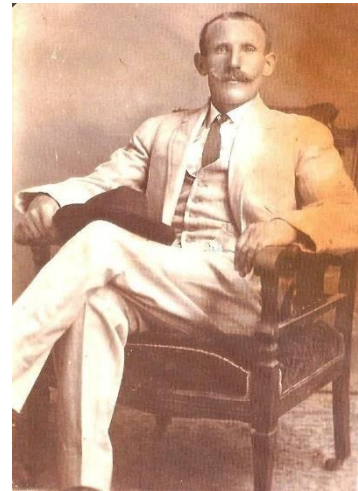
We don't know what exactly Alice's uncle John did after his arrival in Delta County in 1915. Farming probably. In 1918, he manages to purchase a 160 acres farm unit of his own in the Read and Peach Valley near Delta, the seat of Delta County, Colorado. Not far from him lives another Belgian farming family, the Dewildes, who had acquired a parcel of land a year earlier.

Farming was going to be Charley's life too. For a while, he works at John's farm. By 1930, Charley and Alice can finally buy their own farm on the South Paonia Road, near Hotchkiss. Alice works hard to keep up the house, but she too works the land. The Holvoet family history book offers a vivid summary of their life: *"They went from a couple starting out in a dugout under the most primitive conditions to working rented farms living in a small shack to owning their own place. [...] Alice went from no place to go to being the mistress of a four-bedroom house."* Purchasing their own house didn't come without sacrifices, the family history book makes clear: *"It took all the money they had saved to make a down payment on the farm and until the first crops and garden came in, Charley had put the family on food rations."*

Alice – whose family name was sometimes spelled as ‘Coolsalt’ or ‘Coulsaut’ and whom everyone called ‘Liska’ – never really mastered the new language. Dutch – or, rather, their old West Flemish dialect – remained the language Alice and Charley spoke with their two oldest sons – to the bewilderment of their grandchildren who couldn’t understand the “*old language*”. In particular because of the Second World War, the grandchildren were indeed kept ignorant of the old language, ostensibly so that others wouldn’t take them for Germans.

Alice and Charley cultivated their Belgian heritage. They avidly read the Flemish newspaper printed in Michigan, the *Gazette van Detroit*. Odile is a member of the Belgian-American Society. Reminiscent of Belgium too is their eagerness to brew homemade beer – despite the prohibition laws.

We don’t know whether John shared the Holvoet’s attachment to the old country. He lives alone and never married. But during most of their lives, John and the Holvoets continue to live near each other. To the Holvoet family, he was known as ‘Uncle John’ and was considered part of the family. In 1940, however, he moves to Delta. He passes away two years later. Neighbors living close found his body at his home on East Second Street in Delta, Colorado. His remains are buried at the Riverside Cemetery in Hotchkiss.



Cyriel 'Uncle John' Coolsaet  
(photo credit: Dr. Jennifer Holvoet)

A few months later, Charley dies of cancer, age 58. At his passing, the *Hotchkiss Herald* publishes this obituary:

*“A community, saddened by the death of one of its fine citizens, paid tribute to him Wednesday morning, when services for O. C. Holvoet were held at the Catholic church of this city. Charley Holvoet, for years one of the members of the district school board, was the type of man any community could be proud to call one of its own. His plans were those which would be for the betterment of his people and with that thought in his mind he would go out of his way to bring them about. Testimony to his many friends could be seen Wednesday morning when cars lined the street in front of the church and banks of beautiful flowers gave mute evidence of the esteem in which Charley was held. Truly Hotchkiss and community has lost a valuable citizen in the untimely death of Charley Holvoet.”*

Alice lives until age 86. She passes away in January 1973. Like Charley and John, she rests at the Riverside Cemetery in Hotchkiss.

A final recollection of Alice, from the family history book:

*“All through her life, she carried the scars of her early life of poverty. She felt she was rich, though, according to the standards of today, she was still poor.”*



***The Bissegem branches (2) – Emiel's modest life at the periphery of the 'Riviera of the Midwest'***

Upon arriving on American soil, Emiel lives with his half-brother Alfons Haezebrouck at Monroe Ave, Detroit. Employment doesn't come easy for Emiel. In May 1917, his draft registration card for the U.S. Army stated that he is unemployed. A year later he is enlisted in Camp Custer, a training facility near Battle Creek, Michigan. He will never go to war, however, and is discharged in January 1919. He is nevertheless entitled to veteran's status. He also takes advantage of his time in the Army to acquire U.S. citizenship. That occurs in September 1918 before the Circuit Court of Calhoun at Battle Creek, just four years after his arrival in the United States. That is remarkably faster than any of the other Coolsaet immigrants.

