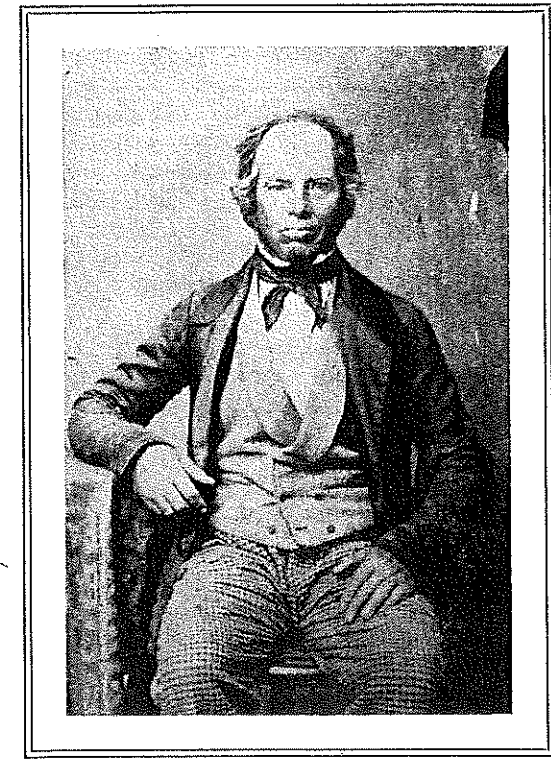


Louise Atwey

*Commemorating*

**100 YEARS**



**PETER GFELLER AT DES MOINES**  
About 1860

**IN THE NEW WORLD**

**1853 - 1953**

by the

**Scions of Peter Gfeller**

*by Andrew A. Gfeller*

Out in Salt Lake City, the Mormons have on display a pedigree chart on their former president, George Albert Smith. This genealogy goes back fifty two generations, to about the year 480 A. D., to a Frankish King of Cologne. Each generation of this long and unusual pedigree has been proved to the complete satisfaction of the Church.

While that pedigree may give Bro. Smith a slight edge over Mr. Peter Gfeller, I want you to know that our Swiss Record also goes back more than 600 years. A certain Burchard Geveller is the oldest known member of the clan. In the year 1301 he was living on his own farm, three miles south of Walkringen, the little Swiss village where Peter Gfeller later taught school. Incidentally, the year 1301 was fifty-two years before Berne joined The Everlasting League, which later developed into the present Swiss Confederation. So, it is obvious that the Gfellers were well established, over in the valley of the Emme, long before there was a Switzerland.

The name means a slope or hillside, and in ancient times the spelling was "Gevelle". There are two places bearing this designation in the neighborhood of Landiswil and Walkringen. In the Swiss dialect the name also means luck, and Gfeller "lucky man". In the Prussian province of Westphalia, on the railway to Dusseldorf, there is also a town called Gevelsberg.

When we understand its original meaning, "Gfeller" simply becomes another place or locality surname; such as Underhill, Beaverbrook, or Roundtree. And it was much easier to pronounce in the days of Burchard Geveller.

"The honors of a name 'tis just to guard; they are a trust but lent us, which we take, and should, in reverence to the donor's fame, with care transmit them down to other hands."

And now I want to tell you something about Peter Gfeller that even Anna Maria didn't know. For one reason, it happened before they were married. Better still, it is based on a confidential report, that just came to light this year. Here's the situation—the date is October 25, 1833 and yesterday the School Board at Walkringen, Canton Bern, selected its new teacher. Reverend Kohler, the School Commissioner from Worb, tells us that there were four competitors—two of them being better than the others.

There was Peter Gfeller from Landiswil, 23 years old, and unmarried. He was trained by Muhleim—a famous teacher before 1830, and afterwards by Langhans—a National Church Minister and afterwards Director of the Normal School. Also by Wehrli—one of the best teachers of his

time at Hofwil, near Berne. For the preceding four years Peter Gfeller had been a teacher at Obergoldbach, parish of Biglen.

Also, there was Chris Muller, from Eggiwil, 31 years old, unmarried who had been a teacher at Signau for the preceding ten years.

