New Glarus: The Emigration

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The original plan for the 1845 emigration from Switzerland was that once suitable land had been purchased the colonists from Canton Glarus would embark for the New World. However, events overcame that and preparations were made for the colonists to leave barely more than a month after the two advance men set out to buy land.

The epic story of the migration has often been told and most of the accounts rely on a diary kept by Mathias Dürst, a tinsmith. The German-language diary is in two volumes and is archived at the Wisconsin State Historical Society in Madison. A translation was published by the state society in 1900. In 1970, for the 125th anniversary of the settlement, an annotated translation was completed and is still available for purchase through the New Glarus Historical Society.

Records show that the group of colonists who left Canton Glarus on April 16, 1845, included 86 adults and 107 children. The total of 193 was much larger than the 156 that was expected. At the last minute a large group from the Canton's *Kleintal* (the more remote *Chlytal* [dialect for little valley] or Sernf River valley) decided to join the emigration. That put pressure on travel accommodations and funds. While emigrants were to pay their own transportation expenses, in many cases their hometowns actually provided the funds and the Emigration Society took care of some common expenses. And when the group arrived at their new home there would be a 10-year period in which they would have interest-free use of 20 acres of land that was being purchased for them, with the right to buy it at the end at the same purchase price.

On the day of departure, the emigrants gathered at noon at the *Biäsche*, an inn at the eastern end of the Linth canal in Canton Glarus. A large crowd was present to bid them farewell. The assembly heard Caspar Jenny make an impassioned speech urging the emigrants to "enshrine in your hearts the three national virtues of the Swiss and Glarnese, namely diligence, harmony and unshakable trust in God. Carry them across the great ocean and practice them in the new fatherland with courage, perseverance and firm purpose, and all will go well."

The emigrants then boarded the canal boats and departed for Zurich on the first leg of what was to be a 124-day journey. During the first days of travel they already experienced much misery – overcrowding on the boats, problems with paying for food and lodging, rainy weather, and the added expenses of hauling baggage for the larger number of emigrants. The group traveled on to Basel and then down the Rhine River to Rotterdam in the Netherlands. They often met up with former residents of Canton Glarus who encouraged them in their endeavor and sometimes helped them financially. Those with a little money tended to spend the nights at hostels. Others slept on benches on the boats. Some had their blankets stolen.

When they arrived in Rotterdam on April 28, they took several different coastal vessels to the port of Nieuwe Diep (literally "new canal," now a region of greater Amsterdam). On one of the nights a storm arose and the Swiss got their first taste of the terror of seasickness. At Nieuwe Diep they boarded the ship Supurb, a three-masted vessel that was to take them to America. There were 88 bedsteads available and the emigrants used straw and their *Gefieder* (featherbedding) to try to make the beds and other sleeping spaces a bit comfortable. While the Supurb was being fitted out, the colonists spent time on and off the ship. Most were shivering in the cold wind that blew off the sea. At times the various families had to buy necessary supplies and they found the prices unusually high.

Dürst comments in his diary at this point that some of the people, when they were back in his hometown of Diesbach, didn't have much to do with him. But he foresaw that "during the voyage they will need me more than I need them."

The Superb finally set sail at 9 a.m. on May 13, bound for Baltimore, Md. Quickly the seasickness resumed. "Now the vomiting started, no one could stand upright anymore, not even those who stayed well, because of the ship's tossing," Dürst wrote.

As with any sailing ship of the day, the food left a lot to be desired. The meat was packed with salt in barrels and not only had to be washed thoroughly but parboiled and then boiled again with different water to the point that it was barely edible. Dürst noted that plenty of hard tack was also available but he didn't think it was fit for human food (he called in horse feed). Rice and lentils were in sufficient supply, but not of the best quality. Flour was as coarse as sand. Many of the potatoes were rotten. Rainwater was used for drinking. Some emigrants had brought some cheese, but all lamented the lack of *Schabziger*, the beloved hard green cheese native to Canton Glarus. That cheese, when grated, would have made some dishes more palatable and perhaps settle the travelers' stomachs.

The first two deaths occurred on May 28. Anna Stauffacher-Beglinger, who had suffered from severe seasickness, died and was buried at sea. Paulus Grob, nominally the leader of the group, led the ceremonies and afterwards tried to encourage everyone to work in harmony despite their inborn distrust of others. That evening, Anna, the 6-month-old child of Heinrich and Barbara Stauffacher, died and her burial was the next day.

Finally on the 30th the weather improved and the next weeks were somewhat more bearable. However, difficulties continued: There were multiple days of unfavorable wind. The pregnant Anna Wild gave birth May 4, but the infant died the next day. Griping, particularly among a group from the village of Diesbach, became quite vocal. Eight-month-old Rudolph Hoesly died June 19. The potatoes ran out and more of the colonists had to resort to eating the hardtack.

