THE BELGIAN TEXANS

THE TEXIANS AND THE TEXANS

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS INSTITUTE OF TEXAN CULTURES AT SAN ANTONIO
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Institute of Texan Cultures
at San Antonio
1994
THE TEXIANS AND THE TEXANS

A series dealing with the many peoples who have contributed to the history and heritage of Texas. Now in print:


The Belgian Texans
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Institute of Texan Cultures at San Antonio
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San Antonio, Texas 78205-3296

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 76-356238
International Standard Book Number 0-86701-063-0

Second edition revised; second printing, 1994
This publication was made possible in part by a grant from the Houston Endowment, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America
Belgians first set foot on Texas soil with La Salle in 1685. Even prior to that time, natives of this small, north European country had influenced exploration of the New World. Gerard Mercator, the father of modern cartography, was a Belgian, as was Peter of Ghent, a lay brother whose educational techniques, pioneered among Mexican Indians, were later adopted in Texas. Even the king of Spain during much of the exploration period was a Belgian, Charles V of Ghent. It was he who launched the epoch-making expedition of Hernán Cortés against Mexico, which led to Spanish conquest in a large part of the Western hemisphere.

Three Franciscan priests from the province of Hainaut arrived with La Salle—Maximus Le Clerq, Zenobius Membre and Anastasius Douay. Membre and Le Clerq were killed in the massacre at Fort Saint Louis by hostile Indians, but Douay survived to return to France and tell the story of La Salle’s death.

Belgium, and especially the province of Flanders, furnished many notable pioneers. Most were farmers who came to enjoy the blessings of freedom, the chance to acquire wealth and the promise of good land. The Belgians did not arrive in large numbers at first; the greatest inflow occurred late in the 19th century. By that time these immigrants had come to represent widely divergent backgrounds and occupations. Each brought his own valuable contribution to his new homeland.

JUAN BANUL
1719

One of the earliest Belgians in Texas was Juan Banul, a master blacksmith born in Brussels. Belgium was under Spanish rule then, so Banul was considered a Spanish subject. While still a young man he traveled to New Spain seeking a new life with better opportunity. By 1719 he was at the presidio of San Antonio, possibly having arrived the year before with the founding Alarcón Expedition. In 1721 the young blacksmith was recruited by the Marqués de Aguayo to accompany an east Texas expedition. Given the rank of corporal, Banul helped build six missions and two presidios in eastern Texas and Louisiana.

Two years later he returned to the presidio of San Antonio. In addition to shoeing horses and mules, he also made most of the iron hardware and did much of the woodwork at the missions San Antonio de Valero and San José. During this period Banul married María Adriana García, a Flemish widow, and in 1730 they were living in Mission San Antonio de Valero, where,
in addition to operating the blacksmith forge, he was also master of the sawmill. In 1737 he was the only blacksmith operating in the Province of Texas. He had land in the Villa de San Fernando, and in 1741 he was granted additional land in recognition of more than 20 years of loyal service to the Spanish crown.

**BELGIAN INTEREST IN TEXAS**

1840

Following its war for independence, the young Texas republic was deeply in debt. Solution to this problem seemed to lie in European recognition and the negotiation of substantial loans with the governments of Europe. Under the administration of President Mirabeau Lamar, General James Hamilton was appointed commissioner of loans and began his official rounds. In London he met the Belgian minister, Sylvain van de Weyer. Belgium itself was a new nation, having gained its independence from the Netherlands in 1830, but already it controlled much capital and produced large quantities of export goods. Van de Weyer indicated that King Leopold I of Belgium might be willing to discuss trade concessions. When next in Brussels Hamilton met with the foreign minister, but nothing was agreed upon. While keenly interested in Texas as a foreign market and possible site for colonization, the Belgians were afraid that official recognition might jeopardize trade with Mexico, which still claimed Texas.

Before returning home in 1841 Hamilton contacted Van de Weyer once more and proposed that, in exchange for a Belgian loan of 37 million francs (over $7 million), Texas would allow certain Belgian products favored status over imports from other nations and allow Belgian vessels the privileges of coastal trade. Since the Belgian government wanted an American colony there is some indication that Hamilton agreed to do what he could to make a site available in Texas, though it was not written into the treaty. The Belgians were still reluctant to advance such a large sum against the revenue of a country about which they had so little information; therefore, Hamilton proposed that the king send a reliable representative to Texas to observe firsthand the nature of the land and its people. The representative would report to the king and the Belgian Chambers. They could determine then the value of a treaty with Texas. At last Belgium agreed to send a commissioner to Texas, and a young artillery captain, Victor Pirson, was chosen.

**VICTOR PIRSON**

1842

At 32 Victor Pirson was already well known in Belgium. He had played an active role in its war for independence and had served as attaché to the Belgian legation in Constantinople. When appointed as agent to accompany Hamilton to Texas, Pirson was cautioned by the government that he was being sent only as an observer and that he was in no way empowered to make treaties. With this stipulation Pirson was to meet Hamilton in England for their departure on November 19. When they met Hamilton informed Pirson that he would be unable to leave England until December 4. During this delay Hamilton requested Pirson to transmit two added clauses for the treaty. One stated that Belgian arms and munitions sent to Texas would enter duty free and the others extended the loan to 20 years.

On the day of departure Hamilton decided to remain behind, sending Pirson to Boston, where he would be
met by Hamilton's oldest son. Docking in late December, Pirson hurried to Washington, D.C., where he visited President John Tyler on New Year's Day 1842. On learning of Pirson's mission to Texas Tyler became concerned at the prospect of a Belgian colony in a republic the United States had talked of annexing. The next day Pirson continued his journey by packet to Charleston and then on to New Orleans. During this voyage he met Henri Castro also bound for Texas. Castro had recently completed negotiations for a colony in Texas, and he gave Pirson a copy of his contract to use as a model in his negotiations.

Hamilton joined Pirson in New Orleans, and the two took a steamer to Galveston, arriving January 25. From there they proceeded to Austin via Houston. While Hamilton had been in Europe President Lamar had been replaced by Sam Houston, who was determined to take a closer look at financial matters. When Pirson and Hamilton arrived in Austin on February 1, Hamilton immediately called on President Houston to discuss his negotiations for the Belgian loan. The matter was submitted to the Senate, but no decision was reached.

