

The Baker and the General Practitioner Fons DeRoeck

Writing 'Letters from Wausaukee to Antwerp 1887 – 1937', a book about my American family, I had to look up many people who came alive in these old letters. One of them was Alphonse (called Fons or Phonse) John DeRoeck who married Josepha (called Josephine, Josie or Jepha) Marie-Thérèsia Cornelia Debot in Wausaukee, Wisconsin, in 1897.

Jeanette Slaets (née Joanna Wuyts) wrote in a letter of September 22, 1897 to her 'Beloved' mother-in-law Angelina Slaets in Antwerp, Belgium:

'...Josepha is thinking of marrying again in springtime. This time to a Flemish boy (Fons DeRoeck) whose parents are also here. They live in Norway...'

Four years later (August 18, 1901) Jeanette wrote:

'...Josephine from Uncle Vic (Victor N. Debot) had a little boy (Leonard E. DeRoeck) in April. Josephine's husband had an accident in Norway about a month ago. He was out to plunder an eagle's nest when he fell out of a tree at 4 in the morning. He then tried to reach the road by crawling on his arms till his skin was gone. Almost all the men have been searching but he was not found. Then a little dog, which was with the men, found him. It was just in time as he was almost dead. He was paralyzed and at the point of death for several days. He is still weak but can already walk now. Otherwise they earn their living very well in their shop...'



Josepha Debot - DeRoeck

In the Michigan Iron county telephone directory I found listed under Norway and its neighborhood, some DeRoecks and I wrote them a letter. That way I came in contact with several who helped me with finding information, pictures and things worth knowing about this Fons DeRoeck, his family and about other Belgium immigrants.

With their information and my searching, for example in the governmental archives, in Belgium I learned that there was more than one DeRoeck family (written as De Roeck in Belgium) who migrated to Norway. At first sight they were not related, but they all were natives of Beveren or the villages around in 'Waasland' in East-Flanders.

Josephine's brother Edmund (also Ed or Edmond) L. Debot had married a Julia DeRoeck, also of Norway. Were Julia and Fons brother and sister?

To find answers I put some family trees together and tried to connect the

Norway DeRoeck's with their ancestors in East-Flanders. I didn't succeed in linking all the DeRoecks as it was too time consuming, but I found the information I needed to complete my book. Before I start telling the story of my findings; Julia and Fons are siblings.

Let me tell you first something about Josephine Debot. She was born in Borgerhout in Belgium March 23, 1874 and migrated with her family to America in 1887. They settled in a forestry camp called Mastodon in the north-west of the state Michigan, and ended up in Wausaukee, Wisconsin, a few years later. This pioneer settlement was established in the middle of virgin forest in the north-east of Wisconsin in 1880. Josephine married Charles H. Lindstrom Sandstone in Wausaukee in 1894. In a letter to Belgium he is called a Swede, but he was born in Menominee in the state of Michigan. Josephine and Charles were living in the nearby Dunbar, where he worked as edger man in a sawmill for the Girard Lumber Company. Josephine gave birth to a son Rudolph August 19, 1895 and only a few months later her husband, 29 years old, died in a fatal accident. He was running the edger when the plank that was being trimmed pinched the saw and was thrown back, striking him in the side. As he was a member of the Dunbar Tent K.O.T.M. (Knights of the Maccabees Lodge of the woodmen) he was brought down to Wausaukee by a special train, the Dunbar Maccabees being on board. Josephine's cousin and my great uncle Louis Slaets, the president of the Wausaukee Maccabees, and his fellow knights followed in the impressive ceremonies of the Order and marched in the funeral procession which was one of the longest ever seen in the vicinity. Also Josephine's parents, Victor and Sophie (Fien), were members.

The brotherly society of the members the Lodge of the Knights (and Ladies) of the Maccabees were mostly ordinary people such as foresters and woodmen.

