Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 38 (1974)
Heft: [12]

Artikel: The Lake of the Forest Cantons : the cradle of Switzerland
Autor: Ritter, Irene
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-942150

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The Lake of the Forest Cantons — the Cradle of Switzerland

The country around the Lake of the Forest Cantons—sometimes also called Lake Lucerne — is the cradle of Switzerland and shrouded in legends of the National Hero, William Tell. The lake, guarded by high and steep mountains, was an important link in the trade route across the Gotthard Pass and the five old-time paddle steamers that still ply the lake are witnesses of a time before railways and good roads existed. The once heavily fortified town of Lucerne where the Reuss leaves the lake was a major trade centre on this route.

Where the river Reuss hurtles through the Schollenen Godge from the Gotthard Pass, it was decided at the end of the 12th century to build a bridge. So difficult was it to span the foaming waters between dark and frightening rocks, that the Devil offered his assistance. He made one condition: that the first to come over the bridge would belong to him. Determined to outwit the Devil, the peasants sent a goat across the bridge. The Devil was so furious that he wrenched a huge boulder from the mountainside and hurled it at the peasants. The boulder missed and rolled to the bottom of the gorge where now, centuries later, there was the devil to pay because the boulder landed precisely where the N2 Motorway has to go through and the Swiss Government is obliged to pay a quarter of a million Francs to displace

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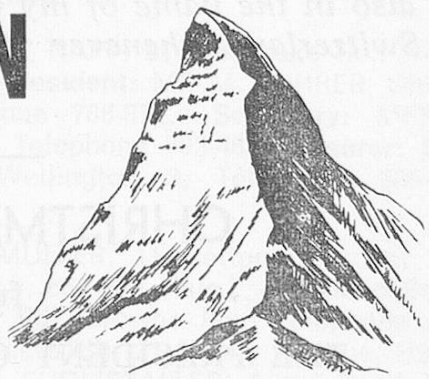

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the Devil's work three hundred feet.

Devil or no devil, it was this Schollenen bridge which shortened the north-south route, making the St. Gotthard instead of the Lukmanier Pass the direct link between Flanders and Germany into Italy. The Lake of the Forest Cantons therefore became a vital waterway along the main trade route. Merchants, pilgrims and warriors travelled over the Gotthard, and it was not long before the influence of contact with the world beyond the Alps made itself felt. Increased traffic turned many a peasant into trader. Not only wine, rice, oils, silks and spices came over the Gotthard to the Forest Cantons—with them came new concepts and new ideals.

The Cradle of Switzerland

The Lake of the Forest Cantons is bound at its southern end by the Canton of Uri. A narrow waterway between steep mountains, the Bay of Uri is wild and majestic. It was a perfect setting in which to breed independence, for the heroic deeds of William Tell, and for conspiracies to defy the oppressive Hapsburgs.

Does it matter if the William Tell immortalised by Friedrich Schiller really existed or not? Places along the Bay of Uri seem to imply he did. He was possibly a member of the free men who met at the Rutli meadow on the shore of Uri on the 1st of August 1291 to swear the oath of allegiance which united the three Forest Cantons of Iri, Schwyz and Unterwalden in their fight for freedom from the Hapsburg yoke. Be it so, the gentle Rutli meadow became a hallowed place of pilgrimage in times of danger whenever it was necessary to reassert the ideals of the first confederates. In 1940, when Switzerland was encircled by the Axis powers, General Guisan summoned his chiefs of staff to the Rutli, and there solemnly declared that Switzerland would not capitulate, but would retire to the Alps around the Gotthard, and in this "Reduit" concentrate all the military and civilian forces necessary for resistance.

Battle honours and illustrious names glitter on the northern shore of the Bay of Uri, in the Canton of Schwyz. From Schwyz came many of the regimental commanders who made the Swiss regiments famous all over Europe. In Brunnen, the lake-shore resort, the poet Shelley, Franz Liszt, the painter William Turner, Richard Wagner and King Ludwig II of Bavaria, Queen Victoria, Queen Wilhelmina and the fairy-tale poet Hans Christian Andersen were among the many holiday guests. Yet Brunnen has another important role. It is the midway harbour for the lake traffic between Lucerne and Fluelen and shelter from the dreaded fohn storms.