Meanwhile, Pirson was recording his impressions of Texas, including some very favorable ones about the quality of the land and the prospects for colonization. He was surprised to find Austin so primitive, compared with European capitals. He was even more dismayed when three members of a nearby family were killed and scalped by Comanches.

At last Pirson was presented to Houston and was given permission to examine all registers and archives of the Republic. From this research Pirson could determine population, revenue, public debts and other sources of income and expenditures by which he could better report the advantages of a Belgian loan.

PIRSON'S TRAVELS

Upon congressional adjournment in early February Pirson was convinced that little else could be accomplished in Austin; he decided, therefore, to see more of the republic and set out in the company of about a dozen congressmen returning to their western homes.

On arriving in San Antonio Pirson visited the missions and historical sites, as most tourists do. His attention then turned to the subject of commerce, which he knew would be of interest to Belgian merchants considering a trade agreement. Assisted by André Antoine Mellaerts, a local businessman and fellow Belgian, Pirson gathered information on the volume of goods traded in San Antonio and even purchased samples to take back with him. Instead of exploring the region between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande as he had intended, Pirson decided to leave for Galveston. This was due in part to news of an impending invasion from Mexico. Pirson reached Galveston in early March and submitted a report on harbor conditions there.

President Houston and Anson Jones were also in town, and Pirson had a last visit with them. They expressed a desire to draw Belgium and Texas into closer diplomatic ties; Houston suggested replacing Hamilton.
with Ashbel Smith to continue negotiations. Secretary of State Jones brought up the subject that had been foremost in everyone's mind, but had not been officially mentioned—Belgian colonization. Houston was prepared to grant the Belgian government two extensive tracts of land along the Rio Grande, between the Castro and Kennedy grants, in exchange for the introduction of 600 to 1,000 families of high character. This land was to be held for the colonization project until December 1, 1842, after which time, if no action was taken, the President could dispose of it.

**FURTHER BELGIAN NEGOTIATIONS**

As Pirson was preparing to sail news came that a Mexican army under General Rafael Vasquez had captured San Antonio, Goliad and Refugio. Pirson's report, submitted on August 9, 1842, dealt favorably with the Republic of Texas in general, but expressed concern over unstable political and military conditions. The Belgian government did not wish to endanger its relations with either Mexico or the United States.

As Houston had promised Ashbel Smith was sent as the new chargé d'affaires to Europe. Smith asked Pirson to arrange a meeting with Count de Briey, the Belgian foreign minister. This was done, but nothing fruitful was accomplished, because Belgium did not wish to imperil its new treaty of commerce with Mexico. As the colonization deadline of December 1 drew near Pirson urged the government to act. A contract was prepared on November 18 calling for the immigration of at least 350 families during the first year. De Briey not only questioned whether the colonists would remain loyal to Belgium, but voiced concern for their safety, since they would exist in a buffer zone on the Mexican border of Texas. He also doubted the need for colonization in Texas, since Belgium was already backing a similar scheme in Guatemala. Pirson was unable to contribute further; so, with the Texas colonization plan ended, he withdrew from the project and went on to other important roles in Belgian life.

The continued hope for a Belgian loan and recognition prompted Texas to send yet another chargé d'affaires to Belgium, William Henry Daingerfield. Waiting until May 1844, Daingerfield tried again. This time he was advised by the Belgian government that not only did it wish to preserve Mexican commercial ties, but it was certain that the United States planned to annex Texas anyway. This ended the matter of Belgian recognition and the loan. Though four years of labor had yielded nothing substantive, the threat of European interest did prompt the United States to move in the annexation of Texas.

**PETER SHINER**

Peter Shiner, a native of Luxembourg, Belgium, settled in 1842 at Victoria, Texas, where he became a prominent merchant, land speculator and stock-raiser. In 1858 he delivered 1,300 horses purchased in Mexico to a buyer in Illinois. This was one of the first major trail drives north.

About 1860 Shiner sold his holdings in Victoria and moved to San Antonio, where he opened a store on Military Plaza. He also opened a rendering works near the stockyards, buying large numbers of cattle and killing them for the hides and tallow. During the Civil War he was an outspoken Union man. In 1865 and 1866 he served on the San Antonio City Council under the provisional government. Later he was a Bexar County Commissioner for two terms before resuming duties as a city alderman.

After the war he purchased ranches in Frio and Lavaca Counties and in 1869 established a candle and soap factory at San Antonio. Operating under the name of P. Shiner & Sons, this was one of the first major manufacturing industries in the Southwest.

After his death in 1881 Shiner's sons carried on his business. One of them, Henry B., became a great cattleman in his own right. After early experience managing his father's herds the son began acquiring land in Lavaca County about 1875. A dozen years later he donated land for the townsite of Shiner, which was named in his honor. Another son, William B., was a noted San Antonio real estate man. After graduating from college he briefly joined his brother in management of their father's ranch near Victoria, but sold his interest in order to live and work in San Antonio, where he was a noted civic worker until his death in 1919. His brother Henry died two years later.

**BELGIAN BRICKS FOR ST. MARY'S 1845**

During the spring of 1845 Bishop John M. Odin visited Europe in an attempt to recruit new priests for his Texas diocese and collect additional funds for his churches. His quest took him to Belgium, where he was approached by relatives of Father J.M. Paquin. Father Paquin, a Vincentian priest and vicar-general of Texas, had perished in the yellow fever epidemic at Galveston in 1844. Bishop Odin had long dreamed of building a new church in the coastal city, and Father Paquin's relatives now assisted by donating a half-million bricks for the construction of a cathedral there. Since Paquin had been pastor of old St. Mary's it seemed an appropriate tribute.
Throughout 1846 the bricks were loaded in the ships of Antwerp bound for Galveston and were sent freight-free as ballast. By early 1847 the transfer was complete, and construction on St. Mary's Cathedral began in March. The massive Gothic structure was the largest church in east Texas. In November Father Paquin’s remains were reinterred within the new building by his friend, Father John Brands. One year later the church was completed and stood as a proper monument to a man who had faithfully served his church and the people of Galveston.

