

The Tramways of the Vosges Mountains



By John Prentice

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Chapter 1: France

For centuries the control of the area around the Vosges mountains, about 75km south-west of Strasbourg, has changed between what are now France and Germany. From the 16th century, Alsace was part of France until it passed to Prussia and thus Germany after the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71. In 1919, after the end of the First World War (WW1), it became French again and has remained so apart from 1940-44 during the German occupation in the Second World War (WW2). Significantly for us this means that the tramways in Alsace on the east side of the Vosges and down to the Rhine were constructed as German lines but those to the west were in the French Department of Vosges (formerly part of Lorraine). The summit level at La Schlucht was the border between the two countries and was served by separate electric tramways from each side.

All the tramways were built to metre gauge, were mostly roadside or off-road and were primarily for the use of tourists, although some goods were carried. Apart from the mountain views, the French area around Gérardmer has some impressive lakes. The Col de La Schlucht

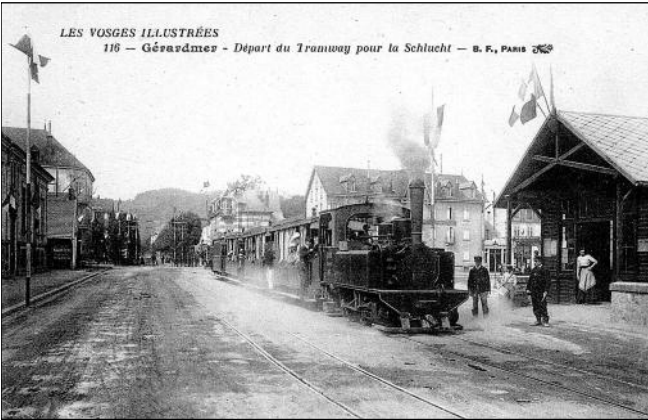
has skiing areas that, apart from recreational use, were employed during WW1 as a training area for the French 7th Army, using the tramway for access. On the Alsace side are vineyards producing mainly Riesling and Pinot Gris wines (the latter previously known as Tokay d'Alsace) and the unmistakable Gewürztraminer.

Gérardmer to Retournemer

The first tramway opened on 25th July 1897 with a run of 10.5 km from Gérardmer to Retournemer. This was on a concession to Mr. Henri Gutton, which passed in 1900 to the *Société des Tramways de Gérardmer* (TG). The tramway started at the railway station of the standard gauge *Compagnie des chemins de fer de l'Est* (CFE). It left the town by the Boulevard Kelsch, then crossed the River Vologne at Le Saut des Cuves, went through Xonrupt and Longemer, and then by a forest path along the north shore of Lake Longemer. After a short tunnel through rocks, it entered Retournemer to terminate to the north of Lake Retournemer. The line was single track, but there were passing loops at Les Saut des Cuves and Xonrupt. Initially the line was to



System map showing the Gérardmer to Retournemer section in red and part of the line to Remiremont off to the left in blue.



Left: Gérardmer station with a Weidknecht locomotive and train leaving for Retournemer, for the onward transfer to La Schlucht. The card was published around 1910 by Berthaud Frères of Paris.

Below left: Train at the passing loop at Le Saut des Cuves around 1910. The tramway crossed the river Vologne near here. The postcard is by Levy Fils of Paris.

Bottom left: At Le Saut des Cuves station around 1910. The train is waiting on the passing loop and the Hotel and café can be seen behind. The postcard is by Levy Fils of Paris.

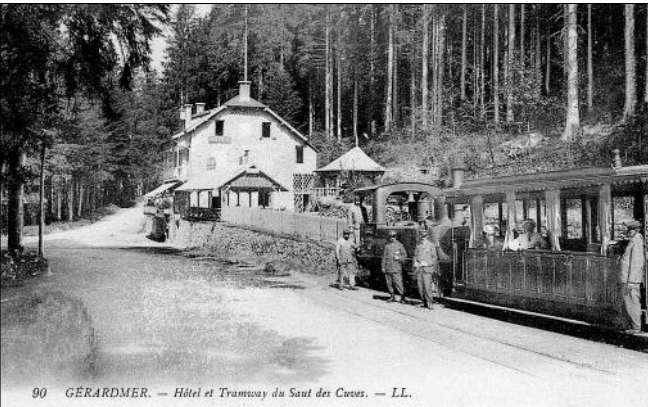
All postcard images are from the author's collection



ond-hand SLM-Winterthur type2 of 1893, becoming no.1 and named La Forgotte. Ultimately there were fourteen 4-wheel trailer cars, mostly built at Blanc-Misseron. They were crossbench: class C being open, class D being glazed. During WW1 the line was extensively used by the military who drafted in extra rolling stock from other steam tramways and at Gérardmer station a connection was made to the Remiremont line. A military cable-car was also introduced in December 1915 from Retournemer direct to Hohneck and beyond to the Wurmsa valley. Steam ceased in 1932 when the line was electrified as an extension of the adjacent route to La Schlucht, which was operated by the same company.

