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Steamboat Jubilees in Switzerland 2015

Mario Gavazzi



120 year old p/s 'Greif', the oldest operating steamer in Switzerland in public service. Photos: Mario Gavazzi

This year we have several jubilees on the lakes of Switzerland. History does not only mean a respectable sum of years, as this is a year of living history since, while we celebrate significant anniversaries of these splendid ships, the people responsible for ensuring that they are still there for our enjoyment, are also changing. The new President of Dampferfreunde Vierwaldstättersee (the Association of Steamboat Enthusiasts on Lake Luzern – www.dampfschiff.ch) is 31 year-old Damian Müller, the youngest President of any Swiss steamboat association. He takes over from Beat Fuchs who held the post for 15 years and worked tirelessly ensured that the future of steam operations on this lake is as robust as it is today.

Now. A question to test your knowledge of steamboat operations on our lakes. Which is the oldest active steamboat in Switzerland in public service? The paddle steamer 'Uri' on the Vierwaldstättersee is called the oldest operating steamer in public service. That is true, but not 100%, because we have the privilege of seeing d/s 'Greif' on the UNESCO-Protected Greifensee (near Zürich). She is a lovely ship that is a screw, not paddle, steamer. Built as a steamboat in 1895 by Escher Wyss the 'Greif' was transformed in 1916 into a motor ship. Then in 1979/80 the original steam engine was found aboard a dredger, which had operated on the Zürichsee, that was in the process of being scrapped. The engine was salvaged and after a period of renovation was returned to the d/s 'Greif' to enable her to begin a second life as an operating steamboat in 1988, back on the Greifensee. She is a small ship that only takes 24 people, so a trip on one of the three 100 minute round trips she makes most Sundays between April and October is a different voyage that should be booked in advance. The SGG navigation company that operates on this lake was founded in 1890 so this too must be congratulated for its 125 years of operation. Apart from excursions it operates a year-round hourly ferry service across the Greifensee between Maur and Neideruster with its modern ships. For more information see www.dampfschiff-greif.ch/ and www.sgg-greifensee.ch.



Paddle Steamer 'Piemonte' on Lago Maggiore, 50 years after her re-inauguration.

So the very oldest active steamboat in public service is actually the 'Greif', whilst the 'Uri' is the oldest paddle steamer in regular public service in Switzerland!

What is more important than a good heart? We are also very happy that the good heart of the largest paddle steamer on a lake in Europe, the ps 'Simplon' on Le Léman, is 100 years old. Old? No, the steam engine built in 1915 by Sulzer in Winterthur, is ready for service in as good condition as it was 100 years ago! We have to be thankful to all the engineers and employees of its owner the CGN (www.cgn.ch) and the members of the supporting steamboat association (www.abvl.ch). ps 'Simplon' was planned to be in service in 1915, but the First World War delayed the construction works, so she finally entered service in 1920. We will be very happy in 2020, when this beautiful paddle steamer will be ready for the jubilee of 100 years. There was a short item about this ship on p38 of the last *Swiss Express*.

Another steamboat sailing in Swiss waters is celebrating two jubilees this year. This is the p/s 'Piemonte' on Lago Maggiore that is 111 years young. She was built in 1904 by Escher Wyss in Zürich as the 'Regina Madre', but her name was changed in 1943 to 'Piemonte'. The ship became out-of-order in 1961, but its owners the state-owned operator Gestione Governativa Navigazione Laghi based in Arona (I) decided to save this boat as a monument of the history of technics, fortunately not in a museum, but active, with the original steam engine. It returned to service in May 1965, 50 years ago, after 4 years of renovation. Congratulations for those 111 years of life, and 50 years of circulation after being saved! 