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Bertha Louise Goetsch:

Early Christmas at Emmanuel Church*

I am of Swiss ancestry on both sides of the family. My paternal Grandfather Andreas Schifferly, b. 1811, was from Kt. Aargau. My mother was a Stalder from Lützelflüh, b. 1851, and baptized by the eminent Jeremias Gotthelf, who was also a dear friend of the Stalder family, as well as their pastor. His novels were so much enjoyed by this family, and they carried them to the USA when they left Switzerland for Ohio, in 1853.

I have my 91st birthday on July 31st [1978], but I look forward to continuing my writing about the Swiss pioneers where my two sets of grandparents moved in western Ohio, in a Swiss pioneer community in the vast northwest Ohio Black Swamp hardwood forest, and where life was far different from the life in Lützelflüh, or at the Stalder farm home called "Schmiedshub," a few miles out of Lützelflüh. I visited these places in 1966.

My husband was a Reformed church clergyman, and served two Swiss Reformed congregations after he left McCormick Presbyterian Seminary in Chicago, where he graduated in 1905. Before that he attended Das Missionshaus, a Reformed church institution founded to train home missionaries for the fast-growing German communities all over the mid-west at that time. My husband had all his education in the German language at the Mission House. He felt the need for further English and also further seminary training before venturing into a church pastorate.

The first Swiss-established Reformed congregation was the one in western Ohio, in the community where I was born. The second was the St. Paul's Reformed congregation in Mt. Eaton, Ohio, in Wayne County, Ohio, where so many Swiss families landed from Switzerland. From there, they then decided where to go for a permanent home. I knew many of the old Schwyzer-Dütsch Swiss who came from Switzerland to that community, and what delighted them, and me, was that I could converse with them in the Swiss-German dialect, which I speak like a native Swiss! My husband's grave is in the Mt. Eaton Ohio cemetery. He died in 1947, after a lingering illness...

*Article from The Bluffton News, Bluffton, Ohio, Dec. 20, 1979, pp. 4 & 5.
First of all, thank you for the February 1978 NEWSLETTER. And for the note enclosed. Yes, the name v. Grueningen is indeed a familiar one. The author of the interesting biography of his father, is a friend by mail of mine. His brother Gustave and my husband, Frank, were very good friends already at the Mission House near Franklin, Wisconsin, and were in the same class. I never met the Sauk City "Pfarrer," v. Grueningen, but heard of him many times. I do appreciate the Feb. issue, especially since it contains this biography. Danke schön. The Heinrich Rusterholz mentioned in the biography was at one time (before I was born) pastor of the Swiss Reformed Emanuel's church in our community near Bluffton, Ohio. This was during the 1870s. It was before the church had the small pipe organ, and Rev. R. led the singing with his violin. Then, when the organ was installed, my father was the first organist. Later, the pastor's daughter, Bertha Greding, was the organist, as her father, our pastor, Rev. Peter Greding, sent her to Heidelberg in Tiffin, Ohio to study music. My father told her she had more nimble fingers than his, so he gladly turned the organist's job over to her.


I am at the moment trying to finish a short history of the Swiss Reformed pioneer community near Bluffton, Ohio. My parents were children in that wilderness forest during the latter 1850s and the 1860s. So much was told to me of life back then by my parents, also by my paternal Grandmother Schifferly, that I simply must put down in the written word, as I owe it to those hardworking Swiss pioneers to tell their story. It was a hard life indeed. So much for that....

With my very best wishes to you, I remain,

Bertha Louise Goetsch

*****

A look at northwest Ohio as it was 150 years ago, may explain why we do not find any written records of Christmas celebrations until many years later.

Chicago had only 12 families in 1830, when the Swiss Mennonites and the Swiss Reformed church families established their separate communities side by side in Riley Township, Putnam County.
We, who are used to seeing these communities today, with the beautiful farms and comfortable homes, find it hard to realize this was once a part of the flat, water-soaked Black Swamp hardwood forest of northwest Ohio, covering an area the size of the state of Connecticut.

Including a wide area beyond the Black Swamp, this was "Indian Territory" until 1817, remaining unsurveyed until 1820, when counties were created. The region was still called "Ohio's Last Wilderness" during the 1830s.

