

The old wood-carver

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Objekttyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): **- (1969)**

Heft 1563

PDF erstellt am: **26.04.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-688394>

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THE OLD WOOD-CARVER

By Bernard Fearnley

Scents and sounds re-kindle memories. The smell of dampness and wood bring instantly to mind a wood-carver's show-room at Interlaken. The tinkling sounds of a Swiss music-box re-call the discordant inter-mingling of Swiss folk-tunes with Brahms's Lullabye or maybe a song currently in the hit-parade as tourists lift musical fruit-bowls or lift the lids of inlaid cigarette or trinket boxes. To this confusion of sounds is sometimes added the jangle of cow-bells as a herd is moved up to mountain pastures, and the soft voice of the old wood-carver speaking in his native "Schwyzertütsch", or French, or English with a pleasant accent.

Even though it is years since we were last here, he recognises our ancient English car and he is out to greet us almost before it has stopped on the fore-court of his chalet. He offers a gnarled, skillful hand in greeting and his kindly eyes wrinkle in a smile. He has spent most of his eighty years carving, and I have spent many hours listening fascinated to his stories of the old days in the Oberland.

He was born in 1883, the youngest of six children, at Brienzwiler. One of his brothers was still carving every day at the age of 87. His father was a carver and tried his hand with a carving and souvenir shop at Mürren before winter sports and the funicular. Everything had to be carried up to Mürren in those days, even the rich holiday makers who were too rich-feeling, too fat or perhaps too crazy to walk. Father Holzhauer did not get rich at Mürren and there was no risk of his children being "spoiled". The three sons all took up wood-carving but, in the last years before the First World War, wood-carving was rather a poor business and Fritz, the youngest son, decided to learn French and English to assist him in running a carving shop later.

After spending some time in French-speaking Switzerland, he had acquired a fair knowledge of that language. So he decided to come to England, where he mastered English in domestic service. Returning home about 1912, he married a farmer's daughter and farmed for a few years. In 1923 he bought his Interlaken carving shop. Unfortunately, he lost a son and his wife soon after. The remainder of his family, one son and three daughters, married and moved away from the district. When his last daughter finally left him to marry a police-sergeant patrolling the Susten, Furka and Grimsel Passes, and settled in Berne, he was left alone. It became even more important for him to renew old friendships formed with his tourist-customers, who called on him year after year and sent their friends to see him. As an Englishman who loves Switzerland, it is a source of pride to me that this fine

old man repeatedly told me that of all the nationalities visiting his show-room each summer, the English were the most reliable. When they told him they would return or recommend him to their friends they usually kept their word.

Wood-carving is one of Switzerland's most popular hobbies — enjoyed, especially during the dark days of winter, by townfolk and country people alike. Some find it a lucrative pastime but most do it just for fun. It is an ancient craft and an important part of Swiss peasant art. All manner of wooden objects are decorated with carving, including furniture and even the timber on house-façades.

Chip-carving was known to the Romans and old Germanic tribes. Pre-historic graves in South Germany have been found to contain chip-carved pottery and the Emperor Charles V had a bench embellished in this manner in 1518. In this type of carving simple geometric designs based on circles and straight lines are produced in endless variety.

True wood-carving or sculpture in wood is quite a different thing. Professional wood-carving, demanding a high degree of skill and special training, is practised all over Switzerland, but Brienz in the Bernese Oberland is the main centre. Here the craft is studied in special schools under master-craftsmen. The carvers have their own guilds and often reach an astounding degree of skill and artistry. A large part of their income is derived from attractive and inexpensive souvenirs for the tourist trade.

Fritz Holzhauer retired to his winter home, a traditional Bernese chalet by Brienzersee, at the end of each season, to carve St. Bernard dogs and chalets and peasant figures in fascinating variety. In this lonely existence he remained mentally very active and full of good humour, even in advanced years. It was with some sadness that I learned that he had been forced to give up his beloved carving. Although he was still able to hold the chisel steadily, failing eye-sight had beaten him. He sold his business and retired to his Brienz chalet, to live out his life, I hope, in peace and contentment, still appreciative of the beauty of his surroundings.

I shall still carry in my mind's eye, a picture of this fine old man, sitting outside his winter home, carving in the pale sun-light. On a table by his side are his tools, pieces of virgin wood and carved figures in various stages of completion. The snows have receded to the mountains, but a neat pile of logs is still stacked by the house, all exactly the same length. Some potted geraniums have been brought out from the basement to enjoy the early spring light. Soon the old man will be taking the work of the winter to his Interlaken show-room for the early tourists. As he so often told me, "I have *ein ideales Leben*".

(Drawing by the Author.)

INTERNATIONAL SALON FOR AVIATION

The first International "Salon of Aviation for Tourism, Sport and Business" ever to be organised in Switzerland will be held in conjunction with the 11th International Salon of Tourism and Sport, due to take place at the Palais de Beaulieu in Lausanne from 1st to 9th March. This new salon is placed under the patronage of Federal Councillor Roger Bonvin, the Head of the Federal Air Office, the Mayor of Lausanne and the presidents of the Swiss Association of the Aeronautical Industry, the Swiss aero-Club and the airline company Swissair.

[O.S.E.C.]