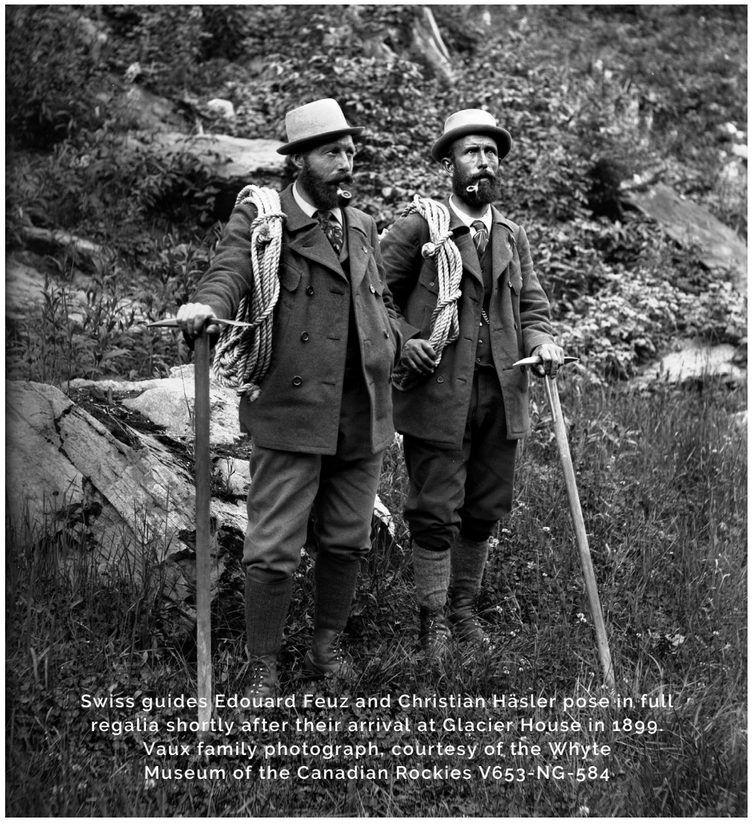
HARD TIME IN THE

CANADIAN PACIFIC ROCKIES



Swiss guides Edouard Feuz and Christian Häsler pose in full regalia shortly after their arrival at Glacier House in 1899. Vaux family photograph, courtesy of the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies V653-NG-584

BY ZAC ROBINSON & STEPHEN SLEMON

Today, the "Swiss Guides" are lionized for the foundational role they played in early Canadian mountaineering history. They weren't quite so celebrated back then. Zac Robinson and Stephen Slemon explore some of the hardships European mountain guides experienced during that so-called "Golden Age."

"Those magnificent, snow-capped, perilous heights that constitute the Canadian Rockies," breathed a promotional column in the *Railway and Shipping News* in July 1898. "There are no mountains in the world offering more inducements & opportunities for mountain climbing."

"They are destined, in time," the column continued, "to become the Alps of America."

By the turn of the twentieth century, those other Alps – the real ones – had relinquished much of their capacity to provide easy access to an immaculate wilderness experience, and had seen the burgeoning development of a mountain tourism industry. The most charming alpine hotels and spas in the villages were booked solid throughout the summer season. The easiest of trails through the highlands were overrun with traffic. The "Golden Age" of mountaineering was over. All the major peaks had been climbed. The travelling classes now longed for familiar mountain substitutes, and the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), one of the most powerful private entities in Canada, had a marketing plan to address that longing. "In a few years," the *Railway and Shipping News* column concluded, "it will be as common for the Montreal and Chicago man to go mountain-climbing in the Rockies as it now is for the Londoner & the Parisian to go to the Alps."

Key to the CPR's recruitment strategy for that leisured-class "man" was the building of a fully "Alpine" tourism infrastructure, and that work was already underway. Since the late 1880s, the company had been building hotels along its main rail line: the Banff Springs Hotel, near the hot springs on Sulphur Mountain; Mount Stephen House at Field, below the steep slopes of Kicking Horse Pass; Glacier House, at the summit of Rogers Pass. In keeping with the theme, Mount Stephen House and Glacier House were modelled around the imagined aesthetics of Swiss Alpine architecture. The "Alps of America" were almost ready to earn.

