

THE HISTORY OF

THE BENDIGO RAILWAY

AND MEMOIRS

OF EARLY TRAIN TRAVEL

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THE RAILWAY FROM MELBOURNE TO THE MURRAY RIVER

It has been stated that the movement to form a railway from Melbourne to the river Murray had a small beginning.

The first meeting, on the subject, being attended by only two or three persons. The subject was first mooted in Bendigo in July 1855 when a public meeting presided over by Mr Vallentes and addressed by Mr Lysaght, Dr Backhus, Mr Bissil, Mr Wolfe, Mr Harney, Dr Hunt and Mr Mackay. It was decided to memorialize the Governor on the subject, Surveyors were subsequently taken. The direct rail to Sandhurst from Melbourne would have left Castlemaine out, and one of the proposals was that a branch line would meet the requirements of the "Great Centre".

There was a severe newspaper war on the subject and while Sandhurst residence desired the direct route and a much shorter trip, Castlemaine residence agreed that a diversion should be agreed to in their favour.

The Sandhurst residence resisted the diversion as the proposal to carry the line through Castlemaine would not only be injurious to Sandhurst but would inflict a permanent tax on the traffic between Melbourne and Sandhurst. However the agitation as far as Sandhurst was concerned proved to no avail for on the 12th September 1857, the legislative assembly decided that the Murray line should pass through Castlemaine to Sandhurst. Captain Clark, the ex Surveyor General, maintained that by carrying through Castlemaine the formation of the line would be delayed for 18 months.

On the 4th May 1858, the tender of Messrs. Cornish and company was accepted for its construction at a cost 3,356,937 pounds. The Murray River railway was completed as far as Bendigo (Sandhurst) on 19th June 1862. The keying in or laying the last brick in the Big Hill tunnel was performed by Mr Higginbotham, the Chief Engineer of the Government.

Before the opening of the railway the Council took up the subject of establishing a connection with neighbouring districts of McIvor and Inglewood by means of a tramways. The Sandhurst and Inglewood Councils also held a conference on the subject of a tramway but with no definite result. The work was completed three years later but never completed.

The 20th October 1862 was a red letter day in the annals of Bendigo ushering in a new era in which the great gold fields centre of the Northern district was to be connected by rail to the metropolis.

The line was declared open by Sir Henry Barkly who met with an enthusiastic reception from 20,000 people drawn together by the importance of the event. The banquet in honour of the occasion took place in the afternoon in a temporary building attached to the Town Hall and some 800 persons sat down. The Chairman of the municipality Mr Robert Burrows presided and he had, on his right, his Excellency the Governor. There were also present the Chief Secretary, Mr John O'Shannessey, The attorney General, the Commissioner of Railway, the Commissioner of Public Works and other notabilities. After the loyal toasts that of the Governor was proposed by the Chairman and his Excellency in reply said that the opening of the railway was not only a cause of triumph to Bendigo but a triumph in which all Victorians should rejoice. The banquet was one of the most successful ever held in Bendigo. The building in which it was held was the scene of a ball at night although the celebrations passed off without a hitch.

It was not so with the railway arrangements and a large number of visitors were obliged unwillingly to stay in Bendigo overnight. As every bed in the various hotels had been engaged days before hand great difficulty was experienced by the benighted travellers in getting accommodation and even the churches were availed of in their extremity and beds made of the pews. A large number of the passengers, amongst them a large proportion of ladies, preferred to remain in the carriages to running the risk of hunting for beds.

The first official timetable provided for three trains on weekdays and two on Sundays. The fare for a single journey was thirty-one shillings and sixpence, first class; twenty three shillings and three pence, second class. The return fares, 47 shillings and three pences, first class; 34 shillings and nine pence, second class. The return fare was any railway trip from Saturday until the last train Monday.

The total cost of building the line was 3,569,937 pounds or \$7,139,874. (That wouldn't build the Big Hill tunnel today).

(Extracted from "Opening of Railway from Melbourne to Sandhurst - Bendigo" from the history of Bendigo by Mr G. Mackay per Mr Bob Carr, 81 Barkley St Bendigo)

The following is a letter written by Mr Bob Carr to the Station Master Bendigo in October 1991.

