

Genève - where two nations meet. Part 3, Gordon Wiseman continues his narrative by discussing the cross-border tramways

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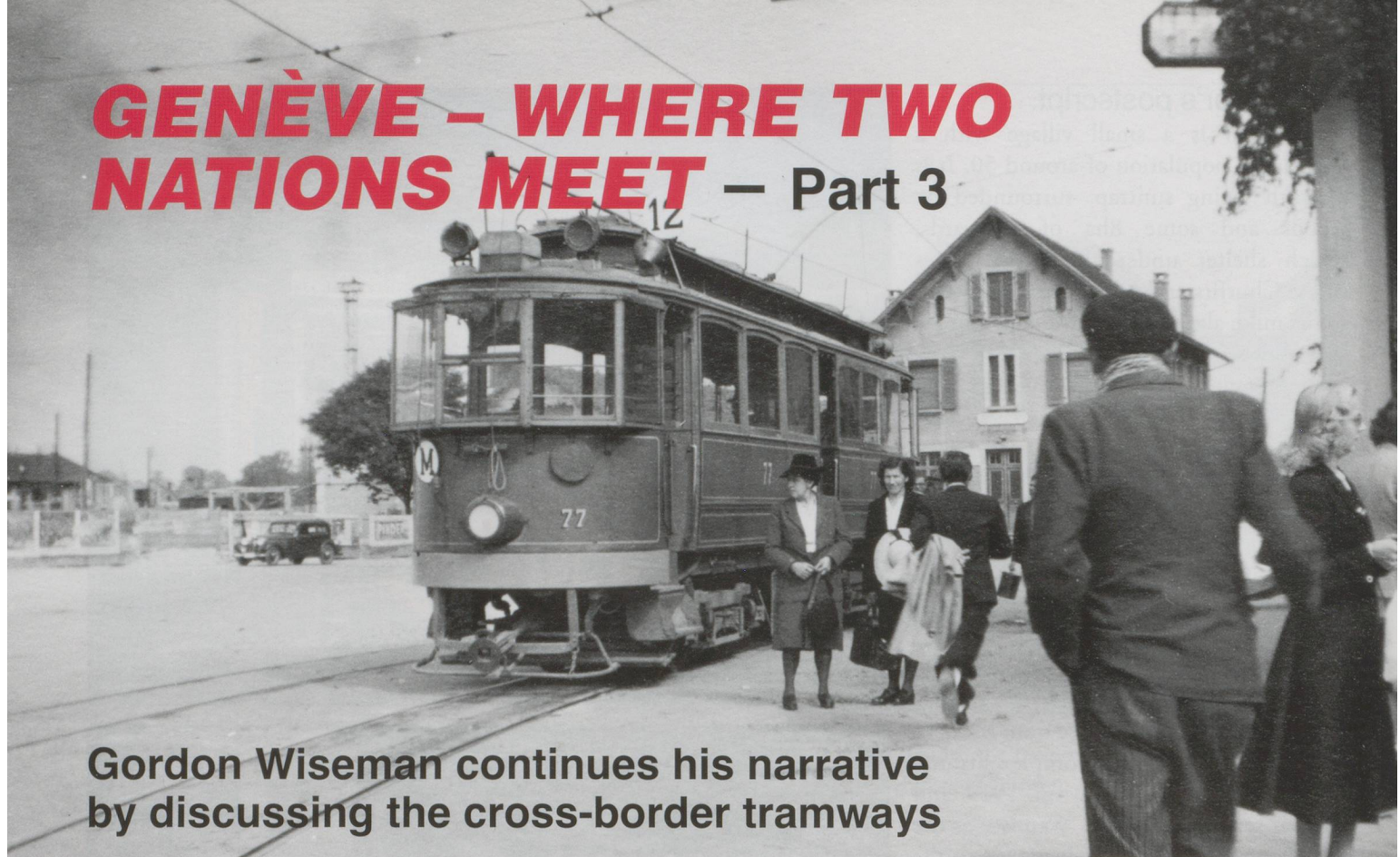
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GENÈVE - WHERE TWO NATIONS MEET – Part 3



Gordon Wiseman continues his narrative by discussing the cross-border tramways

CGTE tram No. 77 (SWS/Schlieren 1901, and nicknamed 'Schlierens') outside Annemasse railway station. Less favoured vehicles were used on the separate shuttle section of route 12 between Moillesulaz and Annemasse. The black cloud left of the tram is smoke wafting across from SNCF steam locomotives in the station!

PHOTO: Jeremy Wiseman

Genève was just the fourth city in Europe to have trams, with the opening in 1862 of a 2.5km standard gauge horse tram route from Place Neuve to Rondeau de Carouge, which survives to this day as part of TPG Route 12, making it the oldest continuously operated section of tramway, not only in Genève but in Europe. The subsequent complex development of Genève's local transport would take several complete issues of *Swiss Express* to explain in full. Suffice to say that from 1862 to 1899 an extensive but rather disparate tramway network, using both standard and metre gauges and horse, steam and electric traction was developed by three main companies, Cie Générale des Tramways Suisses (TS), Société Genevoise de Chemins de Fer à Voie Etroite (VE) and Chemin de Fer Genève - Veyrier (GV). Until the opening of the Pont de la Coulouvrenière in May 1896 the

network was even physically divided by the River Rhone and Lake Genève. At its peak in the 1920s Genève trams ran into France at no less than six different places, all but one into the department of Haute Savoie south and east of Genève.