Their work was not only dangerous, but also a very uncertain job, as they were out of work a lot of the time. Since it was so risky, insurance companies were not interested in selling policies to lumbermen. To provide themselves with a safety net many men and women became members of one of the branches of the Lodge of the Woodmen. This membership assured that they would receive money, after paying a monthly contribution, if they were out of work. The Lodge also provided help to the families of its deceased members. But they also joined as it organized pleasant social meetings. The Lodge had more than two hundred thousand members in 1896. They became a life insurance company in 1962 and changed the name to The Maccabees Mutual Insurance Company. As Charles Sandstone was a member of the knights, with whom he had his life insured, his wife received \$1,000.

Josephine and her son left Dunbar and went to live near her parents Victor and Sophie Debot in Wausaukee. Two years later Josephine acted as bridesmaid (and my great uncle Louis Slaets was best man) at the marriage of her sister Mary and Emile Everix. Her new brother-in-law Emile had invited a friend, Fons DeRoeck of nearby Norway. They both came from East-Flanders in Belgium and were bakers by trade. Emile was a son of the well-known Everix baker's family in Beveren and Fons was born in Rupelmonde. Emile and Mary started the Everix Bakery, which became one of the most modern bakeries in the state of Wisconsin.

Fons wasn't the only DeRoeck at that marriage as his father John, his stepmother Sophia and his sister Julia were guests. Cupid was also invited as Josephine married Fons in November 1897 in Wausaukee and Julia married Josephine's bother Ed Debot May 11, 1898 in Norway.

But wasn't this an article about Fons DeRoeck!

Let start in Belgium.

Simon P. De Roeck was born in Bazel, now a part of Kruibeke, in East-Flanders about 1785. Simon married Aurelle Bollé of Rupelmonde and she gave birth to Josephus J. in Rupelmonde March 19, 1819.

Josephus married Desideria F. Vercammen and their son Desiderius (John) De Roeck, born in Rupelmonde May 30, 1851 married Delphina Van Landeghem. Five children were born; Fons, Frank, Clara, Julia and Susie. After the death of their mother in 1880 their father John remarried Anna Sophia S. Staes. After the birth of Emma and Maria the family De Roeck migrated from Rupelmonde to Norway in 1884. Fons was 10 years old.



Edmond and Julia in 1898

Norway is situated in Dickinson County in the Upper Peninsula of the state of Michigan and was originated in 1877 as an iron ore-mining town and incorporated as a city in 1891. It attracted many immigrants from Scandinavian countries, Belgium, England, France, and Italy. Most of the immigrants worked in the mines.

However men were also needed to work in the woods, cutting timber for the mines, and also work for the railroads, so that iron ore could be transported. Many of the Belgium people were store and saloon owners. One of them was an Isidoor Joossens (in the USA spelled as Jossens) born June 12, 1857 in Beveren (Vrasene) in the province East-Flanders. He migrated two years later than the family DeRoeck and opened a saloon in Norway, and was a good friend of Josephine's parents. In 1892 Isidoor was the president of the Flemish Brotherhood of Norway and the nearby Vulcan. This club was formed so that the Belgian could get together and fraternize, and they also had a bicycle and a pigeon racing club: the Belgian Pigeon Club. They also came together to play music and to sing their Flemish songs.

Three hundred and one people lived in Norway who were born in Belgium in 1900, and ten years later almost twice as many: 573. As many of them built their houses in the same part of Norway it resulted in a Belgian quarter and even a street was called Belgium Town Road. The majority of them had a Flemish name and many had their origin in the Belgian province of East-Flanders. Nearly all of their descendants left Norway and settled all over America. Today Norway has a population of about 3000 and around 160 of them are of Belgian ancestry.

Arriving in Norway the family DeRoeck had to find a place to live, earn a living and send their children to school. They were probably sent to the parochial school next to the Roman Catholic Church on Sunset Hill. The pastor was Father Kehoe and he had enlarged the church and built the school in 1883. But the first thing they, and also their parents, needed was a thorough command of English.

