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The Swiss Automobile Industry

Biographical notes:

Claude Zweiacker is 45 and works in the Education Department of the Canton of Neuchâtel as deputy head of the Service for Secondary Schooling. By way of leisure occupation he writes for the «Feuille d'Avis de Neuchâtel» and the «Bulletin des Communes du District de Neuchâtel.»

It really existed. In parts it still exists!

The Swiss Navy is made fun of. Unjustly. Our country has a small ocean-going fleet. And the Swiss automobile industry? It, too, knew glorious times. It still exists ... just a little of it!

At the beginning of this century

With the motor-car it is not quite as simple as with the locomotive. There the historians are agreed that the Englishman, George

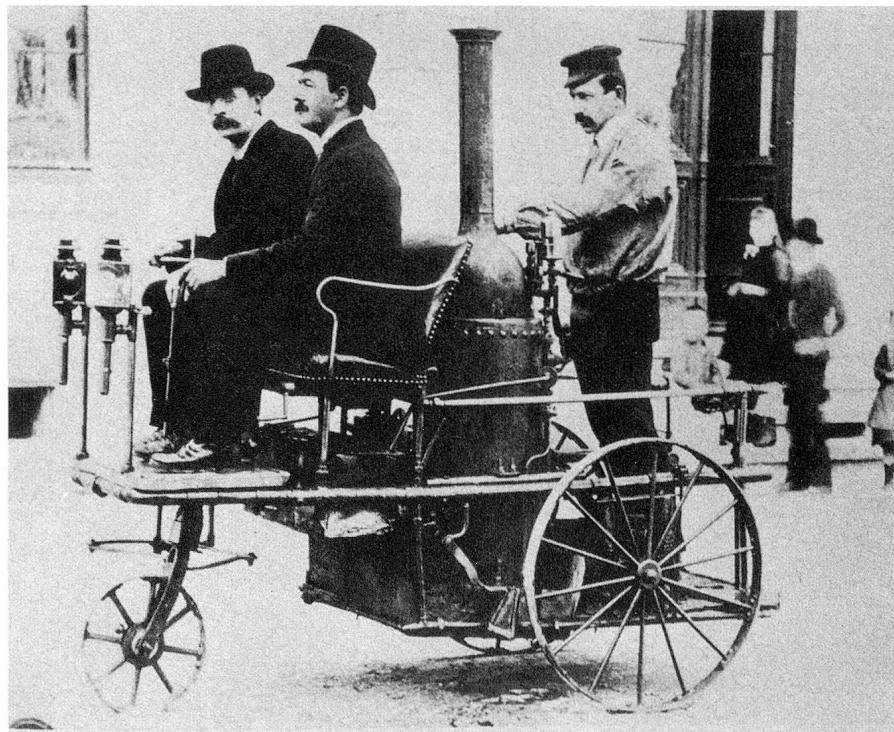
Stephenson, made the first model. The creation of the motor-car industry was a joint venture. Many Swiss are considered promoters of the industry whose development in the last quarter of the century is generally known.

Being fully conversant with precision mechanics and full of trust in the future of a new manner of locomotion, a good two dozen engineers launched themselves into the construction of the motor-car at the beginning of this century.

Against the wind

But the motor-car found resistance in all countries. The Swiss Automobile Club, for instance, recommends its members in 1912 «to avoid certain parts of the country where people are autophobic». In many parts, the local police installed special car traps. In the worst cases, drivers

One of the steamdriven cars of the brothers Meyer (1884).



were attacked with pitchforks, or they were threatened with liquid manure, or stones were thrown at them. In the Grisons, all motor traffic was prohibited till 1928.

In spite of these hostilities, the first Swiss exhibition for cars and bicycles was held in Geneva from 29th April to 7th May 1905. This later became the «Salon de l'automobile». In that year, about 100 cars were produced in Switzerland.

Steam engines

In 1884, the brothers Gottfried and Heinrich Mayer from Horgen constructed cars driven by steam. Such a model could reach Zurich within an hour, carrying three to five passengers.

