

# Napoleon's unpaid debt to a Swiss village

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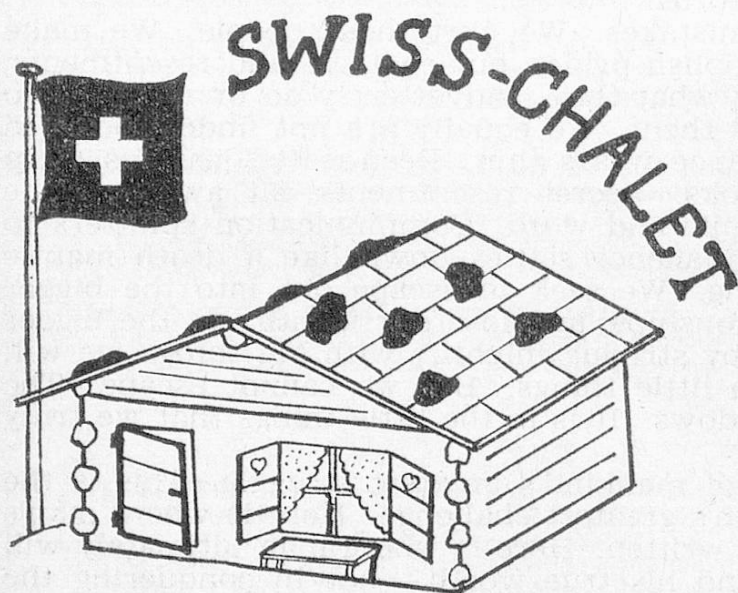
# NAPOLEON'S UNPAID DEBT TO A SWISS VILLAGE

(By John Trevor)

A LITTLE SWISS VILLAGE will come into a fortune if it can get a nearly 200-year-old claim recognised. Bourg-Saint Pierre in Canton Valais says France owes it the equivalent of nearly 40 million dollars for services rendered to the army of Napoleon that passed through in 1800 on its way over the Great St. Bernard Pass.

For more than two thousand years the Great St. Bernard Pass, connecting West Switzerland and Italy, has been a spectacular and sometimes dangerous route for travellers. In 58 B.C. Julius Caesar crossed the Pass with his legions. In 1800 another great general, Napoleon Bonaparte, followed Caesar's example and in a five-day operation took 40,000 men and 5000 horses over the Great St. Bernard and down into the plains of Northern Italy, to fight and beat the Austrians at the Battle of Marengo.

Napoleon's troops sweated and strained as they struggled to the 8000 feet summit of the Great St. Bernard and then tackled the path down the other side. The army's artillery had to be dis-



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mantled for the crossing. The barrels were pulled along in hollowed-out tree trunks by teams of grenadiers, while other soldiers staggered beneath the weight of the wheels.

### **Hospitality Tradition**

Each man was issued with two pairs of boots — and no doubt needed them on the icy, rocky path that cut footwear to ribbons.

On the top of the pass, monks from Bourg-Saint-Pierre had built a sanctuary in the ninth century, but it was destroyed. Later, St. Bernard of Menthon built a hospice for travellers braving the dangers of the journey, starting an unbroken centuries-old tradition of hospitality.

Napoleon and his men also shared this hospitality. Captain Coignet, one of the officers who made the crossing, recorded the kindness of the monks, who gave the soldiers food and wine and place to rest. Like the Captain, Napoleon was impressed by the monks's selflessness. That was why he later had similar hospices built on the Mont-Cenis and Simplon Passes.

On a more practical level, the crossing taught Napoleon another lesson, that a good link road was needed between Switzerland and Italy. The result was the Simplon Pass Road, still today a fine example of engineering.

On the way to the summit Napoleon and his troops passed through the little village of Bourg-Saint-Pierre, where the villagers provided services and food. Bourg-Saint-Pierre still has a list of these services rendered. Nearly 200 copper pans were hired to the French and 80 of them were "won" by the troops and never returned to their owners. More than 3000 logs were provided to roll the cannon along, and over 2000 larch and fir trees were felled at a cost of six francs each.

### **Personal Letter**

The total of Bourg-Saint-Pierre's account was just under 50,000 francs. The villagers reckon that considering the value of the franc nearly 200 years ago and the compound interest that has accumulated, the original sum would today be worth around 150 million Swiss francs or getting on for 40 million dollars.

Napoleon apparently had every intention of paying the villagers for their services. Bourg-Saint-Pierre still possesses the letter signed by Napoleon himself, inviting the Mayor to submit an estimate for cost incurred and damage done.

Napoleon's letter said: "I am very satisfied by the zeal shown by all the inhabitants and the services they have rendered me. I will compensate you for everything. This is only fair and, moreover, I would like to do something worthwhile for your commune".

These were fair words indeed, Napoleon later had more mighty matters to deal with than the claim of a small Swiss village. But



the people of Bourg-Saint-Pierre never forgot his promises and over the years they made several unsuccessful attempts to get the French to pay the debt.

Three years ago, when the 200th anniversary of Napoleon's birth was being celebrated, they decided it was time to try again. This time they commissioned a Valais lawyer, Mr Victor Dupuis, to weigh up their chances.

After going into the question thoroughly, Mr Dupuis has given his opinion that the claim is still valid. Napoleon, who was First Consul in 1800, had authority to contract commitments on behalf of the French State. Also, Mr Dupuis says, public debts do not lapse in law.

### Trying Again

According to the Swiss lawyer, Napoleon's legal successor is the current President of the French Republic, Mr Georges Pompidou. The Swiss Foreign Ministry (which privately, one imagines, cannot rate the chances of success very high) has authorised a direct approach to Paris. It has also drawn Mr Dupuis' attention to the fact that under the 1815 Treaty that settled the affairs of Europe after Napoleon's final defeat, Switzerland was supposed to get five million francs to cover Napoleon's war debts. Whether this money was paid is not certain and if it was, none of it seems to have reached Bourg-Saint-Pierre officially.

### A Gesture?

However, Mr Dupuis made an interesting discovery during his investigations. He found a document suggesting that in 1822 a citizen of the village may have received a sum of 15,000 francs from Paris for distribution among his fellow-citizens with claims to compensation.

If this money was in fact paid, one-third of Napoleon's debt was wiped out. But even if the bill has to be trimmed down because of this, the claim would still stand at a hundred million francs. That would mean a share-out of 400,000 francs for each of Bourg-Saint-Pierre's 250 inhabitants.

Mr Dupuis says he will continue to press the claim on behalf of the Swiss village, even though, one imagines, the chances of success are not great.

How great exactly? Says Mr Dupuis: "Well, President Pompidou of France could at least make a gesture".

—From "Swissair Gazette"

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**STOP PRESS.** From Taranaki comes the sad news of the passing of Mr Ted Napflin of Kaponga who is well known to our readers as a shooting sport enthusiast. To his wife and family we extend our deepest sympathy. [Obituary in next month's issue.]