Gérardmer to Remiremont

The next tramway to open was a 27 km line from Gérardmer to Remiremont, which opened on August 14th 1900. It was built on a concession to Mr.



be worked by four Serpollet flash-boiler steam trams but, after a couple of weeks of trials, two Weidknecht 0-6-0 locomotives were purchased, No.2 named La Vologne and No.3 named La Jamagne. In 1908 a third loco was added, a sec-

Montézuma Goguel but passed on opening to the aptly named *Compagnie des Tramways des Vosges* (TV). Gérardmer and Remiremont were both served by the CFE but on different lines. It was thought that the tramway would provide a better connection. Unlike the other tramways

Right:

Alongside the Lac de Gérardmer we see a Batignolles tram loco pulling a train from Remiremont. The postcard was produced by Berthaud Frères of Paris around 1910.

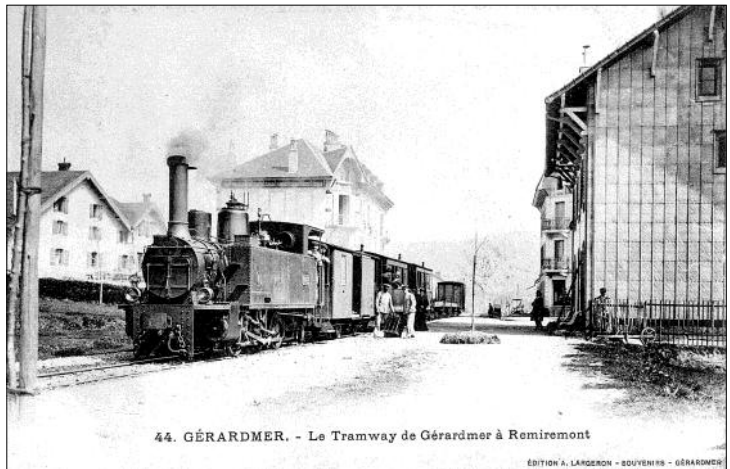
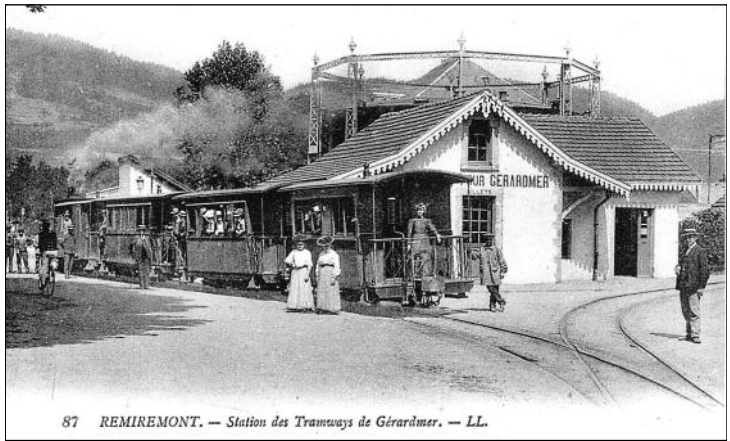
Middle:

Remiremont station around 1910. The train is waiting to depart to Gérardmer. The track to the right goes to the goods sidings. The postcard is by Levy Fils of Paris.

Bottom:

A mixed passenger and goods train for Remiremont at Gérardmer. Station in the Boulevard des Xettes. The postcard was produced by A.Largeron of Gérardmer.

described, this one carried extensive freight, particularly granite from local quarries. For the most part it followed Route Nationale 417 from Remiremont via Bellevue-Saint-Étienne, Saint-Amé, Syndicat, Plaine Cleurie, Julienrupt, La Forge, Le Tholy and Le Beillard, then running along the north side of Lake Gérardmer to terminate in Gérardmer at the opposite side of the CFE station to the TG, to which it was not connected. There were four Batignolles 0-6-0 locomotives numbered 1-4, supplied for the opening. There was also a 2-6-0 Corpet loco, numbered 5, added in 1909. There were twelve 2-axle passenger cars, and originally three enclosed box vans and twenty-seven 10-ton wagons, but the freight stock increased in later days. An all-season service was operated. However, the finances of



the tramway were poor. In 1925 the TV was sold to the *département* who the following year leased it to the *Société Générale des Chemins de Fer Économiques* (SE). Further decline caused the line to be abandoned on March 31st 1935.

