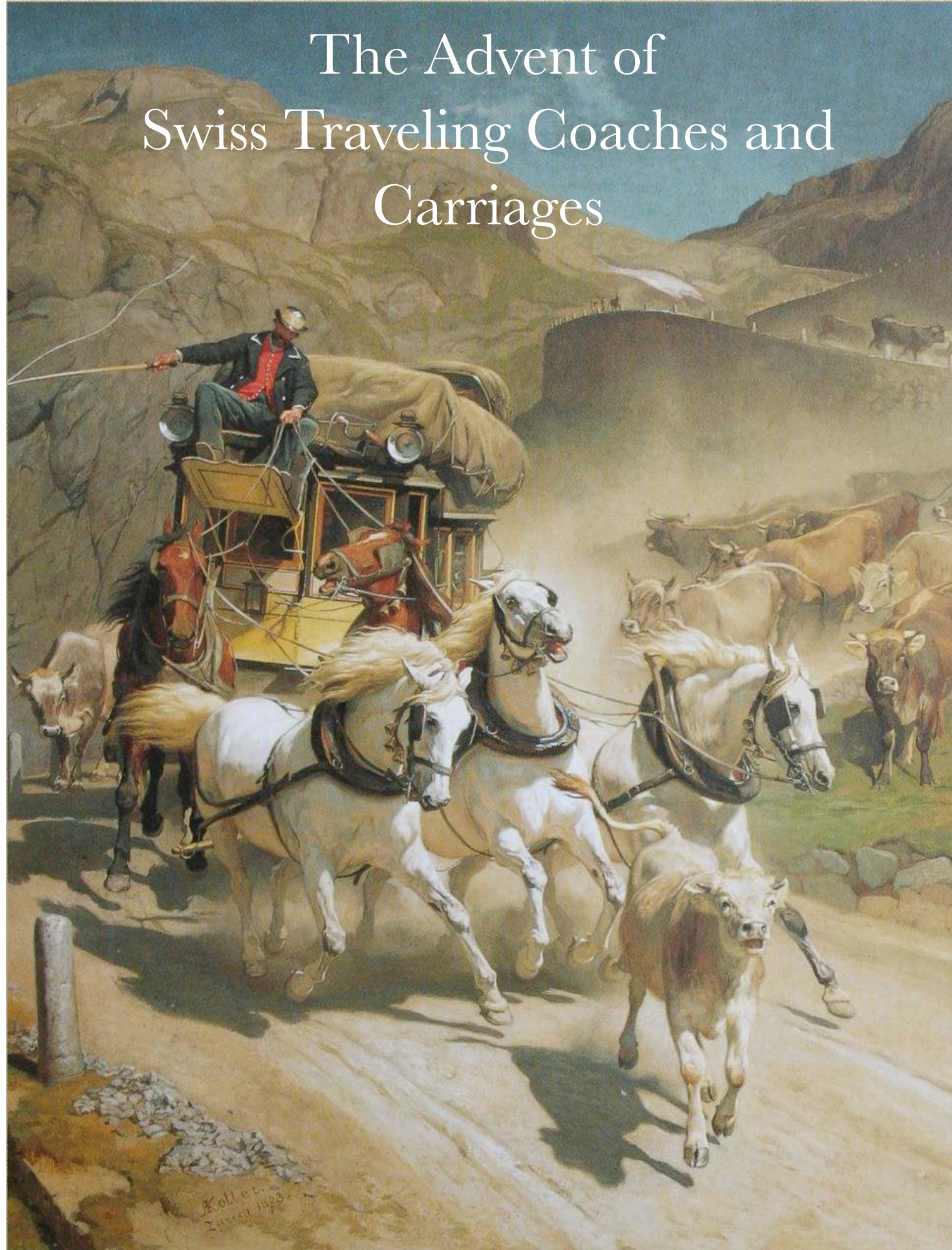


# The Advent of Swiss Traveling Coaches and Carriages







# **The Advent of Swiss Traveling Coaches and Carriages**

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**Translation Susan Niederberger**

The following work is based on a paper given in 2010 to the Carriage Association of America in Williamsburg, Virginia.

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## **A. A BRIEF GEOGRAPHIC AND FISCAL HISTORY OF SWITZERLAND**



*Fig. 1*

*A map of Europe showing the location of Switzerland in Europe as it is today: Topography of Switzerland with the Jura in the north, the Alps in the south and the lowlands in the centre from an English travelling map dating from 1838.*

Switzerland lies in the very heart of Europe, bordered by Germany, France, Italy and Austria. This small country is made up of three very different geographical landscapes: the mountainous Jura of the north, the flatlands of central Switzerland and the Swiss Alps in the south. This country is the source of two great rivers, the Rhine and the Rhone (Fig 1.), and includes part of the European Alps, which divide north and south Europe. Its mountains and valleys therefore define the country.

It was this landscape which determined methods of travel within Switzerland that consisted mainly of mule, or packhorse, and lightweight vehicles. Up until 150 years ago, Switzerland

was not a rich nation relying on its agriculture for income, but rapid industrialization increased the country's wealth. However, tourism and traffic in transit have always played a large part in the Swiss economy and will continue to do so.



*Fig. 2*

*The pass over the Umbrail c. 1900.*

*Federal Archives of Monument Conservation: Eidgenössisches Archiv für Denkmalpflege*

Fig. 2 shows a light travelling carriage on the Umbrail Pass c.1900. The pass road can be seen leading off into the horizon, framed by a magnificent mountain range.

As a cultural historian, I need to set the subject of travel in Switzerland within the relevant context and examine its entire history. I begin with The Iron Age, which was my particular area of interest during my work as an archaeologist.



## **B. THE ANCIENT WORLD**

Over two thousand, five hundred years ago, the area which today is Switzerland lay in the heartland of the Celts. These people, the Helvetii, were excellent craftsmen particularly when it came to building vehicles. During their time the concept of using wheels made with spokes was introduced into Europe. These were constructed in much the same way as they are today, maybe even better, as the Celts understood the need to make the wheel rim out of a single piece of wood which they bent using steam. Using archaeological evidence, I was able to reconstruct a working Celtic war chariot for the Swiss National Museum in 1987. Unlike the Greeks and Egyptians, the Celtic driver sat while the warrior stood behind him on the back of the chariot, which was suspended even then. I had the opportunity to test it with my great friend Daniel Würgler, today one of the world's best four-in-hand drivers.



