

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: - (2017)
Heft: 132

Artikel: Lost lines from Le Léman : Malcolm Bulpitt tells the tale of two tramways
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-853921>

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Lost Lines from Le Léman

Malcolm Bulpitt tells the tale of two tramways.

A tram leaves the esplanade en-route to Rolle station and Gimel in 1900.

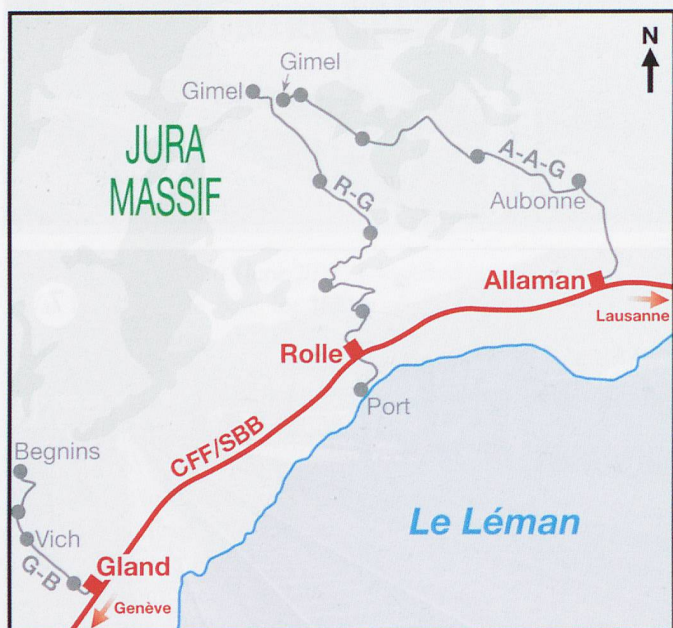
Images from the SRS collection

In the 1880s Gimel, 730m up in the foothills of the Jura Massif above Le Léman, gained a Grand Hotel des Bains and started to try to develop itself into a fashionable spa resort. This small community of just 800 people was at a disadvantage in seeking to develop this tourist trade as it was some 10km distant, and 350m higher, than the historic town of Rolle on the lakeshore where one of the nearest stations of the Jura-Simplon Railway (to become the CFF/SBB) was located. In order to encourage visitors it was decided that a railway was needed and in 1890 a concession to construct a rack railway was obtained. However the promoters, probably some with commercial links to Rolle, failed to generate sufficient finance for this project to commence. Also another issue probably came into play, that of potential rivalry between Rolle and its equally ancient neighbouring town of Aubonne. This historic community of 1,700 people was some 3km inland from the lake situated at a height of some 500m, sheltering under the walls of its historic Chateau on a spur of the Jura. As Gimel seemed to be in the early stages of developing into a popular resort the citizens of Aubonne apparently considered that any transport connection to the railway should come through their town, not

Rolle, and this could also include a link to their nearest station 2.4km away in the small community of Allaman. Giving the town access to the increasingly important main line between Genève and Lausanne was a major local issue. Apparently the route via Aubonne was also the preference of some in Gimel as it followed the gentler gradients of the old main road over the Jura, whilst Allaman station was seen as a more natural focus for them.


The Allaman-Aubonne-Gimel (AAG) line, having gained its concession, was first off the mark opening its tramway between Allaman and Aubonne in July 1896, then extending it another 7.5km to Gimel-les-Bains (some 30m lower than the main village) in August 1898. Meanwhile the promoters of the Rolle-Gimel (R-G) line had also been busy and abandoning the plan for a rack railway chose to follow their rivals and construct the much cheaper option of a tramway. This opened in October 1898 and its route into the village passed the Gimel terminus of its rival the AAG as it climbed up a final steep 8.4% grade into the centre of the community. The two lines never connected.