Then, President Andrew Jackson "mustered out" the remaining reluctant Indians to the sand dunes beyond the Mississippi River. Settlers now arrived in numbers,- English, German, Welsh, Irish, Swiss,- to get some of the rich soil they had heard about.

The Swiss families who arrived had been living in east-central Wayne, Holmes, Tuscarawas, and Stark Counties. They came because they were poor and land was cheap. To a poor Swiss, who could never hope to own any land in his native, mountainous, over-populated little Switzerland, it was a wonderful experience to own acreage—even if it was in a swamp forest!

Writers long declared the dismal Black Swamp and surroundings, as "unfit for human habitation," which was an understatement. Even so, the Swiss communities grew rapidly, as more families continued to arrive, some directly from Switzerland. In 1848, the Swiss Reformed church community, and a number of Mennonite families now were in Allen County, as part of Putnam was added to Richland Township, Allen County.

A description of mail delivery from Cleveland to Detroit, via the Black Swamp, detailed what it was like to travel through this fearful region. Six horses hitched to a "wheeled cart" could travel 15 miles in three days! The horses were often mired up to their bridles in the swamp. Not surprisingly, this was called "slow mail!" A joker of the times quipped," A horse has to be a good swimmer in the Black Swamp!"

One of the Swiss Mennonite newcomers proved to be a real opportunist. His water-soaked acres could not absorb another drop. When it rained, the water stayed on top of the ground, two feet deep, maybe more. He had some logs he wished to move. Instead of using his slow ox team to drag them where he wanted to pile them up to dry out to be burned later, this enterprising individual simply rolled the logs through the water himself, faster than with his ox team.
Both Swiss groups were deeply religious and wished to preserve their Christian faith. The Mennonites built a log church in 1840. In 1857 this was replaced with a larger frame church on the same site. They also had a minister. The Reformed church families held church services in the log school house that stood outside of the southwest corner of today's Richland Township cemetery, facing the then Kenton Road and Kalida Road that passed through the Frederick Gratz homestead. The Swiss called this road "Der Schreg Wäg," because of its peculiar direction from southeast to northwest. An original stretch of this "Slanting Road" remains, named "Schifferly Road," because it was cut through the first Schifferly homestead in 1835.

Visiting clergymen we know of, who came to the Reformed church community, were Lutheran and Reformed church clergymen.

These pastors had charge of several churchless communities, where they made their rounds. If no minister appeared for a service at the log schoolhouse, one of the settlers read a sermon from a Book of Sermons.

The songbooks used then were those they brought from Switzerland. A Christmas Day service was a must for these families. For this very special day, a clergyman was expected to deliver an appropriate Christmas sermon. It was also a time to sing their beloved carols together. The children also expected a gift from the generous Chrischt Chindly (the Swiss Santa).

Swiss children did not hang up stockings. They set out plates, hoping for a gift. The mothers were hard put to provide some small gifts to put on the empty plates during the early years of primitive life in the forest, when doing without was the rule.

Christmas Day, 1861, was a great day in the Swiss Reformed church community. The first Emmanuel's Reformed church was dedicated. A young Swiss, who came to the community in 1856, organized Emmanuel's Reformed congregation (now UCC).

He also taught school, and studied theology in Tiffin, Ohio, making trips there to turn in his work, and to get new assignments. He was licensed to preach and to conduct funerals when a seminarian. When he finished his studies, he was ordained as a minister of the Reformed church in the United States, by Ohio Synod. On this dedication day, he was elected to be the first pastor of Emmanuel's congregation.

This young man was Rev. Peter Greding, who had proved himself a leader and organizer in a community where he was greatly needed. He also dispensed homeopathic medicines, as
physicians were few and too far away when needed. He re-
mained a lifelong friend of many of the pioneering families whose life he shared.

He was pastor of Emmanuel's (now UCC) congregation twice, the first time when he was 24 years of age, the second time when he was an elderly man. This writer re-
members him as an old man occupying his pulpit in the little brick church he dedicated many years before.

The first written report of any kind is an 1874 Sunday School report listing items bought. Nothing was spent for Christmas. Hymn books, New Testaments and ABC books were bought for the Sunday School. Jacob Schäublin was an early Sunday School Superintendent.

