

The day the railway came to Switzerland

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THE DAY THE RAILWAY CAME TO SWITZERLAND

(By John Trevor)

AUGUST 7, 1847 was a proud day for Switzerland. It was the day the Swiss entered the railroad race, the day 125 years ago on which the country's first rail service was officially inaugurated.

Switzerland was not too early in the railway field. The question of building a railway had been broached as early as 1833, only a few years after the world's first public steam railway had been opened in England. But nothing came of this initiative. Then the idea was taken up again later, when a Basel-Zurich railway company was formed, but in 1841 this foundered because of political disagreements and opposing cantonal interests.

It was left to Basel to open Switzerland's first railway station, when the border city became linked with the French system, and the Strasbourg-Basel stretch became the first international railway line.

Cannon Salutes

Perhaps Basel's achievement nettled Zurich, its traditional rival, for soon afterwards another private company, the Nordbahn, was formed and work began on constructing the first all-Swiss line between Zurich and Baden, a distance of some 15 miles or so.

Four engines were ordered from a factory at Karlsruhe, in Germany, and there was great excitement in Zurich in March 1847 when the first locomotive was delivered. It was given the name "Aare", after a Swiss river, and large crowds turned out to watch it manoeuvring with its waggons.

Successful trial runs were made and the official opening ceremony took place on August 7, 1847. Cannons boomed out a proud salute as the first train, carrying distinguished guests and hauled by a flower-garlanded locomotive, steamed out of Zurich on the first official journey to Baden.

Most people were wildly enthusiastic about the new means of transportation that seemed to epitomize the new industrial age that Switzerland was entering. But not everyone.

Losing Senses

There were, for instance, medical men who believed that the "tremendous speed" of the iron monster would cause passengers to lose their senses and fall into a delirium. Farmers, who were opposed to anything newfangled anyway, saw the railway as a man-made hazard to add to those of nature. They feared that sparks from the locomotives would burn up their crops. They said that cows would dry up, and give no more milk, through fright as the trains passed. Bird life, it was forecast, would disappear and the vines would bear no more healthy grapes.

It was perhaps the earliest known example of concern for the environment in the face of advance by technology. But none of those awful things happened, and the Zurich-Baden railway was a big success.

Among those who must have favoured it were the servants of wealthy Zurich families. The town of Baden produced a tasty speciality, crusty rolls known as "Spanische Brötli" and it was the custom of the well-to-do families to serve them to their house guests. It was a pleasant tradition, much appreciated by everyone except the servants, who had to walk to Baden during the night to buy the rolls, which were on sale at 4 a.m., and get back in time to serve them at breakfast.

When the new railway opened, the rolls were put on the first morning train and arrived in Zurich still oven-warm. The railway quickly became known as the "Spanisch-Brötli-Bahn" and it has passed into Swiss history under that name.

Political Question

The opening of this first Swiss railway heralded an age of busy railway construction. A late starter perhaps, Switzerland became a pioneer of railway building in difficult terrain, such as mountain areas, and of tunnel building.

The question of who should construct the railways was one that dominated Swiss political life for several decades. Some people thought it should be the job of the new Federal State, as this would be in the best interests of the community as a whole. This view was backed up by two British experts, who worked out a projected rail system and recommended State construction and operation.

The leader of this school of thought was Jakob Stämpfli, a politician who believed strongly in central government rule. He thought that by owning the new transportation system, the young Federal Government could rapidly consolidate its power. He was opposed by the formidable figure of Alfred Escher, descendent of an aristocratic Zurich family, a radical in politics, a wealthy man and a bold 'entrepreneur'. He expounded the cause of private enterprise and believed that building railways was beyond the Government's financial capacity. In his view, private companies would serve the people better and also construct the railroads on sound economic principles.

Bought Out

In 1852 the Federal Assembly decided in favour of private construction. This was the signal for hectic activity and as a result, more than 600 miles of railways were constructed in Switzerland inside ten years.

But popular enthusiasm for this kind of development was to wane later, when it was found that only a few of the railroad

companies were able to pay interest on their shares. Public opinion thus gradually came round to the idea of State-owned railways and in 1898, the voters agreed by a large majority in a national plebiscite to nationalisation legislation which was put into effect in the first few years of the present century.

The State bought out five of the major lines and several smaller ones, from which Swiss Federal Railways were formed. The Federal Railways are the backbone of the present-day railway system but there are also quite a few private railways still going strong. They include some of the world-famous mountain railways built in regions which even the enthusiastic early pioneers thought could never be opened up to the iron track.

—From Swissair Gazette

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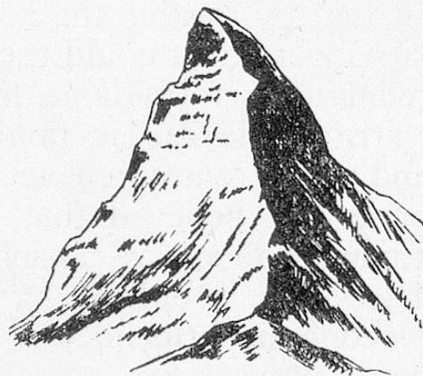
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