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Folk Traditions

Switzerland has preserved many ancient festivals and traditional ceremonies which are still celebrated with enthusiasm. Among them are a number of survivors from pagan times, in particular old customs connected with the end of winter and the Carnival. Religious festivals and processions are celebrated with great pomp and ceremony.

The strong national consciousness of the Swiss is given expression in the traditional meetings of the *Landsgemeinden* (cantonal assemblies), the shooting contests on the Rutli meadow and other popular events. There are also a number of sports peculiar to Switzerland which have developed out of old peasant sporting contests.

On New Year's Eve, particularly in the German-speaking parts of the country, figures disguised in fancy-dress parade through the streets, symbolising the end of the year and the time of darkness; and the symbolic struggle between winter and spring is continued far into the new year in the traditional celebrations of the Shrovetide carnival, **Fasnacht**, lasting well into Lent. Atavistic fertility rites and pagan attitudes to nature survive in the numerous masked figures of 'wild men' under a variety of names - Butzi, Wildma, Barzeli, Roitschaggda, etc. Particularly notable is the Basle carnival, the *Baseler Fasnacht*, which begins with the 'Morgenstraich' at 4.00am on the Monday after Ash Wednesday and continues until the following Thursday. The Morganstraich is a parade through the old town, beginning before daybreak by the 'cliques' or carnival guilds, accompanied by a band of fifes and drums. This is followed on Monday afternoon by the official procession, in which the members of the various cliques wear masks and uniforms. The procession also includes decorated floats with satirical scenes. There is another noisy occasion on Tuesday, when there is a parade by drum and wind bands ('Guggenmusiken'). The Swiss carnival is celebrated later than in some other countries since it is still related to the old Julian calendar.

Another old spring custom is the *Eieraufleset* ('picking up eggs'), in which the egg is a fertility symbol representing the victory of spring over winter.

There are also numerous **religious processions**. In Ticino,

which reflects the influence of Latin culture, there are *Holy Week processions* in many places, sometimes (eg Mendrisio) including representations of the Passion. - At the beginning of April the ceremony of the *Nafelser Fahrt* is held in Glarus, with the participation of the Capuchins of Nafels - commemorating the victory of the men of Garus over the Austrians on April 9, 1388. *The Stoos pilgrimage* at Appenzell has a similar origin.

At many places in the canton of Lucerne there is an Ascension ride, the *Auffahrtsumritt*, for the blessing of the fields - a ceremony which harks back to pre-Christian traditions. The finest and most impressive religious processions are those celebrated in the predominantly Catholic parts of the country at Corpus Christi, when beautiful old traditional costumes can frequently be seen.

There are also many **historical festivals** reflecting the Swiss love of freedom and readiness to defend their independence. Thus the battles of Morgarten (1315), Sempach (1386), Nafels (1388: see above), Murten (1476) and Domach (1499) are commemorated by splendid parades in historical costume. Numerous too are the festivals of the riflemen's guilds and military festivals like the *Rutlischiessen* (Rutli shooting contest) in Uri, the *Knabenschiessen* (boy's shooting) in Zurich, the *Ausschiesset* in Thun and the *Wyberschiessen* (women's shooting) in the canton of Lucerne. Perhaps

the best-known historical celebration is the Geneva *Escalade*, commemorating the successful defence of the town against a Savoyard attack (1602). - Living evidence of the Swiss attachment to democracy is provided by the meetings of the **Landsgemeinden** (communal assemblies) at which the citizens elect their representatives by popular vote.

The Swiss **National Day**, which is celebrated throughout the country with torchlight processions, fireworks and shooting contests is the August 1, commemorating the occasion in 1291 when representatives of the three original cantons of Schwyz, Uri and Unterwalden met on the Rutli meadow a swore an oath of alliance and mutual defence, thus laying the foundations of the Confederation.

Source: Baedeker's Switzerland.

