New Glarus: Finding a New Home

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The events that led to the founding of the Swiss colony of New Glarus began to unfold in Switzerland in the 1840s.

A severe recession was then underway and it brought hardship to many areas of Europe. The years were particularly difficult in the small Canton of Glarus in the eastern part of Switzerland. Many people who had been employed in textile mills were out of work. The economic troubles were also manifested in an increase in public debt, a decline of the middle class and a rising population that was in part due to families returning to their home community. All of that put great pressure on the limited resources of the canton and spurred the idea of some kind of organized emigration effort.

Emigration from Glarus had been going on to a modest extent for a long time previous to this. Now the Glarners, in their deliberate style of thinking, wanted the issue to be fully explored. That was done through the work of the *Regierung,* the canton's administrative council, and by 1844 money had already been set aside. "With the spirit of nationalism, the thought was to open a place of refuge over the Atlantic Ocean for the poor of the land of Glarus," according to an account in the canton's newspaper of the day.

An Emigration Society was soon organized and based in Schwanden, a village near the center of the canton. Advice was sought on where to relocate people. Wilhelm Blumer, a Pennsylvania banker who was a descendant of Glarus emigrants, offered his help. He suggested that the region now known as the Upper Midwest, which was then being settled, would be the best location.

It was then decided that Niklaus Dürst, an appeals judge who sat on the Society's board of directors, would head the search for land. At first it was hoped that Mathias Marti, a schoolteacher who knew English, would accompany Dürst. When Marti was indecisive about going the group instead chose Fridolin Streiff, a blacksmith (who also didn't know English).

After the two men signed an agreement with the Emigration Society, they set off for the New World on March 8, 1845. The colonists would follow later and rendezvous in St. Louis. The specific instructions for the advance men said that they were to buy at least 1,200 aces of land (in one large tract) at the U.S. government price of $1.25 an acre. The property had to include sufficient timber land and have soil suitable for raising grain and cattle. Dürst was to keep a record of his travels and actions. His travel book is now archived in the Wisconsin State Historical Society at Madison. From that record and a diary kept by Joshua Frey, an American who served as guide and interpreter for the two advance men, we can easily retrace their work.

Dürst and Streiff traveled to LeHavre in France and then set sail for America aboard the ship St. Nicolas on March 21, 1845. They arrived in New York City on April

26. There they made immediate contact with the firm of Bourry d'Ivernois, which they were to use for financial transactions. The pair then went on to Allentown, Pennsylvania, to confer with Blumer. While in Pennsylvania they met Frey and he joined them as they began their search for land. The three men traveled back to New York City and then on to Albany, N.Y., where they caught a train to Buffalo, N.Y. From there they sailed across Lake Erie, arriving in Detroit the night of May 16. Although Ohio and Indiana were on their list of places to look for land, they never did. Instead then went on to Chicago, crossing Lake Michigan and arriving there May 18.

The men stopped at the federal land office in Chicago and got their first taste of the fact that while large amounts of Illinois prairie land were still available, the desired timber land was scarce. Nevertheless, they went on to Dixon, Ill., and explored areas along the Rock River. Frey made a side trip to Como (southwest of Sterling, Ill.) to check out the possibility of the Swiss settling there at first and being employed in constructing a long mill race.

Undecided, the men went on to St. Louis, Mo., and spent several days with Swiss residents of the city while making arrangements for temporary housing for the group of colonists from Glarus who were to follow. Then the three explored northeastern Missouri, going as far as the communities of Danville, Williamsburg and Mexico. A stop at a regional government land office showed that most of the land in that area already had been purchased.

They next explored eastern Iowa, including land around Prairieville, Winchester, Birmingham and Fairfield. Again a stop at the government land office did not produce anything that they were interested in. They left Iowa, somewhat frustrated. Frey wrote in his diary: "Nowhere could we reach a decision to purchase, either because forest or water was missing, the site was not healthy, or the still not entered land in one complex was not large enough to satisfy our needs."

