

Swiss-Speaking Hochstetlers?

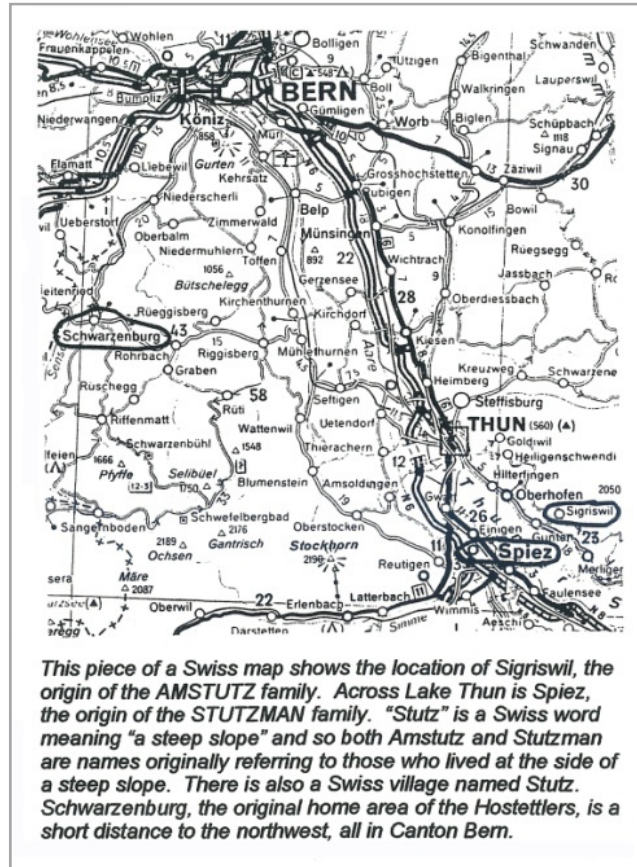
By Daniel E. Hochstetler, Editor of the H/H/H Newsletter and family historian

Whereas the early Hochstetlers from the 1700s in America were Amish-Mennonite and likely spoke a German dialect somewhat different from the original Canton Bern dialect, or Bärn Dietsch, there are descendants today who again-or still-speak Bärn Dietsch. These are some of the older folks in the Bluffton, Ohio area who descended from Samuel and Anna (Amstutz) Hochstetler. Who is this Anna Amstutz who has helped this Hochstetler branch maintain their Swiss language and identity?

Anna Amstutz, born May 12, 1801 and her brother Johannes Amstutz of Sigriswil left their Münsterberg home in Switzerland to come to America in 1818. She was only 17 years old and her brother was a year older.¹ Their parents were very poor, and both parents and a brother died when Anna was 16 years old. Food was very scarce and there was much unrest and war in that part of the country. So the remaining brother and sister decided to come to America as soon as they could earn enough money to pay the fare for the trip on a boat.²

Anna had a cedar chest that belonged to her parents, and in it she packed their belongings for the voyage. The trip was to take 45 days but due to bad weather it took 54 days on the poorly-equipped sailing ship to cross the Atlantic and arrive in New York harbor. Since it took longer for the trip there was an extra \$50.00 charge. Not having the money the brother and sister had to leave the cedar chest with their belongings for security until they could earn the money to pay the extra amount.³

So they started walking westward to the Mennonite settlement in Lancaster, Pennsylvania where they apparently had friends or relatives. Being in debt they



This piece of a Swiss map shows the location of Sigriswil, the origin of the AMSTUTZ family. Across Lake Thun is Spiez, the origin of the STUTZMAN family. "Stutz" is a Swiss word meaning "a steep slope" and so both Amstutz and Stutzman are names originally referring to those who lived at the side of a steep slope. There is also a Swiss village named Stutz. Schwarzenburg, the original home area of the Hostettlers, is a short distance to the northwest, all in Canton Bern.

¹ Gratz, Delbert. *Bernese Anabaptists*. Goshen, Indiana: Mennonite Historical Society, 1953. Reissued 1994 by Olde Springfield Shoppe, Elverson, Pa. Page 132.

² Hochstetler, Walter M. & Luella M. *Isaac & Anna Lauby Hochstetler Family History*, Bluffton, Ohio: Compiler, 1979. Page 5.

³ *Ibid.*

immediately looked for work, and went to work on a farm for Abraham Oberholtzer, a Mennonite. They were soon able to pay their debts and claim their chest and belongings.⁴

After Johannes had saved up some money he continued on to the Sonnenberg community in Wayne County, Ohio in about 1821, where Swiss Mennonites had settled a few years earlier. In 1823 he married Verena Lehman and together with their children moved in 1850 to Putnam County, Ohio where they lived the rest of their lives.⁵

After a few years in Lancaster County Anna Amstutz went to Somerset County, Pa., where she met Samuel Hochstetler and they were married in Pennsylvania Oct. 14, 1824.⁶ Samuel [DJH 6256], a great-grandson of the immigrant Jacob Hochstetler, was born Sept. 1, 1802 in Berks County, Pa., and moved with his family to Somerset County. It is an interesting story how Anna, a single girl who had apparently been raised in the Swiss Mennonite faith and now in Lancaster County, and Samuel, from an Amish family in Somerset County got acquainted. Samuel's parents, Jonathan [DJH 6209] and Frany (Yoder) Hochstetler, together with all their married and unmarried children moved to Holmes County, Ohio in the years before or shortly after 1820. Anna and Samuel also lived in Holmes County on a farm where all of their children were born. They raised their children in a strict religious atmosphere of the Amish and later Mennonite faith.