"I see by a letter in the Bendigo Advertiser that there is to be an Open Day display of public transport. As a contrast and a matter of interest I shall relate some of my experiences re public transport over the past 80 years.

The first railway passenger carriages which were known as 'dog box carriages'. As they progressed they built better carriages known better as 'Tait cars'. I believe they were known as the corridor carriages with improvements done the job for years and I believe all built at the Railway Workshops. They turned out some very good tradesmen in those days, of course.

All steam locos burnt coal and the boilers filled with water. To fuel the locos at Bendigo there was what was known as the coal stage. An elevated railway ramp and platform with a large bin where the loaded coal trucks were shunted up the ramp and the coal unloaded into the bin. It was built high enough for the loco and coal tender to run underneath and the coal to be shoved into loaded up for a trip. This was situated about mid way between the loco shed and the three arch bridge as it was known in those days.

It was a tough job working in those days and of course in those intervals were the water tanks along the tracks where the locos took on water. The remains of those still exist at various intervals at various tracks.

From the early days, I can remember 1910 onwards, all passengers and goods were transported by rail also stock, cattle, sheep and horses to the saleyards. Some drovers operated from near by areas. The saleyard and railway line siding was a very busy place on sale days; sheep Mondays, cattle Tuesdays, and an occasional horse sale.

Of course horse drawn vehicles were the mode of transport those days, for trade deliveries, public transport, local cabs and private folk if they could afford a jinker, buggy or car. Horse drawn vehicles were also used for wood cutting and carting it to the mines and industries, also home fires were big business. Likewise the hotels, Newmarket and Fleece Inn were very well and appropriately named.

In our early days of Sunday school picnics we travelled in the various furniture carrier vans, they would put Sunday school forms or seats down each side perhaps in the centre if there was room and hang on some coloured flags outside to give it the picnic atmosphere. We would travel to Lake Werona, Lake Neangar (Eaglehawk), the Botanical Gardens, the Cherry Tree gardens (near the Cherry Tree hotel a bit below where the vineyard is now situated this side of Big Hill) and also to the pines at Crusoe Reservoir, and a happy day was had by all.

Well from that beginning as the railways built more rolling stock and locos our first taste of rail travel was in cattle trucks. They were washed out and disinfected with phenyl, the only disinfectant in those days. Seats were placed along each side, a white tarpaulin was stretched and tied over the top and coloured flags along the outside and there was, proudly took, our first railway trip to Sunday School picnic. Various Sunday schools went to Marong, Ravenswood (a very popular spot), Axedale, Bridgewater and Castlemaine. So that would be another very busy day for the Victorian Railways (V/Line). The means of rail travel in the cleaned out cattle trucks would be environmentally horrific but how we looked forward to and loved those train trips.

As the years rolled on and more rolling stock became available we were promoted to carriages for years. With the early rail travel before the motor era came into being the taxi cab was the means of transport from the train to the various guest houses, coffee palaces, hotels and private homes. Apparently it was the custom to build and locate the accommodation houses as near to the railway station as possible as the buildings which occupied the corner were Haywoods Coffee Palace and Stanleys Coffee Palace (where Bristol Paints and Stilwells are at present). The Olive Branch Hotel is now Rechters Cafe. The Hopetoun Hotel has been there for many years and where the North West Country Credit Building Society is opposite was the Olympic Hotel. So rail passengers didn't have to travel far to look for accommodation and of course the cabs would be kept busy transporting passengers to various parts of Bendigo.

Another interesting part of the rail and cab link was when the Melbourne warehouses such as Kornblume, Patterson Lang and Bruce and Sargoods, etc., sent their representatives to Bendigo with samples of their various goods. They would travel by train and get a cab to carry their cane or wicker sample hampers to the main sample rooms made available at the Shamrock and City Family Hotels. They would lay out trestles and tables. The Shamrock where those basement sections were you can see today, they have been unused for years. There was a luscious smelling dining room in one part those days and the City Family sample room was the row of shops along High Street. The city representatives would lay out their wares and the managers of the various local stores would inspect and place their orders which would be forwarded by rail and collected by the stores own delivery vehicles or local carriers or the railway carriers of which there was two McCulloch & Company and Buckle & Jeffrey.