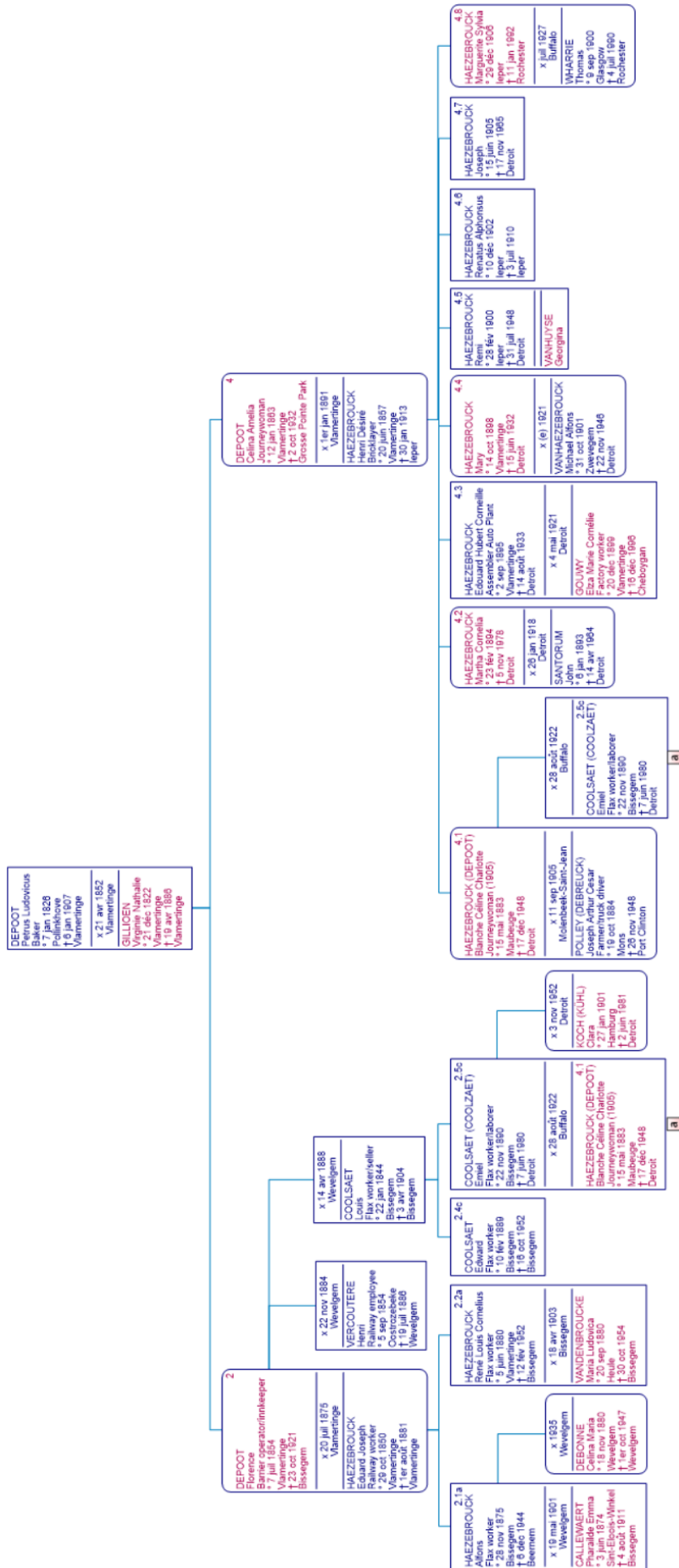
In June 1920, Emiel's elder brother **Edward** comes to visit him in Detroit, together with their mom **Florence** and their younger sister **Elsie**. Upon entering the U.S., Edward declares his intention not to return to Belgium. The three live at 539 Dragoon Street, Detroit. They have apparently decided to make a life in America. Edward starts to work as a mason, Elsie as a clerk and their mother as a timekeeper. But soon they seem to have changed their mind, maybe due to Florence's health. They return home, where Florence dies a year later, in 1921. Elsie and Edward never returned to the United States. Both pass away in Bissegem, respectively in 1943 and in 1952. Neither of them ever married.

Emiel finds himself alone now. His family has returned with no plans to come. His half-brother Alfons is also unlikely to return. Emiel still lives at Monroe Ave, where his half-brother Alfons previously lived, and works as a laborer.

But he will not stay alone for long. In August 1922, he marries **Blanche Haezebrouck**. Here the story becomes a bit tricky. The family tree on the next page hopefully makes it a little clearer. Blanche's mother was **Celine Depoot**. She is the sister of Florence, who was married to Louis Coolsaet, Emiel's father.

In her teens, Celine had gone to Maubeuge in northern France in search of work. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the booming industry in northern France attracted many Belgian workers, men as well as women. Their living conditions were mostly dreadful and cramped and working conditions insalubrious. But labor was in constant demand, offering a perspective for many who were out of work in nearby Belgium. Celine was one of them. In 1883, she gave birth to a daughter, Blanche, born to an unknown father. She then left France and returned with Blanche to her native village. There, a few years later, she married **Henri Haezebrouck**. Henri then adopted Blanche, who was consequently named Haezebrouck. Celine and Henri subsequently had seven more children. One of them died in childhood. Henri passed away in 1913.

Blanche no longer lived with her parents at that time. In 1905, she had married Joseph A. Polley, a truck driver from Mons in Wallonia, and lived in Brussels ever since. Blanche was fluent in both French and Flemish. When their son Camiel was born, they decided to emigrate to the United States. Joseph left first, in April 1911. Blanche followed in January 1912, accompanied by their 4-year-old son. They went to live at 69 Dubois Street, Detroit.



Depoot family tree (partial)

(the letter 'a' under two fields refers to the same persons, Blanche Haezebrouck and Emiel Coolsaet)

In Europe, the First World War broke out. Celine, who had lost her husband Henri a year earlier, fled to France with her children. In 1915, she decided to go overseas. Her daughter Blanche paid for the journey. In late December, they embarked in Bordeaux, destination Detroit. The United States became their new home. Celine never married again. Her children married and spread across Michigan and neighboring states. Celine passed away in October 1932 in Grosse Pointe Park, Detroit.

