ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, https://www.e-periodica.ch

RAILS ON THE BODENSEE

By G. Della Gana

The Bodensee, or Lake Constance, in the north-east corner of Switzerland, is bounded by three countries. The eastern end belongs to Austria, the northern shore, formerly divided between the states of Baden, Bavaria and Wurttenburg, to West Germany while the southern shore between Lustenau and Konstanz is Swiss. The lake is 62 km long and 14 km broad at its widest point, between Kressbronn and Rorschach. The river Rhine enters its south-eastern corner flowing westwards to Schaffhausen and thence to Basle. There is a marked seasonal difference in water level with some ice forming in winter.

Due to the lakes central position, steamship services started at an early date, with the German states being first in the field. The WILHELM of Wurttenburg starting a service between Friedrichschafen and Rorschach in 1824. The Baden vessel HELVETICIA began a service between Konstanz and Schaffhausen in 1832. The Bavarian KONIG LUDWIG I started work in 1837. The first Swiss steam vessel did not appear until 1840, operating a service between Rorschach and Schaffhausen. Seven years later the first railway reached the lake at Friedrichshafen. In 1855 the Nord-Ost Bahn (NOB) arrived at Romanshorn from Zürich and started up in the shipping business.

The NOB took over the ships of the Schweizerischen Dampfboot AG of Schaffhausen in 1857. They were given cause to regret this venture on the 11th March 1861 when their ZÜRICH collided head-on with the Bavarian vessel LUDWIG which sank with the loss of 13 men and her cargo of cattle. The ZÜRICH was involved in a second collision on 12th February 1864, with the JURA, this time there was only one fatility. Fortunately these mishaps do not seem to have hampered development of steamer services, continued railway construction along the lake-side providing a stimulus. The Austrian vessels AUSTRIA and HAPSBURG began 'international' service with the opening of the Arlberg line in 1884.

The German and Swiss railways realised that the lake itself could provide a short-cut for their traffic. In 1869 the NOB, in co-operation with the Bavarian and Wurttemburg State Railways, introduced train-ferry services between Romanshorn and Friedrichshafen and Lindau. They were operated by a vessel designed by John Scott Russell, the last essay in a somewhat chequered ship-building career that had included a hand in the design of HMS WARRIOR, the writing of a massive work on warship construction and the apparent misappropriation of large sums of money while he was building the GREAT EASTERN for Brunel! Elements of the link-span used by this vessel at Romanshorn were still in use during 1985. By 1874 a further train-ferry was required and so the NOB and the Bavarian State Railway had a second ship built for service between Romanshorn and Lindau. No names, other than DAMAFFAHRE, are recorded for these two vessels.

In 1874 three rail-fitted barges were built to provide freight services from Romanshorn and Friedrichshafen to various points on the lake. They were unpowered but equipped with a wheelhouse and rudder. Wagons were loaded via the link-spans at one of the two terminals and then the barge was towed by either a powered train-ferry or ordinary lake steamer to the destination where it would be cast off to drift in under its own momentum. The wagons would remain aboard the barge during unloading. A similar procedure was employed on Lake Luzern. In 1884 the rail-ferry services were again expanded and a further barge was built by Sulzer, with another following in 1887.

The Austrians had become involved with the barge services from Bregenz. There were runs to Romanshorn, Constance and Friedrichshafen. However none of these

