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LIFE BEGINS AT 40

In 2012 the Dampferfreunde Vierwaldstättersee celebrated their 40th anniversary. Our correspondent Mario Gavazzi takes a short retrospective view of their achievements

PS Unterwalden seen in formation with the other steamers on the 7th May 2011, and Mt. Pilatus in silhouette. All photos: Mario Gavazzi

Luzern in 1970. To commemorate the merger on the 1st January 1870 of several steamboat companies on the Lake of Luzern, which resulted in the formation of the Schiffahrtsgesellschaft des Vierwaldstättersees (SGV), the company organised a festival celebrating its 100 years of operation. In September 1970 the SGV introduced a new motor ship the MS Gotthard to replace the steam paddle ship *PS Wilhelm Tell* built in 1908 by Gebrüder Sulzer in Winterthur. Very similar to Sulzer's 1906-built *PS Schiller*, the 'Tell' had been restored just two years earlier so in 1970 few understood why such a beautiful classic ship should be taken out of service and some protests ensued. By 1972 the 'Tell' had become a floating restaurant complete with its in-situ steam engine. This seeming lack of concern by the SGV for its historic vessels prompted serious concern amongst both ship enthusiasts and ordinary observers and users of the lake ships, resulting in the association called Dampferfreunde Vierwaldstättersee being founded in 1972. After several years of dialogue with the management of the SGV, who finally came around to realising the heritage that they were appearing to squander, this association found it possible to save one steamer after the other. With the financial help of the 10,000 members of the Dampferfreunde the fleet of five steamers has been renovated step-by-step over the past 40 years. The five ships are: *Uri* (1901 – Sulzer); *Unterwalden* (1902 – Escher Wyss); *Schiller* (1906 – Sulzer); *Gallia* (1913 – Escher Wyss) the fastest paddle steamer in Switzerland; and *Stadt Luzern* (1928/9 – Sachsenberg, with Sulzer engine). All five are now nearly totally restored to their original condition and are available for service between April and October and in December *Unterwalden* sails on a special cruise timetable. So, forty-years-on the five beautiful ships sail in good condition but the work of the Dampferfreunde will never be finished. Its great success with the salvation and restoration of this unique fleet can only be assured in the long-term by keeping more than only one eye on the operational and economic situation of the SGV. 40-years is a long time in a human's life, but steamers live longer... To celebrate its 40th anniversary Dampferfreunde

Vierwaldstättersee organised a special general assembly in May 2012, that was followed on the evening of the 25th August with an SGV fleet parade celebrating 175 years of 'engine-powered' navigation on the Lake and the 40 years of the association. It is hard now to imagine what might have happened to today's five steamers without the original 1970 protests and the subsequent founding of the Dampferfreunde Vierwaldstättersee. On December 12th there was the launch event for the jubilee book "Lasst die alten Dampfer laufen" (Let the old steamers sail) the history of 40 years of the "Dampferfreunde" that was written by a team of authors. Young people who are the next generation of 'Friends' also helped to create the book with their own texts and they too were included in the event held on the *PS Wilhelm Tell*, still operating as a floating restaurant in Luzern. For more information see www.dampfschiff.ch 



ABOVE: *PS Unterwalden* was restored by Shiptec Luzern (SGV's shipyard) between 2008 & 2011.

RIGHT: Millions of Swiss Francs helped to support the steamboat restorations: Beat Fuchs, Chairman of the Dampferfreunde, with the symbolic cheque showing the contribution of the communes of Seelisberg and Treib.