So on the whole the railway transport in those days was a booming business with passengers, parcels and freight and the refreshments rooms as it was known.

Another interesting and booming time in the railways in the 1920 - 1930 era onwards was the railway picnic as it was known usually a weekend in November, sometimes couple with the football grand final. Trains would run from Melbourne, four or more, the fare 5 shillings and 50 pence a day return and 7 shillings and 6 pence weekend return. A big crowd would come and bring all sorts of things, buskers, novelty sellers, flower sellers. The most popular was the bunches of Boronia which spread a lovely sweet perfume around the city. The first train would arrive in Bendigo about breakfast time. They called it "the drunks special" to get the revellers away early, they said. I don't know if it worked that way. There was the return journey to consider.

However, it was a very busy and bright day and weekend for Bendigo. They ran another one at another time to Ballarat from Bendigo. One train went through Castlemaine and Maryborough and another through Marong, Bridgewater and Inglewood (same fare).

We also had a busy and exciting time on the railways when the Wirths circus came to town. The "greatest show on earth" they advertised it and I believe it may have been. They had their own train to transport all their gear, animal cages and staff. They pitched the big top at the upper Reserve "Queen Elizabeth Oval today" just inside the main gate opposite the Rifle Brigade Hotel. They rigged their ticket boxes and spruikers platform on which the circus band in bright braided uniforms would play bright circus music. The elephants would be used to haul the trucks and things unloaded from the train and passing Alexander Fountain would have a drink and a shower and being horse drawn vehicle time there would be a few bolting horses as they did not appear to like the smell or size of the elephants.

Another interesting part of the early railway era was the safety precautions at the level crossings. The Williamson and Nolan St crossings have been operated from the Signal Box mechanically for as long as I can remember. However, the McCrae St, Bridge St (lower) Thunder St, Mundy St and others have had a gate house where a railway family lived. The father worked as a fettler on a repair gang. Mother or some of the family operated the gates manually when they received the signal a train was on the way. Other level crossings were marked with a conspicuous white cross sign with the words and very conspicuously displayed "railway crossing - stop, look and listen". However with all these precaution lights, bells, etc., there were some idiots who tried to beat them.

What a boost the railways (V/Line) has been to Bendigo as in the hay day of passengers, goods traffic, parcels office, loco, carriage sheds and shunting yards, railway workshops and general station staff. The railway pay was a boom for Bendigo as it was always recognised as the biggest fortnightly pay.

Another part of the doings of Bendigo where the railway played an important part was transporting wheat and flour from Tomlins Simmie Flour Mills where the stock feed mill is today Charleston Rd. A spur line ran from the main Echuca and Swan Hill line from near the Nolan St gates to the mill and there was also a siding platform about half way between the gates and the mill which was used by Hume & Iser Timber yards to receive red gum, hardwood, oregon and other timbers from the mills and also to despatch orders to their customers in other districts. Hume & Iser have a large time jinker drawn by two and sometimes three horses to transport the timber from the siding to their yards.

The siding as by name we knew it was used by the rowing club when they attended regattas at Ballarat, Melbourne Henley and Nagambie. The rowing club had a large oregon frame and a pair of spring cart wheels and springs. They bolted together to act as a vehicle or trolley to transport boats from the rowing club at Lake Werona to the siding where the railways would shunt in a flat sheet wagon Q.R. and a shorter one known as a safety to take the extra length of the rowing eight.

The boats would be loaded Thursday evening with bags of straw for packing and rope lashings usually an eight, four and pair. The scull would be put in a wooden box shaped like a coffin with packing and blades (oars), all other oars and riggers would be packed in suitable sections on the truck and lashed down and the boat transporter wheels, springs and Oregon frame all loaded aboard for transport by rail to Jolimont (Melbourne Henley), Ballarat Railway Yards for Ballarat regatta and Nagambie siding. We always go down Friday night, go over to the Jolimont Yards unload the trailer bolted together, laid the boats and gear and all hands pushed over Princess bridge to the boat shed side of the Yarra River. Assemble everything, row in the various events and vice versa everything had to be taken back, loaded safely on the truck win loose or draw before any play time.

