

Leonz Schicker

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Last Easter the death occurred of the oldest Swiss in New Zealand, Mr. Leonz Schicker. He died at the residence of Mr. J. Allemann, Dudley Rd., Inglewood, Taranaki, reaching the ripe old age of 94. His wife, aged 89, survives him, and is still enjoying good health.

The deceased was one of the first Swiss settlers in Taranaki and an account of his pioneering days, if written by a much worthier pen, would read like a book.

Mr. L. Schicker was born at Blickensdorf, Baar, Canton Zug, Switzerland, in 1845. He left his homeland in 1885 with a family of 5 children. After a sea voyage of 8 weeks they arrived at New Plymouth. Here he found conditions not as good as he expected. He was met by a Swiss friend, who, with a wife and two children, was entirely down and out, even barefooted, not being able to buy boots. But Schicker, strong, determined and full of pluck, did not waste any time in idleness. Although not being a good milker, he accepted such a position in Opunake. Two colonials with whom he had to milk the herd very soon took advantage of his inexperience and left him all the toughest cows, until his hands were painfully swollen. He left this job after expressing his opinion of his two helpers in no uncertain but Swiss language. Back in New Plymouth he found work, furniture making. After about a year he bought from the Government 162 acres of land (all standing bush) at Kaimira, Inglewood, at £1 per acre on the deferred payment system. Acre by acre he enlarged his improvements with the help of his children. As a sideline he found plenty work in road-making and bridge-building, being an extremely powerful man and very handy with tools. Often when he found his helpmate in silent tears and homesick he wished himself back in Switzerland. Practically the only real enjoyment they had was to sit on the verandah in the evening listening to the wonderful singing of the Tuis; and the family would sing old Swiss songs to the accompaniment of a guitar.

When the first dairy factory came into being, better times began for the Schicker family. After 17 years Father thought he would like to see the "old sod" once more. With his wife and 2 children (the others being married) he returned to Switzerland, where the community of Baar received them with great honours. Schicker bought a farm and a country hotel at Wiesenthal, but conditions in Switzerland did not suit him any more and after 5 years he returned to New Zealand again. With him came 21 young Swiss, mostly from Baar. That was the beginning of the influx of Swiss farmers into New Zealand. Once more he settled in Inglewood and in later years he and his wife undertook another trip to Switzerland.

Truly a wonderful sample of a hardy persevering pioneer was Schicker; one of many who made the Taranaki district what it is today. Their children are Mrs. J. Allemann, Inglewood, Mrs. E. Gopperth, Manaia, the late Mrs. Hinz, Inglewood, Messrs. F. Schicker, Otakeho, and E. Schicker, Inglewood. There are 18 grandchildren and 41 great-grandchildren.

Before settling in New Zealand Schicker had fulfilled all his military obligations in Switzerland. During the Franco-Prussian war in 1870/71 he was called to the western frontier when General Bourbaki's army sought refuge across the border. There are a very few of these veterans left to tell the stirring tale when 70,000-80,000 French soldiers had to give up their arms after they crossed the frontier in the middle of a severe winter, starved and nearly frozen to death, the horses chewing one another's tails and manes to still their craving for food. The whole army was distributed all over Switzerland, left in the tender care of the kind-hearted Swiss population. Many settled in Switzerland and every canton can produce families who originated from Bourbaki's army.

Leonz Schicker's long life has been packed with notable events. He was one who has made history for his own country as well as his adopted homeland, New Zealand.

A hearty welcome goes to our latest member, Mr. M. Schoenbaechler of Puniho, Opunake.