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Book Review

Philippe Pierroz, *Des Valaisans à Placerville. Haut lieu de la ruée vers l'or*. Imprint Vert: Philippe Pierroz, 2017.

This richly illustrated study features the migration from the Swiss Canton Valais to El Dorado County in California of people who between 1887 and 1920 gradually converged on the town Placerville and its surroundings. The immigrants hailed from the neighboring Valais communes Martigny-Combe, Martigny-Bourg, Salvan, Vernayaz, Dorénaz, and Trient to find employment in mining, but then gradually shifted from mining to cattle raising and farming. The data presented in this study derive largely from American sources that are reachable on the internet and include New York arrival lists, decennial censuses, civil and military records, and the weekly *Mountain Democrat* (since 1854) as well as other newspapers and local sources. The reachable materials are, however, critically used. The author, for instance, discovered the proper spelling in the note taker's transformation of names of Valais immigrants and recognized that Albert Presroz referred to Albert Pierroz, Antone Pellet Antoine Pillet, and Peter Jacques and Peter Gagnier both Pierre Marie Jacquier. In 1920, El Dorado County numbered about 7,200 people, among them 51 who were born in Switzerland, and 19 of them from the Valais, while most of the other Swiss were from the Italian-speaking Canton Tessin. By 1920 several of the Valais immigrants had died, and a good number, among them the author's grandfather Louis Pierroz, had returned home, so that the total number of people from the Valais considered by the author numbered 44 persons in El Dorado County. Census data state that the county had 20,057 inhabitants in 1850, 10,683 in 1880, and 6,426 in 1920.

Four appendices of the study provide valuable personal detail: Appendix 1 (p. 116) provides the immigrants' and their children's or grandchildren's names, birth year and birth place, year of arrival and age, as well as the year, age, and place of death. Eleven of those listed passed on after their return to the Valais and thirty-three died in

El Dorado County. Appendix 2 (pp. 117–129), titled “Life Stages of the Valaisans”, gives details about 28 immigrants by graph as well as text. Appendix 3 (p. 131) contains the name and age of the Valaisan emigrants, the date of their arriving in New York from Le Havre, the name of the boat, the length of the journey, and the number of a boat’s passengers. Appendix 4 (p.132) gives a list of emigrants born in the Valais who passed away in California, all but four buried in Placerville. The table includes their name, life dates, age, place of death, and burial site. An Index (pp. 133–134) of 124 personal names allows a quick finding of relevant data about individuals featured in the study. These appendices are by themselves a treasure trove for researchers trying to identify individual immigrants.

In the text, the author deals with the data descriptively and presents what is known about individuals without praise or critique, whether it includes success, misfortune, or misdeeds. The weekly *Mountain Democrat*, published since 1854 until today, proved especially valuable in reporting on the peoples’ doings, their social gatherings, celebrations, and journeys. The author shows that some of the immigrants achieved genuine prosperity, others remained manual laborers with meager incomes, some met with misfortune, others were punished for misdeeds. He also touches upon the destruction of the indigenous people, El dorado County having been home to the Maidu, Washoe, and Miwok peoples who greatly suffered from white violence and imported illnesses. In 1920 a small native community of indigenous Washoe people still lived at a campsite near Placerville who sustained themselves mainly by fishing. Gold had been found in El Dorado County in July of 1848, established as a county in 1850. After 1870, when surface digging of alluvial gold became less profitable, gold attached to rock was mined by hydraulic exploitation. In the 1900 census, all Valaisans identified themselves as gold miners, in 1910 most of them, in 1920 none. By then agriculture, forestry, and business pursuits had replaced mining. In 1915 there were 23 dairy farms in the environs of Placerville and in that year Pierre Pierroz had the first telephone installed and began providing milk to the hospital, while in 1919 trucks started to replace horse wagons.

Fire hazards plagued Placerville dwellers repeatedly as in 1860, 1910, and especially in March 1929 when a blaze destroyed much of the artisan and commercial section of the town. World War One intensified racial strife between people of European, Mexican, Chinese, African, and Native American ancestry. In the fall of 1918, the Valaisan soldier Emmanuel Charles Revaz of Placerville died in France during the Meuse-Argonne battle of World War One. In 1934 Eloi Gay Crosier, a father of seven children, committed suicide at age forty. In January of 1930 a fire had destroyed his home, in April he had lost his wife, in 1932 he had been elected municipal secretary but in 1934 official examiners questioned his financial reports that showed irregularities. Rather than face a court, he decided to end his life.

Thus *Des Valaisans à Placerville* chronicles success as well as defeat that immigrants or their progeny experienced. Although the author does not offer an interpretative essay, his carefully assembled data show that migration was not a move from poverty to riches but a lateral move, that is, from one kind of opportunity or setback in Switzerland's Valais to another range of possibilities and drawbacks in California's El Dorado County. Success and misfortune, virtue and frailty had marked lives in the world that people had left, and they shaped equally their experience in the world they had entered. A listing of the sources used by end- or footnotes would have been most useful for future research. However, the book's numerous and exquisitely placed contemporary illustrations of locations, events, and people greatly enrich the carefully crafted text of this book of local history.

- Leo Schelbert