

APPENDIX A

Notes from "Another Italy? The Families of the Piedmont" by Hugh Law
(World Conference on Records 1980)

Reverend William S. Gilly from Essex Co., England, visited the Waldensian valleys in 1823 and 1829. He tells us much of the life of the people of that time: "Most of them have a few rods of land, which they can call their own property, varying in extent, from about a quarter of an acre and upwards, and they have the means of providing themselves with fuel, from the abundance of wood upon the mountains.

"The tenure, upon which land is hired, requires that the occupier should pay to the proprietor half the produce of corn and wine in kind, and half the value of the hay.. They have sheep, goats and cattle, but not many horses; the ploughing is done with the assistance of oxen, where the plough can be used, but in the upper regions, and in rocky soil, where the plots of corn land are very confined and bordering upon the precipices, they are obliged to do everything with the spade and hoe. Carts and wagons are rarely seen; charcoal, which is carried from the valleys to Pinerolo, is conveyed on the back of mules and donkeys, and even the corn (grain) is carried home in the same way.

"We saw enough to judge the industry, and clever expedients, with which the present natives appropriate to their use tracts of land stolen from the rocks and the torrents. Where the sides of the mountain would be likely to fall in, they form terrace upon terrace, in many places not exceeding ten feet in breadth, and wall them up with huge piles of stone. Upon these terraces they sow their grain or plant vines." (6)

The French Pastor Baptiste Noel visited the Waldensian parishes in 1854 and wrote concerning the lot of the farmers there: "One can not imagine the fatiguing life of one of the Waldensian parishes without having seen it. Picture this torn and rugged country, where neither carts nor beast of burden can penetrate and where the farmer is constrained to serve both as a cart and as a horse.

"I have seen slender women crushed under enormous weights during the summer months.. picking up dirt at the foot of the mountain and carrying it on their back to the summit. In successive years the same soil, washed back down in the valley, is again carried up on backs a second, a third time, indefinitely.

"Harvest time was especially a time of hard work. Potatoes had to be dug by hand. Hay was cut by hand with a sickle...the operation of cutting hay was a spectacle of strength and of agility.

"When the hay had dried sufficiently, it was gathered on sleds and dragged by hand down near the winter home of the farmer.

"Grain...was threshed by men striking it with sticks...Then the chaff was separated from it in a winnowing-fan, a machine made mostly of wood, which one man fed with grain...and the other worked with a handle. (7)

"All the members of the family from eight years on had their part in the active life of the family, then almost entirely farming or pastoral. The heavy work was done by both men and women. Children looked after their

younger brothers and sisters, herded livestock, and helped with all the lighter work of farming and raising stock.

"...the vineyard...was often five to fifteen kilometers from the mountain villages. They prepared wine and transported it in large sacks made from goat skin, on foot, from the vineyards to their villages."

"Both men and women...spaded the fields in autumn or spring. Housework was done almost exclusively by women. The men took care of the stable and livestock,...carved stones and baked bread in outdoor ovens." (7)

Rev. Gilly: (6) "No books of instruction or devotion, for the use of the protestants may be printed in Piedmont, and the duty upon the importation of such books is enormous.. The Sabbath day (the protestant peasant) keeps with scrupulous observance. .. The protestants have to pay a land tax of 20½%, while the Catholics pay about 13%."

"Roasted chestnuts, potatoes, and bread, if any, of the blackest and most ordinary sort are the principal food they can obtain.

"...families ate (meat) only on special occasions, using especially chickens or rabbits that they raised themselves. Once or twice a year, at festival times, they would kill a lamb ...Cows were raised for working in the fields, for milk ...beef was not eaten unless some misfortune came to their cattle or those of a neighbor.

"Bathes were not frequent...They were received by persons surprised by rainstorms when far from shelter...Wood tubs for washing clothes also served as bathtubs for the young and for the washing of older family members. Water came from the village fountain and was heated...over fireplaces.

"Many fathers did their best to make wooden shoes for the winter, with the soles of willow, birch or walnut...Usually only the children of larger families, or the poorest, went barefoot.

