

Moving the mail by tram.

In March 1979 I joined the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board as a junior clerk in the traffic branch.

My first job was literally the mail boy collecting and delivering the internal mail around 616 Lt Collins St and 673 Bourke St and also sending it to the depots via satchel. The first task of the day was going to the post office and collecting the daily post. This was usually a large canvas bag full of letters that was taken to the second floor where the receptionist would sort and register them.

Then I would take the lift to the sixth floor and in a carefully planned route visit various offices collecting and distributing internal mail. I had a large bag with a place for each floor and if a letter from a higher floor was received for a lower level office I would place it in the correct slot and deliver it on the way down. The bag was left at a designated spot on each level and I only carried the letters being delivered for that floor and those collected. This was important because the bag could get quite full and heavy at times.

Getting the lift to the top floor required that I travel in the lift driven by Dick (a former tram driver injured in an accident). I wasn't allowed to use the unmanned lift because I was under 18. When caught I would be spoken to and reminded that I was too young to travel alone in the lift! The problem was that Dick was a grumpy old (to me at the time) man who didn't like driving a junior clerk in his lift. He would frequently ignore the call button if he thought I was waiting to travel in his lift.

After the first trip around the buildings I would sort the mail and prepare for a second trip. The second trip had mail for the depots because it would be put into the first satchel of the day. To get across to 673 Bourke St there was a walk though from 616 Lt Collins St on one of the higher floors that went to the next building. Many of the floors and offices were empty in 673 Bourke St, but there was a staff area on the fourth floor with a table tennis table. This was near the caretaker's office. He was also in charge of the men who took the satchels to the various tram lines. The scholars department was on the ground floor with a street front. This area would get quite busy at the start of each school term as parents purchased the passes for their children to travel to and from school.

Upon collection of the mail I would sort it into piles for each depot and insert it into their leather satchel and padlock it for collection by the men who would take it to the applicable tram route and put it on the direct tram to the depot. They would also collect the satchels from the depots from the track boxes at various city locations. These were Tramway green boxes that required a track key to unlock and were used primarily for the holding of satchels between delivery and collection.

I got to put the satchels on the trams to North Fitzroy and East Preston depots at the terminus in Bourke St. This was actually an interesting place with the remains of old cable car track still visible. I also collected the satchels from these depots, sometimes collecting them from the track box or from the tram itself.

The satchels themselves were leather and one of them even had the original name of Hanna St instead of Sth Melbourne depot.

Once the satchels were on the trams I then went back into my little office and rang the depot, always Nth Fitzroy first because it was closer, and told the Depot Master's clerk what tram and run number their satchel was on. They would then go out to meet the tram and collect their satchel.

As the satchels arrived I would open them, checking carefully that all mail was removed and change the flaps about so that the depot name was showing and sort the mail.

On Monday morning it was very important to get the mail to Traffic Wages so they could process the various documents from the depots to ensure timely payment to crews. This was in the days of weekly payroll so speed was of great importance. There were various other important documents depending on the day of the week but the worst was when the Conductor's weekly records came in.

Each depot had a large roll that could be up to a kilo in weight and these needed to be taken up to Revenue Accounting quick smart for processing. Then a couple of days later they would be sent back to the depot for checking ready for the following weeks reissue of the tickets*. However, the return to the depot was even heavier because it was accompanied by a large printout of each ticket outfit's transactions.

*I'll explain more about this process in my next instalment.

Once all the satchels were received and the mail sorted it was another round of the buildings delivering mail. The only difference from previous trips was the immediate delivery of priority mail as noted above. Three trips around the building in the morning before lunch and then after lunch, two more with another set of satchels received and dispatched.

My first location was a little office directly opposite the Doctor's office. It had a chair and a desk as well as a large sorting bench with the various satchels hanging on the wall and two bunches of keys. Each bunch had one key for each satchel's padlock. In the afternoon I needed to use the other bunch of keys to open the second satchel set.

A couple of months after starting, my little office was commandeered for conversion into a Women's toilet and I was moved into the spare space on the foyer of the cashier's office. The cashier was my direct supervisor so utilising spare space in his office area made sense.

Any mail addressed to a person but no location was delivered to the Salaries office on the third floor where they would find their location, readdress the envelope and return it to me on the next round.

