

Potted history of the Landsgemeinde

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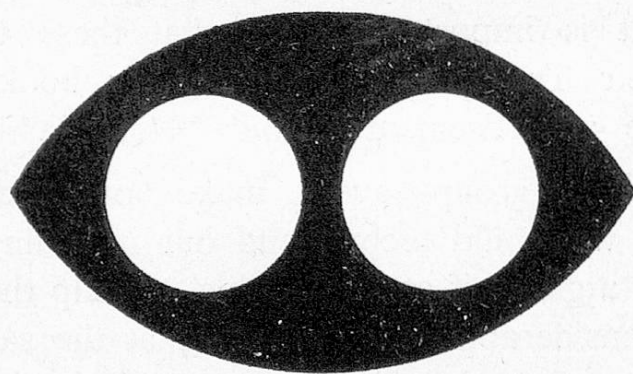
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POTTED HISTORY OF THE LANDSGEMEINDE

There are five **Landsgemeinde** cantons, Glarus, Appenzell Outer Rhodes, Appenzell Inner Rhodes, Obwalden and Nidwalden. The **Landsgemeinde** cantons stand for the purest and most direct democracy. The origin of the **Landsgemeinden** dates from far back in the middle ages. They grew out of the Germanic folk-moot and the rural associations. Every year, on a Sunday in spring, all enfranchised men in the canton assemble at some historic spot to elect their governors and make their laws. Albert Welti, the Swiss artist, painted a superb and vivid picture of the **Landsgemeinde** at Nidwalden for the Hall of the Council of States at Berne, in which the impressive nature of this ancient institution is admirably rendered. Every citizen is under the obligation of attending the **Landsgemeinde**. With early morning the people begin to flock in from the remotest villages, leaving behind only the aged, the sick and a few firemen. If there is urgent business to be transacted, the **Landsgemeinde** can be summoned at other times in the year. If the weather is very bad, it is transferred, in certain cantons, to the church or the place of assembly; in others this is not possible, owing to the numbers attending. The **Landammann**, i.e. the president of the cantonal government, conducts proceedings in a loud voice — up to quite recent times no loudspeaker was used. Accompanied by the



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other members of the government, the Chancellor and the **Landweibel** (sergeant of state), he stands on a platform which gives him a good view over the whole assembly. The **Landweibel** wears a handsome cloak and a cocked hat, for which reason the uninitiated often take him for the most important person present. The citizens proclaim their will by a show of hands. Where more than 10,000 are present, as in the canton of Appenzell Outer Rhodes, it is sometimes very difficult to assess a majority when the ayes and noes are nearly equal. Yet the practised men of the governments of these cantons can cope even with this part of the business in a truly astonishing fashion, and their ruling is very seldom questioned. In certain **Landsgemeinde** cantons, proposed legislation and even the names of candidates for election may be discussed prior to the assembly. The plain man of the people can stand up and express his views. Strict discipline is necessary, on the part both of the speaker and of the meeting. The latter, however, loses its patience now and then and compels a speaker to return to his place before he has finished. There is naturally no provision for a referendum in the **Landsgemeinde** cantons, as it is replaced by the legislative authority of the **Landsgemeinde** itself. On the other hand, before the beginning of a **Landsgemeinde**, the constitutional or legislative initiative can be put into action, and the **Landsgemeinde** then decides upon the petition.

As a rule, the visitor to the **Landsgemeinde**, provided he is a good democrat, is delighted and moved by it. It is a great experience both to watch and to listen. There is a deep and justified solemnity in the proceedings. Even the setting in some beautiful village square or in a field at the foot of some towering mountain contributes to the whole atmosphere. In Appenzell Outer Rhodes, the **Landsgemeinde** is opened by a hymn of worship sung by the whole people with profound fervour. The voices of ten thousand singers thunder up to heaven. Every one wears the dagger which is the sign of his status as a free man with the right to bear arms. At Glarus there is in form stands an inner ring where the older boys of the canton can stand, in order to prepare themselves for their future civic duties and follow in detail the deliberations of their fathers and elder brothers. The newly elected members of all governing bodies have to take their oath before the **Landsgemeinde** that they will conscientiously fulfil the task they have undertaken. But at the end the whole people must take the oath so that its responsibility too may be fixed and visible.

A parliament, i.e. a Great Council on the unicameral system, also exists in the **Landsgemeinde** cantons, but, on account of the **Landsgemeinde**, has not the importance it has in the other cantons. Unfortunately, the **Landsgemeinde** is only suited to the smallest cantons. There are, on the other hand, cantons, e.g. in the Grisons, in which the electorate of the districts unites in a

district assembly which is hardly less impressive than a **Lands-gemeinde**. It is of inestimable advantage to a working democracy if the people is not dissolved into individuals at elections and ballots, but forms a single body, a living community.

Englishmen and Americans have always been among the many admirers of the **Lands-gemeinde**. Sir Francis Ottimell Adams, sometime English Minister at Berne, and C. D. Cunningham wrote glowing descriptions of it based on accurate observation. One, however, William Hepworth Dixon, served up sheer fables in his book, **The Switzers**, among others the statement that the **Lands-gemeinde** lynches evil-doers, a custom rather suited to cannibals than to the highly civilised citizens of Glarus or Appenzell.

("Switzerland Today")

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