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## A new station in life

By William Hyland  
Director of the Center for Norbertine Studies



When he first set foot on U.S. soil, the Dutch Norbertine priest Bernard Pennings likely had little idea that those first steps in a new world would lead, not five years later, to the founding of St. Norbert College.

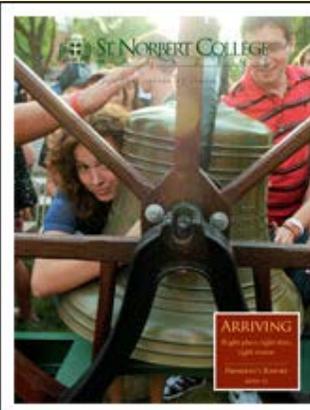
A mixture of excitement and trepidation, common to all starting off on a new adventure, must have accompanied the **Rev. Bernard Pennings, O.Praem.**, and his two Norbertine companions as they set off from Berne Abbey in the Netherlands on a chilly All Saints Day in 1893. It was the start of several weeks of travel to the remote frontier of northeast Wisconsin.

Bishop Messmer of Green Bay had contacted the abbot at Berne, asking him to send priests to help minister to the growing number of Belgian Catholics in what is now Wisconsin's Door Peninsula. Now three Norbertine volunteers – Pennings, the Rev. Lambert Broens, O.Praem., and Br. Servatius Heesackers, O.Praem. – were on their way to Wisconsin, with little knowledge of where they were going and what they were getting into.

In the frequent letters that the future Abbot Pennings sent home, the emotions that all travelers experience are evident, from the trio's last wistful gaze at the coast of Europe, to the wonder at the bustling sights of the New York harbor. While they were certainly impressed with the buildings and the great press of humanity they encountered, their European eyes were astounded



The **Rev. Gery Meehan, O.Praem., '57** recalls **Abbott Pennings** in his later years.  
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### **SNC Day**

It's our annual fall open house, and a chance to share our cherished tradition of radical hospitality.

### **Getting in the game**

Photographer Evan Siegle says that shooting sports is about preparation, timing – and a little good luck.

### **Somewhere in time**

A forgotten time capsule, rediscovered, reveals what was top-of-mind at St. Norbert College half a century ago.

### **A warm welcome**

Tour the new building that is transforming the arrival experience for our visitors.

### **The move-in**

Join **Haley Bass '15** on her very first day of college, as the first-year and her family set up her room in Madelaine/Lorraine.

### **Teach me your ways**

Retired educator the **Rev. Gery Meehan, O.Praem., '57** remembers **Abbott Bernard**

by the egalitarian nature of the urban crowd in Hoboken, N.J., where they came ashore.



**The earliest days at St. Norbert College.**

“The general impression we have gotten here far exceeds our expectations,” Pennings wrote. “I don’t think anything was being exaggerated in Holland when we heard strange things about America. It is beautiful, colossal, and so busy it is unbelievable. Nobody bothers anyone else, everybody goes his own way, or rather everyone takes the tram and rides. The most dignified gentlemen and ladies sit next to working men carrying a saw and plane.”

Moving on to Chicago, and feeling a bit overwhelmed and very much outsiders, their trip took on a more human aspect when they met their

fellow clergy among the passengers on the train from Chicago to Green Bay: “... one of the passengers noticed that we were priests like himself and came up to us in a very friendly manner. After getting acquainted, we learned that Msgr. Katzer, the archbishop of Milwaukee, was sitting in the same coach, a few seats away from us; the latter told us that our new bishop, Msgr. Messmer of Green Bay, was on the same train and that he would introduce us to His Eminence as soon as he had finished his cigar! Words were followed by actions, and a quarter of an hour later we were standing in the presence of our most friendly Bishop Messmer, in whose company we now remain.”

This friendly and casual time of conversation on a train heading north into the unknown was the beginning of a process of welcome as these Norbertines began to feel their way in this new world. They found rest and refreshment at the home of Bishop Messmer, but soon it was time to head north by wagon to their mission in the Door Peninsula at Sturgeon Bay and Delwich: “At 1 p.m. we embarked at the bishop’s residence, wrapped ourselves in warm buffalo hides, a heavy scarf around our necks and a fur cap drawn over our ears (winter had started the day before), and off we went. It was the strangest trip we had ever made, over hills and dales, over roads and rocks, over sandbars and tree trunks; at times an hour long in the midst of a wilderness, and all the while there was a good snowstorm, and always, at least most of the time, going at a trot. Sometimes the road was so bumpy that we and the luggage were catapulted into the air, and Fr. Lamberts and I burst out laughing. ... It is unbelievable that horses can go on such a route without resting. They were expecting us at Rosiere and welcomed us.”

The rough and bumpy road, the warm welcome they received from the religious sisters, and their cozy but primitive living quarters all were indicative of the exciting but challenging tasks ahead. Their enthusiasm, success and perseverance as pastors among the immigrants soon led to more responsibilities and more Norbertines arriving from the Netherlands, and eventually to the foundation of an abbey and college in De Pere. The fact that the Norbertine presence and institutions would over time become an integral part of the life and culture of northeast Wisconsin may not have been evident as they jostled with the crowds in New York and Chicago, and traveled dubious roads through the Wisconsin countryside, wrapped in furs against the winter. Yet these impressive and lasting accomplishments all would grow from the seeds of human interaction and new friendships forged on these very first days in a new world.

*Letter excerpts are drawn from “Letters Written in Good Faith” (Alt Publishing, 1996), translated and edited by Walter Lagerwey.*

Oct. 31, 2011

**Pennings** – founder of both abbey and college.

#### **Memories you can touch**

A First Communion dress, a family drawing and an early biography of Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt – all speak to a life full of meaning.

#### **Ready for primetime**

Sir Norby Knight stars in promo spots for live TV broadcasts of Green Knight athletic events – and more.

#### **Alumni Award Winners 2011**

Each year the college is privileged to honor a few among its many outstanding alumni. Meet this year’s winners, recognized at a celebratory dinner in October.

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