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A SWISS SURVIVOR

Malcolm Bulpitt

BDe 4/4 No. 8 '*La Sagne*' leaves Les Ponts-du-Martel in -20c temperatures in March 2010whilst BDe 4/4 No. 6 waits in the yard. *All photos:* Malcolm Bulpitt

A cream and red single-unit railcar sits on Platform 2 in La Chaux-de-Fonds busy station. Across the island platform on Platform 1 is a metre-gauge train of the Chemins de fer du Jura (CJ) waiting to make its 53km trip across its namesake Canton to Glovelier, and a connection with the CFF/SBB line to Delémont and Basel. The train waiting at Platform 2 will make a much shorter trip, just 16.2km to the small town of Les Ponts-de-Martel. This is the isolated metre-gauge line of the Transports Régionaux Neuchâtelois (TRN), a company that in June 2012 became a component of Transports Publics Neuchâtelois SA (transN) that, as its name suggests, operates public transport across the canton.

Les Ponts-de-Martel is a small town, with just under 1,300 inhabitants, located at around 1000m high in the very rural la Vallée de la Sagne et des Ponts, one of the long parallel valleys that are a feature of the Jura Mountains. The tiny stream that runs through the valley does not join any river. Like many similar watercourses on these uplands with their forest and pasture-land it sinks away into the limestone bedrock to appear somewhere distant. Before the stream disappears underground over the millennia it has formed extensive peat deposits at Les Beids just to the west of Les Ponts-de-Martel. There is only one other community in the valley, La Sagne, and this has less than 1,000 people. The small road that shares the broad valley floor with the railway serves a number of traditional Jura farmhouses scattered along it, but the line's total catchment area once outside La Chaux-de-Fonds probably holds

An SBB service to Neuchâtel leaves La Chaux-de-Fonds in-parallel to the TRN cmn service to Les Ponts-du-Martel.

less than 3,000 people. This line is typical of many that were built at the end of the 19thC to serve rural communities across Europe - most have long since gone. So it is surprising that it has survived to become a small, but locally important, part of the Swiss railway network. It is probably the harsh winters, with the heavy snowfall that the Jura is renowned for, that have kept this line operating, as the railway keeps running when the roads can often be difficult to use. This is the coldest area of Switzerland with temperatures often dropping below -20°C for long periods, whilst nearby La Brévine recorded an all-time Swiss low of -41.8°C in 1987. For the valley it is a vital link enabling commuters and school children, students and shoppers, to go about their everyday business both in La Chaux-de-Fonds and the rest of the country.

The line along the valley was built by the Chemin de fer Ponts – Sagne – Chaux-de-Fonds (PSC) and opened throughout in September 1898. In 1947 it became part of the Chemins de fer des Montagnes Neuchâteloises (CMN) along with the metre-gauge line from Le Locle to Les Brenets. In 1950 it was electrified at 1,500V dc. Another ownership change took place in 1999 when the TRN took it over along with the line of the Régional du Val de Travers. Les Ponts-de-Martel is the focal

Top: TMNcmn No. 8 waits at La Chaux-de-Fonds.

Middle: CJ Bef4/4 No. 641 (ex RhB Abe4//4 No.487) shunts rubbish containers at La Chaux-de-Fonds.

Bottom: TRNcmn Tm2/2 maintenance tractor.
Photo: Theo Stolz

point of the line for this is where the modern depot is located and the station building here, complete with a buffet, is the only substantial one on the line.

There are a few sidings where some engineer's wagons normally live whilst three tracks serve the running shed and workshop. Apart from La Sagne, where there is a passing loop, the other nine halts en-route are very basic and trains only stop on demand, although on most trips some of them see passengers boarding and alighting. The line used to carry a substantial traffic moving the peat cut from the Les Beids area. Until 1966 this was carried by its own wagons, but from that date standard gauge wagons carried on metre-gauge transporter trucks were used up to the cessation of the traffic in 2001.

