

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: - (2019)
Heft: 139

Artikel: The story of the Bodensee train ferries
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-853827>

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The Story of the Bodensee Train Ferries

Der Beobachter



A rare colour view of the deck of the MF Rorschach on the Bodensee taken shortly before the closure of services in 1976.

Photo: © ETH-Bibliothek, Zürich

Recently in *Swiss Express* we have talked about the train ferry operation on both the Thunersee and the Vierwaldstättersee. The Bodensee also had its Trajektfähre (train ferries). From 1869 to 1976 Romanshorn and Friedrichshafen in Germany (in 1869 in Württemberg) were so linked. Bavarian Lindau also had a ferry connection to Romanshorn from 1869, the service ceasing on the outbreak of war in 1939. Following the opening of the Arlberg Tunnel, Bregenz was connected to the Austrian rail network and train ferries operated from there to Romanshorn, Friedrichshafen and Lindau, although all sailings had ceased by the end of the First World War.

The first train ferry rolled off the stocks at Escher-Wyss, Zürich in January 1869 and was operated on the Bodensee the following month. Designed by Scottish engineer John Scott Russell (who had also worked with IK Brunel on the SS Great Eastern), this paddle steamer had two engines each with its own funnel. It could carry 18 wagons on two parallel tracks, but such was its propensity to consume coal at a prodigious rate (it was nicknamed Kohlenfresser or Coal Guzzler by its crew) it was withdrawn and replaced as early as 1883.

An aerial view of the MF Rorschach on 17th August 1954. Visible on board are two FS (Italian Railways) hipped-roof vehicles.

Photo: © ETH-Bibliothek, Zürich

The opening of both the Arlberg Tunnel mentioned above and also the Gotthard Tunnel in Switzerland resulted in a significant increase in traffic, which could only be met by the introduction of barges towed, either singly or as a pair, behind either the train ferry or a passenger steamer. Each of these barges also had two tracks. Great care was needed in the loading and unloading of these barges to ensure they did not capsize.

By the latter years of the nineteenth century the belt of connected railways around the shore of the Bodensee had been completed. Cost calculations now showed that the train ferries were twice as expensive to operate. However they



survived into the twentieth century as the land railways were for the most part single track and unable to cope with all the traffic on offer. Furthermore, the time taken to complete customs formalities was no different on land as by water. Between the wars traffic built up again and the ports were equipped with electrically operated bridges to equalise the lake levels.

In 1926 six barges were motorised. Then in 1929 a new twin-engine diesel vessel, the Schussen, was launched. It could accommodate ten wagons and was also the first car ferry on the lake.

Accidents were rare. However on 10th March 1930 the connecting bridge gave way when a barge was being loaded sending seven wagons mainly loaded with sugar into the harbour. The propelling locomotive stopped short just before it too was about to enter the water. In June 1962 two wagons containing postal items ended up in five metres of water following a shunting accident.

During World War II ferry traffic was suspended resuming only in 1948. In 1960, 27,075 wagons were conveyed from Germany to Switzerland and 16,613 in the opposite direction.

In 1958 the ferry Romanshorn went into service on the lake. She was joined in 1966 by the Rorschach. Train ferry traffic however only survived until 30th May 1976, a victim of falling frequencies and rising costs. Both the Romanshorn and the Rorschach were rebuilt as pure car ferries and can still be seen today, the Rorschach having been renamed the Friedrichshafen.



he MF Schussen seen from the air on Tuesday, 31st July 1956. Unusually it is in use as a car ferry. Normally it would carry railway freight on a weekday and car traffic at weekends.

Photo: © ETH-Bibliothek, Zürich



MF Rorschach is entering Romanshorn harbour on 22nd January 1976 four months before the Trajektfähre crossings ceased.

Photo: © ETH-Bibliothek, Zürich

This year marked the 150th anniversary of the launch of that first Trajektfähre of 1869. Over the weekend of 4th and 5th May a celebration was held in Romanshorn to mark the occasion and Stefan Unholz and his wife Brigitte were there to enjoy the festivities. Here are some pictures of the event taken by Brigitte.



Ferry vessel "Romanshorn" carrying a vintage freight van (formerly Bodensee - Toggenburg K3 no. 1710) that was temporarily placed on a low loader road vehicle for the event. The standard gauge rails that used to be permanently installed on this vessel were removed many years ago.

Photo: Brigitte Unholz



Closer view of this contraption.

Photo: Brigitte Unholz



LEFT AND ABOVE: Photographs showing unloading procedures.

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