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Avalanche in the Alps

by Steve Horobin

A long weekend trip in February to Switzerland coincided with some of the worst winter weather and devastating avalanches experienced for many years.

After nearly three weeks of heavy snow with some ski resorts struggling to remain open the weekend of 20th/21st saw matters about to take a turn for the worst. Already the road and Bernese Oberland Bahn to Grindelwald had been closed due to avalanches. The weather turned slightly milder and the heavy snow turned to heavy rain making the lying snow gain weight and slide off the mountains into the valleys. The rivers began to rise and divert around their normal course washing out some railway lines.

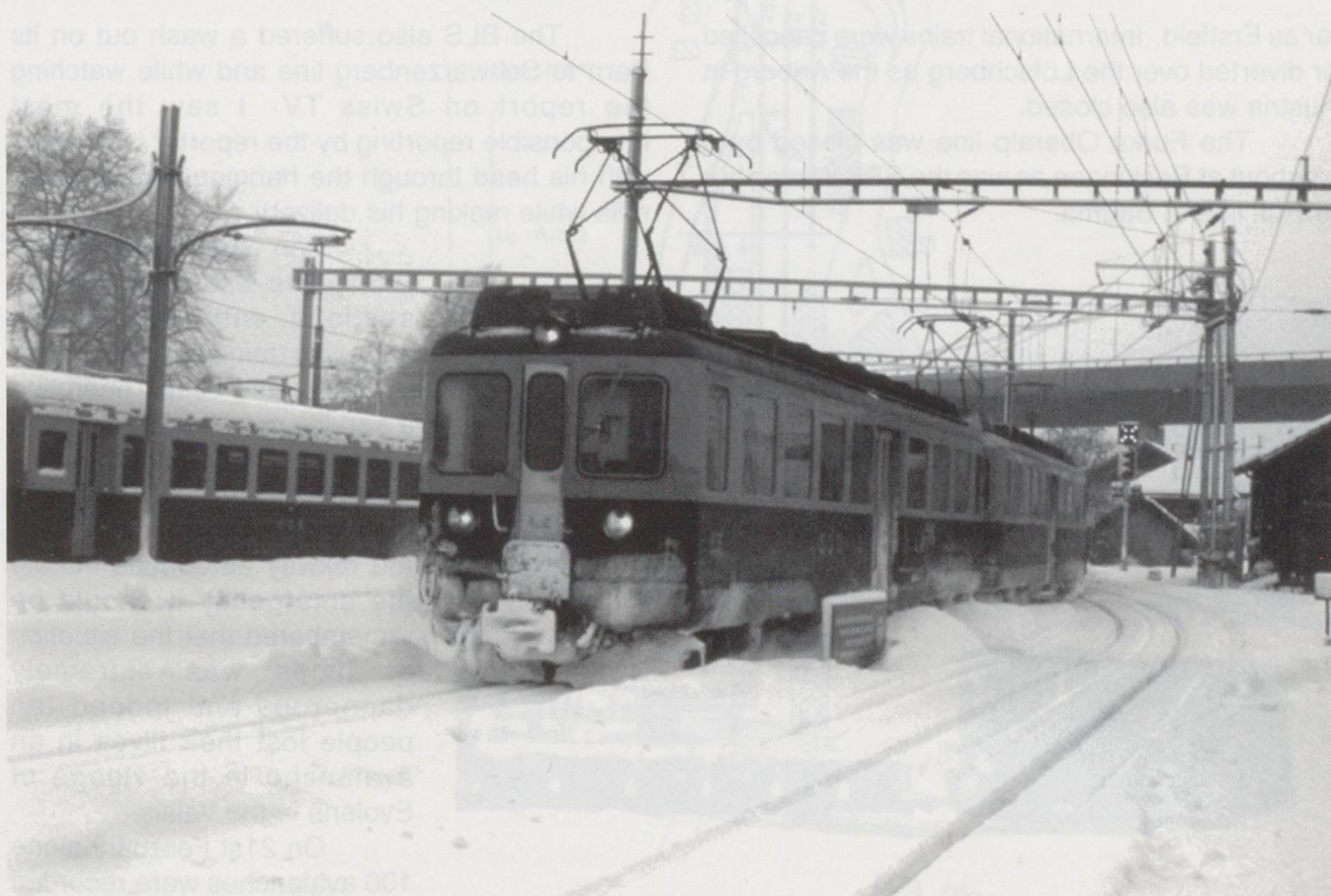
On arriving at my resort of Spiez I learnt that the weather had hit the region hard. The road between Spiez and Kandersteg was closed although the buses of the BLS were able to operate between Frutigen and Blausee. The road between Frutigen and Adelboden had been closed

with holiday makers having to be airlifted out by helicopter.

Car shuttle services between Kandersteg and Goppenstein were suspended and replaced by an emergency half hour service between Brig and Frutigen but I saw no more than a dozen vehicles on any of these trains. Freight trains were suspended and a few days later the Gotthard was closed at Gurtellen causing diversions onto the Lötschberg.

By the 22nd February the weather again turned colder and the heavy snow returned throwing the whole rail network into chaos. The railways of the Bernese Oberland were particularly affected with only the BOB line from Interlaken to Lauterbrunnen and the WAB line to Wengen remaining open in what should have been the peak operational period.

On visiting Arth-Goldau on 22nd February trains for the Gotthard were being terminated though local trains and freight were operating as



Interlaken: BOB Railcars type ABeh 4/4 led by No.308 arrive from Zweilütschienen.