On June 24 a ship heading for France passed closely and the captains spoke to each other through speaking trumpets. Then on the 27th Durst records "the most joyful

day of the whole sea voyage." It was about 11 a.m. when the cry of "land!" rang out and for everyone all the troubles and hardships suddenly seemed forgotten. On the 29th they were in the Baltimore harbor and a doctor came on board. Feeling exhilarated that evening, the best singers in the group sang songs of the homeland. Some of the sailors even joined the emigrants on the lower deck and applauded.

The next morning everyone dressed up in their finest as they set foot on American soil. Baggage, much of it cumbersome, had to be removed from the ship and hauled to temporary lodging. Then the problems began anew. Lodging was expensive. Heinrich Blumer, the Swiss-American who was to have met them, was not there (possibly because they were running behind schedule). The company that they were referred to for transportation to St. Louis was overcharging them and actually was only able to do a contract as far as Pittsburgh.

On July 1 all of the men met on a hill outside the city to discuss their dilemma. It was decided to go with Grob's recommendation on a transportation firm that would charge them 4.5 *frankenthaler* for adults, half price for children under age 12 and those under age 4 free. The baggage was re-weighed and found excessive, causing extra fees.

"This day we saw a ceremony in Baltimore such as perhaps none of us has ever seen," Dürst wrote in his diary. "It was the commemoration of the day of death of General and former President [Andrew] Jackson, immortal for America's freedom. Several thousand horsemen in double file, the first column in black breeches and waistcoats and white jacket with black ribbons and mourning rape, on magnificent white horses." Jackson had died June 8 at his home near Nashville, Tenn.

Before the colonists departed Baltimore on July 2, two of the neediest families decided to stay behind. Some of the communal money was given to them.

The group boarded a train outside of the city and rode it to Columbia, Pa. "This day was for us the most beautiful and joyous of the whole voyage up to now," Dürst wrote. "The first time in our lives on a railroad, we could not see enough of the sights. We rode with the speed of the wind through splendid country and wooded valleys . . . proclaiming American comfort or wealth."

From Columbia they took the Pennsylvania Canal to Pittsburgh. Each canal boat was drawn by a horse. One horse was always in the boat and from time to time would be exchanged with the one pulling. At Hollidaysburg, the boats were loaded onto railroad cars which then were pulled up one side of the Allegheny Ridge and let down the other with the use of a rope and pulley system operated by a steam engine. The operation, known as the Allegheny Portage Railroad, provided a way over the ridge that separates the Susquehanna River from the Ohio River valley. "It is amazing what human hands are able to do," Dürst wrote.

On July 9th the group reached Pittsburgh. Happy again, some of the singers were entertaining on deck. The singing attracted hundreds of people to the banks of the canal and windows along the way were full of people.

Dürst and his wife, Verena, spent some time in the city and they met up with Jost Ruch, a friend from Canton Glarus who was in Pittsburgh with his milk wagon. That evening they enjoyed supper at the Ruch home. The new immigrants marveled at Ruch's success since coming to America. He had between 25-40 cows and three horses that Dürst thought "in Europe would do honor to a nobleman."

Group leaders made arrangements with a steamboat firm to take them to St. Louis. The price was $2 for persons over age 14, half price for those under 14 and free if under age 8. Everyone was to provide their own provisions, but food was cheaper in Pittsburgh. Another baby was born on the waiting steamboat, with mother Agatha Legler-Speich and her child enduring "smothering heat very near the engine."

Again several destitute families decided to stay in Pittsburgh.

After embarking, the steamboat got stuck on a sandbar as it was trying to get close to two vessels loaded with coal for fuel. The Swiss men scurried to unload baggage onto a barge to lighten the steamboat's weight and then strained in helping to try to move the vessel off the sandbar. Some nearly drowned in all the activity.

With the aid of a German-speaking interpreter, Dürst had an interesting conversation with the steamboat captain. The captain wanted to know of Switzerland and the aim of the immigrants. Dürst became worried for his fellow immigrants. "What we had often heard before was confirmed by this man too, that 20 acres are next to nothing and that it is not worth the effort to build a house and barn on it," the tinsmith wrote. The captain urged the group to stay in St. Louis the first winter.

The emigrants arrived in Cincinnati on July 17 and were dealt another blow. The boat that they thought was going to take them to St. Louis was going no further and their contract was over. They were able to secure a second contract and this time it was a little easier since the first mate on the boat spoke German. They also had a surprise visit from another former Glarner, Thomas Streiff, who was doing well working as a cloth pattern engraver in a factory at Cincinnati.

Dürst was impressed with Cincinnati and was able to spend some time looking around. "The streets are wide and paved…the houses, all built of brick, in which an extravagant splendor is apparent," he noted later. Hilarius Wild and his wife and new son decided to stay in Cincinnati awhile and would rejoin the group later.

They emigrants resumed their travel using two boats, with the second leaving Cincinnati on the 19th and eventually catching up with the other. A son was born to Rudolf and Eufemia Stauffacher. And then they felt the "scourge of America" –

mosquitoes. Some of the Swiss were afflicted to the point of having swollen hands and feet.

