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# The Swiss Observer

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## HOME NEWS

Liberal increases in the annual subsidies to several institutions are proposed by the Zurich town council: the children's holiday fund is to receive Frs. 120,000 (an increase of Frs. 20,000), the educational department of the Schweiz. Kaufm. Verein (Soc. Suisse des Commerçants) Frs. 120,000 (an increase of Frs. 30,000), and Frs. 40,000 is to be allotted for a scholastic exhibition in connection with next year's Pestalozzi anniversary.

A new block of buildings, housing the post, railway and customs services, is to be constructed on the Kasernenquai in Zurich, for which purpose the two Federal Houses are to vote a credit of slightly over eight million francs.

Gigantic efforts are being made by the Swedish match trust to exterminate the competition of the Swiss factories by underselling the home manufacturers.

A savings-book with an initial payment of Frs. 5 is to be presented by the Kantonalbank to every infant born after January 1st next in the canton of Thurgau.

Mr. Tommaso Moroni-Stampa, who died recently at Lugano, bequeathed Frs. 50,000 to the local hospital, Frs. 15,000 to the orphanage, Frs. 5,000 to the Institution for the Blind and similar organisations. His residence, the value of which is estimated to be about Frs. 300,000, is to form the nucleus of a fund for the provision of bursaries to deserving Catholic students in the domain of theology, sculpture and painting.

Knocked down in the darkness by a cart, Dekan Dr. Anton Schmid, aged 87, of Muotathal (Schwytz) succumbed to his injuries in the local hospital.

A conflagration, which majestically illuminated the region from the Jungfrau down to Interlaken, attacked and partially consumed five large buildings in the well-known touring resort Mürren last Thursday evening (Nov. 18th). The fire is supposed to have started in the laundry rooms of the Hotel Edelweiss (30 beds) which latter was reduced to ashes, and communicated itself to the Hotel des Alpes (80 beds) on the opposite side of the mountain slope, and subsequently spread over to the Palace Hotel (150 beds). The two last-named establishments belong to the touring agency directed by Sir Henry Lunn, and whilst the first became a prey to the flames the Palace was saved, but suffered considerable damage through water. In addition to three large barns, the neighbouring "Amstutz" stores, the photographic ateliers "Martin" and the local tourist offices were laid waste. The Föhn was blowing at the time at an exceptional rate, and the efforts of the fire brigades were hampered by scarcity of water. It was five o'clock on Friday morning, eight hours after the outbreak, when the flames were subdued in Mürren, but the adjoining fir forest "Fluhwald" was still ablaze; fortunately at 10 o'clock torrential rains set in, which completed the work of the firemen. No lives have been lost, the only residents in the hotels, which were being prepared for the winter season, being a few members of the permanent staff.

A spectacular fire caused through a short circuit and following an explosion in the store-room of a film company destroyed last Wednesday (Nov. 17th) a small building used partly for business and partly residential purposes, situated in the Schneidergasse, the centre of the town of Basle. Thanks to the absence of wind, the fire brigade was able to prevent the spreading of the flames to adjoining property in this thickly populated district.

## NOTES AND GLEANINGS.

Here is another article from the "Times" (Nov. 13th) dealing with **Swiss Transport Problems** and the external difficulties which bar the way to a natural development.

The position of the Swiss railways is none too brilliant. The era of deficits is not at an end.

In order to avoid too serious a rivalry on the part of the motor-car and particularly the commercial lorry the Federal Railway Department has subscribed 51 per cent. of the capital of a new enterprise known as the "Sesa," the object of which is to organize commercial transport services in connexion with the Government railways. The commercial and industrial interests are reserving their judgment with regard to this semi-official enterprise, and questions on the subject are being asked in the Federal Chambers.

On the other hand, the electrification of the lines has given rise to no criticism whatever. The capital invested in the rolling stock and equipment at present exceeds 500,000,000f. Had it not been for the conversion ten years ago, the Government would have had to spend an enormous sum on steam locomotives. The estimated net cost of working for 1927 is 271,000,000f., which, it is calculated, would have been exceeded by 19,000,000f. if the lines were still operated by steam. Economies were effected more especially in connexion with the actual running and maintenance, the sum saved in this way, chiefly in wages, being given as 16,000,000f. The receipts would have been 32,000,000f. less if operation by steam were still in effect, but, on the other hand, interest charges would have been 30,000,000f. less. There was thus a net profit of 2,000,000f. The management considers this result satisfactory, particularly in view of the fact that a large part of the electrical equipment now being used was bought during the war at extraordinarily high prices, and at a time when money was very dear.

Switzerland's facilities in overseas trade are still the subject of active negotiations in various directions. In connexion with the port extensions at Antwerp, an offer for an area of 1,000 acres has been made by a Swiss group, which would bear the expense of constructing a tunnel under the river and endeavour to obtain authority to construct a free port. A Cabinet Committee has just entrusted the examination of these proposals to a special commission.

