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The Swiss In Utah: An Introduction

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Beginning in the mid-1850s, Swiss immigrants, virtually all converts from early successful Mormon proselyting in their homeland, began arriving in the Utah Territory. They became part of two larger immigrant streams: one composed of thousands--by the year 1900, some 115,000--of fellow Swiss who, beginning in colonial times, had found new homes in the United States; and the other, the so-called "Gathering to Zion," the organized emigration of thousands of European Mormon converts, mostly from Protestant countries, in the last half of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century.

These Swiss emigrants traveled to Utah by various means--on sailing ships and steamships, by covered wagons, handcarts, and eventually railroad--to help settle several hundred communities in the "Great Basin Kingdom" of the Rocky Mountain West. Only a very few of them acquired any lasting fame; but they were, in general, industrious, disciplined, and productive people, surprisingly well satisfied with their new, arid homeland. Only an occasional disillusioned soul returned home, while a few others like Heinrich Hug and his brothers and their families lost faith in Mormonism and its leaders and moved elsewhere.

By the mid-nineteenth century, migration and emigration were well-established elements of Swiss demographic life, with over 70 percent of the emigrants choosing the United States as their destination. Throughout much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, religious dissatisfaction, periodic economic crises, and local overpopulation--the push factors--joined with alluring propaganda for America as the "land of unlimited opportunities" and the powerful testimonials of earlier emigrant families and friends--the pull factors--to entice the Swiss from virtually every canton to the United States, where they truly became part of the melting pot.

By the twentieth century, as the Swiss economy, undecimated by world wars, moved toward world-leading levels of prosperity, and as the U.S. began to "fill up," emigration from Switzerland dwindled to a trickle. Families of farmers and tradesmen were replaced by individual young people, businessmen, and scientists drawn primarily by the unique opportunities and lifestyles of modern American cities.

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Until then, Swiss immigration to Utah was both similar to and different from its larger American counterpart. The 1870 U.S. census listed 509 Swiss-born Utah residents, up from 78 ten years before. Increases would continue for the next 40 years. By 1910, the highest number ever--1,691--had been reached. After 1920, Utah showed a net decrease every decade, as the number declined steadily to 548 in 1980. Comparable figures for the U.S. show a peak of 118,659 Swiss-born Americans in 1920, with a decline to 71,515 by 1950.

Unlike the majority of Swiss immigrants to America in the nineteenth century, those who came to Utah came primarily for religious rather than for economic reasons. These recent Mormon converts felt a strong desire to leave Switzerland where their numbers were small and they encountered local persecution and stigmatization. In Utah, they could live and raise their children among friends of the same faith, and they also had opportunities to participate in sacred temple ceremonies, a broader choice of marriage partners, and the satisfaction of helping to build "Zion." These attractions continued until the Swiss LDS temple, outside Bern, was dedicated in 1955.

Swiss Mormons came primarily from Protestant cantons, especially the German-speaking ones, where missionaries had been most successful. Not until late in the twentieth century did Mormons gain admission and converts in the more traditional Catholic cantons. More converts came from Bern, Zurich, and Thurgau; but there was also a sprinkling from Schaffhausen, Basel, St. Gallen, Appenzell A. R., Aargau, and Glarus, as well as from the French-speaking cantons of Geneva, Vaud, and Neuchâtel, where Mormonism in Switzerland had originally taken root. Only after 1960 did non-Mormon Catholic Swiss from the Italian-speaking Ticino become part of the Utah mix.

Nineteenth-century Swiss immigrants to Utah also differed from most other Swiss settlers in the United States by participating as real American pioneers. While Swiss settling in the American East, Midwest, and South usually came to more settled areas and established communities, early Mormon Swiss not only crossed the plains in covered wagons like Ulrich Loosli, on foot, or pushing handcarts like Mary Ann Hafen, but also, after arriving, were often called to help strengthen newly-founded communities throughout the length and breadth of the territory, like the eighty-five sent to Santa Clara in 1861.