Photo: Steve Horobin



Kandersteg: BLS Locomotive Re4/4 No.167 "Ausserberg" with a Frutigen - Brig car carrier. Photo: Steve Horobin

far as Erstfeld. International trains were cancelled or diverted over the Lötschberg as the Arlberg in Austria was also closed.

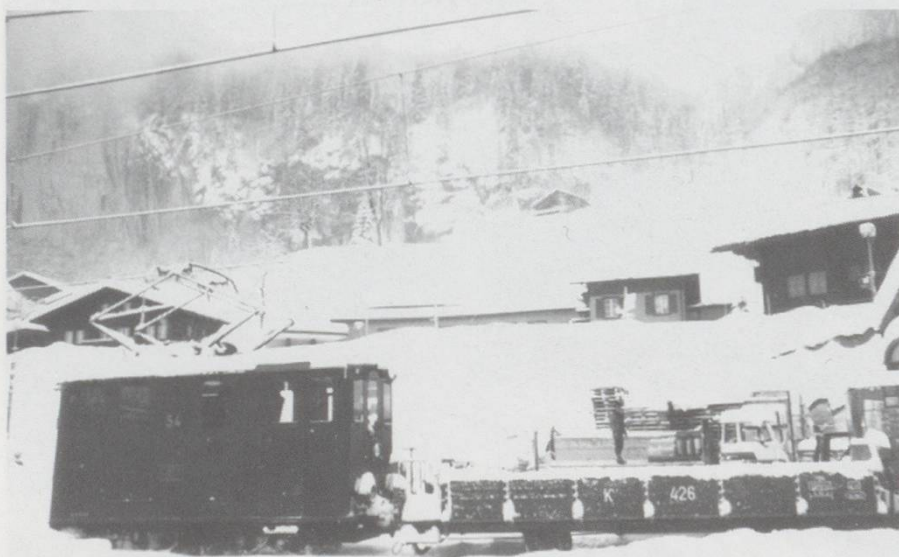
The Furka Oberalp line was closed by a washout at Reckingen as was the SBB Winterthur to Rütli line at Bauma.

The BLS also suffered a wash out on its Bern to Schwarzenberg line and while watching the report on Swiss TV I saw the most irresponsible reporting by the reporter who stood with his head through the hanging sleepers and rails while making his delivery.

The SBB metre-gauge Brünig line was closed in two sections with lake boats replacing trains from Interlaken to Brienz and buses operating a service over the Brünig pass from Meiringen to Giswil.

Although it was an interesting time to watch how the railway authorities handle the emergency it should be remembered that the situation at times was extremely dangerous and indeed ten people lost their lives in an avalanche in the village of Evolène in the Valais.

On 21st February alone 100 avalanches were recorded in the Valais.

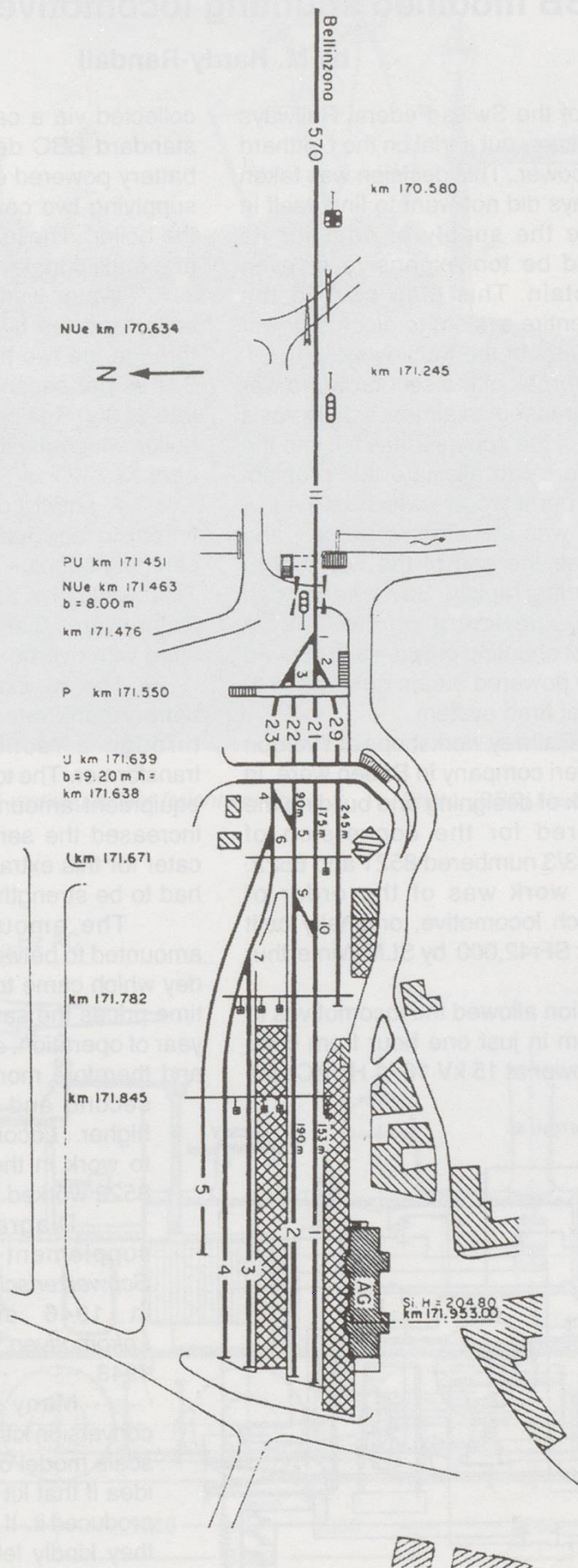


Lauterbrunnen: WAM HGe2/2 No.54.

Photo: Steve Horobin

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Not to scale



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