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Bödelibahn

Bryan Stone looks at 'Zephyr' and the Bödelibahn



'Zephyr' at Wasen im Emmental in 1998.

Photo: Bryan Stone

In the SBB Historic collection, and usually in the Delémont roundhouse, is a Very Little Engine. This is E2/2 'Zephyr', the 138 year old 0-4-0T (Krauss, München, No 290 of 1874), a survivor of the Bödelibahn. 'Zephyr' weighs 15t in working order; is 6.1m long, has a 12 bar boiler pressure and a 1.7m wheelbase. She cost CHF29,000 new and ran for 42 years before being sold out of service in 1916 to the Metallwerke Dornach, near Basel. There she was a 'pet' of the apprentices and ran up to 1970, before finding her way to restoration. She still works, in modest limits, and is always a hit. This writer remembers a glorious 2 day Steam Festival in Sumiswald around 1998, with 'Zephyr' on a little train shuttling back and forth to Wasen-im-Emmental.

But if 'Zephyr' still lives, what of the Bödelibahn? That lives too. Most readers, although the name may mean

nothing to them, will know it. It was the first railway in the Bernese Oberland, and it is a tragic-comic story. The Bödeli is the local name for the isthmus on which Interlaken stands - the post ice-age deposit between the Thunersee and Brienersee formed by the Lütschinen river. In the 19thC Interlaken enjoyed an unprecedented



The Bahnhofstrasse approach to Interlaken West station. Photo: Tony Bagwell

and high-class tourist boom. What started with Goethe, Byron and others from the 18thC onwards became, especially when the steamers from Thun entered service, a seasonal torrent. The hotels shot up, the Hohenweg became a promenade, the English, Russian, French, and German aristocracy met in the Casino. However, the conditions of access were dreadful. The steamers from Thun berthed at Neuhaus, out beyond Unterseen, linked to the hotels by a 2 km long unmade road, and in Neuhaus waited coaches, carriers, hotel carriages, touts and competing porters and drivers. With several hundred persons for Interlaken, and the generous baggage for a 19thC season, the disorder and delay, the fights and shouting, were notorious. Over 200 carriage-drivers were registered in Interlaken in 1850. It was a scandal, but the railway from Basel, opened in 1859, stopped in Thun, at Scherzligen, where the equally disorderly transfer to the steamer took place.

Clearly a railway should serve Interlaken, but the aim of the wily Oberländer was to be on a main line to Luzern, or if possible via the Grimsel Pass to Italy. A company was formed and plans for a standard gauge line from Thun to Luzern via Interlaken were presented. The ships opposed this, but finally in 1872 the first part of a new standard gauge Brunigbahn was opened, 4.3km, the Bödelibahn, from Därligen, on the lake near Interlaken, to what is now Interlaken West.

In Därligen the same transfer took place as before. There was villainy afoot; the Federal concession made clear that the line was to run from Neuhaus, but it was built (illegally as far as we know) from Därligen, the logic being that from there a new railway to Thun was possible. Operations started with two little engines, and a number of four-wheel double-deck coaches. 'Zephyr' was No 3, bought when the line was extended in 1874 by 4.1km to Bönigen, and its steamer pier

The pleasing chalet style façade of Interlaken Ost.

Photo: Tony Bagwell



A DB ICE service crosses one of the bridges over the Aare canal, seen from the adjoining gardens. Photo: Bryan Stone

on the Brienzersee. With hindsight that was a mistake, although understandable as the plans were to build a railway from Bönigen up to Lauterbrunnen. The Aare-canal access was however improved as far as the Zollbrücke (today's Interlaken Ost), enabling the steamers and the railway to Lauterbrunnen to start there. The Bönigen branch became an incubus, undermining the receipts, and Bönigen an idyllic corner, though the BLS still has a workshop there.


The little Bödelibahn trains ran for 21 years, attracting abuse and humour, and never a goldmine. In 1893 the Thunerseebahn, having bought the Bödelibahn and the steamers, finally bridged the difficult gap from Scherzligen to Därligen. Interlaken still had to wait for its planned Brunig line to Luzern. It eventually came as a metre-gauge line with rack sections.





Luzern to Brienz was opened in 1888/89 giving steamer connections to Interlaken but it would be 1916 before the SBB built the last section from Brienz to Interlaken Ost. The Grimsel railway never came.

Four things deserve mention. First the main canal bridges. The Bödelibahn, always at loggerheads with its steamship competitors determined to preserve its rights, so it chose an alignment that crosses the Aare canal on two low bridges that are still there today. The legend says that this was just in case anyone might try to make a ship connection. Incidentally the Brienzersee and Thunersee are at different levels, and there is a weir in the Aare at Interlaken, and today a small power station. To enable navigation there would have had to be a lock. Second there was, and still is, a third bridge. Just over the crossing at Interlaken West a footbridge takes off over the Aare. This once carried rails, which were still visible in the street in 2008, to the Aare Mills, once with a substantial freight traffic. And that brings the third feature: Switzerland's first steam train ferry, operating on the Thunersee between ramps at Därligen and Scherzligen, it carried some five freight wagons on two trips daily. The vessel lasted many years after 1893, finishing up on Lake Luzern. The operation was scarcely photographed, and the location in Därligen is now lost, but for 20 years a going concern. Fourth, Interlaken Ost doesn't belong to the BLS, but to the BOB who built it to serve their lines to Lauterbrunnen and Grindelwald. The BLS works some local services but most of the mainline trains are worked by the SBB, often with DB ICE units. The SBB Zentralbahn subsidiary now works the Brunig line. Also from 2013 SNCF will operate some Lyria TGV services to this station.

So, readers, when today you sweep round the curve by Lake Thun alongside the canal, stop in Interlaken West, and then 3 minutes later (after the two bridges) get off in Interlaken Ost, and wonder why there are quite so many railway complications in the region, remember the Bödelibahn, and little 'Zephyr' in the shed at Delémont. 

TOP: A BLS local awaits departure towards Spiez at Interlaken West. *Photo: Tony Bagwell*

MIDDLE: To continue on from Interlaken Ost, a change has to be made to either the BOB or, as here, the Zentralbahn. *Photo: Tony Bagwell*

BOTTOM: Services using the Bödelibahn run through the built-up area of Interlaken. *Photo: Bryan Stone*