

The shipping news : (with apologies to E. Anne Proulx!) Bryan Stone reports on two lake steamer projects

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THE SHIPPING NEWS

(with apologies to E Anne Proulx!)

Bryan Stone reports on two Lake Steamer projects



All photographs are of the *Unterwalden*.

PHOTOS: Bryan Stone

A "floating legend" is how the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* recently referred to the *ds Unterwalden*. This 109 year old historic ship has been three years in the shipyard at Luzern being completely restored and overhauled. This ship symbolically signalled the turning point on the Vierwaldstättersee when in 1976, despite plans of preservation the *Pilatus* being withdrawn, the *Wilhelm Tell* made a restaurant, and the fleet renewal with big, modern motor ships was in full swing. The last five steamers were to be replaced and *Unterwalden* was next.

It never happened. The Friends of the Steamships, hastily called into life, raised several million francs and paid much towards an overhaul which SGV (the operating company) had never considered. *The Unterwalden* survived, a showpiece, and the remaining four (*Schiller*, *Uri*, *Stadt Luzern* and the flagship *Gallia*) survived with her. It was a close-run thing; on the Thunersee *Blümlisalp*, the last steamer, was withdrawn in 1972 and only very reluctantly not scrapped on the spot, but sold to private interests who hid her in a gravel pit near Gwatt. It took 20 years to get her back on the lake, but now she is everyone's favourite. On Le Léman, fitting a paddle steamer with a diesel motor was considered progress, and it was apparently a surprise to the CGN that the customers lost interest overnight. The *Neuchâtel* (referred to later) had gone from the Lac de Neuchâtel in 1969.

Suddenly enlightenment spread in the land - the realisation that the Swiss and their visitors actually came to see and enjoy the steamships, with a national treasure being on the point of slipping away. The snag was that they are large; old; expensive to maintain and operate; and need a big crew with special skills. The gain was however huge. The lakes are popular and the great steamers are often full, but always serene and elegant. Their motion, with the gentle thump of

the paddles and the rise and fall of the cranks, the hiss of steam and the manoeuvres to land, fascinate all of us. Each of us has a favourite - mine is the *Lötschberg* on the Brienzersee - but the Luzern fleet is still glorious. Even from the shore, the harmony of ship, lake and mountains is inescapable. An especially beautiful moment is to see a steamer in the quiet of the Alpacher See, and that is about to happen again after an interval of some years.

The Unterwalden re-entered service on May 7th, and has the necessary adaption to restore steamer service to Alpnachstad, where the Pilatus-Bahn starts. The Acheregg Bridge, carrying the Gotthard motorway and the 1965 extension to Hergiswil of the LSE (now ZB) Stansstad to Engelberg line, was built too low for steamers, which were, they said at the time, dying out anyway. *The Unterwalden* has upper works and a bridge which retract hydraulically without spoiling her traditional lines so she can slip under the bridge.

The restoration cost was CHF10m, of which the Friends contributed CHF3m. It is not only technical, but artistic. She has been returned to the visual state of the 1950s, even with the canvas awning on the top deck. The Salon, with its Rococo-style panelled marquetry, has been restored to its original splendour based on old photos and relics. It is a masterpiece - as indeed in Edwardian days they all were intended to be - and that is what (with each restoration) is preserved for us; not just a steamer, a monument to skills and engineering of a century ago, but still part of the Switzerland we love.

A work in progress. On Saturday, April 16th I alighted at Sugiez, a tiny, lonely halt on the TPF line from Neuchâtel to Murten. However, I was not alone as some 300 people were making for a small shipyard located on the bank of the Broye

Canal, which links the Murtensee and the Lac de Neuchâtel, where a new wooden hall is rising up above the flat, fertile land. In this hall the *ds Neuchâtel* is being restored. She is a 250 tonne single-deck paddle-steamer, built by Escher-Wyss (their No. 578) of Zürich in 1912, and a veteran of 57 years in service on the lakes at the foot of the Jura. Withdrawn in 1969 she was stripped of her engine, sold, and installed as a restaurant in Neuchâtel harbour, where the hull plates became steadily thinner. Her steam engine was scrapped; her superstructure was severely modified; her paddle wheels were cut in half. By 1998 she was in a poor state. However, the *Neuchâtel* will steam again, probably in the season of 2013. The association 'Trivapor' (with some 4,000 members including your Swiss News Editor) has succeeded in raising most of the CHF8m required, including substantial grants from the Cantons and Communities on the lakes. The ship was bought and last September towed very gingerly to the shipyard at Sugiez. There it was lifted in a cradle by Switzerland's biggest mobile crane and lowered into a prepared dry-dock workshop. How precarious this was became clear when the Government inspector condemned over 70% of the hull plating. There will be a new keel to meet contemporary stability rules (not needed in 1912); new paddles; and a replacement engine. The oil-burning engine, a superheated 2-cylinder compound built by Maffei and removed in 1972 from a steamer on Bavaria's Chiemsee, has been fully rebuilt and is ready. Fortunately when the original paddles were cut the clever bit, the eccentrics on the hub which control the blades' entry in the water, was retained. The fitting-out involves restoring the brass and woodwork in the saloons and public areas to how it would have been in 1912, but with contemporary kitchens and facilities - and all in 18 months? Willy Schaer, Trivapor's President, is optimistic that this timescale is possible.

At Trivapor's AGM in Sugiez we inspected *Neuchâtel*, desolate as she looks today stripped out, but heard bad news which will also sadden many rail lovers. Sebastian Jacobi, the Secretary of Trivapor, for many years librarian and archivist of the SBB - always a friendly helper and a prolific writer - had suffered a heart attack two-days earlier. He survived, but will inevitably withdraw from his role. He says he will now write the ship's history. We hope to share with him the maiden voyage in 2013. Whilst preparing this I learned to

my surprise that there is another survivor, the sister ship *Fribourg* built 1913 and withdrawn 1964. She is hauled up on dry land and in use as a high quality restaurant at a hotel in Portalban, near Murten, but will not be restored. 

