

# Swiss-Americans Find Fellowship in 'Schweizer Verein'

ON MAY 1, 1857, a group of men met after business hours at J.C. Fehr's store, 19 Deaderick St., in Nashville.

For them, this was a new land, with a new language, but with new opportunities. There was a feeling that if they stuck together and helped each other, they could overcome problems. They could have a social life among people of similar backgrounds and traditions.

They had all come from Switzerland, lured by the promise of a better life in America.

SO IN THE store that night, they wrote a constitution, in the old language and the new. They called their organization *Schweizer Verein* or Swiss Society. In simple terms, the aim would be good fellowship and

"They came here broke, just like I did," said 82-year-old John Suter, who joined when he came to Nashville in the 1920s. "Usually, they would start out working on a farm. Most of them were young and single."

In those early days, a man paid \$4 as an initiation fee and a 25 cents a month in dues. There was an automatic assessment of 25 cents when a member died. The Society paid \$3 a week in sick benefits. If the brother was considered sick enough, the president would appoint a couple of men to stay the night with the him.

THE SICK committee had to report to the president three times a week.

"That must have been quite a problem in those days before

"I can remember that sick committee," said 84-year-old Will Suter, Vernon's father and John's brother. "It was in the constitution until 1957."

Until the last few years, a member could borrow money from the Society. It was never much, but in those early days, a few dollars could get a young man going.

"You had to have another member as co-signer," John Suter said. "The most you could ever borrow was \$200 and in those early days, it was much less than that. Finally, we got up into modern times and \$200 wasn't worth fooling with. I guess we only had one loan in the last 10 to 12 years before we wrote a new constitution and took loans out."

THERE WAS a rule in the so-

ciety that personal quarrels and insults would not be permitted. An infraction of this rule called for a 25-cent fine.

"If this law would have been enforced, I am told, the lodge now would be in the millionaire class," Will Suter said in a 1935 speech.

Suter also pointed out that those rules said that if a member refused to accept a nomination to an office or to a committee, he was forbidden to attend meetings.

The Society tried several meeting times. A Sunday morning meeting didn't last long.

"IN 1891, they put in the by-laws that the meetings would be held on the Saturday night before or after full moon," Will Suter said. "This was done so the members in the country

could drive in by horse and buggy by moonlight."

In 1859, the name was changed to *Schweizer Unterstützungs Verein* or Swiss Relief Society. It kept that name until a couple of years ago when the name became the Swiss Society of Nashville.

The Society was always ready to help a worthy Swiss-American.

"The records show that even a few honest Swiss borrowed money and skipped out to places like California and never repaid their loans," said Peter Buschauer, the president. "However, most did repay their loans."

WILL SUTER remembered reading the record of one man who wanted to go to Chattanooga in 1894.

"He didn't have the money," Suter said. "He borrowed \$4 from the Society and promised to pay it back."

"In 1896, another member wanted to go back to Switzerland. He was sick and didn't have any money. So the lodge agreed to a compromise. They would send him back to Switzerland and give him \$5 pin money under the condition that he quit the society."

In 1903, three more members resigned under the condition that they get paid a certain amount of money.

The earliest meetings probably were held in that same store or in somebody's home. Later, they meet at Chris Eberhard's Saloon. Then came the Pullman House. In 1894, they moved to

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# Swiss...

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the Maennerchor-Halle on Jefferson Street. They also met for a time at Twin-Halle on Cedar Street and at the German-American Hall.

**THE SOCIETY** bought the Maennerchor-Hall in 1918. It turned out to be a bad investment because of taxes and repairs. They finally sold it.

There were a lot of meeting places over the years.

"William Nussebaumer, the brewmaster at Gerst Brewery, had the club meet in his basement at one time," Vernon Suter said.

These days, the club meets in the Opryland Hotel where the fare is likely to be more varied than in most of the society's years. However, everybody agrees no meeting would be a meeting without swiss cheese on rye sandwiches and plenty of beer.

Older members can remember there was home brew around even in the days when there was no such thing as legal beer. There was wine from farmers in the country, too.

**WHEN THERE** was a funeral, everybody attended. Anything else was unthinkable. Failure to do so resulted in a fine.

Vernon Suter's earliest memories of the Swiss Independence Day picnic held each year some time around Aug. 1 was of a man sitting on a chair atop a table calling bingo numbers. Having your feet on the same table on which people ate violated every code he had been taught. He was shocked.

"I remember those picnics at Clearwater Beach at Linton, about 15 miles out of Nashville," Will Suter said. "We would have 27 barrels of beer and over 300 people. The celebrating would start early in the morning."

There would be dancing. The older folks would try an old fashioned schottisch and laendler to the melodies of Swiss accordions. John Suter was one of the accordionists.

"Hermann Fessler was a yodler," Vernon Suter said.

**THERE WERE** bowling alleys set up. The swimming was pleasant.

"The nice, clean beach reminding us of the shores of the *Vierwaldstaettersee*, shady trees like the gnarled weather pines of the Alps," said an inviting invitation by the 1933 committee. There would be a quartet singing the old songs and yodeling.

The Society has a book in which its members are listed. As often as possible, their Swiss hometowns, dates of birth, dates of initiation, dates of death and other pertinent information are recorded.

Those early members listed *schneider* (tailor), *zeichner* (draftsman), *conditor* (pastry chef), *gaertner* (gardner) *seifensied* (soap maker), *steinhauer* (stonemason), *wagenmacher* (wagonmaker), *metzger* (butch-



**Peter Buschauer**

*Swiss Society president*

er) and just about every other trade imaginable. Mostly they were in agriculture.

The names they left are among those honored in the community.

**"FOR AN** organization such as ours to have endured for more than a century, to have survived the many changes of our times, its values must be solid and timeless," Buschauer told the group at the celebration of its 125th anniversary. "We are celebrating not only a quantity of years, but also something of special worth. We may call it tradition."

The Nashville group is either the second oldest Swiss group in the United States or the oldest. One in New York may or may not be older.

"Those Swiss men who founded our Society 125 years ago were proud to be Swiss and equally proud to be new Americans," Buschauer told the group. "They understood that by cultivating the memory of our mother country they would strengthen their ability to adjust to a new world and to succeed in it."

**BUSCHAUER** could see some similarities between the old world and the new.

"I think we all agree that the Swiss flourish particularly well in our state," Buschauer said. "Southern neighborliness reminds us a lot of Swiss neighborliness. We love the slow and deliberate pace of life in the South. We take readily to its rural quality. The hills of East Tennessee often merge in our minds with the foothills of the Alps."

"It is not surprising then that so many of the Swiss immigrants to Tennessee stayed here, sank deep roots and their children and grandchildren are proud citizens of the Volunteer State."

The Society is looking for new members. Interested persons can reach Buschauer at 776-1299 nights.

**IN 1980**, the Society ended a long tradition. It voted to admit women as members. This still is a controversial matter in the club. Some men felt it was the one place where they could get away from their wives.

However, most feel that any organization still around after 125 years most likely is strong enough to withstand the presence of the ladies.

—By **MAX YORK**