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THE VEREINIGTE BERN WORB BAHNEN

by Ron Smith

One of Switzerland's smaller railways celebrates its 100th birthday, this year. At first glance it could be taken for a tramway, especially with its, modern low floor articulated tram type trains, but it is an urban railway with a growing importance and dynamism.

The railway performs a vital role in serving the satellite towns to the East of Bern. The first railway to traverse the area was opened in 1857 when the Ost - West Bahn linked Bern with Langnau via Gumligen, a line which subsequently went through to Luzern.

This line bypassed the valley where Muri and Worb are situated, and to avoid being disadvantaged, the people of the canton pushed forward plans for their own line.

The Bern tram company BTG (Bern Tramway Gesellschaft) built and initially operated the line. It was opened on 21 October 1898, and was built to the same metre gauge as the Bern tram network. The original rolling stock consisted of two 0-6-0 steam tank locomotives, six coaches, and two vans. The line ran from the Kirchenfeld quarter of Bern, via Gumligen to Worb. In 1904, the BMGW (Bern Muri Gumligen Worb Bahn) was formed to take over the line, and began to develop it.

In 1907 goods facilities were opened at Muri and at Gumligen, using rollblocks to transport standard gauge wagons over the metre gauge line. The railway was now so busy, that the two steam locomotives could not cope with demand, and so, in 1908, the BMGWB proposed electrification. Finance was raised, and work commenced. Eventually, on 1 August 1910 the newly electrified railway put into operation an intensive service of thirty trains per day, adding five more coaches and one more van to the fleet.

The BMGWB name was quite unwieldy, and so on 21 August 1910 the name was changed to the BWB (Bern Worb Bahn), by which name it was generally known anyway.

Traffic levels still continued to rise, and so in June 1925 the railway pioneered a new type of electric railcar, operated by one person only, and started using it on a shuttle service over the busiest section of the line between Gumligen and Bern.

Meantime, a competitor had arrived on the scene. In 1913 the Worblentalbahn had opened, linking Worb to Bern via the valley of the river Worbla. This is a slightly longer route, at 4.5 kms compared with the 3.5 kms of the BWB. The new line is also metre gauge and electrified on the same 800 volts d.c. system. The two railways merged on 1 January 1927 to become the VBW (Vereinigten Bern Worb) Bahnen).

The VBW began to experience hard times. It did not have the benefit of through traffic to other parts of Switzerland, and being so close to Bern was very susceptible to competition from the growing number of private cars, lorries and buses. Revenue reduced to such an extent that essential maintenance had to be cut back, and growth was curtailed in order to try to balance the budget.

Then, in 1944, the corner was turned and the line between Muri and Worb was completely renovated with new track and ballast. The opportunity was taken to ease some sharp curves and generally improve the lines geometry. This allowed the maximum speed to be increased from 50 k.p.h. to 65 k.p.h. Now the journey from Bern to Worb, with two intermediate stops, took 16 minutes. The old steam locomotives took 35 minutes, for a journey of only 3.5 kms!

In Muri there was a growing congestion in the town where the railway ran down the street, much to the annoyance of car users, especially when standard gauge wagons appeared on their rollblocks. To attempt to alleviate the problem, the train service was suspended, and buses substituted in Spring 1959, operated by the STI company (Steffisburg Thun Interlaken). However, this did not prove a success, and the buses were not able to cope with the timetable, and so in 1962 the trains were reintroduced.

There now followed a period of renewal. In 1963 the line between Eggholzli and Muri was renewed and repositioned to a reserved way in the middle of the street, and the line between Muri and Muri Korone was rebuilt. Then in 1968/69 further modernising took place at Muri allowing an improved timetable to be introduced with a twenty-minute interval service at the peak hours.

In 1973 a new second track was laid alongside

the Bern tramline No.3. In 1974 the valley line was extended to terminate underneath the main railway station at Bern. The BWB line continued to terminate at Kirchenfeld, and received new blue and white trains and became line "G". The valley line received orange trains and became line "W".

The next development was to plan to extend the railway to a more convenient city centre terminus. To do this, the line would have to cross the elegant Kirchenfeldbrücke, and there was concern for the effect of the train weight on the spindly bridge. In 1985 an order was placed for new articulated trains of a design that had been supplied to Zurich. These would be light enough to cross the bridge. To reach the planned Zytglogge terminus, the trains would then utilise part of the Bern tram network which operates on 600 volts d.c. and so the new trains were ordered to operate at this voltage and the infrastructure altered accordingly.

At this time, a further merger took place with the SZB (Solothurn Zollikofen Bahn) and the RBS (Regionalverkehr Bern Solothurn) was born, which still operates the network today.

The new trains arrived in 1987. Four of the old trains were retained to work the short service between Bolligen and Bern. The Kirchenfeld bridge was modified in 1988, ready to take the new trains. However, the negotiations for extending the line became protracted and difficult, and it was not until 18 April 1997 - ten years later - that the trains finally crossed the bridge. A new timetable was introduced with a peak frequency of seven minutes between trains. The result has been tremendous, with an instant 12% increase in passengers.

The railway does not rest here though. In 1999 a new second track is planned to be laid between Muri and Siloah. There is also planned a new chord line to feed the trains into the train line which leads towards the main railway station. It is not known yet whether or when it will be possible for the trains to take this route, but negotiations are in hand. Meanwhile, passenger numbers are still expected to increase as the population of Bern continues to spread out to the suburbs. This will provide more tax revenue for the local authorities to spend on public transport.

In the summer of 1999 a new car parking restriction scheme will come into operation in Bern, which is expected to make the train more

attractive to commuters, and as passengers now can take the train and change into the tram network to reach the main station, the line is confidently looking forward to a busy and bright future.

Special events for the centenary year.

June 1988 - Publication of the special Jubilee book- of the history of the railway. 'RBS Linien G und W' 49 S. Frs.

From 4th June until 16th October, every Thursday, Friday and Saturday, a special "Bistrotram" speisewagen will run, leaving Zytglogge at 19.15, returning at 21.05.

Sundays 30th August until 20th September, from 10.00 to 13.00 hours, garden railway and model railway exhibition in Bolligen, and at Modell und Hobby in Bern.

Jubilee weekend. "100 years RBS line G", and also "25 years of Bern Tram Society" celebrations on Saturday 10th October in Bern Burgernzlel, and on Sunday 11th October at Worb Dorf

For details contact,
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The current vehicle fleet consists of:

Be4/4 built 1961 36 seats 65 kph 28 tonnes built by Schweizerische Wagon und Aufzugfabrik AG, Schlieren, and Maschinenfabrik Oerlikon, Zurich.

One unit number 74.

Be4/8 built 1987, 74 seats, 60 kph, 36.5 tonnes, built by Schindler Wagon AG, Pratteln., together with Schiwerzerische Industriegesellschaft, Neuhausen am Rheinfall, and AG Brown Boveri & Cie, Baden. Nine units numbered 81 to 89