But for the Rockies and Columbias to become truly competitive in the tourism industry, the mountain backcountry and its summits had to be made more easily accessible, not only to the eye, but also to the foot. In 1896, while climbing with a party from the Appalachian Mountain Club, a Harvard-educated attorney named Philip Stanley Abbot suffered a fatal fall from the rotten rock bands on the upper west face of Mount Lefroy, just behind Lake Louise on the Continental Divide. The incident – widely considered Canada's first climbing fatality – proved enormously controversial in the press. The following year, the club's president Charles Fay organized a return to Mount Lefroy, a "memorial climb," but this time the

party included ringers: a couple of crack British climbers and Peter Sarbach, a professional mountain guide from the village of St. Niklaus, in the Swiss Valais. That group summited, and returned safely.

The contrast was striking: unguided tragedy versus guided triumph. In the corporate eyes of the CPR, it was now clear that if the nascent mountaineering industry in the Rockies and Columbias were going to develop, climbing would have to be less dangerous. That meant *managed*. At the end of the 1897 climbing season, Sarbach returned home to the lovely Visp River Valley, below the Matterhorn – the first professional mountain guide to climb in Canada. But the idea of mountain guiding had taken its first firm footsteps in the Canadian west.

"Fifty Switzerlands in one," screamed one CPR advertisement, promoting tourism in the area it had taken to calling – and not without some sense of possessiveness – the "Canadian Pacific Rockies." "It is announced," enthused that *Railway and Shipping News* column, "that the Co. has sent an official to Switzerland to engage a number of Alpine guides, who will be brought over to Canada to act as guides for tourists in the Rocky Mountains."

Three came over in the summer of 1899. Charlie Clarke, a transplanted Englishman living in Interlaken, detrained at Banff, only to find himself promoting mountaineering under the auspices of a disinterested CPR hotel manager. Better financial opportunity in Banff lay in less elevated seasonal activity – like bathing in the hot springs, hiking, horseback riding, painting and dining. However, two Swiss guides, Edouard Feuz and Christian Häsler, found themselves much more enthusiastically received at Glacier House, near the foot of the Illecillewaet Glacier in the Selkirk Mountains. Their guiding activity that summer proved so popular and safe that it changed the "rules" for North American mountain climbing. "Until this time," writes historian Robert Sandford, "climbing had been the almost exclusive domain of those who held membership in an alpine or mountaineering club." Now, "the summits were accessible to people who could not make it on their own."

Indeed, the summits were becoming so accessible that the CPR hired three more Swiss guides for the 1900 season: Karl Schluneggar, Friedrich Michel, and Jacob Mueller. Six more arrived in 1901 – Edward Feuz Jr., Ernst Feuz, Walter Feuz, Christian Häsler Jr., Rudolph Aemmer and Christian Bohren. Bohren and Häsler's guiding work for James Outram on Mount Assiniboine – "the Canadian Matterhorn" – later that summer made clear that "the Canadian Alps" were full of opportunity. There, you could climb safely with a guide on established alpine routes. There, you could even make your own historic first ascent.

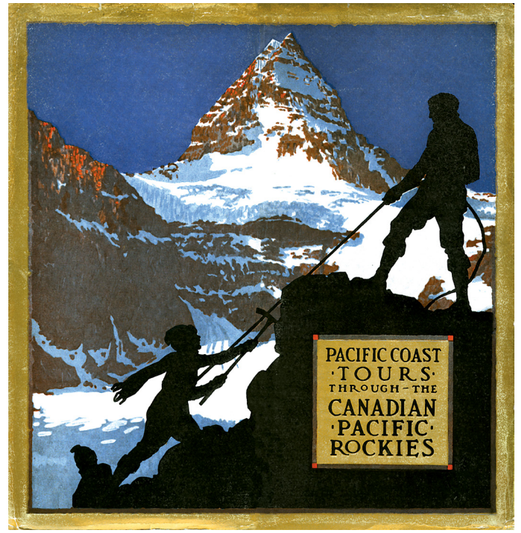
Over the next half-century, about thirty alpine professionals, almost all of them Swiss, gave shape and structure to the Canadian mountain guiding industry. Six of those guides settled permanently in Canada. The rest commuted seasonally, although few for more than a year or two. Their everyday work took them up "bread and butter" routes on mounts Sir Donald, Tupper and Uto in the Selkirks, for example, or Temple, Victoria and Lefroy in the Rockies. But they also led first ascents on over 400 mountains. In fact, 80 percent of all first ascents within the CPR's zone of influence in the first half of the twentieth century were led by these guides. Not a single fatal accident occurred.