Blanche's marriage with Joseph Polley, on the other hand, did not last. In April 1921, she filed for divorce, citing desertion for cause. Divorce was confirmed in June 1922.

Two months later, Blanche and Emiel Coolsaet sign their marriage license in Buffalo, New York. With Blanche, her son Camiel and her mother Celine Depoot, Emiel now moves to 1416 Lakepointe St, Grosse Pointe Park, Wayne County, MI. This neighborhood was the westernmost part of what was once an old French and Belgian fishing and farming colony east of Detroit. But these farms were rapidly being replaced by summer estates for the county's affluent. When Belgian immigrants, often brick layers and carpenters, started to arrive in significant numbers they turned this neighborhood into a modest Belgian colony. As a result, wealthy Detroiters, seeking to separate themselves from the newcomers, moved northwards to Grosse Pointe Farms, Shores and Woods, transforming these into a reclusive Riviera of the Midwest with luxurious landscaped estates.<sup>24</sup> The small Belgian neighborhood – three parallel streets, less than two miles to the east of another Belgian community, around the legendary Cadieux Café – became known as Cabbage Patch, as a reference to the vegetable the Belgians grew in their yards.

Cadieux Café in Detroit



For many decades, this remained a vibrant Belgian community, that kept alive the old country traditions of pigeon races and archery. Moreover, during the Prohibition of the 1920s – when Emiel moves in – Grosse Pointe serves as a favorite landing place for rumrunners, who illegally imported liquor from neighboring Windsor, Canada, over the international waters of Lake St. Clair.<sup>25</sup> Emiel certainly treasures his Belgian heritage. He was an enthusiastic pigeon race participant. In the early 1930s, he becomes a member of the 'Pigeon Flyers', the nickname of the Roose-Vanker Post n° 286, the Belgian-American veterans' organization, affiliated to the American Legion. He also joins the Belgian American Century Club – originally also a club of 100 members, only men, who pledg to help each other in case of death or other needy circumstance. Later, however, the barrier limiting its membership to 100 members, will be lifted. And he votes Republican, not uncommon among the Belgian Americans in Detroit in the 1930s, as we can deduce from the 1932 campaign poster on the next page. (The Belgians' enthusiasm for Republican candidates didn't pay off. Herbert Hoover (R) lost to Franklin Roosevelt (D) and Robert A. Clancy, Republican candidate for Congress, lost to a Democrat.)



# De Belgisch-Amerikaansche Vereenigen

herinneren zich de voordeelen en gunsten hen door deze Republikeinsche Kandidaten bewezen.

EEN VETERAAN VAN DEN  
SPAANSCH-AMERIKAANSCHEN OORLOG



Herkijst  
**WILLIAM  
GUTMAN**  
Republikein  
ALS  
County Auditor

"Gevestend en plichtbevoegd"

William Gutman vraagt ook aan de Belgische kiezers van Wayne County dat ze voor hem zouden kiezen op 8 November.

County Auditor Gutman wijst op zijn verleden. Lange jaren reeds werd hij gekozen tot belangrijke ambten en bedieningen die zijn gaven en kennis ten te meer deden uitbreiden.

William Gutman bracht veel verbeteringen aan in het schikken en uitvoeren van het werk van het bureau. Hij bracht een betere werkwijze in voege tot een ordelijke openen van platen zodat grondigere en meer zekerheid bezaten namens de waarde van hunnen eigendom.

Hij stond verantwoordelijk voor het Wayne County Abstract Department dat ze kosteloos dienst bewijst aan duizende menschen van Wayne County in talrijke gevallen.

Hij zag ook de toekomst in. Hij was een der massen die een tienjaars plan voor Wayne County opstelden op dat Wayne County niet langer in schulden zou verduipen. Het draagvlak van taken werd door hem ook nagegaan met het oog op verbetering in dienst.

Kiezers van Wayne County zullen dit indachtig zijn op 8 November en William Gutman herkiezen als Wayne County Auditor.



Herkijst  
**Judge ERVIN H.  
PALMER**  
Republikein  
als JUDGE voor  
Probate Court

"Een man met ondervinding en kennis"

Wij trekken de aandacht der kiezers van Wayne County op de Kandidatuur van Judge Ervin H. Palmer, als Judge voor Probate Court.

Judge Palmer wordt herkiezen te worden. Het is nu meer dan 20 jaar dat hij werkzaam is in openbare ambten en bedieningen hem door den kers van het Volk toevertrouwd. Menigmaal heeft hij in het uitvoeren van zijn ambt de gerechtigde gehandeld om onze landgenooten te helpen.

Het verleden van Judge Palmer spreekt voor de toekomst. Ten allen tijde nam de rechter zijn ambt waar met al zijn krachten. Hij beschermde onpartijdig de rechten van vele Recht zocht en zelf in zijn recht was.

Altijd stond hij in het voordeel van den minderen man. Zijn lange levensloop heeft getuigd dat hij veel ondervinding heeft, altijd gemiddeld zijnde geweest in gerechtszaken.

Judge Ervin H. Palmer heeft altijd getoond onpartijdig te zijn in het bepleiten van moeilijke zaken. Hij heeft plichtvaardig, heeft ongeboide kennis der wetten.

Op 8 November herinnert U Judge Ervin H. Palmer en zendt hem opzien naar het Probate Court. Steunt de kandidatuur van een eerlijken en verdienstvollen rechter.

