# Swiss Ambulant Post Offices

An introduction to the history of train and ship cancellations, by E.H. SPIRO, R.P.S.L.

The study of Travelling Post Offices and Railway P.O. cancellations provides one of the most fascinating sidelines in philately. This claim can be made with particular emphasis as regards the ambulant postmarks of Switzerland. Research into these postmarks, in the narrow sense, has been adequately covered by the Handbook of Cancellations on Swiss stamps 1843-1882 by Andres and Emmenegger, although its listing is confined of course, to a period of merely 25 years, since the introduction of railway post offices in 1857 until the date when the handbook's schedule closes in 1882. In 1951 Felix Grafe had supplemented a short description of subsequent T.P.O. postmarks in a small leaflet, and a few articles in the Swiss and German philatelic press dealt with the subject in a more general manner.
For the present series of articles, which is planned to run in the "Helvetia News Letter" for several issues, the author, while using some of the existing literature, attempted to gather new material, including information supplied by the PTT, the Swiss Federal Railways and some knowledgeable collectors.

A train with one of the earliest post wagons arrives at Lichtensteig station (near Wattwil) on the old North–East Railway line from Zürich to St. Gallen. These wagons weighed 7 tons. A modern PTT wagon built of light metal weighs 27 tons, some of the mobile TPOs as much as 46 tons.
The etching dates from the early 1860s.
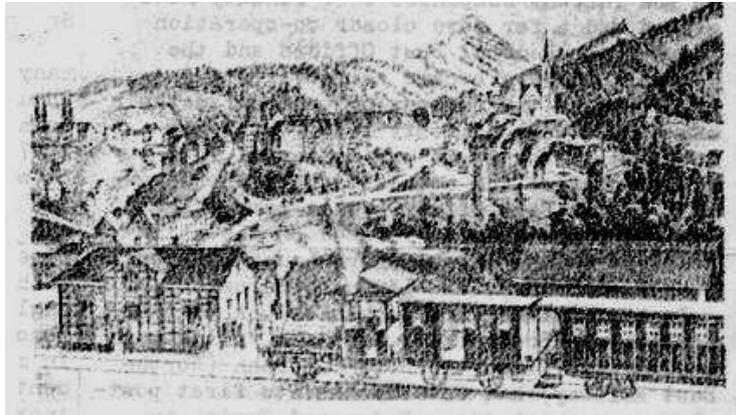
The articles are being written with no more ambitious aim than to provide an introduction to this interesting philatelic field. Indeed, it will need a much more searching investigation to deal adequately with this extremely involved and difficult subject, and the author can only express the hope that one day a leading Swiss expert on route-marks will produce a standard work that will carry on from where the Andres and Emmenegger handbook finished.
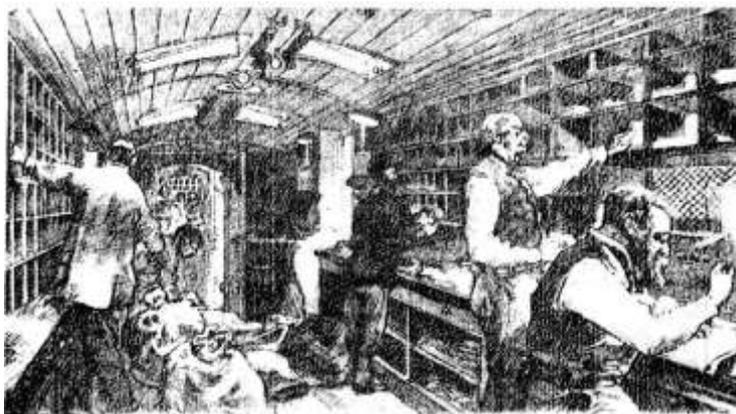
Inside one of the larger travelling Post Offices in the 1890s.

But apart from the study of railway and ship postmarks proper, the history of travelling post offices is a subject of great interest to the student of Swiss philately. Indeed, the postal history of this particular means of conveyance of mail goes back long before the appearance of the railway in 1847, when the first line from Zürich to Baden was opened on 9th August.

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The "diligences" and postal coaches had their "ambulant" postmarks and postilion, carried much of the work later taken over by the sorting clerks aboard the TPOs.

The "route marks" (of which a few examples are illustrated above) were varied and many, and they provide a separate field of Swiss philately, which falls mainly into the so-called "pre-stamp" period before 1850.

