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The Permanent Metamorphoses of a Virtual Archive

Towards an Interactive Communication Infrastructure in Food-, Agricultural- and Environmental History

Working Paper Nr. 05

Bern, Juni 2022

Recommended citation: Juri Auderset, Peter Moser, The Permanent Metamorphoses of a Virtual Archive. Towards an Interactive Communication Infrastructure in Food-, Agricultural- and Environmental History, Afa-Working Paper Nr. 5, Archives of Rural History, Bern 2022

Two decades ago, the Archives of Rural History (ARH) were established to reconnect the activities of historical research and archiving sources. The new institution was conceptualized as a «virtual archive» in the sense that the ascertained and catalogued archival funds were not to be preserved by the ARH, but by already existing «real» archival institutions or the file creators themselves.¹ While this novel approach caused some confusion in academic and non-academic circles alike, it also led to constellations that we began to interpret and exploit as «creative misunderstandings» because they often contained potentials for a cooperation among disparate partners that so far had hardly known of each other. Ultimately, the concept of the «virtual archive» also facilitated the development of what turned out to be an interactive approach towards a public interested in history and its relevance for current debates on food, agriculture and the environment. Both the conceptualization of a «virtual archive» and the development towards an interactive approach for the dissemination of historically informed knowledge are mirrored in the history of the comprehensive research infrastructure that the ARH have developed, maintained, and expanded and that is now open to researchers and the public primarily in the form of our Online-Portals. The metamorphoses that have characterized the ARH and its research infrastructure in the last two decades have their origins in the dialectical processes that are part of everyday life in an institution that attempts to intertwine archiving, historical research, and knowledge communication. In this article we briefly sketch the origins and history of the research and communication infrastructure at the ARH.

The Emergence of Networks as a Potential

Almost parallel to the rise of economic and social history, a marginalisation of historical research on agriculture and the securing and indexing of sources related to agriculture took place in many European countries in the 1970s and 1980s. The rise of what the historian Josef Mooser called «the paradigm of industrialization in social history» thus also pushed interest in rural history to the margins, not least because the social conditions in the countryside, the economic resources, and the behaviour of the farming population only fitted awkwardly into the analytical frameworks that informed «social-science history», modelled along industrial societies.² However, the noted dwindling interest in agricultural history in established institutions and in hegemonial historiographical currents was simultaneously overlapped by a new interest of historians in the

¹ We would like to thank Caitriona Clear for her careful reading of a first draft of this text.

² Mooser Josef, Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte, Historische Sozialwissenschaft, Gesellschaftsgeschichte, in: Goertz Hans-Jürgen (ed.), Geschichte. Ein Grundkurs, Hamburg 1998, 568–591, here: 574; Dipper Christof, Bauern als Gegenstand der Sozialgeschichte, in: Schieder Wolfgang, Sellin Volker (ed.), Sozialgeschichte in Deutschland. Entwicklungen und Perspektiven im internationalen Zusammenhang. vol. IV: Soziale Gruppen in der Geschichte, Göttingen 1987, 9–33, here: 19–20.

topic of agriculture in industrialised societies, which in turn led to the foundation of new institutions in the 1990s all over Europe. While in many countries the people involved in such initiatives began to broach the issue of rural societies and the agrarian question in the age of industrial capitalism with new research institutions and historical journals focussing on rural history, in Switzerland the initiators of the Archives of Rural History had a background and interest in the archival world as well as in the milieu of historical research.

