

The Stanserhornbahn

Autor(en): **Farr, Michael**

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The lower terminus at Stans provides offices for the railway, as well as booking facilities and a waiting room with models including the tram which formerly connected with the quay at Stansstad. 15.09.2000

All photos in this article by Michael Farr unless otherwise noted

Recent difficulties of the country's flag-carrying airline, Swissair, show that even apparently affluent Switzerland is not immune to financial problems. In fact it is not a new experience for the Swiss, for looking back to the end of the last century large areas of that country were in the depths of depression, with whole families leaving their homeland to seek their fortune abroad. The growing tourism industry was bringing wealth to centres like St Moritz, Zermatt and Luzern, but limited transport over difficult terrain prevented all but the hardest from exploring far away from the cities.

The canton of Nidwalden, in the centre of the country, could offer fantastic views from its highest peaks and to tap this tourist potential two local men, Franz-Joseph Bucher and Josef Durrer, hatched a plan to take tourists from the small town of Stans to the top of the Stanserhorn mountain. One problem was that Stans itself was not easily accessible, for the steamers on Lake Lucerne brought their passengers no nearer than Stansstad, so Bucher and Durrer first built a tramway linking the quay with the town.

The cogwheel railways on Mounts Pilatus and Rigi were already attracting crowds, but for the Stanserhorn the two men chose cable-drawn

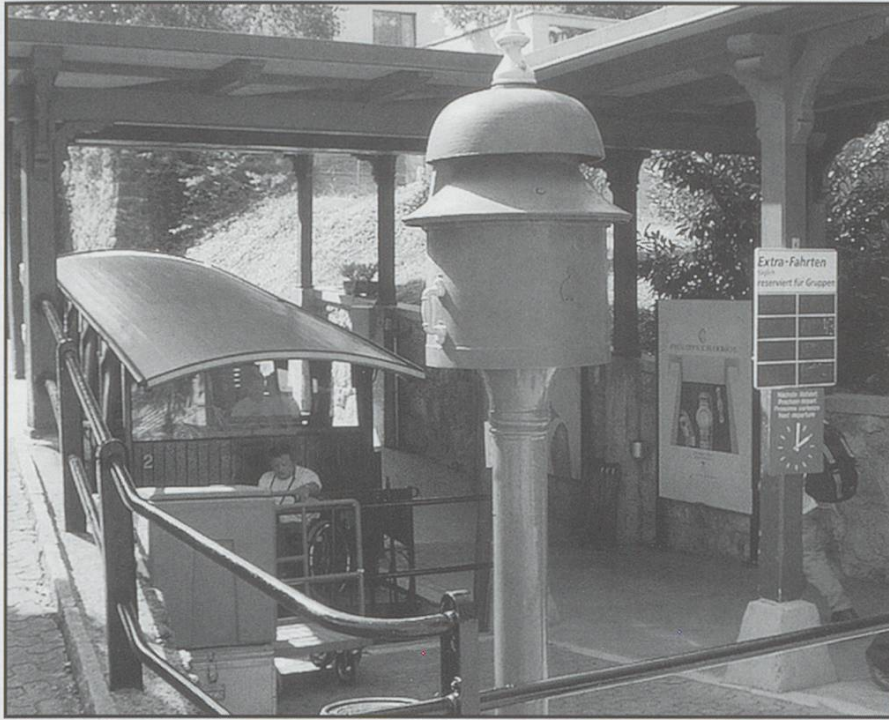
cars. The site for their mountaintop station was 6170 feet above sea level and due to the strength of cables then available they chose to build their railway from Stans (1513 ft)

in three stages with changeover stations at Kälti and Blumatt.

They had gained experience in this form of traction with the Bürgenstock-bahn, which they had completed in 1893 to join the lakeside pier at Kehrsiten-Bürgenstock with the new hotels being built on a high ledge overlooking Lake Lucerne. Here they were able to provide a one-stage cable car.

Starting from Stans, the first section ran for 714 metres across pasture land with a gradient of about 13°. The second stage to Blumatt stretched for 1221m at steeper angles, whilst the last to the Kulm station was as steep as 60°. This steeply graded track was very difficult to build because large sections were on embankment and until the rails had been laid all materials and tools had to be taken up by man- or mule-power. The top section also proved difficult and time-consuming to keep clear of snow early and late in the season.

