

Trees, Grass, and Cows

AT THE FOOT of the southern Alps in Italy, the peasant farmers are unbelievably poor. Twisted grapevines and knotted fruit trees struggle for existence on the poor clay soil.

In the days of the Romans these rolling hills were covered with lush pasture and deep forest. Centuries ago the trees were cut down and hauled away for lumber. As the country became more thickly settled, more and more pastures were plowed up so that successive generations of farmers could make a living.

Today, these peasant farmers own little livestock. Stately oxen with large, up-turned horns pull crude wagons up and down the roads — picturesque, but not very efficient, and only the better farmers can afford even oxen. I saw a man on one farm pulling a small plow with a rope over his shoulders, while his wife trailed behind guiding the plow.

It would not have had to be so. Just over the Alps in Switzerland, the village of Sachseln clings to the side of the mountain as if it might slip into the sapphire lake at its foot.

It was spring when we visited Sachseln. The steep pastures that surrounded the little village were covered with apple trees loaded with blossoms. With a backdrop of towering, snow-capped mountains, the village looks like a picture town right out of a tourist guide.

Typical two-story Swiss houses, with hanging eaves to keep the snow off their quaintly carved balconies, crowded around the slim spire of a medieval church.

Our guide was the manager of the Kruez Hotel, an ancient structure that stands next to the church. The hotel has been operated by this same family since the 17th century.

We drove from town up the narrow, winding blacktop road that crawls up the side of the mountain, past ancient looking Swiss farmsteads.

First stop was the farm of Farmer Spichtig. Several Brown Swiss cows grazed in a small pasture near the barn. Women were washing clothes in an iron kettle outside.

The Spichtigs milked 20 cows. Rows of metal plaques nailed to the side of the barn served as a record of the prizes won at local shows. Pride of Farmer Spichtig was his young bull that had won first prize at what corresponds to our county fair.

The Swiss cattle seem smaller and much more refined to me than most of our own Brown Swiss. Too bad that present restrictions do not allow us to import some of these fine Swiss cattle.

Farmer Spichtig houses his bulls and calves in

one barn, the cows in another. The cows graze out much of the year.

The cows move up the side of the mountain as the snow melts. Here they graze in pastures above the forest-clad slopes. In the winter the cows usually get only hay. A few farmers feed silage. Milk yields are high, between 6,500 and 11,000 pounds of 4 per cent milk.

The Swiss mountain farmers have developed animals that utilize grass and hay. It is doubtful if they would do as well as our cattle under heavy grain feeding, and our cattle probably would not do as well in the mountains of Switzerland.

Every now and then as we traveled along the road, we heard the melodious clanking of Swiss cowbells. Then a herd would appear on the way from the valley up to the mountain pastures. One herdsman led the herd, while another with his dog brought up the rear. They carried provisions in packs on their backs.

Nearly every cow had a bell. Many of them were huge bells, a foot wide. Wide collars with polished brass buckles held the bells on. Frequently these were ornamented with colored leather bearing the cow's name.

I asked Farmer Spichtig why he put such large bells on his cows. He gave the same answer that most of the Swiss farmers give. "The bigger the bell, the prouder the cow. The prouder the cow, the more milk she gives."

These prosperous Swiss dairymen are quite a

contrast to the poor Italian peasant tending his vineyards with great hand labor. Down through the years the Swiss have learned to make a good living on a rugged landscape. Their secret? Trees, grass, and cows.

In the summer they make hay in the lower valleys and graze their cows in summer pastures above the timberline. In the wintertime they tend their cattle and cut timber on the mountain. The timber furnishes good income and work in the off season. The Swiss farmer has learned that it doesn't pay to have all his eggs in one basket. He can make a good living on poor land with grass, cows, and trees. A lesson we can well learn in this country!

This may sound a little strange to American farmers on rich, flat, cornbelt farms. But I came from southern Illinois where farmers still try to farm hills as they would the black, flat land of the cornbelt.

Tons of topsoil washing down the creeks remind me of what happened to the Italian hills. *The future prosperity of thousands of farmers all over America will depend on how soon we learn the lessons that the Swiss farmers found out years ago.*

I grew up on a farm that was homesteaded from the government in 1850. The farm was covered with timber. Immediately the farm family began cutting down the huge white oak trees. They built a house and barn with the logs. They dug a well. They cleared land to grow corn.

Today, over half of the rich topsoil has washed down Spring Branch. If that farm is farmed during my lifetime as it was in my grandfather's day, it will be completely worn out before I am an old man. Our family which has made a living by farming for three generations will have to desert it.

We need more farms with trees, grass, and livestock.