



## The story of Justine Maria DeGroot, née Debot, of Wausaukee, WI.

Justine, called 'our Tinneken' and Gusta, was born Augustus 25, 1885 in Antwerp, Belgium. She was only two when her parents decided to emigrate, taking her and her siblings Anna (Mary), Josepha (Jepha), Josepf (Jeff) and Edmund (Edmond) to a forestry camp called Mastodon in the northwest of Michigan. They left Antwerp on board the SS Nederland, a ship of the Red Star Line, on Monday March 21, 1887 and arrived in Philadelphia on Wednesday April 6. Their voyage was quite uneventful except they had a fire on board and some of them becoming seasick.

### A hardscrabble life

The family soon left Mastodon and stayed for a while in Iron Mountain, Michigan, before settling down permanently in Wausaukee in 1888. It must have been the logging boom that brought them there, and the only jobs available were as lumberjacks or sawmill workers. During the summer months they had to leave town and go into forest for long periods of time to work and live in itinerant camps. Not only the father, but the whole family lived in these camps. The mother and sisters worked in the kitchen and even very young boys had to work in the sawmill. On his first day of work, her brother Jeff, only 12 years old, almost lost his hand. Little Justine attended a school for the younger children next to the camp to learn English, but when she was twelve years old she, too, had to start to work in the kitchen.

### Reaping labor's rewards

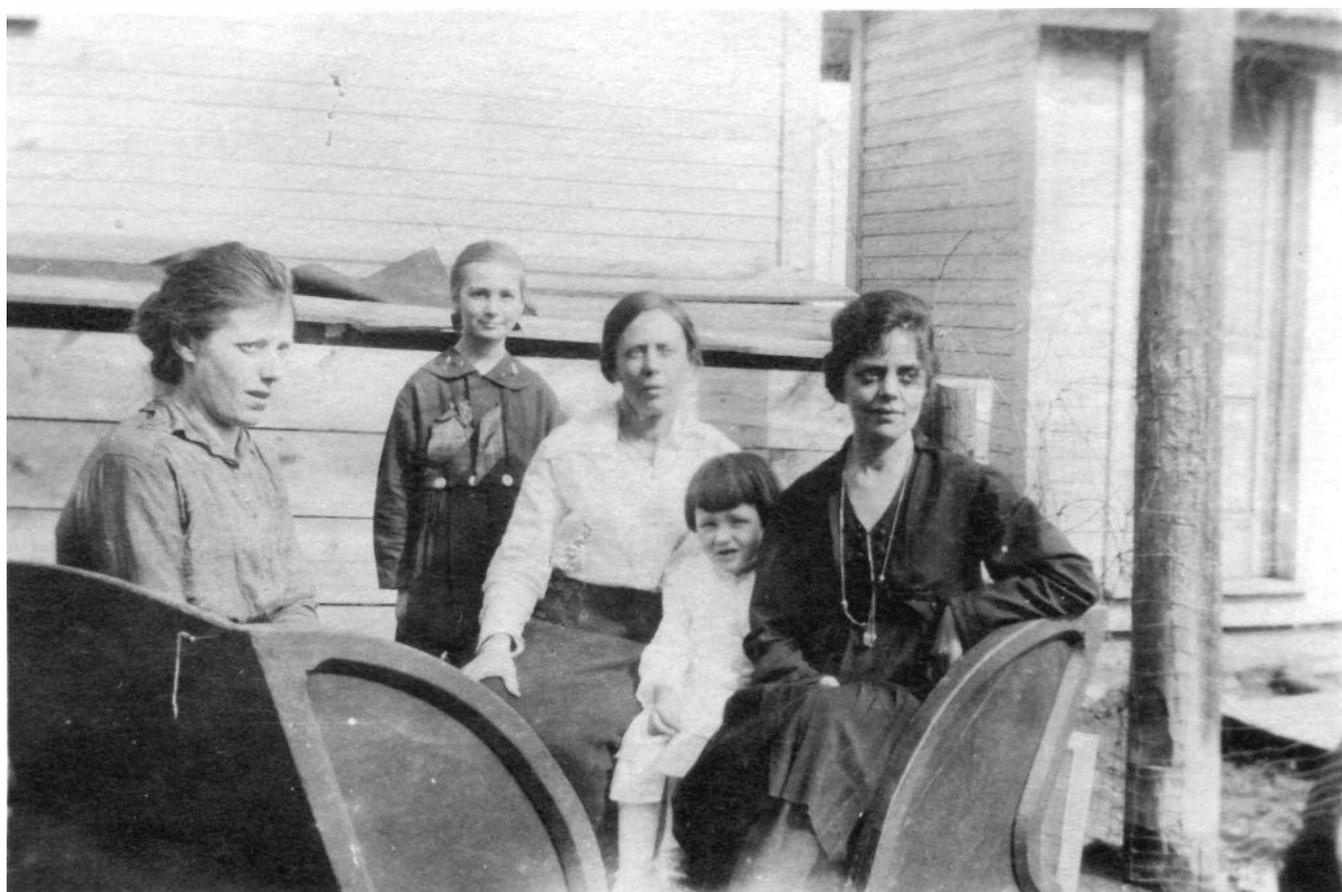
Toward the end of the century, as more and more land was cleared, farmers arrived in Wausaukee and started working the land. Around that time the Debot family built their house on 3 Maple Street in the south part of Wausaukee, next door to Justine's cousin and my great-uncle, Louis Slaets. He and his family had arrived in Wausaukee in 1892. Victor and his nephew Louis both became self-employed businessmen: Victor held positions in the lumber industry and became the Wausaukee town treasurer, and Louis started the 'Louis Slaets Carpenter and Contractor Company.'



