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RAILWAYS IN ICELAND

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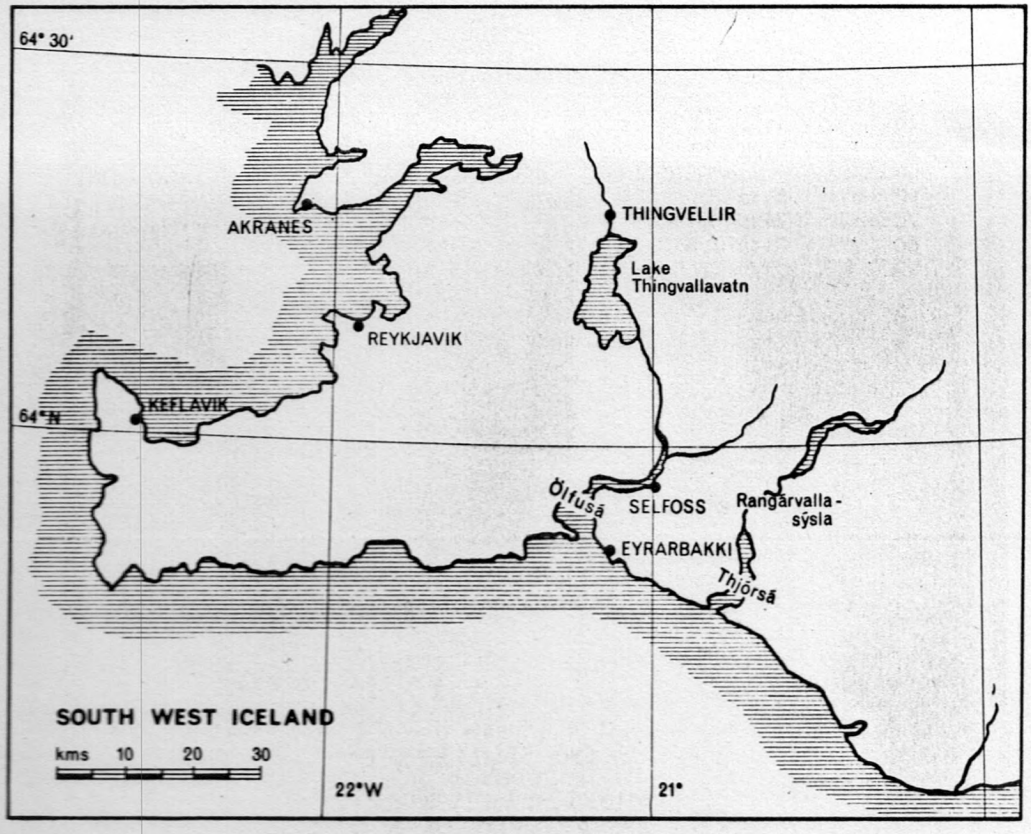
As it is commonly said that Iceland has had no railways, the subject of this article hardly seems a promising one. There seems to be very little information available on the subject; for example, no reference could be found on Iceland in the whole series of volumes of the "Railway Magazine" over the last 70 years or so. In truth there is very little railway history in Iceland, but what there is seems worth recording as far as it goes. What little length of railway there has been in Iceland has been entirely industrial, but projects for public railways were for a time seriously discussed.

An early reference to the first of these projects was in the "Locomotive Magazine" of 15th July 1914, when it was stated that the railway was to be of narrow gauge, running from the capital Reykjavík "to Rangavalle", through the "fertile Thingvalla district"; it would have been about 64 miles long and was to have had a 12 mile branch to the port of Eyrarbakki. The estimated cost was about £2,700 per mile, tunnels being avoided in spite of the hilly country traversed.



A map of South-West Iceland which shows most of the sites mentioned in the article. Two places mentioned which are not on the map are Thingeyri (latitude 65°53'N, longitude 23°28'W) and Ölafsfjördur (latitude 66°04'N, longitude 18°39'W).

At this stage it should be pointed out that Icelandic place-names have often been curiously spelt in English works; "Thingvalla" is presumably Thingvellir, and "Rangavalle" is presumably the favoured farming county of Rangárvallasýsla. Even in this article we are compelled to use "th" in place of an unavailable Icelandic symbol.

Another project was announced in the "Railway Gazette", 18th April 1924, when the Icelandic Government was said to have approved the plans of a Norwegian engineer, M. Moller, for a railway from Reykjavík to Ölfusá at a cost of 7 million kroner. However, it was further reported that "owing to many economic difficulties, against which the Icelandic authorities are striving, it is improbable that a commencement will be made with the work of building the new railway this year". In 1926 further proposals were reported, again in the "Railway Gazette" (2nd April), this time including an offer from Great Britain for the railway construction.

