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Editorial

Considering it is Switzerland's national day this month, I thought this would make the ideal topic for my editorial. But while pondering this subject and what I was going to write, I came to the rapid realisation my knowledge was somewhat lacking.

In truth, the tiny fragments of facts I do possess about the first of August and the history of my country of heritage are pretty dismal.

Quite frankly I was astounded at the huge amount of non-knowledge I had acquired during my 26 years.

Then I started to think about other first, second and further-removed generations of Swissies out there who find themselves with the same void.

Contemplating my flaw further I decided to give myself a quick history lesson about Switzerland and aimed to uncover my biggest question: "Why is the national day celebrated on August 1?"

Yes, I have been given some knowledge

from my parents and others, but I don't ever recall having in-depth discussions or lessons covering the more detailed points of Swiss history.

So this editorial is for all those younger, further removed generations of Swiss who may find themselves asking similar questions as to what I have recently.

That said, I do hope this is also of interest to more mature readers who wouldn't mind a five minute refresher course.

Sifting through books, encyclopaedias, the internet, and what-not, it seems Switzerland has had a fairly colourful history. Not bad for such a wee country that is only one-sixth the size of New Zealand.

Most of us probably know of the treaty signed between three cantons in 1291, which sparked the traditional beginnings of the Switzerland we have now. But did you know that our pre-human ancestors were living in Appenzell below the Ebenalp and in Schaffhausen during the Palaeolithic age

(approximately 40,000 years ago)?

Nope, I wasn't aware of that either.

Apparently humans have been wandering around and fighting over Helvetia (pre-BC name for Switzerland) for thousands of years. Considering this, the fact that we see this country as being only 700 years-old seems kind of ironic to me and very amusing.

On the flip-side of this, every country needs a birthday, and why not August 1, 1291?

So what happened in 1291 that began the birth of a nation?

After hundreds of years of warring, overthrows, and a multitude of rulers, Rudolf III of Habsburg became German King in 1273 and won power over large parts of Switzerland.

Sick of foreign overlords and strict rule, the death of Rudolf III on July 15, 1291 gave three cantons the chance to change things. Nidwalden (Obwalden joined the league in December that same year), Schwyz, and Uri formed the Everlasting League. By the "Rutli Oath" and a sealed document, they promised mutual assistance in keeping their traditional rights and against the policies of the Habsburgs.

Between 1332 and 1353 the Confederation increased to eight members, with the addition of Lucerne, Zurich, Glarus, Zug, and Berne.

When the Habsburgs tried to bring Switzerland back under Austrian rule the Confederation broke free of the Empire in 1439.

Hundreds of turbulent years followed, with various wars, battles and other disagreements between the Confederation and other countries and between the cantons themselves. However, Switzerland ultimately ended up with the 26 cantons and half-cantons it has now. The final one to join was Jura, near the French border, in 1979.

While researching Switzerland's history I have found out many interesting things and have enjoyed learning more about the country my parents come from. As such, I urge other young people out there to do the same if, like me, they ever wonder about the country they come from. And if during your own history lessons any of you come across an article or information that actually states why Switzerland's national day is celebrated on August first, I would be very glad to hear from you.

At this stage I can only assume the Rutli Oath was made on that day in 1291, but from the material I've seen so far I can only narrow it down to between July 15 and December of that year.

Anyway, Happy 711th Switzerland! I hope you are all enjoying it.

Liz Amstalden

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