The initiators of the ARH were, based on their research activities in the 1990s, well-informed about the abundance and diversity of archival holdings in the agricultural world which had so far neither been indexed nor acquired nor made accessible to researchers by the existing archival institutions. It was clear, therefore, that these sources dating from the second half of the 19th and especially from the 20th century could only be made accessible to researchers with the cooperation of the owners of these documents who, furthermore, also had been (and often still were) creating them. Since neither the authorities nor the existing archival and research institutions were willing or able to contribute financially to the establishment of such an enterprise as the envisaged Archives of Rural History, a «virtual» and interactive approach was the only realistic and viable way to pursue. Practically, creating a «virtual» archival institution meant that the sources secured and catalogued by the ARH were to be preserved either by existing archival institutions or by big file creators interested in establishing their own archival department for their records.³

In the beginning of their existence, the Archives of Rural History focused on the search for records among the cornucopia of agricultural institutions, in cataloguing the acquired papers and in depositing them in existing archival institutions like the Swiss Federal Archives (BAR), the State Archives in the different cantons or the Gosteli-Foundation, the archival institution of the women's movement in Switzerland. While the papers of agricultural institutions catalogued by the ARH were now preserved and made accessible to researchers by «real» archival institutions or the file creators themselves, the ARH established in 2005 the Online-Portal «Sources on Agricultural History» (renamed *Collections* in 2022), where it published the finding aids of the indexed archival funds.

Thus, the ARH, already in the process of searching, identifying, indexing, and safeguarding archival funds, found itself enmeshed in a complex process of interactions with innumerable agricultural associations, co-operatives, private persons, and food processing and trading companies as well as with representatives of the existing archival institutions and individual historians. In addition, research institutions on the national and the international level were soon added to this emerging network, resulting from our aspirations to intertwine and cross-fertilize archiving and historical

³ Many of the more than 250 institutions that we have so far been able to convince of the importance of securing and indexing their archival material have contributed financially to the costs of the indexing work.

research and thus to pursue an alternative to the «shift away from history» which had become popular in the archival world in the second half of the 1990s.⁴

The Online-Portal *People and Institutions*

The search for records in the agricultural and food sector, the cataloguing of their archival funds, the cooperation with existing archival institutions and the engagement in historical research on the national and international level created an abundance of information and knowledge about people and institutions involved in working with animals, plants, engines and machines, in stables, fields and forests as well as in trade and food processing companies or educational and research institutions. In other words, these activities uncovered a plethora of information on historical actors rarely perceived as individuals and rarely portrayed in their everyday activities by the existing encyclopedias and reference works. The same can be said about those active in agricultural science, in government agencies related to rural life, in the editorial offices of the agricultural press or in the lecture halls of schools, colleges and universities where farmers and agronomists were trained, and about all the clubs, associations, companies, research institutions, schools, and periodicals that both impacted and were impacted by agriculture. Since all of them were hardly ever mentioned in the common reference works or handbooks, historians seldom knew about these people and institutions and often had difficulties in understanding the tangible consequences of their activities. The challenge, therefore, was not only how to preserve the archival holdings of these actors, but how to assemble, structure and communicate the growing abundance of information about these actors themselves. And so we started by creating a database, initially conceived as an internal working tool. We implemented a Mediawiki software which made it possible to continuously integrate large amounts of data on people and institutions and to record it in a standardized, yet also flexible form. Thus, it became possible to gather systematically information on life data, social background, education, changing professional activities and functions in the public sphere of people as well as on the history and the representatives of institutions. For persons like [Konrad von Meyenburg](#), for example, on whom we gathered a lot of information, it becomes possible to write short biographies. The entries of all persons and institutions are provided with a system of keywords and the actors additionally mentioned in the entries are linked to other entries via hypertextual references when there is a formal or content-based relationship. These linkages often make biographical, institutional, and thematic connections which have been hidden up to now visible. To the extent that the initially fragmented information from archival holdings was supplemented by more systematic evaluations of newspapers, journals and annual and anniversary

⁴ Graf Christoph, «Arsenal der Staatsgewalt» oder «Laboratorium der Geschichte»? Das Schweizerische Bundesarchiv und die Geschichtsschreibung, in: Studien und Quellen 2001, 65–81.

reports, a texture of actors and institutions emerged that had shaped the *agrarian-industrial knowledge society* since the middle of the 19th century.⁵ By November 2012, the Online-Portal [People and Institutions](#), had reached a point where it was possible to make it publicly available. It entails, at the moment, entries for more than 9'000 people and ca. 500 institutions. The decisive factor for the choice of the language of an entry (German, French or English) is the native language of the person or, in the case of an institution, the dominant language of the area where it was based.

