

Belgian Festival Draws Crowd

(This article was written by Sean Leary of the Quad-City Times, and provides a good overview of the first Fall Flemish Fest. It appeared in the *Times* on September 16th.)

Those Belgians are a hearty sort. Despite a drenching in the hours before, and rain drizzling throughout a gray Sunday, the first Fall Flemish Festival filled Moline's Stephens Park with felicitous fun.

Hundreds of people braved the weather as the event served up Belgian food, music, a team of Belgian horses, a rolle bolle tournament, lace-making, pigeon-racing display, children's games, and you guessed it, more.

It was that "more," particularly the sense of this being the beginning of something big, that most thrilled the crowd.

"This is really exciting. I think it's awesome," said Carl Suhr of Milan, a competitive rolle bolle player. "Even with the weather, there are people just coming out of the woodwork. It really shows that there's a lot of people who have been waiting for something like this and will support it in the years to come."

The rolle bolle was a big hit, with fans ringing the courts, but the food, music, horses, pigeons, and children's games weren't anything to shake some homemade lace at either.

"This is a great thing," said Rev. Roy Verhoye, 91, of Atkinson, who described himself as "100 percent Belgian." "I grew up hearing stories about my father coming to this country and our family settling here, and it's exciting to see this sort of tradition being displayed and enjoyed."

"Moline is a natural spot for a Belgian festival because from before the turn of the 20th century, and through most of the century, Moline had the largest Belgian population in the country," said Mark Bray, special events coordinator for the City of Moline.

Now, the top spot belongs to Detroit, he said. Belgians started moving to Moline in the late 1880s to farm.

"It's always been a very vibrant community," Bray said. "Because of that, I think there's going to be a great enthusiasm for this event going forward. We are really trying to make it unique and fun, and we're hoping to really get it off the ground."

If the reception for the first gig is any indication, they're on the right track.

"Seeing all the people come together, even if they're not Belgian, has been really special," said Kayla Hawotte of Rock Island, who passed out free cookies bearing the Belgian flag, for the Olde Town Bakery. "It's just great that people get a taste of the culture."

For some, it was a highly emotional event. Yvette Van Driessche of Port Byron, a "100 percent Belgian" who still carries a heavy accent even having been in the U.S. since 1989, was moved to tears when looking around and talking about her affection for the culture and what the festival meant to her.

"I'm just happy and surprised so many people are here," Van Driessche said. "Even with all the rain, so many people have showed up. I just get choked up a bit. It's just a great thing, this feeling of community and love for Belgian culture."



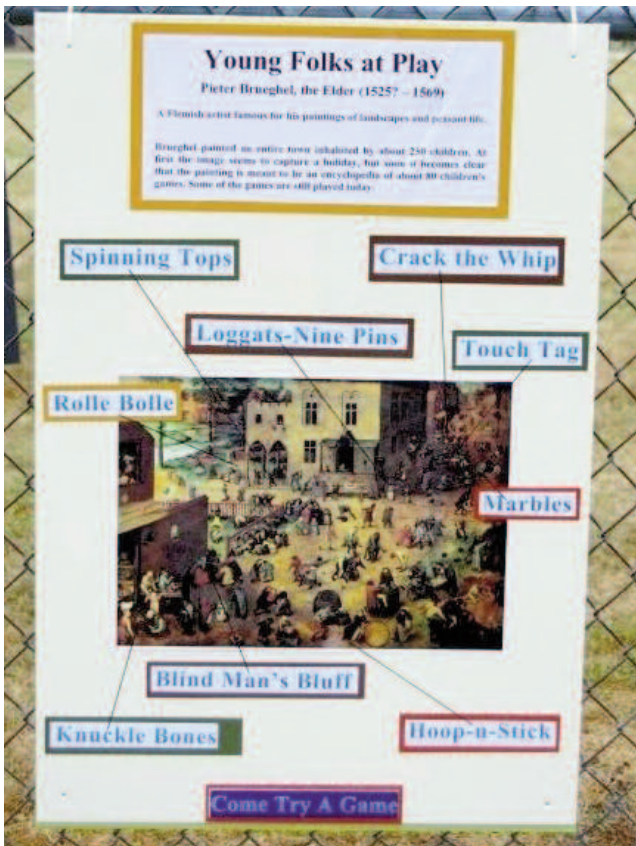
(l-r) Joan Rogers, Marlene Shattuck, and Kathy Bustos demonstrated the art of lace making for the festival crowd.



The line on the right was like this all day, waiting for waffles prepared by the CBC. Not even the light rain deterred the people.



Visitors were amazed at the intricacy and craft displayed by our lace makers.



Gretchen Small, of Butterworth Center, created some children's games based on this Pieter Bruegel print of children playing various games in a Belgian town.



These two children seem to be having fun discovering a game of marbles.



Committee member Kevin Rafferty joins Euclid Distributing's Pat Rangel in a Rolle Bolle beer. In addition to Rolle Bolle and Stella Artois, Moline's Bent River Brewing created Rugged Monk dark ale, especially for the Fest. It's always a great day with a Belgian beer.



The Chordbusters (left) and the VanSpeybroecks (the Happy Belgians) provided the musical entertainment.



There was always a crowd around the doves and homing pigeon exhibit. Heavenly Heights Doves and RRV Pigeon Racing Club provided the birds.



Bolder Christopher Suhr displays great tournament form.



Winners of the rolle bolle tournament pose with organizer Glen Hostens. Left to right are Glen, Carl Suhr, Amy Brummitt, Roy DePauw, and Brent DePauw. Glen drew new teams for each game, then totaled up each person's scores and these were the top four.



Whether it was at the park or along the streets of Olde Towne, there was always a crowd for the national champion Rock Creek Belgian draft horses.