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Railway Preservation Schemes in the Suisse Romande

Jean-François Andrist looks at some issues and a lesser-known organisation

MC Bos No. 74 and 75 plus BDeh4 4 No 32 as a train.

Switzerland has, after or even at par with UK, probably the highest geographical density of preservation schemes in Europe. HECH (Historische Eisenbahn CH) is the equivalent of HRA in UK and had between 50 and 60 members until a couple of years ago. It was largely, if not exclusively, made-up of volunteer-based operations, with the HECH's reasonably priced common 'Responsabilite Civile' insurance scheme as the main attraction to belong. Otherwise - though mostly on a very friendly basis - everyone was cooking his own local brew, in typical Swiss fashion!

Over the last couple of years, common carriers like RhB, ZB, MGB and many others have joined the organisation in order to coordinate the approach to various issues with BAV/OFT (the overseeing Federal organisation), issues which are becoming always more complicated, time consuming and cost intensive especially for running older stock on common carrier tracks.

Discussions with the Bernese overlords are mostly quite matter-of-fact, but 'overheating' is not unheard of and I understand at least twice, the rows have ended at the highest instance, the Swiss Administrative Tribunal, where the outcome was in favour of the preservationists.

Besides the DFB (the Furka summit line), DVZO (Zürcher Oberland) and BC (Blonay-Chamby), most other organisations have to use the tracks of the common carriers. This has so far not led to any major mishaps or severe problems, but it is of course not good enough in a time of rather obsessive 'No Risk' approach. As a result excursions with heritage stock are becoming always more expensive and complicated to organise. This happened first on the standard gauge lines (think of ERTMS on the Gotthard, even for accessing the old mountain route, or now between Lausanne - Villeneuve on the popular route along Lake Lemman). But recently metre-gauge and other narrower



gauge systems also face issues, and the usual mountain of paperwork, if one wants to run without being equipped with a complex and expensive security system. Up to recently having a pilot/second local railman always present in the cab, but this is apparently no longer safe enough...

Nevertheless, hope dies ultimately and many of the more local schemes continue to strive, these based on smaller groups of active members (usually between 10 and 20). Support – either active or tacit – is mostly available to such groups from the official companies, as most of the time one, or several, of the volunteers are earning their living as railwaymen in these companies. But contrary to what outsiders with an idyllic views of the Swiss railways may think, this is not always the case and much depends on the attitude and inclinations of the management (both at the head office and in the workshops), which tend to fluctuate over time! One such smaller group that has recently experienced a turn for the better is TNT or Train Nostalgique du Trient, with a base in a small shed at Martigny station on the Martigny – Chatelard (MC) line, which goes on into France till Chamonix and St Gervais under SNCF – for the time being – jurisdiction, though one is well advised to check beforehand if trains are running on the French section!!! Let us be diplomatic and say that for about 20 years the group TNT had only absolute minimum support, but the 60th anniversary of service of the MC BDCh 4/4 No. 4 to 8 series of units (still looking good and well maintained to this day) has led to a chain of events which resulted in a popular festival being organised in the Vernayaz MC workshops on Saturday 27th May 2017.


It was the first time in many years that the TNT's very interesting preserved rolling stock could officially return to the well equipped and well maintained facilities of the MC, now part of TMR (Transport Martigny Region). The facility was cleaned (you could eat on the floor) by the MC crew and prepared on the Friday afternoon by the small TNT volunteers crew, notably for setting up the unavoidable 'cantine'; one of the advantage of such groups is that everybody has to plug-in and no one feels overqualified to handle tables, chairs and packs of various drinks. Unfortunately it is not always so in larger preservation schemes! By 5pm everything was in place and the day ended up with an excellent helping of local produce and a couple of bottles of 'Valaisan' (here the wine from Vaud is considered 'foreign'!) with everyone being friendly and enjoying the occasion.

Compared to other parts of Switzerland the Valais, and especially its central area around Martigny and Sion, is not a hotbed of rail enthusiasts, therefore there was some anxiety as to whether this first larger event would generate sufficient visitors, even if trips between Martigny and Vernayaz would be free for the day. The programme included workshop visits and speeches in the morning, and a cavalcade in the afternoon, while the 'cantine' was to be in operation from 10.00 to 17.00. The weather was kind enough if –

as often in this narrow valley – extremely windy. In practice everything went very well to the great satisfaction of TNT and – perhaps more importantly – the management of TMR/MC!

I went there with a dear friend who has just retired as the CFF locomotive driver. Of course after 39 years and 7 months of driving around, the last 20-years mostly between Brig and Genève, he knows everybody and I was most surprised to see that around some 20-25% of the people frequenting the tables with friends and families were railwaymen, either retired or active, either CFF or so called private railways. Even if the talks are often on the better, i.e. less automated/stressed, more mixed (freight and passenger) services with many more types of engines, it is interesting to see that for many employees, this is not just another job but there is still an esprit-de-corps and interest in talking railway and spending free time at events like this.

In conclusion the MC + TNT are probably rather unique, even in Switzerland, in having kept one representative of all the series of electric units and trailers that had plied the line since it was first opened, with the TNT collection having the two oldest motor units kept under cover: BCCh 4/4 No. 15 of 1909, which is now approaching the end of its restoration work, and ABDeh 4/4 No. 32 ('*Tracteur*') of 1921, built for the transport of material for the Barberine dam, then under construction. It has also 3 very interesting pilot units, with an "at distance" command system by Thury right from the opening of the line in 1906 and this with a very steep rack section! One of these is the – fairly rare on Swiss MG lines nowadays – open pilot trailer Ct 25 from 1906, a real piece of nostalgia.

All details on this really worthwhile heritage collection can be found under www.trainostalgique-trient.ch. 



LEFT: All 4 vehicles outside the shed.
TOP: MC No 21 and BDCh 4/4 No 32.
RIGHT: Old and new BDCh 4s on display.