THE ROMANCE OF THE SWISS CHEESE INDUSTRY IN WISCONSIN

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It goes without saying that in the preparation of this paper, The Romance of the Swiss Cheese Industry in Wisconsin, I do not, as I cannot, speak from personal knowledge, although the period is coincident with that of my lifetime in Wisconsin. My sources of information, however, are almost exclusively Swiss.

Whence the Swiss cheese industry of Wisconsin? This inquiry is made in the spirit of Milton’s lines:

"Grateful to acknowledge whence his good descends."

The question implies from that place, source, material, causes, came the Swiss cheese industry of Wisconsin. It is but trite to remark, that causes are very subtle, not to say elusive forces or agencies. Do you say that the Swiss cheese industry of Wisconsin had its origin in the purchase by Nicholas Durst and Friedolin Streiff on July 17, 1845, of 1200 acres of land in what afterward became the Town of New Glarus, "A location chosen among the roughest hills of Green County after months of weary travel through nearly all of the Northern states, passing by the broad, rich prairies of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa and Missouri, for a colony of twenty-seven families of Swiss immigrants who started on their voyage for a new home in March, 1854?"—a location most resembling their beloved Switzerland and hence most likely to allay homesickness. I grant that was the seed of the
Swiss cheese industry that having matured in the Father-
land and planted in Wisconsin soil to be cultivated by
those expert in the industry and nourished by the sun-
light and atmosphere of Wisconsin liberality, freedom
and liberty. Yet this was but one of the sources of the
present Swiss cheese industry in Wisconsin, some of
which sources are remote and some of which are near,
both in time and space.

In the language of Mrs. Hemans concerning the Pil-
grim Fathers, it might be asked concerning them:
"What sought they thus afar?"
The answer is, they sought a favorable location for
this colony of German Swiss people to be sent hither by
the Council of the Canton, Glarus, of the famous moun-
tainous country of Switzerland, an emigration made nec-
essary because of over population, crop failures and ex-
treme poverty.
The founding of this Swiss colony in the Town of
New Glarus in 1845 is a vivid, forceful and romantic
reminder of the founding of the Town of Schwyz, of the
Town of Stanz and of the Town of Altdorf, the beginnings
of the Swiss Federation so stirringly told by Schiller in
his William Tell:

Hear what our ancient herdsmen have narrated.
There once lived in the north a mighty people,
By famine sore-oppress’d. In their distress
It was resolved that each tenth citizen,
By lot, should leave his Fatherland.—‘twas
done;
And wailing — men and women — forth they
fared—
A numerous host—into the farther south,
Slashing their battle-way through Germany
E’en to the forest-mountains and wild vales,
Where swift Muota joins the lake below.—
No traces of humanity were there,
No haunt or sign of man, save one rude hut;
Where a lone fisher sat to watch for the ferry;
But the lake rag’d and was impassable.
—Thus check’d, the wanderers gaz’d around,
and seeing
Promise of future plenty, noble woods,
And crystal rills, and many a pastoral scene,
Recalling to their souls sweet thoughts of home,
There fix’d their habitation—there built up
The town of Schwyz, and clearing far away
Dank fen, deep rock, and root entangled brake,
Call’d forth that Garden in the Wilderness.

Meantime the people grew in numbers, till
The land sufficed no longer to sustain them:
So part once more moved southward—crossing
now
The lake, to the high mountains, and hoary
peaks.
Where—behind everlasting snows entrench’d—
Another people spoke another tongue.
—Thus rose the Town of Stanz, beside the
Kernwald;
Thus Altdorf, in the Valley of the Reuss.
Yet still, howe’er by lake or mountain parted,
We all remain’d in heart and blood the same,
Distinct in both from all surrounding folk:

But what was to come of this colony in New Glarus
was dependent, primarily, upon the character, the habits,
the traditions, the life experiences, the capabilities, the
initiative, the hopes and the ambitions of the colonists, in
other words, upon their inheritance from the Fatherland.
The Swiss people have an intense love of country,
of freedom, and they hold in sacred memory the struggles
for its maintenance whereby for hundreds of years they
have maintained a republic in the central portion of the
continent of Europe, managing their own affairs, provid-
ing for their own safety, though surrounded by kings, and "by many fierce battles have kept their beloved mountains free from the feet of invading tyrants."