Coming over the Gotthard Pass, the hot dry wind from the south, known as the fohn, is a fiendish tyrant over the Lake and its poeple. It first vents all its fury on the Bay of Uri and then whips round the bend at Brunnen to play havoc off Gersau and, sometimes with water-spouts up to 400 ft., turns the lake into a dangerous boiling cauldron.

The Bay of Gersau

From Brunnen the Lake turns practicaly at right angles into the Bay of Gersau. Round the spur of Seelisberg, the coastguard inn of

Treib has been a place of refuge since the Middle Ages, where boatmen trapped in fohn storms can stay over until the storm abates. The Treib inn was also an asylum where fugitives were immune from medieval law for several nights. Easy to reach from all three Forest Cantons, the House of Treib was regularly used as meeting place for the confederates. It was Switzerland's first House of Parliament, and the historical parlour still exists in the presentday inn.

Over the Lake from Treib is Gersau which for five hundred years was the smallest sovereign state of Europe. Numbering less than two thousand, the people of Gersau were obliged to keep up water traffic for the French army when nearly six thousand of Napoleon's soldiers were stationed there. The Republic of Gersau managed to remain independent until the Vienna Congress, when it was integrated into Schwyz.

A car-ferry crosses the Lake from Gersau to Beckenried on the Nidwaldner shore, and between the two resorts the Lake is at its deepest. A tortuous under-water region of mountains and valleys, the Bay of Gersau is almost closed off by the two promontories of the Rigi and the Burgenstock. Beyond this narrow passage, the Lake of the Forest Cantons spreads out into the shape of a cross to the Bays of Weggis, Alpnach, Kussnacht and Lucerne.

Centenaries of the Bay of Weggis

A cave about half way up the Rigi, which is known to have been inhabited by a prehistoric clan, indicates the level of the glaciers in the

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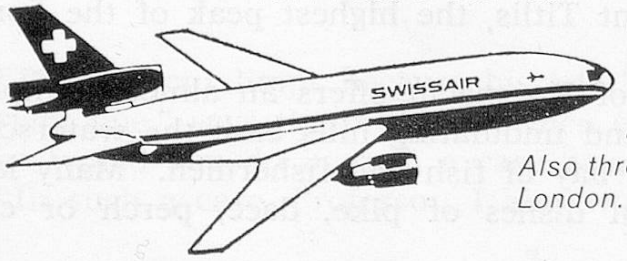

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Ice Age. The Rigi was formed by the movement of the glaciers and the Burgenstock was an island surrounded by rivers of ice. Today the Burgenstock is a luxurious hotel estate, whose first owner was an enterprising engineer who specialised in mountain railways. He invented the loop track which enables the cars to pass each other half way, and tried out on himself his automatic railbrake without which today no mountain railway is ever built. His successor, father of the present owner, had a flair for art and, able to indulge his personal taste, he furnished the hotels with a fabulous collection of Gobelin tapestries, pictures and valuable antiques. There is no guest book, but during the hundred years of the Burgenstock hotels, many a crowned head, statesman, star, scientist, writer and artist has paused on this island of gracious living.

The shore at the foot of the Rigi is regarded as the Lake Riviera where the climate is mild, the vegetation rich and plentiful. From Vitznau, Europe's oldest rack-and-pinion railway climbs to the top of Rigi, and over 95 per cent of the cog racks are still the original ones constructed in 1871 by the inventor Nicholas Riggenbach.

Weggis was developed as a tourist centre in the mid-19th century when Ida Waldis started her telegraph service, which remained in the family for two further generations. From the turn of the century until the advent of the telephone, transmission by telegraphy was at least tenfold what it is today. For over fifty years Anna operated the telegraph in her grandmother's living-room while sister Margrit pedalled her bicycle to deliver the many thousands of telegrams. It was only three years ago that the two sisters retired and the telegraph, after a centenary of private service, was transferred to the Weggis Post Office.

