

This story shows what the will of a few steam enthusiasts at the beginning, supported by the political will of the whole Bernese people, can achieve in a democracy.

# BZ BERNER ZEITUNG

## The end of a long story

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**25 years ago today, Monday, there was a huge festival around Lake Thun: After more than 20 years of tireless fighting by a few enthusiasts, the steamboat Blümlisalp set sail on its 2nd maiden voyage.**

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25 years ago today, the Blümlisalp set sail for its 2nd maiden voyage (May 22, 2017).

She's a living legend. For shipping fans, for BLS shipping on Lake Thun, for the Thun region and for steamer fans at home and abroad anyway: the "Blüemlere", as the steamship Blümlisalp has been affectionately called since time immemorial - or at least since it was built in 1906 in the specially designed for them created shipyard hall in Thun was built.

From the first day she glided across the lake, her reputation for grace preceded her. Elegance is still her middle name today; Yes, it seems that the old lady of Lake Thun shipping is more beautiful than ever today. The modern sight, with the delicate white plume of steam rising from the chimney, is definitely no comparison to

the photos of yesteryear, where a dense cloud of black smoke stands in stark contrast to the steamer's discreetly elegant white bulwark.

**Perhaps the gloomy times that the flagship of the BLS fleet once saw are** one of the reasons why it shines more beautifully and sublimely than ever. Because the "Blüemlere" is a fighter. Decommissioned in 1971 on the nautical siding of the Kanderdelta, she was left to her fate by the owner for decades.

### **The "Blüemlere" is a fighter.**

She rusted away lonely, at some point she was no longer able to swim, so that the once so proud lady had to be supported with stakes to prevent her from tipping over and possible final sinking - or from the actually planned scrapping.

**The fact that the "Blüemlere" is still** circling around Lake Thun after more than 110 years is thanks to a handful of enthusiasts who have lovingly and self-sacrificingly taken care of her for years and decades, thus enabling her to have a second life. They prevented the abandoned ship from becoming a wrecked ship - and above all they were able to inspire business, politics and the population for the cause of the legendary ship.

The steamship movement, which caused a real uproar in the Thun region, in the canton of Bern and throughout Switzerland for around 20 years, is probably unique in its history to this day; it was an uprising of civil society before this modern term was even invented.

The government funds that were raised in these years to correct private sector failures **are also unique;** Tax money that was pumped into a private company via popular initiatives, and a population that broke into veritable storms of enthusiasm.

Anyone who observes how frowned upon it is today to subsidize state-owned companies with tax money will be amazed when looking into the archives at how much money was spent on something that is now widely described as a hobby and whose economic benefit and profitability only recently was recognized again.

**It is thanks to a group of five, which operated under the name Pro Dampf,** that the planned scrapping of the Blümlisalp could be prevented in advance. The five quickly brought the issue to the canton's political stage by submitting a petition to the Bernese government to save the last Thunersee paddle steamer - signed by almost 55,000 people!

It was the first of numerous feats of strength by this early civil society that were necessary to get the former pride of the Lake Thun fleet afloat again. After the Swiss Steam Museum Association in Thun made it possible to move the ship to the Kander delta in 1975, it was twelve tireless idealists who maintained the paddle steamer as well as possible with the simplest of means and saved it from decay.

**The founding of the Vaporama cooperative** with the purpose of rescuing the unique ship in 1982 did not immediately give impetus to the plan to save the same. A popular initiative was necessary, which was only submitted 6 years later with more than 40,000 signatures and was supposed to oblige the canton of Bern to enact a law for the preservation of the last two Bernese paddle steamers - which was then actually adopted 4 years later.

### **The steamer fans all over the country continued to fight for their cause on their own initiative.**

**The steamer fans all over the country did not want to wait for politics** and continued to fight for their cause on their own: In 1989 Vaporama bought the ship from the BLS for a symbolic franc and renovated it between 1990 and 1992 on its own - and not least thanks to the enormous solidarity from professional associations, companies and other organizations that not only contributed cash donations, but also contributed know-how, material and manpower.

The lion's share of the costs, two thirds of a total of 9.3 million, were once again financed by private donors, the last third was covered by contributions from the lottery fund of the canton of Bern, the Federal Office for Culture and the Pro Patria Foundation.

**After the voters had committed the canton of Bern in a referendum with a large majority** to co-finance the operation of the steamer, and after the completion of the renovation work, the time had come on May 22, 1992, 25 years ago today: the "Blüemlere" went under a truly triumphant second maiden voyage in the eyes of thousands of onlookers all around Lake Thun - and many a person who was present at the time might smile mildly when they hear today how so-called civil society is being celebrated as a new element supporting state and society.

**Since then, the "Blüemlere" on Lake Thun has been what its customer once ordered:** a ship that surpasses all other ships on Lake Thun and Lake Brienz in terms of size, performance and elegance – at least in terms of elegance and radiance.

The fact that the pride of the Lake Thun fleet has also been the flagship of BLS shipping again since 2013 is not least thanks to the Friends of Steam Shipping Association. He has supported the upkeep of the ship since it was founded in 1993 with significant amounts, including the last major refurbishment in 2006.

**With the return of the ship to the BLS for a symbolic franc,** the Vaporama Foundation was also dissolved at the end of 2012, since the goal – the founding of a Swiss steam museum – could not be achieved. The cooperative Vaporama as the former owner of the ship continues. In the future, she wants to focus her activities more on promoting young talent and use her expertise for this purpose.

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*Large crowds at the departure for the second maiden voyage of the saloon steamer Blüemlere.*

*Photo by Christian Ibach*



*...The crowds on the second maiden voyage show the great interest in preserving this wonderful paddle steamer, pride of Lake Thun*



*The once so proud steamboat quietly begins to rust away in the Kander delta, far away from the public eye.*



*Wind, rain and snow took badly their toll on the steamer in the open-air in the Kander delta after it was decommissioned*



*The rescue of the steamer "Blümlisalp" soon became a major political issue, and was staged wisely to attract the attention of the media*



*Great attention was paid to every detail during the restoration of the salon steamer, such as the application of gold decorations here*



*A year after its second maiden voyage, the Blümlisalp regained the blue ribbon from the MS Jungfrau (left) as the fastest ship crossing Lake Thun.*

*Photo Christian Ibach*