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Swiss News

RhB Derailment

The 11.02 Regional Express from St-Moritz to Chur was derailed at 12.30 on 13th August shortly after leaving Tiefencastel when it ran into a landslide. Three coaches were derailed, the first landing below the rail alignment, hanging against trees above the Schyn ravine. Eleven of the 140 passengers were injured, five severely - one of whom later died in hospital. The injured were rescued by helicopter. Uninjured passengers were evacuated along the tracks to the Cantonal road, and brought by PostAuto to Tiefencastel. The composition was in this case, perhaps fortunately, not an Allegra multiple unit set, but a conventional loco-hauled composition with Ge4/4^{III} No. 651 'Fideris' and 12 cars. The location is very inaccessible. The single line below Tiefencastel takes a loop around Prada village, before entering the Schyn ravine on a high ledge. After the 300m long Mistail tunnel there is a short gap before another three tunnels in quick succession, leading to Solis station and the Solis bridge across to the west side of the ravine. Below is the Schyn reservoir some 120m below the track, so it was fortunate the coach that went down the cliff was stopped by trees. The locomotive ended up beyond the blockage on the alignment and upright, but damaged; the first coach was derailed, lying vertically down the ravine side with the leading end about 10 m below the rail track. Passengers including the injured were evacuated from the upper gangway by helicopter. The second car was derailed and stopped with a third of its length overhanging the ravine. Passengers were evacuated at the rear end through the third car, derailed and damaged but upright in the alignment. The slide occurred where a stream bed just north of the Mistail tunnel, falls down the mountain side to a small masonry bridge under the railway, and was what is called a slow slide, where part of the hillside detaches itself and, gathering weight and speed, rolls over all in its path. A train had passed 30 minutes before without alarm. The location is not on the official list of endangered sites maintained by the RhB and Canton, and there is no record of previous trouble. However, 60 cm of rain had fallen in the previous 12 hours, about half the August average. The debris and the train were removed within 36-hours and the line reopened within days.

Zentralbahn and road users

A disastrous level-crossing accident in Canton Nidwalden, at Wolfenschiessen on the ZB's Hergiswil – Engelberg section, on August 11th 2014, caused three deaths and five seriously injured. A group of Israeli tourists in a minibus, staying in the district, crossed the railway at a minor level crossing where their vehicle was rammed by an approaching train. Why they were on a local field track is not known. The crossing is one of many field track and access road crossings in Wolfenschiessen. Twenty-two in this commune alone are listed for closure and three for rebuilding. One of these is the Allmend crossing where the accident occurred. The details reflect the Federal Transport Office BAV national ruling that all listed crossings must be made safe by December 31st 2014. At the end of 2013, some 1,200 still awaited attention, many on narrow-gauge private lines. The law now requires every listed case to be presented for

a detailed building permit, with financing, before the year's end, with a work programme for action. Nidwalden had submitted the Allmend crossing as a part of the programme, but its political body, the Cantonal Parliament, had refused a CHF4.3m finance package, requesting cheaper solutions. The project is therefore in suspense. Before we are too severe, think that Nidwalden, not a wealthy canton, has 64 level crossings listed for rebuilding, and the costs including mandatory installations, diversions, and associated road improvements, are beyond its resources. Equally, it is now clear to all but the most conservative politicians, that unfortunately road users must always be protected from themselves. In an effort to deal with the issue there is now a radar system available that can identify people and animals near the railway tracks and warn train drivers. The SBB now plans to bring this into action at three level crossings.

It's not just drivers!

SBB has reported that the number of incidents involving farm animals and trains increased by 50% from 2009 to 2013. A Swiss farming magazine has noted that this is possibly due to more outdoor-grazing by animals than was the case previously. Calls by farmers for more trackside fencing have been rejected by SBB. Legally the company is not liable when it comes to incidents with farm animals.

SBB Historic

In April the SBB Historic team in Erstfeld completed a five-year project to restore Ae6/6 No.11411 'Zug' to working order. This involved over 1000 hours of work funded by some considerable sponsoring. No.11411 is now largely in the external condition of its delivery in September 1956.

Some numbers

In 2013 SBB carried just over 1 million passengers per day (+ 3.7%) but with more trains, and 1.6% more train-km, with the average load per train falling from 125 to 124. Average journey length fell by 2.3 km. Some 2,335,000 HalbTax cards were in use at end 2013, a slight fall over 2012. There were 442,000 GA cards in use which give access to trains, ships, trams and postal buses, and many mountain railways in use. However, a share of these (including your Swiss News Editor's) are at pensioners' reduced rate. Overall, for 2013 it is a mixed result. Results were slightly below the curve on which future investment is based, but we do not of course know the regional and user group variations. Typically misleading is the annual Group Travel figure. In 2003 there were 3.5m journeys in organized groups whereas 2013 only saw 1.5 million. However the comparison is distorted by the number of trains operating now without reservations and without a conductor, for which group reservations are no longer made.