ANTON DIEDRICK
(Dutchover)
1846

In 1842 young Anton Diedrick was walking the streets of his native Antwerp when he unwittingly witnessed a murder. The killers, fearing exposure, had Anton shanghaied onto the first outgoing vessel. For several years he was kept a virtual prisoner aboard ship until in Galveston he got his chance to go ashore. The task of finding food and a job was complicated because he spoke only Flemish. A pair of soldiers recruiting for Mexican War service attempted to convince Diedrick that he only had to make his mark and he would be fed and cared for. When asked his name he responded blankly. At last one said in exasperation, “Aw, he’s Dutch all over. We’ll call him that.” Thus he was listed on the roll as Diedrick Dutchallover. The name was still too cumbersome, so the “all” was dropped, leaving Dutchover.

After the Mexican War Diedrick Dutchover lived in San Antonio for a time. He gained experience as a frontier scout and in 1850 was approached by Big Foot Wallace to serve as shotgun guard on the first stage run from San Antonio to El Paso. He continued working for the stage line and married Refugia Salcedo. When not serving as guard he operated a small sheep ranch in Limpia Canyon. Later he acquired cattle, and after Fort Davis was established in 1854 he frequently sold milk at the post. Indian attack was a constant threat, and when the 8th Infantry left in 1861 Dutchover took refuge in the fort to await the expected Confederate troops. There were not enough soldiers to man the post permanently; so, when the Confederates evacuated, they left Dutchover in charge.

Soon after the troops departed Chief Nicolas and 250 Apaches swooped down on Fort Davis, intent on ransacking the place. Dutchover, with his family and four Americans, had no time to escape, but hid fearfully on a rooftop. After 48 hours the Indians grew tired of looting and had begun to scatter. One of the Americans was dying and could not be moved, so on the third night he was left in hiding, and Dutchover led the others toward Presidio 92 miles away. Four days later the exhausted party reached safety.

When Federal troops returned in 1867, Dutchover was employed as an army contractor to haul timber from...
Sawmill Canyon for use in rebuilding the fort. Even with a heavy guard he would frequently lose oxen at night to the Apaches. Dutchover spent the rest of his days near Fort Davis and was still there when the last soldiers left in 1891. The Dutchover name remains prominent in far west Texas, where numerous descendants live today.

JOSEPH AND THEODORE VANDER STRATEN

Joseph Vander Straten, a veteran of Napoleon's army, left Antwerp in 1846 with four sons and a daughter to join Henri Castro's colony in Texas. Landing at Port Lavaca, they journeyed by oxcart to their land at Castroville. Joseph's wife and one daughter had remained in Belgium until a home was prepared for them. Tragedy occurred when the wife died and was compounded when the two youngest sons died of malaria. Vander Straten decided that the land at Castroville was too barren and conditions too unstable, so he moved to San Antonio, where he found employment as a cook. In 1850 he built a home behind the present Menger Hotel. Joseph's son Theodore worked as a stonemason. One of his first jobs was to repair the walls of the Alamo in preparation for its occupancy by the United States Army. Later he became a general contractor and built many of the city's early stone buildings, including the Menger Hotel, begun in 1858. A close friendship developed between the Vander Stratens and the Menger family. Joseph lived at the hotel until his death in 1873.

In 1854 Theodore had married Miss Franceska Leznick, who had immigrated with Father Leopold Moczygemba's Polish colonists. During the Civil War Theodore moved his family to Boerne, where he led a detachment of scouts on patrol against marauding Indians. Descendants of the family still live in the area today.

D'HANIS

1847

Henri Castro was beset with troubles in the summer of 1845. Having successfully defended himself on charges of fraud, he found his Texas colony was still faced with serious financial problems. While in Belgium Castro transferred the entire colonization project to a group of Antwerp bankers. Among these was Guillaume D'Hanis, who became the principal administrative agent for the "Société de Colonisation au Texas." After 1846 D'Hanis was the principal European representative who signed all colonists' contracts. While under his direction the colonists established the town of Vandenberg (named for the consul general of Texas at Antwerp) and, in 1847, the town of D'Hanis. Although the town was named in his honor there is no indication that D'Hanis himself ever visited the place. Laid out by Theodore Gentilz, the townsite grew. Two years later its Alsatian families were given protection from roving Indians when Fort Lincoln was established nearby. In 1881 the town moved one mile west to join the railroad, leaving old D'Hanis to join the list of Texas ghost towns.

JOHN PHILIP GOETSEL AND THE FOUNDING OF LOUVAIN

1856

In 1854 the first of Victor Considerant's colonists arrived at La Reunion near Dallas. Many Belgians were included. Occupational backgrounds were diverse: poets, engineers, architects and workers, but no farmers. Since La Reunion was intended to be an agricultural colony, this obviously could present difficulties. Among the first to arrive was John B. Louckx of Louvain,
who was with the advance party. Because of his architectural training he was appointed supervisor of construction. He was joined by John Philip Goetsel, also of Louvain, who was in charge of building the rock houses for the settlers. They were assisted by Ferdinand Michel, another Belgian, who made lime for the mortar.

After a year of labor and many natural disasters it became clear that this was not the utopian colony that had been hoped for. In 1856 Goetsel purchased 17 sections of land on Mountain Creek, just south of present Grand Prairie, with the intention of establishing a separate colony for the Belgians. He named the town Louvain after his home in Belgium. Many La Reunion colonists joined Goetsel; houses and other improvements were built as the nucleus of his proposed city. Unfortunately their location was too near the creek and was subject to the overflow after heavy rains. Goetsel recognized that the land was unsuitable for farming, so he attempted to establish a ranching economy. But the colonists were no better cowboys than they were farmers.

Goetsel had invested 30,000 francs in La Reunion, which he hoped he could withdraw from that project to help his own. The directors refused to return his money, arguing that Louvain was established in opposition to La Reunion and that it might draw away their trade. By late 1857 most of the families at Louvain had decided that they were not suited for the rustic life and were beginning to move to Dallas and Fort Worth. Eventually Goetsel himself closed his store and post office and moved to Dallas.

DR. CHARLES A. OTTERBEIN

Charles A. Otterbein, a well-known dentist and investor of Weatherford, Texas, was compelled by his political activities to leave his native Tervuren, Belgium. As a young man he edited a newspaper, L'Abeille, in which he advocated that the French-speaking portion of Belgium should be annexed to France. He soon found it expedient to voice such opinions from the opposite side of the Atlantic. In 1856 he established a less controversial dental practice at Weatherford.

