

# **THE SCHMID FAMILY EMIGRATES FROM RUBIGEN TO NORTH AMERICA**

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## **Emigration After 1881**

Swiss emigration was regulated by the Federal Law of April 12, 1883. Overseas migration from Canton Bern reached a peak of 4,667 in 1883. Both the Swiss Confederation and the cantons tried to address the economic grievances that led to emigration by promoting agriculture and industry. But industrialization, the weakening purchasing power, overpopulation, as well as recognition of American wealth, property and prosperity gave impetus to emigration. The newspaper, "The Colonist," had already noted in 1851 that "particularly Switzerland was fertile ground for the overseas colonization, as the names New Bern, Nova Helvetia, New Glarus and New Switzerland indicated."

## **The Schmid's in Switzerland and America**

In 1990 Byron Schmid, a great-grandson of our former municipal clerk (Gemeindeschreiber) Bendicht Schmid, and a Lutheran pastor in Minneapolis USA, compiled and printed the family history of Bendicht Schmid and his descendants under the title, *The Schmid's in Switzerland and America*. Byron Schmid looks with pride on his Swiss heritage. We thank him warmly for his family chronicle and for his visits to Rubigen.

## **The Emigrant Family**

The municipal council Minutes of February 2, 1889, include the following words: "The family of Bendicht Schmid, deceased, former municipal clerk, intends to immigrate to America. The widow of the fore-mentioned Bendicht Schmid, post mistress, licensee of the salt supply, and shopkeeper wishes to obtain from the community [Gemeinde] authorities prior to departure a report concerning the fulfillment of her duties as designated above and a certificate of personal good conduct.. It was unanimously agreed to accede to this request and to formulate the terms of the certificate positively in every respect, as is due and proper, namely as follows: That she has always fulfilled her duties as postmistress and licensee of the salt supply to the full satisfaction of the whole community; and further, that Mrs. Schmid and her family all enjoy a good reputation and are of satisfactory character. The best wishes of the council accompany them on the way to their new home overseas."

With his election on November 11, 1846, Bendicht Schmid assumed the office of municipal clerk for the community of Rubigen, which he held until the end of October 1883. He was born on September 11, 1820, in Allmendingen and he had eight siblings. He was first married to Magdalena Gfeller, then to Elise Buchser, and the third time to Magdalena Neuenschwander. From these three marriages came 19 children, three of whom died in childhood. Of the 16 children who lived, 14 children and the third wife immigrated to North America, while the sons Robert and Friedrich remained in Canton Bern.

Municipal clerk Bendicht Schmid maintained the registries for residence, voting, taxation, and citizenship. He was also the notary and treasurer. He was a shop-owner with a postal office and salt supply, and also peace officer and secretary of the Rubigen cheese cooperative. In 1869 he purchased at auction a home in Rubigen from the heirs of Elizabeth Hauser-Bähler. On September 5, 1882, he transferred the property, then valued at SFr.25,000, to his five sons – Eduard, Karl, Gottfried, Ernst and Adolf – with benefits and responsibilities of the inheritance to begin after the death of both parents.

Bendicht Schmid died on May 6, 1884. He left his widow with ten minor children, eight of whom were still in school. He also left behind the son from his second marriage and five children from the first marriage. Widow Magdalena Schmid-Neuenschwander had use of the home for life and access to funds for personal use as needed. In the spring of 1888 two of the children, Maria Magdalena Guggisberg-Schmid and Gottfried Schmid, left for North America. Widow Magdalena Schmid-Neuenschwander continued to live at home in Rubigen with eight children, ages eight to 22, without loss of livelihood as shopkeeper, postmistress and salt licensee.

### **Letter From Magdalena Schmid-Neuenschwander to Her Sister Anna Bruni-Neuenschwander in Monroe**

Magdalena Schmid-Neuenschwander's oldest brother, Christian Neuenschwander, had immigrated with his family to Monroe, Wisconsin in 1868. The family of her sister, Anna Bruni-Neuenschwander, had emigrated there in 1883. Between 1870 and the summer of 1888 five children of Bendicht Schmid had also immigrated to North America. So on 29 August 1888 widow Magdalena Schmid-Neuenschwander wrote the following letter to her sister in Monroe:

My dear sister and family,

For a long time now I have waited in vain for a letter from you, so now I will write again. Yesterday I received a letter from my daughter Marie, and in it she passed on greetings from you. She also said that she had heard from you once, which gave her great pleasure. As she writes to us, she is in good health and gets on well with her husband. That is, of course, very good news for us. We consider Guggisberg to be a very decent man and, as Eduard once wrote to us, he is very popular there as well.

