

Victorian History of Railways and Bendigo - linking a State.

Australian railways first became operational in the mid 1850's, some 25 years after the first commercial railway systems were established and proven in England and the U.S.A.

It is difficult nowadays to appreciate both the impact made by the first railways and the size of the technological step forward that steam powered locomotion represented.

The first railways so exceeded the economic expectations of the first railway companies that by the 1840's a "railway mania" had captured the imagination of Europe and North America and line

Building and locomotive production developed in leaps and bounds. This provided not only a massive impetus to the iron and steel industry, but to more powerful new inventions.

The two most prominent were, firstly the invention of the telegraph in the late 1830's and secondly, the application of steam power and iron construction to shipping.

In the early 1850's both N.S.W. and Victoria had decided, through private companies, to commence railways. The initial joint decision was to go ahead with the 5' 3" Irish gauge. N.S.W. changed to the English standard gauge, but, Victoria was too far committed to the Irish standard loco and vehicle purchases and was unable to switch.

From the mid 1850's to the mid 1860's the first lines were established. Most of the private railway companies quickly ran into financial trouble, as line building cost estimates were found to be unrealistically low. Government takeover resulted, making the Australian railway systems virtually unique in a private enterprise controlled world. Besides the gauge multiplicity, the State control of railways has been the other major factor that has given our railway networks their peculiar history.

In 1851, gold was discovered in N.S.W. AND Victoria, the latter being of world wide importance.

Gold fever produced a massive influx of immigrants into Victoria –the population in 1850 was only 76,162, but by 1860 the Victorian population had rocketed to 538,234, 700 percent increase in 10 years. This immigrant arrival rate, coupled with the huge demand for goods, rapidly developed the Port of Melbourne.

The first operational railway in Australia was the Hobson's Bay Company line in Melbourne. –by the late 1850's, the Victorian system had lines from Melbourne to Geelong to Ballarat, and a Melbourne – Bendigo line which was mostly double line track { very progressive for its time and only removed with the advent of the fast rail link with v/locity trains Melbourne to Bendigo in 200 ? }

By the late 1850's the character of gold production had changed. The peak of the production was in 1856 when some 85.2 tons of gold was mined , thereafter production went into a slow decline.

Mining became mechanized , large scale industry rather than thousands of small prospectors working small leases.

People sort alternative livelihoods , and the development of manufacturing , particularly the metal working and engineering was stimulated.

All these factors served to provide a launching platform for Victorian railway development that in the following thirty years gave the system an essential different character to the other States.

The first railways in Victoria were formed by private companies which survived well into the 1870's, but this did not apply to the Geelong and Melbourne Railway Company , which collapsed by 1860 and was taken over by the Victorian Government

The third railway company was the Melbourne – Mount Alexander and Murray River Railway Company, established in 1856 to drive a line inland through to the Bendigo goldfields and on up to the Murray River. By 1857 the company had collapsed and was taken over by the government because of spiralling construction costs. The length of track required before the line could become financially viable was too great to be supported by private investment , especially considering that the line was , from the beginning , double track and passed over first class stone structures. Further , more engineering problems were encountered as the line struck into the hills.

It was taken over by the Board of Land and Works in 1857 , and in 1858 the Board came under the control of the Ministers of the Railway Department , by 1864 , the line from Bendigo to Echuca on the Murray was opened.

By 1874 Ballarat and Bendigo were linked via Maryborough and Castlemaine . By 1876 , the line between Bendigo and Inglewood was open.

Thus by the mid 1870's , Victoria already had a substantial network of lines , and much land had been opened up for agricultural development and population distribution

The Melbourne-Bendigo-Echuca connection was an instant success not only by opening up the river region for economic development , but by rapidly capturing a substantial portion of the river traffic , where wool predominated , throwing out a challenge for cargoes as far north up the Darling as Bourke,

Providing Melbourne merchants with extensive new market opportunities, This created Melbourne business establishments in our regional cities, such as Bendigo and Ballarat. {Myer's began in Bendigo}

Although in the early 1850's the Victorian political scene had been dominated by the pre-gold rush rural interests , by the late 1850's a new wave of commercial and financial interests were in control .

An official Commission of inquiry , sitting in 1856 during the shift in balance of power between the old and the new Melbourne establishments and in response to the Eureka disturbances ---found that of the 7 million pounds in gold recovered in 1856 from the goldfields , between 3 million and 4 million pounds had been gathered in by the commercial interests supplying goods, services and transport to the goldfields..

Bendigo became a major centre for the Railway system , with branch lines to Echuca, Swan Hill, Cohuna, Korong Vale, Robinvale and Sea Lake. A major railway workshops was constructed and a locomotive shed and goods-shed which are renowned for their brickwork and historical value.

Bendigo became a major centre for Vic. Rail which consisted of a number of Branches of responsibility;

Rolling Stock Branch ,

Traffic Branch,

Way and Works Branch,

Workshops Division,

Electrical Branch

Refreshment Branch.

All, providing Apprenticeship training for hundreds of school leavers in Bendigo .{ now gone}

Bendigo became a major marshalling yard for the distribution of wagons in and out of Bendigo – literally employing hundreds of workers , but unfortunately railways became unpopular

In recent times the number of country passengers dropped by one third between 1950 1970 and governments led the railway starvation and dismemberment , using firstly , the Bland Report, the McKinsey Report and the Lonie Inquiry { Victorian Transport Study} With Public infrastructure representing a hundred years of investment sold and service charges raised to reduce debt,

The Railways has always represented a social investment and it is pleasing to see this State Government committed to bring back the passenger service at least.