John and Sophia De Roeck opened a saloon at 412 Nelson Street but they had

no luck. It was June 9, 1888, a very hot summer day and many people were out of town when a fire started in one of the business houses in Nelson Street. Because of a shortage of water the fire very soon got out of hand and destroyed more than forty buildings. At the same time most of the children of Norway and their parents were attending a performance of the Barnum's circus in Iron Mountain and the DeRoeck's family was without doubt also enjoying the acrobatic acts. The Iron Mountain fire department arrived in about 35 minutes as it relied on horse power. Very soon after the catastrophic destruction most of the wooden buildings were replaced by new brick constructions.

Before I start writing about Fons here is some information about his siblings:

- His younger brother Frank DeRoeck died at 17 years, after a brief illness of two days in November 1892. He had for some years been employed in different city stores and up to the time of his death he had been employed at Hohiesol and Company in Norway;
- Julia DeRoeck married Fons wife's brother Ed Debot, of Wausaukee, in the St. Mary's Catholic Church in Norway Wednesday 11 May 1898. Next day they departed to Wausaukee where their parents gave a wedding ball at the town hall, which was attended by a large number of family and friends. Sixteen months later, September 4, 1899 Julia gave birth to Marie and a son, Elmer was born May 29, 1903. Both were born in Norway. Ed and Julia Debot resided for only a short time in Norway (where Ed was a fireman), then went on to live in Wausau, Wisconsin, till 1913. They moved to Wittenberg, where Ed founded the Wittenberg Light and Power Co. He retired in 1930 after which they went to Stevens Point. Their son Elmer married Betty Collins Piffner, a

professor at the University of Wisconsin, hence the naming of a part of the university after Debot and a Debot Scholarship;

- Clara DeRoeck married Anton Treiber in Norway;
- Susie DeRoeck married Oscar Schmidt and they went living in Milwaukee;
- Fons had two half-sisters, Emma and Maria. Emma DeRoeck married Walter F. Dudy June 15, 1910 and Maria DeRoeck married Charles Marshall.

Fons liked sports, as brook trout fishing but also more active ones as bicycling. He tried always to be the best and with success, as a few times his 'heroic deeds' were described in the local newspaper: *'De Roeck was out after brook trout, early in the week and got 24 that averaged a pound and a half and Alphonse De Roeck of this city and Will Cruse had a bicycle race. The run was from Iron Mountain to Quinnesec. De Roeck winning by about 150 feet, the time on the race was 10 minutes and 50 seconds.'*

But he wasn't always that lucky as you have read in the introduction! After this accident his father thanked all who helped in the searching for his son: *'To all who so kindly assisted in any way in the search for my lost and injured son, last Tuesday (6/11/1901), I tender my sincere thanks. John DeRoeck.'*

The same newspaper wrote November 13, 1897: *'Last Friday, Alphonse DeRoeck who had left the city very quietly, Tuesday, returned from Wausaukee with a partner who will henceforth share his joys and sorrows. The young lady who has honored 'Phonse' by returning to this city with him as wife was named Josepha (nee Debot) Sandstone and will be welcomed for both her own and her husband's*

sake. 'Phonse' has not called at THE CURRENT sanctum yet but our hearty congratulations await him.'

Fons recognized her son Rudolph Sandstone as his and he was renamed Henry DeRoeck. Fons and Josepha got six children, four daughters (Francis, Viola, Elsie and Marcella) and two sons (Leonard and Leon.) The oldest, Francis, was born in February 18, 1900 and the youngest, Marcella, October 14, 1914.

Fons and Josephine started a bakery and general grocery store on Nelson Street in the Mognoni building and it was said that it had the finest and best of everything in that line. But in about 1905 the buildings, particularly in the business centre, started cracking because of the mine below. Because of this the DeRoeck's salesroom had to undergo some repair work in 1906. But already a year later, in February, the mining company had to repair up their property, and that of two of their neighbors. It went from bad to worse as the pillars in their store were broken and sloping sides ways, and the center of the brick wall on the outside bulged out making it look pretty unsafe. To hold the walls for a time at least Solomonson, a carpenter from the Aragon mine, and his workforce placed a long rod that ran through the three buildings. But the ground was gradually giving away under a lot of buildings, and nearly every window on Main Street came out of its setting. This became so bad and dangerous that the responsible mining company, the Aragon mine, paid to move the business district and most of the town to a safer place to the south. The excavating of the new grocer and bakery shop began at the end of September 1907 and was erected in brick and cement bloc. The work had to finish very quickly as their store had to be torn down to prevent it from wrecking the neighboring buildings. And in the beginning of January 1908, the DeRoeck bakery and general store was moved to the new building on 317 South

Nelson Street. It was said that it was one of the most convenient, well organized and artistic places in the city! And also after a cement walk adjacent to the DeRoeck's and the other buildings on Nelson Street was laid, the street had almost a metropolitan look!