"True as the Alp to its own native flowers.
True as the torrent to its rocky-bed,
Or clouds and winds to their appointed track,
The Switzer cleaves to his beloved Freedom."
God-fearing and with love of country and love of freedom that forms the bond of union among her people, they are aptly and truthfully described as, "A contented people, quite satisfied with what they have of their own, desiring to take nothing from a neighbor, and with minds fully made up that a neighbor shall take nothing from them." They hold in sacred memory the legend of the story of William Tell; they never forget the victory won at Morgarten; they revere the memory of the little hero, Peter, of Lucerne; they are proud of the chivalry of their men at Soleure; they recount the victory at Sempac where Arnold Winkelried "made way for Liberty," died and won immortal fame in song and story; they treasure the visions of the noble scenery of their country whose wondrous beauty is wealth; they treasure their legends, romance, song and story; they are thrilled by their country's majestic glaciers; they are charmed by her beautiful lakes; they have ineradicable memories of her "mountain giants of tremendous majesty, the peerless splendor of Jungfran, the Maiden in her robe of stainless white, the fairest mountain vision on earth." They have tender memories of the Alp-horn, that huge wooden trumpet used to call the cows home at milking time as well as its more striking use at the hour of sunset, proclaiming the vesper hour, when the herdsman sends pealing along the mountain side the first few notes of the psalm, "Praise Ye The Lord," and from crag to crag is echoed the solemn melody, the signal for the evening prayer and for repose. Ineradicable is their memory and love of their mountain meadows where in truth,
"Alps on Alps arise."

The Switzer needs not be told that the term Alps as applied to the mountain peaks and ranges of Switzerland is derived from the real Alps, i.e., the terraces, the luxuriant, summer mountain pastures, "bordering the mountain fields of eternal snow," rich with the "lusch, tender, sweet, luxuriant grass, starred with myriads of flowers, which growing in the pure mountain atmosphere, watered by crystal pure mountain springs and streams, are, by the foster mother of the human race, transmuted into a pure nectar fit for the gods, which furnishes the raw material from which the Swiss manufacture their cheese.

You recall that nearly every Alpine village had its own alp, while around the village are meadows for supplying hay for the long winter. "Above the meadows is the belt of woodland. Far aloft between the woodland and the snow fields stretch the alps which supply the herds and the flocks with the best of summer grazing."

Of the alps or terraces the lower are the cattle alps; above these, are the sheep alps; and still higher up, are the goat alps.

Finnimore describes the upward march in the Spring for the Alpine pastures as a great event in the Swiss year: "On the morning of the journey, the whole village is astir before the dawn. The animals are as full of joy as any among the merry crowd, for they hear the sound of the bell which is always borne before them. They know quite well what it means. They leap and frisk in their delight as the herd sets out in long procession for the pleasant upland meadows. The finest animals lead the way, and from their necks hang the great chiming Swiss bells, while their horns are decked with flowers. Happiest of all are the boys who are now old enough to go aloft for the first time and help the herdsman on the pastures. As they go they sing a favorite song, which be-
gins: 'On the alps above there is a glorious life'; and a
glorious life they find it.

The chalets dotting the alps, where the herdsmen sleep
and the milk of the cows is made into cheese, are the
simplest of dwellings.

Here on these alps, with their cool, pure mountain
air, their cool crystal pure waters in mountain streams
and springs, their fresh, luscious grasses, and their fresh
pure milk was the beginning and has been for centuries
the paternal home of the Swiss cheese industry. Here
the Swiss cheesemakers "idealized the real" as well as
realized their ideals as they wrought into their cheese
the legends, the romance, the songs and other joyous
Alpine experiences, as well as the stern realities of the
Fatherland. "Joy was duty and love was law."

Here on these Alpine pastures, stay all summer long,
animals and men, herdsmen and cheesemakers, until
driven below by approaching winter to the sheltering vil-
lage, perhaps even a two days journey.

When the snow storms of early September announce
the sad day of return, great loads of cheese are carried
back into the valley and on the backs of men. In William
Tell, Schiller puts into the mouth of the herdsmen for this
occasion, the following song:

"Farewell, ye green meadows,
Farewell, thou bright shore!
The Alpherd must leave you,
His summer is o'er.

Yet again will he greet you, again he'll be here
When the snows melt away, and the flowers
reappear,
When the cuckoo invites him, and songs wake
the day,
And warbling brooks swell the sweet music of
May."

Any lengthy mention of this life on the Alps would be irrelevant; but merely to make reference to it is to awaken joyous memories in the mind of every Switzer who has had experienced that life.

It was with minds filled with these Swiss legends and traditions and glories and an intense love of the Fatherland and its dearly bought and maintained freedom, familiarity with the conditions and processes of Swiss cheese making, the characteristic habits of industry, economy and frugality, desiring to take nothing from a neighbor and resolved that a neighbor shall take nothing from them, imbued with the lesson of loving thy neighbor as thyself and a firm religious faith, all these realities, all these legends and romances permeated the minds of the Swiss colonists who came to New Glarus in 1845; and what a splendid inheritance it was.