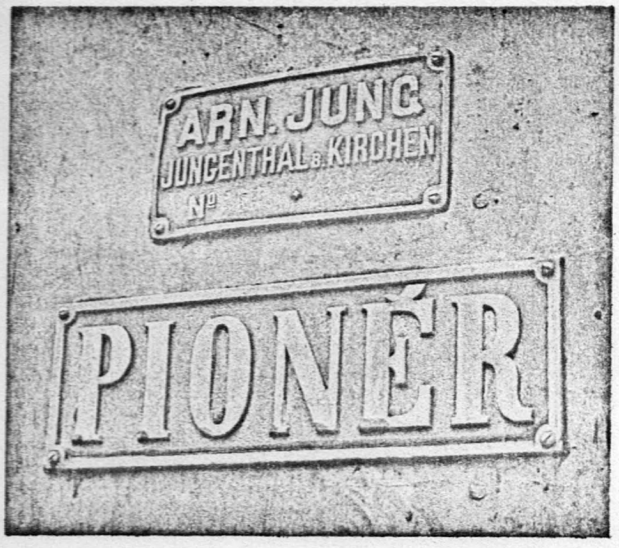
According to a 1942 reference book about Iceland, the Icelandic parliament (the Althing) for a time provisionally accepted a proposal made in 1927 by the Norwegian "TITAN" company for a railway about 100km long to run from Reykjavík to Thingvellir and thence to the agricultural area around Selfoss and Thjórsá. Thingvellir, the site of the old Icelandic open-air parliament, is now a tourist attraction. This proposal effectively used the route covered by the 1914 plan. Having travelled over most of this route, the author fails to see how the railway could ever seriously have been thought to be an economic proposition, especially with the much smaller population there was in those days – about 100,000 in the whole large country. A reference in "Iceland: A Land of Contrasts", by Hjalmar Lindroth, associated the railway proposal with the building of two hydro-electric power stations but these could hardly have affected the railway economics in the long term. Also, there was little prospect of worth-while mining activity in the area.

Yet another railway route linking Reykjavík to the Southern lowlands was surveyed, at least in a preliminary manner, since it is mentioned in an Icelandic book published in 1926. This would have been more direct than the others, with a length of about 65km.

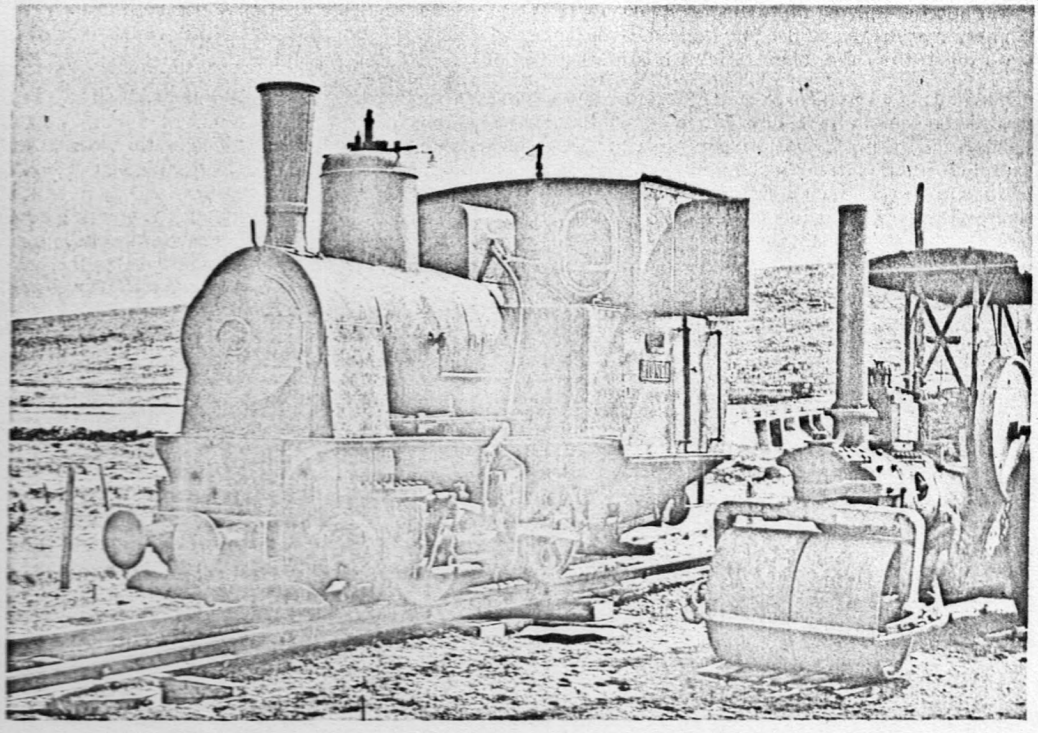
Railways of a sort have existed in Iceland in the form of traversing tracks in some of the shipyards; these can still be seen in Reykjavík. The reference book already cited (dated 1942) describes the minor port of Thingeyri in the north-western peninsula as having the second-best repair shop in Iceland for trawlers and says it is "fitted with railtrack to repair shop". Again, referring to Ólafsfjördur on the north coast, it says it has a "small cod-liver oil factory connected to village by rail track". The author has not yet had an opportunity of visiting these places to investigate these railways further, nor has he been able to find any other reference to them. There was evidently also a rail track on a slipway in Reykjavík harbour in 1907, for a painting by Magnus Ólafsson (dated 1st March 1907 and now in the National Museum of Iceland) shows this track, probably metre gauge or thereabouts. There now seems to be no trace of this track remaining. There is, however, still a portion of narrow-gauge rail track embedded in the tarmac at the edge of Reykjavík Airport and there seems little doubt that other minor pieces of railway have existed in Iceland and possibly even survive until the present time.