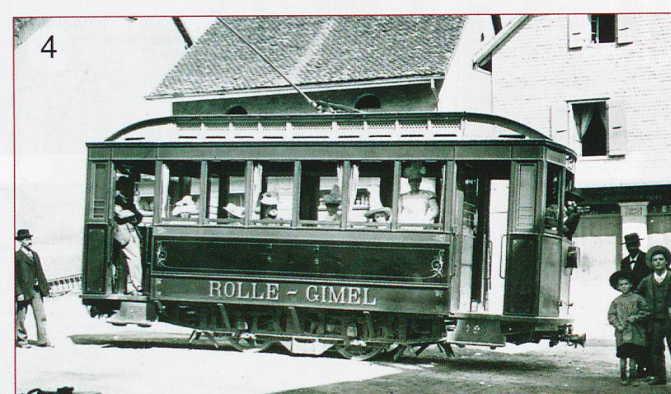
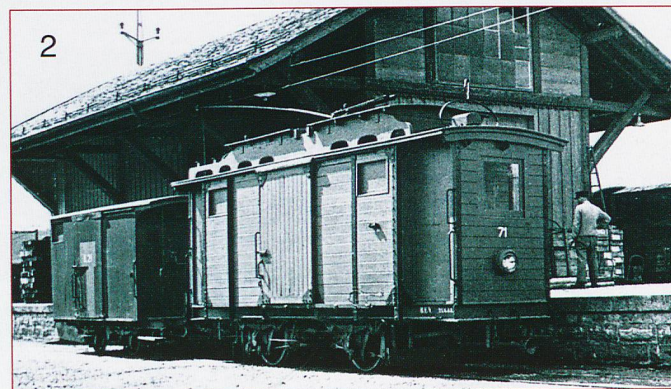
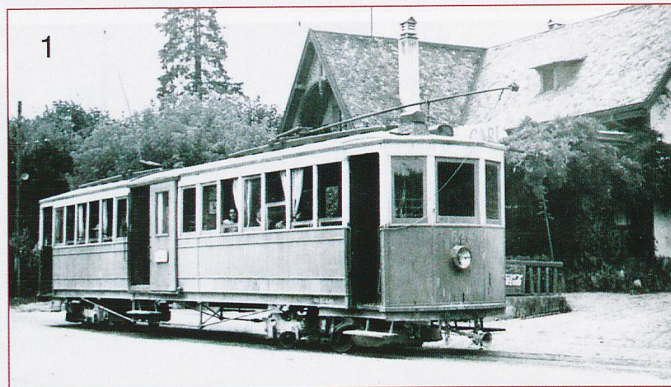
As Gimel failed to develop into even a small resort, probably the tourist drought caused by WW1 marked the end of its ambitions, then in time R-G developed into a line of two parts. Ancient Rolle had always been a busy town and at the end of the 19thC it had become a fashionable small resort on La Léman with an esplanade on the lake and a busy steamer pier. The route of the R-G started at the pier, ran along the lakeside before heading through the town centre up to the Gare CFF/SBB, finally after 1.5km diving under the railway to reach its depot. This section of the route became busy with local traffic. Apparently some 48 return trips a day were scheduled at times. Once past the depot (where in the early days the company also generated its own electricity) the line travelled through vineyards in sparsely populated countryside as it made the steep climb at gradients of over 7% (1 in 14) up the front slope of the Jura Massif to reach Gimel. Never more than 12 return trips a day, with a 41-minute journey time, were made on this 9km section of the line. In winter climbing these slopes in snowy conditions was always an issue with the company's small underpowered trams and during the harsh winter of 1901/2 the line was closed



for 54 days. With its difficult route, and the non-realisation of Gimel's tourist business, the promoter's high expectations never materialised. The early usage of some 60,000 passengers/annum soon settled down after WW1 to the R-G carrying around 40,000 passengers/year (many of these in Rolle) and becoming a loss-making operation that finally succumbed to the inevitable in 1938. The metre-gauge line that ran at 650V DC bought three 50hp Ce2/2 18-seat motorcars Nos.1-3 on opening. These always sufficed for the modest passenger traffic on offer, whilst its sole Fe2/2 motor luggage van and six freight vehicles were also never overstretched. However, apparently it did develop a modest trade in bringing barrels of wine down to Rolle station for transhipment during its early years.

The AAG did fare somewhat better over the years, although it too was never really profitable, even when carrying some 125,000 passengers/year in the 1930s. The metre-gauge AAG was a more substantial organisation than the R-G and operated a wider variety of rolling stock on its 600V DC line from its depot at Allaman CFF/SBB. On opening it acquired two centre-entrance 100hp CFe2/4 bogie motorcars Nos.61-62 that could seat 46 people. In 1898 it purchased four 60hp Ce2/2 motorcars that could seat 18 people, and two of these were rebuilt with more powerful 110hp motors in 1926/7. Finally in 1938 on the closure of the R-G it acquired that line's No.1, although this was scrapped in 1940. During its life it also purchased two second-hand 14-seat, four wheel, trailer cars. The company owned some six freight wagons and had acquired in 1903 a 130hp motor luggage van Fe2/2 No. 71 to haul these, and to assist the motorcars in the bad winter conditions that also affected this line. The AAG schedule saw some 15 return trips/day between Allaman Gare and Aubonne, which had a population of around 2,000 at the turn of the 20thC. These shuttles took 10 minutes for the 2.4km journey. Although popular for a time Gimel never really developed as a resort, so the 7.5km rural route climbing on a 6% (1 in 16) gradient up to the village normally only saw about 8 return trips/day, each taking 27 minutes from Aubonne. This section was the first part of the AAG to close when it saw its last service in May 1950 twelve years after its rival the R-G closed. The shuttle service from Aubonne to its main-line station only lasted another two years to May 1952 when closure resulted in all the, now life-expired, rolling stock being scrapped.

So the probability of some local rivalry, linked to a planned tourist development that failed to materialise, resulted in two tramways serving a basically rural area. Both eventually succumbed to competition from both the motorbus and the private car. Rolle still thrives as a smart little resort complete with its steamer pier, and also as a much extended (6,000 population) residential town for commuters to Genève, Lausanne and other locations in this busy area of Switzerland. Aubonne, has doubled in size but still has its historic centre, its Chateau, and a wealth of interesting buildings. Gimel's ambition to become a spa town inevitably disappeared without trace, as was the fate of the two tramways. 



1. Bogie motorcar CFe 2/4 waits outside Allaman station in 1950 for passengers.
2. Motor luggage van Fe2/2 No.71 with a freight van at the interchange platform at Allaman's CFF/SBB goods depot in August 1948.
3. Ce2/2 No.2, assisted by Fe2/2 No.71 and a team of men, fight a heavy winter snowfall between Aubonne and Gimel.
4. R-G tram Ce 2/2 No.1 stands in Gimel's Place de l'Union at the time of the line's opening.
5. A R-G tram waits outside Rolle station.