The seed of the Swiss cheese industry, matured in the Fatherland, was planted in the little valley of New Glarus on the arrival of this group of Swiss immigrants and beginning the usual work of pioneer settlers. The late Honorable John Luchsinger has told the story as recorded in the Wisconsin Historical Collections, how on arrival here among strangers, ignorant of the language, manners, customs and mode of farming of the country, with scarcity of clothing and the bare necessities of life, with winter approaching, the outlook for these settlers was very dark and that if it had not been that the sum of $1,000 to meet their necessities, had arrived from the old home and been made available, it would have gone hard with the colonists; how in the following Spring, the land was portioned off into 60 lots of 20 acres each and, according to the arrangement made in Switzerland, each colonist who was the head of a family received 20 acres of tillage or meadow land, the location being determined by lot; and how the timber lot was for 8 to 10 years held in common, each using, under certain rules, what he needed; how after the division had been made, each colonist began to till and break up his lot in a small way in
which labor the women rendered assistance, most of them being accustomed to outdoor work from childhood; how most of the first breaking was done with spades and shovels, as teams and plows had not yet been obtained; how some time during the Spring of 1846, drovers brought a lot of cows to a mining town 8 miles east of New Glarus, and how the colonists hearing of it at once set out to purchase some and, being excellent judges, soon selected the best animals of the herd in sufficient number to give each family one; how as soon as the settler owned a cow, the germ of knowledge of cheese making which he had brought with him from the Fatherland began to sprout; how infinitely small the growth was at first, a pail full of milk, a little copper kettle and a wooden hoop split from a sapling being the beginning of the industry; how cheeses no larger than a saucer, which could be held by a child, were the precursors of the 200-pound Swiss cheese now standard; how the little kettle used for cooking purposes and hung in the fireplace of the log cabin was the antecedent of the present-day cheese factory with all its conveniences; how the wife and daughter were the first cheesemakers because the men could spare no time from the work of clearing, breaking and fencing; how they went at this work with what poor means were at their command; how their cheese became larger and better as increase in number of cows and experience came and a steady and remunerative market was created for what could be spared; how up to 1870 cheese was not made by any factory system, but each cheese dairy used only the milk produced on one farm and how a spirit of emulation arose and it became a matter of pride to produce better cheese than others.

In the history of a great industry, Wisconsin Proceedings of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1898, twenty-seven years ago, Honorable John Luchsinger wrote: "It is now acknowledged that Wisconsin Swiss cheese is the equal of that made in Switzerland. It has captured the American market. It is regularly quoted
in the markets of all our cities; it has come to stay. Why not? With Swiss farmers, Swiss cheesers, Swiss merchants, the best of grasses and water and intelligent management, it cannot fail to produce an article which has reduced importation of foreign cheese to a minimum.’’ Elsewhere, he states that the quality of Wisconsin Swiss cheese had reached so high a standard that it had even been exported to Switzerland.

In an address before the Wisconsin Cheesemakers’ association at Milwaukee in 1913, twelve years ago, Mr. Joseph Williman, then cheese factory, dairy and food inspector in the Dairy and Food Department of Wisconsin, made the following statement: ‘‘I shall take a positive stand against the prevailing opinion, that the imported Swiss cheese is better than our Domestic Swiss, for it is not, providing we proceed in the process of making and curing the same as the fundamental principles of Swiss cheese making require.’’

He concludes a somewhat argumentative paper, with the following statement: ‘‘It seems to me, if they over there on land nearly double the price of our land can buy milk, make cheese, cure it for about a year, which implies great capital, then pay transportation and duty to America and still realize a good profit, why cannot we equal this foreign product in quality and in consequence realize a greater profit.’’

I here repeat that the authorities I have quoted in this address are limited almost exclusively to Swiss.

History sums up the material possessions of the Swiss colonists of New Glarus in 1847 as follows, the population being 104: There were two horses, one bull, sixteen oxen and steers, thirty-seven cows, fifteen heifers, twenty-five calves, one hundred ninety-three hogs and one hundred nine acres of land ‘‘broke.’’

Such were the meager and feeble conditions seventy-eight years ago. What a contrast between those and present conditions! With the landscape throughout Green and La Fayette and parts of Grant and Iowa and Dane
and Rock Counties, commonly called the Switzerland of America, dotted with Swiss cheese factories, countless farms, well fenced and well cultivated fertile fields, these farms equipped with magnificent barns filled with the abundant and varied farm products; large, sleek, and well-cared for dairy herds everywhere abounding; beautiful and in some instances almost palatial homes, elegantly furnished, adorning these farms as the family homes, in which dwell happy families of children educated in the public schools of the State, standing and visible monuments of the remuneration and profits of the Swiss cheese industry. Right in these homes, the families may, and many of them do, listen to the World's choicest music. Nor is it wholly improbable that in those same homes, the Swiss families through the radio, may yet hear the melody of the Alp horn's signal for the Vesper hour, the call for the evening prayer and for repose. Romance, this! Wonderful! Aladdin-like!

