

**Zeitschrift:** Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad  
**Herausgeber:** Organisation of the Swiss Abroad  
**Band:** 7 (1980)  
**Heft:** 2

**Artikel:** Nidwalden  
**Autor:** Flüeler, Karl  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907811>

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## Nidwalden

### The author

Dr. Karl Flueler was born in 1922. He studied law at the universities of Fribourg and Zurich. Since 1952 he has been active in Nidwalden's Department of Justice, at the moment as State Attorney. His close ties with his homeland and its people and his interest in the research of historical events and connections induced him to write numerous books and articles on local history and folklore.

Nidwalden – «land nether the wood» – below the Kern Forest, as it was called in olden times, may be compared with Obwalden – land above the Kernwald – only in few things. On the contrary, it shows very noticeable contrasts to its more gentle half-brother. The broad, wide forest gave only the name to the two territories and their inhabitants. But it never managed to unite them. The pleasing upper valley with its wide and open scenery on three levels, its sunny, attractive lakes reflecting the gentle hills and gradually leading to the Alpnachersee, is separated from the austere and narrow

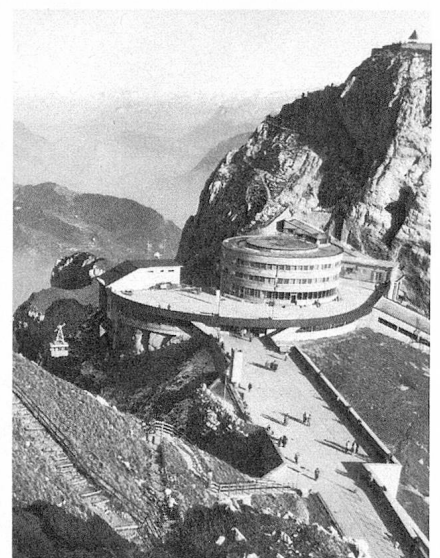
confines of Nidwalden by a topographical barrier.

From the flat bottom of the valleys, wooded rocks rise to the sky. The homesteads at considerable altitudes are difficult to tend. Thus they mostly carry names like *Fluh* (rock) or *Balm* (crag): Wandfluh, Wissiflüh, Diegisbalm, Rugisbalm. Quite often, one of the 30-odd aerial cableways is the only way of access. The wide plain between Stansstad and Buochs is still marked by a swamp and river landscape, even though the land was reclaimed in early times and has been progressively cultivated and built up over the past years. Where the wild river Engelbergeraas leaves the narrow valley, it sets out on a unfettered journey. It knew no bounds in its ever changing course, until, about 500 years ago, its flow was restrained by a bold scheme – there is no other like it anywhere in the Primitive Cantons – when the river was forced into a canal some 7.5 km long which at times lies several meters above the bottom of

Traditional costume of the canton Nidwalden (Photo ONST)



Pilatus, the highest peak (of 2070 m)  
(Photo ONST)



the valley and now flows through the Buochser basin to the Lake of Lucerne.

Only the sunny side of the Buerenberg above the lake and protected from chilly North winds and the hillside falling down towards Beckenried present a peaceful picture, though they, too, torn by wild rivers. Apart from that, however, the scenery has little sunshine and serenity to offer; Stans misses the sun almost completely in December and January. The landscape is sombre, as are the dark woods which surround it, severe, closed up and ever dangerous. Whoever trusts it has to be alert, quick of reaction and resolve, ready to meet danger as was the hero Arnold von Winkelried, though and agile like the historian Dr. Robert Durrer and the large group of artists by no means prim or affected, which the land has produced at all times.

Where do the people originate whom nature has trained to be like that? The Dragon's Den on the Mueterschwandenberg hid traces

The «Schnitzturm» near Stansstad on the lake of Lucerne (Photo ONST)



Swiss Landsgemeinde in Stans (Photo ONST)

from the Bronze Age until it was destroyed by military installations. May Nidwalden bear the key of St. Peter and the proud *Romanus sum* in its crest? Fire tombs at Buochs and meadow names like Dabletten, Kirsiten and Brattelen indicate settlements in the Celto-Roman epoch. But the unmistakable language is Alemannic. Speedily and as on wings, the cumbersome vowels and umlauts of Northern idioms glide into diphthongs so difficult to imitate, preferably in clear «e»s and «i»s. The easiest way of recognizing the Nidwaldner, however, is the cheerful «ili» which he adds to all persons and things that he likes: *Maitili, Tädili, Schätzili, Huisili, Chälbili*. But of whatever stock he may come, he must be alert, quick to make decisions, versatile and inventive – that is what nature asks of him.

