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## Chapter 29

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# Swissconsin

### *Program 29 Performances*

1. Betty Vetterli and Martha Bernet, "I Want to Be a Cowboy's Sweetheart." 2. Louis Alder and His Swiss Yodelers, "Mountaineer Song." 3. Moser Brothers, "Jodler Ländler." 4. Rudy Burkhalter, "My Swiss Girl." 5. Robbie's Yodel Club, "Teach Me How to Yodel." 6. Betty Vetterli and Martha Bernet, "Yodel Polka." 7. Gottfried Wenger and Burnette Kubly, "Wenger's Delight." 8. Alphorn Trio, "Alphorn Melody." 9. Clayton Streiff, "Talerschwingen."

### **Yodelers in Dairyland**

In 1845 nearly two hundred Swiss immigrants journeyed from the economically strapped canton of Glarus toward south central Wisconsin's present-day Green County. Two decades before, a handful of Swiss had settled just westward around the villages of Shullsburg and Gratiot; and by 1842 Swiss from the canton of Graubunden were ensconced to the north in what would become Sauk County's town of Honey Creek. Some Honey Creek newcomers soon traveled up the Mississippi to homestead in LaCrosse County and especially in Buffalo County's Waumandee Valley.

Wisconsin's Swiss were overwhelmingly German-speaking Swiss, and they tended to settle adjacent to other German speakers. The 1880s marked the peak of Swiss immigration to the United States, a span that coincided with the expansion of the dairy and cheese-making industries in Wisconsin. By the turn of the century, nearly eight thousand Swiss, mostly farmers, had dispersed through all but a half dozen of Wisconsin's seventy-two counties. By the 1930 census, Wisconsin, America's Dairyland, was the state with the highest per capita concentration of Swiss. Green County was and remains the cultural heart of Swiss Wisconsin (Hale 1984).

Swiss dance bands—with some combination of button accordions, clarinets, zithers, and violins—were common at Green County's nineteenth-century Swiss dances. Citizens of New Glarus celebrated *kilbi* Mondays—annual celebrations to raise funds for the church—each September with dances "at three or more different halls, and all are crowded" (Luchsinger 1884:636). No doubt some whoops and yodels filled the dance halls, but Swiss yodeling in Wisconsin was not reported until the 1890s.

Yodeling (the nonverbal falsetto performance of melodies involving polyphonic shifts from "chest" to "head" singing) has been used for centuries in the central

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*This essay was condensed from J. P. Leary, 1991, Yodeling in Dairyland: A History of Swiss Music in Wisconsin (Mount Horeb: Wisconsin Folk Museum). With permission.*

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European Alps by cowherds to signal one another and to call and calm their livestock. The influx of Swiss to 1880s Wisconsin included natives of Appenzell and Bern, cantons noted for the strength of their yodeling traditions. Betty Vetterli of Monroe recalled that many of her older rural neighbors still “yodeled while milking the cows” in the 1930s and 1940s. Vetterli herself learned the rudiments of yodeling by listening to her grandmother Kneubuehl and her grandmother’s sisters, late-nineteenth-century immigrants from Bern (Vetterli 1989 I).

The latter half of the nineteenth century was also a period when the folk and a cappella *naturjodel* was complemented by the *jodellied* or *gsatzli*, new compositions in a folk style that combined wordless solo yodeling with singing, often to instrumental accompaniment. Many Jodellied practitioners formed choral-singing groups. The most popular of these alpine groups from the late 1830s on were the singing families who not only won sustained followings in their native Alps, but also enjoyed vogues throughout Europe and even in the United States, where they played to opera house audiences, inspired popular composers, and influenced the southern duet singing that remains an important element in country music.

At least three yodel clubs were founded in Monroe and New Glarus, Wisconsin, in the 1920s. The Monroe Yodel Quartet began curiously in 1921, when a Swiss mountaineer used subterranean walls, instead of alpine peaks, for an echo chamber.

