

# 'The Lake Thun Right-Bank Railway' : Bryan Stone recalls this long-lost line...

Autor(en): **Stone, Bryan**

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# 'The Lake Thun Right-Bank Railway'

Bryan Stone recalls this long-lost line...



Postcard No. 3. Beatenbucht with the tram.

Postcards from the collections of Paul Jenkins, Bryan Stone and the SRS

The name is not really a leg-pull as it was actually called, in public, the *'Rechtsufrige Thunerseebahn'*, which does translate as *'The Lake Thun Right-Bank Railway'*. How many railways have had such a precise name? My mention of this lost line in an article on line closures in *Swiss Express* attracted some comments, and I was asked to follow up. So here we are. It was opened on the 10th October 1913 from Steffisburg through Thun to Oberhofen, then on Christmas Eve 1913 from Oberhofen to Beatenbucht and finally on 20th June 1914 from Beatenbucht to Interlaken West. It was a metre-gauge tramway, at its greatest 25.8 km long, with single track, and was electrified at 1,000 V dc. This railway was closed in

the reverse order to the opening, starting on the 18th December 1939 with the stretch from Interlaken to Beatenbucht, and then during 1952 it shut in sections between Beatenbucht and Thun. The last trams operated on a 3.3km urban section between central Thun and Steffisburg and this finally closed on 31st May 1958. I remember the little yellow trams on the Thun quayside during my first family visit to Switzerland in 1951 when I was 13, but I was unaware then what a curiosity they were.

The line was built to meet a specific need, because in the 19th C. the steamships on the Thunersee did not serve intermediate places on the right bank. The ships operated from end-to-end, including a call in Spiez, but

the growth of hotels and tourism on the north (right) bank was ignored. The first tramway project stopped at Beatenbucht; a glance at the map or topography shows why, for from there steep cliffs barred the way eastwards. But lack of finance stopped the work, and only when a Zürich finance group took an interest, was further progress made. However, they insisted that only a link to Interlaken gave any hope of success and, indeed, they suggested turning the eastern end of the line into



Postcard No. 1.  
Interlaken West Station.



Postcard No. 4. Beatenbucht with the trolleybus.

a local Interlaken tramway by extending it to Gsteigwiler south of Wilderswil, but that good idea was dropped. A concession was granted in 1905, and a company, the *'Elektrische Bahn Steffisburg-Thun-Interlaken'*, was formed in 1911. This company as the STI exists today, running the buses around Thun. And yes, the 'J' is correct. Interlaken is not really an historic place, the real foundation being Unterseen across the Aare, and for many years it was written with 'J'. So we still find the original STJ perpetuated on a few historic bus stops and other signs. Money was never enough, and inadequate capital would always dog the new line. The route taken was along the lakeside, but in Thun it was necessary to serve the then SBB station (it was further north than it is today) by a short branch. In 1920 the current Thun Station that gives convenient rail/ship connections, resulted from moving the ship station into town accessed by a canal, and the tram station moved to the north bank of the canal behind the BLS ticket office. Once beyond Beatenbucht, the line climbed, in the cliff - the road even today being quite spectacular.

Opening just weeks before the start of WWI was disastrous

STI at Thun Bahnhof in 1958.  
 Photo: Markus Schweyckart  
 Foundation.

as the booming tourist business collapsed. Then a legal battle with the contractor led to such costs that restructuring of the company followed, becoming the *'Rechtsufrige Thunerseebahn, elektrische Bahn Steffisburg-Thun-Interlaken'*, but things got no better, except when there was a major event in Interlaken such as the National Marksmanship Competition in 1921. Lack of capital meant that the line had been too lightly built. Renewals were out of the question, so improvisation followed. The section in the cliff from Beatenbucht, with four tunnels, was a dirt road and scarcely ballasted. The last section from the lakeside at Neuhaus led to Unterseen and directly down the street to Interlaken West station, with a terminus





STI circa 1950 .  
 Photo: Markus Schweyckart  
 Foundation

up the remaining tram operations other than between Thun and Steffisburg. There is however a curious reminder of the line still to be found. If you take the north bank cliff road west from Interlaken, in at least two tunnels there are still remains of attachments in the tunnel roof. These date from the catenary abandoned in 1939. Still there in 2014, how long they will last is an open question! See Postcard No. 2

on its north side, that today is a car park.