"In the corporate eyes of the CPR, it was now clear that if the nascent mountaineering industry in the Rockies and Columbias were going to develop, climbing would have to be less dangerous. That meant managed."

The "Swiss Guides" are justly remembered. Nearly every commentator on early Canadian mountaineering has paid homage to their extraordinary professionalism. For Chic Scott, the author of the authoritative *Pushing the Limits: The Story of Canadian Mountaineering*, the skill and competence of the early European guides constitutes a foundational pillar of our national climbing culture. Geography, too, bears the impress of their memory. Twenty peaks are named for the early guides. Permanent museum exhibits in Banff, Jasper, Invermere and Golden celebrate their achievements, as does a recent film documentary produced by the Consulate General of Switzerland in Vancouver. A bronze statue on the grounds of the Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise, not far from the water's edge, depicts a singular guiding spirit in mid-stride, carrying an ice axe, pack and rope, looking purposefully upward to the heights.

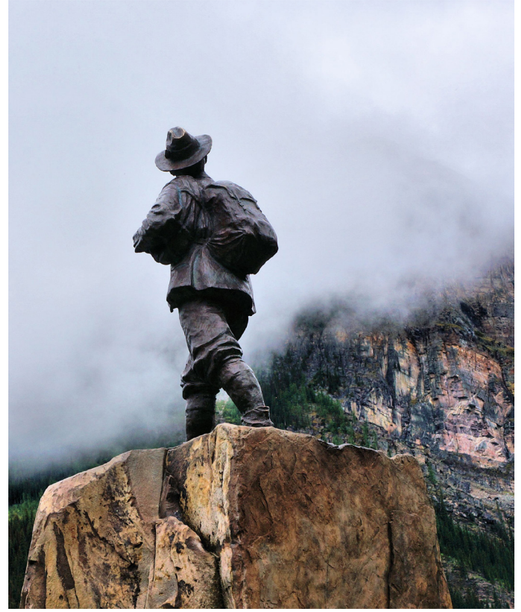
Why go to Switzerland if there are more mountaineering opportunities in the Canadian Rockies? An early CPR ad highlights guided mountaineering with the "Matterhorn of North America," Mount Assiniboine, as the backdrop.