*Fig. 3*

*Reconstruction of a Celtic war chariot with a suspended platform, the body hung from front to back.*

*Swiss National Museum, Zurich, Photograph: Author*

*Fig. 4 (right side)*

*Daniel Würgler and the author testing the chariot in 1987.*

*The author's Archives*



The test was going splendidly until I tried my hand at something that Julius Caesar himself had described, which was 'the warrior method' of leaping at full gallop from the back of the vehicle onto the pole and up to the yoke to be able to throw the spear down from a great height. This my horses tolerated at the halt. However when I tried it again at speed they shot forward catapulting me backwards between their hind legs and only some quick thinking and a roll to the left saved me from becoming yet another statistic concerning itself with the rise and fall of the Roman Empire.

In the past, long journeys, especially those involving trade, were undertaken using barges and waterways wherever possible. It was the Romans, between the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD that constructed the first systematic road system through large areas of Europe. They benefited from the knowledge that the Celts had gained in building vehicles and adopted their methods. Roman travelling vehicles were often sprung from axle to axle.



### **C. MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN TIMES**

During the Middle Ages, after 400 AD, the Roman road system fell into disrepair. Travelling vehicles still existed; however, no great technical advances were made during this period. As in the Iron Age, the bodies of vehicles used at this time were suspended from front to back as clearly seen here in this picture from a Swiss chronicle dated 1474 (Fig. 5).



*Fig. 5*

*A medieval travelling carriage, the body suspended from back to front with snake-like decoration to the framework.*

*Official History by the Swiss Diepold Schilling from 1474,*

*Volume 3, p. 268 in the People's Library, Berne*

The carriage belonging to Eleonora, the wife of the Austrian Emperor Sigismund is seen here at the spa town of Baden being posted, with at least four horses. The vehicle, with its four very large wheels has a barrel-shaped body decorated with heraldic symbols hung on chains from the standards. The horses have full collars. The horse collar was probably one of the most important innovations of the Middle Ages as regards horse-drawn conveyances.

Only a very few people were considered eligible to travel by carriage in the Middle Ages, and they were mainly noblewomen. The most common method of travel was on foot or on horseback. This can be seen in this pen and ink drawing from 1640 now in the Bernese

Historical Museum. It shows a bailiff sitting together with his wife on a heavy horse, he astride it and she sitting pillion behind him (Fig. 6).



*Fig. 6*

*Travelling on horseback. A Bernese bailiff and his wife with a heavy horse. Pen and ink drawing from 1640 in the Bernese Historical Museum*

By the Middle Ages, Switzerland was already an established horse breeding nation. It was mainly the monasteries that owned the equine studs; the famous monastery in Einsiedeln had a remarkable breeding program. Horses were recorded here as early as 1064 and the Einsiedeln horse is still being bred today, which makes it the oldest, continuously documented stud in the world! Pictured here is the baroque stud buildings on the far left of the courtyard.



*Fig. 7*

*A view of the 18<sup>th</sup> century monastery of Einsiedeln in the canton of Schwyz, with the stud on the left in its own private courtyard.*

*Photograph: Author*

The Einsiedeln horse was often exported to Italy where it became known as the ‘Cavalli della Madonna’ or ‘Madonna's horse’ named after the famous black Madonna belonging to the monastery. The breed was and indeed still is suitable to ride or drive.

Archaic forms are known to survive much longer in remote areas than in densely populated lowlands, and this is especially true of the Swiss Alpine regions. Even today relics of an ancient heritage can be found, reminiscent of pre-Christian times.



*Fig. 8*

*A simple four-wheeled vehicle of medieval design from the canton of Graubünden. The design with old-fashioned wheels is made completely out of wood.*

*Swiss National Museum, Zurich, Photograph: Author*

One such is this four-wheeled vehicle from the canton of Graubünden, which was built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 8). It doesn't have the classic spoked wheels as one might expect. A second peculiarity is that it is so skilfully assembled from wood that it has no metal parts not even in the wheels and turning fore carriage! It is an agricultural vehicle of a type that can still be seen today. Depending on what was being transported, loose boards were laid across the inclined sides of the transverse timbers to move wood, a closed box to move farmyard muck and ladder-like side pieces with rungs to transport hay. Seats could also be fixed to the side to make room for passengers. A photograph of just such a vehicle being used in this way appears later (see Fig. 21).



In mountainous terrain, the vehicles were built light and close to the ground, to lower the centre of gravity. The wheels of such vehicles were smaller than those used in the lowlands.

During the Renaissance in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Italian humanistic influence began to improve man's relationship with the horse, formerly defined by Xenophon as a beast of burden. There was also progress being made in the design and building of carriages, and impressive conveyances were increasingly being used by royalty and heads of state. Democratic Switzerland, which had no Kings, Emperors or even its own aristocracy, has no remaining vehicles from the early modern period and there is no evidence to suppose that they ever did. However, they did have sleighs.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the climate became considerably colder in Europe; one speaks of the 'little ice age'. Now runners were needed not wheels as it was not unusual in alpine areas for the ground to be snow covered for 6 months of the year and many of the waterways were frozen solid. Between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, Switzerland developed its own significant sleigh culture.



Fig. 9

Left: A traditional 18<sup>th</sup> century sleigh from the monastery in Fischingen.

Right: Baroque style decorations on its sides of a painting of a sleigh ride.

Swiss National Museum, Zurich. Photograph: Author

Figure 9 shows a simple type of sleigh with two bench seats set one behind the other, which comes from the monastery at Fischingen and is typical of the type used to travel throughout Europe. The painting on this sleigh is from the period around 1750 and focuses on winter amusements. Looking at the picture, you can see that it is driven from the small single seat extending from the back, using long driving reins. Most sleighs were driven single, as the sleigh paths were generally very narrow. In fact, before the 18<sup>th</sup> century they were often only 60cm wide or approximately 24 and a half inches. Sleighs were often overturned which is why so much can be found in old literature imploring people not to drive in such an impetuous manner.

#### **D. THE 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

The 18<sup>th</sup> century also suffered hard winters, yet such weather had its advantages. The frozen surfaces of many of the roads made them better for travel than in the summer months and snow bridges were created over streams and rivers in the Alps. The beginning of winter was the time to travel: one set off when the cold set in. The famous poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe travelled in this manner during his youth. Like most young people at this time he travelled on foot. He wrote about a trip he made following pack-mule tracks over the St. Gotthard pass going south: *'A great train of mules brought the place to life with the sound of their bells. It is a sound that awakens memories of the mountains... We found some road workers who were employed in covering the dangerous ice with soil in order to make a viable path... The way leads up over the rocks of the ever cascading Reuss and the waterfalls here form the most beautiful shapes'*.



Fig. 10

A man with his pack mule in the Schöllén Gorge on the north side of the Gotthard Pass.

Late 18<sup>th</sup> century pen and ink drawing by R. Schellenberg now in the Central Library, Zürich.