services survived the First World War. This was in part due to the war itself but also to improvements to the lakeside railway system together with an increase in the speeds of freight trains. In 1930 the bumb-barge of 1884 was rebuilt with two 5 cylinder 125 hp Sulzer diesels. The barge built in 1887 was reconstructed in 1934 with a pair of 180 hp diesels. At the outbreak of the Second World War train-ferry services were operating between Romanshorn and Friedrichshafen and Lindau. They were suspended during the conflict and only the Romanshorn/Friedrichshafen route was reopened, on the 4th January 1948. Friedrichshafen was bombed in 1944 after which German vessels were taken across to Swiss ports where they were interned, staying until 1949.
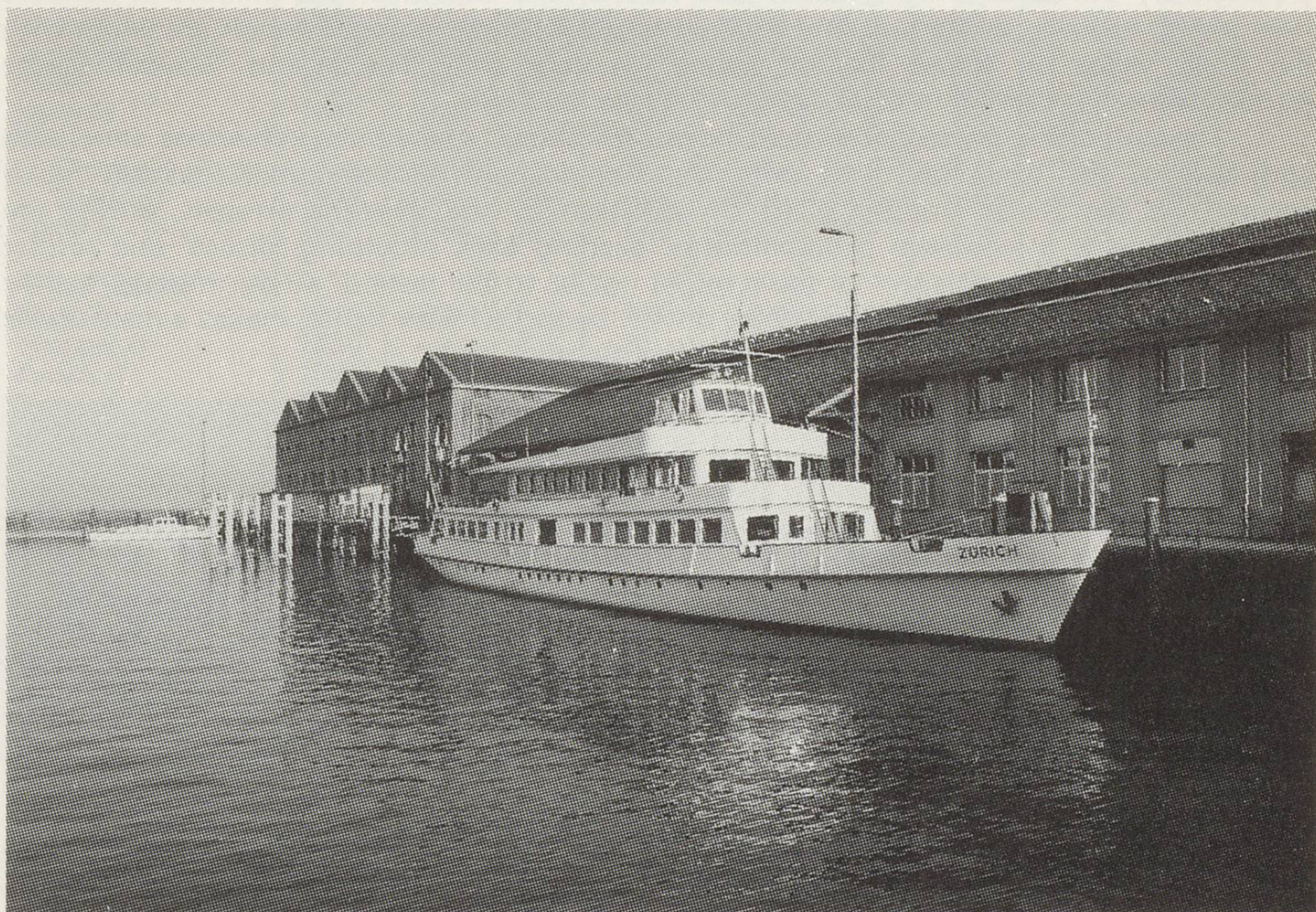
m.v. Zurich at Romanshorn in front of train ferry pier.   Photo: G. Della Gana

The SBB replaced its converted barges with the passenger/railway wagon/road vehicle ferries ROMANSHORN, of 1958 and RORSCHACH, of 1966. However the days of the transport of rolling-stock across the Bodensee were numbered and this the last service was withdrawn at the end of May 1976. At that time up to eight crossings a day were being made. There were three reasons for the abandonment, increased operating costs, fluctuating water levels making loading and unloading difficult and a growing number of wagons that were too large for the ferries. The two vessels are still working between Romanshorn and Friedrichshafen carrying foot passengers and road vehicles. While the ROMANSHORN remains in its original condition and operated by the SBB, the RORSCHACH was extensively rebuilt during 1982/83 and is now run by the Deutsche Bundesbahn (DB) with the name FRIEDRICHSHAFEN as a replacement for their SCHUSSEN of 1929. A detailed description of the rail-ferry operations can be found in chapter 9 of the book 'The Train Ferries of Western Europe' by P. Ransom-Wallis.

Even without train-ferry operations there is still plenty to interest the transport enthusiast on and around the Bodensee. Perhaps because it lacks spectacular mountain scenery this corner of Switzerland does not seem to attract many English speeking tourists. The 'ports' of Romanshorn and Rorschach-Hafen are well worth a visit. At both places the railway comes right along the quay-side. At Rorschach-Hafen there is additional interest provided by a row of hotels and offices their frontages on the west-bound platform. So it is but a short step from train to one of the SBB's fleet of ships. These vessels, SANTIS (II), ST. GALLEN (III), THURGAU (II) and ZÜRICH (II), along with the ROMANSHORN, ply the routes shown on the accompanying map. These ships are basically the same as other Swiss lake vessels of similar size. The colours of the SBB fleet are as follows, white hull and superstructure with red lining. Funnels are white with the Swiss cross on a red 'heater' shield on each side. The legend 'Schweizerische Bundesbahnen' is carried in black lettering across the stern.

The intending passenger should note two things, the sailing schedules vary with each day of the week and that only the Romanshorn/Arbon/Horn/Rorschach leg is covered by the Swiss Holiday Card. In addition to the daytime services, during the summer there is a extensive programme of evening trips providing 'discos' and similar entertainment. Whilst this sort of thing might not be to the taste of all our members, they may well find that a ship on one of these duties, bedecked with lights, makes a memorable sight as it sails out across the lake and into the night.

m.v. Romanshorn at Romanshorn on Bodensee.   Photo: G. Della Gana

Acknowledgements