With the onset in 1939 of Switzerland's National Emergency (WWII), Canton Bern saw a need to widen and straighten the cliff road; the tramway was already hardly safe, and it was paid off to cease operations and recover the rails. Paradoxically, the western end flourished as the transport of military personnel and wartime shortages, meant that in 1942 the STI carried 1m passengers! However, after the war the growth of motorised traffic, the desperate condition of both the track and the elderly tramcars and acutely congested streets, led to the decision in 1952 to give



There had been fourteen 90hp, 18-seat, Ce2/2 railcars built by Credé/SSW for the opening, and some 15-trailer cars also from Credé. These all lasted to the end. Over the years the tramway acquired some 10 goods wagons of various types and freight trains hauled by a railcar often featured in the operations. There were also two 2-wheel Post Trailers built by the company. Five railcars and some trailers were sold to Innsbruck in the Tirol on closure, but I understand that they scarcely ran there. The tram depot was in Schwäbis, in Steffisburg (it no longer stands) and it stayed in use until the final closure of the Thun – Steffisburg urban operation in 1958. After the closure of the main route in 1952 STI took to trolleybuses in a big way, with wires as far as Beatenbucht where the route terminated at a turning circle. The route was electrified at 1,100V dc, higher than normal for trolleybuses but no doubt utilising much of the electrical equipment that served the former trams. There were nine trolleybuses in total and five trailer cars to boost capacity at peak times. Unusually for a trolleybus operation the STI also used two Post Trailers that collected and sorted mail en-route. The trolleybus operation closed in 1982 when the route was converted to normal diesel buses. So it is today.

#### ... and Paul Jenkins follows-up on his 'Mystery Solved' Email

September's *Swiss Express* issue had two references to the '*Lake Thun Right Bank Railway*', firstly a picture-postcard from Chris Wisbey in the photo-gallery on P25, and secondly my Email on P43. Evidently each of us was previously unaware of the one-time existence of a tramway along the right, or north, shore of the Thunersee, but had found indications of it on old postcards. I mentioned in my email that Bryan Stone quickly resolved my 'puzzle' in his second '*The End of the Line*' article on P17 of the June issue in which he briefly summarised the history of the line. The intrigue for me arose from the fact that I spent a few months staying right on the route of the line back in the early 1970's, and yet had had no previous inkling of it. Following my 'discovery' I found an old book on e-bay,

STI heading to Thun Bahnhof in 1958 .  
 Photo: Markus Schweyckart Foundation


*'Die Strassenbahn von Bern und Thun'* by Claude Jeanmaire, published in 1969 by Verlag Eisenbahn, which included a great many interesting photographs and have also acquired a few further postcards which might be of interest.