Figure 10 shows a contemporary picture of the Schöllén Gorge over the river Reuss that Goethe crossed. You can see 5 wooden crosses with a memorial stone behind the pack-mule, which show how dangerous the way could be; many passers-by were killed by falling rocks or avalanches. In 1707, after a particularly dangerous part at the end of the gorge had yet again fallen into the deep, a way was dynamited through the rocks below Andermatt: a great feat of engineering at this time. The resulting tunnel is known as the 'Urnerloch').



*Fig. 11*  
The 'Urnerloch' tunnel just below Andermatt on the way to the Gotthard pass.

Watercolour Central Library, Zürich

The traveller fitted his itinerary around the weather. For example, in good conditions the Gotthard road was the preferable route, but if the weather was uncertain then the Splügen pass was the better way. Even so, despite several passes being available, crossing the Alps was a dangerous undertaking. There were also other considerations to be taken into account, such as road tolls and traveller safety, as the mountains were full of highwaymen well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, many foreigners discovered the delights of the dangerous yet picturesque mountain scenery. In particular, it was the adventurous English who began exploring the Alps whilst on the 'Grand Tour'. They often brought their own coaches or carriages but soon had to leave them behind, as until the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were no roads over the Alps wide enough to accommodate a vehicle!



*Fig. 12*  
A litter to carry ladies in the Swiss Alps. Pen and ink sketch from *A Tramp Abroad* by Mark Twain written in 1880

For those wishing to travel in the mountains it was either by mule or foot. Ladies had a third option; the locals could earn good money with an alpine litter similar to the sedans seen in cities.

The general technical advances of the 19<sup>th</sup> century brought great change to Switzerland. Rich Swiss citizens treated themselves to carriages built in the latest English style. One such example still in existence is the coach belonging to the then Mayor of Geneva, Isaac Pictet. He ordered his carriage in London for a journey that he made in 1789, and until quite recently it was still owned by the same family, which accounts for it being in excellent condition (Fig.13). Even the original breast collar team harness has survived which can be seen here in this contemporary painting that Pictet commissioned.



*Fig. 13*  
The London built travelling coach commissioned in 1789 for the the Mayor of Geneva, Isaac Pictet. The top picture shows the entire equipage, the bottom picture is the coach as it is today.  
Watercolour in a private collection and Musée national Prangins VD

This was the type of vehicle that increasing numbers of English tourists used to travel to Switzerland. It was of course possible to rent an equipage from one of the many posting inns, which could also supply local guides who knew the area well. Around 1800, the roads in Europe began to improve. The major routes now had prepared roads for the first time since Roman times. However, these roads ended at the foot of the Alps much to the dismay of travellers wishing to visit the picturesque mountains or indeed reach the warm south.



## **E. THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

Being faced with the reality of no roads wide enough to take carriages over the Alps, the local coachmakers built vehicles which could be dismantled when the roads gave out, and flat packed onto mules, or carried by men, and so hauled over the passes to be put back together on the other side to continue the journey. According to the 'Itinéraire classique de l'Italie' written in 1824, this complicated undertaking was known to the English as the 'Mont Cenis method'. The 2083 meter high Mont Cenis Pass, located between Geneva and Turin, was a popular route to the south of France and the Cote d'Azur with its tourist resort of Nice, still popular today.



*Fig. 14*

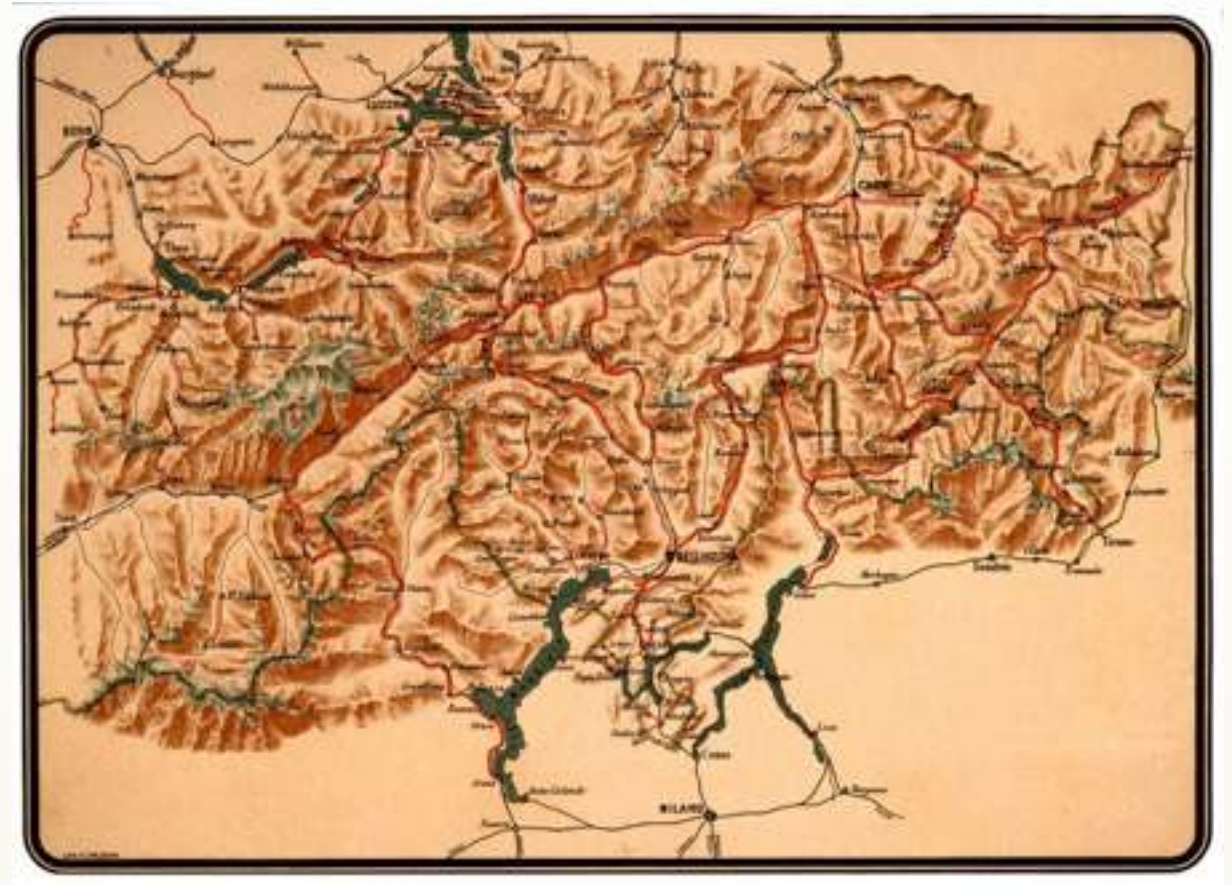
*A late 18<sup>th</sup> century gig that can be dismantled, built in northern Italy.*

*Collection of Carlo Gnechi Ruscone, Inzago*

As far as I know only one example of this type of vehicle has survived in Europe (Fig. 14), which is a chaise of the kind built in Northern Italy now in Carlo Gnechi Ruscone's private carriage collection near Milan. The carriage, built without springs, has a seat for two passengers to sit comfortably and still enough room behind for luggage and a servant. If necessary it could then be easily dismantled into 14 separate pieces and packed. Such simple chaises were generally harnessed to a single horse, which was often posted in the French

manner with a post boy riding the post horse and the horse between the shafts as the hand horse.