Retournemer to La Schlucht and Hohneck

The most scenic tramway in the Vosges area with its fine mountain and lake views, was that to the peak of the Hohneck at 1362 m above sea level. After consideration of various traction methods, Mr. Henri Gutton of the *Société des Tramways de Gérardmer* was 18th January 1902 granted a concession on to operate an electric adhesion-based tramway running from the terminus of their steam line at Retournemer (781m above sea level), climbing to La Schlucht (1139m) at what was then the German border, then reversing and continuing on to Hohneck (1322 m) where there was a footpath to the summit. The maximum gradient was 80 mm/metre (8%). The line ran via Col des Feignes and Le Collett. Trams reversed in La Schlucht station for the last section up to Hohneck. After an inaugu-

Top:
Car A2 is seen at La Schlucht on 1st May 1904 at the official inauguration of the Retournemer - La Schlucht - Hohneck electric tramway. The postcard (which has an undivided back and was posted in August 1904) was published by Zahneissen-Wieland of Munster.

Right:
At La Schlucht station close to the date of the tramway opening in 1904, bogie car A3 waits to ascend to Hohneck while A4 is ready to depart to Retournemer. The postcard (which has an undivided back and was posted at La Schlucht in July 1905) was published by B. Neiter of Colmar.

ration on 21st May 1904 the line opened to the public on 29th June.

The rolling stock consisted of four De Diétrich bogie cars built in 1904 in Lunéville and numbered A1 to A4. They seated 70, and had two Brill bogies, each with a 25 hp motor from *Compagnie Générale Électricité* of Nancy. They used Westinghouse 412 controllers with 5 series notches, 4 parallel notches and 7 rheostatic brake notches, four of which also applied Westinghouse magnetic track brakes which in turn applied wheel brakes. The track brake could also be employed manually. Two 4-wheel cars were delivered in 1913 to serve a shuttle on the La Schlucht - Hohneck section, mainly for passengers arriving from Munster. They were built by the Electric Railway & Tramway Carriage

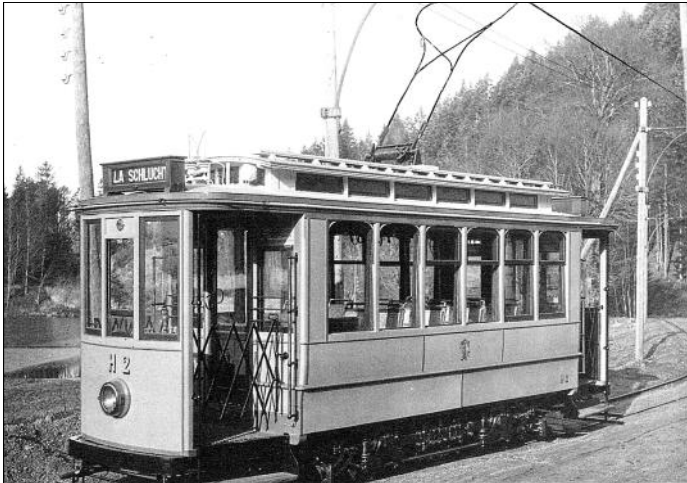




The Shuttle Service 1919-1932

Top:

This view of La Schlucht station dates from around 1919 and shows bogie car A1 and one of the shuttle service H class 4-wheelers. Note the small turntable which was installed during WW1 on the middle track (just behind the centre traction pole). The card was published by Arts Photomécaniques of Strasbourg.



Middle:

Tram H2 is one of the two 4-wheel cars purchased in 1913 from Electric Railway & Tramway Carriage Works of Preston. They had Brill 21E trucks. They were for use on a shuttle service from La Schlucht to Hohneck although seen here close to Retourmemer depot.

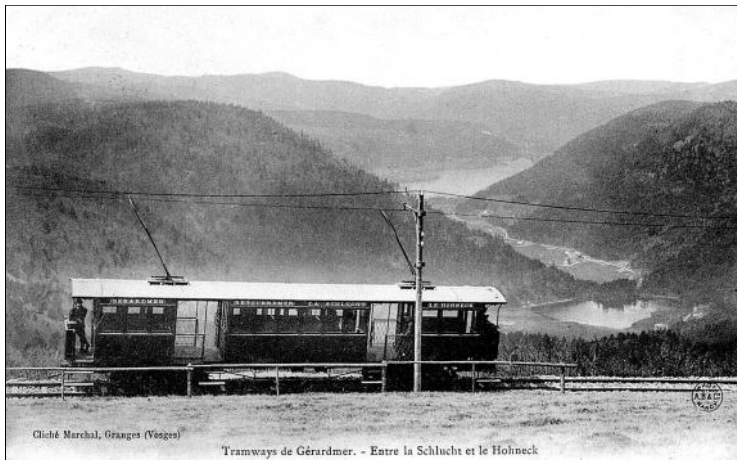
Photo from the late John Price collection.



