

Long lost line : Jakob Jäger recounts the short life of the unusual trait - planches line

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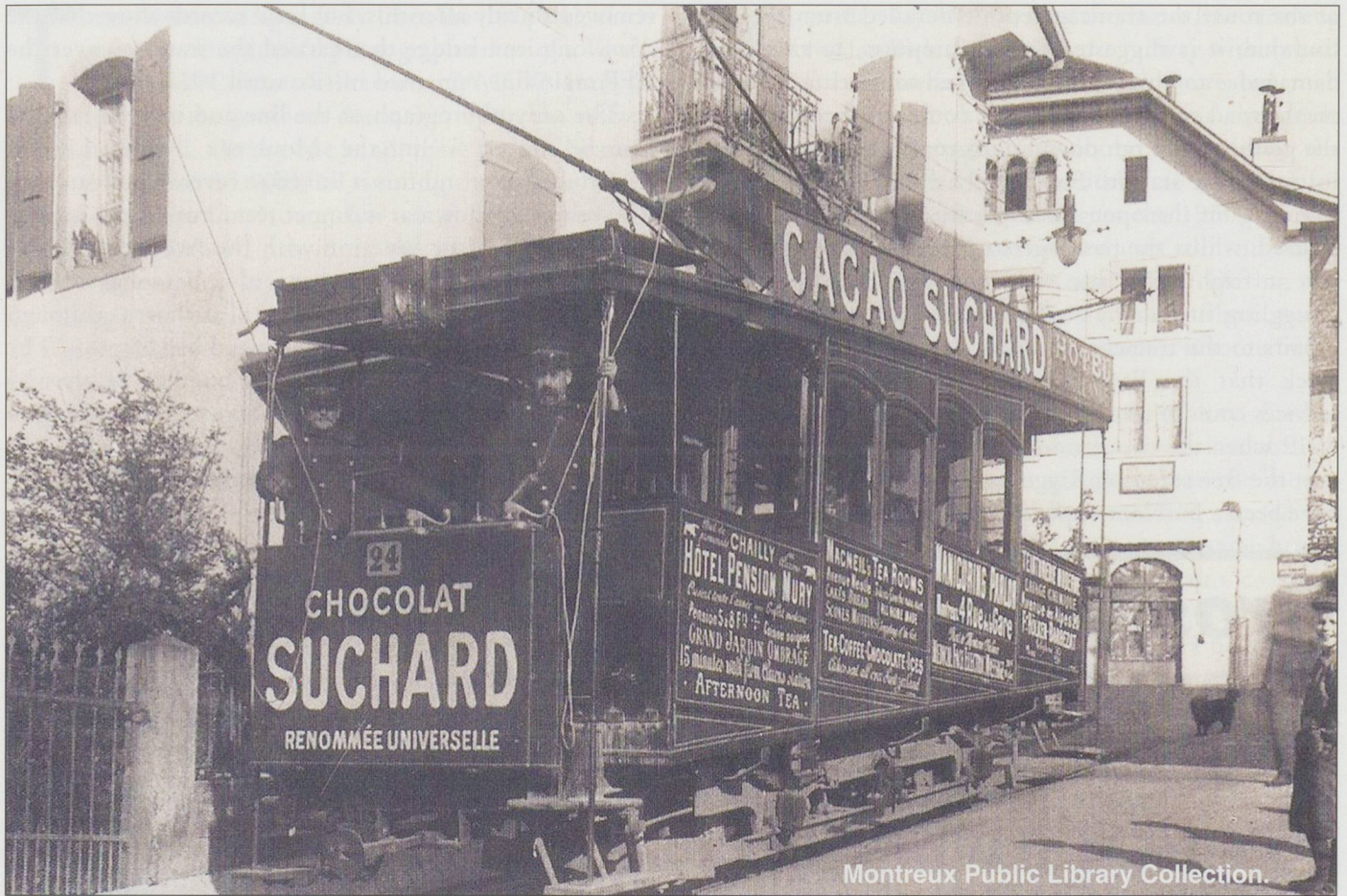
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Long Lost Line Jakob Jäger recounts the short life of the unusual Trait – Planches line.