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Alps finally had pass roads built over them joining northern and southern Europe. This was not for the benefit of tourists but for strategic purposes: troop movement and the transportation of military equipment. The first pass was built over Mont Cenis in 1803 on the instructions of Napoleon Bonaparte, and this signalled the start of a quick succession of further road links across the Alps. In 1805, army engineers built a pass over the Simplon, between the Rhone valley in Switzerland and Lake Maggiore in Italy.



*Fig. 15*

The most important pass routes in the south-eastern part of Switzerland (marked in red). From left to right: Simplon, Gotthard, Lukmanier, Bernardino, Splügen, Maloja, Julier, Albula, Fluela, Bernina and Ofen.

Map from 1881 (with the first railways lines marked in black)

Figure 15 shows the most important passes in the eastern part of Switzerland. (The passes in the west going down into France such as the St. Bernhard and Mont Cenis are situated just off this map). Looking from left to right, the passes you can see are the Simplon, the



Gotthard, the Lukmanier the St. Bernard, the Splügen, the Maloja, the Julier, the Albula, the Fluela, the Bernina and the Ofen. These routes were not only open to private traffic; the Swiss postal service also ran its vehicles over these passes and heavy five horse teams were regularly to be seen crossing the Alps. The mail routes are shown here marked in red on this 1881 map. By this time the railways were beginning to take over some of the major lowland routes delivering the mail to the capital city of Berne as well as Lucerne and the first tracks were being laid in the Rhone Valley and down to Ticino. The Swiss mail continued to cross the Alps using horse-drawn vehicles for the next 20 years. However, it was an expensive way to travel, which in 1873 cost between 10 and 15 rappen per kilometre. Thus many people continued to cross on foot. Never the less, the number of mail vehicles increased steadily and in 1870 it was calculated that they were now carrying more than 10'000 passengers over each of the major passes per year.

So why were Alpine roads developed so late? Well this was not just a question of technical know-how but also of finance. The money was simply not available to build expensive passes. Added to this was the fact that the inhabitants of these Alpine valleys were often dead against having their mule tracks upgraded to wider roads. They had lived for centuries on the revenue gained by their narrow trade routes, and besides agriculture this labour-intensive transport system was an important source of income. But time and tide waits for no man and when the first passes were opened to vehicular traffic they had to follow suit or customers simply migrated to other routes. The Splügen and St. Bernard passes were opened in 1823, followed in 1830 by the St. Gotthard with its many new bridges. This road running from Amsteg in the Reuss valley down to Italy took 10 years to complete.

Whenever possible, the St. Gotthard along with all other passes was kept open throughout the winter. This meant building avalanche galleries in hazardous places.



*Fig. 16*

*Part of the road over the Simplon Pass showing both the summer road and the avalanche gallery for use in the winter.*

One such on the Simplon Pass is shown here (Fig.16). Massive shelters were also erected to afford travellers protection should the weather make their journey too dangerous to continue.

With snow falling, wheeled vehicles were no longer viable, they became too heavy and the grease axles froze causing the wheels to lock. Therefore sleighs had to be used. This was a huge logistical challenge for the postal service as the sleighs had to be placed ready at the snow line so that passengers could change vehicles to be able to continue their journey.

Unlike the carriages, the mail sleighs were tiny and only had room for two passengers, as the ways were just 60cms wide: later increasing to 80cms for safety sake.



*Fig. 17*

*Columns of sleighs belonging to the Swiss Post on the Gotthard Pass.*

*Painting of the Year in 1876 by J. Jacot-Guillarmod in the Museum of Communications, Berne*

Long columns of sleighs carrying goods and passengers were commonplace often only accompanied by two postal workers, one at the front and one at the rear (Fig.17). The horses were used to working in this manner, nose to tail with the sleighs gliding over the snow in



narrow tracks. As you can see from the picture the journey was not for the faint hearted. The passengers in the middle were left to their own devices, often closed in under a dark hood and relying on the skill of their guides and horses.



Fig. 18

*Avalanche!*

*Above: A post-chaise is caught in an avalanche.*

*Below: the blocked road being made good again.*

*Woodcuts from c. 1870*

Avalanches were a constant threat on the passes in winter, as these drawings show very clearly (Fig 18). The locals, however, were compelled to live with the forces of nature and establishing roads again after a heavy snowfall or indeed an avalanche remained a welcome source of income. It was hard work and a job that lasted from November until June. After the snow had settled the paths had to be dug out by hand. In 1938, Isidore Meyer, a former public official from the canton of Uri, described in detail how the roads were initially made. The St. Gotthard pass needed two dozen road workers plus extra manpower. First they sent a loose horse on ahead through the snow. It had to stamp out a path between the four or five-meter long poles set out in autumn to mark the way. When the first horse, now up to its neck in snow, sunk down exhausted the men sent in a second and so a path was made. These horses were known as breakers. Finally a horse could be sent through harnessed to a

small empty sleigh followed by the rest of the men who stamped the track down flat by foot. In this way narrow roads were formed.

Even in the warmer seasons driving in the mountains was an adventure. The local drivers were competent but rough travelling partners who took little notice of what might frighten their passengers (Fig. 19)



Fig. 19

*'Sociable Drivers'. The coachmen do not allow the questionable speed to discourage them from having a friendly chat.*

*Pen and ink sketch from Mark Twain's 'A Tramp Abroad' written in 1880*

Even today, people living in the mountains display a certain confidence not shared by the Swiss living at lower levels. This is something I have experienced myself being of mountain stock, and it is a phenomenon which Americans travelling in Switzerland at that time could tell a tale or two.

In his book 'A Tramp Abroad' written in 1880, Mark Twain wrote of a journey that he made through Switzerland. "We had four very handsome horses, and the driver was very proud of his turnout. He would bowl along on a reasonable trot, on the highway, but when he entered a village he did it on a furious run, and accompanied it with a frenzy of ceaseless whip-crackings that sounded like volleys of musketry. He tore through the narrow streets and around the sharp curves like a moving earthquake, showering his volleys as he went, and before him swept a continuous tidal wave of scampering children,

ducks, cats, and mothers clasping babies which they had snatched out of the way of the coming destruction; and as this living wave washed aside, along the walls, its elements, being safe, forgot their fears and turned their admiring gaze upon that gallant driver till he thundered around the next curve and was lost to sight.”