And yet, the ARH never aspired that the Online-Portal should become something conclusive and finite in the sense of a classical encyclopedia. On the contrary, the Online-Portal was conceived from the beginning as an interactive and dynamic platform, and it has retained this programmatic character to this day. Accordingly, the individual entries are continuously expanded, regardless of whether they contain only rudimentary data or already detailed information. New and relevant information is continuously supplemented. The additional information mainly comes from our ongoing archiving and research activities and, to a much lesser but still important extent, from contributions made by the people and institutions themselves and a broader public that has the opportunity to suggest amendments and corrections to entries via an online accessible registration form. But it is the ARH which decides on the integration of information from the public, taking into account the editorial guidelines of the Online-Portal. «Finished» entries in the sense of a classic encyclopedia article do not exist in the Online-Portal by definition.

Traces, Contexts and Heuristic Effects

Although the Online-Portal *People and Institutions* is primarily conceived as a reference work, its ongoing expansion produces new possibilities for visualizing interconnections. Its vast content not only stimulates new questions, it also provides new insights, especially through its ability to link individual entries biographically, institutionally and thematically. In many respects, the portal thus also has heuristic effects.

The possibility of systematically locating individual biographies within larger family structures, for example, enables us to reconstruct genealogies that make family connections and kinship structures visible, and reveal tendencies in career choices or marriage strategies. Thus, a look at some genealogies not only confirms or disproves general assumptions, but also provides new insights and uncovers clues that can be pursued further. For example, the information on several important, well-documented families illustrates that in the 20th century the sisters of agronomists now and again married fellow students of their brothers. At the same time, it becomes apparent that a

⁵ On this concept see Auderset Juri, Moser Peter, *Die Agrarfrage in der Industriegesellschaft. Wissenskulturen, Machtverhältnisse und natürliche Ressourcen in der agrarisch-industriellen Wissensgesellschaft (1850–1950)*, Vienna 2018.

remarkable number of sons of professionally successful agronomists became, like their grandfathers, practical farmers again. The entries also reveal social and political connections that are relevant for historiography. For instance, anyone interested in the agronomist [Franz Schmidt](#) who worked as a journalist for a socialist newspaper will quickly find out that he was the brother of Dora Schmidt, an adjunct at the Federal Office for Industry, Trade and Labor who advanced to become one of the first senior female officials in the federal administration, heading the Home Economics Group at the Federal War Nutrition Office from 1939 to 1942. Dora Schmidt was also active in the women's movement and chaired the Industry Group at the Swiss Exhibition for Women's Work (SAFFA) in 1928. Moreover, the two siblings had another brother, Georg C.L. Schmidt, who worked as a parliamentary correspondent for liberal daily newspapers from 1933 to 1971. For historians it is probably more relevant, however, that Georg Schmidt was the historian who in 1932 published the voluminous work «Der Schweizer Bauer im Zeitalter des Frühkapitalismus» (The Swiss Farmer in the Age of Early Capitalism), a book read in farmers circles during the interwar period (as can be seen from the [archival funds of the Young farmers movement](#)), but ignored by historiography for half a century.⁶ When the eminent historian Rudolf Braun re-discovered Georg Schmidt's book in the 1980s, he was convinced that it was «probably one of the greatest failures of Swiss historical research that it did not recognize and use this work as a guiding star to find and follow the path to new problems and research directions». Consequently, Braun dedicated his own book on the outgoing Ancien Régime «out of humility, respect, admiration and gratitude» to Georg Schmidt «in reverence».⁷ The threads that are knotted in the entry of Franz Schmidt, however, can be followed up in many other directions. One illustrates how Schmidt fought, like his friend, the agronomist and nutritional scientist [Max Kleiber](#) and other activists politicized in left-wing circles, for a new worker-farmer cooperation at the end of World War I. Moreover, these connections also indicate that their ventures for a re-orientation of the agricultural and food policy, thus far oriented to the world market, provided common ground for a cooperation with agronomists like [Hans Bernhard, the founder of the Swiss Association for Internal Colonization and Industrial Agriculture, who likewise searched for new ways in agricultural and food policies on the eve of World War I and in the interwar years. Left-wing activists like Schmidt and Kleiber not only](#) published on agricultural questions in socialist papers like «Der Aufbau», the «Gewerkschaftliche Rundschau», and the «Rote Revue», but also in leading agrarian periodicals like the [«Agrarpolitische Revue»](#) or the [«Landwirtschaftliche Monatshefte»](#). On closer examination many entries turn out to be nodes in networks whose lines