The Victorian Railways Board { 1975 } replaced the Railways Commissioners in 1973 following the Bland Report , inheriting not only the approximately 6,600 kilometers of track , but also 26,000 employees.

But , the lack of investment in infrastructure :

Apart from the locomotive dieselization program carried out between 1952 and 1965, there were few major innovations of economic substance. { Metro- Loop } The quality of service delivered to customers and the utilization of rolling stock assets appear to have changed significantly for the worse.

The metro –suburban passenger numbers which was 165 million in 1948-49 , declined to 140.8 million in 1968-69, and nose-dived to 89.8 million in 1978-79. Whilst Melbourne's population had doubled in the post-war period

Until the 1870's , Victoria did not have the engineering expertise to establish its own workshops , and all the steam locomotives were imported . But from that time on , the great majority were built by local contractors or the Victorian railways, using a mixture of locally manufactured and imported components.

To ease the pressure on Newport workshops and to provide more convenient facilities for the States northern and western lines workshops were opened at North Ballarat and North Bendigo in 1917.

Consisting of a Boiler Shop, Paint Shop, Carpenter, Coppersmith fitters and its own apprenticeship programs recognized world wide.

Since 1954 , the year all interstate restrictions were lifted , published rail freights have declined by 55 percent in real terms . In fact , the 1975 Victorian Railways report suggested that the railway's published rates were unnecessarily low by comparison with their competitors. And freight forwarders get even cheaper rates..The Hughes and Vale Case of 1954, the High Court ruled that a rail tax was invalid under Section 92 of the Constitution. \this removed the last restriction on interstate transport, and allowed the freight forwarders to use the railways as little more than sub-contractors. As containerization and bulk handling methods improved , particularly in the late 1960's , the interstate freight business became concentrated in the hands of a few freight forwarders.. In place of the 515 stations with attached goods sheds , 35 regional freight centres were established. It failed due to inadequate or insufficient resources to give it a real chance to compete. Further moves of deregulating the grain traffic , and the allowing of B-DOUBLE TRUCKS ON OUR HIGHWAYS WAS DISASTROUS TO OUR COUNTRY RAIL NETWORK. { and country roads }

Victoria , the richest state with the best railways , certainly had the worst roads relative to its density of population and wealth, because so much had been invested in its railways. Rural roads' main transport functions were confined to local needs , taking produce to the nearest railway station or port. The beginnings of the motor age changed all that dramatically.

Victorian Railways had in Harold Clapp an aggressive chairman of the Railway Commissioners who

Was determined to keep VR's finances boyant. He was American-educated { although Melbourne born} and having a clear grasp of what competition could mean. He took road transport on its own terms , and began operating VR's own coach services from 1925 , however he could see that VR could not maintain profitability if private road services were permitted to proliferate and run in competition , each undercutting the other and going progressively bankrupt. Thus in 1927 the Victorian Parliament passed the Motor Omnibus (urban and Country) Act , which provided for the licensing of all bus routes worked by vehicles carrying more than six passengers. Essentially, no licence would be issued for a route competing directly with a railway.

The road hauliers ; victory in the Hughes and Vale and the cases following it only applied to interstate transport . Traffic within state borders remained subject to the anti-competitive restrictions of the 1930's legislation.

However political pressure for its removal became intense. Even groups which had benefited enormously from the construction of loss-making railways ----{ especially farmers and Country Party voters } turned their backs on these same railways they had wheedled out of the tax-payer , since there was now a potential cheaper and more efficient service on offer. { door to door }

Thus , in the early 1970s , a new era of transport was beginning ----it was in transport that the first salvos of the neo-liberal movement were being fired-and the state railways were the targets. Intensifying in the 1980s and triumphing in the 1990's .. Changing politics , technology , increased investment in road transport and a new regulatory environment would ensure that patterns in Victorian transport would be very different from what they had been up till the 1970's

Victorian Railways was the first State to offer its passengers the comforts of air-conditioning, putting its first air-conditioned car into service as early as 1935.

Will the energy usage , which is becoming one of urgency see an emergence of country freight , only **time will tell. But, the unique qualities of railway workers , their skills , their humor and their contribution to the City of Bendigo** should never be forgotten.

Railway men and women have served as Politicians , Mayors, Shire Presidents , Councillors and on numerous Sporting and social Clubs , and have given a real contribution to civic life in our communities.

What hasn't been recognized in our history of the Railways is the dangers associated with working

Shifts , in all weathers, under appalling lighting with kerosene hand-lamps for Shunting Staff and other Employees.

During the Second World War , men where taken out of enlistment in the army to run troop trains.

Shunters and Guards suffered appalling injuries with the use of three linkers connection of carriages And wagons.

Resulting in the Arbitration court handing down a long awaited decision to create a 6 hour 40 minute

Shift for Shunting staff. With a time and one half penalty after that time. ---- for In relation and comparison , the numbers of Shunting Staff , suffered greater losses than our troops during the war.

Penalties did not remove the accident and death rates ----- but technology and investment did with

The advent of auto-coupling , better lighting , dieselization and improved safety.

My first experience with shunting took place in 1954 , when I returned to Bendigo on the railways , working in the marshalling Yard as a Number-Taker . I complained at receiving three pence an hour for working shift –work , whilst the adult shunters and others were paid six pence an hour. My argument being we were all required to work the same hours. { Eventually it did change } But, I met Gubby Allen the A.R.U. yard representative and others , to many to mention here , who have guided my life since.

† Men ,and women who had gone through a depression and world war , who knew the meaning of security in employment , superannuation and comradeship.

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Credits.

Linking a Nation: Australia's Transport and Communication 1788-1970 { Dr Robert Lee of the University of Western Sydney. }

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