As you probably know already, our Gottfried has gone to Oregon with Rudolf. From what Rudolf wrote to us, he seems to have started to lead a rather carefree life there. That upsets us very much, and I reproach myself for letting him leave home so young. Perhaps we should not have let him go. We wrote once this spring to Oregon and asked them what the prospects would be for our family there, since all my children had a mind to emigrate. Rudolf and Gottlieb replied that they could not recommend us to do so, as there were great numbers of immigrants there at the present time and it was difficult to get accommodations. They also said that I might find it difficult to adapt to the different way of life there, and that it would not be easy for Karl to find a job where he would earn good money easily. On the other hand, we could well send the girls, as they would make a living all right. But they would understand us not wanting to send the girls on the journey alone. They obviously think that the boys might not find work and then become a burden on them, and that, of course, is not what we would want at all.

In the past, we always heard it said in glowing terms how the immigrants there got on well and made their fortunes. Guggisberg and Marie also asked them about the prospects for themselves, and they advised them too not to come. So they dropped the idea as they did not want to be a nuisance to them. But as the idea of emigration is always in the mind of all of us, we wrote not long ago to Marie and Guggisberg asking them what things would be like for us there.

Of course, our Karl often does not feel well working indoors in the office as he does. The doctor told him that he would be in much better health if he could give up the paperwork. He suffers from indigestion.

Business here gets worse from year to year, and we seem to go backwards rather than forwards. We find it more and more difficult from year to year to find the money for the high interest and all the many other dues. A lot of new businesses have opened up and our little shop hardly pays any more. The big shops swallow up the small ones. The postoffice as such goes well enough but even there things are getting more and more difficult.

The work of the community [Gemeinde] administration is almost twice as hard as it was when Karl's father was still alive. Even if Karl were to be appointed municipal clerk [Gemeindeschreiber] to the community in time, he thinks the job would not bring him much satisfaction. The longer he works there, the more difficulties he sees ahead. Not that he does not get on well with the people, but he says that he would like to have greater personal freedom and do something else.

Marie and Guggisberg wrote saying that they felt we would make a living there with them. But if we came, they would advise us not to buy a place immediately, but that the grownup children should go out to work for other people for the first year, and then see how things worked out.

I can well imagine that there would be a lot of things in America which we would not like in the beginning. But we feel that the children would be better off there than here. Come the spring, we would have three grownup girls and Karl and Ernst, and we think that they could all earn money during the summer months. We would probably be able to sell quite well and, taken all together, we would have enough money to give us a good start. I would go and live in a rented apartment with the younger children. Guggisberg and Marie would see to everything for us. We would have it in mind to sell this autumn, as we have been advised that it is easier to sell property when it is still possible to examine the land properly. I do not think that we would have more trouble and worries if we decided to emigrate than I have had since I became a widow.

At the moment we are all well. Bertha, the youngest of my children, had some lung trouble this summer, but it seems to have cleared up now. I am still very thin, but otherwise I am well enough. Anna had a place in Bern where she hoped to learn housekeeping, but it was a bad situation and she only stayed two months. Now she goes to Bern two days a week to learn ironing, for about two or three months, but she has to pay. Then Rosa too wants to learn cooking or ironing. Ernst left home two months ago to work in the Vaud, the French part of Switzerland, but he will not get much for himself as the wages are poor. He too would like to emigrate, as he said yesterday when we told him about our plans.

I would be very interested to hear what you think about the whole idea, and what you would advise us to do. We would very much appreciate an answer from you soon. I understand very well that it is difficult to give advice in a matter of such importance, but we know that you would advise us what to do according to your own conscience. We talked over the plan recently with Hans in Vielbringen, and he too thinks that the children would have better prospects there than here.

They are all well at the present. I have no news about Samuel. Like yourselves, I have no news either of sister Marie. As you probably know, her son Fritz went to America as well. I have the feeling that his heavy debts made things too hot for him here.

There is not much to tell you about things here. We had more bad weather than good this summer, as it was cold and rainy. The potato harvest was poor and many rotted. There is a fair amount of cattle fodder, but mostly of poor quality. And there is little fruit. Milk and bread are not too expensive; four pounds of half-white bread are 50 Rappen. A liter of milk costs 15 Rappen and beef 60 Rappen.

We are all anxious to know how you all are, and how my brothers and their families live. Write soon and give us all the news. We all send you our very kindest regards and good wishes, especially your sister, widow Magdalena Schmid.

