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WHEN THE CIRCUS COMES TO TOWN

Ron Smith



Accommodation trailer with five individual "rooms" for staff, performers, etc. Behind is a circus tractor with a road tank-trailer.

ALL PHOTOS: Ron Smith. All were at Glarus in April 2010

Circus Knie is well known for moving around Switzerland from town to town by train. It is an incredible logistical organisation and is probably unique in Europe today. The circus is a self contained city, and I came across it at Glarus. Rakes of flat two-axle wagons (Type Kps) were in the yard, with Re 4/4 11176 in attendance, parked across the other side of the station near the turntable and engine shed. Against the goods shed were more wagons still with caravans on them, sandwiching Am 843 077-9. In the up yard were more empty flat wagons, with the final one (Type Lls) having the hinged sides to bridge the gap to allow loading and unloading onto the loading bay. These wagons were attached to diesel shunter Tm 8756. Knie

All the accommodation trailers on their flat wagons parked-up in the freight yard.

use 53 wagons, which carry around 100 circus trailers, in two trains. This may vary if the next destination is close, when more vehicles go by road. With the "Tierschutz" legislation regarding the transport of animals the elephants, horses, camels, zebras, llamas, ponies and long horned Watusi cattle now travel by road. There no longer is the spectacle of elephants going into domed roof trailers, or giraffes crouching down to slide into their trailers. The Am843 was the resident loco at Ziegelbrücke, where the Linthal branch joins the network, and had been brought up to Glarus for the weekend; Tm 8756 had simply appeared from Netstal further down the valley, where it is used to shunt wagons for the stone and gravel quarry there; whilst the Re 4/4 was the dedicated circus train engine.

The circus arrived early Saturday morning; disembarked; built up the marquee; had performances Saturday and Sunday; then had it all packed away, were back on the train and gone on Sunday night. The station car park, the road flanking the goods shed, and the up yard were full of Knie caravans with cables and pipes snaking between them. There was the kitchen van, serving endless hot meals, to be taken across the road and eaten in the two dining vans opposite, which had longitudinal tables with benches down the sides. A notice on the kitchen van gave the date and details of the next bed linen change day, when it would be laundered. Knie's own fire engine was parked next to the trailer containing the bottled gas cylinders. There were the



male and female toilets and shower vans, and the school van, so that the children's education would not suffer. Then the smart agricultural tractors, often with dollies under the trailers, along with HGV tractor units to pull trailers to the show ground area, where all the mass of materials were rapidly transformed into the big top tent plus accommodation for the animals, and fodder and "waste recovery" facilities.

As the last performance on the Sunday night was underway the dismantling and repacking was already being carried out. The flat wagons have a broad yellow line painted down the centre, including on the hinged end boards which, when flat, create a through roadway, so that driving these huge vans on and off will be helped. On the Monday morning there was absolutely no sign that they had ever been there – no locos, wagons, litter, not even marks in the road. Circus Knie have a permanent base in Rapperswil, where they spend the winter. This is open all year round, and is popular with children who can ride on the backs of the animals, many of whom have been pensioned off from the heavy work of going from town to town. In the past three years Knie have refurbished or renewed the majority of their fleet of vehicles and also the big tent, so they are very smart and bright. If so many vehicles were to travel by road, it would cause enormous congestion and pollution, so Knie are to be congratulated on continuing their tradition of using rail - and congratulations to the SBB as well for organising such a unique operation. 

1 & 2: Tm 8756 waiting in the yard to move the flat cars to be loaded-up with the vehicles that had gone to the Circus site.

3 & 4: Am 834 077 waiting to reassemble the train along with a selection of flat wagons with various circus equipment on them.



Swiss Tip Some good ideas and information about Switzerland from travellers.

Visiting Basel? The café "Zum Isaak" in the Munsterplatz is a place where locals go for coffee, drinks and good value lunches, etc. You have to look for it. It is on the south side of the square and you enter through a large set of old wooden doors in the façade of a fairly anonymous historic building.

Swiss Tip

Lunchtime in St Gallen? On the first floor of the old main station building there is an excellent Migros restaurant that offers good value food and drink. It is not too prominently advertised and at the western end of the building you access it through what looks like an office entrance. Surprisingly, that's what it is as the restaurant is actually also the eating place for the Migros staff employed at the company offices in the building.

Swiss Tip

Travelling on the Voralpen Express? Don't miss out on proper drinks and food. Although the service is advertised as having refreshments available these are dispensed from two Automat machines at the end of one of the First Class coaches. Buy take-away coffee, lunches, etc from the various outlets at Luzern, St Gallen and intermediate stations en-route.