

# The taming of the Rhone

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## THE TAMING OF THE RHONE

The River Rhone has been celebrated during the recent coloured and joyous "fêtes du Rhône" at Sion. This river, which the people of Valais now celebrate, has brought them untold hardships in the past. This was the case in that November of 1779, when Goethe, coming from Chamonix through the Balme pass, descended on the Rhone valley. He was riding up-valley between St. Maurice and the Furka, when, on the lap from Martigny to Sierre, he and his companions arrived at Tiddes, where the bridge had been carried away by floods. He turned back and rode for an hour and a half down to Fully, where he managed to bring his horses to the right bank of the river, not without some worries, on a tottering old wooden bridge. He had noted during his journey that "The Rhone wrought distressing damage in this narrow country". The plain has a desolate look and the sandy banks are just good for alders and willows. That same evening, he makes the lap from Sion to Sierre on foot. Just before St. Leonard, a guide directs him with good fortune across some nasty waterlogged places, but "the sight of this wondrously beautiful valley" has awoken in him "good and happy thoughts". These few observations by the great German writer during his journey through the Valais give us an idea of what the Rhone valley was like two hundred years ago.

During centuries, its inhabitants were the helpless witness of the devastation brought about by the spates of the Rhone. The Chronicle of Marius of Aventicum relates already how, in 580, the crops were destroyed by an overflowing of the river. Since 1086, year when the melting of the snows "flooded the whole plain of Valais", the pranks of the Rhone have produced desolation in the valley innumerable times. In 1469, all the bridges were carried away. The flood of 1640 left only the bridges of Grengiols, Mörel and St. Maurice intact. Nearer to us, the floods of 1860 and the high waters of 1868, 1920, 1935 and 1938 have caused considerable damages.

The cantonal archives of the Valais give a good record of the efforts that have been devoted since the year 1532 in guarding against floods but they were pallid compared to the tempests of the river. The absence of any common plan made them inefficient in most cases. It was in the early 19th century that cantonal and communal authorities realised the necessity of concerting and co-ordinating their efforts in building defences against future floods. The riverside communes were held by new laws to upkeep their stretch of bank under the supervision of the Canton. During the first thirty years of the 19th century, important protections were built between Vouvry and Brigue, but they were generally

spaced to far apart to eliminate all risk of a serious flood.

It was after the devastating high waters of September 1860 that the State Council of Valais asked for the financial help of the Confederation. The Federal Council declared that it was ready to examine a demand for subsidies for a project of embanking of the river which would prevent further catastrophes. This project was presented to the Federal Houses in December 1860, and adopted, after a few modifications, by the decree of 28th July 1863. The Confederation was to finance a third of its cost and supervise its execution. The project had been conceived by the cantonal engineer Venetz who, having died in 1859, was never to see its realisation. The projected correction of the river consisted of an embanking of two parallel and insubmersible dykes to be reinforced and linked every thirty metres by fenders perpendicular to the flow of the river. These, plunging from the height of the outer dyke to low water level, were facing each other from bank to bank. A succession of narrow passes, in which low waters could flow, were thus created between the fenders. High waters were to be contained by the outer dykes. The project also included the elimination of a number of bends in order to increase the slope of the river and speed up its current. These works advanced very slowly, this being partly due to the slowness with which the Simplon railway, on which the works depended, was being constructed. Between 1860 and 1880, it only managed to progress from Sion to Brigue.

The containment of the Rhone was such an endeavour, that it could only be completed in successive stages. It remained, however, the foundation of all subsequent works until 1930.

Although these works were judged satisfactory by the 1880's as they were securing to a large extent the safety of the valley and allowing its exploitation, they were not to bring all the results expected of them. The river bed had been steadily rising along certain stretches, in spite of continuous dredging. The corrected Rhone no longer seemed able to carry along down to Lake Geneva the millions of cubic metres of gravel its affluents were pouring in each year. Faced with this alarming situation, a commission of experts suggested warping the plain i.e., letting the overflowing sediments spill onto it, and a bill was adopted to this end in 1907. But the warping of the Rhone valley proved impracticable, because too much of it was already under cultivation. The necessary alternative was to try to reproduce the original river-bed profile on the menacing stretches. After some trials, it was decided to hem in the Rhone more tightly, so that its carrying-power could be increased through augmented speed of flow. It was decided to fill the spaces between the fenders with

rocks to a height of two metres above low water level. In this way, both low and normally high waters were confined to a narrow channel which had none of the damaging eddies produced by the projecting fenders, and the exceptionally high waters could spill above this enrockment, and be contained by the outer dykes.

These works were only possible with the untiring efforts of generations. The systematic correction of the river undertaken in 1863 was a truly gigantic task, considering the small resources of the population and the inadequate technical means of those days. Earth had initially to be displaced by hand. Untoward difficulties were constantly delaying the completion of the programmes. It was constantly necessary to repair damages caused by overflow of the river, and to rebuild, heighten and strengthen the dykes.

But these hardships paid off. Between the inner dykes, the river has today built itself a very deep bed and only rises to the level of the valley in exceptional cases. The plain is today protected, drained and cultivated. The unhealthy swamps of older days have disappeared and given place to beautiful orchards that have become a source of prosperity to the inhabitants of the valley. The Rhone, daunted at last, is now a source of riches and strength.

*Translated by P.M.B. from*

*"Treize Etoiles", Sion.*

## MODERN PROMOTION FOR ANCIENT CUSTOMS

About 100 competitions will, in the course of this year, again be a source of joy, excitement and delightful entertainment to the fans of Switzerland's most sporting game. Leading the parade is the Federal Wrestling and Alpine Festival which is going to take place on 23rd and 24th August in Bienne, the city of the future. A long-playing record is to be made for this occasion. In addition to the official festival song "Chächi Manne" ("Strong men") the record offers a good selection of yodel songs, natural yodelling and folk music from various regions. The purpose is clear: publicity for Switzerland's national games and ancient customs, aimed particularly at young people and all those who are not familiar with Swiss wrestling, pushing stones, flag waving, yodelling, blowing the alpine horn, "Hornussen" (a ball game played only in this region) and the variety of folklore connected with them. The record will not doubt induce many foreign visitors to use their holiday to get acquainted with typical Swiss customs going back to ancient times. What could impress foreign tourists more than a genuine mountain wrestling meeting that radiates real love for one's country . . .