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New program in U.S. serves up a slice of Swiss pride

By Ellen Williams-Masson
Correspondent for The Capital Times
November 22, 2005

NEW GLARUS - Chevrolet may be as American as apple pie, but its designer, Louis Chevrolet, was of Swiss origin, like more than 1 million Americans today.

The Swiss consul-general believes it's time to talk about common interests, a shared history and, more importantly, a shared future between the United States and Switzerland.

"Especially after the war in Iraq, there has been a decrease of understanding between Americans and Europeans, including in Switzerland," Ambassador Raymond Loretan, consul-general of Switzerland in New York, said in a visit here.

"We could see in Europe a rise in anti-Americanism. The project 'Swiss Roots' is a way to address this problem at the level of people-to-people."

Loretan spoke to a group of Swiss and the Swiss-minded at the New Glarus Hotel Monday night, not in his official role as ambassador but as the co-chair of a new program, Swiss Roots.

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Representative Brett Davis, R-Oregon, talks with Lukas Fitze, Ambassador Raymond Loretan and Monica Howden of the Swiss Roots Committee. (Submitted photo)

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"What we want to achieve with this project is to allow American and Swiss people to get in touch with each other

to confirm or rediscover that the values that we are defending are the same - the basic values like individual freedom, human rights and democracy," Loretan said.

"These values today are challenged in the world, and we think that only together we will be able to make them prevail."

Swiss Roots is building a Web site where people may research their Swiss genealogy, contact Swiss families who share their name and learn about all things Swiss.

Promotional events are planned throughout 2006 in the five regions of the United States with the highest Swiss populations: California, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and New York. A Swiss Postal Bus road show and "Pro Helvetia" cultural program will connect the regional events, and the bus will appear locally with a variety of Swiss-themed activities for the Wilhelm Tell festival in New Glarus and Cheese Days in Monroe in September 2006.

Swiss Roots shares many goals with the Swiss Center of North America here and may turn over management of the Web site to the New Glarus center after 2006. Kaye Gmur of the Swiss Center said her organization is delighted to have been selected to work with Swiss Roots.

"Out of all the places in the country with Swiss populations and traditional Swiss events, they picked New Glarus and Monroe," Gmur said. "In Green County, if you are Swiss, then you know it and celebrate it, but many people around the country aren't aware, and we want people to make that connection back to Switzerland."

Numerous regional and international businesses are of Swiss origin or have Swiss ties, including Nestle, General Casualty Insurance, UBS Financial Services, Joseph Huber Brewing Co., the Swiss Colony and Roth Kse.

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