Bottom:

Tram H2 again, this time the 4-wheel car is standing at the Hohneck summit terminus. At the actual summit in the background, the Hotel Belvédère can be seen.

The postcard was produced by A.Largeron of Gérardmer.



A De Diétrich car running on the section between the summit of Hohnneck down towards La Schlucht. The spectacular view is of the Vallée des Lacs (valley of the lakes), the closer one being Lac de Retournemer and the one beyond is Lac de Longemer. The card was published c1906 by Cliché Marchal of Granges (Vosges).

Below: Car A2 descending the slope towards Retournemer around 1910. Note the check-rail used on this, and most of the steeper sections. The postcard is by Lévy Fils of Paris.

Works of Preston, England. They had Brill 21E trucks each with two 40 hp Westinghouse 840 motors and rheostatic and magnetic track brakes which could also be activated from the overhead supply. They were numbered H1 and H2. The six-track depot and the generating station were 500m to the west of Retournemer station. The generating system employed three Babcock & Wilcox boilers and two single cylinder engines each driving a dynamo generating 550-600 volts DC, supplied to the trams via bow collectors, two on the bogie cars.

The tramway mostly ran a summer-only service with the overhead on the upper section being removed during the winter, but in 1912-14 services for winter sports were undertaken as far as La Schlucht, as had been done famously two years earlier on the Wengernalpbahn in Switzerland. Similar services were occasionally run after WW1. Today there are a couple of ski lifts with downhill runs and a cross-country ski route at the Col de La Schlucht and more extensive downhill runs on the slopes directly above Gérardmer.

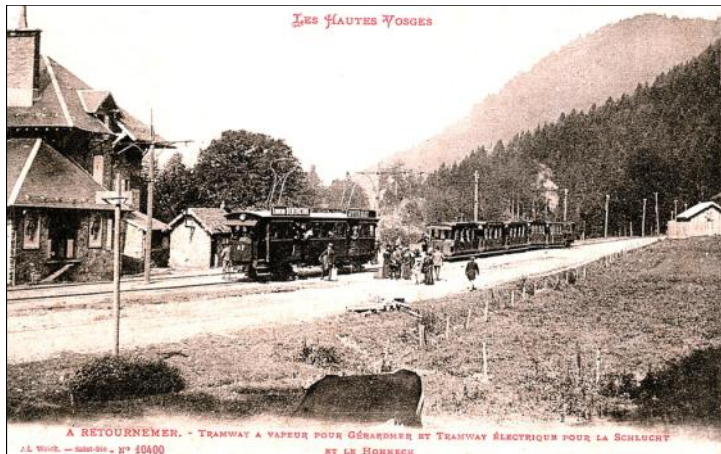


137 GÉRARDMER. — La Route du Tramway de la Schlucht. — LL.

During WW1 the military took over the line to transfer supplies to the front line. A connection was made at La Schlucht and goods carried on the Munster line as far as Altenberg. A small turntable was added at La Schlucht to enable steam locos to be reversed for use up to Hohneck if necessary. Passing sidings were added at Le Collet and Les Feignes and a diversion was made to the Hohneck branch to avoid enemy fire. Some rolling stock was temporarily transferred from the Grenoble - Villars-de-Lans and the Nice (TNL) tramways. After the war normal service gradually resumed although car A4 was not usable. Some consideration was given to permanently joining the line with the route to Munster, which had not re-opened, but this was dismissed due to the need to re-route and eliminate its rack section. In 1923 there was a serious accident between La Schlucht and Hohneck when car A3 ran away and collided with A2, severely damaging both vehicles, causing several deaths and about thirty injuries. This left only A1 in service.

In 1925 Mr Gutton sold his concession to the Department and it was consolidated with the steam line into the *Société Générale des Chemins de Fer Économiques* (SE). A2-A4 were rebuilt by De Diétrich with more modern equipment and the driver's compartments were enclosed. In 1932 the line between Gérardmer and Retournemer was electrified and as there was no

longer a need for H1 and H2 to serve La Schlucht after the closure of the Munster Line, they were transferred to that section. In 1935 control passed to the *Société Auxiliaire des Transports Automobiles de l'Est* (SATE). Some track was re-laid and the power system was upgraded to a high voltage AC supply from the *Société Vosgienne d'Électricité*, with the power generators being replaced by a transformer and rotary converter to provide 700 volts DC. On