In the 1870's the Memphis, El Paso and Pacific Railroad went bankrupt. Its bondholders, mostly French, formed the Franco-Texan Land Company to take over and dispose of the railroad lands that secured the bonds. Many of the investors, rather
than sell their bonds at a loss, decided to move to Texas and occupy the land. Dr. Otterbein ultimately became a shareholder and a director in the Franco-Texan Land Company. His stepdaughter had married George P. Levy, the company’s last president. Otterbein resigned his post not long before this company’s charter expired in August 1896. He died at Weatherford in 1905. His wife, who was an artist and sculptress, returned to France to live out her life.

JEAN-CHARLES HOUZEAU
1858

Jean-Charles Houzeau, one of Belgium’s most famous astronomers and naturalists, found himself dismissed from the staff of the Royal Observatory because of his outspoken political views. In October 1857 he landed at New Orleans, stayed briefly, then pushed on to Texas. Seven months later he was living in San Antonio, where he surveyed for irrigation ditches. Opening up some of the old Spanish acequias and cutting new channels, he was able to help local farmers with their water needs. He soon moved to Uvalde, where he planned various geological and scientific expeditions into different parts of the state.

On one of these expeditions in 1861 Houzeau explored the upper Brazos River and descended it, crossing then to the Colorado watershed. His abolitionist views quickly surfaced in the course of his travels. He found little evidence of slavery on the upper Brazos, in marked contrast to the lower reaches of the Colorado. Near Smithville his abolitionist sympathies were expressed when he assisted the escape of some Negro slaves. In turn he had to save his companion, who was captured by the planters. Houzeau returned to San Antonio and in August attempted another geological expedition, this time to the Pecos River country. Conditions were so unsettled and the threat of Indian depredations so prevalent that he was compelled to return first to Uvalde and then to San Antonio. He continued on to Austin, where he violently refused service in the Confederate army. He hurried back to San Antonio and sought a way out of his dilemma. He wrote the Belgian consul in New Orleans that he was in danger of being pressed into the local militia, but the consul replied that conditions in New Orleans were the same, and it was useless for him to try to intervene.

At this point Houzeau decided to render all possible aid to the Union cause. The most prominent Unionist in San Antonio was Charles Anderson, brother of the Union commander at Fort Sumter. Anderson had been arrested because he had freed his slaves, an act that was interpreted as aiding the enemy. Houzeau and his friends decided to help Anderson escape. On October 22 he waited for Anderson with provisions and a mount and accompanied him far enough to ensure that he was beyond danger. Back in San Antonio attempts were made to discover who had helped Anderson escape. Houzeau feared that he might be exposed at any time and planned his own escape.

In February 1862 Houzeau, disguised as a Mexican laborer accompanying a wagon train to Brownsville,
left San Antonio carrying secret documents from local Unionists. Two days out of Brownsville they were challenged by a party of Confederates. Houzeau's dark complexion and fluent Spanish supported his disguise, and a search failed to locate the messages secreted within his shotgun. The wagons were passed without incident, and on March 20 Houzeau crossed into neutral Mexico. There his message was given to the United States consul. After a while he continued to New Orleans, which was then in Union hands, and became political editor of a Negro newspaper. From 1868 until 1876 he lived on a plantation in Jamaica. He then became director of the Royal Observatory in Brussels. In December of 1882 he returned to San Antonio under happier circumstances than those of his departure—as chief of the Belgian Astronomical Commission to observe the transit of Venus.

FRANK VAN DER STUCKEN

1862

Frank Van Der Stucken and his brother, Felix, immigrated to Texas from Antwerp with Henri Castro in 1846. They left Castro's colony, however, and moved to Fredericksburg, where Frank assisted in the construction of Fort Martin Scott. In the early 1850's in Fredericksburg he opened a store and soon became a prominent citizen; he was twice elected county commissioner. He and a partner also secured government freight contracts to supply west Texas military posts. In 1862 Van Der Stucken opened the Reliance Flour Mill in partnership with his brother Frank. The operation was left to Felix, while Frank served in the army. In 1865 Frank assigned his share of the ownership to his brother and returned to Antwerp. Felix remained in Fredericksburg to become one of its outstanding citizens. In 1869 he was appointed a county commissioner by the military government. In 1889 his son Alfred joined his father in the milling business. At this time the mill was remodeled, and the burr millstones were discarded in favor of a more modern roller system. The Gold and Red Star Flour, produced by the F. Van Der Stucken & Sons Mills, were favorites in central Texas for many years. In 1904 Felix was an organizer of the Citizens Bank of

FELIX VAN DER STUCKEN

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Fredericksburg and served as president until his death in 1913.

BELGIANs IN SOUTH TEXAS 1867

In 1864 the Archduke Maximilian accepted the imperial throne of Mexico under the sponsorship of Napoleon III. When he and his Belgian-born wife, Carlota, went to Mexico, they were accompanied by Belgian army volunteers and Belgian settlers. As conditions grew progressively worse French support dwindled. When Maximilian was executed by Juarista troops in 1867 Belgians were no longer welcome in Mexico. Some went north across the Río Grande, and at one time Belgian immigrants lived in most of the river towns from Laredo to Brownsville.

MICHEL SCHODTS 1869

Michel Schodts's assassination on the streets of Brownsville in 1896 stunned south Texas. The Belgian-born merchant was a highly regarded businessman with no known enemies. The assassin, believed to be a hired killer from Mexico, was never brought to justice. Schodts was given one of the largest funerals ever seen in Brownsville to that time.

A native of Antwerp, he immigrated at age 25 to New Orleans, where he worked as an accountant. The Civil War was already under way; so in 1862 he moved beyond harm to Matamoros, then a thriving export center for Texas cotton as well as a Confederate supply base. Schodts became first a clerk, then a partner, in a prosperous import house. In 1866 he married Susan Diaz. At her untimely death three years later he and his small daughter moved across the river to Brownsville, where he built a highly successful trade in lumber and building materials.

On a February night in 1896 he and a friend were walking home in the moonlight after a game of cards in Jagons's saloon. Within moments after the friend entered his own front gate, Schodts was gunned down at the corner of Eleventh and Washington Streets. His daughter and two grandchildren were his only survivors.

