

From North Brabant to Wisconsin: Dutch Clergymen in Little Chute, Wisconsin

By Gene Janssen and Robin Dekker

The Village of Little Chute in the heart of the Fox Valley is keeping its Dutch heritage alive. A large element of this heritage is centered on the Saint John Catholic Church in the heart of the village. Saint John Parish was established in 1836 by Father Theodore J. Van den Broek, originally from Amsterdam, as a mission to Native Americans. In 1848, three boatloads of Dutch settlers, persuaded by Father Van den Broek, arrived to the area and set about the task of creating a Catholic settlement in the wilderness of Wisconsin. While many of the original settlers came from all areas of The Netherlands, the vast majority came from the province of North Brabant. Tilburg especially was to play an integral part of Saint John Parish and the spiritual history of Little Chute. Reverend Theodore Joseph Knegtel, Reverend Cornelius van den Borne and Reverend Joseph Kools were all born in Tilburg and were clergymen who served at Saint John Catholic Church in Little Chute.

Theodore Knegtel

The Reverend Theodore Joseph Knegtel was born on August 13, 1845 in Tilburg. He went to seminary at Michiels Gestel and at Haaren and was ordained in 1872. Reverend Knegtel served as chaplain in several parishes in The Netherlands until 1882. He was received on October 26 of that year into the Green Bay diocese and was appointed pastor in Preble. On January 21, 1890 he arrived in Little Chute after finishing construction on the church in Preble. Much was accomplished at Saint John Church during the pastorate of Reverend Knegtel. New stained glass windows were installed, a large clock and bells became part of the church steeple and the interior received new pews and decorations. He erected three new additions to the building between 1894 and 1909, including the sanctuary and sacristies, the red brick rectory and an addition to the school.

Three years ago, Saint John Church was again expanded to accommodate more parishioners. Around this time Little Chute resident Gene Janssen became more interested in the history of Saint John Church. While moving things around, Gene came across a chalice which was given to Reverend Knegtel in 1915 to celebrate his 25 years

of service to the Saint John Parish. Today, at ninety-nine years of age, Little Chute resident Alice Jansen remembers the ceremony in which Reverend Knegtel received the chalice from his congregation. Alice was eight years old at the time and served as a flower girl in the procession. "He was a true Hollander," says Jansen. Reverend Knegtel passed away on June 15, 1915 in Little Chute and was buried in the parish cemetery.

Cornelis van den Borne

The Reverend Cornelius van den Borne was born in Tilburg on August 11, 1882 to Jacobus van den Borne en Catharina Reijnen. He went to Belgium and studied in Aarschot and Leuven and did his post-graduate work at Oxford University in Oxford, England. Van den Borne was ordained in 1907 before coming to the United States in 1908. He taught at Sacred Heart College in Fairhaven, Massachusetts for one year before entering the Green Bay diocese in December of 1909. He was immediately appointed assistant at Saint John Parish where he served for five years.

In the early 1930s, Reverend van den Borne became priest at Holy Name Church in Kimberly, where he worked until his tragic death in 1957. In August of that year, shortly before he celebrated his 50th year in the priesthood and his 75th birthday, he was mortally wounded in a gas explosion in the Holy Name School. Reverend van den Borne passed away on August 9 from his wounds and was buried in Holy Name Cemetery in Kimberly.

Joseph Kools

The Reverend Joseph Kools was born in Tilburg on April 24, 1896 to blacksmith Petrus Johannes Kools and Dorothea Ooms. In 1914, he came to the United States to complete his studies in philosophy and theology at Saint Francis Seminary in Milwaukee. He was ordained at Saint Francis Xavier Cathedral in Green Bay on May 7, 1930. Before coming to Little Chute in 1937, Reverend Kools was named assistant in three other Wisconsin parishes: Saint John Parish in Green Bay, Saint Boniface Parish in De Pere and Saint Stephen Parish in Stevens Point. He stayed in Little Chute for only a few months before he was reassigned to another parish. In 1957, he came to Holy Name in Kimberly to take

the place of Cornelis van den Borne after his tragic death. Reverend Kools passed away on October 31, 1973.

The Dutch Heritage of Little Chute

In 1986, Saint John Parish celebrated its sesquicentennial and in 1999 the Village of Little Chute celebrated its centennial. These events renewed the interest among community members in their Dutch heritage. Many residents of Little Chute are originally from The Netherlands and many have ancestors who arrived on the original three boats. An idea began to form at the annual Kermis festival to erect an authentic functioning Dutch windmill in Little Chute as a testament to the people who founded the village.

Through the efforts of then Village President Donald De Groot, lawyer Gerard H. Van Hoof and a committed group of Little Chute residents, The Little Chute Windmill and Van Asten Visitor Center is close to becoming a reality. \$1.5 million to date has been raised towards their goal of \$2.5 million. Famous third-generation millwright Lucas Verbij of Verbij Hoogmade BV in The Netherlands has designed the windmill, which will be built in The Netherlands and shipped over to be reassembled on site in Little Chute. Depending on fundraising progress, Little Chute Windmill, Inc. hopes to order the windmill from Verbij this spring and begin construction. In honor of the many settlers who came to Little Chute from North Brabant, the windmill will be designed in the style of windmills from North Brabant built around the year 1850. The Little Chute Windmill and Van Asten Visitor Center will educate and entertain visitors and stand as a symbol and a celebration of the rich and long-standing Dutch heritage of the area.

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