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The End of the Line

Part 2 of Bryan Stone's look at the closing of railways in Switzerland



Ae4/7 No. 11019 on a local from Neuchâtel, at Les Verrières, where all local services were withdrawn.

PHOTOS: Bryan Stone

Closure in Switzerland is a procedure. The granting of a Concession to build and operate a railway is both a privilege, with a certain protection, and an obligation to operate as promised. The private railways of the 19th C. operated obvious loss-makers, or bought up bankrupt operations, as when the NOB bought the Swiss National Railway SNB, built in 1877 and bankrupt two years later. The lines thus stayed open. After 1902 the SBB was subject to the concessionary obligations of the companies, large and small, that were taken into national ownership. The SBB system, some 2650km, was seen as a national network, and closures were very rare, so cost cutting, as with electrification of lines with low traffic, continued up to the 1960s. The many tramways with local concessions, and minor railways in hard-up private or local political hands, were more precarious. Some closed; some urban tramways were politically suppressed;

others barely survived, like the Langenthal Jura Bahn and Solothurn Niederbipp Bahn (today's thriving Aare-Mobil), or the Le Day - Le Pont - Le Brassus line in the depths of the rural Jura, and in the 1960s were substantially modernized under new legislation. Regional hardship and lack of alternatives were often a reason for refusal of permission to withdraw from the concession. The line from Leuk to Leukerbad did close in 1967 when local road improvements (popular at the time) to cater for the increasing tourist traffic to the resort became inevitable. This required the railway formation in constricted locations - the line went.

After the 1960s things changed. It is perhaps ironic that in a wealthier Switzerland financial constraints became politically more severe. As cost analysis became better, a new generation of managers in the Federal Transport Office, in Cantonal administrations, and at the

Ae3/6^h No. 10422 and 10429 in Lyss on two local services on the line Herzogenbuchsee – Solothurn – Lyss, closed in 1992.



SBB HQ, began to think more critically. Many lines had outlived their 19th C. usefulness. Also present was the need for serious modernization. Steam had gone by the early 60s, but layouts, signalling and numerous other operations had not kept up. Many local lines had a bewildering variety of unique historic vehicles, repaired by local ingenuity. On the SBB operations with a 50-year-old veteran electric loco, two three-axle cars with open platforms and a baggage car were no longer sustainable. Nor was a Station Master and lever frame block post at every local station, fun though it seemed at the time. The following are a selection of some standard gauge services closed since then.

In 1969 the SBB closed some 11km of line between Hinwil – Bauma where today the DVZO steam museum line runs in summer. This closure was preceded by the closure of two sections of the UeBB (Uerikon-Bauma Bahn) between Uerikon - Bubikon and Bubikon – Hinwil in 1948. These were lines in the Zürich agglomeration, which today might have been modernized as an S.Bahn. Such situations occur repeatedly, not just in Switzerland! Final closure at the end of the 60s of the cross-border Etzwilen (CH) – Singen (D) line was something different as it was still un-electrified and very sleepy. Also around this time withdrawal of passenger services over the 1.4km between Interlaken Est and Bönigen was long overdue; it was built in 1874 when the Lake Brienz ships, and the Berner-Oberland-Bahn, expected to start in Bönigen. They didn't, and today we have the interchange at Interlaken Est instead. In 1971 the 8.9km Sursee - Triengen Bahn lost its passenger service. This followed after a long debate over converting it to meter-gauge and extending it to connect with the WSB (now AAR) at Schöftland. Today some people dream of reopening the freight-only line as a new section of Luzern S-Bahn line running out to Triengen via Sempach. In 1973 the 1.6km branch line from Fleurier to St Sulpice up in the Jura, near the frontier with France, lost its uneconomic passenger service, and in 1975 the 7km Huttwil – Eriswil branch line was closed completely, this time by the Federal Transport Office who condemned the track.

The closure of Lenzburg – Wildegg in 1984 had a

Ae 3/II No.10456 and 1041 at Winterthur, in 1965, No.1041 is on the regular fast service between Winterthur and Basel, service later withdrawn on closure of the section Laufenburg - Koblenz.



BLS No.107 at Affoltern-Weyer: this is on the line closed in 2009 between Sumiswald and Huttwil.



Ae3/6' No.10708 on mixed train from Pontarlier, France, at Les Verrières.



ABOVE: Ae6/6 No.11467 at Wassen on the Gotthard-Rampe on a local train from Luzern to Göschenen. The intermediate stations from Erstfeld were all closed in 1992.

BELOW: No.1667 at Emmen.





Bm 2/4 No.1692 Diesel railcar, and a passenger car, on the Singen – Etzwilen line, never electrified and closed in 1969.



Affoltern-Weyer, in the closing days in 2009.



ABOVE: Ae6/8 No.207 on a local train from Spiez to Brig, at Blausee-Mitholz. This picture dates from 1967.

BETWEEN: BLS bus (rail replacement) at Sumiswald-Grünen.



