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European Rail Holiday

Some Observations on the Railways of Spain and Austria

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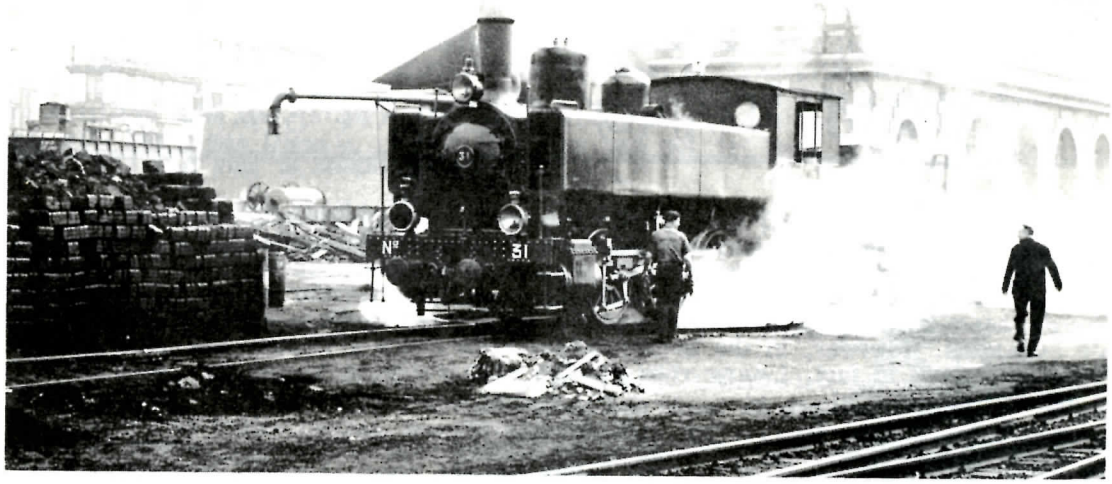
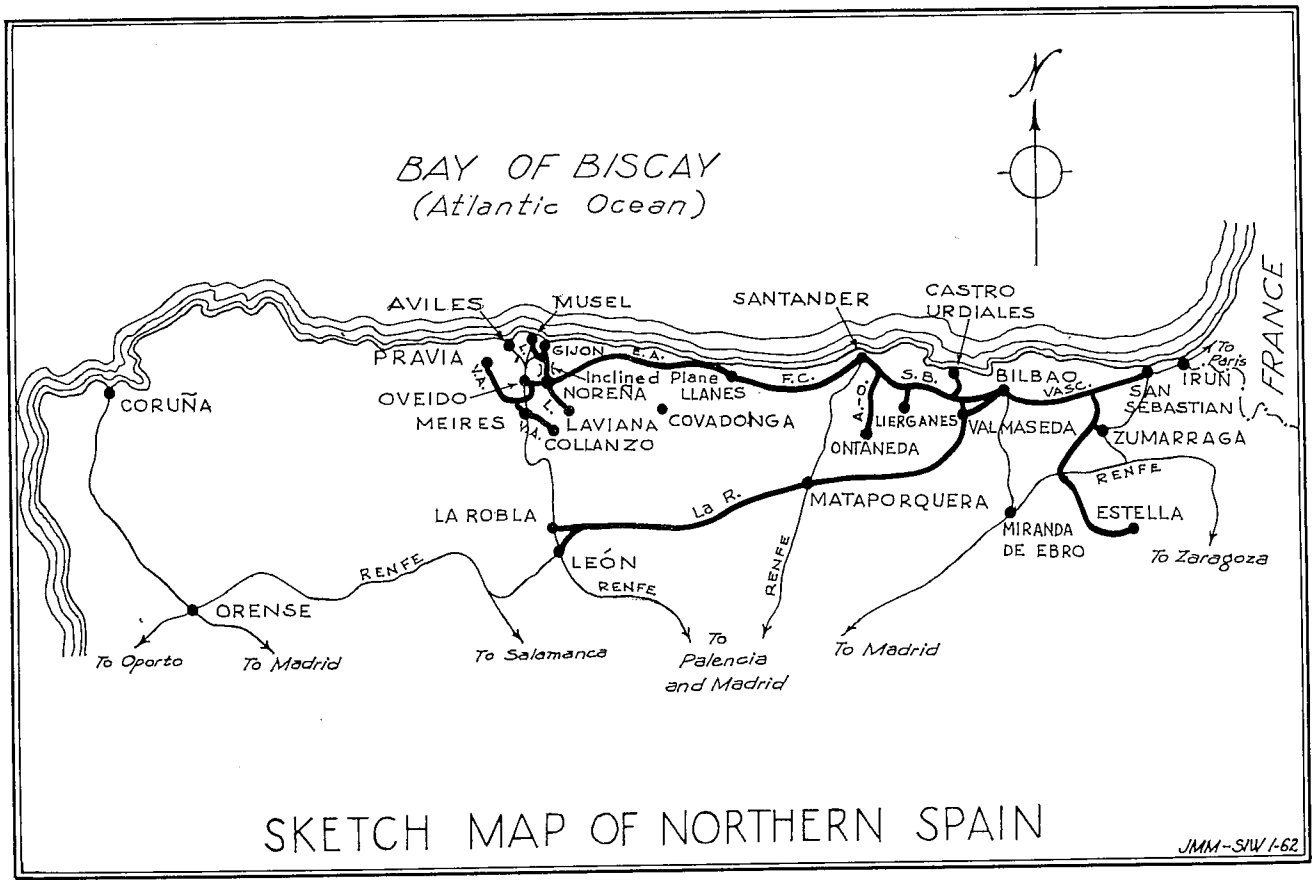