## Deze Kandidaten moeten herkozen worden



Herkijst  
**W. F.  
BUTLER**  
Republikein  
als COUNTY ROAD  
Commissioner  
HOOFDWEGEN  
BRUGGEN  
PAKKEN  
SPOORWEGKRUISINGEN

"Besparing door Zakenkennis"

W. F. Butler stelt zijn kandidatuur voor de kiezers van Wayne County en brengt cijfers en feiten als bewijzen waarom hij dient herkozen te worden.

Om groote zaken in 't kort te behandelen: de totale last door het Board of Supervisors aanbevolen is maar weinig boven de 40 op elke \$1000 voor gelijk gestelde schatting van eigendom.

Het county Park budget is 7½ minder dan vroeger. De begroting voor het kantonaal vliegplan is met 24½ verminderd. De county road last wordt dit jaar heel weggelaten, alomte zom die verleden jaar gevraagd was om Court Road en Souge Bridge af te betalen, dit door het Horton Akte dat door de Legislature ging in hare laatste zitting.

De lastenbetaler van stad moet niets meer betalen in het aftrekken van eigendom en het verlossen van Gratiot Ave., in de stad Detroit, een werk dat goed vooruitgaat zoodat om deel ervan tegen 10 November open zal zijn voor het verkeer.

Er is een van de McMillan Akte; met den 1 April zullen 40% der township roads overgaan naar het kanton.

Er zijn besparingen gedaan voor wegen, bruggen, parken, parkway, vliegplan, enz. Gedurende met hierboven vermeldde besparingen, zijn deze vordende matrigingen die uit het oog niet mogen verloren worden.

W. F. Butler verwacht dus herkozen te worden op 8 November, steunende op het gedane werk.



Herkijst  
**HERMAN L.  
LAU**  
Republikein  
ALS  
County Treasurer

"'t Verleden waarborgt de toekomst"

Herman L. Lau, Wayne County Treasurer en kandidaat voor de kiezers van 8 November, vraagt herkozen te worden.

Herman L. Lau heeft zich altijd kunnen verheugen op den steun zijner vrienden. Het is ook gemeenschappelijk dat het ambt van kantonale ontvanger een zeer belangrijke positie is. Het werk moet er stipt uitgevoerd worden. Elke handeling moet nauwkeurig nagegaan worden en den dollar van den lastenbetaler moet beschermd worden. Plichtbevoegde beamten moeten gekozen worden om den dollar van gelijk welken burger en lastenbetaler te verzekeren.

Treasurer Herman L. Lau heeft zijn bureau openbaar ingericht: Spoedige bestelling, onbeperkte opening en beschikbare, jeur en nauwkeurigheid aan den dag gelaid door de bediening die paarsz werken onder het toezicht van een bekwaam treasurer.

Herman L. Lau heeft steeds in zijn ondernemingen gelukt. Zowel in private zaken als in openbare bediening. Dat is ook een der redens waarom Herman L. Lau moet herkozen worden.

Kiezers van Wayne County, behoudt in zijn ambt een openbare bediening waaraan verleden de toekomst waarborgt.



Stemt voor  
**ROBERT A.  
CLANCY**  
Republikein  
ALS  
Congressman  
VAN 'T 14de DISTRICT

"Een strijder voor onze rechten"

Aan de Belgische Kiezers van het van het Veertiende District van Michigan, stellen wij de kandidatuur voor van ROBERT H. CLANCY, de Republikeinsche kandidaat voor Congressman.

Hij is een ervaren staatman. Wij kennen hem niet genoeg aanvaardt. Zijn doorstand altijd open voor onze landgenooten. Nog nooit heeft Clancy een Belg desgevoerd.

Hij is een strijder, een voorvechter voor de rechten van het Volk dat hij in Congress vertegenwoordigt. Hij streeft ten voordele van onze stad Detroit. Hij wil de stad los rukken uit de handen der lastenbetalers die aan de automobilistverhoor zoveel schade berokkend hebben.

Clancy strijdt tot het inbreken van het 18de Amendement. Van den eersten dag springt hij in de hooi hoewel hij geheel alleen een harden strijd moet voeren in den beginne.

Clancy verdient persoonlijke vrijheid. Hij studee een einde aan het vreeselijke geslacht dat in de zomer 200 diavills workfolk op de oversch der rivier wanneer onschuldige staatsoffers getroffen waren.

Kiezers van het Veertiende District vergest dat niet: op 8 November stemt voor Robert H. Clancy als Congressman.

## Hunne Kandidatuur is gesteund door hunne Belgische vrienden:

OMER BAETENS  
URBAIN BAETENS  
GEORGE BELPREZ  
HENRY BELPREZ  
OSCAR BOSSAERT  
ALIDOR BOSSUYT  
GUSTAVE BONNY  
CONSTANT BROUCKE  
JAMES A. BUISE  
ALIDOR CAPPELLE  
FRANK CLAESSENS  
ERNEST COOL  
EMILE COOLZAET  
RICHARD COMPEVILLE  
JOSEPH COUVREUR  
FELIX COUVREUR  
ADOLF L. DAMMAN  
ARCHIE DAMMAN  
PETER DANIELS  
EMIL J. DERAEKE  
OCTAVE DERACKER  
OMER DEBEL  
JULIUS DE CAP  
JULIUS DECLERQUE  
HENRY DEFAUW  
AUGUST DEGENTNAAR