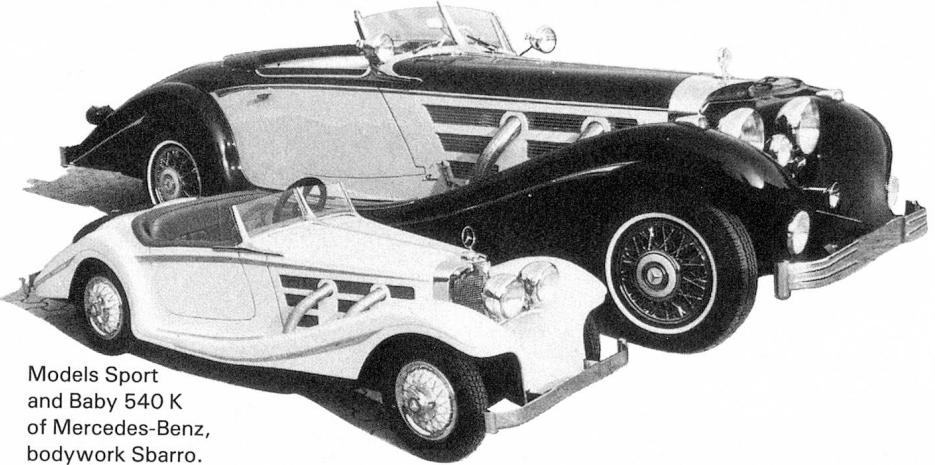
On the front page of the «New York Herald»

In 1904, the brothers Charles and Frédéric Dufaux from Geneva made headlines in the «New York Herald» with the heading: «Success of the Brothers Dufaux in the construction of automobiles». That year, Frédéric Dufaux won the Swiss distance record over one kilometer in 31 seconds, i.e. 115km.

Of Dufaux's four racing cars, two have been preserved: One is in the Swiss Transport Museum in Lucerne, the other is part of the famous collection of the brothers Schlumpf in Mulhouse.

Some are unforgettable

Switzerland has known a few other personalities comparable to the brothers Dufaux. The names mentioned are but a few amongst many. In 1914, Franz Brozincevic, from Croatia, constructed a make, known today as FBW (Franz Brozincevic, Wetzikon). In Biel, the brothers Charles and Fritz Henrion made a name for themselves as inventors



Models Sport
and Baby 540 K
of Mercedes-Benz,
bodywork Sbarro.

of the «first and only Swiss system of durable vehicles». Since 1916, Geneva had real industrial car production by the company of Piccard, Pictet & Co, under the trade name of «Pic-Pic». The firm remained in being until 1923 and employed up to 7500 people during the First World War.

In Arbon, Adolphe Saurer produced his first vehicles in 1897. That was the beginning of one of the most important undertakings in our country.

The American company «General Motors» did well out of buying the firm of the brothers Chevrolet who had come to Detroit from La Chaux-de-Fonds and founded their works in 1912.

From its finest jewel to its model designer

The car manufacturers Martini, the «first and oldest Swiss make» was established in Saint-Blaise from 1903 to 1934 and built some 2000 vehicles. Twenty of these evaded destruction; twelve «Martini» models were shown during an exhibition in the old halls of the factory in February 1983. The display caused surprisingly great interest, and visitors came from all Cantons and even from abroad.

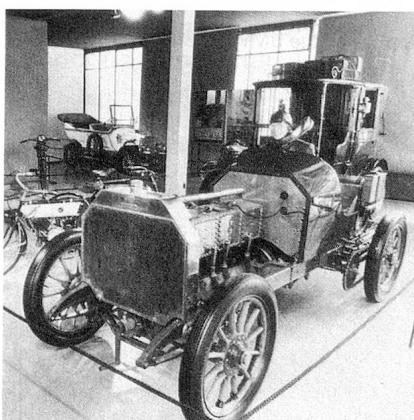
Nowadays practically no cars are built in Switzerland any more. Yet there are still some individual constructors, autodidacts, individualists, admirers.

Historical reminiscences

The Martini Company established itself at Saint-Blaise in 1903, after it had already manufactured instruments for bookbinding, weapons and explosives in Frauenfeld since 1860. As a great discovery in those days, Friedrich von Martini had invented amongst other things a rifle which could be loaded by way of a breech. His patent is still used today in certain competition weapons.

