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A BIT OF SWITZERLAND IN AMERICA

This is the story of a Swiss community in America. That it is the story of the community in which the writer grew up is due to the fact that his great-grandparents, natives of the Canton Berne in Switzerland, were caught up in that great tide of migration from Central Europe to North America just over a hundred years ago. Finding the Eastern seaboard of the New World already too crowded for their liking, many of these migrants moved on towards what was then the Western frontier of the new nation, to take their turn in reducing a part of the great American wilderness to the uses of civilization. Land was still cheap and plentiful farther west, a fact that appealed to the poor immigrant who often came with little more than a stout heart, a strong right arm and a willingness and capacity for infinite labor.

The Swiss founders of this community came into a large area of primeval forest in the newly formed State of Ohio, only recently vacated by wild Indians, who had lived and hunted there for untold centuries. The forest was still the home of the deer and bear and many lesser animals, but not for long. The settlers lost no time in starting to clear the trees away so that food and forage crops could be grown. The magnificent tree trunks, straight and tall, when cut into suitable lengths and laid up with the woodsman's skill, formed the walls of their first dwellings. Other logs, split into rails, made the once familiar zig-zag rail fences which enclosed their farms and fields. Tree stumps, the less obstinate ones, were grubbed out with infinite labour, while the tougher ones, with their sprawling roots, remained for years to be the ploughman's plague before they decayed sufficiently to make their removal possible. Each year a few more acres of woodland were cleared to add to the fields already under at least partial cultivation. Surplus trees were merely burned to be gotten rid of until communication with the outside world made possible the building of saw mills and the selling of surplus timber to add cash to the meager incomes of the settlers. Pestilential swamps were drained, thus removing the ever-present menace of malaria from which nearly every one suffered at times. Gradually the transformation went on till in the lifetime of many an immigrant the primeval forest was changed to productive farms and orchards. The women, as hardy as their mates, worked with the men holding up their end of the job. In true Swiss fashion they gathered wild fruits and herbs and dried or preserved them to supplement their diet of maize and wild game. Later they had vegetables and fruits of gardens and orchards to replace the diminishing wild supply. As soon as they could grow flax or graze a few sheep the women spun and wove cloth for garments. Families thrived and increased, and in time the once sparsely settled area grew and filled up until at the beginning of the present century there was a population of perhaps fifteen hundred souls, nearly all Swiss descendants, occupying an area of approximately twenty square miles. New houses and barns, well painted and in neatly kept premises were replacing the outworn primitive log cabins, the building material still coming principally from the owner's own diminishing woodland. The cleared fields, now entirely free from the troublesome tree stumps, and expertly tilled by the thrifty owners, were producing

excellent crops of all kinds. The practice of leaving a small area of uncleared woodland on most farms as a perpetual source of firewood and timber, to this day gives the landscape a pleasant aspect of interspersed cultivated fields and wooded areas.

The essential economy of the community always has been rural. But as the population increased and the farms, by division and re-division, approached the minimum size that would support a family, certain of the children and grandchildren of the first settlers went into the adjoining towns to enter mercantile pursuits. Many of the leading inhabitants of these towns are the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the original Swiss settlers. Others entered professions and, by diligent application of their inherited traits of thrift, industry and native intelligence, have made their marks in the world of arts and letters. Still the original community continues to flourish. Many of the old Swiss customs and ideals have persisted, and the language of their daily intercourse remains the Bernese "Schweizer Duetsch," although the language of school and church and of official communications is now English.

The deeply religious character of the early settlers has also persisted. Principally of the Mennonite faith, they first met in crude log cabins which served as places of worship. Today there are four large and two small congregations of this faith as well as a number of other denominations, serving this community. Many ministers, teachers and missionaries have gone from these congregations to other communities and to foreign countries. One of the several small but vigorous colleges supported by the Mennonites of North America devoted to the cause of Christian higher education is in this community. It has contributed in no small measure to the high standard of cultural and spiritual strength of the people.

In such a community the author of this sketch had the good fortune to be born. All his great-grandparents migrated from Switzerland in about 1835, and all came from Canton Berne. He was not able to speak any language except the German Swiss dialect until at the age of five he began to learn English from a laborer who was engaged on his father's farm. He grew to manhood on the farm, and went to college and decided to become a singer and teacher of singing in an attempt to satisfy an inner musical urge that seemed to need expression. Teaching and professional singing filled his years until a second time in his life the world was plunged into a state of chaos by a devastating war. The needs of suffering humanity urged him to leave his profession for a while and spend several years in helping to alleviate the sufferings of a war-torn world. He came to England in 1944 as a War Relief worker, and became affiliated with the World's Alliance of Y.M.C.A.'s in its work among Prisoners of War. It is a source of satisfaction to know that the organisation in which he is working has its headquarters in Switzerland, and that many of the leading officials are Swiss. He has an intense desire that before the time comes for his return to his homeland, he may be able to visit the land of his forefathers, to see for himself the beauty of the country, the thrifty industry and the culture of a people who claim at once the universal respect and admiration of the world.

JOHN THUT, London. 19th October, 1945.