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All Change in the Chablais

Jean-François Andrist reports on a new era on the AOMC line of the Transports Publics du Chablais

First double traction trials on the rack section in Monthey.

All photos: Jean François Andrist

On the 18th October, coming back from the 'Tuesday-gang Work Day' at the Blonay-Chamby Heritage Railway, I took for the first time the 'New' AOMC, or simply 'le tram' as locals say - or used to say, as now they don't speak but look at their smartphones!

Indeed, all traffic was by bus for several weeks during the lower traffic summer holiday period for the Aigle-Monthey adhesion line in the Rhône Valley. For the Monthey – Champéry that climbs up the Val d'Illeiez, where the rack portions are all new (changed from Strub to Abt system), the closure was for several months. On the night of the 7th/8th October the overhead current was switched to 1500V DC (from 750V DC thus rendering all the stock used till that date obsolete). Hence the units on the line are all new, Stadler of course, seven BDeh4/8 EMUs at slightly over CHF6m. Five of these units are needed for the current AOMC timetable, but in the morning and late afternoon, it may be possible that some trains will have two units to accommodate the demand. Much of the line also received new ballast and other infrastructure works, while the at-grade crossing that went through the middle of the busy road junction south of Ollon was completely re-modelled; why be smallish when the money is there! The new stock rides beautifully and has the usual huge scenic windows, but I was surprised to find no doors between each of the two coaches and the motorised centre module, which holds most of the technical equipment. Indeed, as a service train running at this busy hour (dep. Aigle 16.54), which did stop at most of the request halts along the way up to my station of Collombey-Muraz evidenced, when in traction or electric braking mode; this is certainly not a mute piece of equipment, with noticeable 'whizz and buzz' modern

sounds. These new EMUs can, in theory, also run on the ASD but there are issues regarding safe clearances in specific tunnels and a severe speed limitation on the Vanel Viaduct due to the axle loading of the central, heavy, 2/2 motor units.

From now on the lines running close to my family home, the standard-gauge CFF/SBB 'Tonkin Line' between St Maurice and St Gingolf and the metre-gauge TPC/AOMC, will both have only one type of rolling stock on 99.9% of their services, boring and tough for this now elderly rail enthusiast. I remember the incredible variety of stock, going back to the early sixties when I was commuting daily to St Maurice College, first in the comfort of 'La Flèche du Jura' (RAe2/4 No.1010), then later in the notorious non-comfort of both modernised and non-modernised CFF/SBB Be 4/6s. The diversity was even bigger on the AOMC, where each passing 'tram' was worth a look to see what had been assigned to the duty. Because of the long, on-going, closure threats, the whole show was very run down in the 60s and 70s and failures a frequent occurrence. From the 80s onwards, it became slowly more uniform, mainly because fixed-formation EMUs (motor coach + driving trailer) became standard. Shunting at Aigle, Monthey and Champéry largely disappeared outside the winter ski season, or when groups were travelling. For years the peak time half-hourly services on the Rhône Valley 'plaine' between Aigle – Monthey were the domain of the ex BLT Class 100 stock. Bought-in as a stop-gap measure from Basel for about 10 years, they were fast becoming an embarrassment after close to 30 years service. However in the 'En Chalex' workshops these simple and 'increvable' (undefeatable) units were popular - they practically never failed. But they were noisy, at best tatty, at worst 3rdworldish inside, and very hot in summer especially

after having baked for the whole afternoon, notably on the 16.54 from Aigle that I tended to use. One of these is now returning to Basel having been acquired by an enthusiast group there.