The first cross border TS route opened in 1883 from Moillesulaz to Annemasse (12), followed in 1899 by the VE line to St Julien en Genevois (13). In May 1890 VE opened the only northbound border line, to Ferney Voltaire (7) in the Ain department. This was the first ever metre gauge line to be built on the 'right bank' and it connected with the steam operated Tramway de Ferney à Gex (at the foot of the Jura) which was never electrified and fell victim to road widening in 1936. December 1890 saw VE open the fourth cross-border line, to Veigy and Douvaine (10). In 1891 GV extended from Veyrier across the French border to Pas de l'Echelle, where it connected to the Salève railway. The GV was extended further in May 1892 wholly within France to Collonges sous Salève, along the road which parallels the Annemasse – Bellegarde railway. In August 1892 the TS extended from Annemasse to Etrembières, in preparation for the opening of the Etrembières arm of the Salève railway.

The most significant date in Genève's tramway history was 11 August 1899, when the forerunner of today's TPG, the Compagnie Genevoise des Tramways Electriques (CGTE) was created with a capital of CHF5m. This signalled the start of two years of brisk change. In August 1900 CGTE opened its own first route - along the Rue du Rhone. It was metre

One of the four-motor bogie SIG/Westinghouse trams of the 1902 series (nicknamed 'Westinghouse' or 'quatre moteurs') at Ferney-Voltaire. The Wiseman residence of circa 50 years is at the far end of this street.

Commercial Postcard



gauge electric as all subsequent routes were to be. Just 4 months later on 1st December 1900 CGTE acquired the TS and a month after that on New Years Day 1901 took over the operating of all VE lines. By just two years later all VE and TS lines had been electrified and the standard gauge TS lines had been converted to metre gauge. The next 25 years saw rapid development of a comprehensive urban, interurban and international network. During this period (in 1908) the last of the cross-border tramways was built, from Croix de Rozon to Collonges sous Salève (16). This created a complete Franco-Swiss tramway loop Genève – Veyrier – Collonges – Croix de Rozon – Carouge. Apart from the GV which lasted until closure as a separate entity, the foregoing numbers in parentheses are post 1911 CGTE route numbers.

The Genève tram network reached its peak in 1924. This article being a history of the international links it is ironic that the second major line closure – marking the start of the 40-year decline to just one route – was the cross-border Douvaine route on 1st February 1928. In October 1930 the GV closed its very uneconomic route inside France between Pas de l'Echelle and Collonges sous Salève. In 1936 operation of the GV passed to CGTE and a new link allowed GV vehicles to reach CGTE's Jonction depot. However, in the same year the GV re-trenched further to terminate within Swiss territory at Veyrier village. Ironically, in the same year through services, from Central Genève across the border to the CEN railway into the French Alps were inaugurated.


The Chantepoulet - Ferney Route 7 closed in February 1938, swiftly followed by the line to St Julien en Genevois. Croix de Rozon – Collonges closed in 1939 as a result of the outbreak of World War 2. On the same date, Annemasse – Etrembières was also closed. The remaining Annemasse route survived despite the war and having been the first to open, became the last cross-border tramway to close, in 1958, although a change of tram was required at Moillesulaz Frontier, with less favoured types of tram used on a shuttle within France. The Salève and Annemasse - Sixt CEN railways within France mentioned in this article had close links with Switzerland and will be described in the next instalment of this series.

As can be seen from this article, the CEVA/Franco-Valdo-Genevois concept of a 'seamless' cross-border transport network for the 21st Century Genève catchment area is nothing new, and in 2012 the wheel has almost turned full circle. It is hugely ironic today – post Schengen - that the 'rush' of cross border tramway closures in just 10 years 1928 – 38 was caused by the tightening of frontier regulations and customs at the Franco-Swiss border.

Although no tram routes have yet been reopened across the border, Ferney – Gex



SWS/Schlieren car No. 86 in Rue de Genève, Annemasse in September 1955. Note the delightful period French cars in the background including a 'Maigret' Citroën Traction Avant. PHOTO: Jeremy Wiseman

(reduced at its lowest ebb to occasional poorly advertised buses in the 1960s and 70s) now has through buses on Route F. The CERN tram route terminates close to the French border, and plans are well advanced to extend this to CERN facilities in France, and on to St Genis-Pouilly, and there is quite a lot of backing for a tramway to be re-extended as far as St Julien. The recently built Meyrin Gravière route gets to within a kilometre or so of France at Mategnin on the road to Ferney, but the latter's current mayor is said to be quite 'green' and TPG will not open tram routes until a certain level of population has been reached, and this means increased urbanisation at odds with green policies. In my lifetime (52 years) the area has seen extensive urbanisation across what were once green fields, although it is still nothing like suburban London... 

Acknowledgements/Bibliography: Histoire des transports publics dans le canton de Genève, Volume 1, by Gilbert Ploujoux, Publisher Editions du Tricorne, 2010. ISBN 2829303210, 9782829303210. Le Tram à Genève, Editions Tricorne 1976. Various published works by Eric Rahm. Web site www.snotpg.ch – unofficial TPG web site.