On the 22nd the boats entered the Mississippi River, which Dürst observed was muddy and full of driftwood. They reached St. Louis the evening of July 23 and were immediately visited by many others who had earlier immigrated from Canton Glarus. The colonists unloaded their baggage and the families scattered about the city in groups of two and three.

They were happy to have reached the rendezvous point and knew that the advance men had been there earlier – but there was no word on their current whereabouts. It was learned later that the advance men had sent a letter from Mineral Point, Wis., telling of the purchase of land, but delivery of the letter apparently was delayed. Meanwhile, the emigrants gathered on July 25th to decide what to do. They did have a letter from Blumer saying that the advance men had been in Peru, Ill., so Dürst and Grob were chosen to try to find them.

While the colonists waited in the summer heat of St. Louis, Dürst and Grob began their search. They went to Peoria via the Illinois River, with riverboats often becoming stuck due to the low water level. At times Dürst did some tin-smithing to help pay expenses. Arriving at Peru on Aug. 3, they made inquiries with the postmaster. He informed them that the advance men had been there and had gone to Wisconsin.

But Dürst and Grob were about out of money. Providence provided help in the form of another former resident of Glarus, John Freuler. He was from Ennetbühls and he and his wife were now living in the Peru area. He heard of the two men and not only came to see them and loaned them money but offered to travel with them. The three men then moved on via stagecoach through Grand Detour and Freeport to Galena, Ill. From there they headed north into Wisconsin Territory and upon arriving in Mineral Point heard the good news that the advance men had purchased land about 30 miles away. On Aug. 8 they arrived at New Glarus.

Mathias Dürst was delighted with what he saw. “It is beautiful beyond expectation,” he wrote. The next day he and Judge Niklaus Dürst, leader of the advance men, left for St. Louis. At first they rode along with Friedrich Rodolf as he drove his wagon back to his farm near present-day Gratiot (Rodolf had been helping the advance men, including hauling lumber to the colony site.) The two Dürsts then walked to Galena and waited for a southbound riverboat. On Aug. 11 a northbound riverboat docked and on board were the Glarus colonists, who apparently had finally received the letter from Mineral Point.

Judge Dürst made arrangements for lodging, obtained medical help for some in the group, and set up transportation to New Glarus for the women and children. Then he sent most of the men on ahead to prepare temporary lodging

It was during their brief stay in Galena that we are furnished with a contemporary description of the colonists. Also in Galena those days was Heinrich Lienhard, an earlier immigrant from Canton Glarus who had been living in southern Illinois (he later went on to California and was with fellow Swiss John Sutter when gold was discovered). Many years later Lienhard wrote an extensive autobiography. In it he recalled meeting with Judge Dürst, who he described as "quite a pleasant, friendly, enlightened man." He had less kind words for the other Glarners: "I was able to see the men in their wide pants that reached to half a foot above their ankles; walking about in their great, clumsy mountain shoes; old, gray puttees wound around their legs instead of stockings; without jackets, and often without vests; with their shirt sleeves turned up to their elbows, displaying their sunburned arms, looking as if they were still having in our old Glarus mountains."

The immigrants soon moved on from Galena. The group of men walked the 60 or so miles and several days later arrived at New Glarus – mostly likely in the early morning hours of Friday, Aug. 15, which has become the traditional day marking the arrival of the colonists. The men quickly set about excavating an area next to the few existing shelters that the advance men had built. They constructed a bowery that was later enclosed on the sides with planks and became the temporary shelter for the colonists. The women and children arrived on Sunday, Aug. 17, with all but the smallest and weakest taking turns walking alongside the wagons. Thomas Schmid, 3-year-old son of Mathias and Anna Katharina Schmid, died enroute.

There were now 135 colonists at New Glarus – 131 of them were among the 193 who left Canton Glarus in the spring, three others joined the group either in St. Louis or Galena, and advance man Fridolin Streiff would be staying with them as Emigration Society agent. Of the 193, eight had died enroute and 53 remained in various cities in America (one family did return to Switzerland). The colonists included 33 men, 24 women and 78 children. Only four of the men were farmers, an occupation that many of them now faced. Other trades included two carpenters, one tinsmith, one blacksmith, four textile factory workers and eight slaters (men who had worked in various parts the slate mining business in the Sernftal)

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On Wednesday, Aug. 19, Judge Dürst penned a lengthy letter to the Emigration Society, reviewing the search for land and recounting what happened to the colonists. On Thursday, Aug. 20, all of the heads of families drew lots for their 20-acre plots. Plot 26, where the initial huts and the bowery were located, was chosen as the village center and to this day makes up much of the central business district of New Glarus. Five of the plots were set aside as woodlots. Unassigned plots would go to later immigrants. On Aug. 29 another 80 acres of land was purchased for more woodlots (the land was west of today's New Glarus Woods State Park).

After Judge Dürst left for Switzerland in September, the colonists set about preparing for winter. Twelve log cabins were complete, with two families per cabin. Some families moved away, but the colony was joined by several other people who had traveled separately. A few families spent the first winter in Galena.

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