

Letter to the Editor, 3/15/07

By Robin Dekker

As I sit here in my office reading the newspaper, I am struck by the number of articles referring to the Dutch heritage of the area. "It really is everywhere," I say to myself. I am a newcomer to the Fox Cities and continue to be impressed by the community values I see here. Family and friends seem to stick together. Many families have resided here for generations, choosing to stay where the quality of life is good and where their children can grow up in safety amongst community and nature. Having been to The Netherlands many times, I see so many similarities between their society and Northeast Wisconsin. The most obvious is that both societies are close-knit and value family and friends above all else.

The first Dutch person arrived in 1835 in what would later become Little Chute. His name was Father van den Broek and he established the St. John Parish in 1836. In 1848, three shiploads of Dutch Catholic settlers followed in his footsteps and settled in "La Petite Chute", French for "the little waterfall". Thus began the Dutch tradition in Little Chute.

This is but one story of Dutch immigration to Northeast Wisconsin. You may be reading this and thinking, "Well, my ancestors came over from Holland and settled in" Many waves of immigration from The Netherlands to Wisconsin took place. But, they all came for more or less the same reason: to make a better life for themselves in America. These Dutch-Americans got just that and they helped form the basis for the wonderful state we live in.

Did you know that out of an estimated population of 5.5 million in Wisconsin, approximately 800,000 or 15% of its residents have a Dutch surname or can point to a family lineage traceable to the Dutch heritage? So why don't we hear about this important, interesting and influential group? I can't answer that question *yet*, but I do know it is time to start celebrating this great history and creating a new tradition of Wisconsin-Dutch scholarship. There are already people doing just this. The Sheboygan County Historical Research Center plans to feature Dutch-Wisconsin history at their 2008 conference. The University of Wisconsin – Madison offers an entire curriculum of fascinating Dutch Studies courses. And right here, in the Heart of the Valley, in your community, Little Chute Windmill, Inc. has undertaken a visionary project to build an authentic, grain-grinding Dutch windmill and visitor center to celebrate the Dutch heritage of Northeast Wisconsin.

The Little Chute Windmill and Van Asten Visitor Center, as it has been named, will not only celebrate the past but enrich our lives of today. Children, adults and everyone in between will be able to experience living-history and see a beautiful 100 foot-tall historic windmill in action. From the outside, you will see its blades quietly whooshing through the air. On the inside, volunteer millers will show you how grain is ground into flour using centuries-old technology. With the help of the Little Chute Historical Society, the visitor center will function as a museum to interpret the rich history of the area. The gardens will provide a peaceful retreat to anyone who takes the time to stop and enjoy. Educational programming will compliment the physical structures.

I like to say, "It isn't just a windmill, it's an icon for the community." This project will change the community for the better. It has the potential to inspire a new generation, to rekindle that warm feeling of having roots, of having a history. If you're thinking dollars and cents, there is a strong probability that such an attraction would be a significant boon to the local economy. The list of benefits goes on and on, but space in the newspaper does not.

It is time to make a difference. It is time to get involved. Little Chute Windmill, Inc. has already raised \$1.5 million on the way to a goal of \$2.5 million. We are on the back side of our fundraising, but we need your help. We are not just asking for your money, we're asking for your involvement. Right now you have the opportunity to *make* history, not just learn about it. We hope to order the windmill from The Netherlands this spring and begin construction, but it can't happen without your support. By choosing to give to the Windmill today, you are choosing to create the best possible future for your community.

While those with Dutch heritage may feel a special connection to this project, I hope I have illustrated the many benefits to the community as a whole. Everyone is encouraged to become involved. The Windmill isn't just about being Dutch; it is about being part of a greater community tradition as well.

There are many ways to help, so please contact Little Chute Windmill, Inc. at 122 W. Main St. in Little Chute, 920-788-2629, yourwindmill@sbcglobal.net. We've got a whole lot of information to get you even more excited about the project. If you want to get started right away, search the internet using GoodSearch. Go to www.goodsearch.com and enter Little Chute Windmill as the organization you'd like to support. Or, go to Larry's Piggly Wiggly in Little Chute and buy some of their tasty Dutch Buns. \$1 for every package sold goes to the Windmill Fund.

Let's make a difference, together!