When, on 1st September 1849, the Federal Government took over the postal services from a medley of cantonal postal authorities, official and semi-official "Post Commissions" and private "postal factors", the conveyance of passengers by postal coaches was a far more profitable proposition than the carriage of mail. In 1852 – according to official figures in the archives of the P.T.T. – the Federal Post Office profited on the average Fr.5.03 per passenger, but less than 20 years later, in 1870, this revenue fell to a mere Fr.1.91, owing to the rapidly growing expansion of the railways, which provided a far more speedy and comfortable means of travel. With the decline of revenue from the passenger traffic, the Post Office had still to provide the conveyance of mail by the "post diligence", which was becoming more and more costly.

Little wonder, therefore, that the Post Officio began to look to its worst competitors, the various privately-owned railway companies, as the helper in their predicament. But it took ten years, until in 1857 the first agreement was signed between the Federal Post Office and the North-East Railway Company, to run special post office wagons carrying letters.

It is true that a Federal law passed by the *Swiss* Parliament in 1852, compelled all railway companies to carry mail (free of charge to the Post Office) in their goods wagons, but the railway companies, obviously not particularly enthusiastic about this imposed burden, treated the mail bags in a rather desultory manner. Mail dispatched by the "diligence" was often much quicker conveyed than that carried by the railways.

Even after the first "postal wagons" were introduced in 1857 on the Zürich-Brugg line, matters did not improve much. The wagons, which were built and owned by the railway companies, were very small, carried only a small proportion of the postal bags handed in by the post offices and it happened quite often that bags were left behind at stations, sometimes *for a* few days, causing long delays in delivery.

In 1861 the Federal Government issued a stern "ordinance" to the railway companies, warning them that if the arrangements for carrying the mail did not improve, the licences of the defaulting railway companies would be withdrawn.

Until 1860, when the TPO service was opened on the line from Les Verrières to Pontarlier, there were only nine postal wagons in use. In 1863 another important run was added, on the line Geneva- Bellegarde-Culoz and during the following six or seven years the number of postal wagons equipped with sorting facilities was by and by increased to 38.

Statistics in the P.T.T. archives show that the number of postal wagons and TPOs increased rapidly until the turn of the century, thus:

1860-1870	40 train post offices
1871-1880	54 " " "
1881-1890	101 " " "
1891-1900	175 " " "

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In 1886 the first night travelling post office was introduced, by attaching a postal wagon to night trains between Basel and Geneva and Geneva and Zürich. Already two years before, in 1884 the first TPO was put to use for international mail service, *when* postal wagons were attached to the Arlberg Express, which ran between Paris-Basel-Zürich and Vienna. In later years the Arlberg Express was expanded to the Arlberg-Orient Express, beyond Vienna to Budapest and Bucharest, with connections to Istanbul.

In 1886 the international postal train service was also introduced on the line Vallorbe-Pontarlier.

The first postal *wagons* were not very well designed and certainly most uncomfortable for the postal clerks who had to work in them. They were really not much more than large goods wagons, with roughly constructed wooden shelves and pigeon holes for sorting the mail, the clerks had to stand during the journey only a few rough chairs were provided. Lighting was bad, consisting of oil lamps hanging from the ceiling and as the wagons had only a few small windows, fresh air came through openings in the roof, which had to be closed in winter or in rain.

In contrast, the modern light metal-built P.T.T. travelling post offices answer every requirement of modern comfort. They have several compartments, a dressing and restroom, a washroom, lavatory, excellent strip-lighting, 20 roof windows with safety glass which provide daylight and 14 side windows.

Things improved a little as a result of this warning, but the Post Office was still far from being satisfied with the service provided by the railways and there were constant complaints from the public and sharp criticism in Parliament and in the Press. Finally, in 1866, the Government decided to acquire from the railway companies the existing 24 postal wagons for the Post Office and to empower the Post Office to build a number of new and better postal wagons, aboard which the sorting of mail could be carried out. These postal wagons became what we now know as the Travelling Post Offices. An agreement with the railways provided for a modest compensation payable by the Post Office for permission to attach those wagons to any trains the postal authorities would choose. A *modus Vivendi* was at last established between the railways and the Post Office, which lasted satisfactorily until most of the railway companies were finally nationalised and a far closer co-operation between the Federal Post Offices and the Federal Railways became self-evident.