Rev. Kohler writes "Both are capable men, with just a little difference in knowledge. Muller has more capacity in asking the children questions. This is due to his longer practice. He is also better in arithmetic, on the blackboard. On the other side, Gfeller is better for methodical teaching, accurateness, and lifefulness in teaching. He wrote a better thesis, is more accurate and exact in singing. Finally, Gfeller has more modesty and more aptitude in learning. So I put Gfeller in first rank, and Muller in the second. The School Board was present the whole day, with much attention. They agreed with me."

You might now be interested in learning a little more about that position, as originally announced to the four candidates at Walkringen. The duties included five hours of teaching daily, except for eight weeks vacation. Special Church Services for the young folks at the School House, every Sunday. In addition to the usual school subjects, the teacher was expected to teach history, especially Swiss History, also geography, and the elements of popular nature science. The income included free lodging in the school house, a garden, six carloads of spruce fuel wood, and 300 Francs (\$375)—half in the spring and half in the fall. The teacher was not allowed to have any outside trade or business that would cause him to neglect his school duties, or get him into "dependence to other people".

Six years later the Commissioner of Education initiated a complaint against Peter Gfeller. Here's what he wrote to the Board of Education: "Peter Gfeller, teacher at Walkringen, living at Bigental, same parish, owner of real estate there, was elected Purser by the Walkringen Township Council. This function makes necessary much interruption in school and my advice is that it is incompatible with school teaching. The competitive conditions of 1833 said expressly: The teacher must not take any function which would be an obstacle to his teaching.—Please answer as soon as possible."

According to the record, the Board of Education checked with the County Governor. His reply suggests the belief that the complainant was slightly nuts. Here's how the letter translates from German into polite English: "Reverend Hess, Commissioner of Schools, in his report of

December 26, 1838 does not mention a very important fact. If Peter Gfeller were just a school teacher, and nothing else, he would be right in refusing to take the office of Purser. But he is also an owner of real estate in Walkringen Parish. He married a wealthy, clever, and handsome farmer's daughter and afterwards bought a good farm there. In his quality as a landowner, he might very well care for Parish employment anyhow. To be Purser takes much less time than to be a Township Clerk—as many teachers are in this County—without anybody, as far as I know, claiming anything against it." This report appears to have satisfied the Department of Education and Peter continued teaching at the same place, fourteen more years.

Then under date of January 28, 1853 we find this report from the School District of Walkringen: "Our teacher, Peter Gfeller, is going to emigrate. So we must have a new teacher. If possible he must be able to play the organ. (Peter was also a piano tuner and could play several string instruments). As farmers have bad times right now, we want to put the wages down. They will still be higher than they are at most other places with 90 to 100 children. Instead of six carloads of stove wood, we want to give 60 Francs cash (\$75), as the school stove can be heated with turf at a very cheap rate. It is available at Walkringen."

For these unique and historic documents, we are indebted to Mr. Christian Lerch of the Cantonal Archives in Berne. Stories about the Swiss Guards at the Vatican may have suggested my inquiry about the possibility of a military record on Peter Gfeller. Mr. Lerch replied that schoolmasters, at that time, were exempted from bearing arms. As a consequence, no such records were in existence. But the idea of a get-together, by the Scions of Peter Gfeller, to commemorate One Hundred Years in America, sparked his enthusiasm and initiated this fruitful search through his dusty records. And by way of explanation Mr. Lerch wrote: "As I have been a Bernese teacher myself for about 18 years, until 1930, I quite understand what pleasure it might be to all of you to learn something about "Schulmeisters Freuden und Leiden", i.e., "The Joys and Sufferings of a School Teacher" a hundred years ago, even in Henry Pestalozzi's Country."

The only picture we have of Peter Gfeller in 1853 is the description that was filed by the now forgotten clerk at the Passport Office, over in Switzerland. Here is what he wrote: Age—44 years; Height—5 feet and 5 inches; Hair—black; Forehead—high; Eyebrows—black; Eyes—brown; Nose—average; Mouth—average (lower lip thrown

up a little); Chin—round; Face—rather long." Here is the balance of the report:

"Laut Passkontrolle Band 4, Nr. 953, wurde am 12 Marz 1853 ein Pass ausgestellt für Peter Gfeller, Lehrer, van Landiswil, in Walkringen, 44 Jahre alt, mit Ehefrau (Name fehlt) und 11 Kindern (Namen Fehlen), ferner mit den Magden Anna Maria Riser von Ursenbach, und Magdalena Inabnit von Grindelwald, und dem Knecht Friedrich Schneider von Biglen. Reiseziel: Amerika, über Holland. Zweck der Reise: Ansiedelung."

