

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: - (2017)
Heft: 130

Artikel: Discovering the Val Bavona : Bob Medland goes in search of Switzerland's smallest post office
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-853883>

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Discovering the Val Bavona

Bob Medland goes in search of Switzerland's smallest Post Office

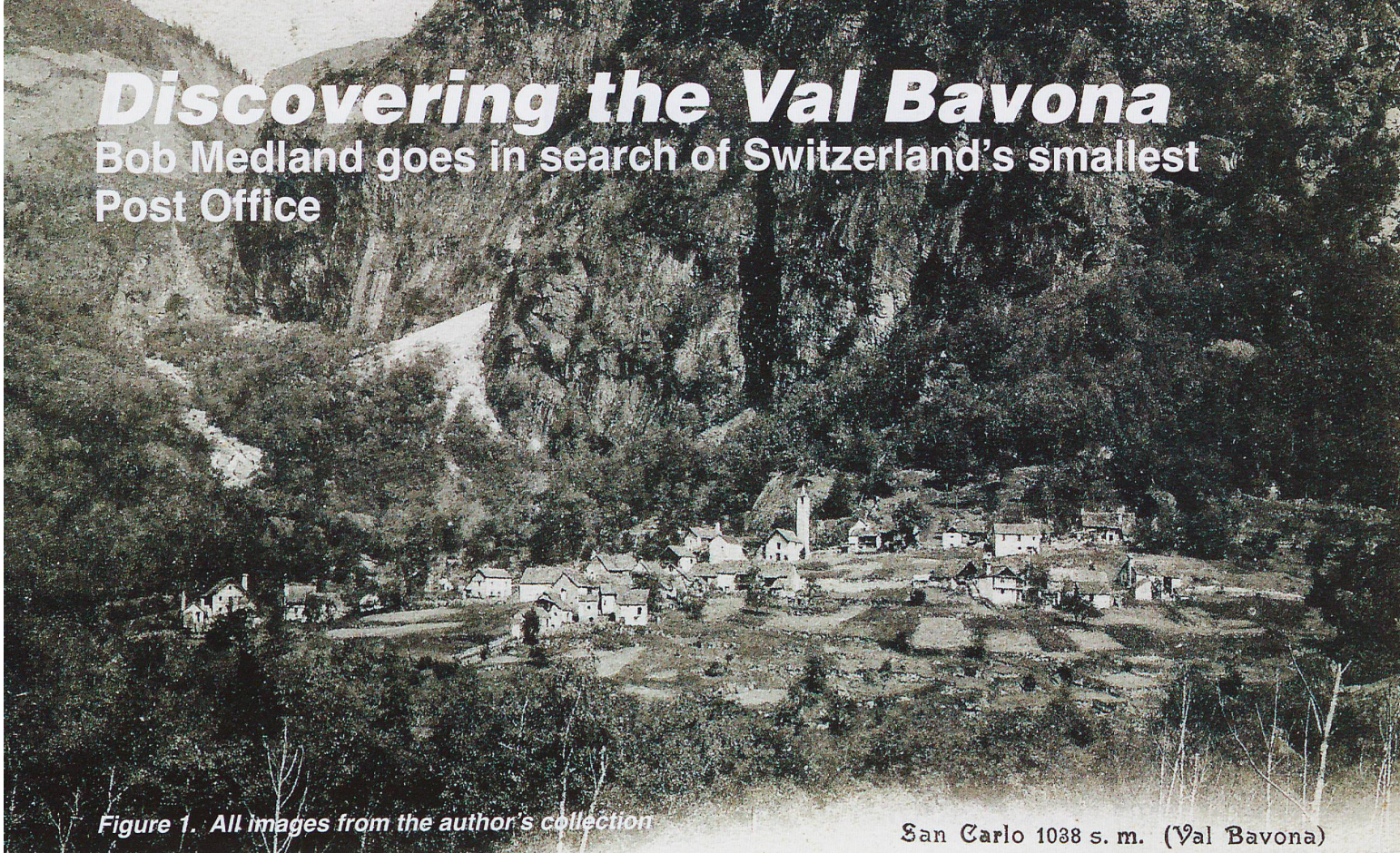


Figure 1. All images from the author's collection

San Carlo 1038 s. m. (Val Bavona)

Fate often hangs by a slender thread. About 10 years ago I bought an old (c1910) picture postcard showing a tiny Alpine village, set in a deep, steep-sided valley (Figure 1). As a student of Swiss postal history I was mainly interested in the intriguing postmark S. CARLO (VAL BAVONA)



Figure 2.

