

DRY STONE WALLING IN SWITZERLAND

Gerhard Stoll

Switzerland is a country with an extremely varying topography. From flat plains to the steepest slopes diverse types of landscape exist; regions in which diverse historical types of dry stone structures can be found. There are the well known stone terraced slopes for the cultivation of wine (and in times past for potatoes and cereals as well) in the southern Swiss regions of Graubünden, Tessin and Wallis. There are extensive free standing walls which served to confine cattle and to mark boundaries (mainly in the western parts, e.g. the Jura). There are also many mule paths, stables and buildings for living quarters, which were erected using dry stone masonry. Especially interesting are the buildings which served for special purposes such as neveras, dry stone buildings in the form of pits, for the storage of snow and ice to cool products throughout the summer and the crots, huts with corbeled vaults, similar to the Apulian trullis of Western Italy, which served as locations for the processing and storage of milk, cheese and butter.



Old vineyard
New dry stone wall.
A project executed with the
civil service in the valley of Schenkenberg.



Detail of Schenkenberg vineyard wall. The new wall was built behind the old and a staircase was created.

The wide-spread distribution of dry stone structures in the mountainous parts of Switzerland reminds us of the fact that historically Switzerland was not the prospering place of banks and industry we know today, but a poor agricultural country. Expensive materials weren't affordable and transport over long distances was not possible due to a lack of roads. So people fended for themselves by constructing the needed buildings with the durable and plentiful material to hand -stone- using what was then a cheap work force drawn from the rural populace.

The last important epoch of dry stone walling in Switzerland was the second half of the 19th century, the era of the industrial revolution. At that time large infrastructural projects across the alps were undertaken: extensive railway lines (including the famous Gotthard Tunnel) and roads were built over the principal passes of the Alps. Massive structures were required to protect these railway lines and roads -and villages- against avalanches. In the course of these constructions dry stone masonry was used on a large scale. Engineered masonry was the first major trend in dry stone construction to evolve from the anonymous "vernacular architecture" described above. Its development was effected by the French army corps of engineers

which established a new theoretical basis to the traditional way of building during the French revolution and the reign of Napoleon.

The situation today:

In the last 50 years in Switzerland the know-how of building and repairing dry stone walls has been lost. The reasons for this are the population migration from the countryside to the towns, the mechanization of agriculture and the change from cheap labour costs and expensive materials to cheap materials and expensive manpower.

In the last five years, the Swiss Stiftung Umwelt-Einsatz Schweiz or SUS (Foundation for Actions in Favour of the Environment) has successfully reintroduced the techniques of building and repairing dry stone walls. Since its establishment the SUS has, with different groups of participants, built about 9000 square meters of dry stone walls all over Switzerland. These groups consist of volunteers -apprentices, both students and adults, as well as unemployed individuals and conscientious objectors to military service. Organized work camps of these volunteers have constructed extensive new dry stone structures under the guidance of experienced masons.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)
[Stone Foundation Home Page](#)

The mission of the SUS has evolved from the realization that , as well as being a valuable ecological niche for many rare plants and animals, the dry stone masonry walls are a important part of the "landscape formed through man", the "cultural landscape" of Switzerland. As is increasingly acknowledged, the saving of and care for these landscape forms is an important part of a sustainable tourism. Therefore in Switzerland the government grants financial support to activities which have as a goal the preservation of these landscapes. Because of this support dry stone structures have been built and are continuing to be built which would have been inconceivable otherwise.

When the SUS became occupied with dry stone walling, members of the British Dry stone Walling Association came to their assistance by enabling a group of interested Swiss persons to learn the techniques. Today a group of seven freelance dry stone masons (one woman, six men), work every year for several months as dry stone wallers. While the SUS only works on projects which lie in the public interest, the seven dry stone masons also execute private commissions. Working in a loosely organized talent pool with the name, "Stone-Line", they have undertaken technically and esthetically challenging projects



Training project at Trimimis with disoccupied people.1998.

The Outlook:

Dry stone walling in Switzerland is at the moment in a phase of vigorous development. As in several of our neighbouring countries there is a concentration on the engineering of dry stone retaining structures and the broadening of knowledge about their ecological functions. Developing and perfecting techniques for such building is a constant concern. Where possible and when needed the work is also aided by machines, small excavators, etc. To handle the weight of the big stones needed for the construction of high walls (3 meters and more) experimental use is made of small cranes with two or three legs which can be easily moved, even in very rough country.

Contacts have been established with dry stone wallers from all over Europe -the Welsh, Scottish and British members of the DSWA, of course, but like-minded people also from Italy, Greece and Austria. Another important connection exists with France. In collaboration with the French Societe Scientifique Internationale Pour L'Etude Pluridisciplinaire de la Pierre Seche, S.P.S. (the International Scientific Society for Interdisciplinarian Studies of Dry Stone Structures) a conference on Dry Stone Walling in the High Mountains is being planned to take place in Switzerland at the end of August 2002 . We hope that all interested persons will participate.

Contacts:

SUS: <http://www.umwelteinsatz.ch>

email: info@umwelteinsatz.ch,

Stone-line: schneider.winter@bluewin.ch

Gerhard Stoll is a Swiss architect, dry stone waller and Stone Foundation member.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

[Stone Foundation Home Page](#)