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Treasure Hunter Searches Rhine River—for a Steam Engine

After 30 years, a train fanatic's quest to find a 19th-century cast-iron locomotive turns promising

Horst Müller, right, with Uwe Breitmeier, left, and Bernhard Forkmann, with a model of the steam engine they are looking for. BARTENBACH.DE



By *Nina Adam*
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 7 COMMENTS



COCHEM, Germany—Horst Müller likes trains. It makes sense. As a child he lived with his family on the top floor of Cochem station. He once celebrated Christmas dinner in the cab of a steam engine with his father, a driver. He's [collected model trains](#), [devoured train books](#) and [photographed trains](#) since he was 12, and eventually became a driver himself.

wsj.net, 10.9.2018

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/treasure-hunt-on-the-rhine-is-for-iron-not-gold-1536513344>



For the past 30 years he has moved beyond “like” to obsession. His fixation: Find a 19th-century cast-iron steam engine lost in the Rhine river before it even took its first journey.



A model of Der Rhein

Now, at 68 years old, he’s as close as he’s ever come to success. After decades of combing through historical documents, dozens of field trips on- and offshore with elaborate sensing equipment chasing up dead ends, and getting wet feet and tick bites, he finally scored a ping on a large mass of underwater iron near the town of Gernersheim, close to the French border.

Next month, when he tries to excavate and raise the object, he’ll find out for sure if he’s found his treasure, or if his hopes have been dashed again.



Mr. Müller with some of the papers used to research the hunt, in his home in Cochem, Germany. PHOTO: NINA ADAM/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

When his sensors found what he believes is the steam engine, “it was Christmas and Easter, all in one,” Mr. Müller said. “Its special aroma, its looks, you can’t find it in today’s models.”

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On a stormy winter day in 1852, the coal-fired engine, fresh from its Karlsruhe factory, was on its way to delivery to its new owner in Düsseldorf. The clipper that was transporting it down the Rhine tipped to the side, sliding the engine into the water—the engine that itself was named Der Rhein, after the mighty river.

Several hundred men and a weighty iron chain tried to recover the engine. Special divers were called in from London, but they couldn't breast the strong current. Years later, in 1925, another planned salvage attempt was abandoned due to high costs. After that, the machine faded from memory.



Mr. Müller with his equipment on the banks of the Rhine near Germersheim in 1994. PHOTO: MÜLLER FAMILY

In 1986, Mr. Müller was reminded of the naval accident in a trade magazine. He immediately felt “turbocharged,” he said.

He had first heard of the saga of Der Rhein at age 12. Steam engines, which had rolled past the windows of his railway station childhood home, had always been his favorite.

“When you board a steam locomotive, it’s warm, it smells of oil and there is a hissing noise,” said Volker Jenderny, an ex-Army captain who has joined Mr. Müller on the search.

“With water and fire you can bring this colossus to life.”



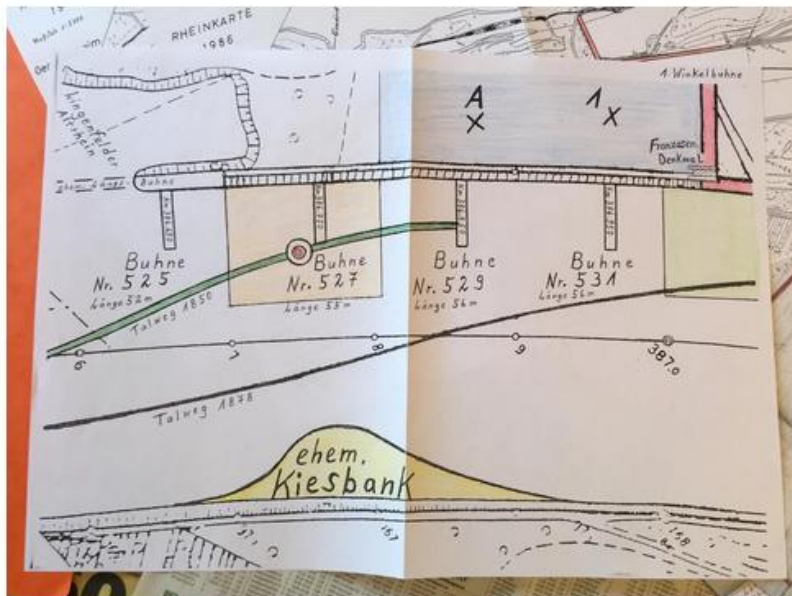
Germany retired steam engines in the 1970s. “Sadly, I drove a steam engine for just one month,” Mr. Müller said, “and not as a driver but as a fireman.”