PIERRE VAN HOLLEBEKE 1879

Pierre Van Hollebeke owned and operated several large west Texas ranches before his death in the saddle at age 74. As a young man in his native Antwerp, Belgium, he operated one of the small skiffs that plied Antwerp canals, carrying people and merchandise. Imbued with a spirit of adventure, he came to the wide expanse of west Texas in 1879, settling on a small ranch south of Colorado City. His wife and children joined him the following year, and for a few months they lived in a dug-out like so many other plains pioneers.

At first Hollebeke tried raising sheep, but subsequently found cattle ranching more to his liking and his profit. He gained his American citizenship in 1888. In the 1890's he operated a small freight line, delivering equipment and supplies to the XIT and other west Texas ranches. In 1900 he began operating a general store at Midland, but three years later he settled on an
Andrews County ranch and became the county’s first postmaster at “Hollebeke.” From 1907 to 1909 he lived at Knowles, New Mexico, then purchased a large spread in Culberson County. He was one of the area’s biggest landowners at the time of his death in 1928.

E.D. WELTENS
1881

At an early age Edward Weltens decided that he was a better cook than farmer; so, leaving his home near Brussels, he obtained a job as chef on a passenger vessel out of Antwerp. He acquired a reputation as an excellent baker. Once, while visiting in Galveston, he traveled to San Antonio, where he had heard there were other Belgian families. He liked the appearance of the town and decided it would be a good place to establish a bakery.

About 1881 Weltens moved to San Antonio, but did not have enough capital to build his bakery right away. For several years he worked as the pastry chef at the Menger Hotel, where his knowledge of five languages quickly established him as unofficial interpreter for the community. Then he worked at Richter’s Bakery for nearly a dozen years before his dream came true.

Shortly before the Spanish American War he established Weltens’s Bakery. In 1898 it was Weltens who delivered the bread and pastries to Teddy Roosevelt’s “Rough Riders,” in training at the Old Fairgrounds. Several years later the bakery moved to an expanded location at Prospect Hill. Bread from its ovens was famous on San Antonio’s west side for many years.

HERMAN VAN DAELLE
1884

In middle age Herman Van Dalee was stirred by a call of adventure that had been stimulated by letters from a friend in the American West. Finally Herman decided to experience the excitement firsthand. Van Dalee arrived in San Antonio on New Year’s Day 1884, his 50th birthday. He acquired land on the old Frio City Road. His wife and children came as soon as he had prepared a home for them.

Van Dalee, born in Liedekerke, Belgium, had always lived close to the soil; his father had been a truck farmer. After a year at the Frio City Road site he found good rich earth at a reasonable price near the intersection of South Brazos and Laredo Streets. This 20-acre truck farm at first suffered a
lack of irrigation. Water had to be hauled from Apache Creek; or, in the dry season, purchased from property owners along San Pedro Creek. It became apparent that another source must be found; so, in 1894 Van Daele and the Baeten family cooperated in drilling their own well. The result was one of the first artesian supplies developed in Bexar County. Not only could the Van Daele and Baeten land be irrigated, but there was now enough water to sell for a penny per barrel.

Van Daele also operated a dairy in conjunction with his highly successful truck farm. About 1922 a baseball stadium was built on a portion of his property and was named Van Daele Field in his honor. He died the following year at 89. A half century later his descendants are still living on the property.

THE GODDESS OF LIBERTY
1888

When the old Texas Capitol burned in 1881 designs were already afoot to build a new capitol. Work began a year later on the same site. The first plans called for a limestone structure with a brick-supported dome, but technical problems caused a change to pink granite. To hold the dome in place, it was decided to use lightweight steel girders imported from Belgium. This was natural, as Belgian steel was already world-famous for its high quality. It was further decided to complete the edifice with a zinc statue of the Goddess of Liberty. The sculptor is unknown, but there is some evidence that he was a Belgian (among other guesses). The figure was cast in sections, and the pieces assembled on the capitol grounds in February 1888. It was then hoisted into place and finished in time for the May opening. Although her features appear exaggerated when seen at close range, they mellow to proper proportions when viewed from the ground, testifying to her maker’s skill.

ADOLPH BAETEN

Adolph Baeten worked on his father’s farm in Belgium until he was almost 30. Then in 1888 he moved to San Antonio, where he worked at odd jobs until 1892, when he leased land on Probandt Street. It was necessary, however, to buy irrigation water from the San Pedro Creek—at the rate of $2 per acre; so, in 1894 Adolph Baeten joined Herman Van Daele in digging one of the first artesian wells in Bexar County. It was dug on the Van Daele property, but Baeten paid the drilling expenses. Both men agreed to share the
water. After the well came in Adolph got married, built a house on his property leased from Van Daele and began farming. Eight years later he moved to a larger place and finally, in 1907, to a 32-acre site on Zarzamora Street. Here the Baeten Truck Farm became one of the show properties of San Antonio, where many new vegetables and fruits were introduced in the area.

CHARLES PERSYN
1891
During the winter of 1812 two Persyn brothers accompanied Napoleon's ill-fated retreat from Moscow. Able to go no further, they stopped in the Belgian town of Lokeren, which they made their home. One of the brothers, who changed the spelling of his name to Persyn, was the grandfather of Charles Persyn. Filled with the spirit of adventure, 16-year-old Charley ran away from home in 1886 and worked passage aboard an America-bound ship. For five years he held a variety of jobs, from miner to zookeeper. About 1891 he passed through San Antonio while working for the Southern Pacific Railroad. It struck him as a nice place to settle when the time came. He continued on to Del Rio, where he worked as assistant foreman for the Southern Pacific Railroad on construction of the high bridge over the Pecos River.

When this project was completed in 1892 Persyn moved to San Antonio. He wrote his brothers, Pete and Casmire, urging them to emigrate. They did so later that year. Charley, meanwhile, was employed at Alamo Iron Works, where he finally saved enough money to buy his own farm. In 1896 he married Augusta Verstuyft. They lived happily on this farm until her death in 1901. Charley later remarried and continued raising produce for many years. Pete Persyn, a farmer himself, was very successful at growing radishes. He is also credited with introducing cauliflower to the San Antonio market, clearing over $3,000 on his first crop. About 1905 Casmire returned to Belgium, but other relatives soon replaced him. Today numerous Persyn descendants still play an active role in the agricultural economy of Bexar County.