RENE DEGRIECK  
CYRIEL DEGRYSE  
ADOLPH DELUE  
M. DEMAGHT  
CAMEL DEMEYERE  
LEO DEMEYERE  
OSCAR DENHART  
GUSTAVE DENOLF  
OMER DEPRE  
CAMILLE DERAEDT  
ADOLPH DERIEMAEKER  
THEOPHIL DERIEMAEKER  
PAUL DERONNE  
JOHN DESCHIEPPE  
EVEREST DESMET  
O. A. DESMET  
MEUARD DESMET  
RENE DESMYTER  
RUDOLPH DE SPLETER  
FRITZ DEVOIS  
GUSTAVE DEVUYST  
JULIUS DEWACHTER  
CYRIL A. DOBELAERE  
MAURICE DUBRUCK  
ALFRED DUBRUCK  
FRED D'HAEM

JOHN D'HAEM  
GEORGE D'HONDT  
ACHILLE EMBO  
H. FRANK  
VICTOR GEERSENS  
ALBERT GILBERT  
CHARLES GODDERIS SR.  
HENRY HOORNAERT  
CYRILLE JACQUES  
VICTOR JOOS  
REMI LANGRIET  
JOHN B. LOOME  
REMI LOWAGIE  
GUSTAVE J. MAERTENS  
JEROME MARGAND  
EDWARD MATYIN  
FRANK MEKSEMAM  
ALBERT MILLEVILLE  
DAN MILLVILLE  
ACHILLE MUYLAERT  
DESIRE MISPLON  
ALBERT NAEYAERT  
CAMILLE NOTERBAERT  
ODILE NUYTTENS  
WILLIAM C. ONGENA  
JULIUS PARMONTIER

CHARLES PATERNOSTER  
EUGENE PHLYPO  
CONSTANT ROOSE  
JEROME ROGIER  
JULIEN RYCKERS  
LOUIS SABBE  
HENRY SABBE  
ALPHONSE SAMYN  
JOSEPH SCHANDEVYL  
MORRIS SCHANDVYLL  
CAMEL SCHARLAKEN  
MAURICE F. SIERENS  
HYPPOLITE SIX  
JULIUS SONNEVILLE  
ROMAIN SYOEN  
LEO O. TERTART  
EMIL O. THOMAS  
FRANK THOM  
DR. CL. TOTTE  
JOE VANCAUWENBERGHE  
JULIUS VANCUTL  
MAURICE VANDAELE  
AUGUST VANDENABEELE  
BEN VANDERBECKEN  
V. VANDEWALLE  
ODIEL VANDEWEGHE  
MAUR. R. VANDIERDONCK

ARCHIE VAN DOORNE  
RENE VANECKHOUTE  
ALPHONS VANHOLLEBEEKE  
JOHN VANHOOT  
HAROLD H. VANHOEY  
ARTHUR VANLEBERGHE  
HENRY VANLEBERGHE  
ALBERT VANMAELE  
ACHIEL VAN SLEMBROUCK  
C. B. VANSENBROUCK  
DESIRE VANSENBROUCK  
ALIDOR VANSTELANDT  
HENRY VANSTELANDT  
A. L. VANWANSELE  
JOSEPH VERBIEST  
ADOLF VERDONCKT  
AMAND VERHAEGHE  
JULIUS VERMEERSCH  
PRUDENT VERSICHELE  
OSCAR VERTYER  
LEON WAIYAERT  
WILLIAM WAYNE  
HERMAN WAYNE  
CHARLES WINDLES  
REMI WYBO

DONATED BY A BELGIAN FRIEND

Gazette van Detroit, 4 November 1932

Emiel spends many years in a succession of humble jobs: excavator contractor in 1925, cement worker, assembler, again excavator, and mechanic in the 1930s. In 1942, he still works as mechanic at the Hudson Naval Plant in Detroit. In the 1950s, he is consecutively cement worker and factory worker. During this period, his name has been spelled in different ways: Coolzedt, Coolzeet and Coolzaet. It is apparently after the Second World War that he adopts this last



spelling (with a 'z'). His father Louis for that matter also used a 'z' when signing official papers, even if the documents themselves used an 's'. This was not uncommon in Belgium at that time.

Blanche passes away in 1948, after which Emiel moves to 5714 Hereford Ave, still in the same neighborhood, but on the other side of Cadieux Café. A little later, he remarries **Clara Koch** (born Kühl). Clara was born in Hamburg, Germany, but in 1924 she had joined her then-husband Erich Koch in Detroit. They had a son, Norman O. Koch, born in Detroit in 1929.

Neither with Blanche nor with Clara does Emiel have children who could have passed on the Coolsaet name. He dies in June 1980, Clara a year later. Emiel and Clara are buried together at Mt. Olivet Cemetery, Detroit. Their joint grave carries no headstone, probably because they didn't have the means to pay for one.

