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Autor: Farmer, Colin

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Swiss Railways Hit The Jubilee Trail

A look into the background of this years celebrations

by Colin Farmer

Festivities are being staged throughout Switzerland this year to mark the 150th anniversary of the country's remarkable railway system. Universally acclaimed as one of the most efficient public transport operations in the world, Swiss railways repeatedly win international polls and praise for their punctuality, cleanliness and reliability.

The first rail route entirely on Swiss soil - inaugurated on August 7, 1847 - was the 23 kilometre stretch from Zurich to Baden. The German-made locomotive was named "Limmat" after the river on which Zurich stands. One hundred and forty invited guests were given an exciting taste of travel of the future.

But the iron monster also met with initial opposition. Critics described the railway as "a satanic invention unsuited to civilised Europe". Doctors warned that the train's "horrendous

velocity" of 50 kilometres an hour would send passengers in to a delirium furiosum - a condition comparable with drunkenness. Farmers were sure their cows would stop giving milk, and wine-growers feared for the quality of their grapes. These were perhaps the first recorded expressions of public concern for the environment in the face of technological progress.

The new service was, however, welcomed by many - and not least by Zurich's high society and their servants. It had previously been the fashion to send domestic staff on the long overnight trek to Baden to purchase a speciality known as the "Spanischbrötli" or Spanish Bun, a delicacy believed to date from Spanish colonial times. The new train service meant that servants could be back in Zurich by breakfast time, with the purchases still warm from the oven. The railway

became popularly known as the Spanisch-Brötli-Bahn - the Spanish Bun Railway - and passed into Swiss history under that name.

Threat to neutrality. The first ever train to operate on Swiss territory had made its maiden trip from France three years earlier in 1844. The route ran from Strasbourg to Basel, only 1.8 kilometres of it on Swiss terrain. But even that was enough to provoke a storm of protest from critics who claimed that the "intrusion" of a foreign train violated Swiss neutrality. Main topics of conversation during those railway pioneering times were the width of gauges - and the narrowness of minds.

These days the Swiss Federal Railways network totals nearly 3000 kilometres. A further 2000 kilometres are operated by 65 private railways across the country. The Swiss are the most frequent train travellers in Europe, with each inhabitant making an average of 41 rail trips (totalling 1798 kilometres) per year - well ahead of Luxembourg, Denmark and Austria. The Japanese are world leaders with 71 trips per year. But if Switzerland's private railways are taken into account, the Swiss beat that figure too.

Three quarters of a million passengers travel by train in Switzerland every day. The nation's railways are so well coordinated with other services - tram, bus, post bus and shipping routes - that some form of public transport is available within a one-mile radius for 97% of all households. Says Swiss Federal Railways Director General Benedikt Weibel: "No other country has a timetable which is as regular and as dense as ours. Nowhere else can you get to such remote regions of the country by buying a train ticket". The punctuality performance is equally impressive. Last year, 95% of Swiss trains arrived on time or no more than five minutes late.

Beer and biscuits. Switzerland's railways have drawn up a 150-event programme of festivities to mark the 150th anniversary of the Spanisch-Brötli-Bahn. The financially-troubled Swiss Federal Railways, which in 1996 operated a deficit of nearly Sfr.6 million a week, has budgeted some Sfr.20 million for the year-long festivities. But this is being covered by sponsors, including a bank, brewery and biscuit company.

Details of the celebrations (open to the public free of charge) are contained in a jubilee

brochure available from most of the 800 stations throughout Switzerland (one was included with the special edition 5/1.1). A replica of the original train is being brought into service, a rolling railshow is visiting 80 towns and cities across the nation, and stations and museums are staging displays, demonstrations and open days.

The bakery industry is making a culinary contribution to the festivities with the creation of a new-style Spanish Bun, on sale at nearly 4000 shops throughout the land. The Swiss Post Office has issued a set of four special stamps, and the Federal Mint has produced a Sfr.20 silver coin. A beautifully illustrated 328 page anniversary book (available in English) is proving a best-seller. And a play has even been written about the role of foreign workers in creating Switzerland's remarkable railway network.

The British Connection. Mining railways were operated in England as early as the 16th century, but the world's first public service railway was inaugurated there in 1825. The inventor was George Stephenson, whose son Robert came to Switzerland in 1850 to help plan this country's railway system. Another British engineer, Charles Brown, began building steam engines at Sulzer Brothers in 1851 and founded the Swiss Locomotive & Machine Works in Winterthur 20 years later. And Britain is the home of the Swiss Railways Society, which was founded in 1980 and whose membership now exceeds 1000 enthusiasts worldwide.

Editors Note:

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