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Hamilton Swiss Club – the last 60 years

Responding to an invitation by Walter Risi and Arnold Biland, a group of Swiss gathered at the Te Rapa Hall on 27th May 1956 – and the Hamilton Swiss Club came to be.

The aim of the Club was to enjoy Swiss folklore, speak Swiss dialect, prepare and enjoy Swiss foods, and above all to make new friends and share the prevailing homesickness among the many recent newcomers to the greater Waikato area. The Club soon became affiliated with the Benevolent Society of Switzerland (now known as the Swiss Society of New Zealand).

In the early years, there were regular social gatherings on Sunday evenings, as well as the other annual events – the picnic in February; the National Day celebration; the fondue evening; and the Christmas function – which all still exist today. Card evenings, which became regular events during the Winter months since the mid 1960's, have also always been very popular.

Catering was all done by the ladies on the committee – much effort went into providing traditional Swiss cooking and baking. During the first 25 years, reimbursement was still unheard of – and after providing and preparing the food for the function, the committee ladies still paid to attend the event!!

But baking abilities have always been much appreciated – and special mention must be made of the immense selection of 'Guetzi' produced by Helen Staheli over many years, as well as the legendary loaves of fresh bread baked by Heidi Leuenberger. Many will also remember the specialty Swiss baking from Werner Buri's shop, and the French Bakery in Ward Street run by Ruth Waldvogel.

The Club, especially during the earlier years, was never short of entertainment – with many talented singers, yodellers, musicians and a dance group. Although not so prevalent today, we still manage a small choir for special occasions, and are always delighted to be entertained by Auckland's Swiss-Kiwi Yodel Group at larger functions.

Our Club has always been well served with very capable and dedicated committees. Herbert Staheli became the Club President in 1981, and apart from a break from 1985 – 87, has now been in this role for a total of 33 years.

The Hamilton Swiss Club has played a huge role in the running of the Swiss

Society, as well as the editing of the *Helvetia*. After innumerable years of commitment to the regular publication of the *Helvetia* until the early 1980's, it was finally decided that, together with running the Society, the editing would also move from Club to Club at five year intervals. In 1983, it was taken over by Taranaki, followed by Wellington and Auckland, before returning to Hamilton in 1997. This year, we have once again taken on our term of Society duties, which has just recently been reduced to four years.

Sports still play a major role in our annual events calendar – beginning with shooting in mid-February, followed by bowling and shot put at the picnic – both for Club trophies and Society medal competitions. This is followed during the Winter months with regular card evenings, now held five times annually in Cambridge on Friday nights; but previously taking place at various other venues – including Putaruru, Tirau, Eureka and Matamata – on Saturdays. In earlier years, attendance regularly reached 50 to 60 players – these days it is around 35 to 40. To this day, however, it is still difficult to know whether card evenings are well attended and popular for the love of playing cards – or the assurance of a delicious supper which everyone looks forward to. Maybe a combination of the two!!

Every year we are always keen to compete in the Interclub competitions with the Auckland Swiss Club, in the hope of going on to compete for the cowbell against Taranaki or Wellington at the Society AGM in June.

Bowling has also been a popular sport at the annual picnic, both for medal and trophy competitions, and until recently, bowling for the Landjaeger in teams of three. Many of us who have grown up attending Swiss Club picnics will remember as children congregating on the hay bales at the end of the alley so that we could pick up the skittles after each bowl!

From 1961 to 1973, the picnic was held at Risi's farm at Ngaruawahia, before moving to Villiger's farm at Kiwitahi until 1999. It then took place at Eureka School for four years, before moving to its current location at Newstead School since 2004.

Apart from the regular annual functions, there have also been many special events and occasions over the years.

These included:

- Fancy Dress Balls in the 1960's
- 10th Jubilee Ball, 1966; 20th Jubilee Ball at Riverlea, 1976; 25th Jubilee at Te Rapa Racecourse, 1981; 40th Jubilee at Cambridge Racecourse, 1996; 50th Jubilee at Claudelands, 2006; and 60th Jubilee at Karapiro on 31st July.
- Film shows at Morrinsville in 1960's to 70's, and more recently over past few years.
- 700 years Switzerland, 1991 – commemorated with a walk around Hamilton Lake to replicate a similar walk in Switzerland.
- 1st January 2000 – running the 'Number One' drink stall for the world's first International Marathon of the new century held in Hamilton for 2500 runners at 5.00am. This was followed by a champagne breakfast at Joe and Helen Staheli's home and then another world first commenced – probably the very first "Jassen" of the new millennium !!

So what has changed since our Club was first formed 60 years ago? Well, not much, really. This was evidenced at our recent 60th Jubilee function which was attended by a large number of people who came to a Club function for the first time and made new friends with fellow Swiss.

Traditional food is still just as appreciated and popular – from Sauerkraut and Fondue, to sausages and home baking.

Today, our Club is financially secure, largely thanks to the dedication of committee members over the years, particularly during earlier times as the Club was being established. These days, expenses are reimbursed, and family functions such as the Christmas function and picnic are at least partially subsidised to keep costs to families as low as possible.

Our membership today covers all ages and family dynamics and numbers are higher than 25 years ago. Many are immigrants from the 1950's – 60's and their families; others are descendants of even earlier immigrants; and then there are also the more recent immigrants with young families – the future of our Club.

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A 32 page booklet about the Hamilton Swiss Club was produced in 2006 to commemorate our 50th Jubilee. Copies are available from Beatrice, ph 07 843 7971.