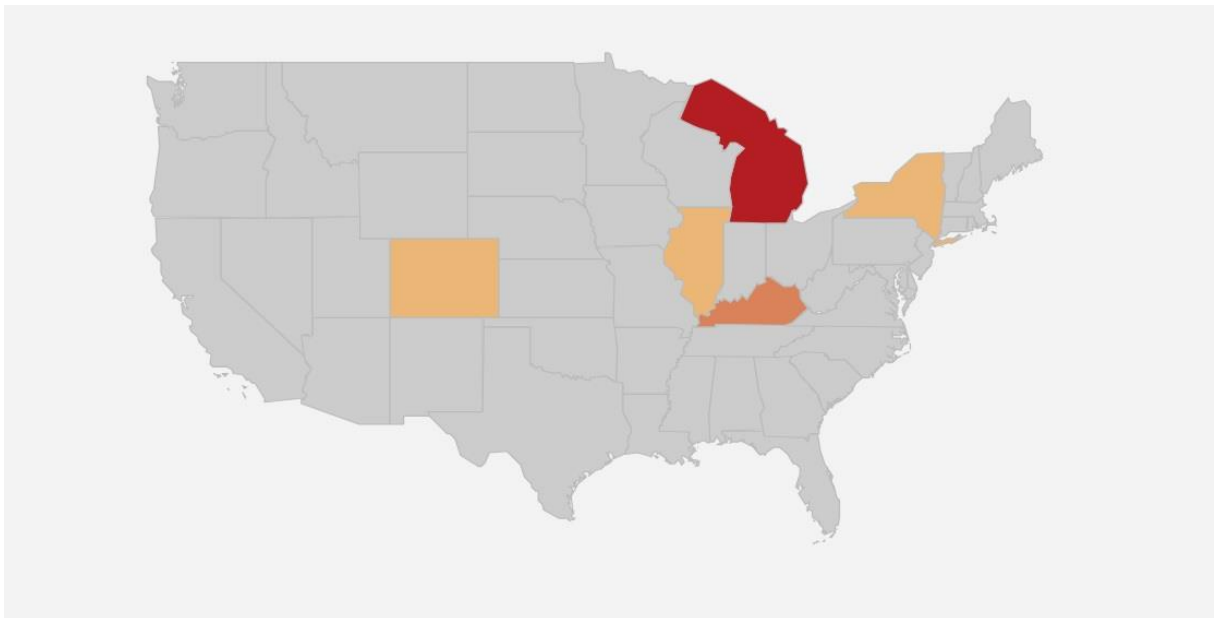


Headstone Blanche Coolzaet, *née* Haezebrouck (Mt. Olivet Cemetery)

## The Coolsaet migration to America – Looking back

In America, the Coolsaet immigrants didn't discover streets paved with gold – the ultimate American Dream of so many migrants at the time. All had to work hard. Most lived an acceptable, modest life, and some lived through a lifelong succession of menial jobs. Some lie buried almost anonymously, without a headstone. One disappeared altogether without leaving a trace. Remi, however, left a lasting mark through the company he founded and, even more so, through the family he built with Amanda.

Only Alice and Remi raised children. Alice became part of the large Holvoet diaspora in the United States. And so, only Remi's children carried on the Coolsaet family name. They were (and still are) concentrated around Grosse Ile, but with family members living (or having lived in) Chicago, Kentucky, Florida, Missouri, New York, Colorado, and Canada.



Distribution of the Coolsaet name in the U.S.A. in 2019 (based on the genealogy portal Forbears)

Among the first generation, Remi and Hector, John, Alice and her husband Charley, and Emiel remained in close contact with their homeland. Paul probably did as well, but we are not sure of that. They often attended the activities of the Belgian clubs and read the Dutch-language newspapers that were published in different states – the *Gazette van Moline* in Illinois and the *Gazette van Detroit* in Michigan.

But as the years went by, bonds with the old country waned. In the case of the Coolsaet immigration, the second generation already had shed most of its Belgian roots. Alice and Charley continued to speak their West-Flemish dialect with her two Belgian-born sons – a language their grandchildren knew nothing of. For Remi's offspring, becoming mainstream Americans didn't take three generations. It had already started with Remi's sons, but as the generations succeeded each other, memories of the old country ineluctably faded, to the point of becoming blurred as to the specific country their great-grandfather had come from.

What happened to the families they had left behind in Belgium ?

In 1921, the prominent contemporary Flemish writer **Stijn Streuvels** described how a whirlwind had swept over the country, transforming the Flemish countryside in ways unseen before. Daily life improved dramatically and gone were the large crowds of journeymen who all day long from early in the morning until late in the evening worked on the farms of their well-off owners.<sup>26</sup>

The families of the Coolsaet emigrants were not among the poorest families in the Flanders. The poorest of the poor did not have the means to pay for the voyage. For them, only neighboring France or Wallonia offered a way out of a life with few prospects. That is indeed what most of the Coolsaet-families experienced too.

The Coolsaet emigration to the United States involved two large groupings of families. Paul, John and Alice, and Emiel were part of a same large West-Flemish Coolsaet branch, of which Jacob Coolsaet (est. 1660-1691) and Joanna Vandewinkele (1658-1743) were the common ancestors. Hector and Remi belonged to another Coolsaet branch in the same area, with Leonard Coolsaet and Judoca Coolsaet (married in 1631) as common ancestors. Both branches were not related to one another, at least no since the mid-1600s.

Those who left for the United States were undoubtedly the exception in both branches. From the first branch originated three large groups of families who went to France and became French citizens. Most of the families, however, stayed in Belgium. The second branch clung even more to their familiar surroundings. Only Remi and Hector went overseas, while a distant nephew of them went to the south of France, the rest remaining in West-Flanders.

Soon after the Coolsaets migrated to the United States, the fortunes of their families back in the old country gradually began to improve. Alice's contemporaries in Belgium still worked predominantly in the flax industry, but living conditions were improving fast. Witness the rise of the aforementioned Henri from flax seller to owner of a flax manufacture – his father having been a modest flax worker.