Later in the same book he describes a drive to Frutigen “The road was smooth; it led up and over and down a continual succession of hills; but it was narrow, the horses were used to it, and could not well get out of it anyhow; so why shouldn’t the drivers entertain themselves and us? The noses of our horses projected sociably into the rear of the forward carriage, and as we toiled up the long hills our driver stood up and talked to his friend, and his friend stood up and talked back to him, with his rear to the scenery. When the top was reached and we went flying down the other side, there was no change in the program. I carry in my memory yet the picture of that forward driver, on his knees on his high seat, resting his elbows on its back, and beaming down on his passengers, with happy eye, and flying hair, and jolly red face, and offering his card to the old German gentleman while he praised his hack and horses, and both teams were whizzing down a long hill with nobody in a position to tell whether we were bound to destruction or an undeserved safety.”

Major infrastructure was needed on these pass roads, particularly places to eat and sleep. The Swiss Alps experienced a hotel boom after 1860, which culminated in the Golden Age of Travel. The most exclusive of hotels were the large palace-like buildings where the guests were treated like royalty. Each hotel had its own carriages in which to collect their guests from the train station. These were generally large comfortable omnibuses in the summer and the invariable sleigh for use in the winter months.



Fig. 20

The train Station in Göschenen in 1900 with the waiting hotel omnibuses. To the right the mail coach from the Furka route.

Photograph by Aschwanden, Altdorf

This picture shows the station in Göschenen after the opening of the Gotthard tunnel in 1882, with carriages belonging to some of the best hotels from the high resorts of Hospenthal and Andermatt - types as one might expect to see in European cities. What an experience then for travellers, after leaving their train, to be sitting on the roof of an omnibus travelling over the raging river Reuss via the infamous Devil’s Bridge.

But this was what the tourists had travelled to experience: an alpine landscape. They would often rent an equipage for several weeks at a time to explore the surrounding area. According to one’s finances this could be anything from a simple chaise with a single horse, a victoria with a matching pair, or indeed a four-in-hand Landau turnout.

This brings us to the types of vehicles most commonly used in Switzerland and those specific to the country. There are five main types of which I am also showing the basic kinds, as it is important to see the entire picture and not just the staged story of a certain class. Switzerland had the good fortune to have photographers who, as far back as 1900, also took photographs of the more common turnouts. One such man was Aschwanden who worked the road alongside the picturesque Lake of Lucerne and would photograph all those willing to pay for a memento.

#### 1. „Leiterwagen“

For many years, the Swiss used un-sprung, ox-driven wagons for transporting passengers - the so-called ‘Leiterwagon’ with its ladder-like slanted side pieces. Seating banks were fixed to the top, the number depending upon the length. This was the type of vehicle most commonly used. The picture shows a group of boys on a school trip (Fig. 21).





Fig. 21

A Swiss 'Leiterwagen' with a group of 11 youths on a school outing in 1910.

Federal Archives of Monument Conservation, Berne

## 2. „Bernerwagen“

A smaller and sprung version of the 'Leiterwagen' was the 'Bernerwagen', named after the huge canton of Berne, a Mecca for early tourists who visited the Bernese Oberland from Interlaken. The name was not exclusive to the Swiss language; Ginzrot also used the term Bernerwagen to describe a simple 'char-à-banc' (Fig.22). The first of this type had banks which were sprung in that they were hung on leather straps and had a wooden perch and a place at the front for the driver to sit. Later types had a body built on elliptic springs, the newer designs having their own box seats and one or two banks of seats for passengers, which could be removed if the vehicle was needed to transport goods.



Fig. 22

A Swiss 'Bernerwagen' with a donkey in harness on the Axen road.

Photograph by Aschwanden, c. 1910 Altdorf

## 3. „Char de côté“

The 'Char de côté' was an exceptional vehicle, formerly called a 'Tour de Lac' or somewhat ambiguously 'Char-à-banc'. It was regarded as the Swiss national carriage, but could also be found in France (Fig. 23). An extraordinary feature of this vehicle is the passenger seat, which is built parallel to the road. Thus it could be described as half a waggonette or indeed half a Jaunting Car. Its advantage was the good view to one side, but only when the driver drove in the correct direction, around a lake for example. This peculiar idea was born out of necessity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to enable tourists to visit the mountainous Jura of northern Switzerland. Here the roads were much narrower than in flatter parts. There were different styles of 'Char de côté', some open, others with a hood and leather curtains or even closed types rather like a brougham. The body was built on two long timbers; a kind of simple suspension also seen on early American vehicles. These were mentioned in the 1892 American Carriage Monthly by the English coachbuilder Hooper after he travelled in Switzerland. He wrote "*the body had no side springs but was suspended on two long elastic wood poles, secured to the front beds and hind axle, the back of the body was panelled at the top.*"



Fig. 23

*A Swiss Char-de-côté in the Rhone Valley.*

*Swiss Pictures 1871*

#### 4. „Chaise“

The general term ‘chaise’, which actually means chair, was formerly used to describe a hooded vehicle. However, in Switzerland, southern Germany and Alsace, it became a blanket term used to describe any upholstered 4-wheel vehicle with a hood. These types were mostly owner-driven carriages such as milords driven from the back seat. Sometimes the small facing seat’s backrest could be reversed so that a forward facing coachman’s seat was created. Mountain chaises were generally lightweight, low vehicles with seating for two. Driven between long shafts, the single chaise horse wore one side of pair harness with breeching. These types of vehicles were mostly suspended on transverse or elliptic springs (Fig. 24).



Fig. 24

*A Swiss chaise with a horse in typical chaise harness.*

*Photograph by Aschwanden, c. 1910 Altdorf*

#### 5. „Cabriolet-Landau“

The ‘Cabriolet Landau’, was a very popular touring carriage in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This type, typically used by job masters, can be described as an extended landau with a cabriolet seat in front and a small seat for the coachman fixed to the top of the dashboard. It had covered seating for 6. There were some larger models built, such as the one in the picture, which offered seating for 8, having an extra cabriolet seat behind. This was used when servants were travelling with the family. The Swiss post had a similar vehicle built which, for democratic reasons, they out-sourced to various regional coachbuilders who also built for the private sector. This ‘Cabriolet Landau’ was built by Chaittone in Lugano.



