

Fasnacht in der Schweiz / Carnival in Switzerland

search of victims to scare and whose faces they would smear with soot.

Back then, the men had only two pair of shoes, one for work and one for Sunday and dressy occasions. Shoes were covered and clothes turned around lest they be recognized.

The Tschäggtätä still march on during Carnival season, but now even children and older men are known to wear the grisly masks, and the event has become a tourist attraction. Many wear old masks handed down from their ancestors, while others may purchase a mask hand-carved by artisans in the area.

Parade watcher Jonaz Bellwald said he was a Tschäggtätä once, but that was enough. "A man changes when he wears a mask, especially a wooden mask," he said. "I always go to the parade, but it's not in my nature to wear a mask."

At last year's parade in Wiler, marching bands of Tschäggtätä as well as isolated figures paraded through the town. Most wore numbers as they are judged for their mask and costume. There were also a few non-Tschäggtätä floats featuring, among others, political figures. There is plenty of interaction between the Tschäggtätä and the crowd as the mean, furry beasts run up and try to scare or kiss the on-lookers. Fortunately, these days they do not have soot on their mittens. It is fun, a great photo opportunity, and you can sip a spiced hot wine to keep warm while watching it all.

Many of the masks covering the faces of the marchers are carved by Agnes Rieder, who has been creating the masks of pine for some thirty-eight years. Her husband, Ernst, has been taking a chisel to wood even longer. Her children (five sons and one daughter) and grandchildren all carve. So did her parents. "Wood is in my blood," she says.

The Rieders live in Wiler where they have a business of producing the grotesque, gruesome Tschäggtätä

faces. At her workshop – whose walls and shelves are full of the awful but weirdly delightful masks – Rieder chips away at a block of wood. "I always try to make something better," she says. "It's hard work, but I don't want to make the same face over and over." And, she is adamant: "I have no desire to make pretty masks." If someone presents her with a photo and tells her to make a mask in its likeness, she refuses. Her masks are original. She especially likes big, ugly noses.

The masks used to be painted with blood and a green substance made from a copper extract, but not much color was used, as it was important to see the grain of the wood.

Rieder, who has a collection of four hundred masks, says the wood she uses must dry for five years. She often uses horsehair and teeth from goats or cows in her creations. The artist, not shy about her talent, spends about four hours carving and another four hours painting the average mask that is fit for wearing, yet some elaborate masks may require forty hours of work. Her large masks sell for between one thousand and two thousand Swiss francs. She sells small, souvenir masks starting at twelve Swiss francs. She pointed out that the huge cowbells the Tschäggtätä wear can cost as much as the masks.

Rieder explains that there are many theories as to the origin of the Tschäggtätä. In the thirteenth century, there was a shortage of food and a band of robbers was thought to have disguised themselves in the terrible costumes as they pillaged houses for food. According to another theory, it all started during a peasant revolution in 1550 when the rebels wore costumes so they would not be recognized. Yet another explanation attributes the custom to the folk theater of the nineteenth century with its devil figures. And, there is the popular belief that the Tschäggtätä is an ancient pagan custom to drive away the evil spirits of winter.

Whatever the explanation, the custom has been practiced for centuries in this valley, once called the end of the world because it was so hard to get to. The Lötschberg railway was built through the mountains in 1910, opening up the mysterious and romantic region of sunburned chalets and rugged peaks. Even today, coming from the north there are no direct roads into the valley. Visitors must put their cars on a train in Kandersteg for the trip to Goppenstein and entrance to the valley.

Just Gotta' Tschäggtätä?

This year's Tschäggtätä parade takes place in Wiler on February 25 at 2:30 p.m. On February 23, beginning at 8:00 p.m., the Tschäggtätä walk through the valley beginning in the town of Blatten and ending in Ferden about midnight. After that, they gather in local guesthouses and party most of the night. While there are no other scheduled events, the Tschäggtätä normally come out every night during the Carnival season, which, this year will be celebrated in the Lötschental valley from February 2 to 28. The scary creatures wander the streets looking for victims to frighten.

More information is available at these websites:

www.loetschental.ch

www.loetschberg.ch

or by E-mail:

info@loetschental.ch

info@loetschberg.ch