As Montreux developed as a resort at the end of the 19thC in the era of the Belle Époque, it spread south-eastwards towards Territet across the slopes that ran down to Lac Genève. One of these new suburbs was Les Planches and its residents looked to the pioneering electric tramway of the Vevey Montreux Chillon (VMC) Company, which had opened along the lakeside road in 1888, to provide them with transport into Montreux and beyond. The nearest railway station was also at the bottom of the hill at Territet. This was before the 800mm-gauge rack railway from Montreux to Glion (subsequently extended to Rochers de Naye) opened in 1909. At first a funicular was proposed, to run from the Avenue du Casino at Trait, (with its tram service) up the hill to Les Planches but for various reasons this proposal never gained ground. What was then developed was unique. It was a metre-gauge rack street tramway that climbed at a gradient of 14% (1:7) and ran for some 392m following the alignment of today's Avenue des Planches. The Riggerbach rack was allowed to be mounted in the surface of the street, although not between the two running rails, but adjacent to one of them. Few details exist but it is assumed that this was next to the kerbside one, in order to minimise the potential for other vehicles to come in contact with the rail. By not being laid centrally it apparently became obvious, once running commenced, that this was a flawed

arrangement that had an adverse effect on operations. Electrification was at 550V dc and to allow for the return of the current this used two contact wires and two trolley-poles on the tramcar. It appears that it drew its power from the VMC supply at Trait. Only one CFeh2/2 tramcar, with a 'funicular-style' stepped seating arrangement, was apparently supplied. This was built in Germany by Singer in Berlin and Busch in Bautzen; weighed 9.6t; was supplied with three 22kw motors; one on both adhesion axles, and a further one for the rack drive. Contemporary accounts also describe both a complex chassis and braking arrangements.

Operations commenced on the 6th July 1898 but it was clear that this vehicle was quite experimental in concept, and also underpowered. By February 1899 problems were such that the tramcar was returned to the manufacturers to be re-engined, bringing its total power up to 78kw, and it was not until the following May that the vehicle returned to resume service. It is understood that the normal travel time to climb the 52m rise to Les Planches was 3 minutes, with the vehicle reaching a max speed of 9kph. The tramway then proceeded to quietly serve its local community although, as later events showed, traffic had presumably declined after Les Planches gained its station on the Glion line with a direct service to Montreux CFF. Then in 1912 disaster struck. Whilst on one trip on the upper part

of the route the tramcar became derailed from the rack line due, it is suggested by local reports, to this being damaged – an obvious danger linked to it being mounted on the road surface. The vehicle could not be stopped on the gradient and ran downhill to come to a halt crashing into the base station. Fortunately the two crewmembers standing on the open front platform were only slightly injured, whilst the passengers seem to have escaped with just a fright. By this time the small company was struggling financially and lacked the means to fund the repairs to the tramcar, and the complete overhaul of the track that the Federal Authorities demanded before services could resume. Formal closure came in November 1912 when the concession was withdrawn. It is assumed that the free standing Riggerbach rack, that must always have been a problem to pedestrians as well as vehicles, was

removed shortly after this, but local records show that the 25m long iron bridge that carried the tramway over the CFF main line remained in-situ until 1918.

The only photograph of the line and its tramcar that can be traced is in the Montreux Public Library reproduced here and this is linked to several local sources. The vehicle is shown at its upper terminus on the Avenue des Planches at the junction with the Avenue du Midi. Remove the tram and nothing else here has altered substantially for the buildings are still as shown, although some doors and windows have changed in 103 years! The car appears to be quite substantially built, probably why it was underpowered at the beginning. It is interesting to note that at least one of the many adverts that cover the bodywork was in English – for ‘Macneil’s Tea Rooms’. 

Crossed wires – and surviving the consequences

John Jesson is intrigued by some complex electrical engineering

