THE USE OF WOOD IN SWITZERLAND

WENDELL G. CORTHELL

The tourist in the Bernese Oberland finding on every hand an abundance of wood carving concludes that this is now the chief use of wood in that little country. He also judges from the many wooden chalets that wood must be very plentiful in the land. In both he is mistaken. Wood carving is, indeed, a growing industry, but the chief use of wood is still in the construction of homes. Though forests are seen on many a mountain side, yet four-fifths of all the wood used is imported. When centuries ago the forests were far more plentiful, the taste for the use of wood was formed, and now when wood is scarce, the taste remains and the demand must be met by other lands.

Here we will speak of the forests of Switzerland, the industry of wood carving and the construction of chalets.

In our own country, forests are mostly owned by individuals who can do with them as they please, but in Switzerland they are now held by the Communes, the Cantons, or the State, and are all conserved for the public good. Forests, on the banks of rivers affected by the melting snows, must be preserved to prevent floods in the towns; those on the mountain sides must guard from the destructive avalanches; and all must be maintained with skill and not allowed to disappear.

The Commune in Switzerland is an aggregation of villages, and each member is entitled to his share of that part of the forest which is allowed to be cut down. Wood for building and for fuel may be had, but new trees must take the place of those destroyed, the forest must be kept up to its standard. Schools of forestry graduate men whose business it is to decide how and to what extent the forests are to be maintained. The surplus growth is apportioned among the people; not among all the people, but only among the members of the Commune. Every member must be born of a member, or become a member by purchase or election. In a Commune like Berne, for instance, composed of a city, there is no wood to divide. The forests there are really wooded parks and no surplus wood is given away.

In the mountains, however, and in many farming localities, there is wood enough for the villagers.

Let us remember that the life in Switzerland is distinctively that of the village. Here is the only true republic in Europe, a republic of far more freedom, dignity and real democracy than that of France, or even than that of our own. A land is here without a "Boss," where every member is free to cast his ballot and have his full share in the general corporation. The forests are among his assets and all are interested to have them kept at their full value.

As extensive as are the wooded heights in this model land, there is only one-fifth enough wood to "go round." This condition becomes all the more serious in a land which
A place of wayside prayer

A Village in the upper Rhone Valley:
The church and the school only of stone
A mountain saw-mill

A typical chalet
produces no coal. Fire wood is precious. The cold of winter is severe, and every stick of that which gives warmth and life is made to yield its full value.

There is that in the character of the Swiss which makes of him the true craftsman. Shoddy goods do not come from Switzerland. For centuries the people have been known for their honesty. They have been doing honest work for themselves in the construction of roads which vie with the famous Roman roads of old, in terraced vineyards that serve for many generations, in watches and machinery of wonderful accuracy and solidity, in mountain engineering, which for daring and safety is the admiration of the world, and in wooden homes that need no paint to hide the deficiencies of workmanship.

Of late years, wood carving has taken a new impetus and grown extensively. In the Oberland the peasants have for centuries, during the long evenings of winter, devoted themselves to the production of articles in wood. The Swiss pine grew at hand and lent itself to the ingenious and skillful use of the knife.

The center of the industry has long been about Interlaken, and near by, at Brienz, a wood carving school has become a great success. It has not only turned out many scholars who can make good things and a good living, but the influence on the people has been elevating and beneficial. Drawing inspiration from this school, more than 800 persons are at work, and the number is constantly increasing.

The work is, however, almost entirely done in the homes. Factories do not flourish in Switzerland. Tiffany tried this in watchmaking and failed.

The school itself is well managed and has the confidence of the people. It is equipped with a faculty of able teachers, workrooms and proper apparatus. The Canton and Parish contribute liberally to its support. The course is either three or four years. There is a small entrance fee, but otherwise instruction and material are free. From the second year pupils receive one-half the proceeds of sales of their work, and also premiums for meritorious work.

Brienz has, in connection with the school, an Industrial Arts, which holds a sample exhibition during the summer, when the tourists visit the town.

