

**M**y great-grandmother handsewed a doll for me when I was three. This Raggedy Andy doll was my best friend until I was five or six; we kept secrets during the day and dreamt together at night. My great-grandmother, Bernah Lowe Felt, has long since died. However, Edgar, as I now affectionately call him, still wears calico slippers. He has lost his yarned hair and no longer has arms. He sits in a corner of my room, resting after a brief, active life.

The following tale about Edgar and me really happened, and were it not for Edgar and the fond memories to which he holds the key – that of my great-grandmother, my relationship with her and the world in which I was to grow into – I would not have experienced my life the way I recently have.

Never did I imagine that this tattered, humble little fellow from my childhood (my dear sister reunited us just seven years ago after she rediscovered her own Raggedy Ann doll) would take me by the hand and lead me to a bucolic village a quarter of the way across the globe. Yet, Edgar did just that last fall when I traveled to Europe for my first time as an adult. He took me to meet the relatives of his maker, my great-grandmother's Swiss family.

Ever since I was a boy, I have awakened from dreams of a secret land, with technicolor greens, whitewater brooks, and rolling countryside. I was never sure, but I always associated these dreams with pictures I had seen of the mountains and pastures in Switzerland.

Last fall, I called my sister, who had been living for six weeks in Morocco and was ready to get out, and told her we

would travel in Europe. I have always wanted to see the Continent. We would begin in Madrid, and we would visit the peaceloving, dreamy nation in the middle of Europe. Two weeks before I was to depart,

## A Doll named Edgar Takes an American to Switzerland

*Michael Carolan*

I met a woman from Switzerland who offered us a place to stay if we visited – her mother and brother had a chateau on Lake Geneva. I had no choice: I would visit Switzerland and find my Swiss family.

I have always held an interest in genealogy, and I believe that my ancestors have something to say about the world in which I find myself. One sixteenth of my ethnic pie is Swiss, and my mother always glowed when telling me of my descent from a line of Swiss watchmakers. She told me about the son of the watchmaker, her great-grandfather Emil Lowe, in whose cavernous harness shop in the small town of Mendon, Missouri, as a little girl, she would roll up and down across the bowed, wood-

en floorboards in his oak chair. I dreamily went about my day whenever she told me that story, looking for my own chair. Emil, Bernah's father, was born and raised in Switzerland in the mid-19th century and, at the age of 20 in 1883, came to New York, where he pushed wheelbarrels stuffed with bricks up ramps to bricklayers building the skyscrapers of that vast and promising city. After several years, he moved to northern Missouri, where he married, opened a harness shop, and had children, including my great-grandmother and her younger sister, Hildred. It was widely known that Hildred wrote her memoir, a copy of which I surprisingly received shortly before I left for Europe.

According to the memoir, Hildred, her mother, and father went to Europe in 1926 to visit the birthplace of Emil and his 10 brothers and sisters in a village in the foothills of the Alps separating Switzerland from France.

It was called Tramelan, a bustling hub of watchmaking and dairy farming in the mid-19th century. Emil had not visited his country since 1904; he was now 63 years old. His mother and father had since passed away, but he had three sisters, one brother, and many other relations living, and he "wanted to see them while he was still able to go," Hildred wrote.

The family took a train to Washington, D.C., that summer, traveled to Philadelphia and then New York, where they boarded the steamship *S.S. Fenland*. They were nine and a half days crossing the Atlantic, then toured England, Belgium, Holland, and western Germany. They took a train to Tramelan, where they were greeted by Emil's sisters and some cousins. Emil's brother Albert, his wife, and five children still lived in Tramelan, the memoirs said.

Hildred wrote that her father and his sisters spoke in German, the cousins spoke in French, and Emil translated to his wife and daughter in English. In contrast, I knew no French, no German, and I figured that most natives, even if they understood a little English, would probably never understand and my somewhat slurry midwestern drawl. "We really enjoyed taking hikes in the foothills of the Alps around Tramelan and then stopping at small restaurants and eating cheese and rye bread," Hildred wrote. Cheese and rye bread? My favorite food, next to fondue!