In addition to Santa Clara, predominantly Swiss settlements were established in alpine-like Midway, and in Providence, Logan, and other Cache Valley communities; but the Swiss also could be found pioneering scores of other settlements up and down the Territory. Many, like Daniel Bonelli from Canton Thurgau, pioneered in more than one community. After leading the Swiss settlement in Santa Clara in 1861, Bonelli moved a few years later to the Moapa Valley near Las Vegas, eventually becoming a prominent entrepreneur-businessman-cattle rancher in southern Nevada and western Arizona. His son, George, became a founder and leading citizen of Kingman, Arizona, around the turn of the century. As both Switzerland and Utah became less agricultural and rural, increasing numbers remained in Salt Lake City and Ogden. Census statistics for 1920, for example, show that

610 of Utah's 1,566 Swiss-born citizens lived in Salt Lake City. Thus, the Utah Swiss, aided by strong religious ties, became integral members of the Utah community, notwithstanding some cultural friction in being confused with Germans or in sparring with their English neighbors in Santa Clara.

All of this settlement took place against the backdrop of continued and direct contact with their Swiss homeland. A large number of male Swiss Mormon converts served missions for their church before they emigrated, and many, perhaps several hundred, both married and unmarried, returned to Switzerland until well into the twentieth century as proselyting missionaries for the Mormon faith; they often attempted--sometimes successfully--to persuade family, friends, and other Swiss to become Mormons and "gather" with them to Utah. Typical of such are Conrad and Ulrich Abegglen, who arrived in Midway with their brothers, mother, and sister in 1860. Between 1889 and 1901 they returned to Switzerland as missionaries and succeeded in converting and bringing back seven other families to Utah.

Many Swiss immigrants wrote glowing letters home about life in Utah; these letters aided in the proselyting and "gathering" work. Utah may thus have been nearly as well-known in Switzerland as some other American states with larger Swiss-born populations.

Many of the Mormon Swiss came as families, including extended families like the Hafens and the Bangerters. Some young men like Fritz Zaugg or Julius Billeter, preceded their families, working for already-established Swiss emigrants to earn the money needed to bring the rest of the family. Later Swiss immigrants came more often as individuals rather than as families, did not come directly to Utah, and were rarely part of any organized immigration movement.

With few exceptions, early or late, the emigrant Swiss brought with them their finest Swiss cultural traits. As early as 1877, Brigham Young complimented the Santa Clara Swiss for their industriousness, noting that there were no "poor" in the settlement. So important were these virtues that the Midway community in 1885 took up a collection to send Gottlieb Kohler and his family back to Switzerland because "you have no job, no permanent home and you will be a drain on the community." Fortunately for the community and for Utah, this peremptory offer was not accepted.

Beside their strong work ethic, the Swiss brought with them long traditions of discipline, a commitment to quality products and craftsmanship, frugality, excellent training, a keen sense of local independence and political responsibility, as well as cultural abilities and appreciation, especially in music and literature. Later immigrants to Utah added excellence in education, scientific expertise, and a broad spectrum of professional and artistic skills.

Although Frank Esshom's 1913 book, *Prominent Men and Pioneers of Utah*, lists only fifty Swiss-Utahns out of over 6,100, the contributions of the Swiss and their descendants to Utah and surrounding states are significant and worthy of recognition. Most important are those of the rank-and-file who have contributed in manifold ways to the building of Utah and the Mormon Church.

From Santa Clara in the south to Park Valley in the north, and in most communities in between, Swiss-Americans included farmers and stockmen like John G. Hafen, Godfrey Fuhriman, and Conrad Gertsch; watchmakers like Octave Ursenbach and Paul Fankhauser; cheesemakers like Gottlieb Abegglen and Ed Gossner; genealogists like Julius Billeter and Anna Fink; and scholars and scientists like Robert Helbling and Gottlieb Schneebeili.

Swiss immigrant women have also played a major role. As wives and mothers they bore the common yet heavy burdens in early pioneer times, not only bearing the children in an often harsh environment but also working in the fields as well as performing demanding household tasks. In addition, they attended to the education of their children, worked in the Mormon Relief Society and other church auxiliaries, cared for the poor and needy and, especially in the nineteenth century, financially, psychologically, and spiritually supported their husbands while they served the LDS Church on missions. Many Swiss women like Mary Ann Hafen, Sophie Ruesch, and Rosena Tobler were plural wives to Swiss men who practiced polygamy before it was discontinued in 1890. Two Swiss polygamists, Casper Bryner and Gottfried Ence, for example, served time for polygamy in the Utah Penitentiary. As a result of these earlier plural marriages, many extended Swiss families became very large, spreading throughout the state and beyond.