As long as the railway companies ran their own postal wagons, only letter mail was accepted by then. It was not until 1865, shortly before the acquisition of the wagon park by the Post Office, that parcel post was experimentally introduced on the railways, at first on the lines Geneva-Lausanne-Sion, Yverdon-Lausanne, and Lausanne-Berne.

In our next article we shall look at the early train post office services, which were inaugurated since the Nord-Ost Bahn (North-East Railway) had established its first postal wagon run between Baden and Zürich in 1851, for which mail wan accepted at the stations and postmarked with the very first ambulant cancellation – a single circle postmark bearing the inscription "SCHWEIZER BAHNPOST - NORD-OST BAHN" with date and train number.

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We shall return later to the subject of equipment of the train post offices and consider in more detail the enormous progress made over the last fifty years. For the moment, however, we must turn to the philatelic subject of the cancellations of the early ambulant post offices.

Soon after the introduction of the first railway post office in 1857 the Post Direction issued the first "hand postmarks". For about six years all those postmarks were single-circle cancellations bearing either the inscription "SCHWEIZ.BAHNPOST" or "BAHNPOST", with either the addition of the name of the railway company which, at first, owned and ran the postal wagons, or with the description of the line on which the travelling post office was used. In the upper part of the circle there was also, as a rule, the number of the train mentioned, for instance "Z.10", the "Z" standing for "Zug", the German word for train. Below it was the date, day, month and year, but no hour, of cancellation.

The North-East Railway network, which included the very first line between Zürich and Baden, opened in 1847, also provided the connections between Zürich and St. Gallen, Zürich and Aarau and later St. Gallen and Chur, quickly expanding westwards to Bern, with the opening of the Aarau-Bern link. The St.Gallen–Chur service was run in cooperation with another private railway company, the Rhätische Bahn, which remains one of the few companies not absorbed into the Federal Railways.

A few years after the introduction of the first travelling post offices in the North-East, Western Switzerland followed suit on local lines and in 1860 we encounter the first ambulant postmarks on routes between Geneva and Lausanne and Neuchatel, with link-ups to the frontier post-offices at Pontarlier and Vallorbe. These postmarks have the description "train" in an abbreviated manner in the French language, the "T" instead of the "Z" stands for "train", though the "BP" for Bahnpost and the "BA" for "Briefannahme" (Letter collection) remain even in the French speaking areas in German, only to be replaced by "Amb"(for "Ambulant") in the early 1860s.

Double-circle postmarks with or without bridge were not introduced until 1862. The Handbook of Swiss Cancellations provides a comprehensive list of the early marks.

Early in the 1860s double-circle train cancellations made their appearance. We can distinguish three main 'types' of these postmarks, as follows:
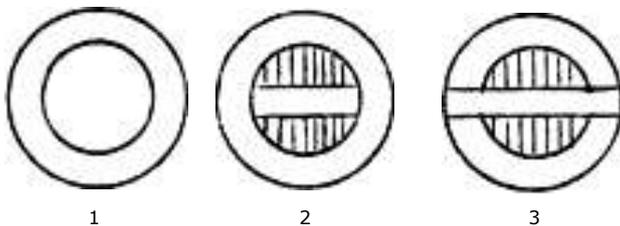
1. Double-circle without bridge;
2. Double-circle with bridge reaching the inner circle, and
3. Double-circle with bridge crossing both circles i.e. reaching the outer circle.

The two latter types are almost invariably shaded inside the two segments.

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Of the first type there are several subtypes. Most of them, and particularly the earlier ones, bear only the inscriptions of the start and destination of the line within the circles, with the date and train number inside the circle, the months indicated either in Roman figures or abbreviated, such as "Oct." or "Jan."
Thus – "BASEL A OLTEN", the "a" strangely enough being in French, instead of the German "nach" (to) even in the German-speaking areas. The date and train number is arranged thus:

