Foreword

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Foreword

In the year of the *Swiss Roots* Program it seems very appropriate indeed to devote an entire issue of the SAHS Review to the family of Dipl. Ing. ETH Othmar Ammann, one of the most prominent Swiss immigrants of the 20th century. The following article is a homage by a loving daughter to her world famous father and his ancestors going back some 460 years.

And what a family it was! At the time when the overwhelming majority of Swiss still lived precariously in the countryside on small farms they were not allowed to own and had no prospect of ever owning, the Ammann family had already moved into town to become part of that gradually emerging urban bourgeoisie that would eventually form the country's economic and intellectual elite. Their arrival in Schaffhausen in the mid-15th century was perfectly timed. Not long before, in 1411 the guilds of Schaffhausen had finally won their generation long power struggle with the old established urban aristocracy. Except for a brief interruption during the Napoleonic occupation the new constitution would give the guilds unlimited power over town and state for over 400 years. At the beginning, the system was fairly open, i.e. access to a guild was open to most every candidate who had successfully completed the lengthy and rigorous apprenticeship program and had formally become a master in his trade. That must have been the case of Hans Ammann, who joined the prestigious Rüdenzunft in 1469 as a rope maker, without apparent difficulty. A generation or two later this would have been nearly impossible. In fact, during the early 1500s the guild system in Schaffhausen closed rapidly, with guild membership simply passing from father to son irrespective of the latter's profession and professional qualifications, and outsiders rarely accepted. 1

The new political system was characterized by a close symbiotic relationship between business and state, between private economic activities and public service. As pointed out repeatedly in this article, most of the Ammann businessmen also served their town/state in one capacity or another, including in such exotic functions as Gate Keeper, Corn Master, Guardian of the Salt (a state monopoly) but often also as baillif of Neunkirch, i.e. as the nearly omnipotent Governor of the town and district with this name, located in the Schaffhauser hinterland. In addition to running their businesses they

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1 The only concession they had to make to the old aristocrats was to let them constitute themselves as the 12th guild (the "Herrenzunft" or Patrician Guild) so that they could participate in government side by side with the 11 existing guilds.
served as judges, military officers, social workers, and members of the town (and eo ipso state) parliament and government.

The Ammanns were active in many trades, running their family owned small and medium enterprises as rope makers, seal and dice cutters, glass painters, gold smiths, watch makers, etc. During nearly 200 years, from the mid-1600s to the mid-1800s they also operated first the one and then the other best hotel in town receiving such illustrious guests as J. W. Goethe and the Czar of Russia. How successful were these enterprises?

As could be expected, there is little direct information to answer this question as hardly any company records have survived – if they ever existed. There are, however, an abundance of land records going back hundreds of years that tell us much about how well the proprietors of these enterprises were doing. According to these records the Ammanns did very well indeed; the homes they acquired and built over the centuries were impressive, situated at choice locations in town and often decorated with beautiful rococo facades and elaborately stuccoed interiors. Many of them still exist today. Obviously, the guild-based political and economic system provided an ideal business climate for enterprising small and medium companies.

During the 18th century a number of business activities had developed that clearly exceeded the size of a small and medium enterprise. In particular, two generations of Ammanns successfully engaged in large scale international trading and banking with connections reaching from Copenhagen to Bordeaux and from Vienna to London, taking advantage of Schaffhausen’s location as an important crossroads of north-south as well as east-west trade across and along the Rhine River. Their detailed company records provide a fascinating picture of the increasing importance of such trade taking advantage of the gradually improving transport network in Central and Western Europe. In the late 19th century a number of family members started manufacturing and selling straw and felt hats out of their own house (obviously, the idea of starting a business in one’s own garage was invented well before Bill Gates). The company grew rapidly and finally led to the opening of a fairly large, modern factory in the canton of Tessin, managed and owned by the father of Othmar Ammann.

Parallel to their diverse business endeavors, the Ammann family fairly early branched out into more intellectual activities, first and foremost into church service, later into medicine, and lastly into law. This clearly increased their standing in the Schaffhausen community. Already by the 4th generation, less than a hundred years after their arrival in Schaffhausen, an Ammann became a pastor. Both he and his son who succeeded him studied at German universities (Strassburg, Wittenberg, Heidelberg) with scholarships provided by the town of Schaffhausen. By the end of the 20th century nearly ten others had followed this first pair, including a missionary who spend most of his life
in India. Theirs was a very prestigious albeit extremely shabbily paid profession particularly in the early years as described vividly below. Gradually, pastors also served as part-time teachers for Latin, Greek, and Hebrew at the local High School/ Junior College, further increasing their prestige – and somewhat also their pay (one would have hoped). By the 7th generation the doctors and apothecaries appeared, much more adventurous than their tradesmen and pastor cousins. One ended up as a deaf-mute specialist in Amsterdam, another as a professor of botany in St. Petersburg, and a third as professor of medicine in Shanghai.

Finally, by the 12th generation, the lawyers appeared with a splash. While – as mentioned repeatedly in the paper – over the centuries numerous Ammann family members had served their community as judges and in many other legal functions, the first university trained lawyer entered the scene in the early 1840s. Returning home from University at the tender age of twenty-two he embroiled himself almost immediately and with gusto in the fight over the new political and economic order being established to finally replace the severely dated guild system. First as editor of a progressive newspaper, then member of the constitutional reform board, city counselor, mayor of Schaffhausen, member of the state government, representative in the federal Parliament and finally member of the federal Senate, Johann Heinrich (#305) was among the most active and successful proponents of a modern, liberal, and democratic form of government abhorred by many old-timers. After his early death his son, another lawyer, continued the fight along the same vein, helping to bring Schaffhausen into the modern world.

The modern world, clearly, was engineer Othmar Ammann’s world. The son of a successful industrialist and the first university trained engineer in the family, he came to the United States in 1904, soon after completion of his studies at the Federal Polytechnic Institute in Zürich, “for a year” to “gain more experience”. As it turned out he would stay on forever eventually becoming one of the World’s leading bridge builders and one of the most prominent Swiss immigrants of all times. He also became an early trend setter in the changing nature of Swiss immigration to the United States. In earlier times the overwhelming majority of Swiss immigrants arrived with the firm intention of settling down permanently. Starting with Othmar Ammann’s generation, however, an increasing number, mostly young University graduates, began arriving with an equally firm intention of not staying permanently but of returning home after a couple of years. Many of them did indeed return home eventually, but many did not as the gaining of experience never seemed to end, professional opportunities were too exciting, and life in America was too good.

This family history makes exciting reading not only for a professional development economist such as the undersigned – who happens also to be a
Schaffhauser – but for everybody interested in long term historical trends. After all, history is shaped not only by wars and conquests, kings and generals, and by the achievements of world renowned scientists and explorers, but as much by the hard and diligent work of families like the Ammanns who over the centuries have, step by step, stone by stone contributed mightily to the extraordinary economic and intellectual progress achieved in once dirt poor Switzerland as well as in the world at large (all the more, of course, since one family member was a world renowned engineer). Hence, the great efforts made by the family to research and publish their nearly 500 year history are much appreciated, as is the enormous work done by Dr. Margot Ammann Durrer who, largely by herself, translated and edited the earlier book by Ernst Ruedi thus making it available to English speakers as well. Their drop into the historical well helps fill the ladle of future research.

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