

CULTURE

Rituals of winter

Examples of Appenzell Ausserrhodens's *Wüeschte*, or ugly, *Kläuse*

© Courtesy of Urnäsch Tourismus

Through the anonymous obscurity of centuries past, pagan and Christian customs blended and blurred to become folk traditions uniquely Swiss. *Swiss News* spotlights a selection of those taking place around the winter solstice.

By Gail Mangold-Vine | During December and January, and primarily in the Swiss-German parts of the country, ancient traditions are observed and celebrated around the time of the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year.

The traditions centre on symbolic activities designed to usher out winter and welcome in spring, or banish bad spirits and entice good ones. Typically occurring when the days start to get longer, they share with the calendar the heralding of the New Year, and with the Christian cycle the celebration of the birth of Christ. The resulting, tangled hodgepodge of influences makes for some fascinating manifestations.

In past issues, *Swiss News* has featured some of the most dramatic, like the *Klausjagen* in Küsnacht am Rigi, which occurs in early December. Here we present more of the best, taking place between Christmas and early February.

Treicheln

Treicheln (or *Trycheln* in Swiss German) kicks off at midnight on December 25 in the Haslital in Canton Bern.

Over the next few days, groups of cowbell ringers and drummers parade all day and all night through the streets of the valley's villages, with the bell ringers moving in a mesmerising, slow rhythm to the beat of the drums. For contrasted noisemaking, two types of cowbell are used: heavier cast metal ones, with a deeper ring, and the lighter *Trychel* made from hammered sheet metal.

There are two completely different explanations to account for why valley inhabitants drop everything to do this each year. *Trychelmajor* Hans Müller – head of a group of 60 male participants – tells *Swiss News*.

“One version is that it’s a pagan tradition to chase away evil spirits – a kind of cleansing, or renewal. The other has it



© Courtesy of Haslital Tourismus

A *Treicheln* parade of bells and drums in Meiringen

© Courtesy of Engadin Scuol Tourismus

Horn Strom's burning of a straw man

© Courtesy of Urnäsch Tourismus

Silvesterklausen's countryside wanderings

that the inhabitants of the valley came originally from Sweden, and that *Trycheln* is their way of accompanying the souls of those who died during the year back to their northern homeland,” he explains.

Bell ringer Müller prefers the second version. And, the way he describes the concentration needed to keep the rhythm, especially when another group working to a different beat crosses his, makes the activity sound like some form of powerful meditation.

During the day, the groups are mostly comprised of young people, on their school holiday. At dusk, adults (traditionally, usually only men) take over until dawn when they have to stop to get ready for work.

The *Trycheln* highlight comes on the last work day before New Year's Eve – on December 30 this year – when all groups, now wearing scary costumes and masks, meet for what is known as the *Uebersitz*

(*uebersitzen* can be roughly translated as “sitting it out”) in the resort town of Meiringen, about 10 kilometres from Brienz and 85 kilometres from the capitol Bern.

Things really get started at 20:00. Both participants and onlookers fill the streets, as well as the local restaurants and cafés, where many “sit it out” until dawn.

Heinz Winterberger, a retired communal official in Meiringen, tells *Swiss News* that the term *Uebersitz* can be sourced to the fact that on this night – exceptionally – eateries stay open all night.

“But it also has a ‘waiting up past midnight’ nuance to it: many families observe it at home,” he says.

Trycheln is “by far the most important event in this area,” says Müller – not only for Meiringen's 4,800 residents, and the valley's other residents, but also for tourists who come from far and wide to resonate to the pounding vibrations of the

bells and drums that get magnified as they echo off surrounding mountains.

Silvesterklausen

One of the most eerily beautiful, and unique, Swiss winter customs – *Silvesterklausen* – takes place in the half canton of Appenzell Ausserrhodens.

This tradition is thought to date back to the late Middle Ages, and is in celebration of the year about to be born. The rituals are also an attempt by locals to secure a year filled with good fortune. Other, more ancient (or pagan) customs are not attributed to the tradition, although the particularly animistic nature of costumes worn by some participants makes one wonder if they aren't lurking somewhere ...

Festivities are held on two separate days, each of which is New Year's Eve. The first is on December 31, and the second is on January 13 – New Year's Eve according to the Julian calendar.

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A representative of spring or life at the *Bärzelitreiben* in Hallwil

On those two days, groups of five to 10 men known as *Kläuse*, or “mummers”, some clad in sumptuous costumes to which bells (some weighing up to about 30 kilos each) are attached, roam villages and countryside. They stop at random homes along the way to perform a kind of shamanic dance – a trancelike jingling of the bells – and offer a wordless yodel known as a *Zäuri* by way of a New Year's greeting. It is customary to give the *Kläuse* refreshments, or money, before they go.

“The tradition is so deeply anchored here, it's in our *Herzblut* [lifeblood]. We take off from work, and on the 13th, the kids don't have to go to school,” Stefan Walser of Urnäsch, an Appenzell Auserrhoden village of some 1,500 inhabitants located about 100 kilometres from Zurich, tells *Swiss News*. Walser is a member of a seven-man group, or *Schup-pel*, of mummers.

He says there are up to 30 groups of *Kläuse* in Urnäsch alone, and some 60 all told in the half canton.

As with the *Treicheln* tradition, a number of the costumes worn by the *Kläuse* reflect stock figures. Only here, the *Kläuse* are categorised into three distinct types: *die schöne* (representing the beautiful), *die wüeschte* (representing the ugly) and *Wald* or *Naturkläuse* (representing the forest or nature *Kläuse*). And, while some of the costumes depict women, they are always worn by men since, traditionally, only men are *Kläuse*.

