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Book Review: Sauerkraut, Suspenders and the Swiss: A Political History of Green County's Swiss Colony

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Duane Freitag. *Sauerkraut, Suspenders and the Swiss: A Political History of Green County's Swiss Colony, 1845-1945*. Bloomington: Univers, 2012.

The title of this engaging book is a bit deceptive. Far from being a recap of one hundred years of Swiss participation in Midwestern politics, *Sauerkraut, Suspenders and the Swiss* is a very interesting look at the life and development of Wisconsin from 1845 to 1945, and a little beyond.

Freitag uses his examination of this tiny microcosm of America to pose and answer a question as old as the United States itself; can a unique ethnic group resist assimilation and still be American? This question resonates today with the debate regarding immigrants from Latin America and the Middle East. The book is divided, initially, into yearly chapters recapping the events of that year. As Wisconsin and Green County develop and sync into the national system the chapters begin to reflect the two-year election cycle.

Duane Freitag details how from the very beginning of the Swiss who deliberately, as a group, colonized Green County (and adjoining counties), Wisconsin, the Swiss immigrants wanted the blessings of citizenship, especially political activity, at first locally and then state and nationally. At the same time they sought to create a tightly knit linguistic and cultural community on what was then the frontier of the United States. These hardworking people created an enclave of "Swissness" in the western United States.

The first wave arrived from Canton Glarus just in time to make their first significant contribution as the Wisconsin Territory became Wisconsin, the state of the United States. The state constitution allowed that anyone that had resided within the territory for six months, and declared his intention to become a citizen, could vote for statehood. From the very beginning the Swiss were building America.

From the very first page, the author provides a very comprehensive account of political activity in a very small, ethnically homogenous group of American immigrants. Freitag narrates how politics, on the local level, was and is not an activity separate from life, but part of the overall fabric of what makes a community, be it a town or a nation. He provides much insight into the political mindset of these new arrivals from Switzerland. Freitag points to the
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commonly held beliefs that these groups shared and how over time this people changed their political views while clinging tenaciously to their religion, language, and culture.

Although the initial group of Swiss settles in Green County in 1845, the author begins the actual story three years later, in 1848. He periodically updates the progress of this group and the arrival of new groups as they progress on the Great Plains. We are guided through the experiences and the events that shape this small unique group as they face war, famine, political upheaval, prohibition, recession and depression, the Red Scare and war again; each event leaving its mark and causing the Swiss to make accommodations. Throughout all of these varied events, the Swiss remain Swiss. They are proudly American, but at their core they retain their culture, their language, their beliefs, their "Swissness." It is not until after World War II, after one hundred years of being in the United States, which we see this community finally being assimilated into the greater culture of Wisconsin and the United States, and yet even now, the Swiss still cling tenaciously to that which makes them Swiss.

Mr. Freitag takes a detailed look at New Glarus and adjoining townships within Green County over a one hundred year period. He successfully ties together the various American political movements with the economic conditions that often spawned these movements, observing the conditions of both the economy and politics from the viewpoint of the citizen-farmer, the book's most prominent character. Economic conditions that prompted farmers to shift from wheat farming to dairy farming likewise lead to a shift from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party and then to the Progressive Party and so on.

Since this is the story of the life of a unique ethnic group, the author includes the many details that breath life into what would otherwise be dry statistics. Freitag provides many interesting insights into such iconic people as Solomon Levitan, Robert LaFollette, Carl Schurz, and many others. Even people forgotten by history become full-blown personalities as the author details their part in events that today are a part of Wisconsin and therefore American history; Cheese Day, the Limburger War of 1935, and Women's suffrage. Freitag describes how Swiss immigrants coming from a poor country play a major part in the American economy pioneering the United States

cheese industry, the condensed milk industry, as well as many other innovations.

As part of the Swiss story Freitag includes short, but no less interesting tidbits of the Swiss participation in America's wars. From the Civil War through World War II, the Swiss community provided soldiers to defend their new nation and paid the price for freedom with a small, but important contribution in lost or ruined lives.

I liked this book for its insight into how a community can be American and yet maintain its unique identity. It is a very informed read on what Americanism really is.

~ *Kevin Cronin*
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