The design and engineering was in the hands of the younger partner, Durrer, whose relationship with Bucher (the financial wizard of the partnership) was at times stormy. The son of a farmer, in his lifetime Bucher built railways and hotels all over the world, including the Semiramis at Cairo. Although he left a for-



Like all good railways, the station at Stans has the familiar Swiss bell. 15.09.2000

passengers were the first two groups of British tourists with Henry Lunn as their guide. He was employed as a chaplain based at the London Polytechnic chalets at Seeburg on the shores of the lake to the south of Luzern. The canny railway publicised that its fares were cheaper than its rivals at Pilatus and Rigi!

An attraction on after-dark journeys on the lakes is spotting the lights at the tops of the surrounding mountains and a powerful floodlight was

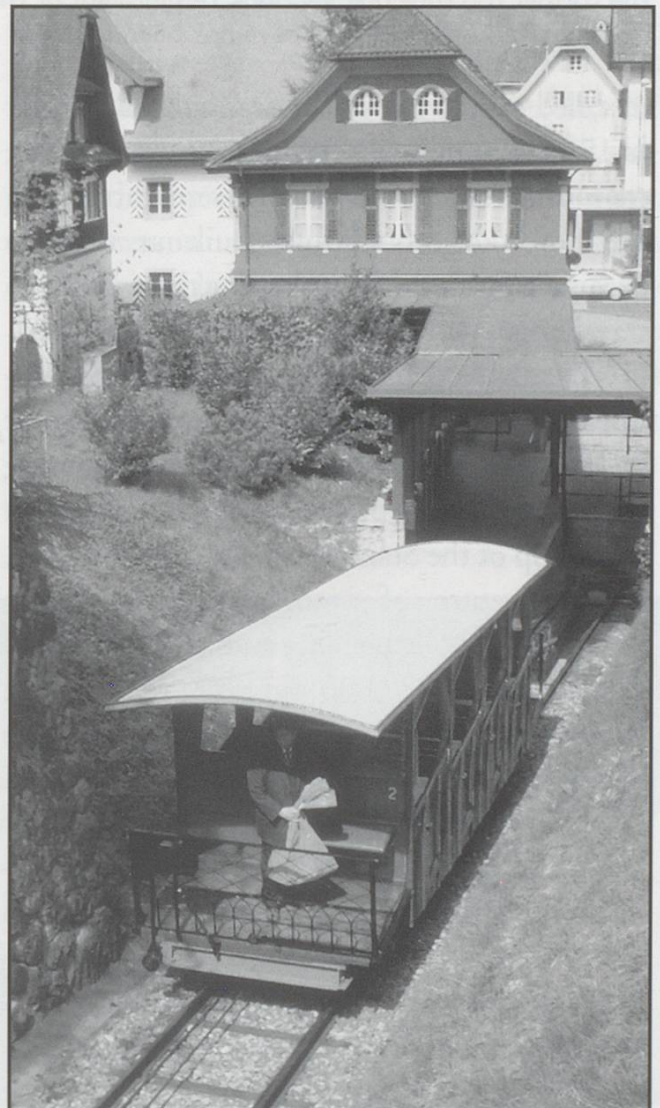
tune worth Fr. 14,000,000 in 1906, he lived frugally, travelling through Europe sitting on overnight trains so he did not have to pay for hotel beds. Indeed, it is said that he never ate a meal at one of his own hotels.

They had hoped to open the line in time for the 1893 season but the work was not completed and the developers were fined a *Kaution* of Fr 500 a day for the delay. Bucher managed to negotiate for this money to be paid in shareholder's certificates - and no dividend was paid until the line's centenary when a once-only nominal sum was awarded to the patient shareholders.

The first passenger trains finally ran on 23rd August 1893, leaving only seventy days of the tourist season, after which the snows came. However, the success of the project can be judged by the fact that during the seventy days 4,726 passengers took a trip up to the viewing platform on the Kulm.

The tracks were cleared the next year in time to begin operations on 11th May 1894 and by the time the snows came again 16,889 passengers had been carried. Amongst those

A car leaves the lower station on 14.04.2000. It had been wet earlier in the day and the driver had used the blue plastic rubbish sack to protect his knees from the rain





A cable car swinging high above the wooded hillside on 15.09.2000. Passengers can trace the track-bed of the former top funicular sections, reminiscent of the Ffestiniog Railway above the Ddauellt Spiral, although in Switzerland the old rails have not been salvaged

installed on the top of the Stanserhorn as early as 1895. A round trip from Luzern by steamer, tram and funicular with an overnight stay in the hotel so thoughtfully built at the top became a fashionable outing for the well-to-do travellers.

Thanks to their custom and that of day visitors, the last season before the outbreak of war in 1914 saw nearly 40,000 tickets sold. During the war groups of prisoners-of-war were taken to the top of the Stanserhorn for a day's outing.