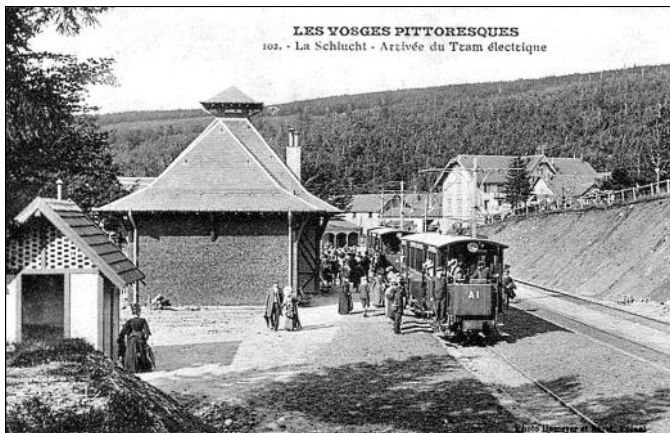


Top: Retournemer Station around 1910. Electric tram A2 is ready to depart to La Schlucht while the steam tram is about to leave for Gérardmer. Passengers had to change trams here and some can be seen waiting. Postcard by Weick of Saint-Dié.

Above: The summit station at Hohneck with tram A4 in about 1910. It's a windy day and the ladies are all holding on to their hats! The card is by Editions Bernez. It was posted on 1st December 1914 by French military post from 'Louis' to his brother and sister remembering happier times at this same location.

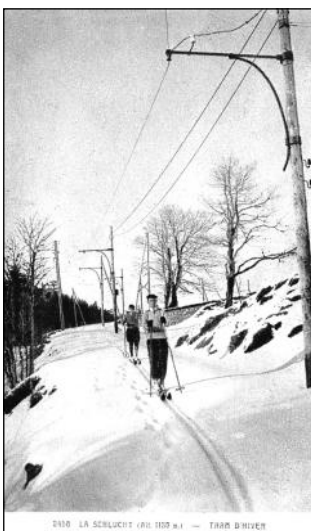


28th August 1940 the line closed as a result of WW2 and afterwards the occupying German forces dismantled the tracks, although the power supply was kept in working order. After the war the line never re-opened for economic reasons, which is a pity as its highly scenic nature probably would have secured its onward future had it been serviceable.



Top:
Tram A2 at La Schlucht station. The caption tells us that it was the first electric tram to arrive there, so was probably on the first day of public service, June 29th 1904.

Left:
Car A1 waits by the impressive station building at La Schlucht in around 1910. Both cards issued by Homeyer & Ehret Épinal.

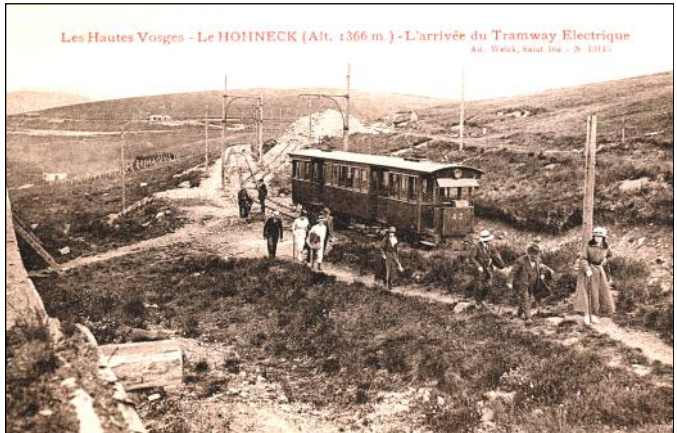


Below left:
Tram A1 passes through a rock cutting between Le Collet and La Schlucht about 1910. The postcard is by Weick of Saint-Dié.

Below right
The amusing caption "tram d'hiver" (winter tram) describes the skiers who in the 1930s are using the track at La Schlucht as a ski run. Card published by Kisgen-Freudenreich of La Schlucht.

Top:

Tram A3 at Hohneck summit station in around 1910. The passengers are taking the footpath to the viewpoint at the actual summit at 1366 m above sea level. The postcard is by Weick of Saint-Dié.



Right:

Tram A2 at Le Collet at the point at which the tramway deviates from the roadway. The card was published by A. Largeron of Gérardmer in about 1910. This copy was posted to Lyon on 28th March 1915 via military post from a Sergeant serving with the 7th Company of the 62nd Battalion of Alpine Infantry (*Chasseurs Alpains*), who were fighting at the battle of Reichackerkopf, close to the nearby Münster—La Schlucht tramway.

