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HURRICANE "LOTHAR" ON MOB

A report from the front line

You will probably remember accounts of Hurricane Lothar and the damage it caused on the continent last Christmas (see March 2000 Swiss Express). Here is one account from the front line!

On Sunday 26 December 1999 (Boxing Day in UK, but not a public holiday in CH) I was driving the 1043 local from Lenk. On arriving at St. Stephan I was told on the MOBILE phone (we had them issued only recently) that, due to the extremely strong wind, Zweisimmen to Spiez had been closed to both road and rail traffic. A little later they said Zweisimmen to Gstaad had also been closed to road and rail, caused by fallen trees. I told the passengers, advising them to return to Lenk by the train we were meeting at St. Stephan. A family on board said they were travelling to Zürich Airport for a flight home to Helsinki!

Near Blankenburg Castle I had to pass under a fallen fir tree. I stopped the Be 4/4 5000-series 3-car set and lowered the leading pantograph. Then I drove very slowly under the tree to where it could be raised again and the rear one lowered. Fortunately the contact line was still well clear of the train's roof-mounted resistors. On arrival at Zweisimmen I was told the Lenk line had been closed behind me. The electric current had failed.

There are three electricity feeders for Upper Simmental: from Spiez and from Gstaad along the valleys, and from Adelboden to Lenk over the Hahnenmoos Pass. All three were now down and over long sections. For four days we local inhabitants had to live without electricity. Fortunately, many people, like my family, own wood-burning stoves. My wife cooked meals and baked bread on ours. Some owners of wood stoves supplied less fortunate neighbours with hot water. Naturally the shops ran out of candles and camping gas stoves.

Large areas of our local forests have been flattened. In the hamlet of Stöckli, next stop up from



*Near Gruben.
Photo: Beat Feller*

my village, Blankenburg, about 20 houses have damaged roofs. At Kandergrund, on the Lötschberg route, they say about 80 house roofs were damaged, some needing total rebuilding. Lothar also caused much damage in Emmental and in the Engleberg valley. Many Swiss rail routes were inoperable, either by power failures or fallen trees, or both.

One crew from Zweisimmen depot were at Montreux when Lothar struck. As booked, they set

off for home on the 0902. Fifteen minutes later they were stuck at Chernex. So they returned to Montreux. Later the same driver and conductor accompanied their passengers on a special bus, by the motorway to Bulle. But they couldn't even get as far as Montbovon before being blocked again. After some confusion they all returned on the bus to Montreux. Eventually, about 1900 that evening the same train crew and passengers set off, this time via Aigle and Col du Pillon to make it through to Gstaad.

The entire MOB was closed for some days. Montreux to Les Avants was reopened first. Then came the snow. Fortunately both powerful (515kW) MOB Gm 4/4 diesel locos were available at Montbovon, with two snowploughs, the new crane wagon [see photos] and the overhead line tower wagon.

Drivers, except those with a bus driver's license, having no service trains to drive, were deployed outdoors to clear the line of snow, ice and tree branches. Daniel, another driver, and I joined the overhead line crew for two weeks. We took turns at driving diesel loco 2004 and helping track workers clear fallen trees. It's quite dangerous using a chainsaw on the leaning trees as one can't know exactly where the pieces will fall.

The MOB still has some timber poles supporting the contact line, although many have been replaced with metal ones. We had to clear up broken timber poles, bent metal poles and outriggers, and the damaged wires. Other crews were working on the Montbovon to Les Avants section - the worst damage being between Allières and Les Sciernes. It is said there were about 130 fir trees down on the overhead line between Allières and Rossinière, a length of seven miles.

As soon as the roads reopened, MOB started bus services: Zweisimmen - Lenk, and Zweisimmen - Gstaad - Château d'Oex - Col des Mosses - Aigle - Montreux. The road to Montbovon was still closed. A few days later buses were operating between Montreux and Bulle via the motorway.