Some were not only large, but became recognized for prominence and achievement. I will cite one non-polygamous family out of hundreds that might have been considered. Leopold Wirthlin, born 3 December 1828 in Moehlin, Aargau, met Anna Hirschi, thirteen years his junior, from Schangnau, Bern, in 1861 in Geneva. Leopold was working as a carpenter. Anna had moved there that year, working as a domestic servant after the death of her mother. As it turned out, she and Leopold had even lived around the corner from each other at one time.

In August 1863 they both joined the Mormon Church and emigrated the following year, crossing the plains as sweethearts. They married in Salt Lake City in January 1865. For the rest of their lives, they struggled to make a living. Leopold died in Los Angeles, where he had been sent for his health, in 1888. Anna lived until 1915. They had seven children, six of whom lived to adulthood, and over 1200 descendants.

Several achieved some degree of prominence. One grandson, LeRoy A. Wirthlin, grew up in Salt Lake City and graduated with an M. D. degree from Harvard in 1928. He taught and practiced surgery in New York City before moving his practice back to Salt Lake City in 1950. His wife, Emily Stiefel, was also of Swiss heritage. Two of their sons, LeRoy and Alvin, followed their father as surgeons; both LeRoy and his sister, Barbara Whiting, served Mormon missions in Switzerland.

Another grandson, Joseph Leopold Wirthlin, had a successful career as a Utah businessman and later served ten years as the Presiding Bishop of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints responsible for all of the Church's temporal affairs. Two of his sons have also achieved significant recognition: Joseph B. Wirthlin is currently a member of Church's leading council, the Quorum of

the Twelve Apostles; Richard B. Wirthlin, one of America's foremost pollsters and a Reagan political advisor, is also a member of the Church's General Authorities. They, too, were Mormon missionaries in Switzerland.

Some Swiss women, even in pioneer Utah, were more than housewives and mothers. At least two of them, Netta Ann Furrer Cardon and Sophie Ruesch, were trained medical doctors, having graduated from respected medical schools in Geneva and Italy prior to their emigration. They carried on special missions among the sick in Ogden and St. George. So did others including Regula Benz, Mary Uraul Staheli-Oberhansli and Elizabeth Fluckiger Fuhriman, all trained midwives who worked with prominent Utah doctors like Romania Pratt Penrose to improve maternity care. Later, other women such as Bertha Hertig and Margrit Feh Lohner--both outstanding musicians--arrived with their husbands and families, and shared their talents with church and community groups for over half a century.

Perhaps because of their democratic heritage, Swiss immigrants and their descendants have made significant contributions to Utah's political life in ways ranging from membership on local water and school boards to participation on town and city councils to serving as governor of the state. Theodore Brandley served as mayor of Richfield for three terms and was also a member of the state constitutional convention of 1894. John Huber was justice of the peace, assessor, and school board member in Midway, while Adolf Merz served as both a justice of the peace and a member of the Mount Pleasant city council. A few joined Serge L. Ballif in the Utah War against the invading Johnston's Army in 1857; others like John Sulzer, John Huber, and Gottlieb Ence (Enz) were veterans of Utah's Indian wars. Utah's governor from 1984 to 1992, Norman Bangerter, is the descendant of Friedrich and Maria Bangerter, Mormon converts from Canton Bern who in 1882 settled in Bountiful, where Friedrich developed a successful career as a farmer-veterinarian.

Most of Utah's Mormon Swiss immigrants also fulfilled well their major objective for coming to Utah--to participate in and strengthen the Mormon Church. Like most other Saints, the Swiss rank-and-file contributed time, money, and devotion to building churches and temples, bringing other immigrants to "Zion", and spreading their faith. Besides struggling for economic survival, these Swiss-Utahns were devoted to their families, church, and communities.