The company knew ups and downs and found itself in a precarious financial position more than once. But it succeeded time and again to launch new models which appealed greatly to buyers from within Switzerland and from abroad.

The brothers Dufaux's racing-car (1904).





Poster of the automobile Society PIC-PIC (1910).

Two contemporaries remember...

Two men concerned with Martini at the time go down memory lane: Luigi Pecchio, at the age of 80, living in the suburb Serrières near Neuchâtel, and Léon Fleuty, aged 89, the last workman left of the Martini staff living at the «Cité Martini» near Marin. «The Martini models were popular particularly during the war of 1914–1918; we made field vehicles for the Swiss Army». Luigi Pecchio calls to mind his timetable: «From 6.30 to noon, and from 1.30 to 6.30 in

the evening, and on Saturday till 5 p.m.»

Replica of the BMW 328 from Sbarro.



Risky undertakings

In 1903, a rich Irishman offered Fr. 26000.– for whoever reached the Rochers de Naye first in a car! This challenge was accepted by the Vaudois Ernest Cuénod in a Martini car. He followed the railway line and reached his goal without difficulty.

«No puncture, no accident, neither to the motor nor the «Continental» tyres which were round the wheels and which withstood the violent vibration caused by the cogged-wheel-like propelling movement.» Thus run the statement in the official report of the dangerous expedition. Subsequently, the car was exhibited at Crystal Palace in London.

In 1906, Federal President Forrer attended the official opening of the «Salon de l'automobile» in Geneva.

In 1910, the President of the French Republic, Monsieur Armand Fallières, was received by the Federal Council. A contemporary newspaper carried a report after an excursion in a Martini to the surroundings of Berne: «Monsieur A. Fallières kindly complimented the organizers of the trip on the happy choice of the car» we congratulate the Martini Company on this success in the name of all Swiss automobilists, a success which showed Swiss manufacture in the best possible light to our guests, for all six cars of the cortège were Martinis.»

Model designers for motorcars

Although the recession of the 'thirties put an end so early in the century to the Swiss car industry, some individuals were courageous enough to continue the work. After his apprenticeship with Saurer in Arbon, Peter Monteverdi began to build fascinating models in Binningen near Basle in 1959: sports-cars and luxury cars in small series.

The same thing can be said for Georges Filipinetti from Geneva.



The model Monteverdi 375, built in 1968 in 40 copies.

Photos: E. Schmid, «Voitures suisses», Edita SA, Lausanne, 1978 and Verkehrshaus Luzern

Franco Sbarro originating from Lecce in Southern Italy runs a very special plant in Grandson. He is a real artist in the creation of cars. For him, motor-cars are the fruit of a love-match between the

client and the producer – he creates cars to measure.

At the «Salon de l'automobile» in Geneva last March, these models made the greatest possible impression... *Claude Zweicker*

Museum of the Swiss Abroad: Innovations at the Castle of Penthes

The museum of the Swiss abroad is successfully engaged in preserving contributions made by Swiss citizens to the military, cultural, political and economic history of the various continents. It has just opened seven new rooms. The room named after Jean-Louis Burckhardt (1784–1817) represents the Age of Enlightenment and is devoted to crusaders, pilgrims, travellers, explorers, missionaries, archaeologists and cartographers.

Diplomats, Counsellors, Ministers, Governors and Viceroys form the theme of the room named after Frederick Haldimand.

Numerous graphic designers, painters, musicians, engravers and mint-masters are to be found in the room named after Johann-Heinrich Füssli, whilst the room of philosophers and scientists is named after Albrecht von Haller.

And finally, the room Maria-Sibylle Merian, (painter 1647–1717) is devoted to the memory of famous Swiss women abroad.

The Castle of Penthes in its beautiful park and with its important collection depicting the history of our compatriots abroad offers an unique opportunity for an excursion. You will be very welcome.

Its address: Château de Penthes
Ch. Impératrice 18
CH-1292 Prégny-Chambésy

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