⁶ Schmidt Georg C. L., Der Schweizer Bauer im Zeitalter des Frühkapitalismus. Die Wandlung der Schweizer Bauernwirtschaft im achtzehnten Jahrhundert und die Politik der Ökonomischen Patrioten, 2 vol, Bern 1932.

⁷ Braun Rudolf, Das ausgehende Ancien Régime in der Schweiz. Aufriss einer Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte des 18. Jahrhunderts, Göttingen 1984, 11-12.

are sometimes family- or friendship-based, that sometimes arise from the intersection of academic and professional careers, or spring from common milieu structures, institutional connections, political loyalties, or thematic interests.

Actors, Networks and Thematic Connections

Against this background, clusters of historical actors can be reconstructed who literally give a face to a certain topic. For example, common thematic fields become visible, in which actors moved, in which they met, cooperated or clashed, and from which, in turn, often new institutions emerged. By means of [thematic compilations](#), the biographies and gender compositions of, among many others, agricultural economists, plant breeders, agricultural chemists or exponents of the cooperative and the organic farming movements can be brought into context. A particularly interesting texture of connections is provided in the field of poultry breeding. Connecting some of the entries on poultry farmers reveals that chickens and other poultry in Switzerland were kept almost exclusively for subsistence and on-farm consumption until the early 20th century. Specialized businesses such as [Gaetano Donini's poultry farm](#) only emerged in the early 20th century. Many who now turned their attention to poultry farming, such as [Eugen Lenggenhager](#) and [Ernst Duttlinger](#), went to North America to learn their trade, since poultry science was not taught at the ETH in Zurich or at the agricultural colleges until the interwar years. In the United States, however, where the consumption of poultry meat became popular already in the 19th century, there were specialized poultry farms and even departments of poultry science at universities. Poultry farmers who had learned their trade in the US, called their farms on their return to Switzerland «Geflügelfarm». In the beginning, they even named their association [Verband Schweizerischer Geflügel/ farmer](#). Female farmers (Bäuerinnen) who kept poultry and produced eggs both for their own use and for sale on the local markets acquired their knowledge of poultry farming at rural home economics schools such as the [Land- und hauswirtschaftliche Schule Schwand-Münsingen](#), where the subject of poultry science was taught by [Margrit Häberli](#), the co-author of the first textbook on poultry farming in Switzerland. The first phase of the professionalization of breeding on specialized poultry farms enabled female farmers to acquire more productive animals and thus to expand and improve their own chicken husbandry on farms. Young women who graduated from the poultry breeding school in Zollikofen (today: [Aviforum](#)), initiated and established in 1935 by primary school teachers such as [Ernst Mosimann](#), also played an important role in specialized poultry farms or, like [Anna Suidter](#), ran one themselves. The eggs produced on the farms were primarily collected and marketed by the [Schweizerische Eierverwertungsgenossenschaft](#), founded by [Franz Müller, a civil engineer who had gathered knowledge on marketing strategies, advertising, stalling systems, and compound feedstuffs during several study trips to the United States in the](#)

1920s.⁸ In the SEG, too, female farmers and elementary school teachers, like [Karl Kleb](#), played a greater role than agronomists for a long time.