Regularly they expanded and modernized their business to give a better service to their costumers. Fons was also one of the first to buy a car and to build a garage next to his shop. But luck was not always on their side as on a Tuesday evening in November 1910, Olive Johns a shop-assistant caused an explosion while lighting a gasoline lamp and set the salesroom on fire. Before the fire-brigade arrived the fire was extinguished, but Olive's hair was burnt and her face was scorched.

When Fons had earned enough money he thought it to be time to fulfill his dream to help and heal people. The DeRoeck family moved to Davenport in the state of Iowa in about 1925. He became a chiropractor after he received his diploma at the Palmer College of Chiropractic and opened a practice in Chicago, Illinois. Fons didn't stop studying, and not much later 'the baker' became a full-fledged medical doctor in the same city in about 1930.

About Fons and Josephine's children:

- Henry DeRoeck, then already professor of music at the Range Community College in Hibbing, Minnesota, was called up for military training to camp Dix in New Jersey in 1918 and sailed with the SS Mauretania to France the same year. Henry was injured in action and promoted to the office of sergeant. On returning to civilian life, he married Lellah Fewell in 1921 and moved to Breckinridge, Texas, where he was director and teacher of music for many years as well as a concert and professional violinist. He played in many theaters and churches and composed many beautiful pieces. He was a member

of the Federated Music Club of Texas, the Breckinridge Chamber of Commerce, the Breckinridge Lions Club and a member of the Disabled American Veterans in Lake Superior, Michigan;



Henry DeRoeck

- Francis DeRoeck, a daughter, was born in February 18, 1900;
- Viola DeRoeck married Cassel (Cass) Ambrose Burris April 30, 1921 in Ranger in Texas. The family Burris went living in Detroit, Michigan;
- Leonard E. DeRoeck married Florence Brockhardt;
- Elsie DeRoeck married Henning Andreson;
- Marcella (Tuitsie) DeRoeck married Melvin Tiegs;
- Leo DeRoeck married Elizabeth Ann Varda Sept. 6, 1924, in Vulcan and they moved to Gladstone in 1935 where they owned and operated DeRoeck's Sporting Goods shop on 10th Street from 1948 until their retirement.

After an illness of several weeks Dr. Alphonse (Fons) John DeRoeck, 73 years old, past away at his home in Chicago, Illinois April 10, 1947 and fifteen years later his wife Josepha (Josephine) Marie-Thérèsia Cornelia Debot died December 18, 1962. She was grandmother of 14 and great-grandmother of 30.

Their funerals were organized by the De Vriendt funeral home. This funeral home was used by most Belgians, and most Belgians were buried in St. Joseph's cemetery. The De Vriendt family no longer operates De Vriendt's, although it's in the same location in the old Belgian neighborhood in Chicago.

Fons' father John DeRoeck died Tuesday morning 26 August 1913. He was 63 years old, and a resident and businessman in Norway for about 29 years. All John's children were married at that time, only his daughter Susie was still at home. Fons' stepmother Anna (Staes) DeRoeck, 85 years old, passed away Thursday evening 4 December 1941 at the home of her daughter, Emma Dudy with whom she has made her home for 29 years. Anna has lived in Norway for 55 years.

The old Bakery and General Merchandise, 317 Nelson is currently 728 Main Street and is now in use by the Norway St. Vincent DePaul charity organization that contributes to the poor.

Dominique Van Rentergem.
Antwerp, Belgium

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John and Anna (Staes) DeRoeck, Sophia (Peeters) Debot
and daughter Josepha Debot