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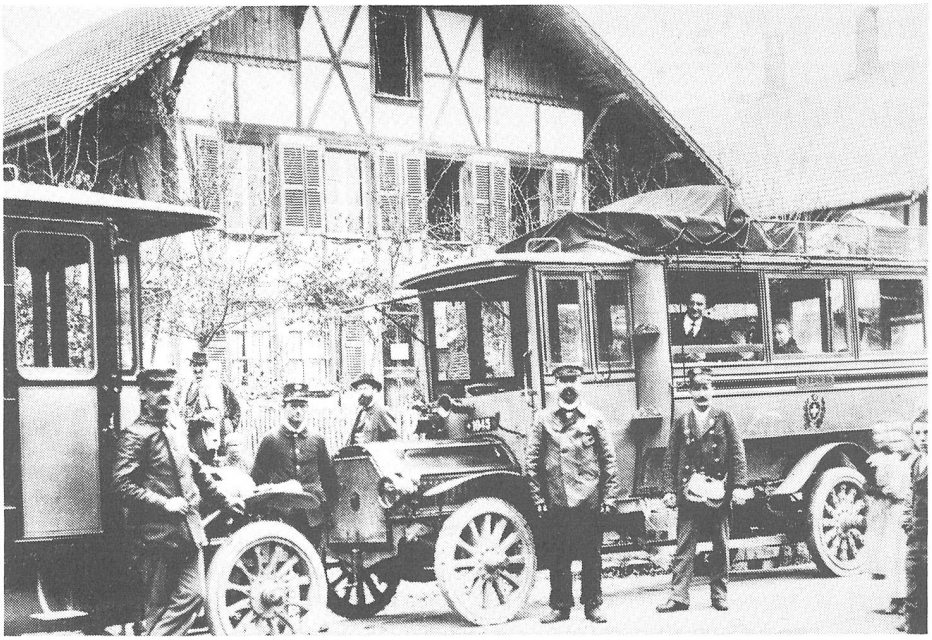
COLIN FARMER ventures down the historic highways and byways of Switzerland's Postal Passenger Bus Service.



The first Swiss Postal Passenger Bus in 1906 – called "Granny" by the locals

To paradise by Postbus

MORE than 2,000 years ago Hannibal crossed the Alps with his elephants. These days it's easier by Swiss Postal Passenger Bus – a unique service that has just celebrated its 75th anniversary.

For centuries, travel over the Alps was a highly hazardous venture, fraught with danger and uncertainty.

When the first postal messengers footed their way over the primitive passes some 700 years ago they had to make the difficult climb carrying loads of up to 50 pounds on their back. The terrain was tortuous, with the constant threat of avalanches, landslides and other natural disasters – not to mention marauding bandits and civil strife, fairly frequent in those days.

At times of plague and pestilence, the postman still had to deliver mail to the stricken recipients. He handed over the letters at the end of a long stick, to avoid infection.

And then there were the evil spirits. In those days a hunter or a cowherd never simply went "missing". Few folk believed that a person had been swept away by an avalanche or struck by lightning. They saw far more in a man's disappearance than mere accident. No – the evil spirits were to blame!

Giants might be responsible for the death of one man, and witches would cast spells on another. Someone else would be trampled to death by ghostly horses. Fiery dragons flew over the mountain peaks, swooping down only to devour men and cattle alive.

In the very early days of tourism, an eccentric and well-to-do Englishman – a certain Mr Miller from Liverpool – had himself carried over the Gotthard Pass in a sedan chair. In fact, in the early 18th century such style of transport over the Alps was not so unusual. People travelled at a far more leisurely pace than the tourists of today, and the portly ones paid well for the luxury.

A passenger of average build required at least six porters, and up to eight were needed for any heavier person. And when the task proved too much for human strength, sturdy mountain mules were used to plod sure-footed over the narrowest of trails.

In 1775 another agreeably crazy Englishman, the mineralogist Charles Greville, made a wager that he could get across the Alps in a mule-drawn carriage. And he won. In addition to the mule, four men were hired to help pull the carriage and another four to push.

Over the toughest parts, the carriage had to be dismantled and carried piece by piece. When Greville completed his journey, it had taken him seven full days to cover a distance which a Swiss Postal Passenger Bus can now accomplish in seven hours.

The first real road over the Alps was built by Napoleon in the early 19th century. Requiring a route over which he could transport his heavy cannons from France to Italy, he chose the Simplon Pass across which a narrow and primitive track had already been built.

The Simplon was for Napoleon the shortest route and the lowest in altitude in the Alps. When the road was completed in 1805 it had taken up to 30,000 men five years to build. Its width of between eight and 11 feet was, in those days, an outstanding achievement, and meant that a vehicle could get across the Alps for the first time.

It was in 1906 that the Swiss Post Office opened its first pioneering post-bus routes – from the capital, Berne, to two outlying villages. The buses took more than an hour to complete a 10-mile journey, and breakdowns were frequent.

The vehicles – christened "Granny" by the locals – seated 14 passengers on long, uncomfortable benches and ran on solid tyres over bumpy roads. But nobody expected comfort, and the public was over-awed at this exciting taste of future travel.

In 1923 came another breakthrough – the first bus with pneumatic tyres – and by the 1930s the Swiss Postal Passenger Bus Service had extended to most of the Alpine pass routes. But the real expansion came after the Second World War, and over the last 20 years alone the annual passenger total has increased spectacularly from 26 million to 63 million – 10 times the population of Switzerland.

The service is now the largest road transport enterprise operating in Switzerland. The entire fleet totals 1,300 streamlined vehicles, operating on 600 routes over a nationwide network of nearly 5,000 miles. That's longer than all the lines of the Swiss Federal Railways and private railways combined.

The bright yellow buses cover a daily distance equal to three times round the earth, and an annual mileage totalling more than 100 times from the earth to the moon.

More than half the passengers are Swiss season-ticket holders – schoolchildren and workers who travel the same, short local routes every day.

But many a foreign tourist here has travelled the highways and byways on the longer-distance routes of the Postal Passenger Bus Service, discovering the many delights of Switzerland, from city centres to remote Alpine villages, from snow-capped peak to palm tree paradise.