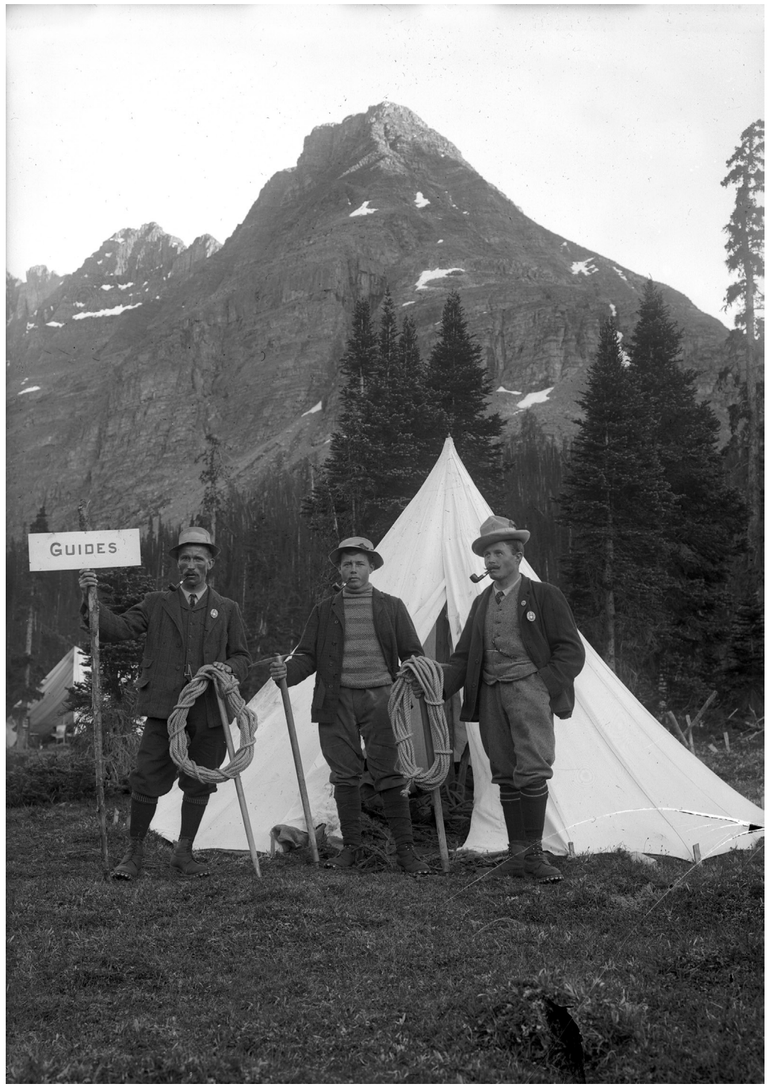
CP Archives, A.17295



A statue on the ground of the Chateau Lake Louise honours the memory of the CPR's Swiss mountain guides.

Photo: Bernie Nemeth





Christian Häsler Jr., Walter Feuz, and Edward Feuz Jr. at an early ACC camp. Byron Harmon

Courtesy of the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies V263-NG-0071.

In the winter months, the Swiss guides were deployed to do janitorial work at the hotels. Here, guides are shovelling show from the roof of Glacier House. Other chores included inspecting the interiors and looking after the furnishings. Because the Chateau Lake Louise had insufficient refrigerating equipment, they would also cut ice on the lake and pack it away in sawdust in the icehouse so that summer guests could chill their whisky, their martinis or Canada Dry ginger ale.

Byron Harmon photograph, courtesy of the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies V263-NA-1360.

National pillars. Guiding spirits. The heart of early Canadian mountaineering. The early-century alpine guides are all these things in popular memory and history, and more. But history remains generally silent on the profound unhappiness experienced by many of those first-wave guides in Canada. We remember the giants – the Häslers, the Feuzes, the Kaufmanns, Christian Bohren, Rudolph Aemmer, or the Austrian, Conrad Kain – but our histories don't speak of guides like Fritz Michel, from Böningen, who worked for the CPR in 1902, experienced acute homesickness, and never returned. Our histories commemorate the first-foot-to-the-summit moments – Conrad Kain famously telling his clients, "Gentlemen, that's as far as I can take you." But they don't dwell on the grind experienced by Edward Feuz Jr., for example, during his two dozen ascents up each of mounts Victoria, Temple and Whyte. They don't articulate the sense of devaluation felt when guides holding first-class Swiss permits – permits that qualified them to lead the hardest climbs on rock and ice – found themselves consigned to easy day outings on the Illecillewaet Glacier: excursions that in Switzerland would have been conducted by second-class, or "Fiehrerli," guides.

Mountaineering history remains generally silent, too, on the economic system that relegated professional guides to an exploitable labouring class. Edward Feuz Jr., for example, settled in Canada on what he understood was a five-year contract for year-round work. That work ended with the summer climbing season, leaving Feuz without a winter income. "My first mistake," claimed Feuz, "was to believe the CPR people when we moved to Canada." To manage things, Feuz and his fellow guides took winter jobs at the lumber mill in Golden. After a series of heated exchanges, and then some diplomatic intervention from the Swiss consulate in Vancouver, Feuz and his fellow guides secured caretaking employment with the CPR at Glacier House and Lake Louise for the winter months, far from their families.

"What we should have done," he later reported, "was quit the guiding business and stay at the mill."

Some of the railway guides discovered themselves to be "loaned out" as employees of Arthur O. Wheeler, the bearded, bombastic land surveyor, who, in 1906, along with Elizabeth Parker of Winnipeg, founded the Alpine Club of Canada. The club needed professionals to work at its annual summer mountaineering camp in the Rockies, and the CPR was happy to support an activity that would put passengers in train seats, if not in hotel beds. The popular two-week camp catered especially to middle-class novices, and many of the guides disliked being relegated to it. Camp meant leading large, inexperienced climbing parties. Camp meant two weeks away from wealthier patrons. And camp meant lousy tips, if any!