Fred Boesiger was entering a tunnel leading to an underground cheese storage cellar and couldn’t resist yodeling to see if there would be an echo. To his surprise, there was a clear yodel reply from the other end. Charles Jenny and Mr. Boesiger ran to meet each other and to finish their song. The Quartet was formed by the addition of Louis Alder and Fred Ritschard.

(28th Swiss-American Songfest Program 1976:13)

The group traveled to Richmond, Indiana, in 1929 and, with Alder performing on zither, recorded three songs for the Gennett label as Louis Alder with His Swiss Yodelers.

No Swiss group had a greater impact on Wisconsin than the Moser Brothers, Albert, Paul, and Alfred. Natives of Bern and noted musicians in Switzerland, the Mosers toured Wisconsin extensively from the mid-1920s through the 1930s. Local newspapers heralded their coming with photographs showing the brothers, clad in Bernese garb, holding their instruments against a painted mountain backdrop. In typical fashion, the *Rice Lake Chronotype* of April 28, 1926, remarked, “Some of their best selections have been recorded by the Victor company and may be purchased in this city.” The Mosers recorded at least thirty-six sides in Victor’s New York studio from 1925 to 1927. Their records, which can still be found in the collections of Wisconsin’s Swiss, include singing, yodeling, accordion solos, accordion/violin/bass trios; marches, waltzes, *ländlers*, polkas, slow airs; paeans to romance, cows, mountains, flowers, rural life, and assorted Swiss homelands (the Bern highlands, the valleys of Emmental and Grindelwald).

### **The Biggest Accordion Band in the World**

Rudy Burkhalter, the dean of Wisconsin’s Swiss musicians, traveled with the Mosers from 1928 through 1936. Burkhalter was born in Basel in 1911. His father and several uncles were accordion players, and Rudy won his first accordion contest as a nine year old. When he was twelve, a Basel distributor for the Odeon label took him to a Paris studio to make records for the Swiss market. At eighteen he was leading a Swiss dance band and working as a travel agent when the Mosers hired him to barnstorm through America.



*Monroe Yodel Quartet: (L-R) Fred Ritschard, Fred Boesiger, Louis Alder, Charles Jenny, late 1920s Wisconsin Folk Museum Collection*

By 1938 Burkhalter had married an American and, although he was leading a successful band in Switzerland, war loomed and Wisconsin beckoned. "Many times I remarked to the Moser Brothers if I ever should be so lucky as to settle down in the United States this [Madison] is one place where I'd like to live." Once settled in Wisconsin, Burkhalter played in numerous dance bands and, with the aid of his wife, Frances, established a circuit of accordion schools that persisted until 1960.

We would descend upon a community in a radius all around Madison. Advertise a free accordion lesson program. Two month free lessons and we furnish the accordion. I imported two hundred small piano accordions from Switzerland especially for beginners. We handed those out and people would come and sign up. . . . We drove up to Baraboo, to Reedsburg, to Richland Center, to Beaver Dam, to Watertown, to Dodgeville, to Darlington, New Glarus, Monroe, all around. (Burkhalter 1987 I)

Although Burkhalter taught a wide range of tunes, he also favored a Swiss repertoire and many of his Swiss charges, like Betty Vetterli, carried on Swiss music.

Rudy Burkhalter's musical presence coincided with the rise of Green County tourism as visitors sought Swiss culture in the communities of Monroe and New Glarus. To the ambience of Brown Swiss cattle, cheese factories, chalet architecture, an annual Wilhelm Tell pageant, and Swiss shops, he added alpine accordion and yodeling vocals. Burkhalter led "the Biggest Accordion Band in the World" in Cheese Days parades, entertained in Bernese attire at a restaurant, coached yodel clubs, organized traveling programs of yodelers, flag throwers, and cowbell ringers for the National Folk Festival, and composed songs—one of which, "Teach Me How to Yodel," figured in a Disney feature.

Today, thanks to Burkhalter, his students, and other musical descendants of immigrants, Swiss music can be heard year round at numerous Green County hostelries and festivals.