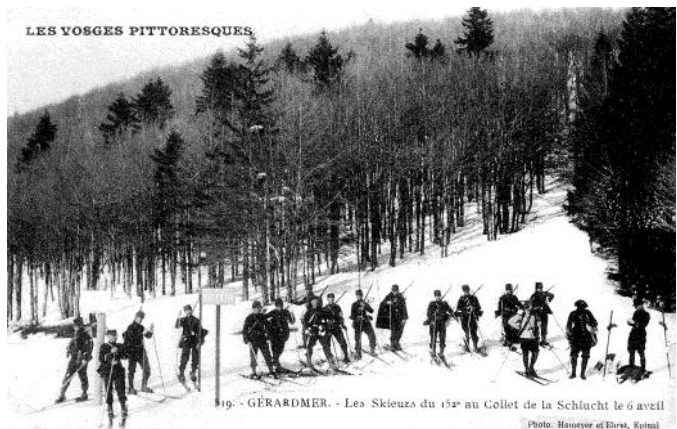


Below:

Skiers of the 152nd Infantry Division of the French VII army in training, on 6th April 1915, also at Le Collet and close to the view above. They would probably have used the electric tramway (just to the left of this location) to gain access and they were contemporaries of the soldier who sent the card in the previous picture. Card published by Homeyer & Ehret of Épinal.

Article cover photo:

Car 1 of the Turkheim to Trois Épis tramway, at Trois Épis (Drei Aehren) in the Vosges mountains. The original postcard was published around 1910 by Gebrüder Metz of Tübingen in South West Germany.



Chapter 2: Germany

This chapter of The Tramways of the Vosges Mountains deals with those on the German side of the border, as it was at the time. See map on the next page which is an eastwards continuation of that shown in Chapter 1.

Turckheim to Trois Épis

The Tramway Touristique Turckheim - Trois Épis (Bergbahn Türkheim - Drei Aehren) was the smallest and least documented of the several tramways known collectively as the Tramways of the Vosges. Turckheim is a small town at the entrance of the Munster valley, which is west of Colmar and about 13km from Munster. It is quite close to Wintzenheim which was the terminus of a cross country tram route of the Colmar town system. The village of Trois Épis is a tourist resort and place of pilgrimage to the shrine of Notre-Dame des Trois Épis. Legend has it that in 1491 the Virgin appeared to a blacksmith and said that if the village gave up its evil ways, then it would have good harvests, hence the name Trois Épis/Drei Aehren which translates as “three ears” (as in ears of corn). The tramway, built by Schuckert & Co. of Nuremberg (later AEG) to carry tourists/pilgrims, was opened on June 3rd 1899. It climbed out of the valley for 8 km between Turckheim and Trois Épis and included 90 metre radius curves and a gradient of 9.8%. There were seven small 4-wheel tramcars, each of which had two 30 horse power electric motors using 650 volts DC. There were also two baggage cars and a goods wagon. Each motor car had three types of brake; a hand brake, a Westinghouse air brake, and an electro-magnetic



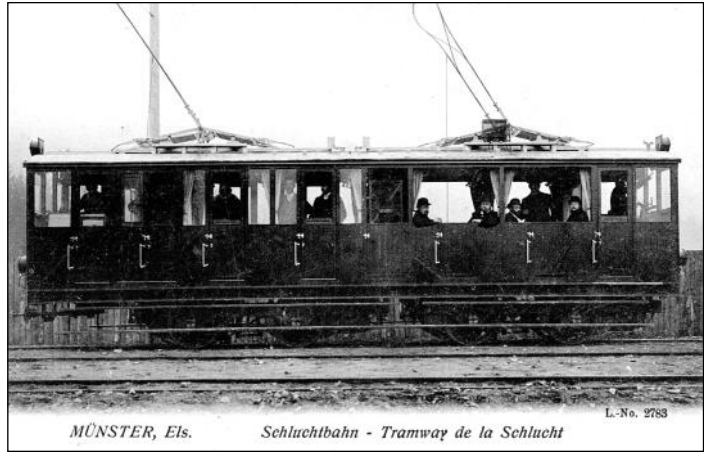
Top: An early view of car 1 and two others coupled together on the of the Turckheim - Trois Épis (Türkheim - Drei Aehren) tramway. The postcard (which has an undivided back and was posted in 1901) was published by F.X.Saile of Colmar.

Above: Car 2 of the Turckheim - Trois Épis (Türkheim - Drei Aehren) tramway in about 1904. The postcard (which has an undivided back) was published by Felix Luib of Strasbourg.

brake. At peak periods the cars were coupled in pairs or even in threes. In 1911 ownership passed to Türkheimer Elektrizitätswerk und Bergbahn (TEB), after 1919 called Société d'électricité de Turckheim et du Tramway des Trois -Épis. The line closed on January 1st 1937.