It was only in the second phase of the specialization in poultry keeping from the 1950s onwards that female farmers gradually abandoned chicken rearing on their farms. However, statistically speaking, poultry-keeping on farms in Switzerland increased sharply in the 1960s. The reason behind this seemingly paradoxical development is that the strong expansion of chicken production from the 1950s onwards did not take place on specialized large-scale farms, but on existing family farms, because the state agricultural policy prevented the emergence of large-scale farms based on the American model. At the same time, this development went hand-in-hand with a shift in the gender division of work in the field of poultry rearing. As poultry farming turned from a subsistence-oriented sideline-branch of the farms into a more commercialized and market-oriented business, the chickens were now increasingly produced by male farmers who functioned as contract fatteners for companies such as Optigal, a subcontractor of one of the major Swiss retailers.

In addition to such connections and developments that become visible through the linkage of individual actors, the density of the entries also enables a reconstruction of the organizational development of the agricultural sector. This is not (only) important for the reconstruction of the history of agricultural organizations, but also for a better understanding of the changing social networks, which are of fundamental importance both for the professional advancement of individuals and for changes in ideas what agriculture is about. In the process of «integration through subordination», in which industrial societies imposed their values and patterns of thought on agriculture since the second half of the 19th century,⁹ emerged a markedly large number of institutions dealing with agrarian issues. The earliest systematic surveys in the first half of the 20th century concluded that there were more than 12'000 agricultural clubs, associations, and cooperatives in Switzerland alone.¹⁰ Switzerland was «an agriculturally completely organized country», noted the [Swiss Agricultural Journal](#) already in 1939.¹¹ But many more agricultural institutions were founded during the third agricultural revolution in the post-war decades¹² as well

⁸ Auderset Juri, Moser Peter, Exploring Agriculture in the Age of Industrial Capitalism. Swiss Farmers and Agronomists in North America and the Transnational Entanglements of Agricultural Knowledge, 1870s to 1950s, in: *Agricultural History* 96 (2022), 91–127; Auderset Juri, Moser Peter, Wigger Andreas, Walter Schmid's Atlantic Crossing, ARH/ERHFA Video Essay No 2, 2022 (<https://ruralfilms.eu/video-essays>).

⁹ Moser Peter, Varley Tony (eds), *Integration through Subordination: The Politics of Agricultural Modernisation in Industrial Europe*, Turnhout 2013.

¹⁰ Brugger Hans, *Die land- und forstwirtschaftlichen Vereinigungen der Schweiz. Eine Darstellung ihres Aufbaus und ihrer Tätigkeit auf Grund der Erhebung von 1941 (Mitteilungen des Schweizerischen Bauernsekretariates 131)*, Brugg 1943.

¹¹ *Schweizerische Landwirtschaftliche Zeitschrift* 67 (1939), p. 425

¹² Brassley Paul et. al., *The Real Agricultural Revolution: The Transformation of English Farming, 1939–1985*, Woodbridge 2021.

as since the 1990s, when a plethora of agricultural reforms were propagated and implemented by old and newly created organizations.¹³

However, not only were new institutions continuously established, sometimes existing ones were dissolved. Others merged or were integrated into larger associations. Time and again they were renamed, for example when they took over new functions or when they wanted to adapt their appearance to the new circumstances. It is therefore difficult even for experienced historians to gain an overview of the diverse landscape of associations and federations in the agricultural sector. Accordingly, the entries on the institutions in the Online-Portal are to be seen as a tool for creating an overview of the development of what the Dutch historian Anton Schuurman aptly called the «institutional matrix» of the agricultural sector.¹⁴ However, the systematic recording, classification and periodization of the institutions not only provides insights into the complex process of creating, merging and the re-naming of many agricultural organizations, it also makes connections visible that would remain hidden if the institutions were only presented one by one.

