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Saved from the scrap-heap

The «Blümlisalp» Saga

There she lies, lonely and abandoned, laid up in the delta of the Kander River, behind a trelliswork fence: no traces remain of the former splendour of the paddle-steamship «Blümlisalp» – still affectionately referred to in the local dialect as «Blüemlere».

For many years, the future of the «Blümlisalp» has hung in the balance. Some opponents of her preservation would have liked to see her scrapped already at the beginning of the '70s, while her supporters have ever since 1971 been moving heaven and earth to have her saved, renovated, repaired and put once again to «active service». The chances of the latter group are more favourable today than ever. Work has already started on the overhauling and reconditioning of the hull.

Once the pride of the fleet of pleasure steamships on the lake of Thun, the «Blümlisalp» was taken into service on July 31 1906, in a festive celebration of the very first passenger steamer to ply that lake, an event marking the start of a new era. And it was only after 65 years as Switzerland's last seaworthy steamer using coal as fuel that she was taken out of commission and laid up. The «Blümlisalp» had long been regarded as the ideal vessel for excursions on the lake, in fine weather and especially on Sundays. At the time of her launching she was far superior in size, comfort and performance to most Swiss steamships and the pride and joy of her then owners. On her maiden voyage all the members of the Government of the Canton of Berne were on board!

A tug-of-war over a steamship

The good ship Blümlisalp had an overall length of 60 metres (nearly 200 feet), a beam

width of 13 metres (43 feet), a displacement of 300 tons and a top speed of 26.3 kilometres per hour (roughly 14.2 knots). And on August 1, 1971, after sailing for exactly 256,493 kilometres or almost 160,000 miles, she was withdrawn from service. It looked as though her fate had been sealed. But at «five to twelve», and at very short notice, a group of a dozen prominent citizens from the political scene and the economy of Thun joined forces and succeeded in securing a concession from the owners, namely the Berne-Lötschberg-Simplon railway (the BLS), for the scrapping of the ship to be postponed for a while, so that plans could be made for the future of the erstwhile «dream-ship». So in May 1975, she was towed into the Kander delta, to what were to be her moorings for the next 14 years. But the tug-of-war over the fate of the former luxury vessel was still far from having been settled.

A gloomy outlook

In the meantime, a co-operative association called the «Genossenschaft Vaporama» was founded, and its members removed all valuable items from the hull: steering gear, lamps, speaking tubes, name-plates, the panelling of the saloon and so on were taken away to be stored in a safe place. This precaution was fully justified, as the «Blümlisalp» soon became a favourite target for vandals.

The Vaporama association came up with a new plan in November 1983, whereby money would be collected to finance the necessary repairs and rehabilitation so that the steamer could then be placed at the disposal of the BLS for putting her into operation anew. But the BLS, though expressing gratitude for the offer, declined to accept it.

The wind changes....

Meanwhile, a change occurred: in nautical terms, the general weather situation altered and the «Blüemlere» came to benefit from a tail-wind. A popular «initiative» was launched to petition for measures to ensure the preservation of Switzerland's last paddle-steamer. This campaign proved a big success, and in March 1988 no fewer than

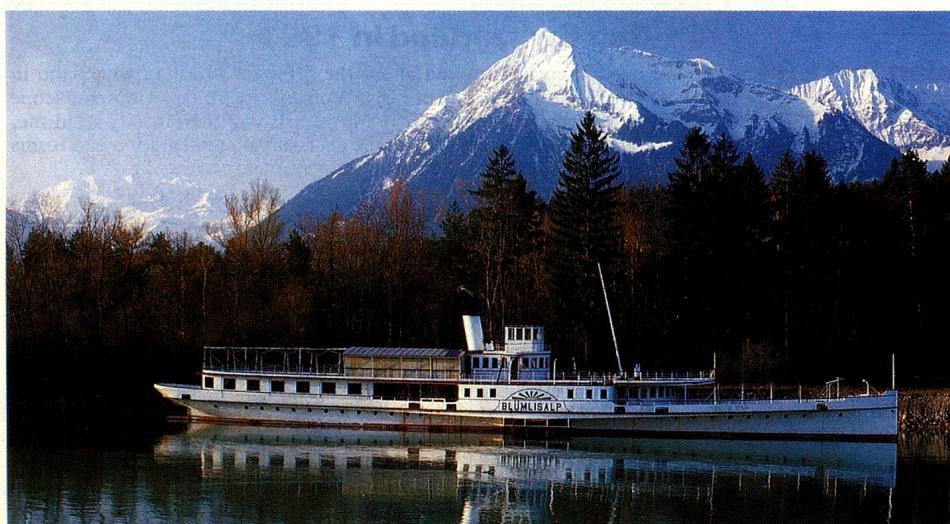
Obviously, further donations to the fund for saving the «Blümlisalp» will at all times be very welcome, and can be paid in to «Dampf für die Blümlisalp», Vaporama, Fließerweg 11, CH-3600 Thun, whose Postal Cheque Account is No. 30-50-1.

40,000 authenticated signatures were collected and handed in to the Federal authorities in Berne.

Regeneration is close at hand!

The current carefully revised estimate of cost reckons on a total expenditure of Sfr. 7 million, a figure which includes Sfr. 600,000 for the smaller makeshift dock and Sfr. 300,000 for training of staff. Thus a net amount of about Sfr. 6.1 million would be left for the actual cost of the reconditioning – little more than half of what had originally been deemed necessary. So the date for the definitive «regeneration» of the «Blüemlere» is rapidly coming nearer. The fund-raising collection started in the autumn of last year for saving the old steamship has by now already brought in Sfr. 1.8 million, made up of more than 12,000 individual donations.

By the summer of 1992, 21 years after the «Blümlisalp» was «mustered out», it is hoped that she will set forth on her second maiden voyage. One person, among countless others who will celebrate the occasion, is Rudolf Aeberhard, who for many years had been the captain of this luxury vessel, and who had steered her on his last voyage. He says: «You know, she was my first great love, and she still is...». In other words, an old flame never dies. *Markus Senn*



The good ship «Blümlisalp», laid up in the delta of the river Kander. (Photo: M. Senn)