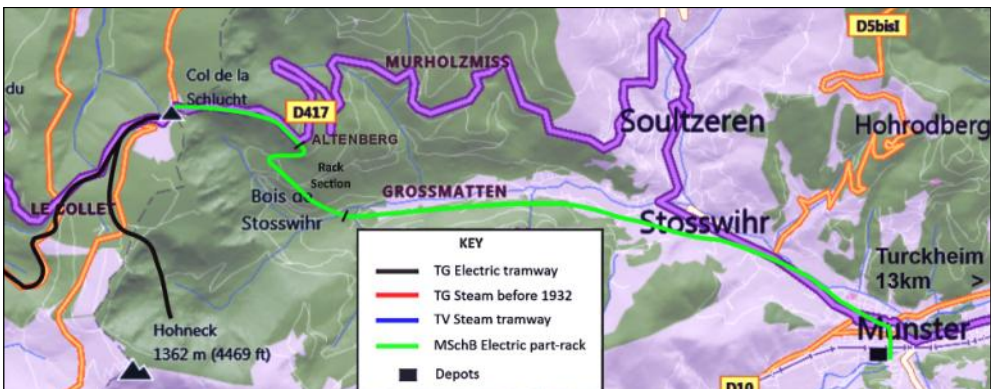
Münster to La Schlucht

On 25th May 1905 a concession was awarded to Elektrizität und Bahngesellschaft Münster – Schlucht for construction of the Münsterschluchtbahn (MSchB). This electric tramway opened on 16th May 1907. It ran for 10.8 km but, due to the steep gradients, was rack-assisted for part of the journey. From Münster the tramway passed through Stosswihr, Ampfersbach and Schmelzwasen. Then a Strub rack was used between the edge of Grossmatt and Altenberg. Between Altenberg and the terminus the line ran along the road and included a short tunnel at Krappenfels. At La Schlucht the tramway ended in front of the border customs post, but with no connection to the Gérardmer line on the French side. The upper section was closed in the winter, service continuing on the lower adhesion



Top: Side view of one of the SLM-Winterthur cars on the Münsterschluchtbahn about 1910. The postcard is by Manias & Cie of Strasbourg.

Above: This view of about 1910 shows the short tunnel on the upper adhesion section of the Münsterschluchtbahn at Krappenfels near La Schlucht terminus, just visible in the distance on the left. The postcard is by Weick of Saint-Dié.





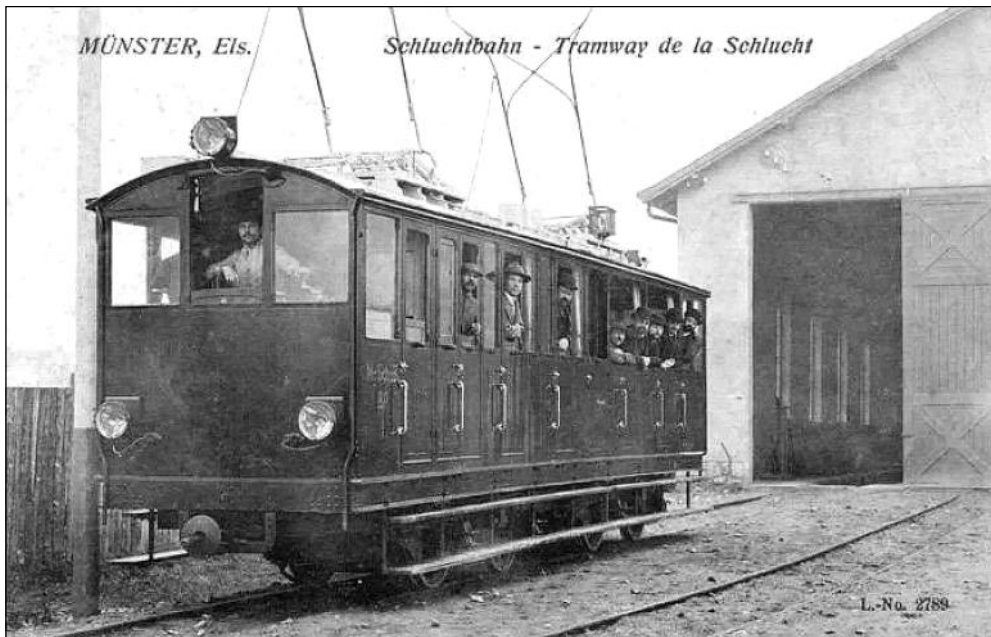
On 13th May 1907 there was an inauguration ceremony for the new Müsterschluchtbahn, seen here at Schlucht station on a postcard from French publisher Weick of Saint-Dié. You can see one of the small trailers that were sometimes used and the set has been decorated for the occasion. The building behind is the French/German border customs post.

Société Suisse Alioth. There were three large rack-fitted bogie cars numbered BP1 to BP3 and a small adhesion-only 4-wheel car numbered B4

section, according to demand. Power was supplied from a power station at the Münster depot, using two horizontal compound steam engines to generate 7,000 volts AC at 50 Hz three-phase with a substation at Grossmatt, where it was converted into 750 volts DC. The trams used bow collectors, two on the bogie cars.