One of the teachers says: “Without the wood carving industry, the people would have to emigrate wholesale. Not only do we keep our population, but other people come from different parts of the country, learn the industry at our school, and settle here for good. I myself am an outsider.” Wherever tourists resort, there is on sale the product of the carver’s knife. While far behind the exquisite work of Japan or even of Italy, the work is yet good enough in its way to find ready sale to the travellers from many lands. Every piece is just what it pretends to be. There is no pretense to fine art. The articles are mostly for household use, such as salad forks, plates, chairs, clocks, canes, book-racks, shelves, frames, etc. Most of the work is done in the village homes. Father and son work together in the front room of the chalet, while the product of their tools is spread out to catch the attention of the passing traveller. Often the little bench and its worker are moved out on the sidewalk to gain more light and advertise the work more fully.
A harmony of nature and structure

An excellent effect of timber construction
WOOD IN SWITZERLAND

The industrial schools of Switzerland are many. There are schools for decorating watches, for the making of toys, for basket making, for joinery, wood engraving, art cabinet making, and, in Geneva, a large and flourishing school of industrial art, housed in a building costing $160,000, and ranking with the one at Munich as the best in Europe.

The Swiss village home, or chalet, is unique. Cross the Alps into the Canton of Ticino on the Italian side and the chalet disappears! There stones take its place. The village is there, but the wood has given place to what in Italy has always been the building material. The writer has stood on Monte Salvatore near Lugano in Ticino and counted one hundred and twenty-seven stone villages. That could not be done in any part of Italy. In every other canton wood is the favorite material for the village home. Owing to the original abundance of timber, it was used almost exclusively for the building of houses, and the famous chalets have, for centuries, been the homes of the people.

In every Swiss village there are two exceptions to the public use of the wood. The church and school house are of stone. Religion and learning are too precious to be at the risk of fire. Not that fire is at all common, even in the wooden houses, but there is a feeling of security in a stone building. The writer has spent nearly a year in Switzerland and has seen but one fire, and that was in a hotel.

In 1896 there was held at Geneva a "National Exposition," at which was an accurate reproduction of a Swiss village. The chalets were copied from the best to be found all over the country, from the richest and most artistic dwellings, with their carved and partially painted façades down to the little and rude mountain shelters built for the use of the cowherds in summer. The result of the Swiss village has been educational and stimulating to a renewal of the older forms of chalets. Architects are now building after the style of one hundred, fifty years ago, and many admirable examples are to be found, and a better art is manifested than in the previous twenty-five years. The art of building in wood has flourished four hundred years, and the best examples belong to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

We lack space for describing technically the construction of the chalet. A few general features may, however, not be overlooked.

A true chalet does not cover its exterior with paint, or hide its interior wood by paper and hangings, which can never be so beautiful as the natural grain of the wood.

Here in the States, we often spoil our houses with paint on the outside. Many a village vies with the rainbow in colors. Some of the houses are bright, some faded, and all out of harmony. How much better the Swiss custom of having the natural wood merely treated with refined linseed oil, and then leaving time, the true artist, to use its sunshine and its rain to mellow the colors of the wood into real harmony and beauty!

Instead of hiding the materials employed and the methods of their employment, every effort is made to show the joints and their fittings, the boards and timber, so that what is there by necessity becomes an object of decoration and harmony.
A wood-carver's shop

A chalet with side entrance
WOOD IN SWITZERLAND

Swiss pine in age takes on charming colors. An oriental rug is not more susceptible to the gentle hand of time than is a Swiss chalet. The brush of the years paints in charming shades of tan, sepia, gray and black. Certainly the American village paint pot may well retire in shame.

As may be seen by the illustrations there are certain distinctive features in the chalets. The foundations are of stone and often go half way up the first story. These are generally kept whitewashed, setting off as in a frame all the woodwork above. Stones again are often found on the roof. The reason of this is chiefly to hold the snow.

In the plains, where there is much rain, the roofs are steep, to throw off the water, while in the mountains, where there is much snow, they are made flat and dotted with stones to hold the snow, which aids to keep the house warm.

The wide, overhanging eaves, from three to nine feet, which are universal, are to protect the occupants from the summer sun and winter snows. In summer the sun runs high and is kept out, while in winter it runs low and can come in.