The St. Augustine's church and school in Wausaukee, WI

Their next goal was to help to establish a church and a school. Until that time Mass was celebrated in local halls and even in barns of farms like that of Barney DeGroot. For the children's education too, they had to improvise. With the help of most of the Roman Catholics they were able to start the construction of their own St. Augustine church in 1889, which was completed in the spring of 1890. Its founding pastor was Rev. John Selbach. A Catholic parochial school was to follow. The dedication took place in 1906. There was room for 180 pupils and the first teachers were three Dominican sisters from Racine, Wisconsin.

Justine's sister Jepha married Charles Sandstone in 1894 and her sister Mary married Emile Everix in 1897. After losing her first husband in a fatal accident in 1895, Jepha married Alphonse DeRoeck in 1897. Their brother Jeff married Catherine Bourdeau in 1901 and Edmond married Julia DeRoeck in 1898. Agnes, the youngest of the family and the only one born in Wausauke, was about 30 when she married Clarence Lindstrum in 1922.



The Debot sisters: Justine DeGroot and Mary Everix visiting Josepha DeRoeck in Norway, MI

### **Love is in the air**

Justine would ride her bike out to Barney DeGroot's farm to buy eggs. That is how she eventually met Barney's bother, John Antone, a shy young man who was working on the farm. She liked him so much that she married him on November 3, 1904 at St. Augustine Church in Wausauke. John's parents were both from the province of North-Brabant, in the Netherlands; his father Bernardus DeGroot's family came from the village Schaijk and his mother Petronella Verstraten came from the village Zeeland. The newlyweds must have been a loving and happy

couple as they had a baby every year or two, ending up with a full dozen: Edward was born in 1905, Raymond in 1906, Eunice in 1908, Gerald in 1910, Harold in 1911, Cyril in 1913, Mary in 1914, Rendall in 1915, Rita in 1917, John Jr. in 1919 and the twins Richard in and Robert in 1922. All twelve were born in Wausaukee.



The DeGroot family in 1932

### **Not a bed of roses**

Justine and John lived near the Debot residence for about two years and then rented a farm north-east of town, later known as the Bill Wartick farm. They bought their own farm south-east of town on Highway C in 1917. As there were no modern household appliances at that time, Justine had to wash on a washboard for many years. Baking the daily bread was another of her tasks: 18 loaves in a batch, and big loaves too! One week three batches were baked, and the next week two. Five batches in two weeks or 90 loaves means the family went through about 6½ loaves a day! They made their own butter and they needed plenty. It was a usual thing to peel a peck of potatoes a day. It was quite a job to care for so many people every day.



When scarlet fever broke out in 1925, the whole family were quarantined. Justine stayed in the house with the sick children while the others stayed in the powerhouse and barn with their father. In 1928, Justine became very ill with erysipelas (also known as “St. Anthony’s fire”), an acute bacterial infection of the skin accompanied by high fever, and for a while she wasn’t expected to live. Her daughter Eunice had to come home from Green Bay to help keep things together. Miraculously Justine recovered, except for the bad headaches that would plague her all her life.

In 1940 John started working at the Nordberg Manufacturing Co. to help in the war effort, and they farmed in Wausaukee until 1943. About the same time they bought the Pelnar Hall Building (a former restaurant, hotel and dancing hall) in Wausaukee. They tore it down and used the lumber to build a nice home for their retirement. As John couldn't sit still, he took a job at the Wausaukee Post office, which he held for 10 years. They had a beautiful garden and a well-kept, large yard. In 1954 they celebrated their 50 years marriage in the Bay Settlement, with family and a lot of friends. Russell Wolf bought their property when they moved to Green Bay to live in a trailer next to their son Raymond. It was only a short time later that they found out that they couldn't manage alone. The last remaining years they stayed with their daughter Rita and their son-in-law Paul Bentley. John died August 10, 1972 and Justine January 29, 1975, in Milwaukee, WI.

What became of their children? Edward married Evelyn Edlebeck in 1935 in Wausaukee; Raymond married Josephine Beemster in 1934 in Green-Bay; Eunice married Joseph Champeau in 1934 in Wausaukee; Gerald died as a result of a tragic accident in 1940 in Wausaukee; Harold only lived 4 days; Cyril married Rose Tomaszewski in 1942; Mary entered Religious life as Sister Mary Maurice in 1931; Rendall married Mabel Van Eyck in 1943 in Green-Bay; Rita married Paul Bentley in 1937 in Wausaukee; John Jr. married Elaine Manesta in 1947 in Chicago; Richard married Helen Keller in 1954 and Virginia Mason in 1963 in Menominee; Robert married Adele Flannery in 1949.



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This story is based on letters send from Wausaukee to Belgium by the Slaets and the Debot families from 1887 till 1937, the writings left by Justine's son-in-law Paul Bentley (1913-1999) and her daughter, Mary Elisabeth DeGroot (1914-2007.) Mary was known for most of her life as Sister Maurice. On Aug. 30, 1931, she joined the Racine Dominicans and spent 35 years teaching in Catholic Schools. Later she took care of sick and elderly.



The DeGroot house in Wausaukee, WI