Historic prototype withdrawn

In May 2014 Re4/4 No.11101 the prototype Re4/4 II was withdrawn after having been defective for some time. It was not a preservation candidate. Its last duties were the heavy shunting of passenger rolling stock, which is still required around Basel SBB. On delivery in 1963 the loco was numbered No.11201 as one of 6 prototypes ordered in 1960, all being

finally delivered by July 1964. When still new in December 1963 No.11201 was severely damaged in a fatal accident in Oberwinterthur so did not reappear until October 1964. By this time the series was renumbered as Nos.11101-6 and these became the pre-cursors to the biggest series of locos (built over a 15-year period) that Switzerland has ever seen - the Re4/4 II and Re 4/4 III. Although the ranks are slowly thinning many of these will still run for some years.



Now withdrawn RhB Ge 6/6 No. 702 at Chur when still in regular service. Photo: David Edwards

Another historic withdrawal

At the end of August the RhB announced a first withdrawal of a Ge 6/6^{II}, No. 702 built in 1958, of the series 701-707. Although used for all kinds of traffic, the booked workings of these engines are on the regular freight services, which have recently been in steady decline. No.702 was 'stored unserviceable' and so is unlikely to run again.

Rheineck – Walzenhausen (RhW)

This line, one of Switzerland's shortest operations, and now part of the Appenzeller Bahnen, was closed for over 6-months while the BDeh1/2, the only vehicle, was entirely renovated. This work was undertaken by the RhB at its Landquart works. The railway re-opened on May 19th and your correspondent promises to go to see it. It is a remarkable line, a 1.92km long rack railway on the unique 1200mm gauge. It was originally built as two railways, a level section 300m long opened in 1909 to connect the SBB Rheineck station with a funicular, opened in 1896, from Rheineck Stadt (Ruderbach) to Walzenhausen. In 1958 the two were combined and, after several months of rebuilding, re-opened as a new rack railway. Its only railcar, seating just 28, dates from the rebuilding.

Zentralbahn

Following the arrival of the new Stadler EMUs several coaches have been sold: B316/317/362 to Guinea; B318 to Togo; and B361 to Niger. The elderly BDeh 4/4 locos have mostly been broken up whilst in July No.110 022 was behind the works in Meiringen. In early July one Interlaken/Meiringen stopping train diagram was worked daily by No.101 965, creating a picture we thought had been lost long ago, but this will not last for long.

Weissenstein tunnel threatened

This tunnel, was built as part of the SMB and is now part of the BLS, is on the line between Moutier and Solothurn that

is 22 km long, with ruling gradients of 1 in 35. The line penetrates the main Jura ridge using a 3,700 m long tunnel under the Weissenstein summit, a well-known viewpoint from which the Alps can be seen in a glorious panorama - given the weather. This was described in Hilaire Belloc's book 'Path to Rome'. Regrettably, the railway was always an economic failure, and presently covers only 25% of its fixed costs. The investment of over CHF200m in a now overdue tunnel renovation is therefore difficult to justify. If you are interested, get there soon.

Stadler gets new SBB orders

Six FLIRT EMU sets have been ordered by SBB for operations around Winterthur and Lausanne along with 19 new KISS double-deck EMU commuter sets. SBB Passenger has also ordered four new Class 922s, part of an option agreed in 2007. These, and also the abolition of SNCF 1500v dc around Genève, should end the days of the last Ee3/3 IV (Ee934) in Genève and Basel. The total value of the EMU orders is around CHF460 and it will provide additional work for Stadler's Bussnang works.

Ballenberg Dampfbahn

It has been announced that following establishment of a finance plan, all three locomotives, G3/4 No.208, HG 3/3 No.1067 and No.1068, will be restored after the depot fire in November 2013. No.208 is expected to be serviceable in 2015, while No.1067 will be ready in 2016 and No.1068 will follow. The last loco had not run for 40-years having been on a plinth in Meiringen.



Support wagon at the Bahnpark roundhouse in Brugg.

Photo: Robert Amstutz

Going, going, ...

Support wagons for track maintenance crews have also almost disappeared from the railway scene in Switzerland. These usually had a place for the crew to sit in a warm, dry environment, a kitchen and a cook to provide a hot meal for the crew. This former support wagon is at the "Bahnpark" roundhouse in Brugg.

