GRAPEVINE CUTTINGS   (July 1998)

By Rob Upson

THE RAILWAY TO BENDIGO   Part 1

The day the railway came to Bendigo (Sandhurst in those days) was an occasion that
'Events Bendigo' would probably have organised if they had been in existence 136 years
ago. A great number of visitors were expected and all available accommodation had been
booked out well in advance. Businesses would have been rubbing their hands in
anticipation, the hotels in particular.

Several mines were offering tours of their operations and inspection was invited of the
Hospital and Benevolent Asylum. Some shop windows, including gold-brokers and
banks had splendid displays of *auriferous and geological* specimens. Visitors were
invited to see the architectural grandeur of our many Churches; the Australasia, Union
and Oriental Banks; the Shamrock, Lyceum and Freemasons Hotels; as well as some
private residences. They were also invited to visit the hamlet of White Hills and the
Botanical Gardens, the township of Eaglehawk, Fire Brigade depots and the Mechanics
Institute.

On the 20th October 1862 Sandhurst took on a holiday appearance with flags and banners
decorating streets and buildings. Three special trains left Spencer St. station at half hourly
intervals from 9 am. The first train comprising 15 carriages and 2 locomotives carried
500 passengers, including the Governor, Sir Henry Barkly. The second train had 16
carriages and the third had 17 carriages.

The first train arrived at the Sandhurst station at 1:30 pm, where the Governor declared
the line officially open and congratulated the workmen assembled. He then led a
procession of municipal officers and dignitaries plus a military contingent down Mitchell
St. along Pall Mall and up Mundy St. to Market Square and the Criterion Hotel. Their
progress was difficult at times due to the large crowd lining the route, estimated to be
between 15 and 20 thousand. The Governor addressed the crowd from the balcony of
the Criterion Hotel, then followed a banquet for about 800 guests in a temporary pavilion
attached to the Town Hall. A free dinner was provided near the railway station for the
men who had built the line.

In the evening, a Grand Ball was held in the Town Hall. Dancing commenced soon after
9 pm with the band of the Volunteer Rifles and the Chewton band playing alternately and
at one time there were no fewer than 500 dancers on the floor. According to 'The
Advertiser' *the lady visitors presented a galaxy of beauty and fashion, some with the
Louis Quatorze period hair styles la Pompadour* .

Even though the celebrations had been a success, the arrangements for the return train

journeys to Castlemaine and Melbourne were a complete stuff up. One train was supposed to have left at 5:30 pm but didn't leave until 11:30 pm and then only with a few carriages.

The greater portion of the carriages with passengers for Melbourne still hadn't left the station by midnight. It was then disclosed by railway management that they would not be starting before morning. The reason given being the lack of water at the station for the engines or if there was water, the construction of the rails in the vicinity made it impossible for the engines to reach the water pipes.

As all accommodation was booked out, some passengers decided to sleep in the carriages while others availed themselves of the pews in nearby churches. It must have been a fairly dishevelled and disgruntled group of visitors that departed Sandhurst in the morning. There was one slight diversion during the night when the temporary wooden triumphal arch erected at the station for the opening ceremony caught fire by a spark from an engine.

 In the few years since gold was discovered on the Bendigo Creek, significant progress had been achieved. The Municipality of Sandhurst was created in 1855, the electric telegraph came in 1856, gas was laid on in 1860 and in 1862 the railway came to Bendigo.

(to be continued)

Reference :- The Annals of Bendigo

GRAPEVINE   CUTTINGS   (November 1998)

By Rob Upson
THE RAILWAY to BENDIGO   Part 2

Monday the 20th October 1862 was the day the railway came to Bendigo with the line officially opened by the Governor, Sir Henry Barkly.

Government legislation authorising a railway to be built from Melbourne to Bendigo (or Sandhurst as it was then) was passed by Parliament in Nov. 1857 and seven months later a contract was signed with Messrs. Cornish and Bruce to provide a double track line of 97 miles and 3 chains for a cost of 3,356,937.

The route to be followed was that surveyed in 1855 and was to by-pass Castlemaine with this town being provided with a branch line from Harcourt. This was altered after strong representation from angry Castlemaine residents.

There were some notable engineering works associated with the construction of the railway line. These being :-
*   A 260 ft long x 60 ft high, five arch stone bridge over the Coliban river at Malmsbury.
*   A 650 ft long x 120 ft high, five span iron viaduct over Back Creek near Taradale.
*   A 1264 ft long tunnel through solid rock at Elphinstone and another tunnel of similar length under Big Hill.

The line was completed and opened in sections with separate ceremonies being held at Castlemaine and Bendigo due to jealousies between the two Municipal Councils. The passenger service to Melbourne commenced with three return trips per day and the return first-class fare was not cheap at 47 shillings but nevertheless a lot cheaper than the journey by coach and horses. Melbourne to Bendigo by coach used to take 2 days and now the train could do it in 4 hours.

The following year, in 1863, tenders were called for the 55 mile extension of the line from Bendigo to Echuca. The single track line through flat country encountered no major engineering difficulties and goods and passenger services commenced in late 1864.

An aboriginal word meaning 'meeting of the waters', Echuca was founded in 1850 by Henry Hopwood who operated a ferry across the Murray River. The town rapidly became a major port for the riverboat trade and the rail link to Melbourne further enhanced the development of inland Australia.

Gold was discovered in the Heathcote district in late 1852 and a shantytown known as the McIvor Diggings quickly developed. The township was named Heathcote in 1870 (probably on account of the flowering heath in the area) and by 1879 it had a population of 1500 with 11 hotels, 3 flourmills and a newspaper. When the gold diggings 'ran dry' the main industries became timber and agriculture. The supply of timber to the Bendigo goldfields and surrounding areas led to the construction of the railway. The contract for building the track from Bendigo to Heathcote (28 miles) was awarded to Andrew O'Keefe for 84,409.

The largest structure on the line was a 100 span, 2200 ft long bridge over the Campaspe River near Axedale. The line was opened in October 1888. Seventy years later, when plans for the Eppalock weir to flood the area made it uneconomical to relocate part of the line, it was closed and, in 1970, the tracks were dismantled. Today, a 13 km walking track along the railway route between Junortoun and Axedale is known as the O'Keefe Trail.

Reference :- Victorian Railways to '62   by Leo J. Harrigan