One of Margrit Waldis's frequent destinations in 1921 was Hertenstein, where the Emperor Karl established a court of exile. It was one of those quirks of fate that the last reigning monarch of the House of Hapsburg should seek refuge on the very shores of the lake where his forefathers had reigned as tyrants.

Of Dragons and Fishes

The Bay of Alpnach is almost cut off from the Lake by the spur of Mount Pilatus. A sinister mountain, it was reputed to be the home of dragons who breathed out fire as they flew back and forth over the lake from Mount Pilatus to the Rigi. Legend tells of Pontius Pilate buried in shame and curses in a small dark lake high up in the crags. Mount Pilatus was endowed with the supernatural because, standing detached from the main range of Alps, it does have special atmospheric powers. Framing the other shore of the Bay of Alpnach, the Stanserhorn stands guard to the valley of Engelberg, mecca for skiers and mountaineers on the eternal snows of the Mount Titlis, the highest peak of the Forest Cantons.

Across the Lake, the Bay of Kussnacht offers an almost complete contrast. Here vistas widen and undulating hills ease the waterscape into a lighter mood. It is the bay of fish and fishermen. Many lakeshore restaurants specialise in dishes of pike, dace, perch or char

brought in daily from the Lake. Of the 25 fishermen still professionally active on the Lake of the Forest Cantons, seven belong to the one family Hofer of Meggen, in the Bay of Kussnacht. As far back as the 16th century, generations of Hofers have been fishing the water of the cross-shaped Lake of Lucerne. Setting off at dawn summer and winter, it takes about five hours of hard work to bring in the nets set the evening before. An average daily catch in summer is about 600 lb., but the biggest catch Sebastian Hofer ever made was about 3000 lb. of roach—for which there is no market—and it all had to go to a local farmer for pigmeal!

Fair Wind, or Foul . . .

Off the spur of Meggenhorn are two tiny but significant islands. The larger is Altstad, the old customshouse which controlled the port of Lucerne. The old chalet on the waterfront and its shallow harbour offer shelter to watercraft in trouble. The other island, a rock with a chapel, houses St. Nicholas, patron saint of the boatmen and fishermen. It takes three hours on a steamer to travel from Lucerne to Fluelen. Covering 250,000 nautical miles a year, the steamers carry some 2 to 3 million passengers as well as freight and mail. Only five old-time paddle steamers still ply the Lake. Panic broke out among tradition-loving steamer fans when the oldest steamboat "Wilhelm Tell" was put out of commission at the age of 62, fearing the world's largest side-wheeler fleet was being threatened with extinction. "Wilhelm Tell" has become a lakeshore floating restaurant on the fashionable Schwizerhof Quay of Lucerne. Is it really William Tell's fate to be a tourist attraction?

Built on either side of the river Reuss as it flows out of the Lake, Lucerne was an important trade centre on the crossroads between the Brunig route to Zurich and the north-south Gotthard route. A heavily fortified town, the main defence line to the lakeside was provided by the covered wooden bridges, with the parapet facing the lake higher than on the river side, and chains mounted on piles beneath to prevent passage of enemy watercraft down the river. The oldest still in use is the Chapel Bridge with the octagonal Water Tower. The Schweizerhof Quay occupies the area where the continuation of the Chapel Bridge led to the Cathedral. People in Lucerne soon found the bridges a pleasant place for strolling, as the roof protected them from bad weather, so paintings illustrating local history and saints were affixed in the gables.

It took 41 years, and a young boy who overheard a plot to murder the free men of Lucerne, to enable the town of Lucerne to break away from the mighty Hapsburgs and join the Confederacy of the three Forest Cantons.

Irene Ritter.

"This patient limps because his left leg is four inches shorter than his right one," says the professor when examining a medical candidate. "What would you do in such a case, young man?"

"In such a case, Professor, I also would limp!"