With my backpack stuffed with clothes, a few photos of family, dead and living, a copy of the memoir, and a family tree, I set off. Toward the end of the trip, my sister and I traveled to the chateau in Switzerland that my friend had offered to us. After explaining to my hosts about the historic mission I was beginning, they laughed. Of course, I thought, the situation had an air of hilarity, if not futility. Knowing neither the language nor the landscape, I was sitting in a Swiss chateau maybe 10,000 miles from home, contemplating traveling to an obscure village almost 70 years after a distant, now dead, member of my family had traveled to meet people she had never met. What would one say? "Hello, all of our ancestors are dead, and I know we look nothing alike, but we really are family." At least, I told my hosts,



Marie Curdian

I wasn't going to hit them up for bed and board for a month. I could see it, though—the relations gossiping to their neighbors: "His name is Michael. He is from America, says he's related, but for the life of us, we don't think so. Just look at him." The following morning I said goodbye to my sister. She must have thought the quest was fruitless, and she went on to obtain an itinerary of all the trains I was to catch to make the trip to Tramelan and then to Paris—some six or seven in the next eight hours. As I made my way to Tramelan, I changed trains three times. Sometimes the next train departed less than a minute after the former arrived, but the Swiss have a seemingly harmless obsession with time (stemming, perhaps, from their famed watchmaking) and while I did not wear a watch while visiting the country, I made every train on my itinerary. Those three trains also seemed to shrink. At the end of the journey, I found myself on a one-car, local picture-window train, crammed with Swiss commuters, chugging through vast valleys. Outside the picturesque and immaculate Tramelan central station (complete with a sharp and attentive station attendant) was a village that mirrored the depot, appearing as if it had sprung from the arrival point of my Aunt Hildred and great-

the town's wise women – a 95-year-old woman who knew every body who came through Taramelan in the last 75 years. The Chateains warned me that her memory may not be so sharp these days, but she was my only real lead. Max drove me to the house of Mme. Elvie Mouvier.

She answered the door dressed elegantly. She kept a small apartment alone and had many family members who lived nearby and checked on her. She walked with the stability and grace and posture of a dancer. It had to be the Swiss air, I thought, unlike any air I have ever breathed. I also thought that her youth may have been attributable, through some unseen, mystical, and unreckonable force of nature, to this recurring and unavoidable motif of clocks, watches, and numbers that I found in Switzerland, a symbol that manifested even in her home, with time-pieces everywhere.

She immediately began inquiring who we were. They spoke in French. "She wants to know who I am," Max said. "She says she knows my grandmother well and her sisters well and that she has heard of me." After Max explained to Mme. Mouvier why this young, long-haired, unshaven traveler was visiting her village, she smiled and nodded and took my hand.

She began speaking ... no, it was more like she was being spoken through. She paused and Max would translate slowly and deliberately. After maybe ten minutes, which seemed more like an hour, during which Max did not translate – they were names and places and history of the village that he must have thought had no bearing on my mission – she remembered the sister of Emil who married a Chateain, and she remembered all the names of their 12 children. Some still lived, she believed, but had run off to a Club Med in the South Pacific. Then, as if the darkness of years gone by, years that held lives and their tragedies and births and deaths and hopes and marriages, had been lit, she remembered my great-great-grandfather, the Ger-watchmaker, and my great-great-grandmother, the German man from the Black Forest. After returning to look at the family tree I had plotted and then looking out over my head, she recalled Albert Loew, brother of Emil. She remembered his children's names and then *their* children's names. Albert had four daughters and two sons, which I found strange since the memoir said he had only five children. His daughter Ellen had a daughter, Ann Marie, who lived not far away from where we now sat speaking. Max said Ann Marie had three daughters, all with whom he had gone to school.

We called Ann Marie, made arrangements for a visit in 15 minutes, and I asked if I might snap a picture of Mme. Mouvier on her porch, from which was a view of the village. She was delighted that I had asked. She asked if I believed in God and then she gave a blessing. I asked Max to translate it for me, but he said it was too complicated and he would tell me later. I asked her the secret to living such a long and lovely life, and she told me (her words will be a treasure for my children). I gave her a long hug and she blessed me again on my search and we

great grandfather on their visit decades ago. Cobblestoned streets, steeped churches, and smartly-painted cottages set back on steep hills, Taramelan was a town not unlike the one in which my great-great grandfather eventually made his home. The intervening century, however, had made a striking difference. This town's American counterpart, whether Mendon, Missouri, or Falls City, Montana, has, unfortunately, due to misfortune and the passing of time, fallen into a neglected, soon-to-be-empty monument of the past, while Taramelan rose from the hills, as if not a house had been torn down, nor had a villager departed within the last two centuries. The mystery why my great-great grandfather ventured to see his birthplace only several years before his death no longer eluded me. My father (who still lives in the town in which he grew up) has always shown me that one can never escape place. My great-great grandfather in the 1920s must have known this also. He must have seen the beginnings of decay that would so inevitably consume not just his American town, but all of booming agrarian America. He must have known that in Switzerland, he could come home to something untouched, uncorrupted and constant. And how pleased I was that I too could come to such a place.