He began learning everything he could about Der Rhein, and over two years, he sent about 140 letters to libraries and archives, requesting maps and newspaper snippets.

A big problem immediately became evident. Extensive engineering work to tame the Rhine in the 19th century had caused the river to change course, reduce its length and increase its current. It was unclear whether the site of the original accident was still part of the river, or now on dry land.

By 1989, after triangulating the location between historic sources and more recent maps, “I was pretty sure I’d pinned it down,” he said, and launched his first expedition in the field.

He boarded a rubber dinghy to scan the river bed with a technician using a Foerster probe, a sensitive metal detector used by German bomb disposal squads. After about eight hours scouring the location, he conceded defeat. There was no 6-meter, 20-ton steam engine there.



One of Mr. Müller’s maps. He believes he has located Der Rhein close to the red spot.

PHOTO: NINA ADAM/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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He added members to his team. Mr. Jenderny, who was **infected with the same railway bug**, helped handle red tape and permits. Uwe Breitmeier, head of the Darmstadt railway museum, pledged to help restore Der Rhein if they could find it. Mr. Müller wrote to Bernhard Forkmann, a geophysicist from Saxony who was also an old treasure-hunting hand. The wiry university professor was immediately hooked. “I’ve been to Alexandria to hunt for the tomb of Alexander the Great,” he said. “But his case is truly unique.”

Mr. Müller started to believe the engine was in fact now on dry land. The team headed for the floodplain forest near Germersheim, playing Indiana Jones. Once they forded a stream and almost submerged their four-wheel drive vehicle. Another time they tiptoed past a meter-long snake on a path. “It felt like being on the Amazon, or rather a mini version of it,” Mr. Müller said.

But more failures followed. One large metal object was ruled out as the locomotive because of its shallow location. Passageways drilled toward a second candidate underground were too inundated with sand to receive the delicate sensors.

“It was the absolute low point in my life,” said Mr. Müller. He took a break from his passion. “His first love has always been the steam locomotive,” said Edina Müller, his wife.

In 2008, Mr. Müller took two months off work as compensation for over 700 hours of overtime. The open time reinvigorated the search. He set up in the regional government archives in Speyer and waded through 150 meters of shelving space holding files about civil engineering work back to 1800.



Mr. Müller's last journey as a locomotive driver in 2010. PHOTO: MÜLLER FAMILY

For days, he was the first to enter every morning and would skip leaving for meal breaks. "I felt dizzy at times, but suddenly I was holding two original documents from 1852," he said. "It was like winning the lottery."

The documents led Mr. Müller back to the idea that the locomotive was underwater, and near a particular gravel bank. According to river maps from the 1850s, "there was only one gravel bank in the entire region. This had to be it!" he said he remembered thinking.

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His faith would be tested for the next seven years, when 14 expeditions to the spot revealed nothing. Finally, in 2016, on expedition 15, the metal detector sprang to life. It showed "a perfect magnetic footprint," Mr. Forkmann said.

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It was enough of a victory to spur a celebration with sausage and beer at a

nearby yacht club.

The real test lies ahead. Mr. Müller, now retired from the railway, is working on plans to excavate the hulk in October. A hydraulics company has started preparatory work for the salvage. Mr. Müller's goal is to restore Der Rhein into Germany's oldest preserved locomotive.

Some skeptics have argued the mass might turn out to be an unexploded bomb, a tank or another war relic. "It's quite possible that they'll pull out a heap of scrap metal," said Björn Bohländer, head of Frankfurt's Historic Railway Association.

The team is confident. "If it's not the locomotive," said Mr. Forkmann, "it can only be the Nibelung hoard"—the fabulous "Rhine gold" of Germanic folklore.

For Mr. Müller, that would be a great disappointment.

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