THE HOOGE FAMILY
1892
In 1892 Peter Hooge left the family farm near Ghent, Belgium, and moved to San Antonio. For two years he worked on the railroad and in 1894 was joined by his brother Philemon. Together they rented 25 acres of irrigated land on Probandt Street and began growing vegetables. They were able to send enough money home for their father and five brothers and sisters to emigrate in 1896. The Probandt Street land was fertile, but the rent was expensive, and there was talk of closing the San Pedro canal. Shortly after 1900 Peter and Philemon moved to other property on Brady Street. There they drilled a water well in joint effort with their neighbors, the Wauters family. The venture was unsuccessful; the Wauters sold their land to Philemon and moved.
In 1903 Peter married Elizabeth Chavagneux. For six years the couple lived near Espada Mission, where they repaired many of the buildings, assisted the priest and operated the store. In 1909 they moved back to the city limits.

In 1916 Philemon and his family homesteaded a small ranch near Columbus, New Mexico. He had no more than settled when Pancho Villa raided and ran off his stock. Discouraged, he returned to Texas and started a ranch near Campbellton.

That same year Peter Hooge and his family moved again, this time to Valley Wells. He remained until 1925, when he became a soft drink distributor and Stephanie died of pneumonia at Beirvelde. In 1929 Peter visited his father in Belgium. When he returned to Houston he was met by his wife and son, who had brought a truckload of vegetables with them. The vegetables were quickly sold at the market and since that time the Van de Walles have had a wholesale outlet at the Houston Produce Terminal. The family survived the depression years and began buying land around Kelly Field. At the start of World War II they had the largest truck farm in the San Antonio area, with more than 800 acres under cultivation. In 1937 Octave brought his four sons into the business, and it became Van de Walle & Sons. Later three grandsons became partners. In 1942 Van de Walle & Sons were granted large government contracts to supply vegetables to nearby military bases. This led to the introduction of some new crops, in addition to the inevitable potatoes. In 1945 the firm was given a special certificate for meritorious service by the Quartermaster General. Octave Van de Walle retired from business after suffering a stroke, but continued

STEPHANIE HOOGE
1903
When her mother died in Beirvelde, Belgium, Stephanie Hooge assumed the care of her five younger brothers and sisters. She had wanted to enter a convent, as her younger sister had done, but felt a sense of responsibility to her family. When the Hooges moved to San Antonio in 1896 it was Stephanie who educated the younger children while her father and two older brothers worked in the fields. In 1903 they decided to drill a water well on their Brady Street property. A vow was made that, if the well was productive, a chapel would be built. Although the result was disappointing it was decided to build a chapel anyway. The one-room structure was quickly completed, and Stephanie gathered the children of the Belgian colony to teach them the catechism and to broaden their education. The small chapel was also used by the adults whenever Father Heuchemer from Sacred Heart Parish could come to say mass.

When Stephanie felt that her duties to her family had been fulfilled, she made plans to satisfy her lifelong dream of becoming a nun. In 1906 she bade goodbye to her kinsmen and friends, and returned to Belgium, where she joined her sister Camilla Hooge (Sister Mary Leocadie) in the convent at Beirvelde. There she took the name Mary Lutgardis and became a teacher. She was prevented by failing health from returning to San Antonio and starting a school for the Belgian children. In 1911 she died of pneumonia at her convent in Beirvelde. In San Antonio her chapel continued under the name of St. John Berchmans, as she had wished. St. Stephen's Church, which now occupies the site, is dedicated to her memory.

OCTAVE VAN DE WALLE
1905
In 1905 Octave Van de Walle left his father's farm near Lokeren, Belgium, to start a life of his own in San Antonio. A year later he married Marie Leonie Hooge and began farming a small plot of ground at Zarzamora and Brady Streets. In 1910 Octave, his wife and her brother Peter Hooge donated land for the new St. John Berchmans Church. Because of crop failure the Van de Walles moved in 1914 to Valley Wells in Dimmit County. The situation did not improve; one year there would be drought, the next year flood. While the farmers who remained in San Antonio during World War I prospered, those in Valley Wells became poorer. After seven years of hard times in Valley Wells the Van de Walles moved back to San Antonio.

They farmed first at St. Peter's Orphanage on Mission Road, and later on Castroville Road and Morey Road. In 1929 Octave visited his father in Belgium. When he returned to Houston he was met by his wife and son, who had brought a truckload of vegetables with them. The vegetables were quickly sold at the market and since that time the Van de Walles have had a wholesale outlet at the Houston Produce Terminal. The family survived the depression years and began buying land around Kelly Field. At the start of World War II they had the largest truck farm in the San Antonio area, with more than 800 acres under cultivation. In 1937 Octave brought his four sons into the business, and it became Van de Walle & Sons. Later three grandsons became partners. In 1942 Van de Walle & Sons were granted large government contracts to supply vegetables to nearby military bases. This led to the introduction of some new crops, in addition to the inevitable potatoes. In 1945 the firm was given a special certificate for meritorious service by the Quartermaster General. Octave Van de Walle retired from business after suffering a stroke, but continued
to assist from the sidelines until his death in 1952. Later that year Mrs. Van de Walle rebuilt St. Stephen’s Church as a memorial to her husband.

“COMPAGNIE DES EAU
DE SAN ANTONIO”

1909

In 1906 the San Antonio Water Supply Company was organized to supply the city of San Antonio. The organization experienced financial difficulty, and after three years 90 percent of the stock was sold to a group of Belgian investors in Antwerp. Under a new name, “Compagnie des Eaux de San Antonio,” they not only continued the waterworks, but expanded it. From 1910 to 1920 the city’s population almost doubled. In 1914 Germany invaded Belgium, and all communications between the stockholders in Antwerp and the company in San Antonio were cut off. Throughout World War I the interest and dividends that ordinarily would have been sent to the investors were put back into the company for expansion. When the armistice was signed in 1918 the Belgian owners badly needed money to rebuild their devastated land. The Belgian franc had fallen to its lowest point; so, by selling their stock, they would be getting a comparatively greater number of francs for use at home. In 1920 a syndicate of San Antonio businessmen purchased the stock from the Belgian investors. Since the company’s net worth had increased considerably there was a substantial profit for both parties.