Fig. 25

*An eight-seater Swiss ‘Cabriolet-Landauer’ built by Chiattonne in Lugano.*

*Carriage Collection Robert Sallmann, Amriswil*

Well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, wealthy travellers took advantage of the services of local job masters who offered tours, often running over several days, for the whole family. Popular routes over the passes were:



The 'Clevner-route' over the Splügenpass to Chiavenna and down to Lake Como.

The 'Belenzer-route' over the St. Bernard Pass and down to Bellinzona, and the 'Engadin-route' and 'Oberalp-route' to Lucerne.

Such tours cost several hundred francs, which was at that time more than a factory worker earned in three months!

### **F. DRIVING OVER THE ST. GOTTHARD**

The St. Gotthard was the main road link between Frankfurt and Milan: that is to say between Germany and Italy. The pass itself, even with its gorges and difficult places, was the better road than other passes such as the Simplon or the St. Bernard, because there are rivers and lakes that lead up to it, making for easier access. It was also quicker to use the St. Gotthard to travel from Paris to Milan rather than travelling through Dijon and over the Mont Cenis in France. In 1842 the first mail coaches drove over the 2108-meter high St. Gotthard. When the Post was nationalised in 1849, it was reorganised more efficiently following the example of the pioneering English Royal Mail. 1872 broke all records when 72'000 passengers were carried over the St. Gotthard

I want to take you now on a journey back in time to 1870, travelling from north to south over the St. Gotthard Pass.



*Fig. 26*

*The steamer from Lucerne to Flüelen, the starting point of the mail to Milan.*

*Collection: Furger, Reinach, CH*

Mail coach passengers travelled to Lucerne by rail to stay overnight in a hotel, ready to rise early to catch the steam ferry across the lake to Flüelen, whose church spire could be seen from afar (Fig. 26). There, a heavy post coach with a team of five awaited them at the quay. A similar coach, number 880, has survived and is now in the national museum in Zürich (Fig. 27).



*Fig. 27*

*The last surviving mail coach that ran the Gotthard route c. 1860.*

*Swiss National Museum, Zürich*

The vehicle was built for the mountains with its low body bringing the centre of gravity down, suitable for the dangerous journey along the road with its many sharp curves. It seated 9 passengers; 6 in the main compartment and 3 at the front in the coupé. The hooded hind seat over the post box was reserved for the guard, known as the conductor. For a small tip, he would vacate his high seat to a passenger and go and sit up the front with the

driver, who was known as the postillion. The guard was constantly on the move, having to get down to put the skid shoe under the rear wheel and remove it again wherever necessary. The coach was also equipped with a mechanical brake with two brake pads on the front and back of each rear wheel. If more than 9 passengers were expected then a second post vehicle could be made ready which then followed behind the first.

At 8 o'clock sharp, the coachman sounded his horn and the mail left. Now the passengers had 23 hours travel ahead of them journeying south. Of course there were short stops built in along the way with the tired horses being changed for fresh ones 12 times (Fig. 28).

*A mail coach crossing the 'Langenbruck' on the north side of the Gotthard Pass.  
An oil painting by J. Weber in 1880*

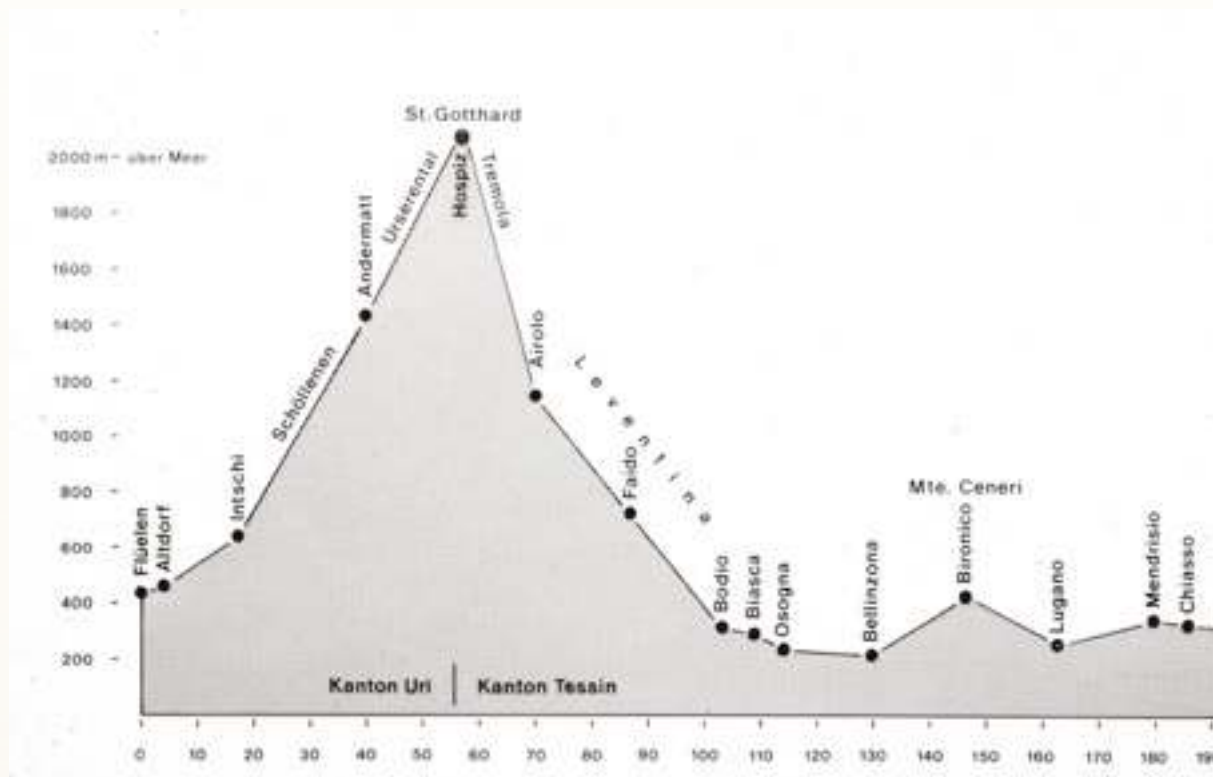


Fig. 28

*The distance and elevation chart showing the Gotthard route. A mail coach could run the 190 km from Flüelen to Camerlata (before Como and Milan) in 23 hours.*

*The author's Archives*

The first stop came in Aldorf, the capital city of the canton of Uri. Initially, the road rose gently, then came the demanding ascent that rose over 1000 meters. Slowly but surely the road climbed on, through the Reuss valley and over the picturesque 'Langenbruck'. To the right of the valley the remains of the ancient packhorse way could still be seen. (Fig. 29).