But worse than all of that, camp meant labouring under Arthur Wheeler. The man was blustering, imperious, impatient and short-tempered, as historian Leslie Bella tells it. He was "aristocratic" in manner, despite his own working-class background. "Towards his subordinates," Edward Feuz Jr. recalled, Wheeler was no less than "savage…. Those in his employ or at his orders … found him abusive, arrogant, conceited and autocratic." They were happy when their camp sentence ended. A different type of employer might have changed his ways, or his manners.

Instead, Wheeler took a page from the CPR's management book and imported his own employee. This is how Conrad Kain, the gregarious young Austrian guide, began his spectacular career in the Rockies. Kain's first two seasons with Wheeler – at the ACC camp and on topographical surveys – proceeded relatively smoothly. But then came what Kain described as the "hard, hard" summer of 1911. One afternoon, while in the Mount Robson area, Kain slipped away from Wheeler's camp and climbed Whitehorn Mountain – alone. Wheeler was furious. Kain's ascent, he roared, "would not be recognized." George Kinney, another of Wheeler's subordinates that summer, explained it this way: "Wheeler was robbed of the privilege of farming out the 'first climb' to some ambitious climber later on."

This sense of employer privilege over the independent actions of mountain guides in the Rockies had a history. In the summer of 1904, Hans Kaufmann, in the employ of the CPR, was guiding for Charles Fay, now the president of the American Alpine Club, on what was to have been the celebratory first ascent of Mount Heejee in the Valley of the Ten Peaks. Fay, in anticipation of the great moment, had already arranged through the Geographic Board of Canada for the mountain to be given another name: Mount Fay. As it happened, however, Hans' brother Christian was on the same day leading the remarkable British climber Gertrude Benham up Mount Heejee by another route. Christian Kaufmann's day went smoothly, Hans Kaufmann's didn't, and so the first ascent went to the redoubtable British woman, not the clubbable American man. It was ever after rumoured that Fay subsequently wrote in fury about the affair to CPR President Cornelius Van Horne, and that Horne had Hans Kaufmann sent home. Hans Kaufmann never again returned to Canada.

Conrad Kain's wage from Wheeler was supposed to be two dollars a day – half the rate the guides were earning. But, even then, there were no guarantees. As was common practice, Wheeler paid out Kain at the end of the 1911 season. Kain felt that Wheeler had short-changed him. "It's mostly my fault," Kain wrote to a friend in October. "I am too trusting…. But this has to change. I am through with the Alpine Club, as long as Mr. Wheeler is the director."

By the 1920s, Wheeler was denouncing Kain to potential clients. He "said bad things about me to the people," Kain wrote in a letter. "He told them … not to come and that they would save money by staying in his camp." "I have twice saved Mr. Wheeler's life in the mountains," Kain's letter continued, "and have done work for him that no one else would do…. [A]s long as I was working for him, I was always a 'fine fellow,' but as soon as I became my own master, I was no good to him!"

Social devaluation, controlling management, economic hardship: these conditions didn't just hit hard on the guides. As Andy Kaufmann and Bill Putnam explain so well in their 1986 book, *The Guiding Spirit*, these conditions also affected the CPR guides' families, who suffered, in addition, from a year-round sense of linguistic and social isolation. The guides were away in the winter months, unhappily fulfilling their seasonal janitorial chores. As for the summers, town life in the Rockies and Selkirks struck the families as culturally thin. They'd known community in their Swiss Alp villages: "dancing pavilions," "tourists sipping Scotch whisky and champagne," "wonderful bands with their beautiful music." In the town of Golden, however, distance from community proved in fact to be the organizing principle of their lives.

The guides were housed three kilometres out and above town, and as Kaufmann and Putman report it, at least one of the guides thought that "some CPR official" had planted them there deliberately so that they'd be insulated from complaints about the company, "which were legion." Another (and possibly more likely) reason for that distance was a commercial one. The guides' homes consisted of six "chalets" pitched "on the flanks of a gravelly, soil-poor hill" beside the rail line. Each house had a flagpole displaying "the Swiss emblem with its white cross on a red background." Each was embellished with "gingerbread fancy-work." Each sported a "cuckoo clock beside the door." All this local colour could be seen from

There were altogether six structures, whose facades only distantly reminded the observer of chalets, which compromised "Edelweiss Village."