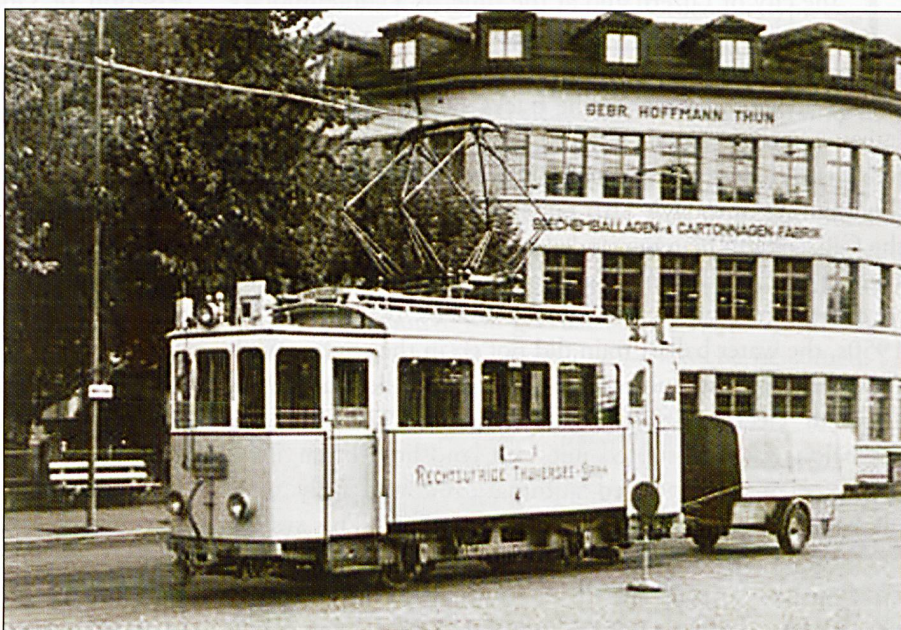
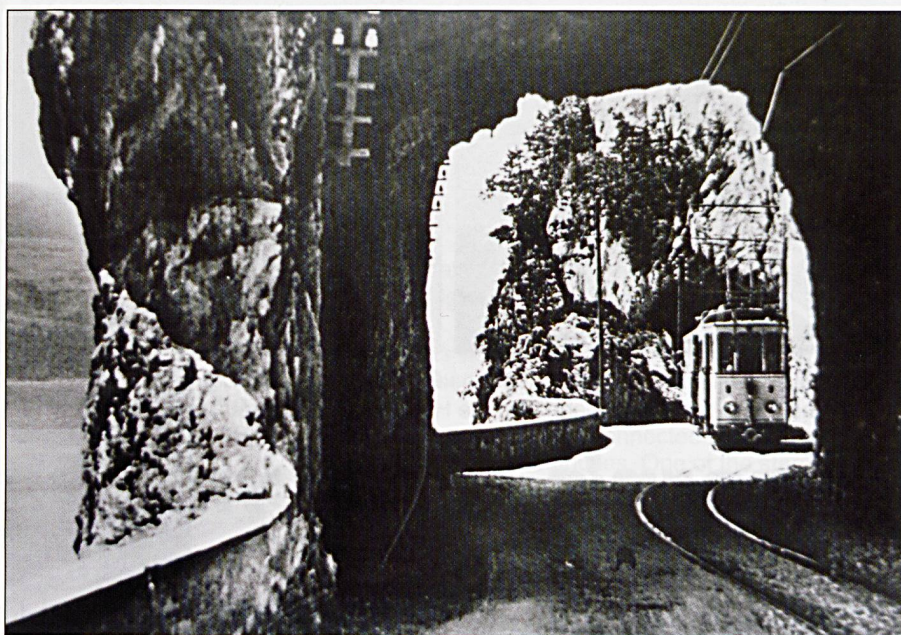
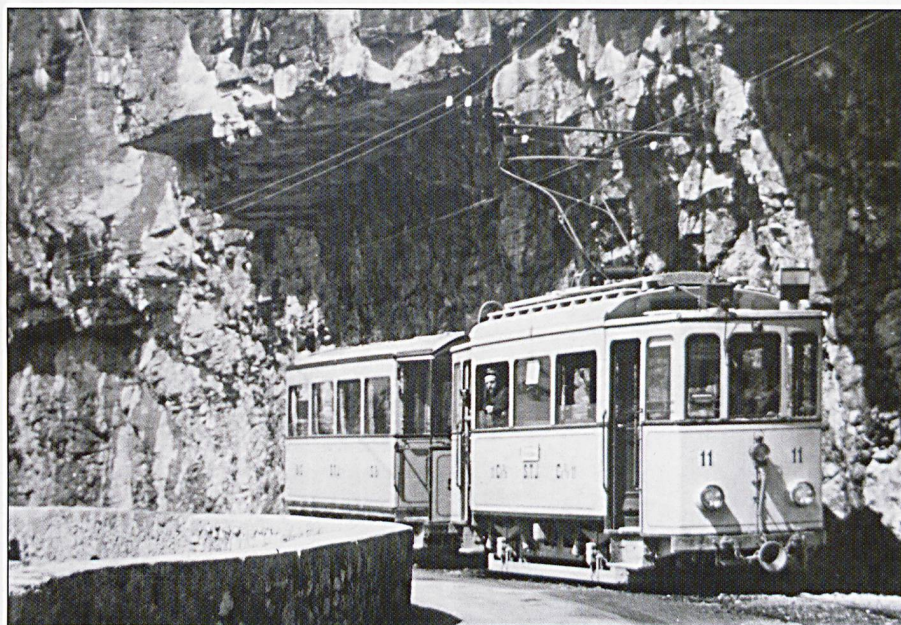
Postcard No.1 is the view of Interlaken West mentioned in my email in which I spotted the 'mystery' tramcars, beyond the greenery in the foreground, with a class EZB Ce4/6 and train standing at the platform.

Postcard No.2 was posted in 1939, shortly before the closure, and shows a tram on the rough cornice road between Beatenbucht and Neuhaus.

Postcard No.3 is a view of Beatenbucht, seen from a very similar viewpoint to that featured in September's photo-gallery but evidently later and presumably post-1939 since the bus would seem to be awaiting passengers for the tram-replacement service to Interlaken. Rather improbably we also see both the funicular car for Beatenberg crossing the bridge and a lake-steamer just offshore. Interestingly the book referred to above contains precisely the same picture in black-and-white and the author's caption makes the point that the boat is clearly out of scale and, in any case, is in a position where there are submerged rocks on which it would certainly run aground! He also adds that the back-drop of the Eiger, Monch and Jungfrau is false as it cannot be seen at all from this location. All of which neatly underlines the fact that these old postcards, while beautifully produced and very appealing, cannot be trusted to provide an honest depiction of the scene.

And if any further evidence were required of these 'manipulations' Postcard No.4 shows the same scene again, with some detail changes, but clearly based upon the same original photograph, with the same boat in the same location, but this time masquerading as a post-war picture with the trolley-bus (plus Post Office trailer) at the turning-circle, and the connecting bus apparently departing for Interlaken.

All of this aside this was clearly an unusual and fascinating line and I'm very pleased to have stumbled across it. The next time I'm in that vicinity I will have to look out for the old apparatus mentioned in Bryan Stone's articles. 



TOP: A tram on the 'mountain' section of the line.  
MIDDLE: Postcard No. 2. A tram on the rough cornice road between Beatenbucht and Neuhaus..  
BOTTOM: Tram with Post Trailer in Thun circa 1948.