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After being one of the familiar sights of Melbourne for 55 years, the cable trams will vanish from our streetscape. When the old Melbourne Tramway and Omnibus Company surrendered the lease of the cable tramways in 1916, all records of operation were destroyed. Figures which are available, however, suggest that from the 11th November, 1885, until the 30th June, 1916, the cable trams carried 1,640,000,000 passengers, while since then the records of the Cable Tramways Board and the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board reveal, the Chairman of the board (Mr. H. H. Bell) said yesterday, that from the 1st July, 1916, down to the present day the cable tramways have dealt with just over 2,000,000,000 passengers, or a grand total for the 55 years of 3,640,000,000. Curiously enough, while the Melbourne cable trams go, those which served as the pattern for them, the San Francisco cable trams, remain, and so make Melbourne's citizens more than a bit sceptical of the amusement alleged to have been felt in recent years by visitors from the United States over the spectacle of a mode of transport which now has but few examples in the world.

Reviewing the history of transport in Melbourne, Mr. Bell remarked that nowadays it was almost incredible that 60 and 70 years ago the advantages to be gained by the provision of a street transport system had not been visualised with any clarity. When the Melbourne Omnibus Company was wound up voluntarily in 1872, and became the Melbourne Tramway and Omnibus Company, the intention was to construct tramways within the city and inner suburbs. No unseemly haste was indulged in. Ten years elapsed before the necessary Parliamentary authority was secured, and another three years went by before the first line, that from Spencer street to Richmond, commenced running. The Tramways Act authorised the company, with the consent of the municipalities concerned, to lay down tramways.

Optionally, the Act gave the municipalities the right to construct the tramways themselves. Twelve municipalities came to the conclusion that that option should be exercised, and to give effect to that decision a Tramways Trust was formed, seven of the representatives of which were from the Melbourne City Council and one each from the remaining 11 councils. The Trust had to raise sufficient funds to pay for the construction of the tramway tracks and the engine-houses, and was under the obligation to complete such work by the end of 1893. Actually, this work, at a cost of £1,660,736 (which included the expenditure by the Melbourne Tramway and Omnibus Co.), was ended by October, 1891, the earlier completion being inspired by the success of the first lines opened. In addition, the Trust had to give the company a lease of the tracks as from the 1st July, 1884, when the liability for the interest on the loans raised in London for the construction of the tramways commenced. In return, the company found the capital for the rolling stock and for the equipment of the lines and engine-houses, and had to pay to the Trust annually the interest upon the loans, together with a sum sufficient for a redemption fund. On the expiry of the lease in July, 1916, it had to hand over the tramways in good working order to the Trust. The various lines were opened to traffic in the following order :—

Richmond, November 11, 1885
 Fitzroy, October 2, 1886
 Victoria Street, November 22, 1886
 Clifton Hill, August 10, 1887
 Nicholson Street, August 22, 1887
 Brunswick, October 1, 1887
 Carlton, December 21, 1887
 Brighton Road, October 11, 1888
 Prahran, October 24, 1888
 North Melbourne, March 3, 1890
 West Melbourne, April 18, 1890
 South and Port Melbourne, June 17, 1890
 Windsor, October 27, 1891.

By the end of 1891 there were 41 route miles of cable tramway in operation,

and the length of the wire rope in motion under the various roads was equal to about 95 miles, the ropes varying in length from 16,000 to 32,000 feet. With several small additions, the cable system at its peak extended to 46 miles of route. While the route to Clifton Hill was the fourth to be opened, the programme of conversion commenced by the Tramways Board in 1925 decreed that it should be the last to go and so close an era in the transport history of the metropolis.

Mr. Bell said that he recollected as a very small boy the excitement over the opening of the Richmond line, and how the trams were packed all day long in the early weeks by curious citizens and their families eager to ride on the new vehicles. When the St Kilda section began running, a trip to the beach on the dummy was reckoned by children the main treat of the summer. Sound construction with the best of materials went into both tracks and rolling stock. When taken up 40 years later, blocks were found to be almost as good as when they had been put down, while No. 1 tram, after running something like a million and a half miles, had only been recently taken off so that it might find a place in the museum. Naturally there were now none of the original employees who had opened the cable service left, but Conductor G. E. Andrew, who joined the Clifton Hill depot on the 4th June, 1903, was still working, and Conductor G. Bresnahan, who joined the Northcote staff on the 20th September, 1905, was still on that service. The oldest gripman still on duty is B. McMahan, who began work on the Clifton Hill line on the 21st March, 1905. Conductor A. Ogden has worked also on that route for 35 years. The public, Mr. Bell was certain, would be glad to know that none of the old employees of the cable service would lose work through the closing down of the trams, and neither would the amount of their retiring gratuities be affected.

