

Four landmarks in the history of Switzerland

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FOUR LANDMARKS IN THE HISTORY OF SWITZERLAND.

("Swiss Industry and Trade," May, 1940.)

The customary collection on the Swiss National Fête Day will, this year, be devoted to the Swiss National Donation for the Swiss Red Cross Society and Needy Families of Soldiers (the central organization for help for soldiers and provision for their families). Four special stamps are being issued for this purpose, commemorative of four important events in the history of Switzerland. On the 5 cts. stamp, we see the monument of the battle of Sempach against a pale green background. The orange-brown background of the 10 cts. stamp bears a picture of the monument of the battle of Giornico, while on the 20 cts. stamp there is the monument of the battle of Calven. The 30 cts. stamp, finally, shows the monument erected at Les Rangiers in honour of the defenders of the Swiss frontiers from 1914 to 1918. Four National Day stamps, four memorable dates in the history of our country! What happened at *Sempach*, "the small town"?

It was 1386. Switzerland had waged war upon war in order to gain her freedom: with firm confidence in their own strength, the Confederates claimed their independence, the result being war with Austria, the most important and decisive war ever fought by Switzerland. More than 150 Lords and Princes refused to join the Confederates for fear of the attack of their mighty opponent. On July 9th, Duke Leopold of Habsburg led his army to elevated ground near the small town of Sempach where he came upon the Confederates unexpectedly at eight in the morning. The Swiss army, consisting of men from Lucerne, Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden, numbered 1500. Soft soil and hilly country were unfavourable for war on horseback and the Austrians had to dismount. Feeling themselves vastly superior to "This handful of peasants," they expected to gain a speedy victory. We are told that the army led by the Austrian nobility stood like a compact mass armed with long spears, with which they parried the attacks of the enemy who advanced like a wedge. The Austrians had all the advantages: they were on the heights, were superior in numbers and had long weapons that rendered the short battle-axes and halberds of the Swiss useless. Many a Swiss soldier was wounded or dead before a single Austrian fell. Until midday, the peasants were in a desperate position. But when they gave up their wedge-shaped formation and advanced in a line the tide turned. At a critical moment the brave deed of a single man turned defeat into victory: Arnold of Winkelried suddenly rushed forward, embraced as many spears as he could with his strong arms and pressed them to his breast as he fell, crying "Con-

federates, I will make a way for you." His body paved the way to victory.

The victory at *Giornico* on Dec. 28th, 1478, was equally glorious. It was in the days when the lords of Milan still imagined they had a right to the Valle Leventina in spite of Swiss warnings. In November the people of Uri decided to fight for their rights and crossed the St. Gotthard, reinforced by men from all parts of the country. But the siege of Bellinzona was not successful, the cold was terrible and it was decided to give up the campaign. The Confederates were not aware of the fact that another 10,000 men were on the way from Milan, and they withdrew the greater part of their troops, only leaving 175 men, 100 of whom were from the Canton of Uri, at *Giornico* to guard the frontiers of Uri. On Dec. 28th the Milanese army made an attack on *Giornico*, where, however, they met with great resistance in which 350 men from the Leventina took part. During the fight, the Confederates rolled stones and boulders down the hillside as they had done at Morgarten. The rivers, which they had banked up, overflowed, and all the slopes and roads were covered with ice, so that the enemy found no foothold. The Milanese army fled in disorder, leaving 1400 dead in their rear. From that time onward, the Swiss army was much dreaded in the whole of Italy.

One of the most terrible battles of the Swabian war was fought at *Calven* in 1440. On the way home from the Netherlands, King Maximilian of Austria hoped to deal the Swiss a definite blow via the Tyrol, in order finally to subjugate them. The Munstertal in the Grisons was the scene of battle. The pass was called Calven, or Chialavaina, i. e., metal foundry, so named after a mine in that region. In this narrow valley, the inhabitants of the Grisons had erected considerable fortifications, consisting of bastions and bulwarks, terraces and towers. Their army numbered 2,500 men, while the Austrians in the valley below had 13,000 soldiers. The small Swiss contingent had marched over the hills to Schleis on the night of May 21st, there expecting reinforcements. But the reinforcements did not come. The small company had to face the powerful enemy alone. For five hours a fearful battle waged on the bastions. Defeat seemed imminent, when, at last, reinforcements, led by Benedict Fontana, arrived on the scene, altering the course of events. Fontana fought like a lion. Mortally wounded, his last words were: "Rhaetia and the Grisons to-day or never!" His example incited his followers to still greater efforts: the victory was won, the enemy routed.

While the three first pictures bring to mind events of days long gone by, the last one, the wonderful monument at *Les Rangiers*, leads on to modern days. On August 1st every native of Switzerland should think both of the past and the present, of the heroes of olden times and of the soldiers who guarded our frontiers from 1914 to 1918. The monument at *Les Rangiers* is dedicated to the memory of the latter: its simple lines, showing a sturdy Swiss soldier on sentry duty, gazing far away over the frontier, are convincing in their grandeur. He stands immovable, a symbol of determination and courage, — of the courage that does honour, not only to the soldiers of the last war, but also to those who keep watch over our frontiers to-day and have done so ever since September 1st, 1939...

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