<div align="center">

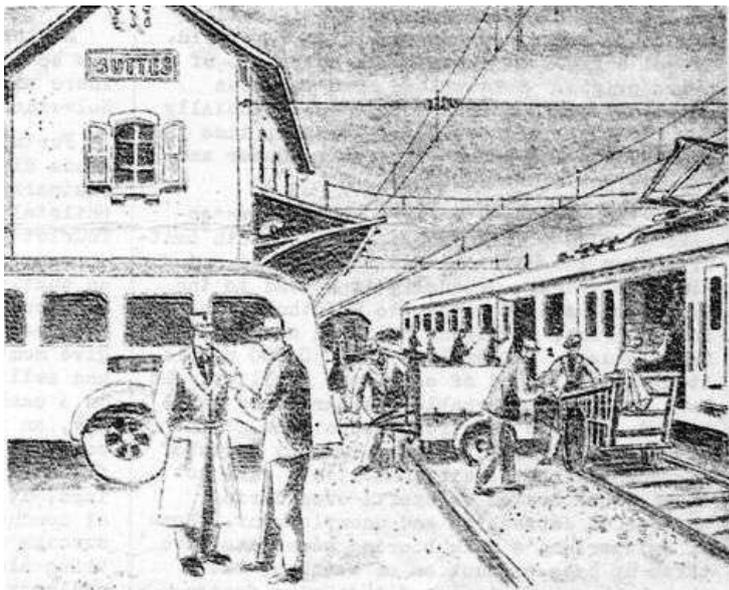| 15		26
XI 63	or	DEC 65
17		78

</div>
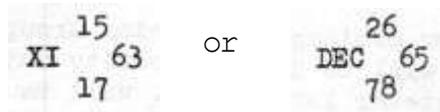
Some postmarks, maybe because of the desire to avoid either French or German indications, have only a hyphen between the town-names, e.g.
"NEUCHATEL-PONTARLIER" or "CHUR-ZURICH".

About 1865 the inscription "BAHNPOST" or "AMB." or "AMBULANT" was added to the town-names, for instance: "BASEL-CONSTANZ BAHNPOST" or "AMB. GENEVE-NEUCHATEL". Many postmarks produced *in* the later 1860s have also the letter "Z" or "T" added to the train number, possibly because the number alone led to confusion with the figure indicating the year.

The majority of double-circle, bridge-less, train cancels have a small 'Cross of the Confederation', at the bottom between the two circles. It should be noted that, at first, different postmarks were used for each direction, thus a train post office plying between Chur and Zürich had two cancellation instruments, one "Chur-Zürich", the other "Zürich-Chur". But soon the postal authorities decided to introduce a more economical device, providing instruments which could be used for both directions having inscriptions such as "SION-GENEVE-SION", or even including three names, when the train post was re-loaded, for instance: "BERNE-BIENNE-LAUSANNE".

Because the train postmarks were at first provided by the various District Post Directions (of the eight and later eleven postal districts) there is a great variety in their appearance. Most of them were made locally and some of the head-postmasters used their own taste or imagination. The Post Direction only stipulated the size and the main features of the postmarks. On one or two occasions the postmarks have dotted or interrupted circle lines, others have the town names in Italic letters, some in Roman, with others without serifs. The size of the figures in the date inscriptions varies considerably.

Co-operation between rail and road. Postbags and parcels are transferred from a post coach to a train post office.

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Greater uniformity was achieved in 1870 when the train cancellations, in common with ordinary postmarks, were changed by adding a bridge for the date. These new postmarks (Type 2) have almost always a larger Cross of the Confederation in the circle or oval in the lower part of the double-circle, at times reaching up to the lower bridge line.

While it is impossible to enumerate in a short study even only a part of the railway postmarks of each of the main periods, it may help the beginner in this specialised field if we mention some of the more frequently encountered postmarks, leaving the rarer ones aside.

Among the Type 2 double-circle with bridge reaching the inner-circle marks, the following may *be* mentioned:

ZURICH-LUZERN-ZURICH; LUZERN-ZURICH-LUZERN; ZURICH-ROMANSHORN; LUZERN-OLTEN-LUZERN; BERN-ROMANSHORN and ROMANSHORN-BERN; BASEL-OLTEN and OLTEN-BASEL; LAUSANNE-BERN and BERN-LAUSANNE; ZURICH-CHUR and CHUR-ZURICH; NEUCHATEL-PONTARLIER.

All these are, of course, the "small" postmarks, 22 mm. in diameter. The "large" postmarks of a similar type but with a diameter of 27 mm. are of much more recent origin, and did not make their appearance as train postmarks until 1910, although the ordinary post offices were using them some years earlier; the first *being* **Basel 10** in 1905.