Balconies are also ever present. A chalet without a balcony would hardly be a chalet at all. Here the entire family is accommodated. It is the den, the salon, the sitting-room, the dining-room, the outlook, the place of gossip, the place for flowers and brilliant color, the family resting place.

In many of the chalets the chimney is covered with a board which can be raised one side or the other, according to the direction of the wind.

The outside staircase is very common. The entrance is usually at the side, sometimes by stone steps to the first floor and wood stairs to the second floor.

As a rule, the windows are in groups, two, three and even four in close row, and then a wide space of wood. The interiors are finished entirely in natural wood. In the Museum at Bâle are various rooms finished and furnished with the work of previous centuries. Here the natural wood, mellowed by age, and often carved, is the only decoration. A Swiss would find it difficult to breathe in the stuffy rooms of some of our modern apartment houses.

He is accustomed in his chalet to floors, uncarpeted, of creamy, unpainted pine wood, and very clean, to low raftered ceilings and walls, decorated with the natural grain of the wood. About are carvings of maple, beech, or walnut. His furniture is also of wood, solid and rich in plainness.

Of course there are chalets and chalets. There are many costing from ten to twenty thousand dollars, while there are more, like the mountain chalets, for instance, occupied by the herdsman, without ornament, which may be built for three hundred dollars.

Considering that Switzerland is the playground of Europe, and that the rich and prosperous from all lands are constantly pouring out their money among the Swiss people, it is remarkable that the latter have retained their habits of thrift, economy, and simplicity of life. The cost of the government is only three dollars per capita per annum. In England it is twelve dollars, and in France fifteen dollars.

The Swiss are a nation of workers. If there is a leisure class, the tourist never sees it. No one is ashamed to work, no one looks down on the craftsman.
The door of an old chalet

Street scene at Interlaken: wood-carvers at work
WOOD IN SWITZERLAND

Switzerland has no castles, no walled towns. She has been governed for five hundred years by her own people and without the help of kings. She is a land of villages, of homes. Of six hundred thousand householders, five hundred thousand own a bit of land. The Swiss are the freest people in the world, the Athenians of modern times. They are the most universally educated of any country, it being their boast that every one who is not mentally incapacitated, is able to read and write. They have all the virtues and none of the vices of our own political life.

Editor’s Note.—An editorial which appeared in the *Boston Transcript*, some time during the month of August last, completely justifies the statements made by Mr. Cortell regarding the prosperity of Switzerland and the causes for the same.

The editorial opens with a quotation from Mr. Peck, a former United States minister to the mountain republic, who lately said: “There is no country, no nation on the globe, which can compare in quality and number of educational institutions with those of Switzerland, according to the number of inhabitants.” The writer of the article then develops a comparison between Switzerland and Massachusetts, in both of which commonwealths it has been discovered that the intelligence of the people is a prime cause of all other prosperity, material as well as moral.

In the course of his observations the writer states that, long ago, emigration from Switzerland ceased, and immigration into that country began; since Germans, French, Italians and Slavs were and are still attracted by the excellent economic conditions there prevailing.

The democracy of the European state, the writer maintains, is much more essential and powerful than that of Massachusetts: popular control being now almost absolute, and preventing the use of the public resources for the selfish advantage of the few. These conditions are maintained by means of an article of the constitution, the *Referendum*, which provides that all measures of vital import, in order to become laws, must be referred to the whole body of the citizens.

The editorial closes with a second quotation from Mr. Peck, who says that the three millions of Swiss consume more commodities to-day than the fifteen millions of Italians, although the natural productiveness of the two countries can not be compared.

In these and many other favorable facts to be noted in the present condition of Switzerland we may discern the effects of good government, pure and simple; but before instituting a parallel between that country and Italy in the matter of commercial consumption, the geography of the two countries should be considered. Switzerland is protected from the greed of the continental powers by a natural barrier. Her children are thus left free to cultivate the soil, to develop manufactures, and to elevate themselves. On the contrary, Italy is now, of necessity, an armed camp, forced to nourish its defenders, who are drawn away from the peaceful life of the fields that they may learn to kill, to devastate and destroy.