We always came home on Sundays, same procedure at Ballarat only there was a push of about one mile yet everyone was keen to be in it and raring to go for next time. Nagambie was a good trip also and it was strictly amateurs, pay your own way and a trophy for a win. The trucks "railway" and boats were usually returned to Bendigo siding by Tuesday when all hands had to be on deck to unload and transport boats and gear to the rowing club. However, the boys and girls and others are still around supporting the amateur sport of rowing.

Another very important aspect of railway transport was the delivery of coal to the gas works siding and coal stage which was situated on a spur line off the Swan Hill line about mid way between the Bridge St and Thunder St level crossings along side the creed viaduct. The gas works had a railway track from the siding to the gas works and they had a lorry or truck with railway wheels, horse drawn which they would back into the coal stage and unload the coal and transport to the gas works to be shovelled into the retorts to make the gas. It was one of the toughest, hottest and dirtiest jobs around and you had to be very fit and willing to stick at that job.

The railway transport in those days, 1920 - 1930 era onwards, passengers and goods trains ran to Marong, Bridgewater, Inglewood and Korong Vale a very busy rail centre, Goornong, Elmore, Rochester and Echuca, Raywood, Miliamo, Pyramid Hill, Kerang and Swan Hill. The porter would call the names of the stations in that rotation as the trains were getting ready to leave and of course the Bendigo - Melbourne and in between stopping stations.

Another part of the railway history worth a mention was the Beehive and Myers stores sent travellers usually a lady and a gent to the country towns, they would set up their wares also transported in cane and wicker hampers in the local hall or a large room in the hotel where they would stay and take orders from the country folk and of course those orders would be forwarded by rail so you can see the railway system played a very important part in the life of the community all around.

Another thought has just come to me re the railway transport of the earlier days; there was a branch line out to the freezing works, as it was known by name. They killed and processed mostly lamb for the local and export market. That site was taken over later by Mayfair products and is at present an industrial site in Bendigo East.

The train also conveyed passenger, goods to Boort, Quambatook, Cannie, Lalbert and into the Mallee Country when the Mallee was being opened up particularly by soldier settlement after the first world war, 1914 - 1918.

Mallee roots, for fire wood, became a very big part of railway transport to Melbourne, Bendigo and other parts for fire wood (what a beaut fire they made). Also another branch line ran to Kilmore, Seymour to connect with the Sydney line out through Junortoun, Longlea, Axedale and Heathcote. The viaduct bridge over the Campaspe at Axedale I believe was one of the longest in it type on the Victorian Railways (V/Line) today. Other places nearby connected by rail for stock, wheat, oats, hay and fire wood transport were Maldon, Shelbourne, Leichardt, Derby.

Another episode which couples the railway transport though the depression of the 1930's when there would be 100's and perhaps 1,000's of fellows on the roads with their swags and to get from place to place and save walking was what was termed jumping the "rattler" where the swagman or tramps, just like you and I, out of work would go to the railway yards or thereabouts and get aboard a truck with a tarpaulin cover and attempt to remain unseen and get a lift along the track for I don't know where as there was no work to be had. The railway had detectives and Inspectors patrolling the trains to stop this practice. However, some were human and considerate, others departmental and tough. There were always some who made the grade and got a free railway ride. One sad instance, was the case of one very well known Bendigo family. Sidey Bux (Indian decent) jumped the rattler and whilst getting off the train which was still moving at Footscray slipped and his legs went under the wheels and had both amputated. He lived for a number of years, saw the end of the depression and into the good times. He started to do a bit of dealing in scrap metal when the economy became balanced. He bought a lovely horse and a special saddle made to take the two big stumps and rode around on his dealing projects for a number of years. He made quite a success of the business and only passed away in Melbourne 2 or 3 years ago. Some of the family still live in Bendigo.

Another instance with a tragic end to jumping the rattler was another fellow who was in a truck under a tarpaulin on the Swan Hill to Bendigo train and whilst coming into Eaglehawk on the other side of the station was a foot bridge across the line giving access to one of those streets. When he unfortunately lifted the tarp and also his head to have a look where he was just as the train was passing under the bridge and he was killed.

Of course there was always some suffering and misery during the depression of the 1930's.

So much for my memoirs of public transport via cabs and railways!

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