The first written report of a Christmas Eve "Fest" in Emmanuel's church is dated 1875.

From this record we know there was a Christmas tree for the children. What kind of a tree this was nobody knows. There were no native evergreens (conifers) in northwest Ohio. Several years later another Christmas tree was constructed for the children from a "born sycamore."

The Christmas Eve festival was intended for the children when they had their own program. All received gifts consisting of candy and a book. At one of these festivals the con-
gregation presented their pastor with a beautiful new leather harness for his horse. In 1890, a Christmas tree was bought for one dollar.

The 1875 Christmas Eve festival was planned that every-
one, children as well as parents, should be remembered with gifts. A partial list of items bought is interesting reading, particularly when compared with present day prices. The money spent for the gifts came from free will contributions, totaling $34.00. After this splurge the munificent balance of $7.14 remained.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9 dozen paper sacks</td>
<td>.37 ½ cents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 lbs. stick candy</td>
<td>$1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 lbs. &quot;round&quot; candies</td>
<td>$4.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 lbs. hazelnuts</td>
<td>$2.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 lbs. peanuts</td>
<td>.62 ½ cents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Porcelain and Glass dishes</td>
<td>$1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>106 tumbliers</td>
<td>$5.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 birds (for the tree)</td>
<td>$1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 cigars</td>
<td>$1.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 smoke pipes at 20 cents each</td>
<td>$1.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 ½ doz. candles</td>
<td>50 cents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 doz. tin candleholders</td>
<td>.72 cents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 lamp chimneys</td>
<td>.20 cents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lamp wicks</td>
<td>.15 cents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 gallon coal oil (kerosene)</td>
<td>.20 cents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 ball of twine</td>
<td>.08 cents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gum arabic (for paste)</td>
<td>.05 cents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 lb. sugar (for paste)</td>
<td>.11 cents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>silk rope</td>
<td>.25 cents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 book for the treasurer's record</td>
<td>.25 cents.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The half-cent was still in use at that time.
These early settlers had endured privations, hardships, and toil for many lean years of creating farms from a forest of mammoth trees, vines and undergrowth, and digging up the roots of all this vegetation.

Ditches had to be dug to carry away the swamp water from the ground. Life had been unbearably difficult. Now they had finally "come out of the woods," literally and financially. It is readily understandable they would like to make up for those harsh years now gone. The women never had any money then, and could not afford necessities, let alone simple luxuries, such as glassware or porcelain dishes. Smoke pipes and cigars for the men were also done without during the pioneering years.

Today's sophisticated families may smile at the simple pleasures of these long ago Americans and their simple Christmas celebrations.

The decade of 1890-1900, is well remembered by this writer. The children's Christmas Eve festival was then a well-established custom. There was always a real Christmas tree decorated with all kinds of glittering tinsel, ornaments and many candles.

The children always had a program, carols and recitations. We always received gifts of candy, a book, and an orange, the only orange we had all year. A well-rehearsed choir always contributed beautiful Christmas music at the children's festival.

Then there was Margrit too. When it was announced the offering would be received for the support of the denomination's Home in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, Margrit rose from her seat and circulated among the families with small children. From her deep dress pocket she brought forth handfuls of pennies. To all outstretched little hands she gave some. She wanted to make sure that every child had a gift to drop into the almsbags. She insisted the children should learn to share with the needy no matter how little they had to give.

Little by little families began to bring their children's Christ Churchly gifts to the Christmas Eve festival. Finally there were two "schools of thought!" The for-and-against ones.

My parents did not believe in carrying our gifts to the church and assured me not to look for any gifts under the Christmas tree in the church. Oh, how I wished my name might be read from a package just for me!
One little Swiss Mennonite boy who attended our Sunday School must have felt the same way. He solved his problem by packing six apples into a bag, wrote his name on it and put it under the tree! He grew up to be a Sunday School Superintendent.

At one Christmas Eve festival a family wheeled a sewing machine from behind the tree which proved to be the straw that broke the proverbial camel's back. The older ones said this was going too far. One old Swiss said in his best English, "Diss wird G'schtopped!" And it was.

Christmas festivals will continue as long as there are children to be thrilled with the joys of Christmas.