

## **Across the Pond:**

Where Glarus's customs are just around the corner

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### **An exchange among sisters:**

#### **How the descendants of Swiss emigrants keep their traditions**

In the “Driftless Area” of southern Wisconsin, a geological region with hills, cliffs and rivers that were untouched by glaciers during the last Ice Age, lies the fertile land where Swiss emigrants from Kanton Glarus settled in the mid 1800s. The hills there look nothing like either the Glarner Alpen nor the surrounding limitless expanse of woodland and prairie of the Midwestern USA. But perhaps this southern Wisconsin landscape gave a small feeling of ‘home’ to the Swiss who arrived in increasing numbers towards the end of the 19th century. After various Indian Wars and treaties displaced the Native Americans, emigrants also arrived from Norway, Sweden, Belgium, Holland, Finland and Ireland. The original Swiss settlers endured extremely difficult conditions to establish themselves in Wisconsin, which was still a wilderness “Territory”, not yet a “State” in the USA. However, they prevailed and it is because of the industriousness of those Swiss emigrants that, for example, everyone in the USA now knows Wisconsin as “The Cheese State”.

### **America’s Little Switzerland**

Today, 172 years after the founding of New Glarus, the town is thriving, with a comfortable and safe lifestyle for its residents, a dynamic private sector and lively tourism built around Swiss customs and ancestry. New Glarus sits within Green County where several other villages, such as Monroe, have a significant percentage of Swiss-descended residents. Although only 20% of the people in New Glarus trace their lineage to Switzerland, the town has the nickname “America’s Little Switzerland” and Swiss flags and Kanton Glarus flags are displayed proudly alongside the American red, white and blue. Common transliterated names can be seen on street name signs, local businesses and, of course, on the headstones at the Swiss Cemetery, for example, Elmer, Hoesly, Hefty, Tschudy, Luchsinger, Kubly, Schwanden, Haslen, and Diesbach.

For many Swiss-descended Americans in New Glarus and southern Wisconsin, it’s been their life’s work to keep Swiss traditions alive within their families, communities and to travel to Switzerland to remain in contact with the people,

places and the culture here. These elders in New Glarus work to keep the connection to Glarus alive, by preserving the past, being active in the present and by preparing for the future.

### **Hard Work for the American Dream**

Duane Freitag grew up in New Glarus in the years following WW II and as he grew older, he was “surprised that not everyone in Wisconsin ate Chalberwurst and Schabziger.” His parents spoke Glarner-Deutsch around the house and amongst friends but after the war years, “They were like most parents and thought we did not need to speak any language other than English,” says Freitag. He went on to a long career as a journalist and editor in Milwaukee and has more recently become an author of books about the history of New Glarus. He is currently working on a new book about the first 10 years of the New Glarus colony. His goal is to complete the book in time for the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of New Glarus in 2020. Says Freitag, “There is much interesting information in old letters, some of which were transcribed in 1995 for the Historischer Verein des Kantons Glarus yearbook, and in the land and citizenship records here that reveal a vibrant community seeking the American Dream. I will bring together in one place stories about many of the individuals. Many things were achieved through hard work by these pioneers, but there were setbacks also, including devastating scarlet fever and cholera epidemics. The year 1853 was a dramatic one and we can find large groups of Glarner on Atlantic sailing ships, many but not all coming to New Glarus.” Duane has made several trips to Glarus including “to help represent New Glarus at the Kanton’s ‘650 Jahr im Bund’ celebration in 2002 and to be a guest at the Landsgemeinde in 2013.” Before departing for America, Freitag’s relatives lived in the Suworow house in Elm. He explains, “My great-great grandparents, Johann Jakob Freitag and Maria Freitag-Schiesser and their three children left Elm in the spring of 1845, with a group of other emigrants from the village. Maria was a first cousin of Niklaus Durst, one of the two men who selected the site for New Glarus. Our family is one of four different Freitag lines in the New Glarus area, although all stem from the original Freitags in Elm.”

### **Contact between Glarus and New Glarus**

If you happen to recognize Mike Nevil, that’s because he has done much to maintain perhaps the most dynamic interpersonal connection between Glarus and New Glarus. As the captain of the New Glarus Fire Department, he has been part of eight exchanges of firefighters. Members of the New Glarus Fire Department have visited Glarus four times (in 1996, 1997, 2001 and 2007) and members of the Glarus Fire Department have visited New Glarus four times as well (in 1998, 2002, 2008 and 2010). Upon his first visit to Glarus, Nevil

“became great friends with Heinz Rast, Geni Dieffenbacher and Stevie Scott not to mention a whole list of other firemen who were very friendly and very helpful ‘tour guides’. It was a great learning experience and we were able to compare the ways our departments operated and also how much we were the same in so many ways.” The Glarner connection is close within the two fire departments. “There are many of same names in both fire departments, so it's really like family in more ways than one,” says Nevil. In March of 2018, about 12 New Glarus firefighters and their spouses will be visiting Glarus for a mixture of business, tourism and keeping friendships alive. About his familial connection to Switzerland Nevil says, “My maternal grandparents came from areas such as Rüti, Glarus, Amden and Emmental. My grandfather was a Gmür.” After graduating from culinary school, Nevil first came to work in Switzerland in 1982 and is now the co-owner of the New Glarus Hotel Restaurant.