While nearly all the *"named"* travelling post offices, i.e. those using postmarks with the town names, had postmarks with the Cross of the Confederation framed by a circle (and in a few cases by *an* oval), "unnamed" postmarks bearing only the inscription **BAHNPOST** or **AMBULANT** (or abbreviations such as **B.P.** or **Amb.**) show the Cross without a frame, mostly between the route number (see illustration on the right). It should be noted that it is the route number and not the train number that flanks the Cross, thus: "**No + 11**". The train number is after the date (on the postmark illustrated it is "1608").

Where the travelling post office ran on lines crossing from one language region to another, we find the inscriptions **"BAHNPOST"** and **"AMBULANT"**, one at the top the other at the bottom of the inner circle, sometimes separated by stars. These German-French postmarks do not have the Cross.

An example of an old "small" train postmark, which combines the town names of the routes BERN-SCHWARZENBERG-BERN with the inscription BAHNPOST, is shown on the left. It is dated 15th August 1932 and must have been in use for more than thirty years. It has the vertical hatch lines of the old Type 2.

Of Type 3, with the bridge across the whole postmark, reaching to the outer circle, there are again "small" and "large" postmarks, but only comparatively few are "named". Most train postmarks of this type are 'BAHNPOST' or 'AMBULANT' ones, bearing the number of the route in the lower part of the double-circle and the train number after the date, exactly as in Type 2.

A "small" Type 3 postmark is illustrated on the right.

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When, on 10th July 1914 the PTT decided to change the design of the cancelling instruments by doing away with the vertical hatch lines in the circle segments, train postmarks were replaced only slowly. Indeed until the present time one can encounter quite a number of the old type postmarks still in use, with hatch lines.

All this does not make collecting TPO cancellations easier but it certainly makes it a most fascinating specialised sideline of Swiss philately.

In subsequent instalments we shall deal with train postmarks of more recent years and also describe the enormous technical progress of mail distribution and transport by rail.

The great progress achieved by the P.T.T. in speedy and efficient transport of mail of every description - in the face of probably the greatest difficulties as regards climate and terrain which confront any postal authority in Europe - was only possible by the closest cooperation between the Post Office and the Federal and private railways, and by the employment of most modern technical devices for sorting, conveying and loading the mail. In both regards, Switzerland now leads the world.

In this brief survey of Swiss ambulant postal services we can give only a few examples of their efficiency. Let's take just one instance. Our picture on the right shows the loading of parcels aboard the night train No.2, which leaves Zürich five minutes after midnight and arrives at Geneva at 5.40 am., crossing nearly the whole width of the country. Normally it carries six ambulant post office wagons (at times up to ten) which take the entire mail, letters and parcels posted in Zürich and anywhere in the eastern parts of Switzerland until the closing of post offices at either 6 pm or (in Zürich) at 7 pm. At Olten, the ambulant PO's take on additional mail unloaded there from the Basel and Ticino ambulant trains. In one night at least 50,000 letters, often twice this number, and 6,000 to 10,000 parcels are carried by TPO No.2 and on arrival at Geneva they are ready sorted for delivery by the first morning delivery at 8 am.

TPO No.1 is the same route in the opposite direction from Geneva to Zürich; the train departing from Geneva 2 minutes before 1 am and arriving at Zürich at 6.36 am. The mail is distributed to Zürich addresses (and to most others in Eastern Switzerland) by first morning delivery.

The cooperation between post and railway goes far beyond the transport of mail. First of all railway personnel assist post office clerks and porters to handle the mail. At practically every railway station, even in the smallest villages, it is the duty of railwaymen to empty post boxes and to convey the mail to the nearest post office, including Sundays! Nearly every station-master or booking clerk acts as a sub-postmaster, sells stamps and accepts Express letters and telegrams, the latter being telephoned to the nearest post office for further dispatch.

The same cooperation exists between the railway and the PTT Postal Coaches which maintain postal traffic between remote Alpine villages and the nearest town or larger village, where there is a railway station.

All this requires, of course, very well trained personnel. PTT employees who work in the ambulant service are required to pass many examinations. They must be fully conversant with Swiss geography, know train time-tables, including international train connections. Only after two years service in an ordinary post office can an employee apply for TPO training and even then he has to undergo a probationary period. Once he has passed all his exams, he becomes a fully fledged TPO man and gets a higher salary.

Source: Helvetia Newsletter March-September 1957 & January 1958.