

Some Swiss yodel

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SOME SWISS YODEL

By ELEANOR GUREWITSCH

Approximately one out of every 480 people living in Switzerland is a member of the Federal Yodelling Society; approximately ten out of every ten tourists visiting Switzerland want to hear some "real Swiss yodel music". With a little bit of effort and advanced planning they can do so, hear not only the folk music provided on the standard city tours, night-life tours, and folklore and scenery tours, but hear some Swiss people who yodel because they enjoy the traditional old folk music and want to keep it fresh and alive, with or without an audience to spur them on.

The best opportunities to see the authentic folklore enthusiasts in action during 1966 are provided by three regional yodelling festivals. About eighty yodel groups are expected to participate in each. The dates to note are: 21st-22nd May, St. Imier (Canton Berne); 11th-12th June, Horw (near Lucerne), and 25th-26th June in Chur (Grisons). Another important folklore festival, the Federal Alpine Festival in Frauenfeld on 13th and 14th August, will also include substantial amounts of folk music.

Erroneous information to the contrary notwithstanding, Switzerland is not a nation of yodellers, nor is it a country where most people live like Heidi and her grandfather. Switzerland is an industrialized country, people are leaving the farms and the mountainsides steadily for the more sophisticated life, the more lucrative professional opportunities offered in the larger cities.

Nevertheless in Switzerland some people still enjoy folk music and yodelling just as in the United States some people still sing in barber-shop quartets and/or go to Saturday night square dances in a grange hall or barn. Members of the yodelling society number about 12,000, include business executives as well as cowherds. The organization has a bi-lingual newspaper which appears weekly during the summer and semi-weekly during the winter months. Most local groups get together regularly throughout the year for rehearsal sessions.

If a visitor to Switzerland keeps this important frame of reference clearly in mind he will avoid making the mistake of asking every Swiss he meets whether he knows how to yodel and would he like to demonstrate; avoid the other mistake of assuming that the only place to hear some yodelling is in a tourist-oriented establishment.

Yodelling and the alp horn are many centuries old. These methods of communication developed in many mountainous countries, were used in the Himalayas as

well as the Alps to send messages across steep valleys to friends on distant mountain slopes. Today in the cities as well as the mountain villages there are men and a very few women who still practise the ancient yodels and their related verses and choral accompaniments. (Of the 500 yodel groups in Switzerland there are only three women's groups, about thirty or forty mixed groups).

A yodel group consists of not more than fourteen people who sing folk songs, usually in four-part arrangements similar in some respects to those of American barber-shop quartet groups. One or possibly two yodellers are the stars of the ensemble. Alternately they use high falsetto (head tones) or deep penetrating natural voices (chest tones) when it is their turn to perform.

Folk festivals like the yodel festivals indicated earlier provide a rare opportunity to see the Swiss in an unsophisticated moment, to observe their wit and humour, their pride in the ancient skills and customs of their country, their Canton and their village. The charm of the festivals lies in their authenticity. There is nothing contrived, not an artificial note. People are dressed in traditional costumes, not in jazzed up versions created for the tourists. There is usually a parade with farmers carrying alp horns or swaying under the load of heavy cow bells; women carrying flowers or pitchforks or sitting in wagons and weaving rugs; children riding on horsedrawn carts piled high with hay. A few wagons carry the famous big round Swiss cheeses.

As the groups parade, some sing folk songs; a few play accordians. Intermittently a band plays. There are animals in the parades too: horses and even a few ponies, perhaps a small dog-drawn wagon carrying a cart of fresh vegetables and flowers. At the end of the procession there is traditionally a herd of Swiss brown cows and one solitary bull. After the parading and the formal competitive events, the contestants form small groups and retire to nearby cafes and restaurants for food and drink and for much more music. It is fun to mingle with these people, to enjoy their music and their friendly hospitality.

If your schedule does not permit taking in one of the major folk festivals, inquire locally for yodel groups. Perhaps they are having a concert or a rehearsal which you might attend. But as we mentioned at the outset, don't forget that *some* Swiss yodel. The large majority do not.

[S.N.T.O.]

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