RhB 'Sings for its supper'

The National Yodeller-festival took place in Davos (not itself known for yodeling, which is a feature of Bern, Gruyère, Appenzell and other cantons) between July 3rd and 6th. It showed the RhB's capacity for enormous efforts as trains ran at 15-minute intervals for 3-days between Landquart and Davos

utilising eighteen, rather than the usually rostered five, train sets carrying over 100,000 extra passengers.

Limmattalbahn

Early last summer bids were requested to manage the tendering and implementation of the civil engineering and railway elements of the project to build a 13.4km metre-gauge light rail line along the Limmat Valley west of Zürich. Bids were scheduled to be received by mid-September for this scheme estimated to cost around CHF715m. Project planning should be completed by the end of 2015 for construction to commence in 2017 and the line to be in service by the end of 2019. Over 90% of the route is planned to be on dedicated rights-of-way as it serves some 27 stations en-route from Zürich Altstetten to Killwangen-Spreitenbach with LRVs running at 15-minute intervals on a 37-minute service schedule.

Gotthard Base Tunnel

An initial phase of test running in the first completed section of the new 57km tunnel was completed last summer. Over 650 test runs, some at speeds of up to 220kph, were made in the 13km section between the Bodio portal and the Faido 'station' inside the tunnel. The tests were carried out by AlpTransit Gotthard (ATG) using rolling stock and personnel provided by SBB. The data is being analysed prior to the start of full trial runs in Autumn 2015. Commercial operations are scheduled to commence in December 2016. Meanwhile, following two-years of negotiations, Canton Uri has agreed to its emergency rescue teams aiding those of SBB in the event of problems in the new tunnel.

Another Gotthard Tunnel

In September the Swiss National Council gave the go-ahead to the project to construct a second Gotthard Road Tunnel. The current road tunnel is 30-years old and needs essential improvement work to be undertaken that can only be undertaken through a long closure. Without a second link through the Alps such a closure would result in massive transport problems and the virtual severing of road links from central Switzerland to Canton Ticino. The estimated cost is some CHF2.7 billion and the estimated start date is 2020. It is probable that the decision will be challenged by a national referendum.

Basel – Another cross-border tram route

On the 29th September the BVB commenced testing the new cross-border tramway extension to their Line 8 that runs to Weil-am-Rhein in Germany. Prior to the line opening to the public on 14th December the German section of the route will require certification by the Stuttgart-based Technical Supervisory Authority for Tramways (TAB). This work will also require all types of tram currently in use with the BVB to be tested to German operating standards. Swiss customs officials are also using the test phase to gain experience of border controls on the new line. Although passengers will be able to travel freely across the border it is understood that German customs officers will carry out random checks once the route is in operation. On the opening day of the CHF104m extension

all trips on Line 8 will be free. The Swiss section of the route will operate to a 7½ minute basic frequency with every second tram serving Weil-am-Rhein. It is planned that the new fleet of Bombardier Flexity LRVs will normally be used on the service.

Rolling stock moves

With the demise of the Glarner Sprinter service in June the two specially decorated Class 560 units became redundant and one was subsequently being used on a Muri – Olten diagram. A casualty in April 2014 was Pendolino 470 005 that had become due for major overhaul and was therefore set aside – probably with a sigh of relief by the operating department! Several of the last Ee3/3 classic rod-drive shunters were withdrawn earlier this year. An escaped veteran may be found on the Orbe-Chavornay line, with its industrial sidings, where former SBB-Em3/3 No.18816 is now in service with Travys.

CJ withdraws ex-RhB unit

In March, the motor coach Bef4/4 No.642 (ex-RhB ABe 4/4 No.488) dating from 1973, that has normally been used to haul the heavy trains of domestic garbage containers, suffered a serious short-circuit defect. Damage to two traction motors was severe, and re-profiling of all wheels was due, so it was decided not to effect repairs to this 40 year-old veteran. Earlier this year the CJ acquired four Ex-FW units (see June's SE) with the intention of using one or more of these on the freight duties No.642, and its ex-RhB sister No.641, were operating. This move apparently came none too soon.



A BLS 'Blue Arrow' at Brig.

Photo: George Bett

Verkehrshaus der Schweiz (VHS)

