

Touring Reporter Relates History of New Glarus

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AAA Touring Reporter

"Gentlemen, is it the will of the Emigration society of the canton of Glarus that Fridolin Streiff and Nicholas Duerst be our advance colonization agents?" the chairman of the meeting inquired.

"Yes," came the unanimous reply of several hundred Swiss who had met to discuss plans for migrating from their overcrowded little country.

"What then must be the qualities of the site for our new American home?"

"It must be suitable for grain and stock raising," suggested one. "It must be as near like our own Switzerland as possible," offered another.

"You have heard the wishes of your neighbors," the chairman told the two agents. "Go then to America and seek out a new home for us! We shall follow in your path."

Started in 1844

Thus in 1844, just a little over a century ago, in the Canton Glarus, Switzerland, were laid the plans which lead to the settlement of New Glarus, Wis., and the eventual establishment of the cheese industry, which since has made both Green county and the state of Wisconsin famous.

After landing in the United States, Streiff who was a blacksmith by trade, and Duerst, a judge in his native country, traveled several months in search of a place that met with their countrymen's requirements. Their journeys took them to Michigan, Illinois, and Missouri, before they finally picked the Wisconsin site on the Sugar river at New Glarus.

Too impatient to wait for a report from their emissaries, the migrating colony started the long trek from Switzerland several months after Streiff and Duerst started out. In the neighborhood of 190 men, women and children made up the original band. They traveled as far as St. Louis without hearing any word from their two agents and from that point sent out Mathius Durst and Jacob Grob to locate them.

Laying Foundation

Word reached Durst and Grob that the two original agents had been killed by Indians, but quite by accident, they picked up their trail and found Streiff and Duerst busily engaged in laying the foundations for the New Glarus settlement. Claim for the 1200 acres had been filed by the advance agents July 17, 1845, at Mineral Point.

Primed with the information that the Swiss colonists were already in America, Judge Duerst set out for St. Louis to guide the party to New Glarus. At Galena, Ill., he met the hardy band of pioneers, who had heard of the Sugar river site and were en route there. Under Duerst's direction, 18 of the strongest men were sent ahead on foot, equipped with axes and building tools. In three days they covered the distance, stopping only for meals and brief periods of rest. The balance of the party secured wagons and teams from the lead miners in southwestern Wisconsin and completed the balance of the migration. During the 5,000 mile trip, three of the group died, but were replaced by births. However, before reaching their final

destination, 85 of the members had dropped out to settle elsewhere along the route. Some settled in Pittsburgh and other cities, taking employment there.

Judge Duerst aided the colonists in establishing the village and in setting up the laws for the community. He returned to Switzerland in 1854, leaving Streiff in charge.

Divide Land

The 1200 acres were divided among the families' heads, and the Swiss set about raising wheat for a living, with Milwaukee the nearest market. This did not prove too profitable to the colonists and a period of lean years followed. Chinch bugs descended on the region and not only destroyed the wheat crop, but also the barley, oats, and corn. At the same time, due to the general business conditions throughout the country, the price of wheat dropped to 35 cents a bushel. It became apparent to the early colonists that some other means of livelihood must be developed if the farmers were to survive.

The first cows were brought to the Green county area from Ohio in 1846. They were sold at the rate of one to a family at \$12 a head. Almost immediately the women of the families began to make cheese as they had in their native Switzerland. At the outset, the tools of the industry were a pail full of milk, a copper kettle, and a wooden hoop split from a sapling. Cheeses made were no larger than a saucer, but were the ancestors of the 200-pound Swiss cheese "wheels" as we know them today.

After 20 years of poverty as their wheat crop returns diminished, the Swiss farmers turned to dairying and cheesemaking. The fields were seeded for pasture and hay, and the herds were developed and increased in size. Small factories were built and cheese making soon became a prominent industry. Two cheese factories were built. The first year's results showed that the climate of the region and the rich blue grass, along with the excellent water furnished by spring fed streams, provided the right combination required for successful dairying. Trained cheesemakers from the valley of Emmen, Switzerland, were hired to take charge of the factories. Copper kettles, tools, and other supplies all were imported from Switzerland. A cooperative factory plan was introduced. The farmers sold their products monthly to Monroe wholesalers, who built storage and curing warehouses and had the necessary outside markets.

Swiss Cheese Leader

Today Green county is the leading producing area for Swiss cheese in the United States. One-third of the Wisconsin total output comes from this section which also accounts for one-fourth of the nation's production. The manufacture of Limburger cheese is also carried on in this section. Sixty per cent of Wisconsin's total and one-half of the nation's

output comes from Green county. Also produced today is brick and Munster cheese, block Swiss, and some American. Butter, condensed and dried milk, and the shipment of raw milk provides a steady year-round income which amounts to millions of dollars annually.

The friendly, fun-loving Swiss, who work hard, still know how to play. Each year at Labor day, one of the nation's outstanding festival programs commemorating the activities of William Tell is presented. A natural outdoor theater nestled among the green hills of New Glarus, provides the setting for an American counterpart of Oberammergau. Each year, the farmer, the cheesemaker, the lumberman, the editor, and the storekeeper lay aside their jobs and take up their roles in Schiller's epic drama. In years past, the Swiss were content to present the William Tell play in the original tongue, but due to national popularity, an English version is now presented. Over 250 citizens participate in the play, young and old; and the region's famous Swiss cattle, goats, and Arabian horses are used in the pageantry. The week-end of the play is a festival occasion in picturesque New Glarus.

New
Glarus
History
1946

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There is singing on the village green and dancing. Colorful costumes make the visitor forget the rest of the world as if he had been transplanted into a bit of the old.

The plans made over a century ago in Canton Glarus, Switzerland, and intrusted to Nicholas Duerst and Fridolin Streiff were well laid. Although the job of carrying out the instructions was a hard and sometimes thankless job, if these two men were to visit the community today, they could truly say, "It is as nearly like our native Switzerland as possible."