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ROUNDABOUT SWITZERLAND

by Derek Meakin

JUNE brings one of the most fascinating events I have in my Swiss calendar. And it is no man-made festival either.

The Valaisan cowfights that take place every June are unique. They can only be seen in one particular corner of the country when the hardy Alpine cattle are driven to their summer pastures high up the mountainside.

I was introduced to my first cowfight while staying in an isolated chalet above the little-known Swiss resort of Verbier as guest of the local judge.

Verbier, lying on a grassy plateau in the back of the beyond, is not a spot to figure in all the travel guides. Most of the visitors there are on first-name terms with the locals. So the cowfights and other traditional events that serve to animate this little community are more or less family affairs.

I could sense a strange atmosphere of excitement and anticipation when I woke up on that fine summer morning. The air was full of the multitoneed sound of the cowbells, and through my window I could see the farmers driving their cows up the path that wound past the chalet.

Hurriedly I climbed to visit my nearest neighbour, Marcel the cowherd. He was fussing about his stable, smartening up his impatient animals. The idea was that I should help Marcel lead his cows to the new pasture, which was an hour's walk further up the mountainside.

That was the idea. But in actual fact it was the cows which

led us. So restless were they that it was almost impossible to hold them in check.

In his sing-song Bagnard *patois*, Marcel said they were always the same on the morning of the fights. Some sixth sense told them they must get to the pasture as fast as they could.

And as far as my eyes could see, more and more cows were arriving by different mountain paths. As we got higher the excited music of the cowbells, the fierce bellows, the shrill cries of the farmers and their wives and children all rose to a crescendo of noise.

Suddenly we burst on to a vast grassy amphitheatre. It was alive with cows, all shades of brown, some chewing, some mooing, and some knocking each other down with gay abandon.

When our leading cow saw the huge assembly she pranced in the air with delight, tossed her head, and let out a fearsome war cry.

Then, before we could stop her, she dashed away to join her fellows. Immediately she plunged into battle, shook her wicked-looking horns and tried to challenge the whole herd at once.

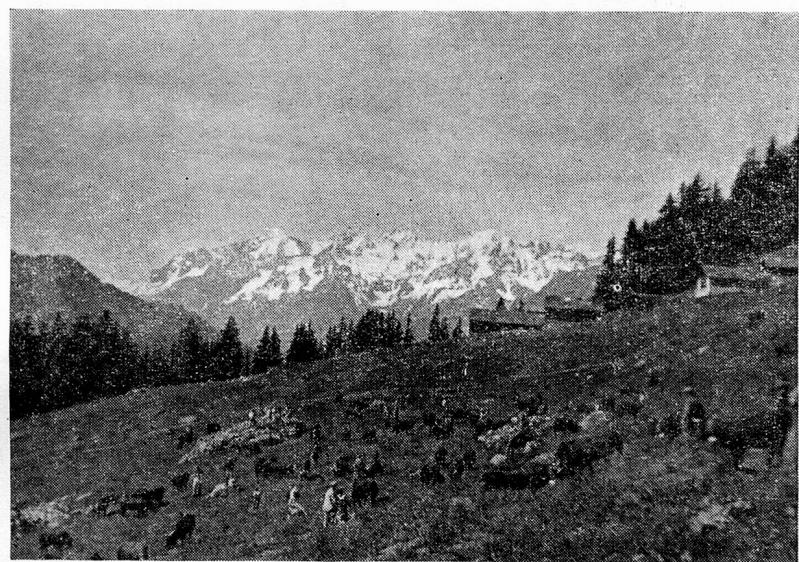
I went to a point above the natural arena where a group of farmers and their friends were watching the scene.

One was telling his neighbours: "It's strange, but you won't find them fighting down in the valley. Yet once they climb up here something comes over them. It must be the mountain air".

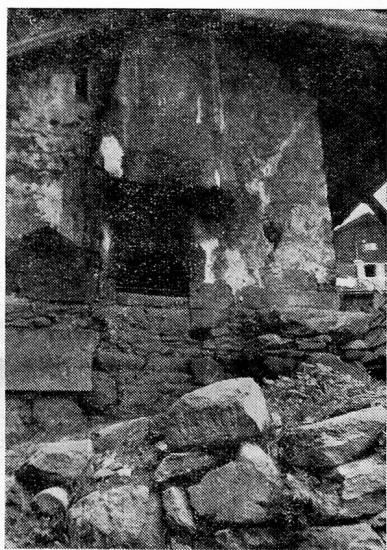
Or was it, I wondered, some survival of an age-old savage instinct that, in this remote region of the Alps, can still turn ordinary milking cows into ferocious fighting machines?

For these battles I was watching had a purpose behind them. With man only a bystander, the cows would fight it out among themselves until the strongest of them all emerged as Queen of the Herd.

For the rest of the summer the others would follow wherever she led. And any indiscipline would be met by a sharp butt of her powerful horns.



High above Verbier cows and farmers arrive for the traditional cowfights that take place here every year. In the background are some of the snow-covered mountains that are a feature of Switzerland's rugged canton of the Valais. (Helvetic News Service copyright photographs.)



While the cows are in their summer pasture the cowherds live on milk, butter and cheese made on the spot — and hard bread baked in this ancient communal oven in Verbier.