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Autor: Jesson, John
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Volgelsberg Visitor

John Jesson



SBB Bm4/4 II No.18451 on a passenger train from Singen at Etzwilen.

Photo: Bryan Stone

Until the introduction of 'Open Access' on the European railway network in the recent past, the sight of a Swiss locomotive outside its national boundaries was a rare one. Even rarer would have been the sight of a Swiss diesel locomotive. Rarer still would have been the sight of one of SBB's two passenger diesel locomotives. Imagine my surprise then, when browsing through a very limited-run book, whilst on a visit to Germany, there was a picture of Bm4/4 II No.18451 heading a train along a rural branch line in Hessen in August 1981. Even more interesting was that in the train it was hauling was SBB's Re 4/4 II No.11276 and a test coach. The mystery deepened. Some research was needed.

The line where the Swiss engines were photographed had been known at various times as both the Vogelsberg Bahn and Oberwald Bahn. It ran 65km from Glauberg-Stockheim to Lauterbach through the fields and forests of the quiet rolling countryside around the Vogelsberg, an ancient volcano in an area of Hessen located between Frankfurt-am-Main, Fulda and Giessen. The two end stations of this steeply graded and sharply curved line are still served by secondary cross-country lines, but the Oberwald Bahn lost its passenger services in the 1970's, and freight traffic on the southern section not long after the Swiss locos were photographed there. Freight services lingered on the northern section out of Lauterbach until 1994. The trackbed is now part of Germany's excellent network of long-distance cycle and hiking trails and known as the 'Vulkanweg'.

So why were the Swiss engines there? It would appear

that due to the steep and serpentine nature of the southern 25km of the route from Stockheim to Ober Seemen, it had been used previously by DB to test various performance aspects of its rolling stock, notably the DB VT10.5 articulated diesel train built in 1953. It is understood that the 1981 tests were carried out by the SBB as part of an ORE project, under the supervision of the UIC, to determine the point at which a wheel started to climb the rail. With the abandonment of passenger services the route was then only used by occasional ad-hoc freight operations that could be easily rescheduled. This then enabled DB to prepare the track with various faults for the trial and the SBB fitted the Re 4/4 II with a test wheel-set on one of the bogies. The SBB Messwagen (X 61 85 99 30 100-8) needed a 230v/50Hz power supply which, at that time, no German diesel could provide, hence the use of Bm 4/4 II No.18451, which could provide this supply. From the photographs in the book it is apparent that the test train was formed with the two Swiss locos, an Hbis van, a 2-axle tank wagon, and the Messwagen. The SBB locos left Bern on 3rd August and arrived at Stockheim, where it is believed they were stabled, on 4th August 1981 and were there until the 29th making various test runs to Ober Seemen. The equipment finally arrived back in Bern on 4th September.

And the locos? Bm 4/4 II No.18451 was one of a pair of diesels (originally Nos.1001 & 1002) built by SLM in 1939 as Class Am4/4 with an 830bhp 8-cylinder Sulzer engine and designed for passenger service. Weighing only 66t, and having an axle loading of only 16.5t, it was almost a 'go anywhere' engine. It had a very varied life and spent much

of its time replacing steam traction on lines prior to electrification. In its final 'service years' it operated the never-electrified cross-border secondary line from Etzwilen to Singen (Germany) prior to its closure. Bryan Stone caught-up with it there in 1966 and has supplied the SRS with some of his historic images. It languished in SBB's reserve fleet until it was officially 'retired' in 1990, when it was handed over to SBB Historic at Olten from where it occasionally ventures out to special events such as the one on the BDWM last June where Neil Wheelwright photographed it. Electric loco No.11276 was new at the time of the tests; one of the slightly longer last batch of Re4/4 II locos to be built. It was transferred to the SBB Cargo fleet and was unique in being the only Re4/4 to receive the short-lived original 'Cargo' livery. The 2002 photo taken at Luzern shows it working a passenger service – a not unusual circumstance. It is now 420 276-8 in the Cargo fleet and has been fitted with ETCS, so it could now be retracing much of the excursion it took through Germany early in its life.

John wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Rüdi Steinman and Malcolm Bulpitt with some of the research work needed for this article. 

TOP: No.18451 at Rotkreuz in 2011.
Photo: Bryan Stone
MIDDLE: Preserved SBB diesel Bm4/4 II No.18451 at Bremgarten West in 2015.
Photo: Neil Wheelwright
BOTTOM: No.11276 at Luzern, 2002.
Photo: John Jesson