Fig. 29 (right side)





*Fig. 30*

*A heavy load. The fully laden mail coach weighed over 3 tons.*

*A sketch by Rudolf Koller for the oil painting from 1873 shown in Fig. 34 now in a private collection*

Now the horses really had to lean into their collars as the impressive sketch by the Swiss artist Rudolf Koller shows (Fig. 30). With the fully loaded coach weighing something like 3 tons, each horse had to pull more than its own body weight.

The most spectacular part of the whole journey was the legendary ‘Devil’s bridge’ in the Schöllenen Gorge that crossed the rugged valley at its narrowest point (Fig. 31). The new bridge, built in 1830, rose much higher over the raging river than had the narrow medieval one used by pack mules. Even so, the sound and spray of the roaring Reuss in full flow wrapped the passengers in a damp mist.





Fig. 31

Left: The two 'Teufelsbrücken' or 'devil's bridges' over the Reuss (Steel engraving by E. Whymper).

Above: The new bridge under construction around 1825. The new „Devil's bridge“ is rising behind the old narrow pack road bridge (Detail from an oil painting by Karl Blechen in the New Pinacotheca in Munich).

On again, and after the 'Urnerloch' the town of Andermatt finally came into sight: at 1.05 a stop was made for lunch. At 4 o'clock in the afternoon, the coach reached the St. Gotthard hospice, the highest point on the pass but halted only briefly (Fig. 32).



Fig. 32

After 8 hours on the road and over 2000 meters above sea level, the Gotthard Pass Hospice comes into sight.

Now the journey began its treacherous descent down the built-out road on the south side with over 40 sharp curves. The most expensive places were those at the front of the coach, in the coupé with a clear view of the horses and surrounding area (Fig. 33).



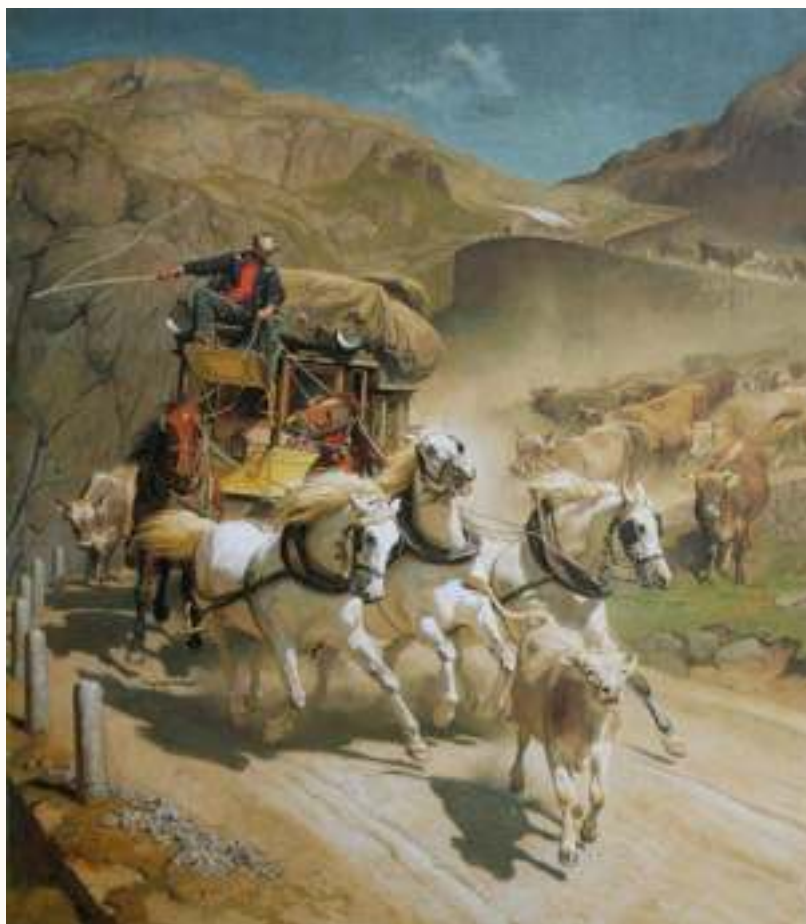
Fig. 33

A view of the horses from the coupé (Museum of Communications, Berne)

The passengers were constantly aware of the sound of harness bells and the post horn used to signal the coach's approach, warning those on foot, with herds or with other vehicles to clear the road as all had to give way to the post.

It is hard to believe today but this continuous descent was mostly driven in trot. People and animals on the road had to get out of the way quickly when the post coach came thundering down, or there were problems (Fig. 34).





*Fig. 34*

*The Gotthard mail coach on its rapid descent to the south. The horses take fright at the sight of a calf on the road which has broken away from the herd. The coachman sends the horses on with the help of the whip. An oil painting by Rudolf Koller painted in 1873 in the Kunsthhaus, Zürich*

The well-known oil painting, again by the aforementioned Rudolf Koller, shows a calf that has broken away from the herd, causing the green centre leader to shy. The coachman can be seen sending it on vigorously with his whip and the journey continues unabated. As if it were not difficult enough by day, the night mails drove the same road at the same fast speed.

At the foot of the steep road in Airolo, passengers were allowed a short break of 20 minutes at 5.20 for a light evening meal at the inn before starting on the road again. Now the journey took the long road down to Leventina. Here the weather was warmer but the way ever darker. The city of Bellinzona was reached at 11.05 and here again a small meal could be eaten. After a short stop the coach was on its way once more through the night, on to Lugano crossing the causeway over the lake, on and on towards the Italian border at Chiasso. By now it was 5 in the morning and the end was in sight, another 2 hours drive and the mail coach reached its destination at the train station in Como. It was here that the passengers took breakfast, after which they switched to a waiting train that took them on to Milan.

## G. THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

The lengthy journey over the Gotthard Pass was deemed no longer necessary after the opening of the railway tunnel in 1882, which is still in use today. However, many of the other passes were still used by the post. Their newer vehicles were built to a lighter design and offered more outside seating.



Fig. 35

*The Swiss post well underway c. 1900.*

*Collection: Z. Kälin, Euthal*

This picture shows a photograph of the type that an American tourist might have taken home as a souvenir. Around 1900 driving in this fashion was pure nostalgia as there were almost no other mail coaches using main roads in Europe: the train had replaced them. However, in mountainous Switzerland, the number of horse-drawn vehicles owned by the post reached its zenith in 1913 with a stock of 3290 wheeled vehicles and 1059 sleighs available for use!

Of course by this time the automobile was a serious opponent. Step by step the horse-drawn post was forced to concede defeat. The watershed came in 1920 when the post switched from mail coach to post bus as the graph in figure 36 shows.