For a long while the Swiss Ocean and the Bordeaux-Odesa committees have been working with a view to increasing the ocean outlets for Switzerland's overseas trade. The French railway companies (P.L.M. and Paris-Orleans) have promised to consider the possibility of improving the time-tables, routes, and tariffs on their systems. It is worth mentioning, in view of its interest to Great Britain, that goods of Swiss origin destined for Brazil or the Argentine are shipped to Southampton, whereas the natural port would be Bordeaux. Switzerland now is devoting more attention to the latter port than she has done in the past. During the last six months the Commercial Association of Bordeaux-Bassins has received consignments of more than 16,000 tons of grain for the Federal Government. The Atlantic traffic is not likely, however, to eclipse the Rhine traffic, which in fact is growing more important every year. Attempts are being made to ensure that traffic up to Basel shall be uninterrupted for at least 320 days in the year, and that this continuity shall be attained for at least five years running; but in order to obtain this result the Rhine must be regularized. The speed of transport on the river is growing, a barge from Basel loaded with wheat having recently made a record of 11 days between Rotterdam and Basel in spite of the low water.

## Electrical Energy.

Most interesting and eulogistic statements with reference to the electrical industry in Switzerland were made by Prof. F. Pacon in the course of his presidential address to the South Wales Branch of Mechanical Engineers on Nov. 9th. The following excerpts are re-printed from a report which appeared in the *Engineer* (Nov. 12th):—

You may think it sounds dreadful to hear that engineers are busy transforming Switzerland into a vast power station of an ultimate capacity of some 8,000,000 horse-power; but the Alpine structure is on too vast a scale to suffer appreciable disfigurement. The fact is that Switzerland, although a highly industrialised country, is free from man-made ugliness. Even buildings for purely industrial purposes rarely offend the eye.

As Sir Archibald Barr once pointed out:—"The works of the engineer are to be used by some people; they have to be endured by all. Taking the highest view of our calling—and surely we do not hold that ours is in any sense a sordid or selfish vocation—the engineer fails in

the fulfilment of his duty in so far as his works are detrimental to the health or destructive to the property of the community, or in so far as they are unnecessarily offensive to any of the senses of those who are compelled to live with them. There has been too great a neglect of such considerations. The medical practitioner is held negligent of his duty if he acts solely in the interests of his patient, and does not take due precaution to guard against the spread of disease or the offence of the community by the exhibition of unsightly forms. We should take as high a view of our responsibilities."

My impression is that this exhortation is largely superfluous in the case of Swiss engineers. The aesthetic side is put last, but it is not lost sight of. This applies to machinery as well as buildings. It was a Swiss designer of steam turbines who remarked to me:—"We strive to attain safety, reliability, efficiency, economy and convenience by scientific design, appropriate materials and first-class workmanship, and having attained these essentials, we are not content until we feel we have also secured a pleasing appearance."

To-day the electrical method may be said to have completely solved the problem of the transmission and distribution of power. As regards the storage of power, however, the electrical method of secondary batteries still falls as far short of power supply requirements as the flying ropes of Schaffhausen would fail in the now commonplace feat of transmitting thousands of horse-power hundreds of miles and incidentally hitching up dozens of power stations to millions of consumers.

Switzerland is up against the storage of energy problem in a much more acute way than any other country in the world. Wherever power is derived from the combustion of fuel man can regulate the combustion more or less to suit the demand for power. But Switzerland wants to live entirely on her native power from falling water. Nature decides when this shall occur, and her moods bear no relation to the habits of man. The Rhine refuses to flow full bore from 8 a.m. till noon and then knock off for lunch. The glaciers refuse to melt in the winter, which is the season of heaviest demand for light and heating. The hour to hour variations of load throughout the day, and the discordant month-to-month variations throughout the year of both supply and demand call for power storage on a colossal scale. The Waeggital works is the latest and boldest attempt to solve the storage problem. The town of Zurich and the North-Eastern Power Company of Switzerland have combined in an expenditure of over £3,000,000 to store about 50,000,000 kilowatt-hours during the summer months for use in the winter. It has involved huge impounding works for creating a lake storing 140,000,000 tons of water at an elevation of about 1,500ft. above the tail race of the lower power station.

These works are a fine engineering feat. Whether they are a fine piece of economic folly I shall not discuss further than to mention that one does not have to travel far to meet Swiss engineers who regard them in that light. It is certainly amazing to think that in this enlightened age we are still without a neater substitute for a coal pile of 50,000 tons than that of an artificial lake high up in the mountains. It is really humiliating that if there does not happen to be a convenient mountain handy with a large, almost closed pocket within its folds, the problem of storing the electrical energy we can release by burning 50,000 tons of coal in any ordinary steam power station cannot possibly be bottled up again for future use for six months or even six seconds. Surely a cheap and neat solution of the storage of power comparable in its compactness with combustible fuel is one of the major engineering problems now pressing for solution.

I have said that Switzerland is the country hardest up against this problem of energy storage. That is the position to-day; but it may be our position to-morrow, for energy storage is the real crux of utilising tidal power.

If the Severn barrage scheme matures—and the Government Committee charged with the investigation has just declared that a *prima facie* case for it has been made out—we are promised 500,000 horse-power during a ten-hour day, or 30 per cent. more than the power generated by Niagara. This would render the Severn estuary more famous than Niagara or the Rhine, for it would be the first great conquest of tidal power.