Langreo 0-6-0T No. 31, beside a large pile of briquettes at Gijon, July 13, 1961. A product of Haine St.Pierre, Belgium in 1910, No. 31 appears anxious to be off.

A long-standing wish was fulfilled in July and August of last year, when a 3-week tour of Spain and Austria enabled me to visit several very interesting railways, in addition to seeing many of the more typical tourist "sights" of these two countries. Considerable reading in advance had suggested the most rewarding regions for railway interest, and in combination with the official railway timetables permitted me to draw up a detailed itinerary in advance.

I decided to visit Spain and Austria because it seemed that the great gray fog of standardization and modernization had made less headway there than in other parts of Europe. While acknowledging the economic advantages of this trend in our conditions, there is no disputing the fact that when the unpredictable and unusual is replaced by the standardized super-machine, much interest is lost.

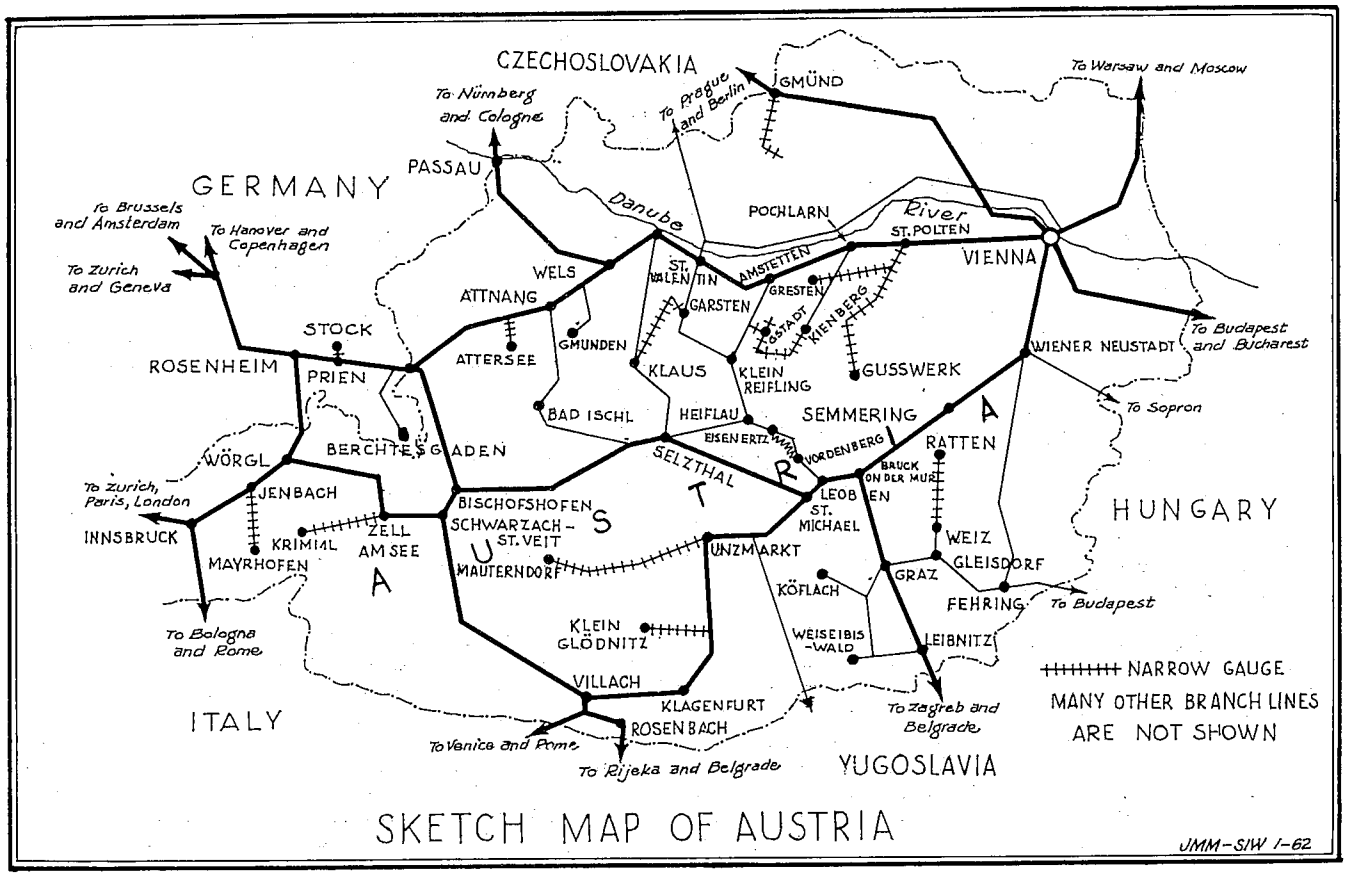
The Geography of Spain has had a decisive influence on its railways. The Capital, Madrid, was arbitrarily located in the geometric centre of the country, so that the railways fan outwards like the spokes of a wheel to the other large cities, most of which are near the coasts. Madrid is surrounded in all directions by a vast, semi-arid area which can support very little population. It is very dry, scorchingly hot in summer and surprisingly cold (in view of its latitude) in winter, and generates little traffic for the railway system. Furthermore, much of Spain is mountainous. This



greatly hindered railway construction, and made it much more costly, because the nationalstandard gauge of slightly less than 5'6'' is very badly adapted to mountainpus terrain. Because of this, much of the country is served by narrow-gauge lines, many of them on the metre gauge. A truly surprising number of these lines are still in existence, though many of them operate only by virtue of large state subsidies. However, in the north coastal area which I visited, the metre-gauge railways are far from moribund; in fact, I have very seldom seen railways to compare with them for efficiency and general excellence.

A high range of mountains runs parallel to the Biscay coast, which is reached by the wide gauge only by branches which terminate at several points on the coast. Lateral communications are exclusively in the hands of the metre-gauge companies, and there are several hundred miles of narrow gauge track in this area, forming an inter-connected network belonging to several private companies. This is possibly the most prosperous part of Spain, having abundant rainfall (north of the mountains only) and considerable mineral wealth, and its prosperity is faithfully mirrored in its railways which are busy hauling coal and passengers in large quantities.