The men went on to Galena, Ill., then the center of the region's lead mining district. From there they went north to Mineral Point in the Territory of Wisconsin. It was at Mineral Point that they met up with several members of the Rodolf family, who were originally from Switzerland and had settled in the region in 1834. Theodore Rodolf, who operated a general store in Mineral Point, assisted the men in various ways. His brother, Friedrich (actually Jacob Caspar Friedrich Rodolf and known as Fritz), who ran the family farm near present-day Gratiot, Wis., proceeded to take Dürst, Streiff and Frey around the area in his farm wagon. The men looked at land in Green County and Dane County and then traveled as far as Milwaukee, stopping at the land office there. They returned to Green County and were staying at the now-vanished mining community of Exeter when they finally came upon land that fit their needs. The tract, which they first inspected on Friday, June 27, 1845, was in Town 4 North Range 7 East. It had fertile soil, springs, a river sufficient to run a mill, and some timber, with more woodland available on the ridge to the south. The trio then returned to Illinois for another look, a trip that they later termed "unfortunately futile." Soon they were back in Mineral Point and, after looking at some land along the Wisconsin River, they decided that the Green

County tract was the right one. On July 17, 1845, Dürst and Streiff, as agents for the Emigration Society of Canton Glarus, purchased 1,200 acres in what is now the Town of New Glarus. A letter was sent to St. Louis describing their whereabouts. They bought some needed items at Theodore Rodolf's store and then on Sunday, July 20, 1845, Friedrich Rodolf took Dürst and Streiff in his wagon to their new land.

That night Dürst recorded in his notebook that a number of "firsts" were accomplished – first shelter begun, first fire lit, first fish caught, first bread baked and first meal eaten. He immediately called the place "our Colony of New Glarus."

The men then set about getting things ready for the colonists. Rodolf hauled lumber for them to build some small shelters on a knoll not far from a bend in the Little Sugar River. Frey, who had made a quick trip back to Como, Ill., to check on things there, returned with no news on July 22. He then helped surveyor Arnzi Comfort mark off the land and divide it into 20-acre plots. When they were finished the pair laid out a road to Greene's Prairie, a small Yankee settlement about seven miles to the west. With his part of the mission completed, Frey then left Aug. 6 to return to Pennsylvania. The others busied themselves as they awaited word on the colonists.

Two days later, on Aug. 8, 1845, two men from the group of emigrants – Mathias Dürst and Paulus Grob – arrived in New Glarus with the news that the colonists had arrived in St. Louis. Niklaus Dürst and Mathias Dürst then left for St. Louis to bring everyone to Wisconsin.

See separate account for the immigration story

The plan was for Streiff to stay with the colonists and Dürst to return to Switzerland. A farewell party was held at New Glarus on Sept. 1 and then Dürst left for New York City. Unfortunately, he was ill as he traveled from Milwaukee to Buffalo via the Great Lakes. He decided to take the cheaper (and slower) Erie Canal across the state of New York rather than the railroad, arriving in New York City Sept. 15. Accommodations were provided to him by Jacob Dörler of the Bourry d"Ivernois firm until he was well enough to undertake the sea voyage home. While waiting he exchanged several letters with Streiff, so Dürst was aware of the colony's situation. He had hoped to visit Frey and Blumer in Pennsylvania, but did not travel there because of his illness.

Dürst finally left America on Oct. 1 (or 2nd), sailing to Hamburg, where he again received some medical attention. He slowly traveled south through Germany to Basel, Switzerland, and arrived back in Canton Glarus on Dec. 2, 1845, healthy and warmly greeted by his fellow countrymen. Several days later the bi-weekly newspaper in Glarus published an extensive account of the search for land and the emigration, including what happened to each person who had left Glarus that spring. The information was obviously provided by Dürst.

Niklaus Dürst remained a highly-regarded member of his community. He was married twice and had nine children. He died in Switzerland in 1874.

Additional resources used for this account:

Searching for a New Home by Robert A. Elmer and Duane H. Freitag, special issue of the Swiss American Historical Society Review, June 2005.
Briefe des Appellations-Richters Niklaus Dürst [Letters of Appeals Judge Niklaus Dürst], two self-published booklets by Elisabeth R. Dürst, 2004.
Glarner Zeitung, Dec. 20, 1845. The Glarus newspaper discusses the emigration.