I was quickly jarred to the late 20th century when, while parting in the middle of the road outside the station, a group of schoolboys whizzed past me. One youngster with cropped blond hair looked at me, giggled to his friends, and said (I had grown my hair long like, I will admit, a girl) "*Bonjour Mademoiselle.*" Smiling, I found a telephone and looked for the phone book. To my discouragement – shattering my image of a town in heaven here on earth – the pages I needed were gone.

Thanks to the attendant at the station, I was not completely out of the good luck I believed had been with me. I looked up Loew (Emil had changed the name in America) and found none. I looked for the name Chateain (one of my great-great-grandfather's sister's married names), and found sixteen. I called one of them and a French-speaking woman answered. Despite knowing only three French words ("hello, I'm hungry"), I got the number of an English-speaking Chateain who had the first name of a relative on my family tree. After some discussion and deduction, I discovered she was unrelated. She gave me the number for another Chateain who may have been related and who also spoke English. At that number, I found Max Chateain, a 30-year-old banker, whose roots also came from Swiss watchmakers in the town (he said that every Taramelanian has watch-making roots). He thankfully spoke English and took an interest in my plight, even though we found we were unrelated. He picked me up and drove me to his house, where his parents served me coffee and apple pie.

His mother called several friends who could help. Because of the unspoken fact that the only relations I knew of were all dead (the memoir was from 1926), my mission seemed all but impossible to the kind Chateains.

After a few more pieces of pie, Mme. Chateain called one of

set off again.

We arrived at a four-storied apartment house in a hill and were greeted by a blackbearded and excited man in his '50s. He spoke only French and hustled us in the doorway and up two flights of stairs. There at the door of what appeared to be a large apartment, I met my distant cousins. I met Ann Marie, a woman of my mother's generation, and her daughter, a woman whom I was afraid would notice my long and smiling gaze. While they looked nothing like me or any of my closer cousins, it did not matter.

Here we were together, with absolutely nothing in common except the bond of a genetic thread stretching over four generations and a cultural connection spanning an endless ocean. With an immensely idiotic expression on my face and what seemed an infinite pause after shaking hands with the two women, everyone broke into smiles and began speaking French very quickly and very loudly. They ushered me into the apartment and into a chair. There I was bombarded with questions that were hurriedly interpreted by my new-found and now somewhat harried friend, Max. He did his best and I found that I, too, was taken in by Ann Marie and her husband's excitement.

They already had photo albums sprawling on the coffee table and as our attention went to the aging and yellowed photos, the husband, Monsieur Saugier began tearing them from the black paper they were glued to and gave them to me. But no, these were dead people, he seemed to say to me as he noticed me admiring the Matisse prints on the walls about us. He immediately jumped up and led me through what seemed to be an entire gallery of Matisse. This man was a collector, and all these were originals. He pulled out another book, and another, with smaller Matisse behind plastic and he smiled and breathed heavily and I could see he had as much passion about art as I had about books.

Then, it was back to the family. Ann Marie had never met her great uncle, my great-great grandfather Emil, as he came to Switzerland before she was born. Her grandfather, however, went to America every so often and it was said he had a brother there. "He was the kind of man who would get up and go somewhere without telling anyone," said Monsieur Saugier.

And so began a most exciting tale, told rather proudly by the husband. Albert and a woman in Tramelan, other than his wife, had a son, who also was named Albert. For reasons unknown, this illegitimate son fled Tramelan for Algeria, where he became a successful jeweler. Albert, Jr. had a son who is said to be still living there. This Algerian uncle Albert seemed almost to be the pride of the family despite his status as an illegitimate son. They gave me a picture of him.

I was profoundly interested and pleasantly surprised, as it has always seemed to me that in much of American society, blemishes and scars and severed limbs on family trees have always been kept with guarded whispers. But here, in a country that on first glance – what with the flowers on every window-



*Meeting my French-Swiss family. My interpreter, Max Chatelain, and the Saugier family.*

ledge and perhaps village codes for how many you must put out on the ledge – seems pristine and scarless, a family can take pride in and even celebrate its idiosyncratic and seeming disjointed limbs. My family celebrates misfits and black sheep, too, (I happily consider myself both) and the Swiss limb only set the fact in genetic stone.

After another hour of talking back and forth through the patient and often chuckling Max, it was time to make my train to get to Paris. Max knew its route and said he would drive me to a town twenty minutes away. After taking a photograph of the group and saying goodbye and that I would learn French and would one day return to their village, I had Max drive me up the hill so that I could take a panoramic picture of the village. Afterward, as we sped down those winding Swiss mountain roads toward where I was to catch my train (I got on the wrong train and went in the opposite direction), I looked at Edgar, strapped to my backpack, and his pencilthreaded grin, and I thought of my great-grandmother Bernah. I felt her watching me in that weaving little sports car, as entertained and enriched and humbled as I. ♦