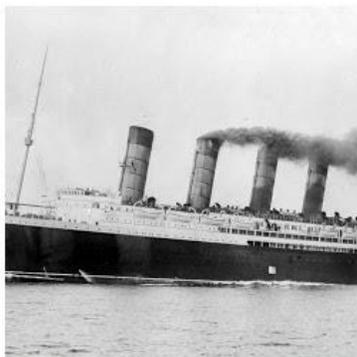


# What's YOUR immigrant story?

My great grandfather, Alfons DeConinck (now DeKoninck, b. 1885-d. 1976) came alone from Rysslede, Belgium to New York on May 3, 1912. He travelled aboard the ill-fated RMS Lusitania later torpedoed by a German U-boat in 1915. After processing through Ellis Island, Alfons journeyed to northeastern Indiana where he joined a distant family member. He eventually became a tenant beet farmer residing in Allen County.

Alfons couldn't travel during World War I, so he was unable to go back home and spend time with his family and girlfriend, Elisa Verstriaete (b. 1891-d. 1958). A year after the war ended, he returned to Belgium and on January 16, 1920, married Elisa. Twenty-four hours later, Elisa applied for a passport at the American Embassy in Brussels and their plans to move to the United States were in motion.



Alfons and Elisa travelled to Liverpool in March, 1920, where they were to board a ship bound for America, but there was a strike in the shipping yard and were subsequently delayed for 5 long weeks. Finally, on April 27<sup>th</sup>, they boarded the ship travelling in steerage for \$35 a person.

Once Alfons and Elisa arrived to Allen County, he resumed tenant farming in the Hoagland area. He and Elisa had 10 children and my grandfather, Frank DeKoninck (b. 1926- ), was their 4<sup>th</sup> eldest child. They were a very traditional Belgian family and only spoke Flemish at home. I recall my grandpa telling me he was punished in school for not speaking English. He spoke only Flemish for the first 7 years of his life. Nearly 90 years later, I still hear an accent and a distinguishable cadence in my grandpa's speech.



Grandpa Frank worked hard and married my grandmother, Phyllis Rauch (b. 1927-d. 2014). Together, they had 6 children and their eldest is my mother, Patricia DeKoninck Rinehart (b. 1949- ).

He remains a very proud International Harvester retiree. From digging graves to working farms, to building homes to repairing trucks, to driving a school bus and to being the most skilled doer person I know, my grandfather embodies the economic prowess his father had and that of many immigrants who continue to come to America.

I'm a proud 3<sup>rd</sup> generation immigrant and hope I live up to the high standards they set before me.

**Melissa Rinehart, Lead Organizer for Welcoming Fort Wayne**  
Cultural Anthropologist, Changemaker, and Committed Community Volunteer