(Figure 2). Ever curious, when I acquire such items I like to look up the location and details of these villages using different resources including maps, guidebooks - and the Internet, of course. What I found out led to one of the most memorable day's outing in my life.

It is difficult to imagine a more inaccessible village in Switzerland. The Val Bavona lies in the north-west of Canton Ticino on the south side of the Alps (Figure 3). As the raven flies, it is only 15 km south-west of Airolo but to get there, other than by hiking over steep, remote mountains, you have to travel no less than 120 km in a great clockwise loop around the canton, via Bellinzona, Locarno and then up the Val Maggia. Halfway up that valley lies the village of Bignasco, where there is a gap in the mountains on the western side of the valley, (Figure 4). This is the entrance to the Val Bavona: somehow enticing, it looks like a piece of scenery from 'Lord of the Rings'. The valley setting is dramatic with intimidating cliffs on either side that overshadow the beautiful, pastoral setting of unspoiled villages surrounded by meadows and birch woodland beside the stream (Figure 5). It is idyllic.

So where is the public transport interest in all this? Firstly,

there used to be a metre-gauge railway up the Val Maggia from Ponte Brolla to Bignasco, the Ferrovia Locarno-Ponte Brolla-Bignasco (LPB), that later became part of Ferrovie Autolinee Regionali Ticinesi (FART). This organisation still operates the section between Locarno and Ponte Brolla as a part of the Centovalli Line. Opened in 1907, and electrified from the beginning, the line north of Ponte Brolla sadly closed in 1965, so we had to use the hourly bus now provided

Figure 3.





Figure 4.



Figure 5.

by FART. The service (Kursbuch 62.315) runs from Locarno FFS/SBB up the Val Maggia to Cavigno via Bignasco where you disembark and wait in the village square (Figure 6) for the Post Auto service (62.333) that takes you up the Val Bavona to San Carlo. This service of four return trips daily operates only between 1st April and 31st October because the valley is cut off every winter by deep snow. Travelling up the valley you pass through several small villages including Foroglio (Figure 7), with its famous 80m high waterfall that cascades down into the main valley, and Sonlerto (Figure 8). The road, which was only opened in 1962 in association with the hydro-electricity project at the head of the valley, has to skirt around these settlements because the village streets are little more than narrow footpaths - or donkey tracks - in between the buildings (Figure 9). In times gone by the inhabitants survived the winters by digging a maze of tunnels under the snow around the villages to reach stores of fodder, woodpiles etc.

Nowadays the occupants vacate the valley for the winter months. It was interesting to discover that these tiny communities are still not connected to the electricity grid; during the summer occupancy their electricity comes solely from local solar power equipment, despite the fact that the infrastructure at the valley head is a major supplier of power to the rest of the country.

After about 10km, a 30-minute trip, you reach San Carlo, which is the end of the road (Figure 10). Compare this 2016 photo with the 1910 postcard: the Val Bavona is a very unstable area geologically and what was a fresh landslide c100 years ago is now covered with vegetation. Just across the valley the tiny village of Presa was devastated by a landslide in 1945 and is now empty, the ruins conserved. On arrival in San Carlo we found the miniscule village post office complete with PTT sign outside (Figure 11). Despite being the only post office to have existed in the valley, surely it couldn't still be open after all the PTT cutbacks over the last 20 years? Alas, it was not to be. Originally opened as a seasonal post office in 1907 it was closed in 1998, not before enjoying some publicity as being Switzerland's smallest post office – and the spur to our adventure.

