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THE MAGIC OF KÜSSNACHT'S "YFFELN"

A St. Nicholas tradition in Central Switzerland

"Infuln" or "Yffel" is what the inhabitants of Küssnacht call the enormous mitres that are carried through the streets on a special day early in December. Their making involves much imagination, free time — and quite a bit of pocket money: a good 600 working hours are necessary to complete one "Yffel", and the six foot high and forty pound head-dress (sometimes made to order) may cost between 1,000 and 2,000 Swiss francs.

The basic shape is made from two firm cartons, pointed at the top. With compass and pencil, the Yffel-builder traces complicated ornaments onto the cartons — traditional or modern designs, just as his whims and his imagination guide him. There is only one rigid rule to follow: the figure of St. Nicholas must adorn the front part of the mitre.

Punch and hammer transform the cardboard into works of art. The stamped-out surfaces are carefully covered with coloured paper until

they look like small gothic church windows. The cardboard halves are next mounted and nailed to an oval base of wood with two candles. Inside the mitre a light metal construction holds up to twelve candles — electric light bulbs would be frowned upon.

A genuine "Yffel" has to hold the living fire. On 5th December at 8.15 p.m. arises a most heathenish din: "Geisslechlöpfer" and "Treichler" — men cracking whips and shaking bells — lead the procession out of the dark into the streets. Behind them two hundred mitre carriers follow the solemn and stately figure of St. Nicholas. "Yffel" by "Yffel", a bewildering profusion of ornaments glowing in the night and moving to the ceremonious steps of their carriers.

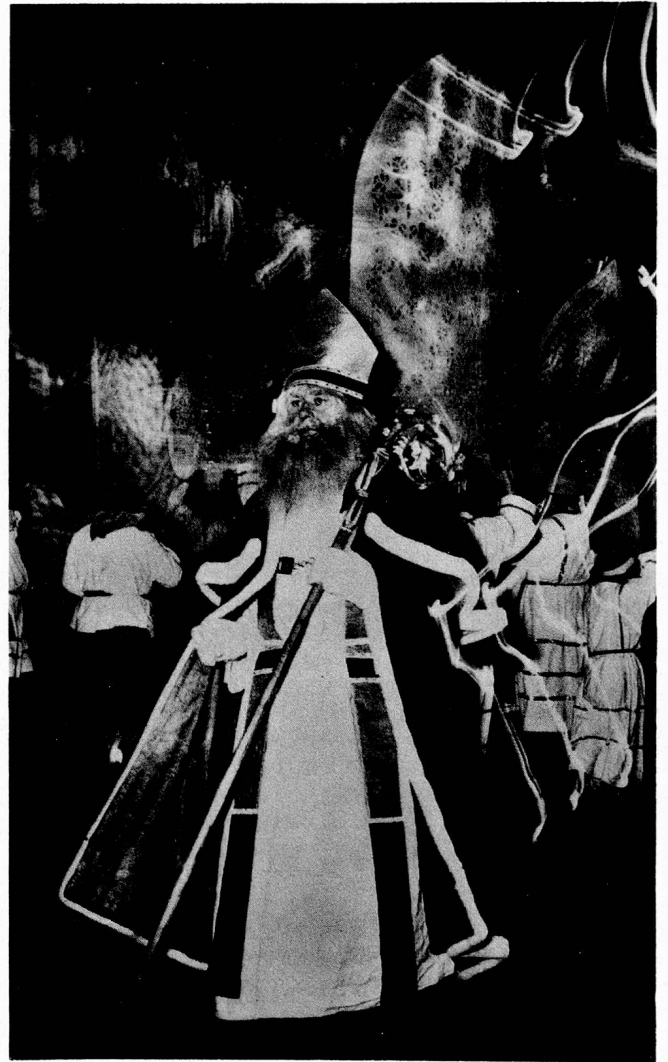
Luckily, this custom is not destined to disappear. The Nicholas Society fathers, school teachers, all teach the children at an early age how to make at least a small and light copy of an "Yffel". With the pride of grown-ups even the youngest among them carry *their* mitre around during an afternoon procession on the same day.



The punched out ornaments are carefully backed with coloured paper. Picture by courtesy of SNT0.



Shortly after 8 p.m. on 5th December comes the great moment — the candles are lit. Picture by courtesy of SNT0.



St. Nicholas walks through the streets accompanied by the Inful carriers. Picture by courtesy of SNT0.