Zweisimmen depot drivers and other workers repaired the overhead line on the Lenk branch which reopened on 4th January. As the diesel locos had been unable to reach Zweisimmen, they had been forced to improvise an overhead line work train from BDe 4/4 3004 by fixing pallets to the

cover of the roof mounted resistors. After positioning this power car we had to call up Gstaad panel on the MOBILE phone to get the juice switched off, then earth the wire as a safeguard before climbing up to do the work.

At this time Daniel and I were still out on the main line with the real overhead crew. We took turns at working on the tower wagon and at driving Gm 4/4 2004. The snow had now stopped, the sky cleared. Nice sunshine but very cold on the fingers at -10° Celsius trying to handle tools and wire.

As there was so much damage MOB management called in two overhead line contractors: Furrer + Frey and Kummeler + Mather. Sometimes their people were able to work with us, but they were also in demand on other railways.

We got no lunch on 28th December. The sun was setting as we worked up on the Lanciau Bridge, beside the dam at the end of Vernex Lake west of Rossinière. Driving, I was signalled by hand to move the work train. 2004 didn't want to go forwards, only the other way. After a short discussion Daniel went to find a piece of wood, opened a particular cover along the side gangway and pressed on the 'forward' contact with his stick. So we were able to finish the evening's work and enjoy our lunch, which by now had become dinner.

Next morning our loco had forgotten her problem. I suppose our proud lady doesn't like to be operated by a piece of wood! It reminded me of a problem with Ge 4/4 8003. Five years ago I had to drive this loco to Chernex workshop on only three motors, accompanied by an ABB engineer working on his laptop to identify the problem. But he couldn't pin it down. After some time he observed "These things have souls." After 25 years of train driving I had learned to agree.

Next day, Wednesday, we started by towing away an abandoned train. Hauled by a Ge 4/4 8000-type it was stuck with no power mid-way between two level crossings near Les Granges. On Thursday we reached Gstaad. We'd arranged with colleagues to have lunch together. But our chosen restaurant was full. So off elsewhere, about a mile back, on our own diesel train to another beside a level crossing.

In the afternoon we towed away BDe 3002 + ABt3302 stuck power-less at Gruben's home signal just 20 metres short of the level crossing. Then we

could continue our clearing work on to Zweisimmen. We took five days to clear the 25 miles from Montbovon to Zweisimmen. And this only to be able to run a NON-electric train. Now we could start to repair the overhead line.

We changed several metal posts, but this was not possible in the Vanel area, between Rougemont and Saanen. This section, renewed in 1974, had posts set directly into the concrete bases. The later designed metal posts elsewhere are bolted down to the concrete base, and thus simple to replace. All we could do with the concreted-in posts was to bend them as straight as possible with the crane, then hold them in place with steel stay-ropes. So these damaged posts will be to replace, together with new bases, in the springtime. Also in Vanel we had to search in deep snow for contact line tensioning weights. Six out of 12 were missing, each weighs 25 Kg (55lbs.). Before our weightlifting exercise we had to warm them with a camping gas flame to melt off ice.

Zweisimmen to Château d'Oex was reopened to trains on 14th January. First from Zweisimmen was the 1600, immediately after we had tested the line and signalling with Be 4/4 1003. Fortunately as we passed Les Borsalets level crossing, on the main road between Les Granges and Les Combes we stopped to photograph our little train which someone had decorated with a few flags. So we noticed that the level crossing barriers remained down. This was traced to an insulation failure in the controlling track circuit. Train service between Montreux and Montbovon also restarted on 14th Jan. The remainder of the MOB reopened on 19th January. Our management offered return tickets at single



*Near La Tine
Photo: Beat Feller*

fares over the MOB for all, until the end of January.

The B.L.S. had been more fortunate. To operate Spiez - Zweisimmen with no overhead power supply, they were able to hire five diesel sets from B.O.B. An article by George Hoekstra about this appeared in the last Swiss Express. The fast trains were cancelled during the loss of overhead power.

"Lothar" showed that, despite what people think, not everything is predictable. Perhaps we should take more care of the global environment.

See the colour section for other pictures