Our journey did not end there: immediately above the village is the base station of the Robièi cable car, constructed in 1964 in association with the building of the impressive dam at its top part of a major pumped storage hydro-electric scheme. It was opened for use by the public in 1972, is run by the FSCR, and apart from carrying some 20,000 passengers annually in one

125 person cabin, its other 'cabin' is equipped to transport maintenance equipment up to the power station in its remote location (Figure 12). The FSCR too is a very seasonal operation only normally running hourly from mid-June to





Figure 7.

the beginning of October in association with the opening of the Albergo-Ristorante Robiei at its summit. The cable car is the hotel's only means of supply. The cabins climb 945m over a 4km route up to the dam, its lake and the Basòdino glacier beyond. The views from the cable car are spectacular even by Swiss standards (Figures 12 and 13) but it's not for the faint-hearted. So, on the return trip when the cabin suddenly lurched to a halt and we were left swinging high above the valley floor, people looked around worriedly. Next came a bang from above us and then shouting, followed by the roof of the cabin crashing open . . . and two maintenance engineers climbed in, having been checking the pylon (Figure 14). Drama indeed!

Once safely back on solid ground we left San Carlo slumbering in lovely September sunshine and set off on foot, walking back down through the villages and meadows of the Val Bavona, soaking up the scenery. Truly one of the most beautiful, yet least-known, Alpine valleys in Switzerland.

Bob Medland is the Helvetia Philatelic Society's Librarian.

Figure 8.



This is an amended version of an article that first appeared in the HPS 'Newsletter', and has been used here with the permission of the Society. For more information about the Helvetia Philatelic Society please visit their website <http://www.swiss-philately.co.uk/> or, if you are interested in joining, please write to their membership secretary Neville Nelder 13, Bowbridge Lock, Stroud, Glos. GL5 2JZ or email secretary@swiss-philately.co.uk for details

Robiei Dam, the Cable Car, and the Valley – some additional information.

Editor

Bob's splendid description of his day in the Val Bavona sent me off on a search to find out more about the cable car he used and the hydro-electric scheme, high up in the mountains above this peaceful rural valley, that it serves. The

first stage of the complex scheme operated by Ofima, that now involves one natural and five man-made lakes, was built between 1950 and 1955 and accessed from other locations. The second phase, which involved the construction of several spectacular dams, including the one at Robiei, commenced in the 1960s and included the construction of the valley road and the cable car system. The scheme is one of the largest linked systems in Switzerland and is a major supplier of power using a complex pumped storage scheme. In addition to the lakes there are some 60km of water-carrying tunnels buried in the mountains above the idyllic valley Bob spent a pleasant day in. Habegger of Thun built the heavy haul cableway to carry all the necessary construction and operating machinery up to the remote site. The construction gangs lived up at Robiei in the building that is now the mountain Albergo. The cable way is unusual as it has two completely different cabins. The one that carries today's tourists was only introduced in 1972 when the hydro-electric

Figure 9.




scheme was completed, and replaced dual-purpose equipment similar to its current 'pair'. The other cabin and cargo deck is an original from 1964 (although subsequently modified in 2001) and utilising an under-slung flat-bed platform can carry up to 13,400kg, making it one of Switzerland's biggest cable-hauled carrying platforms. The operating equipment of the FSCR is some of the most powerful cable car systems in the whole country. Due to the fact that only one car carries fare-paying passengers this gives the operation an un-balanced public timetable, with just one 15 minute duration 'tourist' trip every hour, although the system operates half-hourly. Had Bob visited earlier in the year he would have found the valley road much busier, as August 2016 marked the end of a 4 year CHF93m project by Ofima to replace the generating equipment in the underground turbine hall that serves the Robiei site. The valley is unique as it is governed and managed by a non-profit Foundation set-up under the auspices of the Confederation to preserve its unique human environment, along with the scenic and wildlife elements that make it such a special place. See www.bavona.ch for more information on this little-known corner of the Ticino. 



Figure 10.



Figure 11.

Figure 12.



Figure 13.



Figure 14.