ST. JOHN BERCHEMANS
CHURCH

1910

Named in honor of a 17th century Belgian saint, St. John Berchmans Church can trace its origins to the one-room chapel erected by Stephanie Hooge in 1903. Use of the chapel declined after Stephanie returned to Belgium. Interest revived in 1910 with the appearance of Father Richard Verschaffelt. While lying ill in Santa Rosa Hospital he heard a nurse speaking Flemish. They talked of the Belgian colony in San Antonio, and as his health improved the priest visited the colony. He envisioned the chapel as the site of a new Belgian church. In 1910 it was decided to enlarge the original chapel. Additional land was donated by Peter Hooge and Mr. and Mrs. Octave Van de Walle. Work began in July and was completed two months later at a cost of $1300. The simple structure did not even have a bell until 1912, when an old fire bell was donated by Mayor Bryan Calaghan. Even then, it was about six months before a tower could be erected. Until 1947 St. John Berchmans was the Belgian national parish, with all services conducted in Flemish. Then there was a revision of parish boundaries which greatly diminished the Belgian influence. In 1948 new land was purchased and St. John Berchmans relocated. The original Brady Street chapel was remodeled by Mrs. Octave Van de Walle in 1952 and renamed St. Stephen’s. In 1965 St. John Berchmans moved to its present site on Cupples Road. A rectory and a school stand nearby. Throughout the history of St. John Berchmans Church, most of its priests have been Belgian.

REVEREND RICHARD
VERSCHAFFELT

Richard Verschaffelt was responsible for the rebuilding of St. John Berchmans Church and was its first pastor. In addition to regular parish duties, he was also an educator, sometimes a physician and an advisor in business matters. Born at Ghent, Belgium, in 1879, he had expressed an interest in the Church from his earliest years. He was ordained a priest in 1898. After serving churches in Belgium and in Paris he sought to fulfill a long-time dream of becoming a missionary. In 1904 he had his chance when he went to Tulancingo, Mexico, to minister to the Indian tribes there. During this period he visited San Antonio on annual trips north. Father Richard remained in Mexico until forced out by the Revolution of 1910. After getting acquainted with the Belgian colony of San Antonio he recognized the need for a Belgian national church, which he promptly set about to organize.

In 1912 he was asked by the bishop to go to Marfa, Texas, and to work with the Mexican missions. Although life there was difficult he cheerfully carried out his duties until World War I began. He felt then that his homeland needed him more, and he
Reverend Richard Verschaffelt at the Grothues home, 1910

asked to be relieved of his position. Verschaffelt tried unsuccessfully to return to Belgium. In 1917 he joined the Canadian Expeditionary Force and was sent overseas. While in occupied Belgium he was captured by the Germans and sentenced to be executed. With the aid of Resistance forces he was able to escape from prison on the night before his impending execution.

After the war the priest returned to the United States and was pastor at Thibodeaux, Louisiana, until 1932. Father Verbaeke of St. John Berchmans died, and Father Richard returned to San Antonio for his second term as pastor. He labored for ten more years, but age and illness were his companions until his death in 1942.

JULIEN PAUL BLITZ
1912

In his 66 years Belgian-born Julien Paul Blitz led two major Texas symphony orchestras—one at Houston, which he founded, and another at San Antonio. These two organizations laid important foundations for later cultural development in the state. The man responsible was born at Ghent of a Belgian father and an American mother. Both were musicians, so it was not surprising that Julien should have an early love of music. He graduated from the Royal Conservatory of Ghent in 1905, after completing an eight-year course in four.

Young Blitz sailed from Antwerp to New York that same year, but soon found the northern winters too harsh. His father contacted an old friend, Herman Bal, who was chairman of the music department at Baylor Female College in Belton, Texas, and secured employment for Julien. The young man soon moved on to San Antonio, Houston and back to Europe for postgraduate work. In 1912 he returned to Houston as director of the Treble Clef Club. A year later he saw possibilities for starting a symphony orchestra and turned to Miss Ima Hogg for help. A trial concert was given at the Majestic Theater with a group of 35 musicians selected and led by Blitz. The trial concert was a success, and the Houston Symphony Association was formed soon after. Blitz was appointed the first conductor. For the next three years he conducted both the Houston Symphony Orchestra and the Treble Clef Club. He then left the orchestra and moved to a monastery in Arkansas to further develop his techniques.

In 1917 Blitz became conductor of the San Antonio Symphony Orchestra, which had been sponsored by Mrs. Anna Hertzberg. About 1925 he left the orchestra, and for two years he and his wife taught music, gave concerts and frequently accompanied Josephine Lucchese on her tours of Texas. In 1930 the couple moved to Sherman, where he headed the stringed instrument department at Kidd-Key College. After five years he became chairman of the music department at Texas Technological College in Lubbock, where he spent another 15 years. In 1950 he retired and moved to Dallas, where he and his wife taught music and conducted a workshop for the staff of the San Antonio Symphony Orchestra.
the Dallas public schools. In 1951 Julien Paul Blitz died, after having contributed more than 40 years to music education in Texas.

**AVIEL “TIP” VANDER POORTEN**

1917

At his death in 1936 “Tip” Vander Poorten was a highly respected leader of San Antonio’s Belgian community. His nickname derived from World War I service when he learned his first song in English, the ever-popular “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary.” He was excessively generous with his rendition of the melody. Tip was assigned to the Quartermaster Corps and was frequently chosen to drive General Pershing’s staff car. He and the general enjoyed a long and enduring friendship. In 1927 he bought the 3-Points service station and a small cafe at Quintana and Frio City Roads. He expanded the diner into a tavern called Tip’s Place. There patrons could relax and enjoy a game of bolls or shoot pool. Tip also dispensed advice to local farmers on the type of seeds to buy, how to cultivate their land, and even gave counsel in simple legal matters. He always urged expansion of the Belgian colony and was influential in bringing additional emigrants from the Old Country.

**CAMILLE DE WINNE**

1920

A center of Belgian culture in San Antonio is the Belgium Inn, owned and operated by the De Winne family. The founder, Camille De Winne, arrived in San Antonio from Overmeer, Belgium, about 1920. At first he worked on Peet Call’s farm, but soon obtained a job at Ed Welten’s Prospect Hill Bakery. In 1923 Camille, by then a foreman, felt secure enough to get married. The following year he opened a small grocery store on West Commerce, which was operated by his wife while Camille worked at the bakery. In 1925 he opened his own bakery next to the grocery store and called it the Daylight Bakery. Soon he had a thriving bread route among the Belgian farmers.

