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HOW THE SUGAR GETS TO THE COFFEE

Bryan Stone investigates sugar beet on Swiss trains

Even the YStC gets to play with sugar beet wagons. Ge4/4 No.21 at Yverdon.

ALL PHOTOS Bryan Stone

Some years ago Dr Benedikt Weibel was CEO of the SBB, and UIC Director in Paris. He remarked that he was surely the last UIC boss to have a sugar beet campaign. Now, in years gone by the sugar beet crop had been taken by rail to factories for processing over much of Europe. As a child growing-up in the Trent Valley during WW2, I remember our Colwick Austerities labouring in from country stations with 50 mineral wagons full of beet, and the awful stench of the factory on the marshes. But now Dr Weibel was right. From the crisis years of war, when overseas sugar was unobtainable, to the over-production of today, things have changed; so has the railway, no longer able or willing to handle a 3-month peak of millions of tonnes, with wagons, locomotives, crews and stations, for intensive short hauls.

Everywhere*, that is, except in Switzerland. There are two factories, one at Frauenfeld (TG) on the line from Winterthur and the other at Aarberg (BE) between Lyss and Payerne, which annually process about 1.3 million tonnes of beet. Around 900,000 tonnes are delivered by rail, a tightly planned operation involving permits, loading points and scheduled dates for loading and delivery. Today the farmers have a choice, resulting in too many giant tractors, dripping mud, slowly hauling two heavy trailers from field direct to factory along the country roads, annoying other road users whilst provoking congestion and road accidents. Sugar beet is a competitive business, involving some 4,000 farmers. Some local railways are glad of the traffic and income. They even compete with one another.

Last autumn I went up on the Bière-Apples-Morges (BAM) to study operations. They move some 100,000 tonnes down from the Jura hills on their metre gauge railway to Morges, where the SBB makes up block loads for Aarberg. But the map shows that the upper reaches of the BAM are not far from SBB loading points in Orbe, Chavornay and Cossonay, nearer Aarberg and still within a tractor-ride; so the BAM has to be sharp to keep its traffic. Notices on the

stations indicated that on Monday 6th and Saturday 11th October, except at rush-hour, there had been no passenger trains, only buses as the railway was closed for all except sugar beet loading. The big 'Eaos' bogie wagons on their metre gauge transporters were left standing by the beet fields and at level crossings, as loading direct from the harvester to the rail wagon saved the farmer time and costs, and discouraged seeking a lower rail tariff by going down the valley. On the Yverdon-St Croix (YStC) the beet traffic is less; but again the 'Eaos' wagons are hauled up on the metre gauge on Rollböcke to be loaded at the small stations. A portable farm elevator is all it needs. You will see the same at wayside stations, and at some larger centres like Yverdon, while the sharp-eyed will spot the beet all around those big flat or rolling fields, waiting in trailers and dumps for agreed loading times.

Nothing is as easy as it looks. A fully loaded 'Eaos' weighs up to 100 tonnes. Although it has 1:28 gradients the BAM is built like a main-line, as it also carries 100-tonne armoured vehicles the 19 km from Morges to the army training centre at Bière-Casernes. It has also two 3,200 Kw Ge4/4 locomotives Nos.21 and 22, built in 1994, to work the beet

Beet arriving at Yverdon.



traffic too, although the passenger railcars Nos.11, 12, 14 & 15 also have coupling bars to haul freight cars on Rollböcke. On the YStC the 'Crocodile', Ge4/4 No 21, a veteran of 1950, handles freight on the 1:24 gradients.

This is only part of the overall picture. The SBB provide loading facilities and wagons - 780 this year. Some 510 are their own 'Eaos' wagons, a further 170 wagons are rented from Slovakian Railways, whilst the remainder comprise 100 two-axle 'K' wagons. The SBB's wagons are normally in scrap metal traffic, but the peak beet demand of about 300 wagons a day cannot be met with its own resources. However, when some years ago the Aarberg factory threatened to eliminate the BAM from its sources, leaving farmers to bring the beet down to main line stations themselves, the SBB intervened insisting that the BAM was economic. That shows how complex this story is. In eastern Switzerland, a deal between Frauenfeld Zuckerrabrik, Kt. Thurgau, and the SBB aims at having beet from the region south of the factory and east of Weinfelden transported by rail. The Kantonal authorities have also subsidised the operation, including improving loading points, to reduce unwanted road movements. Further afield a typical picture was at Hüntwangen-Wil (ZH), between Eglisau and Schaffhausen, where one Saturday morning in 2008 one thousand tonnes of beet destined for Frauenfeld were loaded from farm trailers into 20 wagons.

The background is, as so much in Switzerland, also political. In Aarberg, for example, the first sugar factory dated from 1898, but it took years for farmers to start growing beet. After bankruptcy a new factory was built in 1913 but only handled 32,000 tonnes of beet, of which a quarter came from France. Then WW1 made clear how important food self-sufficiency would be, whilst land in Kantons Bern, Fribourg and Vaud was seen as suitable. Fixed tariffs were introduced and soon large amounts were handled. Today Aarberg receives 500,000 tonnes by rail and 300,000 tonnes by road. In 2009 the protective duty on imported sugar was abolished. Beet prices fell, production is dropping, SBB Cargo must look to its costs, and there is a glut of granulated white sugar so things might change. This year however there were still 76 nominated loading points on the SBB network, each with its empty wagons, ramps, points and switches, and some with Tm tractors. The SBB still hires in wagons and it's still a great time to see superannuated heavy locomotives like Ae6/6 pulling out a heavy load again onto the main line. Sugar beet accounts for 20% of the freight revenue of the BAM, and they don't want to lose it. How long will it last?

* Editor's Note: Does any reader know of anywhere else? 

A tractor delivers more sugar beet to Cossonay station.



The mechanical sugar beet loader at Apples on the BAM



Loading sugar beet at L'Isle on the BAM



BAM Ge 4/4 No 21 brings some sugar beet into Apples

SBB 841 000 at Yverdon on a sugar beet train