The line is operated by three identical BDe 4/4 units seating 48 built by ACMV at Vevey, No. 6 '*La Chaux-de-Fonds*', No. 7 '*Les Ponts-du-Martel*' (both built in 1991) and No. 8 '*La Sagne*' (built in 1996) all with BBC/ABB electrical chopper equipment. The three railcars are 'boxy' in appearance, and would win no points for style, but they are very practical and efficiently maintain the basic hourly service. However, there is a 2 hour service gap mid-morning and another during the evening. Like many lines in Switzerland there is an after-midnight service from La Chaux-de-Fonds on Saturday and Sunday mornings to allow 'night owls' to get home without using their cars. The units have a large area used for carrying cycles that also houses a ticket machine for the use of passengers boarding at the intermediate halts. With only low, or no, platforms en-route this space is unfortunately inaccessible for wheelchairs, etc. All rail operators in the Jura encourage the use of their lines as a means for cyclists to get out into the peaceful countryside and ride the network of dedicated paths that are quite popular during the summer. In 1998 the operation acquired purpose-built Ast21, a 'Voiture-salon-panoramique'. This smart driving-trailer (the driver sits in a segregated glass compartment at one end of the open saloon) is in the same boxy style as the railcars. It was built by Carrosserie Lauber SA of Nyon, a company more used to building coach and bus bodies, on the underframe of BDe4/4 No.1 dating from 1950, which had its bodywork scrapped in 1997. Unsurprisingly this vehicle, which seats 44 people in great comfort, includes many bus elements in its design. It is complete with a small galley area and a toilet, and is available for private charters as well as offering excursions down the line in association with the 'Fromagerie les Martel'. This, the principal tourist destination in the valley, is located close to Les Ponts-de-Martel station and offers guided tours around its modern dairy (plus shop and café) which processes milk from the valley's farms into a range of cheeses.

The CFF/SBB station at La Chaux-de-Fonds is not only shared with this line and the CJ, it also hosts cross-border SNCF services from Besancon as well as its own services to Le Locle, Neuchâtel and Biel/Bienne. Starting from the island platform that is shared with the CJ the two separate metre-gauge lines run eastwards, parallel with the main lines, for about

Top: Showing its origins as a roadside tramway No.8 heads west near La Sagne.

An unidentified SNCF railcar waits at La Chaux-de-Fonds.

0.5km before the CJ leaves the confines of the railway and heads up the middle of a busy road on its way east. Our line then climbs away from the side of the standard gauge routes before they go into a short tunnel, heads through the halt at Grenier, before swinging over the main lines to again run parallel to, but above, the Neuchâtel line, that is now on its eastern side. After 1km the CFF goes its own way, the metre-gauge route swinging west through the halt at Le Reymond, traverses a 322m tunnel, and climbs at 4% (1 in 25) to the summit of the line near La Corbatière (1120m). From here the route follows the north side of the valley running down a gentle gradient to its terminus. Near the La Sagne-Eglise halt the tracks move to the south side of the local road and after the only intermediate station at La Sagne the line effectively becomes a roadside tramway passing through five other halts before it reaches Les Ponts-du-Martel. Until recently the line occasionally hosted steam-powered excursions that had run over the CJ by La Traction from its Pré-Petitjean operating base. These normally terminated at La Sagne using the only intermediate passing loop on the line. This is a quintessential 'community railway' that quietly goes about its business serving the local area, and is probably an operation that would have difficulty surviving outside Switzerland.

Top: La Sange in the summer.
Photo: Bryan Stone
Middle: Ast21, the TRNcmn's 'Voiture-salon-panoramique' in use on the CJ.
Photo: Theo Stolz
Bottom: The end of the line, showing the disused goods shed on the lefts.

Demise of the 'Cook Book'.

Many members will be disappointed to learn that Thomas Cook intend to publish the last edition of their famous European Railway Timetable, fondly known as the 'Cook Book', at the end of August. The company has issued the following statement - "As part of the on-going transformation and strategic review of Thomas Cook's UK and Ireland business, the company has reluctantly taken the decision to withdraw from the published travel guidebook and timetable market from September 2013." With many railway operators withdrawing their own printed timetables we must hope that the Swiss do not cease publication of the Kursbuch.