### **Preserving Swiss Heritage**

For nine years, Beth Zurbuchen has been the president of the Swiss Center of North America which is based in New Glarus. The non-profit's purpose is to preserve Swiss heritage, celebrate Swiss roots and promote Swiss culture. The Swiss Center provides resources for people seeking help with genealogy and hosts a very elegant collection of museum-quality artifacts in its Donald J. Tritt Library and Archive. Zurbuchen grew up in Verona, Wisconsin, just north of New Glarus. Her grandfather came to Wisconsin from the Emmental in 1923 and her other Swiss ancestors came to Wisconsin as far back as 1882. Prior to leading the Swiss Center of North America, Zurbuchen worked her way up the ladder in the world of TV news in Wisconsin over the course of 23 years. She first began as a reporter, then became an anchor, producer and news director. This time spent in the world of communications has served her well in pursuing the goals of the Swiss Center. Drawing a comparison between her previous and current work, Zurbuchen says, “It's telling someone's story. It's asking ‘why’ and listening to the answers. People, like Switzerland itself, are so diverse; each and every one of us has a story to tell. The Swiss Center wants to capture those stories and preserve them.” Zurbuchen will be in Glarus and other areas in the country during the month of September for “connecting and learning” as well as a bit of enjoying the surroundings and culture.

### **American Themes in Scherenschnitte**

Elda and Linda Schiesser are a mother-daughter artist-historian team living together in New Glarus. They have spent decades and countless hours creating unique Scherenschnitte works which have been exhibited in museums in both America and Switzerland, such as the Swiss National Museum in Zürich, the

Museum of American Folk Art in New York, and the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. One of Elda's pieces also was hung on the Christmas tree at White House in 2002. Elda is 99 and a half years 'young' while her daughter Linda is 73. Both are as sharp as their scissors and are quite engaging in conversation. Many of their Scherenschnitte pieces use the traditional technique but have incorporated American-themed imagery and subjects. Linda explains, "Our designs have been created from what we have seen in traditional illustrations and our observation of life around us. We have always stayed to the authentic techniques of Scherenschnitte. We have wanted others to enjoy this Swiss folk art, therefore we adapted a more American feel to our cuttings. We each have our own style, yet can do each other's designs." Elda's maternal grandparents came from Linthal and Schwändi and her father was from Bern. As a child growing up in New Glarus, both Elda and Linda "knew we were Americans first but with many Swiss traits and values. The entire village of New Glarus preserved the Swiss culture through the festivals, music, and general way of life." Elda recalls that her mother's side of the family "carried on many of the Swiss foods and handicrafts" and often ate Swiss food together such as "Bierabrot, Fastnacht Chuechli, Bratzeli, Gschnetzlets, and Chalber Balleli."

### **What Lies Ahead**

Both Switzerland and America are countries where their respective histories and identities are well-maintained but also places where ideas, styles and technologies are increasingly globally-influenced and rapidly changing. The residents of New Glarus profiled in this article are also thinking of what lies ahead; not only are they concerned about the future of preserving the Swiss-American culture within their community but they are also interested in strengthening the relationship between Glarus and New Glarus. As Zurbuchen points out, the family unit is the first place for cultural awareness to take root, "You can't force interest in heritage. But you can surround the young people with it and it can become part of their lives. It's what we do pretty well here in New Glarus, but I do worry that there aren't enough of us to carry on." There are suggestions for ways to develop closer ties to Glarus. For example, the Schiessers say, "The exchange of exhibits between organizations would be a way for all to learn. Each year life changes in our communities." Nevil adds, "In earlier times, it was much easier to do a cultural exchange and it would be great to keep that going on a more regular basis. Our New Glarus high school still does an exchange with Germany, which is great, but we need to keep it up with Switzerland as well." Online-based communication such as social networking also will play an increasingly larger part in staying in touch; as Freitag points out, "Of course Switzerland has changed also and we need to appreciate new things as well as the old. That may be a key to keeping the young interested."

Maybe the use of modern media will spur some of the young to explore things Swiss and things Glarner.” Glarus and its namesake ‘across the pond’ have an undeniably special relationship. It is the hope of the residents of New Glarus that this special relationship, with effort and organizing, will be taken up and carried forward by the next generation.