All this affluence, all this abundance, all this prosperity, all these necessities, conveniences and luxuries, have come because in this state of liberty and freedom, the Swiss colonists and their descendants found congenial environment, found opportunity to make use of their rich inheritance from the Fatherland, of the Swiss characteristics I have portrayed, where self-reliance and loyalty to their own intelligence, their own skill and integrity and sense of honor, all these Swiss characteristics were wrought into the domestic Swiss cheese. As these romantic achievements have resulted from the agencies I have portrayed, is it not most reasonable to conclude, that the greatest assurance of a continuance of these wonderful successes lies in a continuance of loyalty and faithful adherence to the same agencies, the same forces, the same leadership.

In a paper I prepared entitled, The Wonderful Story of Wisconsin's Dairy Industry, attention was called to the liberal manner with which the State has dealt with the various dairy organizations of the State and the dairy
industry as a whole. Naming these organizations, the Wisconsin Dairymen’s Association, The Southern Wisconsin Cheesemakers’ and Dairymen’s Association, the Wisconsin Cheesemakers’ Association, the Wisconsin Buttermakers’ Association, I said: “The State encouraged the pioneer missionary, educational activities of these associations by granting a moderate annual bounty as an aid and stimulus to these activities. To these different dairy organizations, the State’s modicum bounties bestowed, were veritable lifesavers cast to them on stormy seas. To the state, the bestowal of these bounties was a casting of bread upon the waters, which has returned to the state with the artesian effect of the widow’s cruse of oil, namely: the fruits of good citizenship manifest in the industry, frugality, affluence, sobriety, progressiveness, vast contribution to the general prosperity, public spirit and patriotism of those who comprise the magnificent dairy industry of the state; for it is as true today as it was twenty-three centuries ago, when uttered by the great Athenian, Thucydides: ‘Where the rewards of virtue are the most liberal, there will be found the best citizens.’”

With the liberal rewards of virtue accruing to the citizens of Wisconsin engaged in the dairy industry, with her liberal and protective laws guaranteeing equal rights to all and special privilege to none, the state may reasonably expect and anticipate a loyalty and obedience to her laws equal to the love and devotion of the Swiss people to their Fatherland.

Do you recall that in the legendary history of the Swiss people and in the beginnings of Austrian tyranny, it is related how one Stauffacher, a respected peasant of Steinnenn in Schwyz, was sitting outside his newly built house one day, when Gessler came riding by and disdainfully asked whose house it was. Receiving from Stauffacher the answer that it belonged to their common lord, the Emperor of Austria, Gessler sneered at this, calling out he was there in the Emperor’s place and would not
tolerate the peasants’ building themselves such fine houses and behaving as if they were the lords of the land.

Has it ever occurred to you that surveying with avaricious eyes the fine farms, the elegant homes, the splendid dairy herds of the Swiss colonists and their descendants, which I have portrayed, as the transmuted results of the revenues and profits of the Swiss cheese industry, some Gessler, representing corporate and predatory wealth and greed, and assuming oligarchic power, may deny that you are entitled to those conditions and assert, if not in words, yet in schemes and actions, that these should be the possessions only of the overlords he represents. He is not, however, likely to employ the crude methods of the Austrian Gessler. Instead, his schemes and devices will be more cunning and crafty. If the attempt be made by some such would-be overlord who dwelleth not among you, to hang an Austrian hat of foreign domination over the Swiss cheese industry, will you submissively uncover in its presence?

In conclusion, I wish to call your attention to the teachings of two of Aesop’s Fables, the first by way of caution, the second by way of counsel.

The First:

“A dog crossing a bridge over a stream with a piece of meat in his mouth, saw his own shadow in the water and took it for that of another dog with a piece of meat double his own in size. He therefore let go his own and fiercely attacked the other dog to get his larger piece from him. He thus lost both, that which he grasped in the water, because it was a shadow, and his own, because the stream swept it away. Grasp at the shadow and lose the substance—the common fate of those who hazard a real blessing for some visionary good.”

The Second:

“In former days, when all a man’s limbs did not work together as amicably as they do now, but each had a will and a way of its own, the Members, generally, began
to find fault with the Abdomen for spending an idle, luxurious life, while they were wholly occupied in laboring for its support, and ministering to its wants and pleasures; so they entered into a conspiracy to cut off its supplies for the future. The Hands were no longer to carry food to the Mouth, nor the Mouth to receive the food, nor the Teeth to chew it. They had not long persisted in this course of starving the Abdomen into subjection, ere they all began, one by one, to fail and flag, and the whole body to pine away. Then the Members were convinced that the Abdomen also, cumbersome and useless as it seemed, had an important function of its own; that they could no more do without it than it could do without them, and that if they would have the constitution of the body in a healthy state, they must work together, each in his proper sphere, FOR THE COMMON GOOD OF ALL.”