Working in 616 Lt Collins St meant I got to see some interesting things that were integral parts of the Tramways Board but no longer exist. I saw the original Radio Centre where the key method of communication was via track telephones. It wasn't until CHOGM in 1981 that the MMTB got handheld portable radios for the line inspectors. The people currently working at Fleet Operations Centre would be amazed at its basic tools and equipment.

The switchboard handled all of the calls for the MMTB with the telephone number 62 0291. You rang this number, either told them your extension or asked to be put through to a specific office and they would transfer your call. However, once a year this was a very hard place to work. The Royal Children's hospital appeal on Good Friday used the number 63 0291 and there were many misdialled calls to answer.

Heating was provided with oil filled heaters and if you were lucky you were allocated a cloth hand towel for your exclusive use that you kept on the heater between uses. This was collected and laundered at regular intervals,

The male toilets each had one cubicle reserved for senior personnel. It was locked and required a key to open. Those were the days.

Cars that parked in the basement of 616 Lt Collins St were lowered by a lift to the basement and then drove onto a turntable where they were pushed around until they faced the direction of the carpark. The reverse turning was required to leave the carpark.

The cashier was responsible for ensuring that postage stamps had PERFINs to identify their origin. <http://www.philatelicdatabase.com/australia-and-dependencies/perfins-of-new-zealand-and-australia/>

This was a task easily delegated to the junior clerk but done under supervision because the stamps were valuable Tramway property.

There was a manual timeclock for signing on and off each day. You pulled the handle down and the paper was timestamped where you signed. The working day was 0800 to 1636. The line would start forming about 1633 hours with no signing off permitted before 1635 hours. This was earlier than other offices to allow people to get on their tram earlier thus saving space for other commuters later in the afternoon. However, if a senior person saw people gathering too early they would be told to return to their work location until the proper sign off time.

If a person was late there was often a final 0800 timestamp available because the last person to sign on would again pull the handle and jam the pencil in it meaning one more person could sign on in a timely manner. Sometimes there might even be two signatures in the same timestamp!





These pictures were taken from E-bay and show the standard design of the satchels with reversible flaps. However, the Northcote Bus Depot was never part of the MMTB and I have no idea where this would have been used. There was also a metal rod that went over the flap and between the three metal loops with the padlock securing the rod to the top loop.

Your occupation determined your payroll number.

The MMTB had three wages offices.

Traffic wages that handled drivers and conductors.

Civil branch that handled manual workers, linesmen, mechanics, cleaners etc.

Salaries that handled Officers and clerical staff.

Each occupational group had its own range of payroll numbers as follows.

Traffic staff, i.e. drivers and conductors used numbers 1-6,999. These were further divided up as follows.

Numbers 3,700-4,999 were reserved for and exclusively allocated to women.

During the 1980s a tram driver was transitioning from male to female and at the appropriate time, and with her permission, her number was changed to a female number.

Numbers from 6,000-6,999 were used to designate male conductors recruited from the United Kingdom during the 1960s. The highest number I remember was in the 6,2xx range.

Numbers not set aside as listed above were available for any man who commenced as a conductor and were allocated by the employment section upon acceptance of a job offer.

If a person left and later returned they would almost certainly be issued with a new number and the old number was crossed out on their record card and the new one written in red ink. With some people, especially vacation conductors, it was quite common to see four or five different numbers on their cards.

Civil branch used numbers 10,000-19,999. There was further division within these numbers according to your role, i.e. tradesman; unskilled labourer etc. but I cannot remember how they were allocated.

Salaries used numbers 30,000 onwards although the highest I can remember was in the range of 33,000. Strictly speaking very few people were on an actual salary but were paid an hourly rate and especially in traffic branch could do overtime and of course weekend work was the norm with associated penalty rates.

If a person changed occupation their payroll number also changed. The most common reason was promotion from tram or bus driver to Depot Starter, although their formal title was Ticket Examiner, Relief Depot Starter with the unfortunate acronym TERDS. And yes, that is how it was printed on their pay envelope.

In the early 1990s the payroll offices were combined and everybody issued with a six digit number. Some people had numbers added to the beginning or end of their original number whilst others were issued completely new numbers. It was the end of the MMTBs approach

to payroll numbers. These new numbers were generic with no indication of occupation or gender.