The evolution of the Online-Portals *People and Institutions* and *Collections* was closely linked to our archiving and research activities. The Portals were expanded in stages, and their cycles also reflect the development of our changing thematic priorities. While, for example, entries on archival funds from institutions and men and women from areas like wheat breeding, dairy farming or organic agriculture were at the center in the beginning, archival funds and representatives of other thematic fields moved to the center of our activities later on. The information about the historical figures who gave the *agrarian-industrial knowledge society* its stamp often came from the periodicals that provided a key source for the research-project dedicated to the history of agrarian-industrial knowledge in the 19th and 20th centuries.¹⁵ A similar interplay between research conjunctures and the expansion of the Online-Portals is observable regarding the actors involved in the search for a new agricultural and food policy in the context of the First World War and the General Strike of 1918 or those who were engaged at the intersections of alcohol, food and agricultural policy from the late 19th century to the present.¹⁶ Crucial information on the actors and institutions involved in

¹³ Auderset Juri, Moser Peter, Permanenz des Unbehagens. Epistemischer Wandel und agrarpolitische Re-Regulierung im Zeitalter des Neoliberalismus, in: Ludi Regula, Ruoss Mathias, Schmitter Leena (ed.), *Zwang zur Freiheit. Krise und Neoliberalismus in der Schweiz*, Zurich 2018, p. 37–60.

¹⁴ Schuurman Anton, *Agricultural Policy and the Dutch Agricultural Institutional Matrix during the Transition from Organised to Disorganised Capitalism*, in: Moser Peter, Varley Tony, *Integration Through Subordination. The Politics of Agricultural Modernisation in Industrial Europe*, Turnhout 2013, 65–84.

¹⁵ Auderset, Moser, *Die Agrarfrage in der Industriegesellschaft*.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Moser Peter, *Mehr als eine Übergangszeit. Die Neuordnung der Ernährungsfrage während des Ersten Weltkriegs*, in: Rossfeld Roman, Buomberger Thomas, Kury Patrick (ed.), 14/18. *Die Schweiz und der Grosse Krieg*, Baden 2014, 172–199; Auderset Juri, Moser Peter. *Eine «sperrige» Klasse. Die bäuerliche Bevölkerung im Landesstreik*, in: Rossfeld Roman, Koller Christian, Studer Brigitte (ed.), *Landesstreik. Die Schweiz im November 1918*, Baden 2018, 241–258. Auderset Juri, Moser Peter, *Agrarische Alternativen. Landwirtschaftsprogramme, Genossenschaftskonzepte und Siedlungsprojekte in der Arbeiterbewegung im Kontext des Landesstreiks*, in: *Traverse* 3/2018, 151–167; Auderset Juri, Moser Peter, Rausch & Ordnung. *Eine*

these histories resulted from periodicals and archival funds we identified, rescued and catalogued. The same can be said about the actors involved in the long-lasting attempts to first mechanize and then motorize agricultural work in the 19th and 20th centuries.¹⁷

Expanding and Diversifying the Online-Portals: Films and Images

The conjunctures and dynamics of our research and archiving activities are not only evident in the early established Online-Portals *People and Institutions* and *Collections*, however, they are also reflected in the Online-Portals on films and photographs we only established in the last few years in cooperation with many other institutions in Switzerland and Europe. Our knowledge about the content of the many catalogued archival funds made us more and more conscious that the agricultural sector was one of the pioneers when it came to producing moving pictures after World War I. But since these films were not regarded as culturally valuable for the most part of the 20th century, the established film archives seldom collected and stored them – in spite of the fact that the rural world was increasingly characterized by mobile cinemas and film screenings in the village pub, that everyday culture in the villages became permeated by the experience of watching films, and that the farming population and agricultural institutions discovered the medium of film as an instrument of self-expression and communication with industrial society.¹⁸ While in countries like France the government funded a rural cinema campaign in the interwar period, in Switzerland it was mainly agricultural institutions that promoted – albeit often in cooperation with state authorities – moving images as a medium of communication.¹⁹ Women in agriculture were particularly quick when it came to using films for representing themselves and their work in the public sphere.²⁰ From the late 1920s onwards, female farmers' associations, female students of agricultural colleges and individual farm women (i.e. Bäuerinnen/paysannes) commissioned professional film makers like [Arthur-Adrien Porchet](#) or [Armin Schlosser](#) in order to illustrate their