### **Agreement With the Heirs Concerning Sale of the Property**

Mother Magdalena Schmid-Neuenschwander and her eight children decided to emigrate on the basis of the information they received about acceptable living conditions in Ohio and Wisconsin. Weighing the good benefits of life in the Rubigen community [“wie in Alp”] for the 16 children, the widow Schmid consented to sell the home property and gave up her right to lifelong support from it. She received the entire income from the sale and agreed to cover the emigration expenses of the children. The agreement also specified that the daughter, Maria Guggisberg-Schmid, already in America and who had previously paid for her own passage, would receive SFr.150. The four sons from the third marriage also were each to receive SFr.200 from the inheritance. The written agreement, dated November 2, 1888, was signed by the brother of the widow, the children and the guardianship authority of Rubigen. Widow Magdalena Schmid-Neuenschwander then sold the property to the postmaster, Johann Stegmann, for the price of SFr.29,000.

### **Travel Contract**

The Schmid family emigrants, the mother and eight children from 7 to 22 years of age, contracted in January 1889 with the emigration agency, A. Zwilchenbart (patent holder of the Swiss Federal Council), for the safe transport of themselves and their luggage to Le Havre, then to New York and finally to Scranton, Pennsylvania, with the following conditions:

1. The contract entitles the afore-mentioned persons to rail travel third class from Bern to the port of embarkation; further, to sea passage third class from Havre to New York on the steamship “Champagne” (owners the Transatlantic Company), departing Havre on March 7; further, to rail travel from New York (port of disembarkation) to Scranton, Pennsylvania.

2. Travelers are to receive from the Agency:
  - a. sufficient, wholesome and clean food and lodging as far as the port of embarkation.
  - b. sufficient, wholesome and clean food during the sea passage, during which cooking on a private basis is not permitted. On the inland railway journey abroad, passengers must make their own arrangements for provisions en route.
  - c. free medical care.
  - d. suitable funeral arrangements in case of death en route.
  - e. in the case of a stop or delay in transit, full board and lodging, providing that there is no proof of responsibility on the part of the emigrant; further, if the above-mentioned transport be not available or not sufficient, then prompt alternative transport by other means, at least as good as that foreseen above.
3. The steamship "Champagne" will supply all necessary ware and bed linen for the sea passage.
4. Each passenger has a free luggage allowance from the railway station in Bern to the port of embarkation of 10 kilos, children up to the age of 13 years, 3 kilos, on board ship, 100 kilos or 10 cubic feet respectively, on the American railways, 50 kilos.
5. All heavy baggage must be clearly marked with the complete name of the owner and the address of the destination, and must be delivered to the Agency in Bern by March 5, failing which the Agency cannot accept any responsibility for shipment of that baggage.

Passengers are responsible for their own hand luggage. When the heavy baggage is taken on board at the port of embarkation, passengers must be present on the boarding side punctually on departure to identify their baggage personally.

6. Included in the transport price is an insurance against accident for heads of family up to a sum of Fr.500 per person during the journey to the port of disembarkation. The baggage of the emigrants is insured to a maximum of Fr.100. Whoever wishes to insure his/her baggage for more than this amount should register this in advance with the Agency and pay a premium on the following basis: for the journey to N. America, 1%, and to S. America, 1½ %, of the additional sum in excess of the total value of Fr.100.
7. Passengers are entitled to a suitable cabin on the ship. They have the right to remain on board ship for 48 hours after arrival at the port of disembarkation.
8. Passengers are obliged to observe scrupulously all regulations of the police and the American authorities.

9. The contract of acceptance is valid for a rail ticket to Havre and the passage to New York for six adults over 12 years of age, for two children from 10-11, and one child of 3-7 years of age; further, for the inland ticket abroad from New York to Scranton for the sum of Fr.1,500. At the signing of the contract duly paid Fr.200, remaining balance due total Fr.1,300.
10. Under no circumstances may passengers be obliged to make any further payments over and above the sum stated in the contract, or tips, hospital costs or any other taxes.
11. Travelers are instructed to keep strictly to the following list of addresses and to report on arrival:  
Bern: Zwilchenbart, 4 Käfiggässchen  
Havre: Schildknecht, Schweizerbund, 13 quai Notre Dame

Travelers are requested to give to the Agency before departure the exact name and address of their relatives, so that these can be informed as to the time of arrival of the steamship at the port of disembarkation.

