

Grade 10-12, Topic 2

Midway, Utah: Switzerland in America

My grandfather left my family a little red brick house in Midway, Utah, a small town in the Heber Valley, about 50 miles from Salt Lake City. The main part of the house was built around 1880 by Swiss immigrants. The first family that lived in the house was named Aplanap. The second family who owned the house was named Gertsch. My grandparents bought the house from Conrad Gertsch in the mid 1960's. On the wall, near the room I use as a bedroom, hangs a wooden milk bucket. The bucket is about the size of an oatmeal box, only elliptical instead of round. It has a wooden lid carved to fit snugly. About one-quarter of the way from the top, there's a nail pounded partway into the bucket. Conrad Gertsch brought the bucket from Switzerland when he immigrated in about 1880. He was about 14-years-old. In Switzerland, Conrad milked cows daily for their owners. He was allowed the portion of the milk from the nail to the top of his bucket as his pay (Brinton).

Conrad was one of many Swiss immigrants to settle in Midway in the 1870s and 1880s. In 1866, Brigham Young instructed the Mormon settlers to build forts to protect them from Indian attack. Two Heber Valley settlements decided to build a fort half-way between each of them, and called the fort Midway. Most of these Swiss immigrants were converts to the LDS Church (Springer). They settled in Midway because it reminded them of their homes in Switzerland. The Swiss immigrants shaped the town of Midway. They built Victorian chalets with steep roofs that allowed snow to slide off easily. They carved intricate borders for their windows and eaves. They grazed cows on the hillsides, and farmed even though the growing season was very short because of the high altitude. Conrad Gertsch used to hang large Swiss cowbells from the necks of his grazing cows (Brinton). The immigrants cooked foods that they were familiar with like Swiss sausages, Swiss cheese and bratzelies made on special Swiss irons. The town census listed names such as Huber, Kohler, Probst, Zenger, Durschi, and Abegglen (Springer).

The Swiss immigrants in Midway were very hard-working and disciplined. They eked a living from the rocky soil through sheer determination. They made good use of limited resources and valued quality craftsmanship (Tobler). The town was laid out in an orderly fashion with trees, gardens, and pastures. Even after the town residents ceased to depend heavily on their gardens for sustenance, they still took great pride in their gardens. Even in the 1960s to 2000, my grandfather earned his place in the social fabric of the community through his dedication to his immaculate vegetable garden (Brinton).

In successive generations of the mid 1900s, the poor farmlands could no longer support the growing population. The grandchildren and great-children of the Swiss immigrants moved to nearby cities such as Salt Lake and Ogden to find work (Tobler). Many people moved away from Midway, but very few moved in as permanent residents. Still the town of Midway remained fairly isolated until the last 15 or 20 years (Brinton). In the last decade, there has been a building boom as people sought the beautiful rural setting. There are now hotels being built along with numerous cabins and large summer homes.

Even though relatively few people are of Swiss descent, Midway still shows Swiss influence. In 2005, the Midway phone book lists many Swiss names. The Huber descendents have carved a large statue of their great-great grandfather, John Huber, out of a tree in their front yard. The Probst farms sell expensive candles and jellies; the Gertsch cows still graze in the pasture behind my grandfather's house.

The Swiss influence can be seen in local architecture, both in public buildings like the church and town hall, and in private homes. The town hall has a huge Swiss clock with figures of a Swiss boy and Swiss girl that rotate on the hour. The church has Swiss shutters and Swiss stenciling on the exterior. Every summer, almost all the residents of the town work together to host 60,000 visitors at the annual Swiss Days celebration (Springer). The local citizens sell Swiss food and perform in a bell choir. Even though there are hundreds of outside vendors and performers involved, the Swiss influence is still evident.

The architecture of Midway is symbolic of the past and present influence of Swiss culture in the local community. Both the town hall and the church are built, at least in some part, from pot rock, a porous stone plentiful in the Heber Valley. Many private homes, especially those dating from the 1880s have pot rock walls, while newer homes have pot rock fireplaces, chimneys, and decorative work. The buildings, both old and new, are built in Swiss style using a local material. They illustrate the intertwining of European influence with the indigenous landscape. Immigrants brought aspects of their own cultures, made due with the resources they had available to them, and assimilated within a new community.

The town of Midway illustrates one way in which European immigrants influenced American culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their influence was perhaps more subtle than that seen in European-American neighborhoods and boroughs in large urban areas, but it was pervasive and continuing. As a fourth generation Asian-American, I can feel the extent of this Swiss influence sitting in front of a small red brick house, thinking about a wooden milk bucket, and nibbling on a bratzelie.