illustrierte Geschichte der Alkoholfrage, der schweizerischen Alkoholpolitik und der Eidgenössischen Alkoholverwaltung (1887–2015), Bern 2016.

¹⁷ See, for example, Auderset Juri, Moser Peter, *Mechanisation and Motorisation. Natural resources, knowledge, politics and technology in 19th- and 20th-century agriculture*, in: Martiin Carin, Pan-Montojo Juan, Brassley Paul (ed.), *Agriculture in Capitalist Europe, 1945–1960. From food shortages to food surpluses*, London 2016, 145–164; Moser Peter, «Motor-Kultur» statt «Dampf-Unkultur». Zur Entstehungs- und Rezeptionsgeschichte von Konrad von Meyenburgs Bodenfräse, in: Ferrum. *Die Personen der Technik. Technology's Workforce 91* (2019), 66–76.

¹⁸ Thissen Judith, Zimmermann Clemens (ed.), *Cinema Beyond the City. Small-Town and Rural Film Culture in Europe*, London 2016; Zimmermann Clemens, Mahlerwein Gunter, Maldener Aline (ed.), *Landmedien. Kulturhistorische Perspektiven auf das Verhältnis von Medialität und Ruralität im 20. Jahrhundert* (Jahrbuch für Geschichte des ländlichen Raumes), Innsbruck 2018.

¹⁹ Hubscher Ronald, *Cinéastes en campagne*, Paris 2011; Levine Alison, *Cinéma, propagande agricole et populations rurales en France (1919–1939)*, in: *Revue d'histoire* 3 (2004), p. 21–38.

²⁰ Mühlethaler Jacques, «La paysanne au travail» – ou l'art des relations publiques, in: Moser Peter, Gosteli Marthe (eds.), *Une paysanne entre ferme, marché et associations. Textes d'Augusta Gillibert-Randin 1918–1940*, Baden 2005, p. 311–315.

multifarious activities on farms, in educational institutions, in the farm household and in the public sphere.

The wide range of films we encountered while cataloging archival holdings of agricultural institutions brought us in close contact with established as well as newly emerging film archival institutions. Using their infrastructure, we screened the film reels and provided the identified films with metadata we gained from the archival funds. The film reels are stored by the Kinematografie Lichtspiel in Bern, where we can also digitize those films we intent to make accessible to the increasing number of historians that become conscious of the relevance and value of films as a source for rural history in the 20th century.²¹ For rural historians films are for different reasons an important source genre. For example, they often illustrate, sometimes unintentionally, activities of children, women, laborers and working animals that are hardly ever mentioned or even described in written sources.²²

In order to systematize the existing information about the identified films (Who commissioned them? Who made them and what were the major intentions? Where were they performed? How did the spectators react?), we first created an internal database where we could include the metadata that is crucial for the contextualization of each film. Filmmaking not only produced moving images as sources, it also created a multitude of other and complementary written sources such as correspondence between clients, producers, and directors, scripts and their revisions, film reviews in rural newspapers, reviews, magazines and, particularly interesting, testimonials from spectators who tried to convince their own organization to produce a film about a specific subject for a particular occasion.

