

Swissdale: A piece of Switzerland in our area

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"History books say the Wenkers got the most land, but the stoniest, and it really was!" said Terry Wenker, a direct descendant of Abraham Wenker, who had arrived in 1839 in the area that would eventually become Clinton County's community of Swissdale.

One of a contingent of settlers from the canton of Bern (or Berne), Switzerland, the Wenkers owned about 350 acres of land in the mountains about three miles directly north of Lock Haven. It was a semi-wilderness area, where howling wolves and panthers were plentiful until the 1870s, and black bears until the 1880s.

Other early pioneers from Switzerland included the Blesh, Schumacher (Shoemaker), Probst (Brobst), Laubscher, Glise, Feller, Sutter, Witchey, and Swope families. It is said that they settled here because the mountainous terrain, with its virgin forest, reminded them of their Swiss homeland.

Always known for being a freedom-loving people, these hardy folks pulled up their roots and struck out for America because life in Switzerland had become too restrictive. Food was scarce, opportunities and land limited. Reports of Pennsylvania's sprawling, fertile land and, in general, the great liberties available and chances for prosperity in the U.S. drew their attention.

In 1825-26, Nicholas Sutter was the first to arrive, exploring northcentral Pennsylvania. He was evidently very impressed, sending back the message: "Kommen alle; est ist wunderbar."

And come they did, establishing what would first be called the "German Settlement" in the area between present-day Farrandsville and Route 664 north of Dunnstown. As farmers also possessing other special skills, they prospered in the 1830s.

They cultivated large crops of wheat, along with rye for family use; it was said that they "made a winter's supply of bread in the fall." Johannes Laubscher also was skilled at making baskets and brooms; Jacob Schumacher and Abraham Wenker were skilled cobblers; and John Blesh was an able tailor.

Some also worked on construction of the dam on the Susquehanna River, and on the Pennsylvania Canal there in 1833-34. Others worked for Hollenbeck, McDonnell and Co., mining clay along Quinn's (later Queen's) Run and producing firebrick.

From 1832-42, religious services were held in their homes, without a minister, except for about once a month when a Methodist "circuit rider" might gallop into the settlement on his horse and minister to the settlers. A log school was built in 1841 on the Probst farm property, and after an Evangelical congregation was organized in 1843, services also were held in that schoolhouse. In 1858, the school became the community's church only, as a new school was built at the "Crossroads" (where Route 664 and Croak Hollow Road intersect today).

Florence Laubscher, the great-granddaughter of the original settlers Jacob and Anna Schumacher, wrote of the early school days from family records: "Pine benches not fastened to the floor sometimes rolled over and as a result many a howl was heard. Some of the older residents carried injuries such as broken noses, sprained ankles and crippled fingers as relics of those days."

Laubscher continued with more school and education information: the first teacher in Swissdale was a man named William Riley, and the children were educated under the policy of "spare the rod and spoil the child"; the first pupils were taught without any books, and any book that was owned by a family "was a treasure handed down from generation to generation."

According to Laubscher, the Swiss "truly appreciated education." After Central State Normal School (which eventually became the Lock Haven University of today) opened in 1870, quite a few young people from Swissdale attended and graduated. And Laubscher noted, "Few places the size of Swissdale have given so many teachers to the world" (between 1870-1900). Also during that time period, seven of Swissdale's youth entered medical professions as doctors, surgeons or dentists.

The community's cemetery was established on land provided by Jacob and Anna Schumacher, for \$50; high on the hill above the crossroads, along the south side of Croak Hollow Road, at first the land had been called Jacob's Garden (1841-58), then the German Settlement Cemetery (1858-1903), and finally the Swissdale Cemetery (1903-present).

Since its first years, the community had continued to be called the German Settlement. In 1890, however, during a village meeting, David Wenker rose to state his opinion that it seemed rather ridiculous to call it that, since most of the settlers came from Switzerland. He moved that the name be changed to Swissdale, and, obviously, his motion carried.

In 1895, the United Evangelical Church was constructed across Croak Hollow Road from the school. That house of worship is now the Swissdale United Methodist Church.

A view of Swissdale, as seen from the Swissdale Cemetery.



Florence Laubscher summarized the lives of those 19th and early 20th century, mostly Swiss residents of Swissdale: "Theirs were not spectacular lives, but they had the true fundamentals: love of learning, love of home, love of country and love of God. On such was America founded and on such it must go forward."

Swissdale did go forward into the 20th century, with quite a few descendants of the first pioneers remaining at their family homesteads. Eventually, however, they had to start giving up on farming as a way to make a living.

Today, a mile west up Croak Hollow Road from Route 664, 56-year-old Terry Wenker runs Bear Mountain Taxidermy, a business that he started in 1977. His family's experience was typical: "My grandfather had worked on the farm for awhile, but then went to Woolrich Woolen Mills until he retired; my dad also tried to farm, but ended up with Montgomery Wards and then to Piper; and, as a kid, I was always outdoors on the farm, and I tried to farm a little bit, but there's no money in that, so I too had to give it up."

So residents adapted to be able to stay in the area that they loved. Bear Mountain Taxidermy, Stimpson Contracting and Coleman's Landscape Service are the only businesses in the Swissdale area. "Every one else here either works in town (Lock Haven), State College, or Williamsport," Wenker said.

It is four miles from the Jay Street Bridge in Lock Haven up Route 664 to the crossroads at Swissdale. Two signs on the right ("Welcome, Come As You Are" for the United Methodist church, and "Award-Winning Studio, Bear Mountain Taxidermy") tell the visitor or traveler that he has arrived at the "heart" of the over 175-year-old settlement. Across 664 from the signs is the Methodist church, under Pastor Ginger Baker Betz; and across Croak Hollow Road from the church is its auxiliary building-social hall, which used to be the one-room school. A small number of residential houses also are in the immediate area, along Route 664, Croak Hollow Road and up German Road to the east.

Less than half-a-mile west on Croak Hollow Road, up on the south hillside, is the beautiful, windswept Swissdale Cemetery. Many Probsts, Laubschers, Shoemakers, Fenstamakers, Wenkers, Helbleys, Sorgens and other early settler family members lie interred there. One interesting stone has etched on it, "Erected to the memory of Miss Sadie, by loving friends, members of the First United Evangelical Church of Lock Haven. By her consecrated voice and her unselfish devotion to duty she inspired many to nobler lives. Sadie. Daughter of J & C Probst. 1860-1909."

Across from the cemetery is the residence of Jerry and Melinda Updegraff, with its big, old-fashioned treehouse for the grandkids. Five llamas call this gorgeous, mountain-backed location home also.

The next house west on Croak Hollow Road is another old home, the brick edifice of Wayne Laubscher. The firebrick is from the small, old brickyard in the area, which, indeed, provided for the building of all the old Swissdale brick homes.

The days of brickmaking are long gone; the days of growing large crops of wheat, corn, oats and tobacco are no more. But the Swiss descendants remain, still attached to the land that gave their ancestors a new, good way of life.

Asked if he anticipated any changes coming to Swissdale in the future, Terry Wenker answered, laughing, "It's pretty small. I don't think we'll be getting any Wal-Mart up here soon."

(NOTE: Historical information in this article came from Richard E. Winters' compilation, "History of Swissdale," especially the section by Florence Laubscher, available at the Ross Library in Lock Haven.)

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