Now in addition to the two maid-servants and the man from Biglen, the Gfeller Party also included a cook. Each party had to take along its own foodstuffs and prepare its own meals. This cook was a young school teacher from the nearby village of Worb. I find that he was the second passenger to board the ship at Antwerp. So it follows that he had an early choice of the meagre accommodations that were available. Some of you will remember him as Pastor Peter Lehman, who married Elizabeth Gfeller in 1855, finally moved to Alida, subsequently organized the St. Paul's congregation at Linn in Washington county, and for seven years served the two congregations. Some of you may also remember him as the stern teacher that taught those Saturday classes in German.

Those of you who have crossed the Atlantic, or whose sons or daughters have gone abroad, must have wondered about that ship to which the Gfellers entrusted their lives and our future. We have found a picture of it for you—a reproduction of a painting that hangs over the old square piano, in the Skolfied Mansion, back in Brunswick, Maine. Master George Skolfield built this ship and his son Captain Alfred served as its skipper. The reproduction was made several years ago by the photographer for the Pejepscot Historical Society at Brunswick and fortunately he still has the plate. This picture shows the ROGER STEWART, just as it appeared 100 years ago—with all sails billowing in the wind and the Stars and Stripes flying at the stern. The ship is about to meet and pass a similar vessel off the coast of England. Small craft are upon the sea, including a distant steamship shoreward bound.

She was built of oak and hackmatack; almost all the labor was done by hand. The carpenters had but few tools besides the broad ax, saw, adz, and pod auger. The ship smith, with the help of his strikers, worked his own iron. She measured 180 by 36 by 18, draft 20 feet, and carried 425 passengers. And her skipper must have been just as sturdy. The story is told that he once quelled a mutiny by drawing a chalk line across the deck and threatening to shoot any

DISTRICT OF NEW YORK—PORT OF NEW YORK.

I, *Alfred Wolfpelt* do solemnly, sincerely and truly *swear* that the following List or Manifest of Passengers, subscribed with my name, and now delivered by me to the Collector of the Customs for the District of New York, contains, to the best of my knowledge and belief, a just and true account of all the Passengers received on board the *American Ship Roger Stewart* whereof I am Master, from *Antwerp* *So help me God.*

Sworn to this  
Before me

*Alfred Wolfpelt* Master of Manifest OF ALL THE PASSENGERS taken on board the *American Ship Roger Stewart* whereof  
is Master, from *Antwerp* burthen *1066 1/2* tons.

NAMES	Age		SEX	OCCUPATION	The country to which they severally belong	The country in which they intend to become inhabitants	Died on the Voyage
	Years	Months					
41 James Ruffer	18		Male	Farmer	<i>Swiss</i>	<i>Swiss</i>	
42 Elizabeth Ruffer	17		Female	"	<i>(Switzerland)</i>		<i>One Box</i>
43 Madeline Ruffer	20		Female	"	"		
44 Nicholas Ruffer		9	Male	"	"		
45 Elizabeth Braun	22		Female	"	"		
46 Peter Heller	24		Male	<i>Farmer</i>	<i>Swiss</i>		<i>Ironstone Chest</i>
47 Anna Heller	34		Female	"	"		
48 Elizabeth Heller	17		Female	"	"		
49 Lind Heller	15		Female	"	"		
50 August Heller	13		Male	"	"		
51 Mary Heller	12		Female	"	"		
52 Maria Heller	9		Female	"	"		
53 Sophia Heller	8		Female	"	"		
54 Gottlieb Heller	7		Male	"	"		
55 Gottlieb Heller	6		Male	"	"		
56 Louis Heller	5		Male	"	"		
57 Adolph Heller	2		Male	"	"		
58 Robert Heller		6	Male	"	"		
59 Anna Mary Pruser	18		Female	"	"		<i>One Box</i>
60 Kasimir Lindlich	24		Male	"	"		<i>One Box</i>
61 Frederick Schneider	30		Male	"	"		<i>Three Boxes</i>
62 John Frankenhau	44		Male	"	"		<i>Two Chests</i>
63 Anna Frankenhau	41		Female	"	"		
64 Elizabeth	19		Female	"	"		
65 Mary Ann	18		Female	"	"		
66 John	14		Male	"	"		



THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES  
Washington, D. C.

