

## Nemmers/statue

One unfinished story among Luxembourgers in Northwest Iowa concerns a 170-year-old statue of Mary, the mother of Jesus, that presently stands in the front entry of Spalding Catholic School in Alton, IA. Now, new information has surfaced about the origins of the statue. According to Michael F. McCarthy, the statue may have been created by Nicolaus Nemmers, one of McCarthy's ancestors.

All that was known about the statue's journey to Alton came from Mrs. Florence Ginsbach, whose husband was the grandson of one of Alton's original Luxembourg settlers. According to Ginsbach, a group of 38 pioneers left St. Donatus, IA and carried the statue in an ox-drawn wagon across Iowa. On many occasions, one of the women in the group held the statue on her lap to protect it while crossing rough terrain or when fording rivers, creeks and sloughs. The group and the statue arrived safely in the Alton area May 19, 1870.

However, origins of the artwork that portrays a mother clad in traditional blue and white robes holding the child Jesus on her left arm while both extend their right hands toward the viewer, were unknown.

Now, Michael F. McCarthy and Suzanne L. Bunkers have added to the story of the statue. According to McCarthy, the image was likely created in Luxembourg by McCarthy's ancestor as a journeyman carpenter's guild project. Bunkers says it may have been fashioned by Nicolaus Nemmers before he and his family left for America on the ship Tarquin, arriving in New York on July 26, 1847. The family included then 2-year-old Nicholas D. Nemmers, who later carried the statue across Iowa.

McCarthy says the artwork is made of wood shavings and animal glue. Wood shavings, the waste from carpenter's or furniture maker's work benches, were mixed with glue extracted from animal hide, bones, and gelatin.

Following techniques of the time, Nemmers probably first soaked and mixed the wood shavings and sawdust with the glue into a thick paste and then applied the mixture to the inside of half-shell sections of different molds. The dry casts were removed from the molds and glued together to form the statue's features. More thinned paste was applied to strengthen the three-dimensional construction and to give detail to features such as fingers.

When Nicolaus Nemmers came to the United States from Luxembourg, it is likely he brought the statue of Mary with him. After the carpenter arrived in the Luxembourg settlement of St. Donatus south of Dubuque in the 1840s, the statue would have been housed somewhere in the settlement. Later, his son Nicholas D. Nemmers brought the figure with him when he joined the group of 38 settlers who migrated to northwest Iowa in 1870.

Once it arrived in northwest Iowa, the creation may have been present at the first Mass in the area, celebrated in a store in Alton in October, 1873. Then, the statue probably graced the old "Prairie Church", St. Donatus, built southeast of Alton in 1881. When St. Donatus was torn down in 1896, the work moved to the new parish, St. Mary's in Alton. It later spent many years in the school chapel, until being moved to its present position in the entry of Spalding Catholic School. The Luxembourg Heritage Society of Northwest will celebrate the arrival of the wagon train carrying the first Luxembourg settlers to northwest Iowa with an outdoor Mass on Monday, May 17 at 6:00 p.m. The Mass will be held at the site of the original St. Donatus Church, located at the corner of Kingbird Ave. and 480th St., southeast of Alton. Everyone is welcome. In case of bad weather, the Mass will be moved to an area church. Attendees should bring a lawn chair.