Referring particularly to the Northcote line, Mr. Bell said that that municipality had a transport history all its own, beginning modestly enough with a single cab in 1874. Running to the corner of Swanston and Lonsdale streets, the fare each way was 6d., and the driver enlivened the journey with vigorous blasts on a bugle. Two other cab services, one to the city and the other to Fitzroy, came into existence before the Melbourne Tramway and Omnibus Company instituted a regular horse bus service in 1880. Following upon the commencement of the cable tram service from Clifton Hill in 1887, the Northcote Council secured the right to run tramways and then gave a company a lease for 30 years. When the public announcement of this project was made, there was a rush to purchase frontages on High Street, and within a week advanced by from £5 to £10 a foot. The gamble was such that many of the lots changed hands repeatedly in the course of a few weeks. In the end, this particular portion of the metropolitan land boom crashed as decisively as other portions, and eventually High Street frontages were sold for as many shillings per foot as previously they had brought pounds.

Work on the tram lines was begun in 1889, and the first tram ran on the 18th February, 1890, after £77,998 had been spent on the permanent way, road construction, engine-house plant, land and rolling stock. Due chiefly to the depression which followed the collapse of the land boom, the tramway failed signally to realise the optimistic expectations of its promoters. By 1893 there was an accumulated loss of £6,176, and the undertaking closed down on the 7th July of that year, the engine-house, plant and rolling stock being taken over by a bank. A private individual re-opened the line in April, 1894, and worked it until November, 1897, by which time renewals were required. The prevailing conditions were wholly against profitable operation,

and consequently the line lay derelict until 1900, when it was acquired by the Northcote Council for £3,500, and renovated at a cost of £12,285. With the view of taking a lease, the tramway was run for six months by two private individuals. Apparently they came to the conclusion that the prospects were not sufficiently encouraging, for they abandoned the venture. Recognising that times were improving, another individual had his offer of £250 a year for seven years accepted by the Council, and he profitted handsomely over the transaction. When his lease expired in 1908, two men offered a rental of £1560 per annum for five years and £1825 per annum for the balance of the period, and this proposal was accepted by the Council. Northcote was now increasing rapidly both in population and property, and in these circumstances the new lessees of the tramway found that they had secured the equivalent of a prosperous gold mine. Beginning with a revenue of £200 per week, it increased steadily until by December the weekly takings were averaging £402 per week. "I have no doubt," remarked Mr. Bell, "that they were extremely disappointed when the council did not renew the lease; but what they lost Northcote gained, for the tramway remained a profitable municipal venture until taken over by the Tramways Board on the 1st February, 1920. So, after all its many vicissitudes, the Northcote cable tramway ended as a valuable municipal asset, the profit for the last year of operation alone having amounted to just on £4,500."

"There is, of course," commented Mr. Bell, "a vast difference in the running costs to-day compared with those in force while the Northcote line was a separate organisation. Wages sank to a very low level indeed during the years of the depression, while the hours were long. Even early in the present century gripmen and conductors worked

54 hours per week for wages of 50/ and 49/ respectively. In the closing years of last century, on the cable system as a whole, there were no free uniforms (the sole item of uniform was a cap, which the employee had to pay for himself), no holidays, no sick pay, no limitation on the spread of hours, no subsidy for the Tramway Benefit Society, no retiring or death gratuities, and no time and a half for Sundays and public holidays. All these privileges and many other improvements in conditions have come to the tramwaymen over the years, while the wage to-day for drivers and conductors with 10 years service for a week of 44 hours is, exclusive of overtime, £4/19/ per week. The wage has not only doubled during the last 35 years, but nearly all the various benefits, including sick pay, holidays with pay, the Benefit Society subsidised on a £ for £ basis, substantial retiring and death gratuities, limitation of the spread of hours, overtime, time and a half for Sundays and public holidays, free uniforms, and compassionate gratuities in certain cases, make the lot of the tramwaymen to-day a vastly different thing to what it was then. Moreover, the way to promotion is open to all, as the Tramways Board fills vacancies in the executive ranks from its staff instead of from the outside.