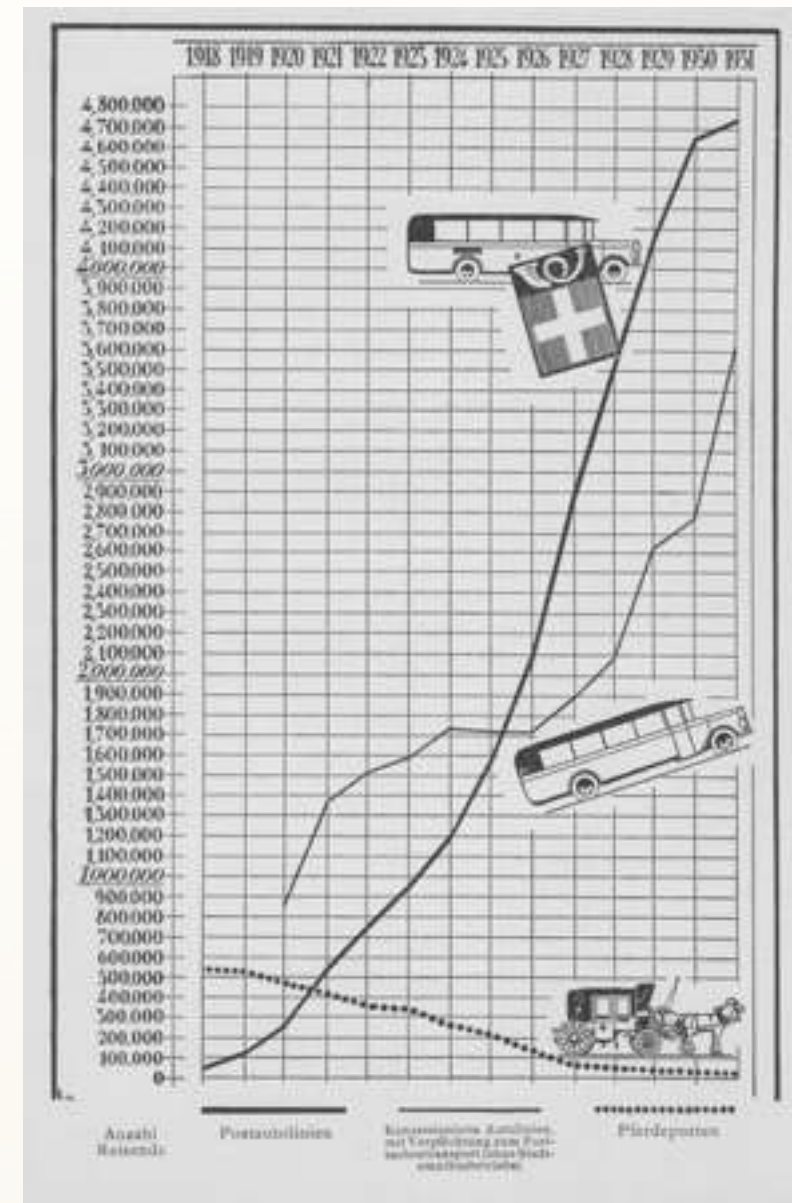


Fig. 36

*The automobile versus the coach. It was not until 1920 that motorised vehicles finally replaced the mail coaches in Switzerland.*

*One Hundred Years of the Swiss Post, Geneva 1932*

The number of passengers carried by the motorised post now rose dramatically as did the number of privately owned motor vehicles.



But even with the car by now well established, the wealthy still nurtured a driving culture and liked to make lengthy tours over several days with their own horses. This was the age of the long distance driving competitions organised by private clubs. Rich American and English gentlemen could be found making long drives on the continent. In 1902, Morris Howlett drove a drag for a group of English over the St. Bernhard and the Simplon Pass. Swiss sporting drivers used their own eminently suitable Swiss built carriages such as this Siamese Phaeton belonging to the wealthy heir of Goldenberg castle, Arnold Vogel-Koller (Fig. 37).



*Fig. 37*

*Driving a lightweight sporting vehicle: a gentleman's sport in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The owner of Goldenberg castle in a Swiss built Siamese-Phaeton.*

*Archive Kindhauser, Goldenberg Castle*

Lightweight American types were in particular demand. Well-travelled Swiss families such as the Schwarzenbach's from Horgen, who made their money from industry and had large subsidiaries in the USA, knew the American fashion in carriages well. Several Surrys and Buggys were imported during this time. Swiss carriage builders also copied these types and adapted them to local conditions.



*Fig. 38*

*Above: An American-style Siamese-Phaeton built by the coach builder J.C. Geissberger in Zürich.*

*Centre: Spider built by Geissberger two for the wife of the american founder of the „Anglo-Swiss Milk Company (George Page) in Cham c. 1880.*

*Below: The sleigh was possibly imported from America and supplied by J.C. Geissberger with a high backrest and other appointments in Switzerland.*

*Collections of Toni Meier, Oberrohrdorf and Jacques Butz in Allschwil*

The best Swiss maker of such lightweight types was the coachbuilder Johann Caspar Geissberger in Zürich, who was particularly known for his Siamese or double phaetons, like that at the top of the picture, built around 1870, and the spider phaeton below, both with hickory wheels (Fig. 38). The sleigh at the bottom of the picture was probably imported from America and fitted with a high backrest and other appointments in Switzerland.

But despite a thriving equestrian sport, the automobile still attempted to drive the carriage off the roads in Switzerland. Here again it was the feisty alpine population who put a spoke through those wheels, and until 1925 the canton of Graubünden with its many passes banned all those rattling mechanical monsters that frightened the local horses. This led to the often-bizarre situation whereby foreigners arriving in their cars either had to leave them outside the canton or organise harness horses to haul them to their destination! So it was for the German-born owner of Tarasp castle (Fig. 39). He had to turn off the engine when he reached Graubünden and have a team take his car sedately on to his estate.



*Fig. 39*

*A ban on motorised vehicles in all of Graubünden up until 1925: The German owner of Tarasp castle had to hire a team to get him home!*

*La Suisse Sportive 1916*

The Swiss mourned the passing of the mails in the same way that the English felt the loss of their own golden age and Koller's oil painting of the Gotthard mail became a symbol of the 'good old days'. It is against this background, therefore, that the magnificent Gotthard mail was revived in 1987 (Fig 40).



*Fig 40*

*The Swiss coaching revival: The driving trials expert Daniel Würigler with a team of five on the Gotthard Pass in 2008.*

*Archive: Gotthardpost, Andermatt*

It is now again possible to cross the Alps in a mail coach pulled by a team of five. Leaving from the old post inn at Andermatt, the newly built mails, now equipped with foot brakes, travel a spectacular section of the pass between Andermatt and Airolo: one day's drive. I have been lucky enough to be able make this journey twice, and have even driven part of the way myself. It was an unforgettable experience and one that I can thoroughly recommend to all driving enthusiasts.