

Reminiscences of Swiss pioneers in New Zealand

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REMINISCENCES OF SWISS PIONEERS IN NEW ZEALAND.

The passing away of one of the oldest Swiss settlers in New Zealand, the late John Schlaepfer of Pukekohe, has inspired one of his intimate friends, our compatriot W. Ungemuth, to write down the following reminiscences, which no doubt will be read with much interest by the Swiss community in New Zealand.

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When in December last, our old friend, Mr. John Schlaepfer of Helvetia Ostrich Farm, Pukekohe, departed from this world, the Swiss Community of New Zealand lost one of their most interesting pioneers and most popular compatriots. His demise is very deeply regretted by all who knew him. His jolly, real Appenzeller nature, his keen patriotism, his kindness and readiness ever to help others made him very popular with everybody who came into contact with him.

I am greatly beholden to his sons, John, Robert, Arnold and Walter for the material they loaned me and for their kind permission to work up something of interest to the Swiss Community in New Zealand. These most interesting chronicles are really deserving of a much better and more experienced pen than mine.

It was on October 16th 1884 that an enterprising little company of 6 Appenzellers left Teufen on their long journey to New Zealand. These were: John Schlaepfer aged 20; Johannes Knoepfel aged 50; Emil Zuercher aged 23; Jacob Tanner aged 22; Jacob Eisenhut aged 20; and Conrad Hoerler aged 20.

Of these I have been very well acquainted with John Schlaepfer, Johannes Knoepfel, and Jacob Eisenhut. John Schlaepfer I knew from the time of my arrival in New Zealand 39 years ago. I arrived in Auckland in company with Fred Frehner of Hundwil, Ct. Appenzell, who died a few years ago on his sheep station "Riverina" near Frasertown, Hawkes Bay. How well I remember my arrival at Pukekohe where I did not know whether to go East or West. I had a letter of introduction to Messrs. Schlaepfer Bros., "Helvetia", which meant the two brothers John and Jacob. Well, my geographical knowledge of Pukekohe was nil, and my knowledge of the English language about the same. So the first thing I did was to have a look at the people on the Railway Station. I picked on an old man with snow white whiskers framing a kindly face. I walked up to him and held my letter of introduction under his nose. After giving me a rather queer look, he pulled out a pair of glasses and scrutinising the address, he seemed to arrive at the correct conclusion that I did not understand English, so smilingly he motioned me to follow him. He lead me up the main street to a boarding house where he told me to wait while he disappeared into the house. After a while he came back with a young fellow who showed me the way to Jacob Schlaepfer's. Just imagine the animated conversation we had over the 5 miles with my poor knowledge of English and his still poorer knowledge of "Schwyzerduetsch".

Johannes Knoepfel and his sisters were lifelong family friends of ours at home in Teufen. He was a great lover of the Alpstein or Saentisgebiet which he knew from one end to the other. Many a pleasant trip I had under his guidance. Is it a wonder that the poor fellow got homesick and returned to his beloved Appenzellerland where he arrived after 1½ years of absence? Although suffering from an impediment in his right foot he was a wonderful walker. No matter how steep an ascent was, he would treat his company to some beautiful original Appenzeller music on his mouth organs, of which he always carried about three or four. He was very original in his ways and the whole Appenzellerland, Innerrhoden as well as Ausserrhoden knew him as "Bergknoepfel".

Of this group of pioneers the only survivor is Emil Zuercher, now of Geraldton, Western Australia. While speaking of him, I may mention the strange coincidence when he and John Schlaepfer met in Teufen quite unexpectedly when both were, unknown to one another, on a visit to their homeland.

Nine months before this company arrived here, a first contingent had arrived consisting of: Ernest Eugster, Jakob Schlaepfer, (a brother of John Schlaepfer), Konrad Altherr, Peter Blumer and Michael Heeb.

Of these, Konrad Altherr is the only survivor and leads a retired life at Rotorua. I still remember our first meeting about 37 years ago when I arrived in Rotorua from Taupo in a 5 horse mailcoach. Just after we had passed Whakaremarewa I noticed a well bewhiskered man scrutinizing me so closely that the coachdriver remarked "He must think he knows you".

Tired as I was after a 56 mile journey in an old rattletrap of a coach and not knowing what to do with myself, I passed my time after tea in the billiard saloon when suddenly the same man entered the room and approached me, asking me in his broadest and homeliest Appenzeller dialect which was better than music to me, "Is your name Ungemuth?". When I assured him that he was not far wrong, he said "I am Chuedli Altherr". Naturally I was delighted to meet him of whom I had already heard quite a lot. I am pleased to say that this happy meeting was the foundation of a lasting friendship.

To return to our immigrants, as already mentioned, Knoepfel, a most ardent lover of his homeland especially of his beautiful Appenzellerlaendli, became very homesick, so when Jakob Schlaepfer (brother of John Schlaepfer) decided to take a trip home to find himself a wife, Knoepfel decided to return home with him.