Three Centimeters

RECORDS OF THE BUREAU OF CUSTOMS  
Portions of the passenger list of the ROGER STEWART,  
delivered to the Collector of Customs, Port of New York,  
and sworn to on May 10, 1853.

man who dared step across that boundry. No one did!

The Skolfield Family still treasures a card advertising "The fine first class American Packet Ship ROGER STEWART—A fast sailer and a fine conveyance for goods—Will sail punctually on the 10th of September 1853—Liverpool to New York." Obviously this referred to the very next crossing, following the Antwerp to New York run—only that time it was to be used for goods instead of Gfellers.

This part of our story would be incomplete with out a report on what finally happened to the ROGER STEWART. In 1860 she was sailing from Mobile, Alabama to Liverpool, loaded with cotton. All went well until she reached Cape Hatteras, off the coast of North Carolina. A severe gale of wind was encountered that lasted for several days, a leak was discovered, the ship took a nose dive—and never came up. She was then only eight years old.

An eastern writer who did a wonderful feature on the Skolfield Family, several years ago, made this observation: "What a pity so splendid a vessel as the ROGER STEWART had to meet a watery fate! But this may have been better than to rot away at some neglected wharf, forgotten, and unsung."

We have all heard about the SANTA MARIA that brought Columbus to the New World. I wonder if you remember that his voyage from the Canary Islands to the Bahamas, where he first landed, required only 36 days. On the 34th day Columbus wrote in his Journal:

"Here the people could no longer suffer the journey. They complained at the long voyage—but the Admiral encouraged them as well as he was able, giving them good hope of the benefits they would receive, and adding that for the rest it was useless to complain".

Remember—these were hardened sea-faring men, presumably as salty as Popeye the Sailor. What must those 295 Swissmen on the ROGER STEWART been thinking—after 34 days at sea, cooped up betwixt decks "there can hardlie a man fetch his breath"?

Their arrival at the Port of New York was reported in the NEW YORK DAILY TIMES for Monday, May 30, 1853 as follows: "Arrived, Sunday May 29, Ship Roger Stewart (of Brunswick) Skolfield, Antwerp, 38 days, mdse and 41 passengers to Perkins & Delano". Fortunately newspapers in those days were made of better stock than they are today. That issue is still in good condition at The Library of Congress in Washington D. C.

The typewritten record in the National Archives in

Washington is now known to be incorrect. The recorder was simply unable to make out Captain Alfred Skolfield's figures on the required Ship's Manifest, when he docked at the Port of New York.

At this point we might well ask: "Just what did those ancestors bring with them, to the New World?" Probably very little in the form of chattels. But they did bring with them memories and experiences of an older social order and a cultural pattern that was much more advanced than that which they found over here. Their folk songs, traditions, and customs mirrored a civilization much older than what they found. It is to be regretted that they so quickly and completely conformed to the "American Standard" and so successfully forgot their heritage . . . the heritage that we now attempt to rediscover and reconstruct—bit by bit.

Perhaps you have read of the long-lived Dane, Christen Dragenberg who took part in the wars of three Kings against Sweden, was sold as a slave by Algerian pirates in his 60's, escaped after 15 years, and at the age of 84 served another hitch in the Danish Army. The story goes on to say that at 111 Dragenberg married a woman of 60, outlived her, proposed at 130 to several more, was rejected, but lived on for 16 years, undismayed. This is supposed to be true, but it seems to me that the family record of Peter Gfeller and Anna Maria is equally remarkable. And it certainly ties in with that question regarding what they brought to America. There was Frederick, Gottfried, Gottlieb, Adolph, Karl, William and Peter whose life span totaled 530 years. There was Elizabeth, Lina, Anna, Barbara, Emilie, Louisa, and Christiana that scored a total of 545 years. This makes a total of 1075 years for their fourteen children, and longevity is one of our best yardsticks of stamina and physical vigor.

You will recall that the Swiss Passport Control was dated March 12, 1853. Four months later Peter Gfeller was a landed proprietor in the State of Illinois. He had acquired a 148 acre farm for \$1500, just west of Chicago. Today that farm is part of Bensenville; in reality, an integral part of Greater Chicago. But even then it was a well chosen site—astride one of the three main plankroads leading to town . . . and plank roads were considered very ultra.