I suppose the rail enthusiasts will miss them, but the numerous daily commuters towards the CFF/SBB connection at Aigle will appreciate the air conditioning, the smooth and a bit faster ride, as well as the low level entrance of the new Stadler units. And you, dear readers from across the Channel, too bad that these days, your Swiss Travel Pass will bring you to the same stock all over the Suisse Romande - or even the whole country. The everyday user, and Herr Spuhler (founder and owner of Stadler), will both be pleased. The latter because the Division that makes these new units is called 'Tailor Made' and the margin on them must be better than on the hard fought standard gauge markets for FLIRTs in Europe, where the competition of Siemens, Alstom and Bombardier, not to speak of Polish or Chinese offers, should have a nasty effect on the ultimate profit margin. I know for a fact that - a few years ago - some insiders at the local metre-gauge lines in the French-speaking area of Switzerland tried to encourage the Villeneuve workshops of Bombardier to make an offer for the numerous new trains that have in the meantime been delivered. Bombardier's then management (expat, globalised and with hardly any local links) was not interested, or reacted too late. This, in the very regionalised and politically tightly knit Switzerland, was a capital mistake that does not happen with Herr Spuhler and his (often rail enthusiast) team of engineers and salesmen! The end result is a de-facto monopoly for Stadler in a niche market that in the end is not so small and certainly well capitalised, which seems to have an unending demand for new stock, both in metre and standard gauges.

An unexpected encore was that with only two items of the old (relatively - 2001) stock being refurbished to run on 1,500 V DC - just BDeh 4/8 No.591 + 592, that are also cleared for the ASD - there was to be a massive scrapping exercise in Aigle. This was especially regrettable for a wonderful piece of Swiss technology: the BDeh 4/4s of the famous Nos.11-14 series. New as of 1954 (I remember them as an 8 year old on a presentation parade through Collombey), these mixed adhesion and rack units were still looking good 50 years later, the only issue being perhaps that the passenger compartment noise abatement was not an important issue when they were built. Renumbered Nos.511 to 514 unit 511 was recently scrapped, while the other three somehow survived like old pets protected by the kind and discreet benevolence of their masters and keepers. After all TPC is still a relatively small and locally well-anchored company, where management and employees (or most of them) care. One or two of them were offered to the Blonay-Chamby Heritage Railway by just-retired Director M. Oreiller and these simple machines would be useful, but the B-C has a 'nothing built after 1945' policy. This has been effective at preventing civil wars amongst the members, since everyone has his favourite system - as

In Chemex during the trials, with the Dents du Midi as backdrop. The 7 units each carry the name of one of the peaks in the background.

can be expected the MOB gang is particularly active! So it was looking as if the scrappers would by now have rendered Nos.512 to 514 back to the recycling industry. However, salvation came from a totally unexpected corner. Olivier Geerinck, a Belgian known for his drawings/gouaches of the Swiss metre-gauge scene, persuaded Belgian animal park 'Pari Daiza', who successfully operate an internal 600mm gauge railway, to plan for the construction of a short metre-gauge line to link a SNCB station to the park entrance. As Olivier is an absolute AOMC fan, and since the units have none of the smart, but quickly outdated (with no spares available) electronic gadgets, nor any asbestos, the three units were sold for CHF1 each and as of mid-October were heading north. Two flat wagons ex-AOMC, and a box van ex-ASD, should follow. Since the line has to be electrified two old MOB 'consoles' were gifted by the Blonay-Chamby to the new venture to be used as potential models for new ones. It was realised that, except for the on street portion in Aigle which is still in daily use by ASD, none of the stylish old catenary support of either the ASD or AOMC had been kept during the very recent modernisation of the overhead equipment. So - in a few years time - we will have to go to Belgium to ride in these mythical old trains.

The TPC's modernisation project covering all their lines was possibly inevitable, but it has resulted in these local lines losing a lot of their character. An example is the replacement of their overhead line equipment to the standard, heavy duty obtrusive catenary found all over Switzerland. Was this absolutely necessary everywhere, notably on the stretches where the speed does not exceed 40kph or in stations? Look at a picture of Les Avants on the MOB before and after - a shame! But neither the Federal Office for Transport (Bundesamt für Verkehr, that is also known as Bundesamt für Verhinderung - Federal Office for Obstruction!), nor the civil engineers seem to have much understanding for such sensibilities, which should be much more valued as a part of maintaining our environment and not covering everything under concrete and standard galvanised steel catenary poles. The keen observer will have noticed that it is only in the vicinity of the castle of Aigle on the ASD that the OHE structures have been painted green, but only because the Vaud Department of Culture and Environment insisted on it. +

Jean-François Andrist is the immediate Past President of the Blonay-Chamby Heritage Railway.