## **Travel and Settlement in Monroe**

On March 5 the mother left Rubigen with her eight children. They traveled from Bern by rail via Pontarlier to Le Havre, where on March 7 they boarded the steamer, "Champagne," for New York. From New York they traveled by train to Scranton, Pennsylvania. After a short stay, they continued on to Monroe, Wisconsin, where they ended the tedious travel. Magdalena Schmid-Neuenschwander bought a house in Monroe, where the family lived. Three children married in the next three years, and the mother herself married Ezra Blumer on July 16, 1897. Magdalena died in December 1907 and is buried in Greenwood Cemetery.

Magdalena Schmid-Neuenschwander kept pleasant memories of Rubigen. She spoke often of the beautiful Bernese Alps and the family gatherings with the Neuenschwanders. She remembered the tubucular-free goat-milk that they drank in Rubigen and also the smallpox vaccinations. In particular, she recalled the abundance of pear, peach, cherry and apple trees and the vines in Rubigen. She never forgot the big farmhouse with a spacious courtyard as a playground for the children. In her Monroe home, Magdalena had many family gatherings, often involving yodeling and singing.

## **Settlement Locations and Occupations of the Children**

The sons Robert (born 1856) and Bendicht Friedrich (born 1860) continued to live in Interlaken and Allmendingen respectively. Of the 14 emigrating children (eight sons and six daughters), the eldest son John (born 185)) was a locksmith and farmer in Walnut Creek, Ohio. The youngest daughter, Bertha Jung-Schmid (born 1880), died during a visit to Münsingen in 1907.

### **a. Monroe (Wisconsin)**

Five children settled in Monroe. Karl Schmid (born 1867) owned the Monroe House (a hotel) and later farmed near Juda. The daughter, Rosette Thomm-Schmid (born 1872), owned a dairy

farm with her husband. Often on Sundays after church, her siblings would gather and share memories of Switzerland and sing Swiss songs. Relatives also often gathered on Sundays at the home of the daughter, Lina Blumer-Schmid (born 1874) whose husband operated a brewery. Lina was proud of her children and fussed only when her husband smoked “too many” cigars.

Adolf Schmid (born 1876) owned a tavern. His wife was an avid reader, and he had a tame crow that could mimick speech. The crow used to walk up and down the clothesline and pull out the clothes-pins. The husband of Elise Kundert-Schmid (born 1876) operated a hardware store. Elise’s home was often a family gathering place for Christmas and New Year’s Eve. Elise baked Swiss [Bretzeln], “Züpfе,” pear-bread and rolls, and set on the table, much to the delight of children, bowls of whipped cream, sugar and cinnamon.

#### **b. Portland (Oregon)**

Five children settled in Portland, Oregon. Gottlieb Schmid (born 1852) was first a blacksmith and later operated a tavern and rooming-house. Rudolf Schmid (born 1861) began as a cheesemaker, and later operated the Swiss hall café and also was president of the Portland Swiss Club. Ernst Schmid (born 1869) also started as a cheesemaker and then operated a truck (vegetable) farm. The husband of the daughter, Maria Magdalena Guggisberg-Schmid (born 1870), operated a tavern. The husband of the daughter, Anna Signer-Schmid (born 1871), operated a tavern and later was a coffee trader.

#### **c. Fairview (Michigan) and Pierre (South Dakota)**

Eduard Schmid (born 1865) began as a coal-mine owner and weighmaster and then worked as a veterinarian in Michigan. Gottfried Schmid (born 1868) served in the U.S. Army in the Spanish-American War in the Philippines. He died in Pierre, South Dakota.

### **Schmid Reunion in Switzerland**

On August 29, 1991 representatives of the municipal council and the community historical book committee welcomed descendants of former municipal clerk Bendicht Schmid back to Rubigen. They included 22 descendants of the two sons who had remained in Switzerland and 10 descendants of the 14 children who had emigrated. The oldest participant from the United States was Mrs. Helen Walch, an 84-year old daughter of expatriate daughter Elise Kundert-Schmid. Today slightly more than 1,000 descendants of Bendicht Schmid live in the United States and some 150 descendants remain in Switzerland.

We showed the Schmid visitors the farmhouse of their ancestors at Thunstrasse 28a (the house of today’s drugstore owner, Habegger), the chapel at Kleinhöchstetten, and the castle at Worb which displayed the Bernese emigration exhibit prepared by the State Archives in Bern. The owner of the castle personally welcomed us. On the Häberli farm at Oberholz we feasted on wine, bacon, “Hamme u Züpfе” in a wholesome “Bure-Zabe.” Our visitors enjoyed the beautiful view of the Bernese Alps and the well-maintained farm. So we sat with our guests and appreciated the evening twilight together. It is possible that another Schmid reunion group might visit Rubigen in the fall of 1999.

*(Prepared by Byron Schmid, March 2011)*