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"European Industrial Heritage - How to tell the International Story?"

Call for papers – Submission of the abstract (deadline: 1st June)

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The story of the Fen-Rail – From the transportation of coal and ore to cycle tourism

In 1889 the Fen-rail between Luxembourg and Aachen (Germany) became operational by passing for the most part of East Belgium on the feet of the High Fens. The main purpose was exchange: the emerging industrial district around Aachen has been rich of hard coal, but was lacking on iron ore; the Minette-Region in the south of Luxembourg, offered iron ore of sedimentary origin and demanded hard coal. Luxembourg became a very early member of the „Deutscher Zollverein“. The cost advantage through transportation of iron ore by the Fen-rail led to a location advantage of the steel mills in Aachen and Eschweiler by comparison with the more distant located steel production along the Ruhr River. Therefore the Fen-Rail can be marked as a very early harbinger of the „Montanunion“, founded in 1951. The best years of the Fen-rail have been before the First World War. Meanwhile passenger travelling has been established too. Tourism arrives with the Fen-Rail, guest experienced an new kind of travelling. The Fen-Rail has beyond these purposes stimulated local trade (agricultural products etc.). But for some local production the Fen-Rail arrived too late as for the potteries of Raeren or the weavers of Monschau, caused by the too long delays from the first plans and their realisation. Therefore entrepreneurs shifted to other countries like Karl Wilhelm Scheibler to Poland, where he founded the textile industry of Lodz, later known as the “Manchester of Poland”. After considerable destructions at the end of the Second World War during the Ardennes offensive (above all St. Vith) and bombardments of bridges by the Wehrmacht the traffic on the Fen-Tracks came to a close. First reflections of future use of some sections and viaducts focussed on their preservation. Soon the idea of utilising the former railway track for cycling was born. Since 2013 the Fen-Rail-Route is one of the new successful cycle routes in Europe and storytelling along the route contributed to its success in marketing and sales. 2014 the Fen-Rail has been awarded the title “bike route of the year”.

Along the Fen-Rail-Route (120 kilometer, crossing Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg) 14 sites offering local stories in written form and caricatures (one strengths of Belgian arts). These 14 interlinking short stories are focussing on local content with regard on three key-narratives - border, landscape and rail with its industrial-cultural inclusions. The stories have been elaborated in cooperation between local experts and historians, representatives of cultural institutions, friends of the Fen-Rail etc.

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