Eugster bought a large block of unimproved land about 4,000 acres, of which he disposed of a few hundred acres to Jakob Schlaepfer. After about 4 years partnership with his brother Jakob, John married Miss Johanna Grob who had been keeping house for her uncle E. Eugster. Later in 1890, John Schlaepfer bought a farm at Waiau Pa on the Manukau Harbour about 15 miles distant from "Helvetia". After 3 years' residence on this seaside farm, John purchased Eugster's land. After building a house and outbuildings, he settled here permanently. But luck was not with him. Sheep farming was not very promising. Wool had sunk to 3d a lb. To improve the feed for his flocks of sheep, he planted a large crop of turnips on virgin soil with surprisingly good results, which caused neighbouring farmers to open their eyes. A very well known farmer encouraged by these results bought 8000 acres in the neighbourhood for sheep farming.

"Helvetia" consisted of a considerable part of bushland and for the greater part of open fernland. Cultivated and wisely nursed with artificial manure, the soil soon responded very favourably.

In 1901, John Schlaepfer received an offer of partnership in the formation of an ostrich farm from a leading merchant in Auckland. Seeing quite a lot of advantages in this venture, he accepted.

With 1903 still in its infancy, a time of transformation began on "Helvetia", or as it was now called "Helvetia Ostrich Farm". Before long, 2 residences as well as most comfortable men's quarters, a large shed for storage of grain and machinery besides accommodation for ostriches and an incubator house and chicken house arose and made the whole place with the old homestead and its ever beautiful Puriri and Totara park like a little village. Now came the most difficult job of all. About 500 ostriches had to be transferred from their old home at Whitford Park over a distance of about 18 miles to their new home at "Helvetia". They were driven over the hard metalled country road where vehicular traffic had to be reduced to a minimum, so as not to upset the rather timid birds. The drive was completed on 2 Sundays with very little trouble.

At the beginning of this new venture the birds did very well. To preserve the quality of breeds great care was taken with the choice of breeding birds. Ten picked couples of breeding birds were utilized for that purpose and good results were maintained. They even crossbred South African and North African ostriches, two quite distinct breeds. South African male birds are adorned with necks and legs of man-of-war grey while the North African (Algerian) birds are distinguished by their pink necks and legs.

In the factory 6 girls and 1 forewoman for years turned the feathers into various sorts of finery, until rather suddenly, the fashion in ostrich feathers died out. Sheep and cattle now received more attention while the number of birds gradually diminished. The great world war 1914-1918 was also responsible to a great extent for this. Slowly the ostrich farm died down except in name. No more birds dot the wide expanse of what used to be the "Helvetia Ostrich Farm".

The farm was resurveyed and divided into smaller farms. About 1300 acres with all the existing buildings were retained by the Schlaepfer family. Each son has his own farm and the quality of their fat stock and wool is a household word in the market. Under the wise guidance of their father, the sons have brought their farming system to a fine art.

On July 28th, 1921, John Schlaepfer had the sad misfortune to lose his wife with whom he had led a most happy family life for many years.

In 1923 he paid his first visit to his old hometown in Appenzellerland and in 1929 he visited it once more. On each occasion he was accompanied by two of his sons.

Besides farming, John Schlaepfer also took a great interest in public life. For many years he was a member of the Karaka Road Board, where he occupied the Chair for several years. For 3 years he belonged to the Franklin Licensing Committee. He was also a foundation member of the Franklin Agricultural Society occupying the presidential chair for 2 terms and being a member of the committee for a number of years. Some years ago, he was elected an honorary member in recognition of his long and valuable services.

For a great number of years he was also an ardent supporter and a personal friend of the late Right Hon. Mr. W.F. Massey and the Garden Parties at "Helvetia" in his honour are still well remembered.

John Schlaepfer's popularity was well proven by the large number of old identities and friends who followed him to his last resting place.

The Franklin district is mourning the loss of an old pioneer and leading farmer, but there are four sons who are taking a pride, as their father did, in keeping up the great prestige of their family name.

W.U.

AUCKLAND CARD EVENING, JASS.

Another card evening will be held at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Moosberger, 129 Crummer Road, Grey Lynn, on Saturday, the 12th of June, at 7.30 p.m. sharp. Visiting country members are especially invited to take this opportunity to meet old friends and compatriots.

ANNOUNCEMENTS OF DEATHS & MARRIAGES. Some members have complained, with good reason, that "Helvetia" fails to report equitably on the deaths and weddings which occur from time to time in the Swiss community in New Zealand. We wish to point out that such information will, at all times, receive our immediate and careful attention, but we are entirely dependent on our members for sending immediate notification to the Secretary.

ADVERTISEMENT S.

Sharemilker wanted (preferable two single men, Swiss) for good herd of 65-70 cows --- 1/3 share and 1/2 calves and pigs --- good conditions, cream supply. Start June or July.

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