The return of peace also signalled the return of the holidaymaker and passenger numbers climbed to 80,000 per year. This seemed to be the maximum number which could be accommodated, due to the brevity of the operational season. As the last snows fell a team of about twenty men would climb to the top section and it would take them twenty days to clear the exposed tracks; services ceased abruptly again with the first snows of October.

The Stanserhorn and its railway had become a regular outing for visitors to the region but the

hotel was becoming grossly under-used as the pattern of tourism turned away from the overnight stay on a mountain-top. So what at first seemed a disaster when it happened in October 1970 was soon appreciated as "Glück in Unglück" - good luck inside bad luck.

Lightning struck the upper section of the funicular and set fire to the hotel at the top. Fortunately there were no guests staying and the ten staff left on the mountaintop overnight were able to escape unharmed, though they (and the eighteen men who braved a blizzard to climb for 1^{1/2} hours from Blumatt cable station to the top) were powerless to tackle the fire. The hotel was completely gutted.

The company decided not to rebuild the hotel but designed a panoramic restaurant on the same foundations seating 220 diners, with a further 400 on the terrace in fine weather to cater for day visitors. Because of the problems with snow early and late in the season, they also decided to abandon the two top sections of the funicular and to replace them with a cable car.

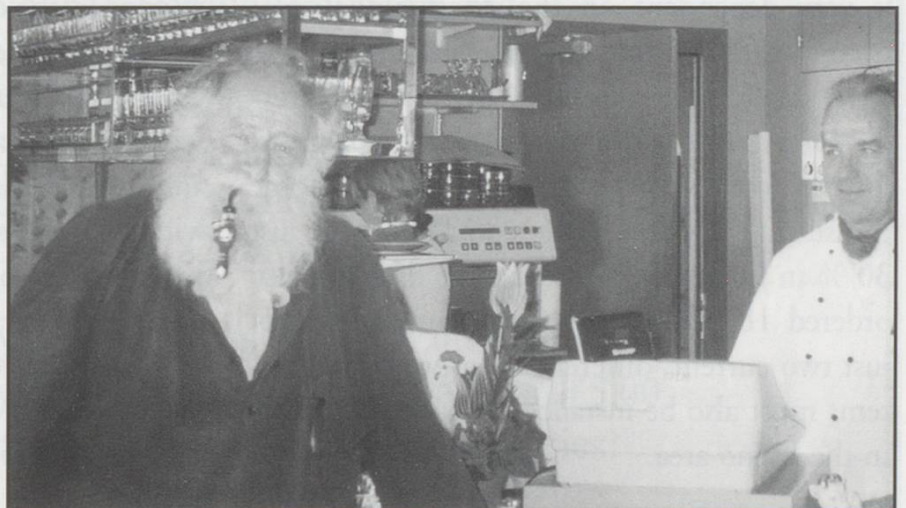


The new Rondorama revolving restaurant at the top of Mount Stanserhorn.
Photo: ©Stanserhornbahn

Since the railway reopened in 1975 (and the restaurant a year later) they reckon that by avoiding the snow lying at the top of the mountain it can operate for an extra hundred days a year; often the snows do not fall in earnest until mid-November, one of the few advantages of global warming.

The bottom of the three sections of railway had not been affected by the fire and so these were refurbished and are now advertised as the "Oldtimer Train" still operating from the attractive terminal building in Stans which doubles as offices and waiting room. On arrival at Kälti, passengers cross to the brightly painted cable cars for the journey

Bani "the Beard" Wyrsh was the most frequent traveller on the Stanserhornbahn. He made more than 170 journeys each year so he could sit in the restaurant at the top and play cards with his many friends, pausing from time to time to puff at his pipe - which he insisted on having in the photograph. Alas, Bani died last autumn, his final words reputedly being, "feel too tired to go to Mount Stanserhorn this afternoon"! Photo taken in the old restaurant on 14.04.2000



to the top, or they can pause a while to visit the winding drum, with its huge wheel on which the wooden teeth did not need complete replacement until after the line's centenary.

There are spectacular views as you climb in the panoramic cable car, looking down on the abandoned track of the old funicular. As you step from the car you can now enjoy even more spectacular views from the revolving restaurant,

opened last year, which has attracted 55% more diners than the old, fixed restaurant.

When the mountain reopens on 29 March one familiar face will be missing. Bani 'the beard' Wyrsh was a larger-than-life character who, in his retirement held the record for riding to the top of the mountain - 170 times in a single season. Sporting a huge beard, Bani played cards in the restaurant with other regulars, but towards the end of last summer he died. He had not been ill, they told me, but his last words were, "I feel too tired to go to Mount Stanserhorn this afternoon!"