

The awakening of the sleeping beauty

Autor(en): **Eugster, Lee**

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THE AWAKENING OF THE SLEEPING BEAUTY

It is strange how regions which played an important role in a country's history and economy sink into oblivion, then awake again centuries later.

This happened to the valley of Goms or Conches, meaning Conch, since this cradle of the Rhone River resembles a long shell with jagged rims.

This valley links the Alps' two clefts which are separated by the barrier and watershed of the Gotthard. One of central Europe's west-east trade routes passed through it before the people of Uri managed to bridge the Schöllenen Gorge, thus opening the great traffic axis from north to south. Then the travellers who, for millenniums, had made the detour through the Goms, deserted it.

Its inhabitants, essentially farmers, also guided pack-mules over the passes. Thus they contacted the outside world, and their villages strung along the lusty young Rhone, are still witnesses of this mingling with other peoples.

During the long winters, the Gommer sculptured their furniture and ceilings, or painted pictures on the outside walls of their black wooden houses. Between the 16th and 18th centuries, a dynasty of sculptors — the Ritz of Selkingen brought fame to their valley. Together with the family Sigristen of Brig, they carved out of fine-grained larchwood Baroque altars which, painted by other artists, still adorn the seventy churches and chapels built in the Goms during the Counter-Reformation.

The Goms was also the cradle of the Ritz and Seiler hotel dynasties and of a number of prelates. The most illustrious, Cardinal Mathew Schiner, born around 1456 at Mühlebach near Ernen, was a poor farmer's son.

After all this glory, the valley fell asleep. In the second half of last century, not even the tinkling bells of five horses drawing the postal coach along the dusty highway disturbed its lethargy. Its population dwindled, for the young emigrated to industrial centres or overseas. Gradually, the idea of reanimating the ancient west-east traffic by means of a railway line over the Furka and Oberalp Passes took form. The cantons of Valais, Uri and the Grisons joined some French financiers to found, with the sanction of the Confederation, a Railway Company. Work on the stretch from Brigue to the height of the Furka Pass started in 1911. But unforeseen difficulties were encountered at 6,600 ft., where bitter cold, high snow, avalanches and unfavourable geological formations in the tunnel measuring 6,184 ft. caused delays and the loss of many lives.

On 30th June, 1914, steam-powered engines pulling four coaches inaugurated the stretch of Brigue-Gletsch. But the outbreak of World War I stalled the work of linking this line with Andermatt (Uri) and, over the Oberalp Pass, with the Rhaetian Railways in Disentis. The Furka Railway rendered great services to the army and the people of the Goms, to whom it carried supplies. But in 1923, the company went bankrupt, for none of the expected rich tourists arrived from war-ruined Europe.

However, State Councillor Maurice Troillet from Martigny, a pioneer who later was the instigator of the road tunnel under the Great Saint Bernard, supported by other men of foresight of the Valais, Vaud, Uri and the Grisons, refused to let this important and costly railway fall to ruin. They founded a syndicate which bought the line with the moral and financial support of the Confederation.

The Company of the Furka-Oberalp Bahn has the obligation to run in winter trains from Brigue to Oberwald (Goms) and Disentis-Sedrun (Grisons), in order to carry passengers and supplies between these stations, while the two passes are impracticable because of too high snow. The whole line from Brigue to Disentis was finally electrified in 1940/42.

The gay red trains which flit through the Goms acquire in summer additional glamour as the "Glacier Express", when passengers can ride from Zermatt to St. Moritz in the Engadine through Switzerland's most imposing alpine scenery without leaving their coach.

Despite this touristic railway and the excellent pass road of the Furka, the charming villages of the Goms lost inhabitants. Travellers rushed through the valley without stopping to visit villages and their wonderful churches.

At last, the Gommer are changing the situation without help from outside. By do-it-yourself methods they modernize their farms, build comfortable small hotels, vacation chalets. Since aerial cableways reach the erstwhile alpine pastures of Riederfurka, Riederalp, Bettmeralp, the Eggishorn and Bellwald, these hamlets atop the ridge separating the Goms from the Bernese Alps are developing into favourite vacation resorts for summer and winter sports, with a marvellous view on mountains and glaciers.

The quiet, fresh Goms is ideal for hiking in lush meadows and scented pine and fir forests, for trout fishing, and ski-ing in winter on its sunny snowfields. Fiesch, the chief town of the district, has now a school for rock climbing run by experienced patented guides. The little known side valley of Binn, which became a nature reservation for rare flowers and animals, offers splendid excursions. Incidentally, there lives in the village of Binn the last "Strahler" — prospector of marvellous crystals which abound in the region.

Lee Eugster.
(By courtesy of "Treize Etoiles.")

NEWS FROM LUCERNE

For some time now visitors and local people alike have been able to see and hear a new attraction near the bridge across the River Reuss: the owner of a well-known watch and jewellery store has had a twelve-tone carillon installed while renovating his building. Four times a day, at 10 a.m., 4, 6 and 8 p.m., familiar melodies chime forth. This first installation of its kind in Central Switzerland is normally run automatically. However, it can also be played by hand on keys. When the bells ring towards the nearby houses whose angle provides good acoustics, this is meant to give the native of Lucerne a reason to stop and reflect during a busy day, and to provide a welcome surprise for the foreign visitor.

The wooden Chapel Bridge which was built in the 14th century across the River Reuss presents an unaccustomed sight nowadays. At a first glance it might seem that this ancient sight of Lucerne is being demolished. Nearly the entire bridge above the water has been removed; only the wooden poles still protrude from the water like accusing fingers. The bridge is being completely renovated. In the course of this work the valuable paintings in the gables will also be restored. Thus next spring the Chapel Bridge will be able to present itself in its ancient glory to photographers from the four corners of the globe.

[S.N.T.O.]