My first contact with this metre-gauge network came after an all-night train ride from Madrid to the rather dull industrial city of Bilbao. From this point electrified narrow-gauge lines run east to the French border, and provide an intensive suburban service with cars bearing a remarkable resemblance to Toronto's aluminum subway cars. South-west from Bilbao runs the longest (207 Mi.) of the metre-gauge lines, the Ferrocarril de La Robla. This line boldly traverses the mountain chain, handling a very heavy coal traffic from inland mines to the industrial complex around Bilbao or for trans-shipment to the National Railways at La Robla and León. The La Robla line has over 60 engines, all of them steam, and is a very busy undertaking. A rather sparse passenger service is operated, using some very smart brass-bound Pacifics purchased a few years ago from the African territory of Tunis. At the time of my visit, three of these engines were laid up, and I was told that they experienced trouble with oscillation of the tender at speed. I do not know, unfortunately, if any of these excellent engines are at work. Also on the roster, and very much in use, are seven smart 2-8-0 tender engines purchased second-hand from the Rhaetian Railway in Switzerland when that line electrified not long before World War II. The La Robla also possesses the largest metre-gauge engines in Spain, four 2-6-2/2-6-2 Garratts built in 1929 and 1931. These are very powerful and impressive, though they could not be called handsome, and are in addition very elusive machines, since they are used only on the most mountainous section of the railway and do not op-



SKETCH MAP OF AUSTRIA

fers to and from the Ring lines can be made at covered platforms and, where it is necessary to cross the road, tunnels are provided with escalator access to the street car platforms. These platforms are located on the sidewalk, since on the "downtown" portion of the Ring, the car tracks are laid next to the curb. This is almost as effective as private right-of-way, since motor traffic does not drive on the tracks except to made right turns at intersections. Parking and stopping on the tracks is absolutely banned, but it is unnecessary in any case, since narrow service roads between the sidewalk and stores etc. provide for parking and delivery.

Many of Vienna's cars are single-truck of both old and new types, all of them very powerful as they are frequently required to pull two trailers almost as big as they are themselves. There are a number of streamlined four-wheel cars and matching trailers, and comparatively few double-truck streamlined cars, but very many matching trailers which are hauled behind single truck motors of older pattern on all routes where turning facilities are provided (the new equipment, unlike the old is single end.) Most cars, new and old, have roller bearings and electric brakes similar to those on the West Penn Railways. Both acceleration and braking are worked by the controller, which is pulled one way for "go" and the other for "stop." The controller on the motor operates the service brake on the trailer(s) as well. The electric brake fades out at 3 or 4 m.p.h. and the car is brought to a stop and held by an ordinary hand brake which works on the motor only; this operation appears rather anachronistic on the new streamlined cars. Seating in all cars is wooden, that on the newer cars being on moulded plywood which is about as comfortable as a hard wooden seat could be. Standing passengers are invariable and indeed in the older motors, which operate on the "perambulating conductor" system, a ride on the platform, which is quite legal, is an interesting experience. The one exception to all the foregoing is the cars obtained from the Third Avenue Ry, New York, immediately after the war. These are rather wide for Vienna, and are therefore confined to a small group of lines in the north-west section of the city. They appear to be largely unchanged from their condition in New York (even the red-and-white paint scheme is similar) except for the addition of a pantagraph, and are the only cars in Vienna with air brakes, upholstered seats and roller signs, among other features. They do not haul trailers.

The first "Kleinbahn" visited was a line belonging to the Province of Styria in the south-east part of the country. This connects with the Bundesbahn (State Railways) at Gleisdorf. The first few miles are standard-gauge as far as Weiz, and service is provided by a mixed train powered by an