"Death records of 300 married men and women in the 1850's show that ... one of every six died during or before their fortieth year." Parish registers tell of children who died from falling over cliffs,...of drownings in streams, and of avalanches that destroyed several homes and killed the inhabitants. Deaths from cholera of numerous young children..are also recorded." (6)

Reverend Gilly in 1824: (6) "though a patois of Italian is still the common dialect of the province, all the children of the Vaudois are taught French, because their books of instruction are in that language. One thing is astonishing, that persons externally so savage and rude should have so much moral cultivation. They can all read and write. They understand French, so far as is needful for the understanding of the Bible, and the singing of psalms. You can scarcely find a boy among them who cannot give you an intelligible account of the faith which they profess." (6)

Reverend Gilly described a visit to a Vaudois home: "Immediately to our right as we entered, was an infant in a cradle, near it a circle of half a dozen children, neatly dressed, and of cleanly appearance, who were repeating their catechism to a young girl, of about twelve years of age. To our left were seen a cow, a calf, two goats and four sheep: and the motley group of living creatures helped to keep each other warm. It was the common sleeping

chamber of them all. Leaves and straw generally compose the beds of these simple peasants...(Later they were made of wood, usually by the head of the family.)

"We mounted to the upper part of the cottage, in which we found their father and mother...Here was a variety of articles of household use, not lying carelessly about, but sorted and disposed each in its proper place; there were cleanly and well scoured vessels for milk, cheese-presses and churns, and a few wooden platters and bowls. We also observed..Spinning wheels and a large frame for weaving; for almost every thing that is worn by these rustics is made at home.

This cottage "was built very high upon the side of a mountain, constructed of coarse stone, uncemented for the most part, but having a little clay or mud to keep together the loose materials and exclude the wind on the side most exposed to the weather. There was neither chimney nor glazed window; and the upper chambers were entered by a ladder and gallery.

The roof was covered with gray slate. "An old saying in the Piedmont dialect states that a good roof of slate lasts 100 years." The cellar "has another exit going outside of the house. This can be considered as a safety exit in case of a ...heavy snowstorm or avalanche.

"Births were attended often only by the grandmother of the baby, or another woman experienced as a midwife. After the baptism of a baby, there was normally a dinner offered to friends and relatives at the parents' home, often causing financial hardship to the parents. ⑦

"A young man often made small objects of wood with great and loving care for the girl who had promised to become his wife. At the actual engagement he gave her presents such as a spindle for spinning or a small silk shawl.

"At the time of marriage the church offered the couple a family Bible. There could then be a dinner at the home of the bride, followed by a dance in the late afternoon.

"In the mountains marriages are still celebrated, especially in the spring, when farm work is less urgent than in the autumn. Saturday was the preferred day for it gave time for two days' celebration. ②

"When a person died...he was dressed in his best clothes and a group of close relatives and friends would stay awake all night in the room where his body was kept or in an adjoining room. They spoke of the deceased and of his life and departure until morning.

"On the day of burial, the minister, friends and relatives of the deceased gathered in or in front of his or her home and the minister conducted a brief religious service. Two men would carry the casket on their shoulders to the cemetery, being replaced when necessary by others from the line. At the grave the minister continued with a speech on the briefness of human life and the necessity to prepare for death.

"Following the funeral when the family of the deceased were financially able, they offered bread and sometimes wine to those who came to their home." ②

The Bible was the foundation of their church and the first book the

children read. "...it pleases us to imagine the old grandfather with the Bible on his knees surrounded by his children and grandchildren at evening worship. While the old man reads, the others follow with their eyes on the book and thus learn to read for themselves. This fact would suffice to explain how the ability to read was much greater among the Waldensians than among the other inhabitants of the same region." (9)

Prayers were customary before meals and before retiring at night.

"Above 1,000 meters apples, prunes, pears, cherries and chestnuts are almost all wild...nuts were..used for the production of oil which was used to light the houses and season food. Nuts were also eaten as food." (7)

Rev. Gilly: (6) believed that the Waldensian Church had developed from the primitive church of Jesus and his Apostles dated back to their time. "They live together in such undisturbed harmony, that, during the whole time I passed in their valleys, I observed no symptoms whatever of broils or quarrels. I heard no angry disputes, and saw no rudeness among the children. ...blasphemy and profane swearing are held in abhorrence."

A Colonel Charles Beckwith, who lost a leg at Waterloo, went to the Waldensian valleys to see what he could do to help them. He was instrumental in establishing schools for the children. "He paid the teachers' salaries and for books to begin with and then urged the church and the communities to assume this responsibility...By 1846 there were 120 schools... He called upon..the king of Sardinia (sometimes called Savoy), and he was influential in helping bring about (the Vaudois) emancipation in 1848" (10)

"The Waldensians are admitted to enjoy all of the civil and political rights of our subjects, to attend schools and Universities and to earn academic degrees."

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