Several were called as mission presidents, not only assuming responsibility for missionary proselyting and church members in large parts of Central Europe but also writing and translating missionary literature and editing church periodicals, including *Der Stern*. Many led groups of emigrants to Utah, at times, as in Serge L. Ballif's case, even paying the way for those with inadequate means. Some, like the multilingual Ballif, presided over German-speaking congregations comprised of recent arrivals and those whose fluency in English came more slowly. The *Salt Lake Beobachter*, a German-language newspaper published by the Mormon Church between 1890 and 1935, tied the

immigrant Swiss and German communities together and served for many as a bridge from the older culture to the newer one.

Since the building of the Mormon temple outside of Bern, Switzerland, in 1955, the first in Europe, several Utah Swiss have been called to give volunteer service there, including temple presidents Walter Trauffer, Charles Grob, Carl Ringger, and Louis Ringger and their wives. Descendants of Swiss immigrants have also risen to become General Authorities in the Mormon Church, as in the case of the Wirthlins. William Grant Bangerter, an older brother of the former governor, was a member of the Church's Quorum of Seventy. Literally tens of thousands of descendants of Utah Swiss have served voluntary missions for the LDS Church throughout the world, but often back in Switzerland, thus maintaining emotional and cultural ties with their homeland as well as instilling pride in being Swiss in their posterity.

Besides their religious faith and their work ethic, Utah's Swiss immigrants also brought with them a lively appreciation for their native culture with its art, literature, and folk music. Many Utahns are well-acquainted with the artistic brilliance of John Hafen, a native of Thurgau, who studied painting in Paris and whose paintings adorned many buildings in the state and enriched pioneer life.

Folk music has also been important to the Swiss in Utah. In 1861, when Mormon apostle, George A. Smith met the Swiss company headed for southern Utah, he commented favorably on their singing and good humor. One of their number, George Staheli, whose musical reputation apparently preceded him, received an offer from Brigham Young to remain in Salt Lake City to augment the capital's musical talent. Staheli turned down the offer to remain with his Swiss friends in Santa Clara, where he later organized a band that played at both community and church events, including the 1877 dedication of the St. George LDS Temple. Andreas Burgener was known as Midway's Swiss Music Man; he had been a military band leader in Switzerland and brought seven instruments with him to start and lead the second band formed in Utah.

Cultural expression, however, was not confined to the more homogeneous outlying communities. A large "Swiss colony" in Salt Lake Valley had existed since before the turn of the twentieth century and gathered occasionally for Swiss patriotic and cultural events. In response to immigrants' requests for more association, Walter Trauffer, Julius Billeter, and Eugene Strasser organized the Swiss Chorus Edelweiss in 1934. A primarily Mormon folk music and dance organization, the chorus provided a focal point for many Utah Swiss as well as an effective integrating force for new immigrants. By 1997 the organization had celebrated its sixty-third anniversary of singing, concertizing, socializing, and traveling together. During this time, they have brought not only enjoyment and fellowship to themselves and their families but also an awareness of Swiss traditional culture to Utah and much of the American West.

Other expressions of the preservation of Swiss heritage and identity in Utah have been the development and expansion of Swiss Days in Midway--visited by some 60,000 people annually--a

new though similar event in Santa Clara, the recent publication of immigrants' journals, as well as articles and books about Swiss pioneers, and a general resurgence of interest in Swiss heritage and roots among many in the state. Recently, a Swiss Biz club was established to bring together in a non-denominational setting native Swiss who enjoy hiking and socializing.

The modern Utah Swiss community is varied. Composed of both aging Mormons and non-Mormons, it continues to contribute Utah. Yet, if Swiss immigrants to Utah and their descendants have helped both build and transform the state, they have also been transformed by it. Because they became so fully integrated into Utah with its unique scenery and lifestyle, they could not enjoy and celebrate their native land and native language. Utah not only attracted certain kinds of Swiss citizens but also helped them escape the confining narrowness, pettiness, and class consciousness that modern Swiss authors, especially Max Frisch and Friedrich Dürrenmatt, have lamented among their fellow Swiss. Not only have the Swiss been a boon to Utah but, in the words of one of them, Max B. Zimmer, they have had the best of two "homelands," the best of two worlds.