De Winne began selling sandwiches in the grocery store, and soon it evolved into a small restaurant. When Prohibition was lifted in 1933 he opened a package store and tavern called the Belgium Inn. This became the most popular of the Belgian gathering spots, offering card games, darts and Belgian bolling. During World War II the bakery was closed because of a shortage of raw ingredients. After the war the restaurant was enlarged,
Belgian social gathering, showing bolls and dart board.

and tourist courts were added next door. This gave the De Winnes a block-long complex which is still in use today.

**SOCIAL LIFE**

The Belgian "Kermess," or outdoor festival, was traditionally held in mid-August and again on November 17, depending on the condition of the harvest. Another festive event was June 21, the Belgian national holiday. In reality, however, the Belgians of San Antonio required no special reason to celebrate, and each evening generally found some of the colony in the Belgium Inn, Belgian Village, Flanders Inn or one of the other local spots. There, over a cool drink, they could discuss the crops. In earlier days wooden shoes were worn, and these were sometimes the source of free drinks from non-Belgians who would buy a round for the privilege of trying on the wooden footwear. These shoes also had another practical side; in addition to being economical, they were easier to clean, which was important in an agricultural society.

One of the most popular Belgian pastimes was the sport of bolling. The game was played with round wooden bolls, which resembled flat cheeses, the object being to roll the disk in an arc to a peg at the opposite end of the alley. The player whose boll came closest to the peg and survived the bombardment of the opposing team was declared the winner. The women enjoyed a similar game, but it involved rolling the boll into a narrow box. Dancing was also popular, and sometimes the dancers wore native costumes. Today these traditional games have disappeared, except for special occasions, such as the Texas Folklife Festival.

**BELGIAN ACHIEVEMENTS IN AGRICULTURE**

Thanks to their ingenuity and diligence, the Belgian vegetable growers of San Antonio have made it possible for Texas housewives to prepare fresh vegetables all year long. No segment of the agricultural economy is so fickle as the growing and marketing of highly perishable truck crops. Too much or too little rain, labor problems, insects, blight and other diseases cast a shadow over every crop year. Another threat is even worse—no market!

Through the Bexar County Truck Growers Association, these farmers have encouraged their own members and others to assume the risk of raising vegetables on a year-round basis. More importantly, they have tried to create a stable market. At first vegetables were brought from the fields by wagons and sold in stalls at the old market in Military Plaza. Today vegetables are processed and packaged, then speeded by truck to their destination. In 1952 Henry Van de Walle was influential in starting the first annual South Texas Vegetable Day show to acquaint consumers with locally grown crops and to encourage quality improvement.

Belgian farmers have also pioneered new roles in irrigation. The siphon technique which they intro-
duced into this area is a far cry from the days when water had to be carried to the ditches by hand. A series of siphon tubes are placed in the ditches at right angles to the water source, and the gravity flow system diverts the water to the individual furrows.

In addition to growing vegetables, many San Antonio Belgians produce a flower crop in the fall. A major market for these flowers has been the Mexican population of south Texas, who use them to decorate cemeteries on All Souls Day. Through modern technology and untiring labor these Belgian farmers have contributed impressively to the San Antonio economy.

ANDRÉ A. CRISPIN
1949

Typical of many Texas success stories is that of André A. Crispin. Born in Brussels, young André served with the Belgian army during the dark days of 1940. After Belgium's defeat by the Germans he continued his education at the University of Louvain and graduated with an engineering degree in 1943. Wishing to aid his occupied country, he served for a time with the Belgian underground, then after the war, with the American Military Government in Europe. Here he decided that he would like someday to go to America. In 1947 he got his chance. Early that year Crispin arrived in Colorado Springs, Colorado, with $30 in his pocket. He worked for a while with a wholesale grocer and kept hoping to have his own company.

In 1949 he moved to Houston, where he opened a small import-export business with money borrowed from friends. This was the start of the Crispin Company, which primarily imports iron and steel products and oil field tubular goods. Today the Crispin Company is a multimillion-dollar concern, with affiliates throughout the United States, and offices in Europe, Latin America and South Africa.

In addition to his business enterprise, André Crispin has many other activities. In 1953 he was named one of five outstanding young Texans by a committee of Texas businessmen for his work in the steel industry from 1950 to 1953. He was president of the World Trade Association of Houston and is the founder and past president of the World Trade Club. Prominent in Houston society, Crispin belongs to more than a score of civic organizations, and at one point led efforts to build the World Trade Center.

ANDRÉ GRAINDORGE
1966

Brussels-born André Graindorge ran away to sea at 16 and worked as a deck boy on a Belgian freighter. Among his duties was helping the ship's cook, who recognized André's potential and recommended that he attend cooking school. Graduating from the Ecole Hotelière in Brussels, he began working as a baker on a cargo liner operating between Antwerp and North America. He soon became head chef and achieved recognition for his many Belgian and French dishes. In 1965 he married Loelleta Carpenter of Austin and decided to settle there. In 1966 he became the chef at the Polonaise, where many Texans enjoyed his culinary talents. After two years he became chef at the Swiss Chalet and a year later assumed management of the cafeteria for the local IBM plant.

Andre A. Crispin
Ever since arriving in Austin Graindorge had wanted to open his own restaurant. In March 1970 he leased the old Courthouse Cafe and remodeled it as André's. It was a family operation, and each member pitched in. While conditions were cramped business was good, and André's reputation grew. In 1972 the enterprise moved to a new location on Highway 71. Here his Belgian-style game dishes have earned him a reputation as one of the finest chefs in Texas.

CONCLUSION

The 1850 Texas census revealed only eight Belgians living in the state, seven of those in San Antonio. More than a century later most Belgian Texans remain concentrated in the Alamo City. While many diverse occupations are represented, agriculture heads the list. Belgian Texans have experimented widely in the introduction of new crops and have improved irrigation techniques. There have been countless individual success stories in other fields of endeavor. Today it is difficult to distinguish Belgians from other ethnic groups, since many of their distinctive folkways are no longer observed. They have blended into the local culture until they survive more as Texans than as Belgians. They retain a proper pride, however, in their contribution to the growth of their adopted land.
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