Not everyone's lot improved so dramatically. But in a generation, pay, working conditions, and prospects nevertheless improved for just about everyone. After World War I, universal suffrage was granted to all men. Infant mortality dropped dramatically thanks to advances in medicine and hygiene. Post-war reconstruction provided many opportunities for unskilled labour, reducing the need to go looking for work abroad.

Added to that was the fact that wages in the flax industry rose sharply, more even than in the United States, while working hours decreased and working conditions improved.<sup>27</sup> All this was the result of sustained union action, which provided the flax workers with a sense of shared destiny that had previously been lacking.

The following generation then began to quit flax work altogether. Professions diversified. Many became small-scale entrepreneurs (with notable numbers of butchers) or employees. Moving up the social ladder was no longer an unattainable dream.

All these developments help to explain why Belgian migration to the United States (and to France for that matter) largely stopped after World War I. But the anti-immigration frenzy that gripped America in the 1920s played its role too. Economic anxiety, the belief among many Americans that immigrants were taking their jobs and driving down wages, and fear of European immigrant

*“mongrelization”* of American society, led to stringent anti-immigration laws. In 1924, national quotas were introduced, limiting the number of new immigrants to the country. For Belgians, this quota was set at 512 individuals per year.

A final word about the Coolsaet emigrants' close families. Not surprisingly, they fit the general pattern of their generation.

The offspring of John's brothers mostly remained in West-Flanders, where some continued in the flax industry, while others became mechanics.

Paul lost a sister and a brother at a young age. His remaining sisters stayed close to Gullegem, often as a lacemaker. One of them married Jerome Vandewalle, who tried his luck in America, but then quickly returned, first resuming his flax work job, but later becoming an innkeeper and an employee.

Emiel too lost two sisters at a very young age. His three other sisters remained in the area as lacemakers or housemaid. His brother kept to flax work. He never married, so no one in Emiel's close family carried on the family name. His half-brothers continued to work in the flax industry, as did most of their children. But among the grandchildren, diversification of occupations rapidly set in.

The Coolsaet branch Hector and Remi originated from also failed to continue the family name in Belgium. Louis, Constant's younger brother and thus the uncle of Hector and Remi, had a large offspring. Many however died in infancy. This was also the tragic fate of Louis' sons, August Oscar and Leon, cousins of Hector and Remi. August Oscar, clog maker and painter, had a large offspring, but all four sons died young. Except for one, all daughters married. When they passed away, the family name was discontinued. Almost all of Leon's children were stillborn. His last surviving daughter, Christiane (married to Etienne De Bruyn), belonging to the same generation as Allan and Remi Jr., was the last family member of this branch to bear the Coolsaet surname. She passed away in Aalst (East Flanders) in 2009, at age 76.







## Acknowledgements

Genealogical research is fraught with uncertainties and unknowns. Information is often scarce, sometimes circumstantial, and seldom complete. This also goes for the life stories in this *Voyage to America*. Time and attentive readers will undoubtedly help correct errors that may have crept into the text and further connect the dots. *So, for those reading this Voyage to America, consider this as a kind invitation to share your reactions and reminiscences.*

Gratitude is owed to many people without whom this voyage could not have been written.

For the life stories of Hector and Remi, I thank first and foremost the Coolsaet family on Grosse Ile. In 2013, Chris and Kathy Coolsaet most kindly welcomed us into the history of their family – and on a boat tour on the Detroit River with Canada in sight. Chris' parents Allan and Edween shared with us some memories of their father Remi, which we gladly incorporated in this story. Chris also gave us access to the extensive research by Maurice Vandenberghe, a genealogist from Rekkem (near Menen), on the ancestors of Hector and Remi in Dadizele and its surroundings. Vandenberghe has done this research at the request of Rev. Marcel Josson, who for many years lived with the Coolsaet family at Grosse Ile. In 1958, Vandenberghe produced two detailed handwritten volumes on the Coolsaet family history, which are still in the possession of the Coolsaet family on Grosse Ile.

In Dadizele itself, my gratitude goes to 'Dadingisila' for its enthusiastic support. Without the help of this wonderful and dynamic group of volunteers, who for many years have been studying the local history of their village and its inhabitants, it would have been impossible to reconstruct to such detail the Dadizele scene. I would like to thank in particular Daisy Decoene, Noël Devos, Xavier Monteyne, and Alma Samyn.

In Gullegem, the home village of Polydoor, aka Paul, I could rely on the helpful support of Dr. Jaak Debussere of the local history society 'De Meiboom'. He did his utmost to find out locally what had happened to Paul, who disappeared in the United States – in vain, unfortunately. In 2023, the society published a lavishly illustrated history of the village. In 2013, Dominique Verhaeghe of the city archives of Wevelgem helped to clarify the Gullegem scene. Peter Van Ammel of the Kortrijk (Courtrai) city archives has been of great help in digging into the archives of Kortrijk and its vicinity – at a time their digitization was still in its infancy. To all my sincerest thanks.

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his and many others' efforts, the *Gazette* unfortunately ceased publishing and operation on December 31, 2018.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Antoine De Smet, Les Belges ont-ils pris part à la fondation de New York? *Bulletin de la Classe des lettres et des sciences morales et politiques*. Académie royale de Belgique, 1953, 39, pp. 35-74.

<sup>2</sup> Antoine De Smet, L'émigration belge aux États-Unis pendant le XIXe siècle jusqu'à la Guerre Civile. *Annales du 32<sup>ième</sup> Congrès de la Fédération Archéologique et Historique de Belgique (27-31 July 1947)*.

