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Modelling Swiss Railways; Making a start

by Peter Marriott, photos by author

It could be said that the Swiss railway network is too varied and too expensive for railway modellers! Too varied because it makes the choice of railway company and location difficult to decide upon unless you are firmly committed to, say, the RhB, MOB or SBB and too expensive because there is such a variety of quality railway models tempting our cash or credit cards. Whilst I'm sure no-one will complain about the former, the second is unfortunately a fact of the mid 1990's.

My personal interest in Switzerland was sparked some 25 years ago when we visited Interlaken on an "eight European countries in ten days coach tour" family holiday and whilst my railway modelling activities have taken place over a similar period it is only in the last five years that I've actually modelled anything Swiss. It appears to me (and I stand to be corrected) that whilst interest in prototype Swiss railways is quite widespread, the number of people actually producing Swiss based layouts or dioramas in

Above: First attempt at a diorama using Bemo rolling stock and sommerfeldt catenary.

Britain is relatively small. There are few familiar (worthy) Swiss layouts on the exhibition circuit and several more new ones appear each year in the model railway press but is it true that many more are collectors rather than modellers? The same could be said of, say, French or German layouts - their layouts are few but the number of models sold is not inconsequential.

A few years ago I came across a couple of articles in Eisenenbahn Zeitschrift (regrettably now defunct) which inspired me to begin Swiss modelling and recently I began to wonder why it took me so long to get started! What follows are some of the reasons I used to delay the first steps in Swiss modelling together with my present observations as to whether any were valid or just excuses!

Following a visit to the Transport Museum at Luzern I gained the impression that only a huge



Above: First continuous run layout, Bemo and Sommerfeldt, again.

layout conveying the spirit of the St. Gotthard spirals would fulfil a wish to reproduce a part of the Swiss railway network in miniature. That was reinforced by the relatively large HOM layouts of Disentis and Filisur which were exhibited in various parts of the UK a few years ago. It was only when I saw several dioramas representing FO/RhB and SBB practice in the above magazine that it occurred to me that a considerable number of modellers in Europe prefer to produce well detailed dioramas (sometimes forming part of an integrated layout) rather than "complete" layouts. This became even more apparent on visiting model railway exhibitions in both Switzerland and Holland.

Once the "big is best" idea had left me I decided to have a go at a small FO based diorama. At last I had reached the conclusion that building something along Swiss lines (sorry about the pun) would be better than merely dreaming of an extensive layout and instead settle for something a little more realistic.

The second delaying factor was my apprehension at the task of building catenary.

All those wires, masts, insulators and intricate soldering! In hindsight I enjoyed this part of the diorama construction more than anything because the difference the catenary makes to the overall visual impression is enormous and the job satisfaction is likewise. It is worth studying prototype catenary construction, and reading and rereading the Sommerfeldt catalogue and wiring guide before the project is commenced. Use your longest item of rolling stock to test the mast clearance required and plan the positioning of the masts before the baseboard is built - masts waving in fresh air do not provide a stable catenary system!

After some 20 years of railway modelling in 00 gauge the idea of starting narrow gauge modelling brought feelings of trepidation but of course it is not necessary to model Swiss railways using metre gauge (or similar) because much of the rail network is standard gauge. I suppose my reluctance to model Swiss railways



Above: First HO layout using Hag, Roco, Faller buildings modified and Sommerfeldt catenary.

in standard gauge stemmed from the erroneous notion that all that's typically Swiss should be modelled in H0m or Nm. Whilst it is evident that many modellers and prototype enthusiasts are drawn to the narrow gauge lines, the SBB or BLS standard gauge lines offer alternative constructional challenges and are now a refreshing change from the familiar H0m or RhB or FO layouts.

Another stumbling block to my joining "Swiss modellers" was the apparent lack of research material in the English language. But how the past few years have changed this. There are now more excellent video programs produced than our wallets can stand, some fine pictorial photographic albums carry captions in English. Platform 5 publishes its "Swiss Railways" motive power book with both English and French text and their "Todays Railways" magazine contains current information about all European networks.

In my five years of Swiss modelling I've subsequently built one FO diorama, one small continuous run FO layout, moved on to a larger SBB/BLS standard gauge continuous run layout and my fourth Alpmatten project is at drawing

board stage - it may integrate both H0m and HO lines. Experience gained on the earlier basic diorama and layouts has now provided me with the confidence to tackle something a little more ambitious. We'll see what transpires in due course.....

I do profess to be a proficient "Swiss modeller" and my only regret is that I did not start modelling earlier - I would not be having to pay such prices for models today assuming I'd already built up a motive power fleet!

It is my hope that these few words may encourage someone or other to commence work on a Swiss railway modelling project he (or she) has been promising themselves. After all, it may be the first step towards that ultimate layout!

Good building?

Peter Marriott