No different reason, increasingly to be found: it connected the Seetal line at Willegg to a main line between Aarau and Zürich. The Heitersberg tunnel of 1975 meant that the fast connections were now made at Lenzburg; Willegg was redundant. Closure was controversial, because the 'Hero' conserves factory that generated heavy freight traffic, was on the line. It did close and the whole is almost effaced by inner-urban highway improvements. Removal of lines no longer justified following modernisation had taken place previously. In 1960 the opening of the Kerenzerberg Tunnel saw a section of the line alongside the Walensee closed and this was followed in 1969 by the going of the old line through Weesen. The line from Weesen to Näfels-Mollis had gone thirty eight years earlier! Although not a proper line 'closure', many readers regretted the withdrawal in 1987 of stopping services between Kandersteg and Frutigen, including Blausee-Mitholz. They were an undoubtedly ineffective use of line capacity when the BLS was full; but now that the 'Lötschbergers' are the only regular trains over the old line, there is talk of serving more stations again. The SBB did the same thing in 1994 with the stopping trains between Erstfeld and Bellinzona; most stations were closed, but perhaps they only sleep until the Gotthard base tunnel opens.

In 1992 a historic line closed. Stephenson and Swinburne had in 1850 advised that the way from Olten to Genève was with a line to Solothurn and Biel, branching off the Olten-Bern line at Herzogenbuchsee and this was built in 1857. But when Olten – Solothurn direct via Oensingen was built in 1876, Herzogenbuchsee – Solothurn became a backwater. It remained so, but in 2004 we could again travel over 12km of it for the Solothurn branch of the Olten-Bern high-speed-line uses the alignment between Wanzwil and Solothurn – but the stationmasters and level crossings have all gone. In 1994 came closure between Laufenburg – Koblenz. The line had once carried regular fast trains between Basel and Winterthur, in 1993 still faster than the later route via Zürich. 17km were closed, leaving Laufenburg as the extremity of the Basel S-Bahn, and Koblenz on a Zürich S-Bahn line from Turgi to Waldshut in Germany, over the oldest Rhein rail bridge at Koblenz. Also in 1994 came closure of another picturesque one, Sumiswald –

Griesbach – a halt closed with the section Sumiswald – Huttwil.



Wasen-im-Emmental, 5km and a journey time of 7 minutes. Agricultural traffic was quite heavy, but the track needed substantial renewal and so it closed completely.

The mood now changed again. The popular vote for Bahn 2000 with its high-speed lines and subsequent Alpine base tunnels meant that heavy financial commitments to railway infrastructure were being made. The political scene at the same time moved to greater responsibility at Cantonal level, with a financial structure that ensured that Cantons now ordered and paid for given levels of service, the basis for the new integrated zonal services and all-in pricing of buses, trams and trains. The consequence has been that lines have had their purpose changed, been built into networks, or have been retained as local links, where narrow economics might not have been evident. A conspicuous example was the old Hauenstein line between Sissach and Olten, a massive loss maker, where the Basel Land cantonal budget always excludes financing it, but the politicians always vote to keep it. On the other hand the 14km of loss-making Huttwil – Sumiswald line in Canton Bern was closed in 2009 almost without anger. Now there are plans for museum trains on it.

However, the Federal Transport Office has now ruled that lines that do not take 30% of their direct costs in fares should normally be closed unless compelling reasons are given. A recent example of a service under the microscope is the 22km Solothurn – Moutier line via the Weissenstein Tunnel, ex. BLS and now SBB operated. Here tunnel renovation is looming, stations do not meet legal standards for access, there is no freight outside the Solothurn suburbs, and receipts are around 20% - possibly the lowest proportion in the country. Battle rages as I write. Another potential for closure is the CJ's isolated standard gauge 11km branch from Porrentruy – Bonfol, a remnant of a once through line to France that was severed in 1970. This, unsurprisingly, also struggles to make 20% of its costs even with heavy freight from a chemical dump in Bonfol that has kept it busy in recent years - but this flow ends soon. It is suggested that both lines are visited sooner rather than later!

Many local lines have really been reformed, and perform today at a high level. My BLT here near Basel, formed in 1974 of two decrepit local lines, now carries CJ No.102 at Porrentruy with the service to Bonfol, now threatened with closure.

millions and makes money. Other lines survive, with heavy investment, after decades of closure threats; metre-gauge Nyon-St. Cergue or Aigle-Sepéy-Diablerets, and the standard gauge Seetal Line, are examples. The processes of both regeneration and closure will continue.

As many will realise this is not a comprehensive listing of closed lines, especially narrow gauge ones. Further articles are needed to cover these.

Good references for further study are: 'Schienennetz Schweiz/Réseau Suisse', by Hans G. Wägli, AS Verlag 2010; and 'Le Paradis Perdu', by March Dietschy, Editions Slatkine 2011. 



Oberdorf on the line from Solothurn to Moutier, threatened with closure.



ABOVE: Wasen im Emmental: a local train in 1995 on the now closed branch from Sumiswald.
BELOW: Weesen: station seen from Chur – Zürich express in 1968, just before closure as part of major realignment from Ziegelbrücke to Walensee. A new Weesen station was built on the new line but is, since 2012, also closed. .