Koninklijke Oudheidkundige Kring van Antwerpen, 1950, pp. 188-208. I would also like to recommend 'The Belgian American', a great virtual resource center for Belgian American immigrant history and genealogy, launched by Kristine Smets on 7 January 2019 (<https://thebelgianamerican.com/>).

<sup>3</sup> Auguste Van der Straten Ponthoz, *Recherches sur la situation des émigrants aux Etats-Unis de l'Amérique du Nord*. Brussels, Meline, 1846, p. 106.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Stengers, *Emigration et immigration en Belgique au XIXe et au XXe siècles*. Brussels, Académie Royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer, 1978, pp. 25 and 45.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Dellisse, *Les Belges de Wisconsin*. Brussels, Le Cri, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Overall survey by the Belgian consul in Green Bay, 21 February 1885. Archives Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Belgium), 2953/I.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Griffin, *The contribution of Belgium to the Catholic Church in America (1523-1857)*. Washington, The Catholic University of America, 1932.

<sup>8</sup> Edouard de Moreau, Les missionnaires belges aux Etats-Unis. *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, 1932, 59, 5, pp. 411-439; Antoine De Smet, *Voyageurs belges aux Etats-Unis du XVIIe siècle à 1900*. Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, 1959.

<sup>9</sup> Ginette Kurgan, E. Spelkens, *Two studies on emigration through Antwerp to the New World*. Brussels, Center for American Studies, 1976, pp. 9-49.

<sup>10</sup> Report by the Belgian Consul in Detroit, Michigan, December 1895. Archives Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Belgium), 2953/I.

<sup>11</sup> The Belgians in Detroit. *The Detroit News Tribune*, 5 August 1906.

<sup>12</sup> Gino Speranza, The Immigration Peril. "Americanization" a failure. *World's Work*, November 1923, p. 61.

<sup>13</sup> *The Daily Post and Record* (Rochester), 7 November 1923; *Gazette van Moline*, 8 November 1923.

<sup>14</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, 13 June 1940 and 6 July 1942. (I thank David Baekelandt for bringing these newspaper clippings to my attention.)

<sup>15</sup> These are the main sources used to reconstruct the history of the flax industry in southwest Flanders: Bert Dewilde, *20 Eeuwen vlas in Vlaanderen*. Tielt, Lannoo, 1983; Brecht Demasure, *Sociaal-economische streekstudie Midden- en Zuid-West-Vlaanderen (1840-1970)*. Leuven, Centrum Agrarische Geschiedenis, 2011; Dries Claeys, *De industrialisatie van de vlasnijverheid in Zuid-West-Vlaanderen (1890-1955). De vlasfabrieken in de gemeenten Bissegem, Gullegem en Wevelgem als casus*. Master's thesis, Ghent University, Department of History, 2012-2013.

<sup>16</sup> Report by Eug. Venesoen to the governor of Antwerp, April 25, 1903. Archives Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Belgium), 2953/II.

<sup>17</sup> The local history society of Gullegem has published a delightful volume on the history of their village: Het verhaal van Gullegem, 't Meiboompje, 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Francis Deleu has written a history of Bissegem, on which we have often relied: *Bissegem vroeger*. Kortrijk, Groeninghe drukkerij, 1986.

<sup>19</sup> For the description of Ghent, I relied on: C.F. Case, *History and Description of Lyon County, Minnesota*, 1884 (<https://sites.rootsweb.com/~mnlyon2/history/ghent.html>); Arthur P. Rose, *An Illustrated History of Lyon County, Minnesota*. Marshall, Northern History Publishing Co, 1912, pp. 211-218; Robert Houthaeve, *Flandria Americana Vol. 2. Ghent, Minnesota. Een studie van Vlaamse emigranten naar het Amerikaanse Continent*. Torhout, Flandria Nostra, 1985; Joseph A. Amato, *Servants of the land. The trinity of Belgian economic folkways in Southwestern Minnesota*. Marshall, Crossing Press, 1991.

<sup>20</sup> <https://hanna.ca/our-heritage>.

<sup>21</sup> Cornelius Jaenen, The Belgian Presence in Canada. Leen D'Haenens, *Images of Canadianness. Visions on Canada's Politics, Culture, and Economics*. Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, 1998.

<sup>22</sup> For Superior and its Belgian Club, I was inspired by: Judith Leibaert, The Belgian Club of Superior. *Zenith City Press*, s.d. (<https://zenithcity.com/archive/superior-and-south-shore/the-belgian-club-of-superior/>); John Buytaert, The Belgian Club of Superior. *Belgian Laces*, 21:80, September 1999 (<https://sites.rootsweb.com/~inbr/VolAndNumber/BelgianLaces80Binder.pdf>).



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<sup>23</sup> *Landverhuizing. Staten Colorado en Wyoming en grondgebied Nieuw-Mexico*. Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1908.

<sup>24</sup> Laura Martone, *Michigan*. Berkeley, Moon, 2011, p. 58.

<sup>25</sup> *Grosse Pointe 1880-1930*. Chicago, Arcadia, 2001.

<sup>26</sup> Stijn Streuvels, *Herinneringen uit het verleden*. Tielt, Lannoo, 1924, pp. 265-272.

<sup>27</sup> François-Xavier Van Houtte, *L'évolution de l'industrie textile en Belgique et dans le monde de 1800 à 1939*. Louvain, Nauwelaerts, 1949.

