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'NEW' LOCOS FOR THE DAMPFBahn FURKA BERGSTRECKE



An HG 4/4 arrival back home ready for restoration
Photo Bill Weber

People who have made their way up to the Dampfbahn Furka Bergstrecke (DFB) at Realp, Gletsch and Oberwald this summer have found that services are being run by original Furka Oberalp (FO) HG3/4 Nos.1, 4 and 9, and by a former VZB HG2/3 No 6 along with diesel-hauled trains on the Oberwald – Gletsch shuttle. Many may not know that the former FO engines took a circuitous route to get to the DFB Realp depot. After WW2, and following the 1942 electrification of the FO line, several steam engines were sold to France for service in Indo-China, where they worked on a metre-gauge rack line for some years. This line was in what became Vietnam, where they were laid aside in the wars of the 1960s and 1970s. In 1923 and 1930 SLM had also built rack 0-8-0Ts, a type that had never run in Switzerland, for that line and these too were now rusting in the jungle. The story of how these engines were found, purchased, and shipped back to Switzerland via Hamburg for the re-opening is too long for here, but the first priority saw the original FO HG3/4s brought back to working order and these are in use today. One more FO HG3/4 No 3, never went to Vietnam, but stayed on the FO; this is now at the Blonay-Chamby Museum Railway, where it is often in steam, and from where it travelled to Lenk for the MOB Lenk 100 celebrations.

Following repatriation to their homeland the 0-8-0Ts, now known as HG4/4 Nos.704 and 708, were stored awaiting time and money. With the realisation that the re-opening to Oberwald would need more engines, work started. Their condition was frightening, but there was another snag; they were built to slightly different standards. The FO had a 10cm lower rack rail than in Vietnam, and a 20cm lower coupling and buffing line. The 0-8-0Ts had not been modified on export, but built differently to start with

and, of course, their design had never been subject to approval in Switzerland. This and their obviously poor condition when stripped down (including cracked frames) led to a decision to rebuild the locomotives on new, re-designed frames, something that was not going to be cheap, not a job for amateurs, and a supply of original plans was also essential. The engines' nearest relation proved to be the 0-8-2T rack engines built in 1952 by SLM for Nilgeri in India. SLM's plans for these, now held by SBB Historic in Winterthur, were available and a valuable friend was found in Peter Spuhler, the CEO of Stadler Rail, who made available heavy workshop facilities that are now otherwise rare. The new frames now exist; the second pair was delivered to the DFB's Chur workshop in Feb 2012, after some 1400 hours of volunteer drilling and riveting work. The former No.706, that was also brought back will never run, but is proving a source of cannibalized spares; and work is now moving ahead again. It may be a couple of years before we see them in the daylight working the Furkapass route, but the 'new' old engines will then be a sensation. 

DFB 1 at Oberwald on 27th August 2010. Photo: Mark Barber

