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Jakob Lauper – one of New Zealand's earliest Swiss immigrants

by Hilary Low*

On 15 March a small group gathered in the beautiful Old Napier Cemetery to unveil a headstone on the grave of Jakob Lauper who died 109 years ago. In the group were two of Jakob's great-great-great granddaughters, Susanne and Sonja Hostettler, from Switzerland.

Jakob was one of the first Swiss in New Zealand. He was born in 1815 in Giffers, not far from Fribourg. His father was a farmer and prominent local leader (*Landammann*).

Young Jakob was a free spirit who loved roaming the countryside and had a reputation for practical jokes. He grew to be a rebellious young man with an "unusual personality" and an appetite for adventure.

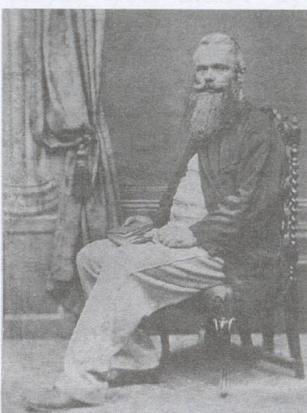
After the village school, he attended the prestigious Kollegium St. Michel in Fribourg, possibly to study law, but was expelled for misconduct before completing his studies. At the age of 20, he entered the Swiss Guard in

Rome, but stayed only a few months. It is likely that he left to follow other former Guards into the French Foreign Legion.

After five years away Jakob turned up at home in Giffers. He stayed and appeared to settle down. He married his cousin, Elisabeth, and they had two sons. He worked as a farmer, and a justice of the peace, then became a member of the local district judicial tribunal. But it was said that he had financial problems caused by his passion for the Paris stock-markets, and as his situation worsened he became more deeply troubled.

Then, in 1858, he left his family and Switzerland for the Victorian goldfields, where he became an expert gold miner. Four years later he followed the rush across the Tasman to the new goldfields in New Zealand. But by chance he joined a Canterbury government expedition to the West Coast; then hired again soon afterwards for a new expedition with government surveyor, Henry Whitcombe, to search for a pass suitable for a road through the Southern Alps in advance of the anticipated gold rush on the West Coast.

In April 1863, the party of four set out from Christchurch. At the foot of the Alps near the source of the Rakaia River, Whitcombe believed he



Jakob Lauper, described as "a giant of a man with an aura of strength and energy", c1858, before leaving his home and family for the Victorian goldfields.

had found the pass. Against orders, he decided to cross it (later named the Whitcombe Pass) to the West Coast, and to take only Lauper with him. The journey descended into a gruelling nightmare, as the two men, starving and exhausted, struggled down to the coast, where Whitcombe tragically drowned crossing the flooded Taramakau River.

Miraculously, Jakob survived. Back in Christchurch, the government praised him for his loyalty and courage, asked him to write a report of the expedition and Whitcombe's death. Despite his weakened state, he started work on his report (*Umständlicher Bericht über die Expedition und den Tod des Hr Withcomb*). Within a few weeks it was finished, translated (badly) into English and published.

Afterwards Jakob prospected for gold, worked as a surveyor's assistant, then settled in Hokitika, working in menial jobs in the government engineer's office. In 1867 he left to return home to Switzerland, apparently to bring his family back to New Zealand, but they were reluctant. He tried to settle, but after years of freedom and adventure it was difficult to return to his former life.

He stayed for 12 unhappy years, then at the age of 65, he disappeared again for New Zealand; this time to live in Napier, where he worked at the Napier Bluff Lighthouse until his death in 1891, aged 76. He was buried in a pauper's grave at the Napier Cemetery, which is now marked with its new headstone. Lauper's name lives on too in the Southern Alps. The majestic peak above the Whitcombe

Pass is named Lauper Peak, and Lauper Stream flows from the Pass into the Rakaia River.

Today some of Jakob's descendants, like Susanne and Sonja, still live near Giffers. With the passage of time any family bitterness towards him has faded, replaced by a desire to know about and understand their restless, unconventional ancestor who abandoned his home and family not once, but twice, for a life in colonial New Zealand.

* Author of a new book: *Pushing his Luck: Report of the Expedition and Death of Henry Whitcombe, by Jakob Lauper, A New Translation and Commentary* by Hilary Low, Canterbury University Press, 2010.