When Samuel and Anna's youngest child was about four years old they with "seven children moved from Holmes County to Allen County, Richland Township [OH] in 1844 on an 80-acre tract of land that had a log house and log barn on it."⁷ No doubt this community which included many recent arrivals from Switzerland was a strong attraction for Anna, rather than the settlement in Holmes County where Samuel's family lived. Soon after this second relocation they built a good sized bank barn in an architectural style that was common in Switzerland. All the stone for the foundation came from the creek running across the farm. The lumber for the barn came from timber on the farm. The tin roof and the four- corner nails were about all the items that had to be purchased. They had a big orchard with a variety of apple, cherry, peach, and pear trees, as well as the customary grape arbor. The family also built a cider press for their own use and also for making cider for the neighbors. In 1853 three children as well as a young married son died within a short time, perhaps from Typhoid Fever.⁸ While several older daughters also had children, the Hochstettler name is perpetuated through the large families of the two youngest sons, Samuel S. and Isaac.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Gratz, *op. cit.*

⁶ Gratz, p. 132, says they were married in Lancaster County, while Hochstettler, p. 5, infers they were married in Somerset County, Pa. where they lived before moving to Ohio.

⁷ Hamman, Doris. "All-day Hochstettler reunion held Aug. 6," *The Bluffton [OH] News*, July 28, 1988.

⁸ Hochstettler, *op. cit.* p. 6

Samuel and Anna and family attended the Thut, later Zion, Mennonite Church which was located about five miles west of Bluffton, Ohio. The church was started by John Thut, a Swiss Mennonite minister who had lived in Holmes County and picked up on some of the beliefs and practices of the Mennonites in that area. Some of these practices were footwashing and plain clothing, which were not observed by the more recent arrivals from Switzerland in the Bluffton area. It is understandable why Samuel Hochstetler of Amish-Mennonite background where footwashing was also observed was attracted to the church led by Thut. Samuel became a deacon in the Thut church. Sometime after the death of Samuel and Anna the Zion church, located a miles west of the Ebenezer Mennonite Church, was closed. The few people that were left joined other churches, mostly Mennonite, but a few families, such as Isaac and Anna Hochstetler joined the Reformed Church.⁹

This Richland Township community around Bluffton, like the Sonnenberg community, had been settled in the early 1800s by recent arrivals from Switzerland and the Swiss culture survived and thrived for many years. Anna (Amstutz) and Samuel Hochstetler were married for over 54 years before he died July 13, 1879. She died Dec.18, 1885 and they are buried in the Old Gratz Reformed, now United Church of Christ, Cemetery near several of their children and other descendants.¹⁰ The cemetery is located at the corner of Phillips Road and North Dixie Highway southwest of Bluffton. Across the intersection from the Old Gratz Cemetery is the larger, current Emanuel Cemetery where Levi (1872-1949) and Amanda (1873-1961) Hochstetler and others of this Swiss family are buried.

When Anna and Samuel's youngest son Isaac [DJH 6286] married in the early 1860s the elder couple built a grandpa house nearby and Isaac and his wife Anna moved into the family log house where their twelve children were born before they built a larger house in 1882.¹¹ From Anna and Samuel's children have come a great many descendants, some of whom are still living in the Bluffton, Ohio area and continue a strong sense of their Swiss identity. Walter Hochstetler, a son of Isaac's son Levi, published an Isaac and Anna Lauby Hochstetler Family History in 1979. Some of their family still speak the Bern Swiss dialect, reported Maynard Badertscher, born 1924, a grandson of Isaac's son Levi, in an Oct. 18, 1999 letter from Bluffton. Another descendant of Anna (Amstutz) and Samuel Hochstetler, Daniel Hostetler [grandson of Waldo, DJH 6281], is a businessman in Milan, Italy who maintains a Hostetler Familyweb page www.hosteter.net . "Although DJH spells our name with one t, we have always used two for several generations," writes Isaac's great grandson A. Dale Hochstetler of Midland, Michigan.

⁹ Letter from J. Virgil Miller, Feb. 2, 2001.

¹⁰ Hochstetler, *op. cit.* p. 6

¹¹ Hamman, *op. cit.*

While Hochstettler is not a prominent name in the local telephone directory today, several barns in the area are a reminder of the continuing influence of this large family in the community. South of the Ebenezer Mennonite Church, on Phillips Road, is a well-kept red trimmed-in-white barn from the past century with the name "M. S. Hochstettler" on the front. A grandson of former owner Marion, the son of Noah [DJH 6285] who had owned the family cider press, now lives here. A large all-white barn, in good condition from over a century ago, sports the name "Levi Hochstetler, 1896." It is located at 9480 Shifferly Road about three miles southwest of Bluffton. Levi was the son of Isaac, while the red barn represents the descendants of Samuel Jr., both sons of Samuel and Anna Hochstetler.



Anna Amstutz and Samuel Hochstetler represented opposite sides of the division which occurred among the Swiss Brethren (Anabaptists) in the last decade of the 1600s, but their marriage and life in America over a century later merged their common faith and heritage. Today their progeny, like other large H/H/H branches, is scattered throughout North America and the world. While some remember their Swiss roots, for others the memory has largely faded. But when they return to Ohio to the area of their ancestors they will still find a distinctive Swiss influence, and if they meet the right persons they may hear some authentic Bärn Deitsch spoken in the 21st century.