

Amerikalied

(Research, preface and translation by [Urs Hostettler](#))

This song is an adaptation of an excerpt from a letter that a former Swiss citizen that had emigrated to America, Hans Hostettler, had sent home to a cousin, Frau Eisenhändlerin (meaning "iron merchant". She had a shop dealing with all kinds of useful items for kitchen and household) Streit who lived in the village of Schwarzenburg in the Canton of Bern in Switzerland.

Hans Hostettler – called "Chäpps Hans" (for the interest of the reader, **ä** translates from German to English as **ae**, so in English his name would have been Chaepps Hans) - was a teacher at Kalchstätten near Guggisberg (which is in Schwarzenburg County, Canton Bern, Switzerland). Born in 1805, he emigrated in July 1833 together with his young wife Anna (maiden name Zwahlen) and her brother. They arrived in Buffalo, New York, then moved to a village named Elk Creek and eventually settled in Middlesboro in Erie County, Pennsylvania. Hans worked there as a "tailor's merchant".

Hans wrote several letters home to Schwarzenburg, telling his friends and family about his everyday life in this strange new country called America. Within these letters he sent two poems. One of them began with "Was ghört me da im änge grüne Tal?" ("What's that sound in the narrow green valley?"). It was a kind of lovesong for his old County of Schwarzenburg. The people who received his letters back home put the words to a melody, and it was sung by patriotic song clubs of Schwarzenburg for a long time. The other poem he wrote was the one I have sung here, called Amerikalied (Song of America). This one became much more popular spreading over the whole rural region of Berne and was put to a variety of different melodies.

The song was first published in, 'Die Schweiz' in 1855. The Reverend of Beatenberg in the Berner Oberland made mention of it in his writings. He erroneously wrote, in fact, that the song came from the Obersimmental (Upper Simmen Valley), from an author "J.K." (a wrong transcription of J.H. – making wrongful reference to Johann Hostettler). The reverend's error shows that knowledge and use of the song had become widespread and that the correct knowledge about its origin had vanished by this time. There are other references to the song in the Swiss Folksong Archive and one in particular from the nearby Canton Freiburg. As late as 1936, Friedrich Wenger wrote from Burgdorf (in Emmental): "My grandmother told me that she often heard this song sung. The most beautiful version was the one by a farmer with his hammered dulcimer." Then, in 1961, Alfred Binggeli published the song in his Schwarzenburg songbooklet named 'Drum singe, wem Gesang gegeben'.

I, myself ([Urs Hostettler](#)), visited this Alfred Binggeli when he was 85 years old. He told me that the song was not sung anymore by the patriotic song clubs but he had the original letters of Hans Hostettler, and he allowed me to make some copies of them.

There were at least three different melodies given to this song, none of them chosen or approved of by Hans Hostettler himself since he had sent the words to the poem only. Binggeli told me that the most well-known melody in the Schwarzenburg area was created by a certain Mrs. Boss, the Uhrmacher's wife (Uhrmacher means clockmaker or watchmaker).

Friedrich Wenger wrote in 1936: "The song has no original melody. But it is well known with the melody of Gottlieb Jakob Kuhn's Sigriswilerlied", so that's the tune I chose to sing it to. The variety of the melodies that the words were put to demonstrates that the lyrics were more important to the people than

the music. The people who remained in Switzerland used the song as a type of newspaper that told them about the adventure of emmigration to America.

The song was exceptionally long and Hans was not a brilliant poet, so I have taken the liberty of cutting it down from 23 verses to 14. The original text also contained many words that no longer exist in the German language, so I had to improvise a bit on the translation. Nonetheless, I have included all the most humorous and relevant passages. Nothing of importance to the significance of the song was deleted. I sang this song once for Swiss Radio and sing it for you now all by myself (solo) with my trusty Hanottere (an old instrument of 5 chords from the Emmental area). My young son Michi did the recording.

I hope you like it.

Urs Hostettler

[**Editor's Note:** The actual recording of this song was offered at one time and will be offered again. Be patient or [write Urs](#) directly for a copy of it. He is very happy to receive communication about these types of heritage inquiries]

Translation

Listen, I want to tell you something
about the new land of America.
I've wanted to write you for a long time,
but I never could for some reason.
Nearly one year has passed
since I said goodbye to you.

When I left you there
it hurt more than just a little.
I nearly died from the heartache
because I was missing you.
Then we went through Paris
and over the sea on the water.

That ocean is an awfully large puddle,
whoever hasn't seen it, would not believe it.
And it is so deep that you can't reach the bottom
entirely with a stone tied to a rope.
You can sail around on it for a year,
and yet only have seen a part of it.

Nearly all of us who took the ride on the sea,
got ill in the first hour.
By the time you feel your stomach shaking,
you have to vomit like a dog.
It overwhelmed me heavily,
and I got a big piece of the sickness.

Up into the sky or down into the water,
you can look as far as your eyes can see.
You don't many beautiful things,
only a big fish from time to time.
Then there came big waves, too,
that rose higher than the side of the boat.

The one morning it happens,
that you hear someone yelling to you:
"Now we are finally here", and quickly the boat turns
towards the new shoreline.
You are instantly struck with joy,
when you hear the words "Land, Land, Land!".

First you go and look at the countryside,
at the towns and at the people, too.
"Help yourself" says the Yankee,
but "Help yourself" means another thing in German:
Who has money is on top here,
Who has none finishes on bottom here, too.

Most of the people go further inland,
but nowhere do they really like it.
There is no place, where they can stay,
for good land is too expensive and the people are too selfish.
Finally you buy a bit
of the wild growth and you build a house on it.

Building in a funny thing
for the ones in the bush, who hardly can afford it.
You pull a lot of logs out of the woods
and lay them according to their length.
Then you ask your friends to help you for a day,
and you put them up and in a row.

You need nothing more than roof and floor
and maybe two windows and a door.
Then you have to fill the holes with mud,
otherwise the wind would blow through.
Then you put a chimney into it,
that will stand and will not crash.

You have cattle here, too, that you milk and butcher,
and you can cut down fairly many trees in the forest.
If the cattle run away, it's a bad shock.
Searching to find them again is a bad dream
because this country reaches all the way
from Greenland to Mexico.

It is not, as many people think,
completely flat over here.
He who wants flatland had better stay at home
near his old place.
But for able people, who want to work,
it's fine to come over, if they have the will to.

Anyone who comes over should bring bells
and handfuls of money, so it's better for them
to get cows and rent some grassland.
Swiss cheese is at a good price.
It will be a happy life here
for one who really likes to yodel.

I wish you could peep over here
and see for yourself how it is.
Most of you would certainly like it,
but some of you would say, "No, no, for sure!
If I have to choose, I would rather
lose my last penny at home."

I can't really advise you
by saying to come or to not come.
For our lives are uncertain
till we all go to eternity.
There we will find each other well,
if God wants it so, fit and happy.