

BELGIAN SETTLEMENT AND SOCIETY IN THE INDIANA RUST BELT*

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ABSTRACT. At first glance the industrial city of Mishawaka, near the northern border of Indiana, appears to be ethnically homogeneous. Closer examination, however, reveals the rich ethnic heritage of Mishawaka, as it does in so many other Rust Belt cities from Pittsburgh to Chicago. One of the most fascinating of these immigrant stories is the rise of Belgian Town, on Mishawaka's southwest side. This study examines residential, commercial, and social patterns of this evolving ethnic community during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Although industrial jobs attracted immigrants to the city, creation of a Flemish Catholic church provided the foundation on which to build a tightly knit Belgian community. *Keywords:* ethnic geography, Flemish, Indiana, Mishawaka, Rust Belt.

Downtown Mishawaka, Indiana, reflects an aging Rust Belt city. Several storefronts have stood empty for the past two decades as commercial development and office complexes shifted the city's focus farther north to take advantage of access to interstate highways. Where the old downtown meets the southern banks of the Saint Joseph River, an enormous lot awaits redevelopment. This empty space was left behind when the abandoned Uniroyal plant (formerly the Mishawaka Woolen Manufacturing Company) was finally demolished in the summer of 2000. People on the downtown sidewalks appear to be ethnically homogeneous. Like most of Indiana's population, many of the city's residents are of a long-forgotten mixture of German, English, Irish, and Scottish heritage. But Mishawaka, like other Rust Belt cities between Pittsburgh and Chicago, has many stories to tell of the diverse immigrants who came to work in the city's burgeoning industries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of the most fascinating of these stories is the formation of Mishawaka's Belgian Town, on the city's southwest side.

This study illustrates the morphology of an urban immigrant population's residential, commercial, and social patterns as it evolved from a scattering of residences in 1900 to a mature ethnic community thirty years later. The morphology is documented through the use of manuscript census records, city directories, obituaries, newspaper articles, local histories, and field observations. The study contributes a new chapter to the story of Belgians in the United States. Previously, scholars interested in Belgian settlement focused on Walloons in New York (Bayer 1925) and Wisconsin (Laatsch and Calkins 1992) and on Flemish rural settlements in southwestern Minnesota (Pansaerts 1989; Amato 1990). In contrast, I explore an evolving community of Flemish immigrants and their children in an urban indus-

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