Thus the people of Nidwalden, without asking their cautious half-brother in the upper part, decided resolutely to swear to the Alliance

with Uri and Schwyz at the beginning of August 1291. Without haste, Obwalden followed in due course. In those days, Nidwalden protected its gateway, the harbour of Stansstad, by an elaborate system of blocking. More than 6000 tree trunks were driven into the shallow bottom of the lake, and an artificial island with sentry boxes and barricades prevented any hostile landings.

With so much spirit of adventure, it seems surprising that Nidwalden remained so small. But it bordered on friendly Communes on all sides, and there was no room for expansion. In the North, the City of Lucerne reached the Buerenberg and secured a sizable chunk for itself. In the East, Seelisberg belonged to Uri, though it was accessible by land and is part of the

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region today. In the South, the free imperial Abbey of the Benedictine Monastery of Engelberg formed a boundary. Only in the West, the traditionally wise Hergiswil had freed itself from the feudal overlords and preferred a relationship on equal terms with the rural State across the lake to communal ties with the City of Lucerne.

Thus remained only consultation with Ennetbirgen and sharing of its political fate. Together with Uri and Schwyz, Nidwalden reigned in Bellenz, Blenio and Riviera for well nigh 400 years, after Obwalden had retired following some unhappy and disappointing undertakings. Not even the tribally related Haslital could unite with it. Who knows, if Nidwaldner had inhabited the upper valley ... Yet in Swiss political life, Nid-



View of the Buochserbucht facing Beckenried. In the background the mountains Nieder- and Oberbauen.

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walden had little luck. Although it had created the bond with the two other Primitive Cantons, it was soon outdone by the more densely populated and cautious Obwalden. Within the framework of the Diet, Nidwalden counted only as one third of the votes. Once only in three years, it was allowed to send representatives to the Diet and provide bailiffs for the communal bailiwicks. Nidwalden protested immediately against this rebuff, in Council and with force, in the unhappy French period, by rejecting Engelberg so ready to join, and also during the *Sonderbund* wars. If its Government today insists so firmly on a full voice in the Council of States, inspite of general federal interests, it has its source in history.



View of the Bürgenstock and the lake of Lucerne (Photo ONST)

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Construction of a viaduct between Beckenried and Rütenen  
(Photo Odermatt)



Animal market in Wil

(Photo Odermatt)

What may be said about the modern method of governing the Canton? Nidwalden is one of the *Landsgemeinde* Cantons. Every year, on the last Sunday in April, the people assemble at Wil on the Aa, in order to vote on matters of importance and to conduct elections. The citizens are greeted as «*getriiwi, liebi Landsliit*». But the complexity of more and more legislation is becoming too much of a burden. This has led to an oligarchy of a group of leaders dominating the Cantonal Parliament. In addition, one has to watch that the *Landsgemeinde* does not become a mere folkloristic event.

That is why education is most important. It is certainly not neglected. Elementary schooling lasts 9 years everywhere. There is no lack of modern and up-to-date school buildings. The *Gymnasium* of the Capuchin monks in Stans is open to boys and girls alike; it is considered the Canton's middle school. Concordats ensure plenty

of opportunity of training outside the Canton to those willing to learn different subjects. Only students at higher educational institutions are at a disadvantage; minimal scholarships compel them to look for additional work in order to supplement their grants.

In the economic field, Nidwalden defied all expert reasoning at the time of the big crisis in the 'thirties and forced self-sufficiency with electric energy. It has consequently been swamped by industrial development. Farmers and small traders exchanged cowherd's tunic and tradesman's apron for the uniform factory overall. Their sons work in the service industry, in offices and administrative departments. We have become financially strong. But the formerly sound state finances are now badly strained by a building boom and none too expert development of new industrial undertakings. Not the least of the expensive ventures is the joining up with the rest of Switzerland through the motor-

way, once so badly longed for and now just as strongly cursed. And the remaining untouched countryside is getting marred more and more.

Nidwalden was opened up as late as 1860 by the bridge across the narrow straits of the lake near Stansstad and the Bruenig road around the Lopper. Previously, market ferries and rowing boats established the only contact with Lucerne, Uri and Schwyz. Another 100 years were needed before the Canton joined up with the railway network of the country (1964). In December this year, the opening of the Seelisberg Tunnel and the transit motorway from Lucerne to Uri will bring the fruits of this progress. Will they be a blessing or a curse?

We are in the process of adapting ourselves to the rest of Switzerland, of discarding what was typical of Nidwalden. Let us be watchful that in this craze for innovation we don't lose also that which is sound federal nature!

Karl Flueler