However, we not only intended to make the metadata on films accessible to researchers, but also some of the films themselves. For this purpose, we established together with other archival and research institutions the European Rural History Film Association (ERHFA) in 2017, and we developed an Online-Portal where contributing institutions from anywhere can make their digitized film material online accessible – if it fits thematically. Members of the ERHFA include the Centre for Agrarian History in Belgium, the Frisian Film and Audio Archive in the Netherlands, the Gesellschaft für Agrargeschichte in Germany, the Institute of Rural History in Austria, the Austrian Filmmuseum in Vienna, the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) in Great Britain and, among others in Switzerland, the Research Institute of Organic Agriculture FiBL, the Swiss Rural History Society, the Cinémathèque in Lausanne, the Lichtspiel in Bern and the Schweizerisches Sozialarchiv in Zurich. Together with these institutions we maintain the database and publish, together with a

²¹ See, for example, Böhmer Maria, «A mamelle seine, lait sein». Milchhygiene und Eutergesundheit in der Schweiz, ca. 1950–1980, in: Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte, 71 (2021) p. 34–54.

²² Moser Peter, Wigger Andreas, Working Animals. Hidden modernisers made visible, ARH/ERHFA Video Essay No 1, 2022 (<https://ruralfilms.eu/video-essays>).

gradually expanding number of other contributing institutions, digitized footage through an [Online-Portal](#).

In order to communicate knowledge gained from historical research based on audio-visual (and written) sources, we have launched a new initiative for the production of Video Essays in Rural History. These Video Essays are conceptualized as an independent form of communicating historical knowledge on all matters relating to rural history broadly understood. They add new dimensions to a specific historical insight and advance a thesis or argument by using the potentials and possibilities of visual sources and moving images. Since the format of a video essay is not meant to replace, but to complement and amend written texts, each video essay in this series is accompanied by a written abstract, the script, references and additional information on the topic and indications for further reading. The video essay and the written document are published simultaneously online. The first two Video Essays produced by the ARH, are accessible [online](#).

It is no coincidence that the first Video Essay produced by the ARH addresses the topic of working animals since the statistical relevance, the cultures and spatial orders of working animals have become important topics in our institution in the last few years.²³ Beside the many films which document the work of animals and their interactions with human beings, photographs are an equally important source when it comes to understand the relevance and practices of working animals in the process of modernization in the 19th and 20th centuries. Therefore, it was logical that we created a database as well as an Online-Portal for the publication of the photographs along the lines of the one we have developed for the film material. So far, a dozen contributing institutions from Switzerland present more than 1'000 images about working animals in the [portal](#). The portal can easily be expanded so that in the future, images on other topics relevant to rural history can be made available online by interested institutions.

Towards an Interactive Communication Infrastructure in Food-, Agricultural- and Environmental History

The development of the Online-Portals has been an ongoing process. And it will remain an ongoing process in the future too. On the one hand, the content will continually be amended. On the other hand, we intend to transform the Online-Portals into an interactive communication infrastructure accessible to a wider public. In view of the increasing societal relevance of food, agricultural and environmental issues and the need for a better historical orientation of these

²³ See, for instance, Moser Peter, Von «Umformungsprozessoren» und «Überpferden». Zur Konzeptualisierung von Arbeitstieren, Maschinen und Motoren in der agrarisch-industriellen Wissensgesellschaft 1850–1960, in: Nieradzik Lukasz, Schmidt-Lauber Brigitta (ed.), Tiere nutzen (Jahrbuch für Geschichte des ländlichen Raumes, Band 13), Vienna 2016, 116–133; Auderset Juri, Schiedt Hans-Ulrich, Arbeitstiere. Aspekte animalischer Traktion in der Moderne, in: *Traverse* 2/2021, 27–42.

debates in the political arena, we aspire to an expansion of the now open-access research infrastructure along citizen science principles. This will involve a closer interaction with the file creators as well as with archival and research institutions and a wider public. Thus, the process of assembling information necessary for conducting scientific research will simultaneously inform the public about the activities of the Archives of Rural History and thereby intensify the reciprocal circulation of knowledge within society as a whole.