

Popular traditions in Switzerland

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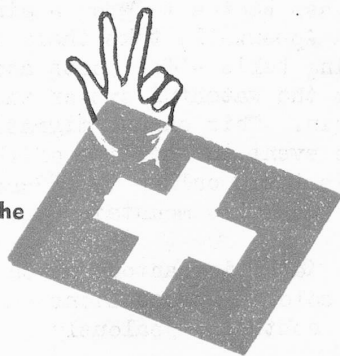
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POPULAR TRADITIONS IN SWITZERLAND.

"When three Swiss get together they found a club and start singing." This is sometimes said in fun, but exaggeration apart, it contains an element of truth. There are few countries in the world where clubs and societies of all kinds are so numerous and so developed as in Switzerland. Not a valley, not a village, but has its local choir meetings where men and women of the region gather together to cultivate the art of singing under the guidance of a local conductor, who is very often the village schoolmaster. Every year innumerable regional, cantonal or even federal music festivals reunite these hundreds and thousands of singers who, before an enthusiastic audience, rival in friendly competition with each other. These choral societies may be said to hold the same place in Swiss social life as sports clubs do in the United States.

Shooting practice also ranks among the oldest popular traditions in Switzerland; it has become a real national sport and, moreover, plays an important part in the national defence scheme. A stranger travelling through the Swiss countryside on a Sunday morning will be surprised to see so many men, old and young, leaving their homes with their gun on their shoulder. They are off to the shooting-range - there is one in every locality - where they train never to miss the bull's-eye. Here again, yearly tournaments and matches enable these men to meet in friendly competition and every three years a great Federal Shooting Festival, lasting a fortnight, takes place in one of the big towns and assembles the best marksmen of the country. The Swiss also always take part in international shooting tournaments where they have often carried off world championships. This training is of course very useful to the military organisation of the country, for each officer and soldier is under obligation to shoot off a certain number of cartridges each year, between the annual periods of military training.

The age-old traditions of Switzerland are as diverse as the life of the people. Every region and district has its own customs. Central and Eastern Switzerland are famed for the "games" played by the cowherds; wrestling, stone-throwing, "Hornuss" - which is played with bats or rackets. These sports develop muscles and render bodies supple, but they also give rise to most amusing country festivals where popular gaiety is given free rein.

Every town and district is renowned for some particular local tradition. Basle, for instance, is famous for its fife and drum band; Geneva for its Feast of the Escalade, or annual celebration of the victory of the citizens of the town over the army of the Duke of Savoy on the night of December 11th, 1502; Vevey, on the shores of the Lake of Geneva, holds a Vine-Growers' Festival every twenty-five years which glorifies the work of the fields and the vines; Montreux has its annual Festival of the Narcissus; Locarno, in the Tessin, its Feast of the Camellia, Zurich its Spring Festival.

Every Spring, as soon as the grass begins to grow again on the heights, the cowherds of Gruyere, Valais and Appenzell, take their flocks up to the mountain pastures to the sound of tinkling bells - for goats and cattle all wear a bell, so that, should they stray from the watchful eye of their guardians when in the pastures, they may be found again. This annual migration from village to alpine grazing lands is quite a solemn event in the life of the peasants, and a most beautiful melody is sung at this time, called the "Ranz des Vaches", which has become the traditional song of the Swiss mountaineers.

In the Upper Valais, which is a Catholic canton, on Corpus Christi day the mountain folk make wonderfully colorful processions through their villages and put on their treasured national costumes, jealously kept and handed down from generation to generation.

A great deal could be said about these old popular customs of Switzerland, so numerous, so diverse and sometimes so moving. Mention can only be made here of the better known among them. And yet in every canton, in every valley and region the most characteristic and charming customs are kept up, although their origin may be lost in time.

There is, however, one national tradition which must be mentioned here: every year, on the night of August 1st, the National Day of Switzerland, from one end of the country to the other, in the valleys and on the mountain peaks where the Alpine horn resounds so harmoniously, bonfires are lit around which gather the dwellers of towns and villages. The parson or a local magistrate reads in solemn tones the Federal Pact of August 1st, 1291, by which the founders of the Swiss Confederation swore to unite their strength in order to defend their liberty. Thus, after 650 years, to the town-dweller of Geneva, who speaks French and is Protestant in belief, is brought the realization of the fundamental ideal which unites him to his Catholic and Romanche-speaking brother of the Grisons. That is the link which welds together this multiple diversity of language, race, culture and religion and out of these creates the harmonious whole of the Swiss Confederation.

THE SWISS MERCANTILE FLEET.

(Problems during and after the War).

The present Swiss Mercantile Fleet is comprised of the following ships:

1. "Calanda" 7470 tons.
2. "Maloja" 2650 "
3. "St. Gotthard" 8340 tons.
4. "Generoso" 2260 tons.
5. "St. Cerque" 7600 tons.
6. "Chasseral" 4200 tons.
7. "Säntis" 6690 tons.
8. "Eiger" 8137 tons.
9. "Albula" 2030 tons.
10. "Lugano" 9300 tons.

There is also, in addition to these, the Red Cross Ship "Caritas" 4650 tons which sails under the Swiss flag. The total tonnage of the Swiss Mercantile Fleet, excluding the "Caritas", is at present 58,677 tons.

In addition to these ships owned by the Swiss Government or by Swiss shipping firms, the Swiss Government has also chartered a number of vessels from foreign shipping concerns.

The big demand for scarce shipping space. The formation of a Mercantile Fleet was forced on Switzerland by the events of the present war in 1940. Neutral Switzerland, with the consent of the belligerents, must endeavour to maintain a minimum of her overseas trade. We must obtain raw materials and grain in order to keep our factories going and to feed ourselves, and in turn we must export the finished products which will enable us to pay for these imports. The direct participation of the Swiss Government in founding this Mercantile Fleet proves how