As commonly constructed, a roadway sixteen feet wide was graded and on this eight foot planks were laid crosswise. This was deemed sufficient for a single track road, the remaining portion of the grade being available for teams to turn out in passing. The toll rate allowed by law

was 2½ cents for a man on horseback, double that for a single team and wagon, and 7½ cents for a four-horse vehicle. By 1851 some of the plank roads were paying their investors as much as forty per cent. But soon those heavy planks became warped and loosened, wagons passing over them could be heard for miles, and the plank roads passed out of existence.

We can well wonder how those newcomers managed to get by for that first year or so, in that strange untamed area, with even the elements seeming to conspire against them. For example, that hail storm they experienced in the summer of '54:

"We turn aside from our usual articles on culture to record one of the most destructive hailstorms within our knowledge . . . The entire crops of grain and potatoes are completely broken down and ruined and much of it is not worth cutting. The corn is completely stripped of its leaves and mostly broken off near the ground. Fruit and shade trees are nearly defoliated, badly bruised and in many cases large strips of bark knocked off. At one house in Addison, a pile of hail stones accumulated in an angle of the building, three feet deep, and at five o'clock next day, hail stones were measured from this pile from three to five inches in circumference.

"All the windows on the south and west sides of the houses had the glass broken. Cattle ran bellowing through the fields—horses broke from their fastenings, and ran with whatever was fast to them. The ten minutes the hail was falling were of fearful grandeur, alarm and rapid destruction. The dark mass of clouds streaked with lurid lightning—the roaring of the hail like the pouring out of a thousand torrents might well inspire terror and dismay. In a few short minutes the hopes of husbandman were gone; the broad ears of beautiful waving grain fast ripening for the reaper and which were destined to feed and clothe those he held most dear, were utterly ruined and prostrated before him."

Peter Gfeller probably read this account in the Chicago Democrat or its German counterpart, for the Democratic Press eulogized the foreign-born voter, denounced his Whig enemies, and generally supported proposals to print official documents in the German language. In the Autobiography of P. H. Gfeller we find evidence that this loyalty to The Party continued long after the Whigs were forgotten: "I recall now the evening as Father was reading the weekly paper, he looked up and announced that Lincoln had been shot. As it seemed to me that more of the neighbors were Democrats than Republicans, I was not sure if I should feel sad over this loss or not." Little "P. H." was

then a lad of but six.

Perhaps at some other time we may continue this Gfeller Saga of courage and adventure, suffering, self-sacrifice, idealism, blindness, and clear-vision—much of which some of you must know far better than I. Peter Gfeller had the spirit and tenacity to distill the essence of other men's dreams into reality. Our only possible criticism might have to do with the innate modesty that kept him from recording that struggle in minute detail . . . The same modesty that caused his sixteenth child to be named after a neighbor, instead of the father.

We know that the need for "belonging" is perhaps the deepest instinct in the human animal. The clan and the tribe began, not as economic units. They arose from the physiological necessity of separating one's friends and neighbors from the rest of society, in order to identify one's self with this unique solidarity. The Scions of Peter Gfeller should therefor look forward, and plan on these Annual Reunions, year after year, and world without end!

George Santayana tells us that the barbarian is the man who does not know his derivations, nor perceive his tendencies, but who merely feels and acts, valuing in his life its force and its fillings, but being careless of its purpose and its form.

It just doesn't make good sense to be constantly and entirely occupied with the things we can touch, taste, weigh, and count. Life would be horribly dull if its only meaning were to be found in the fishtail car, the winter tan, or acquiring the neighbor's northwest eighty. Meetings such as this seem to float to the surface some of life's deeper, more fundamental, and lasting values . . . for all of us to appreciate and enjoy.

I am told that at the end of the midway, that dominated the Exhibition of Zurich in 1939, there stood one of the most magnificent symbols of its destiny that any people has ever found. There was the cross of the Swiss flag. There was the Red Cross, which is its daughter. And there was the Cross of Christ, which is their eternal origin. Fortunate are the people that have these symbols and understand their true meaning. Even more fortunate are the Gfellers who have still a fourth symbol . . . in the name, memory, and example of Peter G.--citizen of Landiswil, pioneer of the West, and honored father of this sturdy clan.

—by  
Gladwin A. Read

July 12, 1947  
Chicago Democrat

Prepared by the  
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Junction City, Kansas

May 10, 1953

