Book Review: Heritage on Stage: The Invention of Ethnic Place in America's Little Switzerland

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This work, priced at 98 Swiss Francs, is a valuable addition to any genealogical collection that serves people with a Swiss background. although it is written in German, most of the information can be understood with a limited knowledge of that language. It may be purchased in the United States and Canada for US $75.00 from Delbert L. Gratz, 8990 Augsburger Road, Bluffton, OH 45817-9596.

Delbert Gratz


Yodeling, alphorns, cowbells, Wilhelm Tell, cheese, chalets, and cantonal flags conjure up either nostalgic images of a romantic Swiss folklore culture in the pre-industrial world or a visit to the Wisconsin town of New Glarus, popularly known as “America’s Little Switzerland.” A visitor from Basel remarked that New Glarus seemed “more Swiss than Switzerland.” Steven D. Hoelscher argues that the community invented “ethnic place” by its continual reinterpretation of ethnicity and by its reshaping of “Swissness” over time through its landscapes, museums, festivals, and cultural performances. It is this conspicuous construction of American ethnic heritage, identity, and place that Hoelscher examines in *Heritage on Stage*, which covers the period from the founding of New Glarus in 1845 until its sesquicentennial.

Hoelscher organizes the struggles and tensions of the public display of ethnic heritage into three chronological parts. First, commemorative events bound together an increasingly modern community from 1890 until the outbreak of World War I. The displaced weavers and craftspeople, who founded New Glarus under the auspices of the Auswanderungsverein (emigration society) of Canton Glarus, turned to farming and cheese making in Wisconsin. As the memory of this generation faded, the town’s tradition of celebrating Swiss holidays and festivals on July 4th expanded to more and varied celebrations of ethnic culture revolving around themes of the homeland, the pioneer, and the notion of progress. These commemorative festivals reflected the fragile tensions of being both Swiss and American at a time when economic development threatened both community and public memory. The insular community’s desire to reject progress created an antimodernism atmosphere in its public festivals as it strove to preserve vanishing traditions.
In the second part of the book, the interwar years reflect a shift in ethnic identity. Hyphenated Americans strove to demonstrate that their culture was American culture. In New Glarus, citizens reshaped their local culture by depicting their ancestors as pioneers of the American west whose work ethic, patriotism, and love of democracy were compatible with American goals and values. The New Glarus Swiss proclaimed their uniqueness while emphasizing their American loyalty. In this era, visitors increased as the automobile offered new possibilities for tourists to seek rural refuges from the negative consequences of modernization. At the local level, business and community leaders projected their patriotic values to increasing audiences by establishing an annual outdoor pageant performance of Friedrich von Schiller’s Wilhelm Tell. This invented tradition brought together tourists and performers who found a new sense of ethnic community and identity. On the state level, scholars and historians researched, mapped, and documented Wisconsin’s ethnic heritage to prove that Wisconsin, with its unique character of persisting ethnic groups, was a place where democracy worked and diversity served as the basis for unity.

In Part III, the transition to tourism, from 1962 to 1995, demonstrates the commodification of ethnic place heritage and brings forth questions of authenticity. Negative aspects of ethnic tourism provide opportunities to examine who has the authority and power to determine what is authentic. Landscape has increasingly become important in defining cultural difference through streetscape, architecture, and public sculpture.

Hoelscher uses postmodernist tools to examine the invention of ethnic place as an antimodernism movement and to reexamine keywords such as “ethnicity,” “tradition,” “public memory,” and “selling place.” He could have further expanded the complexity of these ideas by reexamining modernist keywords, such as “progress,” which also have multiple meanings that have changed over time and by seeking connections of this theme to larger ethnic pageants in the Midwest. Coincidentally, the Columbian Exposition of 1893 also emphasized progress as a theme just two years before New Glarus’ shift to a progress theme in the presentation of ethnic identity. The Chicago World’s Fair of 1934 featured a Swiss Village in its collection of old world displays, which preceded by one year the idea in New Glarus for a Swiss historical village. Although the women of New Glarus are included when they have prominent or visible roles, Hoelscher neither examines their invisible roles nor the possibility that the continuous reinvention of the meaning of ethnicity offered these women opportunities to challenge the boundaries of old world gender roles.

Readers of *SAHS Review* will find a multiplicity of ideas and issues to stimulate their imagination in this cultural geographic study spanning generations of Swiss in America. New Glarus is exemplary as a case study in the public display of ethnic heritage. Hoelscher’s study of the ongoing tensions and struggles over ethnicity, identity, place, and authenticity as New Glarus emerges as the international guardian of traditional Swiss culture offers new insights into how vernacular and official ethnic identifications reshape and reinforce each other. History is rewritten as ethnic place becomes tourist place.

*Cheryl Ganz*


To do justice to this work is less than easy, yet is certainly a labor of love. Diverse materials in Swiss archives and others unearthed in the United States form the documentary core of this book. Its rich primary sources deal not only with the world of destination, that is several regions in North America such as the Midwest, Texas, and the Pacific Northwest, but also with the world of origin, especially Klosters and Davos. The author is intimately acquainted with that mountainous area of Switzerland’s Canton Graubünden and she also familiarized herself by extensive travels with the American world. She embedded the primary sources she uncovered over years of research into narrative parts which contain dialogues and feature thought processes that are the author’s invention. Thus primary evidence and attempts at genuine, if fictional, reconstruction intermingle and make the work part documentary, part story. It is divided up into some forty chapters of differing lengths that are in part interwoven, in part juxtaposed, which makes it at times less than easy for the reader to grasp the various strands of the narrative. Joyful events are mostly overshadowed by experiences of disaster, be they natural catastrophes derived from the weather and illnesses or from human proneness to doing evil. Marriages, births, and deaths follow each other in a merciless rhythm as are youthful dreams, strivings, achievements, and defeats.

Central to the first part of the book is the story of the Hitz and Brosi family in Graubünden and then in Virginia and Washington, DC. The grandfather Johannes Hitz (1772-1840) had been elected Landammann of the region and was also an entrepreneur in mining. In 1831 the son Johannes Hitz (1797-1864) and his wife Anna Kohler (1796-1883) moved with their son Johannes (1828-1908) to Virginia, then to Washington, DC where they became prominent in Swiss American circles. Their son Johannes (John) married Jane C. Shanks in 1865; he became a successful businessman, banker, writer, and philanthropist and, from 1864 to 1881, served like his father as Consul General of Switzerland. In that role he not only assisted numerous Swiss immigrants in their adaptation to American life, but was also concerned with the plight of the deaf and dumb and served as superintendent of the Volta Bureau founded by Alexander Graham Bell on their behalf.