“We make our own costumes, carving headdresses out of Styrofoam. The butcher gives us cow or goat's teeth for the ‘ugly’ masks,” Walser explains. “A costume takes about two years to create. We spend a year perfecting basic design sketches, and another making the costume.”

And they really make the entire costume themselves? “It's true our wives help with the sewing,” Walser admits.

With regard to visitors hoping for a show, he cautions: “Our wanderings don't start or end anywhere. It's not a parade. Some visitors don't understand that, and leave bitterly disappointed without having seen a single group.”

His tip to readers is that, on December 31, it's best to head for Urnäsch where groups of mummers will be coming through the main part of town from around 10:00 to 13:00.

On January 13, however, they tend to wander the countryside.

“On that day, head for the main square in Urnäsch where there's an info booth, and a shuttle bus service operating between 10:00 and 20:00 to take you out into the surrounding countryside,” Walser suggests. A shuttle ticket costs SFr 3, and there is no charge for children under 10.

And for those wanting a little preview: *Evil and Good Spirits – Mysterious Switzerland* and *Silvester in Urnäsch, Schweiz* are just some of the videos about Silvesterklausen you can watch on www.youtube.com.

Epiphany – and *Greiflet*

Epiphany falls on January 6 (the 12th night after Christmas). It is a Christian holiday celebrating the visit of the Three Kings (wise men) to the baby Jesus. The German, French and Italian words for the day resemble the English, but in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, it is usually called *Dreikönigstag*.

While not an official holiday in most cantons, it is nonetheless widely observed through a bakery tradition where a special, sweet white bread (*Dreikönigskuchen*) with a gold paper crown and a tiny figure of a king baked inside is sold.

The round loaf, featuring eight round, attached rolls, is traditionally eaten at breakfast, and whoever gets the piece with the figurine is crowned king (or queen) thus enabling them to order family members around for the day. Home recipes recommend using a token such as a dried bean for the king, but bakeries typically put in a tiny figure made of non-toxic plastic.

Some say that the tradition of naming a king for the day can be traced back to Roman times. The January 6th celebration of Three Kings Day or Epiphany has been documented back to the 9th century. Although there is evidence that the traditional bread or cake can be sourced back to the 10th century, it was a tradition lost in Switzerland until the 1950s, when it was revived by enterprising Swiss bakers.

Epiphany is an official holiday in the canton of Schwyz, where it coincides – and contrasts – with the secular *Greiflet*. The latter, in the words of the local tourism board, is “supposed to have magic character in order to defeat winter and to announce spring.”

The best place for visitors to soak up the energy of this day, which falls on a Tuesday in 2009, is in the town of Schwyz itself. There, starting at 11:00, the Swiss whip-cracking championships take place in the main square. Groups known as *Sternsinger* roam the streets singing Christian carols, and children ringing cowbells go from door to door wishing people a happy New Year.

Then, at 20:00, men clad in long white shirts and head-hugging black caps parade around the main square, cracking whips and swinging big bells. For about an hour, the sharp cracks combined with the mesmerising primeval clang of the bells – swung with ritualistic regularity – produce otherworldly noise levels.

The clamour is punctuated by addresses from locals, who stand before the crowds to recount amusing incidents from the past year.

At around 21:00, it's all over, and spectators and participants disperse to fill cafés and restaurants.



Annual whip-cracking championships take place on the day of the *Greiflet* in Schwyz

Recap of the main events

Treicheln

Meiringen, Bern
Tuesday, December 30
From 20:00 to dawn
For more details, contact the tourism office at: 033 972 50 50 or www.haslital.ch

Silvesterklausen

Appenzell Auserrhoden's
Hinterland district, and parts
of the Mittelland district
Wednesday, December 31 and
Tuesday, January 13, 2009
From dawn to far into the night
For more details, contact the tourism
office at: 071 364 26 40 or
www.urnaesch-tourismus.ch

Learn more about the extraordinary
costumes at the Appenzeller
Brauchtumsmuseum in Urnäsch,
open from 9:00 to 11:30
More details are available at: 071 364 23 22
and www.museum-urnaesch.ch

Epiphany (Greiflet)

Schwyz, Schwyz
Tuesday, January 6, 2009
From 11:00 into the night
For more details, contact the tourism
office at: 041 810 19 91 or
www.schwyz-tourismus.ch

Other events

For more information on all events
mentioned in this article, and links to local
tourism offices, go to:
<http://www.myswitzerland.com/en.cfm/des-tinations/culture/offer.cfm?category=About-Culture&subcat=Customs&id=9030>

Achetringele

Laupen, Bern
Wednesday, December 31

Bell ringers, boys and men with wooden
poles to which juniper branches have been
tied, and *Blaateremannli* or “little bladder
men” – carrying pigs' bladders filled with air
– parade in orderly fashion, stopping
periodically to wish the crowd a happy
New Year, before things get rowdy.
Then, they run after spectators and engage
in spirited, albeit harmless, “beatings” that
destroy both the poles and bladders. The
custom is considered to be another variation
of chasing winter or evil spirits away.



Bärzelitreiben

Hallwil, Aargau
Friday, January 2, 2009



Masked men divided into
green (representing
spring and life) and
brown (representing
winter and death) teams
run around this tiny village
creating a ruckus. Costumes
include suits made of wood
shavings, and others of fir
branches and ivy. For a preview, watch
Bärzelitreiben in Hallwil at:
www.youtube.com

According to Switzerland Tourism, Hallwil
(population 700) is the only Swiss village
to maintain a complete cycle of winter
customs, starting in November and
culminating with the *Bärzelitreiben*.

Hom Strom

Scuol, Graubünden
Saturday, February 7, 2009

A straw man who personifies the spirit of
winter is made by village kids who twine
thick strands of specially prepared hay on
a telephone pole some eight metres high.
After dark, the straw man is ignited and
villagers sing as he is consumed by flames.