Aside from their attractive fronts, and grand view to the west, the houses were purportedly "little better than stables." Over three kilometres from town, there were no nearby amenities so essential for growing families.

Locals called it the "Golden Ghetto."

Swiss guides and their wives pose for a publicity shot in Liverpool, England, on their way to Montreal, 1912. Bottom L-R: Walter Feuz, Clara Aemmer, Rosa Häsler, Elise Feuz, Martha Feuz. Top L-R: Rudolph Aemmer, Christian Häsler Jr., Ernst Feuz, Edward Feuz Jr. Johann Feuz

Courtesy of the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies NA66-1268.

the passenger trains, above a sign that read "CPR, Swiss Guides' Village, Edelweiss." It was one thing for the families on their outward voyage to have endured the "nosy newspaper reporters" in Geneva, the "publicity circus" in Trafalgar and Montreal, the compulsory newspaper photograph of resolute women in decorated bonnets standing before their rustic "mountaineer" husbands bedecked in feathered velour trilbies and holding picturesque wood-handled ice axes. It was quite another to have to live in a settlement designed as a tourist spectacle instead of a home.

"Edward," exclaimed Martha Feuz, when she first saw the Edelweiss Village houses beside the railway track. "I think I am going to faint. They look like monkey cages."

By the early 1920s, the so-called golden age of mountaineering in "The Canadian Pacific Rockies" was sputtering to an end. With the completion of the Connaught Tunnel at Rogers Pass, trains no longer passed by Glacier House, and so "the birthplace of Canadian mountaineering" had all but boarded up its doors. The cost of travel was rising, while opportunities for first ascents were falling. Almost all of big peaks in the region had been climbed. "100 years will pass before all the many heights of the as yet unknown Rockies are climbed," the *Railway and Shipping News* had boasted, just a quarter century earlier. That estimate hadn't calculated sufficiently for the extreme skill and competence of the European alpine guides.

Two of those guides found an innovative way to face the changing times. Undeterred by two decades of top-down control over guiding independence, Edward Feuz Jr. and Rudolph Aemmer proposed to the CPR that a hut might be constructed on the high col between Mount Lefroy and Mount Victoria, 1,400 metres above Lake Louise. It would be an invaluable resource, they noted, for "serious mountaineers." Their overture was met with "no takers." And so, working together, Feuz and Aemmer drafted a building plan for the hut. They brought wood, bolts, lime for cement, and windows to Lake Louise. They hired a wrangler to lead horses carrying the supplies to the base of the avalanche-prone Death Trap beneath the overhanging ice cliffs of Mount Victoria. From there, they carried packs – 75 pounds per load – and winched sleds up the steep sections. They had to ladder their way across a large crevasse. They gathered stones from the col, hired a stonemason, and then set to work: masonry on the outside, three-ply wood on the inside, a kitchen, a dormitory room for men, another one for women, and to top it all off, a cozy wood stove.

The "highest permanent housing structure in Canada" – until the construction of the Neil Colgan Hut in 1983 – opened officially in the spring of 1923. Twenty members of the Appalachian Mountain Club travelled from Massachusetts to Lake Louise to commemorate the achievement. Today, it is designated a National Historic Site.

But the house that Feuz and Aemmer built in 1923 never actually carried their names. Its official title is the Abbot Pass Hut – from the name of the Harvard attorney who fell. For the next few decades, most people just called it the Canadian Pacific Hut, after the company that didn't originally want it. ▲

Taking commercial advantage of their relegation to the category of rustic exoticism, Christian Bohren and Christian Häsler display a baby goat by Golden's rail terminal in 1902. They sold it to a curator from the Philadelphia Zoo for $500 dollars, more money than most of the guides saw in six months.

CP Archives, A.19074.

The Abbot Pass Hut on the saddle between Mount Lefroy and Mount Victoria, built by Swiss guides in 1922/1923.

Photograph courtesy of the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, V200-PA-81b.

{ The authors want to thank Eva Marie Müller, a PhD candidate at the University of Gießen, for her work with archival material at the Library of the Swiss Alpine Club in Zürich. }