The rolling stock was built in Switzerland by SLM-Winterthur with electrical equipment by

which was used on shuttle services between Münster and Grossmatt. There were also three 4-wheel rack-fitted trailers and two non-rack trailers, plus three wagons. The motor bogies for the rack section were of an interesting design. Each of the two bogies on the larger cars had two 43hp motors, axle-hung but on the outside of the axles, not between them. The "downhill" motor drove the cog-wheel, which was loose on the

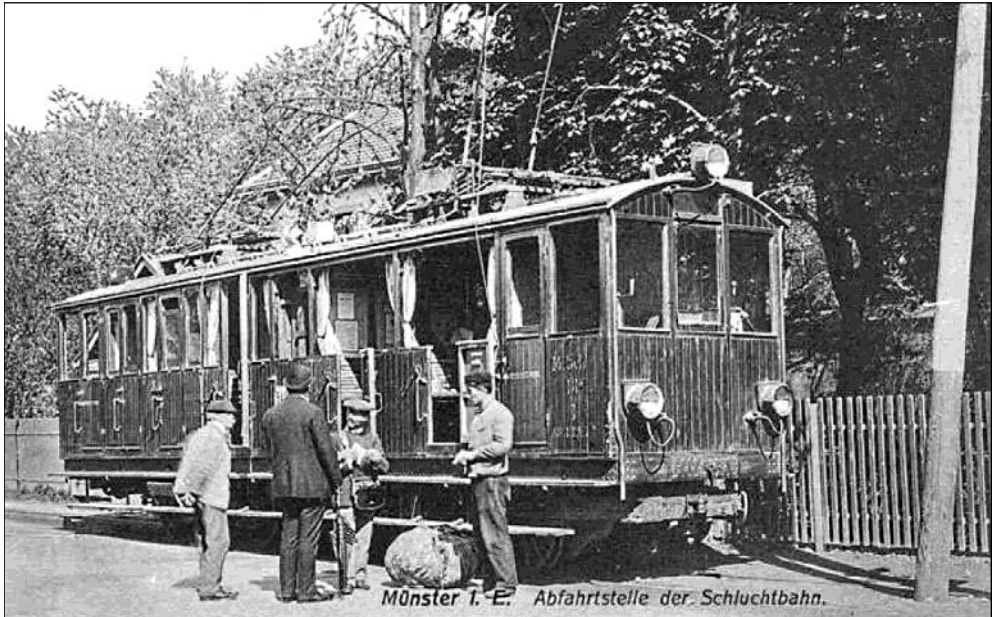


The depot in Münster in about 1910, with a car waiting to go into service. It appears to be carrying tramway staff. The postcard is by Manias & Cie of Strasbourg.



Left:
An early wintertime view of the Münsterschluchtbahn on the rack assisted section between the edge of Grossmatt and Altenberg. Note the conductor riding on the footboard (left side of car). The postcard is by Manias & Cie of Strasbourg.

Below:
Passengers await the departure of a car at Münster station in around 1910. Note the crossbench wooden seats which can be seen through the open doors. The card is from an unknown German publisher.



running axle, via double-reduction gearing. The “uphill” adhesion axle was driven by its motor using simple gearing. Although the wheels were equal sized, the kingpin was displaced towards the uphill end of each bogie to provide a maximum-traction effect. They were fitted with conventional wheel brakes, rheostatic braking and a drum brake on the cog-wheel. Large controllers were mounted longitudinally at one side of the driving cab. They had two drums, one with 8 series-only notches and 7 brake notches to con-

trol the cog-wheel; the other had 5 series, 4 parallel and 5 brake notches for the adhesion axle.

Services ceased in 1914 and the tramway was damaged during the war, never to be rebuilt. Only its upper part, from the La Schlucht to Altenberg, was briefly used during the war by the French Army, who had made the necessary connection at the former Schlucht border.



Left:
Taken in 1907 at the Hotel Altenburg, we see a Münsterschluftbahn tram with one of the three wagons used on the line. Altenburg is at the summit of the rack assisted section. In the field behind we see sheets being bleached in the sunlight. The postcard is from Zahneissen-Wieland of Münster.

Below left:
A view in around 1910 showing the French/German border with a tram of the Münsterschluftbahn next to the border post. This was the uphill terminus of the tramway. The postcard is by Levy Fils of Paris.



Acknowledgements:

All the postcards used in this article are from the author's collection, mostly produced by local Vosges publishers.

Thanks to Bob Appleton for his assistance and for the original typesetting. A version of this article was previously published in Tramfare magazine.



Left:
Around 1907 we see with one of the trams of the Münsterschluftbahn outside the Hotel-Restaurant Weisses Rössel, which was close to the terminus at Schlucht. On the left is the Chalet Hartmann which still exists today, albeit rebuilt and re-named as the Hôtel Restaurant Du Chalet. The card is from an unknown German publisher.