The VHS at Luzern has a special exhibition, on until December 2014, of themes associated with the National Exhibitions (the Ländi) of 1914, 1939 and 1969. The Ae8/14 No.11852, built for the Gotthard and shown in 1939 (and then the most powerful electric locomotive in the world) has been in the museum for several years, and several other large exhibits had also been variously displayed at the Exhibitions. However, VHS and SBB Historic have together turned out many special items, such as the history and model of the EXPO station built specially in Lausanne in 1964, and most important, a digitally reworked version of the Circorama film made by SBB in 1964 to illustrate the importance of rail to Swiss life. This film was originally made with a

multi-camera installation, mounted on trains and road vehicles, generating an image in full action on a circular screen surrounding the viewer. It was seen by over 4-million people, and therefore one of the most successful Swiss films ever. The new version was shown to a guest audience at a vernissage (preview) on Swiss National Day, August 1st. Your correspondent had heard much of this film but never before seen it; and it is remarkable. It is inevitably a living cross-section of a modern railway of 1964, but equally a portrayal of operating practices that today would be unthinkable. It reminds us that apart from Ae6/6 engines and TEEs, many freight and passenger services in 1964 were still backward and archaic, however charming. Also displayed at the 1939 Ländi were the BLS 'Blue Arrow' light electric railcars built from 1938-on for local services and private hire. BCFe 4/6 No.736 was one of these and it ran until 1985, latterly on the Sensetalbahn. It has now been completely restored to working order, at a cost of CHF2.1m, and had an inaugural trip on the Bern-Neuchatel line on August 12th.

125 Years of the Pilatusbahn

The Pilatusbahn was built as a steam-operated rack railway and first ran on June 4th 1889. Its well-known features today are its incredibly steep gradient of 48% (1 in 2) and its Locher patent flat double sided rack. A steam rack car, No 10, is in the Verkehrshaus in Luzern. Its boiler is set transversely in the cab, so as to ensure a safe water level. The rack mechanism is driven from the cylinders over reduction gears to two rack wheels. These grip the Locher rack, a centre rail with teeth on both sides. This gradient is over the whole of the 4km long Pilatusbahn. Had a 'standard' Riggensbach rack line been built (as was originally surveyed) the maximum gradient would have been 25% (1 in 4) and it would have been 8.7km long, unsuitable on the steep-sided mountain. The Locher solution (Eduard Locher was the entrepreneur of the whole scheme) allowed the climb direct from Alpnachstad where the Brünigbahn was opened in 1889. Originally Locher planned a monorail, similar to the Irish Listowel and Ballybunion Railway that was built to the Lartigue system with the engines having two parallel boilers, but finally the 800mm gauge line we know today was authorized. The Locher principle allows no classic-type points, so all junctions are made over sliding bridges. Steam operation continued until 1937, when electrification at 1500 V dc was adopted. Steam car No.10, later adapted for freight and works activities, continued in service until the 1960s. The eight original electric cars are still in service, with two later additions. The railway is only in operation between May and November.

MIB

This little line leads a quiet life, but it has an interesting history and now another feature. It isn't always easy to define what distinguishes a railway from a tramway, and the MIB, which is a railway, makes it more interesting by adopting (with full legal authority) tramway operations for a length of just 2-metres. This is at the level crossing of the bridge footpath at Aareschluch West, where tramway rules have allowed a much more simple rationalization. The crossing is used mainly by walkers visiting the Aare gorge near Meiringen.

Some common sense

Following many complaints from passengers in Canton Aarau, particularly in Baden, that it was difficult to distinguish between local and longer distance buses, the cantonal transport co-ordinating organisation 'A-Welle' has announced that participating transport companies may retain their own identity and are no longer required to spray their buses or trains in the 'A-Welle' colour scheme. So far only PostAuto has reacted positively to this news noting that none of their buses will be resprayed, but all new vehicles will appear in the PostAuto livery.



The last station master?

From a local newspaper via Robert Amstutz


The last of the line?

The Station Master (Bahnhofvorstand) at Sihggenthal-Würenlingen could be the last of the line. No other station in Northwest Switzerland now has a Station Master. All other stations are either unstaffed, or only have ticket sales teams which have nothing to do with the day-to-day running of the railway. It is foreseen that Siggental-Würenlingen will be downgraded to an unstaffed halt in 2015/2016, the layout simplified, and the platforms moved to the north of the present station.

Any spare cash?

Steam loco No.141R568, one of the 2-8-2s built at the end of WWII in USA and Canada for SNCF when operational locomotives were very scarce was put up for sale this spring. Privately preserved in Switzerland, she was extensively overhauled in 2012 and can run in Switzerland under all signalling conditions. Owned by Swiss Classic Trains GmbH, a subsidiary of William Cook Holdings (GB), she is offered for sale as a going concern. If you have to ask the price you probably cannot afford it.

Travel the RhB on-line

Google Maps/Street View has now recorded the whole of the 384 km network of the Rhätische Bahn (RhB) and it is accessible at www.rhb.ch/streetview. Some 37,000 images were taken from a flat car, located at the front of various trains travelling at a steady 40 km/h, during the spring of 2014. 

Swiss News is compiled by Bryan Stone and includes input from, Michael Donovan, s'Murmeli, Boyd Misstear, Mario Gravazzi, Robert Amstutz, Ernst Leutwiler, and others.