

When Luxembourg immigrants first arrived in northwest Iowa in 1870, most thought they would never have contact with family or friends in the “old country” again. For many, this was true. However, through the ensuing 150 years, a steady stream of visitors and contacts has been established between northwest Iowa and the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg.

During World War II, one prominent guest who visited Remsen was His Royal Highness Jean, crown prince of Luxembourg. Prince Jean and his mother Grand Duchess Charlotte, as well as other members of the Grand Ducal family, fled their country in 1940 and eventually went into exile in Montreal, Canada, to escape the Nazi invasion of Luxembourg.

The heir to the throne of the Grand Duchy arrived in Remsen September 18, 1941, to find a “main thoroughfare...crowded by hundreds.” Part of the welcome included a band from Granville composed entirely of musicians of Luxembourg descent, directed by John Ries. The Prince stopped to visit the Sisters of St. Francis, who staffed St. Mary’s School, and to view the interior of St. Mary’s Catholic Church.

During his visit to Remsen, Prince Jean, speaking in English, told a large audience, “You, my dear friends, who are from Luxembourg or of Luxembourg descent, you know best what a peace-loving people the Luxembourg people are and always have been. No harm was ever done by us to anyone in the world.” He went on to say, “We sincerely hope and pray for that great peace that you enjoy and have enjoyed for so long in the United States of America.”

After the liberation of Luxembourg on September 10, 1944 by Allied troops, the good will that the Prince’s visit raised was reflected in the establishment of a Luxembourg Relief Committee in Remsen. One project was publication and sales of a brochure which included pictures of Grand Duchess Charlotte and histories of the Grand Duchy and of Remsen.

Another project was the celebration of Maifest (May Fest) on May 27, 1945. Activities during Maifest included a Mass at St. Mary’s church in Remsen which featured special prayers in thanksgiving for the liberation of Luxembourg, followed by a banquet for an estimated 1,000 guests.

Chairman Gustave Alesch of Remsen said Maifest would be the start of a fund-raising drive for the relief of serious post-war conditions . According to Alesch, Luxembourg was the hardest hit of all European areas during the War. John Alesch, part of the Committee from LeMars, noted that Luxembourg was approximately half destroyed, and the “need is dire.” Luxembourgers from Remsen, LeMars, Oyens, Alton, Granville, Hospers, Marcus and Maryhill cooperated to raise funds. The Luxembourg Relief Committee eventually raised thousands of dollars to aid their distant relatives in Luxembourg.

The sesquicentennial of the arrival of the first Luxembourg settlers in northwest Iowa will be celebrated June 6-7, 2020 in Alton. The Luxembourg Heritage Society of Northwest Iowa will gather on Saturday, March 23, 2019 to continue planning for the anniversary celebration.

The get together will be at 9:30 a.m. in the meeting room of the Alton Public Library, 605 W. 10th St., Alton, IA. Topics of discussion will include invitations to the festivities to be sent to various Luxembourg dignitaries. Anyone of Luxembourg descent or interested in Luxembourg history is invited to attend.