By kind permission of the Narrow Gauge Railway Society and Neil Pitts we are able to quote from an article in "The Narrow Gauge" (March 1969, No. 50) concerning a narrow gauge railway at Siglufiord. 'Siglufiord ... a fishing port on the northern coast [of Iceland] ... was once the main centre of the herring industry, before the shoals migrated eastwards. In its heyday Siglufiord was the home port for a large number of herring boats, though only a handful remain today. In order to facilitate unloading the catches several wooden piers were built out into the harbour, and 60 centimetre tracks were laid along these. Four wheeled trucks were used to transport the fish from the holds of the boats to the processing sheds. The lines were mostly about fifty yards long, and of course "mandraulic" power was used. With the decline in landings at Siglufiord little use is now made of these tramways, although the tracks and the occasional points are still in fairly good condition. A few trucks remain on the tracks, and some others are to be seen on some waste ground nearby, probably withdrawn from traffic.'

The only substantial railway actually built in Iceland was that used in the reconstruction, modernisation and extension of Reykjavík harbour in 1913–17. According to a report in the "Locomotive Magazine", 15th November 1915 (kindly drawn to my attention by K. P. Plant), the line was about 60km long, laid to a gauge of 900mm – about 3ft – and worked by two steam locomotives. The report in the "Locomotive Magazine" stated that 'It is worked by two four-wheeled side tank engines, named "Minor" and



A close-up view of the nameplate and maker's plate on PIONÉR. The original works number and date have both been chipped or ground off and replaced by the present ones (1591 of 1910), which are stamped into the face of the plate. Does anyone know the original Jung number which this locomotive carried? (D. G. Tucker)



PIONÉR as preserved in the open-air Folk Museum at Arbaer, Reykjavík.
(D. G. Tucker)

"Pioneer" with wheels 2ft 8in diameter, and cylinders 10¾in diameter by 15½in stroke. They each weigh about 13 tons in working order. They were built in Germany by Arnold Jung & Co., in 1892, and were provided with new boilers in 1910, prior to their purchase for the Reykjavík Harbour line. This railway was opened for traffic on April 17th, 1913.'

What has happened to MINOR is not known, but PIONÉR (incorrectly spelt in the report quoted above) is fortunately still to be seen, preserved as an exhibit in the open-air Folk Museum at Arbaer on the eastern outskirts of Reykjavík, standing perhaps appropriately, alongside a steam road-roller. The builder's number (1591) and the date (1910) appear on the worksplate, but are difficult to read, being only lightly engraved. The author, having made a few measurements on the locomotive, confirms the gauge of about 3ft, the actual distance between the wheel flanges being 34¼in. However, the present wheel diameter is 30½in, and not 32in as reported in 1915.

In referring to this locomotive, a recent booklet states that "This antique engine ... was brought to Iceland by a mining company, but operation of the train was found not to be feasible." This may be true, and if so, it was probably very soon after the re-boilering in 1910 that the mining company tried the locomotive. Presumably they also bought MINOR, but confirmation on this assumption is required. Being already in Iceland, these locomotives would be an obvious choice for purchase by the harbour contractors.