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“When the Alps glow bright...”

The Swiss Alpine Club celebrates its 150th anniversary this year. It is thanks to this organization that our mountains no longer hold any secrets. We turn the spotlight on a sporting association that has developed in line with Swiss society and talk to Françoise Jaquet, the club's president.

By Alain Wey

It was established 150 years ago, just fifteen years after the foundation of the federal state in 1848. The Swiss Alpine Club (SAC) is an integral part of our nation's history. “Without it the Alps would not be such a big part of Swiss identity,” remarked Ueli Maurer, President of Switzerland, at the club's general meeting in June. Founded in 1863 after the British (1857) and Austrian (1862) clubs, the SAC initially focused on alpine exploration and the construction of mountain huts to facilitate ascents. Its activities then extended to mountain rescue, mountain sports instruction and environmental protection. It also has a publishing house (guides, maps etc.) and a monthly magazine called “The Alps”. As Switzerland's fifth largest sporting association, it has seen its membership triple over the past 50 years and double over the last two decades to reach over 140,000 in 2013. Its history and development have reflected that of Switzerland politically, economically and socially over the past 150 years. This is underlined by the election of Françoise Jaquet from Fribourg as the club's first female president in June. A look back in time at altitude.

The golden age of mountaineering – a period of rapid growth

In the middle of the 19th century, the mountains and peaks still held many secrets. This was also the golden age of mountaineering (1855–1865) when the highest European and Swiss summits were conquered, mainly by British teams. A patriotic movement with a scientific approach emerged in Switzerland, with the geologist Rudolf Theodor Simler a prominent figure. He did not want Swiss people seeking to find out about the Alps to have to refer to British publications. “Such a thing would be embarrassing, even shameful,” he remarked. It was against this backdrop that the Swiss



The SAC's central committee in 1893
The Monte Rosa Hut officially opened in 2009,
the Dom Hut with the Weisshorn around 1900
and the Krönten Hut in the Gotthard region

Alpine Club was founded on 19 April 1863 in the buffet restaurant at Olten railway station by 35 men belonging to the upper echelons of Swiss society (scholars, politicians and bourgeoisie). Its objective was to develop the alpine region. In order to achieve this, the club periodically selected areas for excursions on which members would focus and published topographical maps and literature on the geological and botanical findings obtained. It constructed pathways and huts in the mountains and organized the training of guides. The first hut in Tödi (Grünhornhütte, canton Glarus) was built in 1863. By the outbreak of the First World War there were 75 huts, and by the time the Second World War broke out there were 115. In his thesis on the emergence and development of the SAC, the sociologist Andrea Porrini points out that the sporting association “along with the development of the apparatus of state and the

boom in tourism contributed to the process of opening up the national territory”.

Unloved sport

Mountaineers have skied in the Glarus Alps since the 1890s. While skiing is clearly superior to snowshoes in terms of speed and pleasure, most of the SAC's sections regarded skiing as a passing fad, overlooking its practical benefits. Although the sport became increasingly popular amongst young people during the First World War, the SAC failed to respond. Skiing did not enter into the club's bylaws until 1923. The impact was remarkable as within three years the initiatives on skiing (publication of route guides, training of instructors etc.) saw the number of young members increase by 80%.

Female mountaineering

The club's development in line with that of Swiss society became even more evident

with the emancipation of women. While women took part in some of the emerging club's excursions, they were excluded from 1907. Instead of allowing their passion to be dictated by the patriarchy, Swiss women set up the “Swiss Club of Female Mountaineers” in 1918. It took over half a century before the two clubs finally merged in 1980 – nine years after women were given the right to vote at a federal level. They now make up over a third of the SAC's membership. A case of everyone is equal before the mountain? That is a question of viewpoint. The mountains take no interest in the gender of the people who explore them. In admiring the mountains we can also learn something from them.

www.sac-cas.ch

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A roped party with a woman on the Beichtgrat around 1900 and an alpine tour in the Orny area of Lower Valais

ALPINE CLUB FACTS AND FIGURES

Over 140,000 members, of whom around a third are women. Age structure: 11% aged 6 to 22, 15% aged 23 to 35, 29% aged 36 to 50, 18% aged 51 to 60 and 27% aged 61 and over.

- 111 regional sections
- 152 mountain huts
- 9,200 places to sleep
- 310,000 overnight stays a year
- 1,500 mountain guides
- 8,000 volunteers
- 97 rescue stations and around 3,000 active volunteer rescuers
- 200 training courses a year

SWISS ALPINE MUSEUM CELEBRATES ANNIVERSARY

To celebrate the 150th anniversary, the Swiss Alpine Museum in Berne is holding an exhibition entitled “Helvetia Club” until 30 March 2014, tracing the history of the SAC against the backdrop of a mountain hut. Visitors to the exhibition can find out about the sporting association's demographic, sociological, political and infrastructural development by visiting seven stations. Giant, breathtaking frescos provide visitors with an adrenaline rush and they can also enjoy the filmed accounts of three generations of female mountaineers. The SAC's network

of 152 mountain huts can be viewed through binoculars. They are represented by models suspended from the ceiling according to their altitude. The exhibition is rounded off by a contemplation on global warming and the melting of the glaciers. What state will the Alps be in by 2063? Artists' impressions provide us with a glimpse of the future. Will the Aletsch glacier have turned into a lake where it will be possible to swim at an altitude of 2,850 metres? Visitors are left to ponder what the future might hold.

www.alpinesmuseum.ch