Swiss Cheeseland—No. 3

Bilten Settlement Paces
Modern Dairying Industry

Green county's distinctive cheese industry originated in the fertile valleys of Little Sugar river.

Imported from Switzerland the now important dairy business did not come all at once. The unfolding took 20 years before the cheese factories came.

Original colonists of 1845 founding New Glarus were industrial people engaged in textile weaving in the province oppressed at the time by war. Because of their fear of hard times and famine they felt forced to look elsewhere for livelihood. They came here in Wisconsin seeking homes in new country.

A second sizeable group, 70 at one time, came from the town of Bilten, off in a corner of Canton Glarus in Alpine lowlands. Bilten was more agricultural for it had pasture lands. The new group knew cows and was experienced in their care. The journey was by ocean sailing vessel, the lake route to Milwaukee and overland to New Glarus. Arriving in New Glarus in 1847, they set out at once for the country where they might have land, timber and stone. The few artisans among Swiss settlers were masons, which accounts for the general prevalence of stone in the old time building of homes, barns, stable basements, school houses. Many of the structures still mark the landscape, especially the barn basements and spring houses.

Land around New Glarus had been taken up and their search took them into Washington township south of New Glarus and north of Monroe. Government land was available at low price. They established homes as a community group and named it Bilten settlement.

New Glarus township was absorbing the in-pouring population previous to 1847 but the years immediately following the movement was greatly increased. Green county's population in 1840 was 933 and during the decade from 1840 to 1850, the period covered by rapid settlement due to increased immigration, it rose to 8,566. Swiss participation amounted to 364. This means that only 4 per cent of the total population at the time were to stamp their habits and characteristics so indelibly on the history and industry of Green county.

Bilten settlement of twelve families soon proved important far beyond its number in its immediate influence on countrymen back in the old homeland, as shown by later marked penetration by Swiss
people. The years immediately following 1847 saw population boundaries extended to unoccupied Washington township valleys to the west and south.

The first cows, one to a family and selling at $12, were received at New Glarus in 1846.

Nick Gerber, also a Glarner (born 1836, died 1903), came to America in 1857 and located at Booneville, N. Y., where he opened the first cheese factory introducing limburger in the Mohawk valley. He spent 11 years there and in 1868, informed of the successful start being made in raising cattle in Green county, he came here to investigate.

He met Albert Babler at New Glarus and toured the Bilten area where he found just what he was looking for in a new country. He at once arranged with farmers to take their milk, opening a limburger factory in a log building on the Albert Babler farm in New Glarus township.

He made the cheese himself and had outlet for his product in the east. Six farmers delivering milk to the first limburger factory had less than 50 cows: Albert Babler 15, George Legler 10, J. C. Blum, Andrew Hoesly, Balthazer Kundert and Christopher Babler, the remaining 25.

What was then known as Long Valley extended across the top of Washington township to Monticello. Bilten settlers claimed the valley and others of the smaller tributaries of Little Sugar river. Another valley to the south and west was left for the arrivals from Bern. They came from the valley of Emmen river, Emmenthal, where Swiss cheese made in the form of large wheels originated.

A few cheesemakers applied their skill and took rightful place in what was to become Green county’s basic industry. Beginning the making of regular Swiss in 1869, the industry was developed in both Swiss and limburger.

Nick Gerber had the necessary contacts for sale of his products in the east. They now are staple cheese items on counters of food markets the country over. Thus the development marked the beginning of factory manufacture of Swiss and limburger cheese here and in Wisconsin.