

La Fête des vigneronns 1977

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LA FETE DES VIGNERONS 1977

For the fourth time this century, the "Fête des Vignerons", the vinegrowers' festival, will be held at Vevey in August this year. It is an outstanding spectacle which has a long tradition.

The Canton of Vaud stretching from the frontier of Geneva as far as that of the Valais is, above all, a wine region. Endless rows of vines cover the slopes running down to the lake of Geneva. Since a long time back in history, Vevey has been the centre of viticulture. It was the monks of Haut Crêt, a monastery depending on the Chapter of Lausanne, who planted the first vines of Lavaux at Le Dézaley. The Abbey Saint-Urbain, whose aim was to encourage viticulture and help labourers dedicated to it, was founded at Vevey well before 1647 when its existence could be officially established. The name of "Confrérie des Vignerons" (brotherhood of vinegrowers) was later conferred on the Abbey. The "Confrérie" followed the same goal and traditions including the procession later known as "parade" or "bravade" when members of this highly respected society also participated in a day of gaiety.

At the beginning, the vinegrowers met every two or three years, but then spaced out their festivities over longer intervals of time. The procession grew in size and later, singing, dancing, floats and mythological figures were added, the protagonist being Bacchus. The young god, hoisted up on a barrel or a stretcher supported on men's shoulders, was soon joined by his companion, Ceres, played in 1747 by a brawny butcher's lad whose appearance being far from seductive was turned into an object of laughter. This was soon to change and the rôles of the goddesses Ceres and Pales were to be interpreted by blond and brunette beauties of the weaker sex. These processions then gave way to a true fête with stands for spectators.

In 1797, the Winegrowers' Festival took place in one of the finest squares in this country — the "Grande Place" or "Place due Marché" where, on 13th May 1800, General Bonaparte inspected a corps of 6,000 men before leaving for Italy.

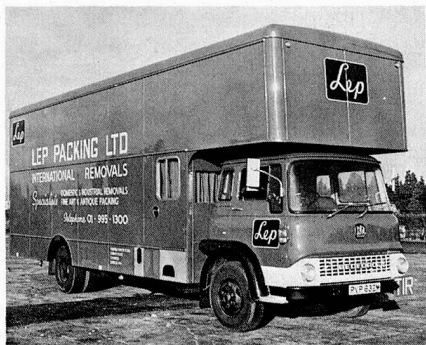
This square covers over 20,000 sq. yards and can be cleared completely of all obstacles. It lies in charming surroundings and faces the beautiful panorama of the Savoy Alps. It is doubtless an ideal spot for festivals on a large scale. It is not surprising, therefore, that these spectacles dedicated to the growth of the vine and the labours of the earth according to the changing seasons, grew in importance during the centuries. Five vinegrowers' festivals were held in the 19th century, and 12,000 spectators attended the one in 1889. Needless to say the costs of these festivals have also risen considerably. The one held in 1797 cost no more than 3,227 francs, in 1889 the amount was 34,000 francs and a total sum of 25,000 francs was spent in 1905. At that time, stands were built for 12,500 spectators. The well-known composer Gustave Doret was responsible for the music, René Morax for the text and Jean Morax for the costumes. Unfortunately, Greek-style scenery tended to hide the attractive buildings facing the square.

There was a gap of 22 years before the public returned to Vevey for another vinegrowers' festival. The first world war was to upset not only Europe but also the life and ways of this small town on the lake of Geneva. However, nine years after hostilities ended, in August 1927, the "Grande Place" was seen again to swarm with singers, dancers, musicians and auxiliaries. They performed in the centre of a huge stage with room for 14,000 spectators facing a *décor* imitating the ramparts of a city of days gone by with towers, huge gates and other characteristics. The composer, Gustave

Doret, who had so excelled in the musical score in 1905, was once again in charge of the same task. Now, fifty years later, people still sing his tunes which are far from dull or commonplace and this is, without a doubt, a proof of the popular quality of his choir music. The Geneva poet, Pierre Girard, wrote the enchanting text about the changing of the seasons in an unusually fresh style. The painter, Ernest Biéler, designed rich, authentic costumes in warm and discreet colours. For the first time, solo singers came from abroad: René Lapelletrie and Hector Dufranne of the Paris Comic Opera. The striking rôle of the priestess Ceres was acted by the talented singer from Soleure, Berthe de Vigier.

The second world war was to bring upheaval to Europe again, and it was not until 1955 that the "Fête des Vignerons" was held once more. That time, the huge enclosure was encircled by a monumental staircase which made one compare the whole to a flying saucer suddenly landed on Vevey territory. The open-air theatre could seat 17,000 spectators, and more than 3,500 actors, 950 children, 300 horses, oxen and sheep appeared on stage. Specialist producers directed these mass movements: Oscar Eberlé from Zurich and Maurice Lehmann from Paris. A choir of 450 male and female singers, 120 musicians from the Paris Republican Guard, and excellent singing and dancing soloists interpreted Carlo Hemmerling's music. The colours were magnificent, and the setting had been designed by the Parisian H.-R. Frost. 4.7 million francs was spent on the festival, not counting all the work that went into it. It was an unforgettable event for all who were privileged to witness it.

And now once again, the festival is being prepared. And one is looking forward to an even more spectacular event than ever before.



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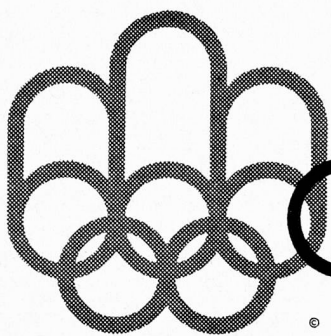
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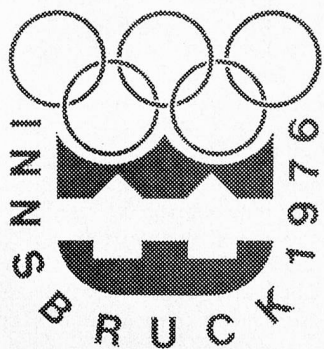


No — it's not Vincent Price — it's a scene from the Fête des Vignerons in Vevey in 1955. The man is wearing the costume of a medieval Swiss warrior. The photograph is by courtesy of the Swiss National Tourist Office.

Lugano celebrates its wine harvest every year — with dancing in the street. The photograph is by courtesy of the Swiss National Tourist Office.



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