

MY UNCLE BILL

THE TRAMWAY MAN



The Life and Times
of a
Melbourne Tramway Family

RICHARD GILBERT

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The author, right, with his fact checker and proof-reader,
Uncle Bill's son, Laurie Simpson.

Richard Gilbert
Clunes, Victoria
February 2014

INTRODUCTION

I have been a member of the Ballarat Tramway Museum for 42 years, being interested in the provincial tramways, but I have never delved fully into my family tree to research those others who were employed by the tramway authorities in Melbourne.

My 'Uncle Bill', who was really my Grandmother's brother, therefore making him my great uncle, was a tramway man, and he was a keen photographer. He was also interested in electrics (today we would say electronics) and was a sort of party time musician with a banjo and mouthorgan. As a child I remember he would provide entertainment at various family functions. I decided there was a story to research and I have come up with a lot more than expected. I took notes whilst talking with my grandmother and Uncle Bill, himself, over 25 years ago and these have lain around with the intention of preparing this history. Subsequently I have done further research and found quite an involvement in the tramways by my extended family.

Uncle Bill was a keen photographer and took many photos whilst overseas during the First World War and subsequently during his tramway employment and some of these are used in this article. This is the first time these photographs have been seen in the public forum and it now adds to the growing collection of early tramway photographic records in the public domain. I am indebted to Uncle Bill's son, Laurie Simpson, who passed the photographs and certificates on to me when clearing up Bill's estate.

I am also indebted to Laurie for reviewing my original manuscript for this article and correcting dates, names and places along with adding quite vital information from his personal interest and knowledge of the family.

Members of the Simpson family were employed on the cable trams and electric trams and other extended family members had connections with the tramway industry from 1902 to the 1980s.



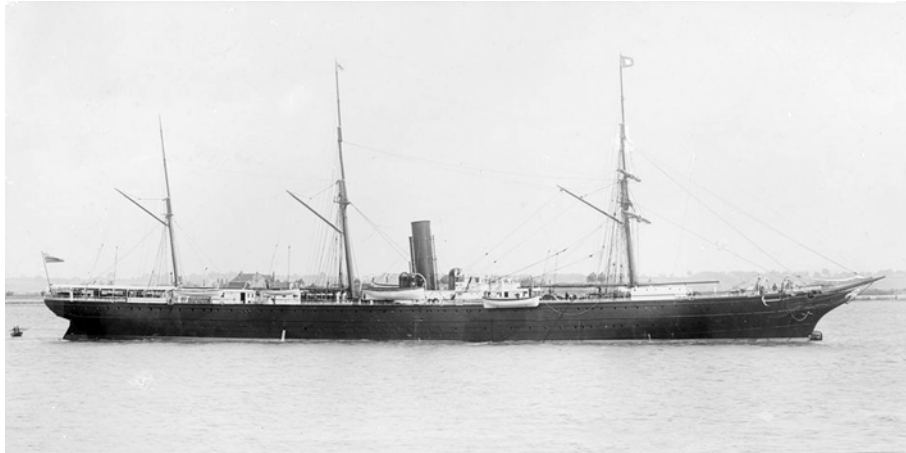
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My Uncle Bill at an early age.

ARRIVAL IN AUSTRALIA

Stephen Charles Robert Simpson was born on 4th August, 1867 in Surrey, England, to parents, Stephen Simpson, a merchant clerk, and Littella Simpson, formerly Blake of Myatta Road, Kennington, Surrey.

He sailed from London on the Orient Steam Navigation Coy's steamer *Chimborazo* in November, 1882, arriving in Melbourne on 21st December of that year.



The Orient Steam navigation Coy's steamer Chimborazo.

Whilst settling into his new country he worked at the Exchange Hotel, Port Melbourne where he met Eleanor Mary Clifford, who was a boarder at the hotel. She was born in Thurles, Tipperary, Ireland, and had migrated with a sister. Both of them worked as barmaids at the hotel. Stephen Charles Simpson and Eleanor Mary Clifford were married at St. Ignatius Church, Richmond, Victoria on 15th January, 1896.

Stephen became a Porter at Spencer Street Station. At this time they were living at Westbank Terrace, Richmond. Their next door neighbour was a Tramway Inspector, Jack Hobbs.

ON THE CABLE TRAMS

Stephen left the Victorian Railways and joined the Melbourne Tramway and Omnibus Company in 1905.

He was employed as a Conductor, as he was considered “not heavy enough” for the job of Gripman. Eventually he was asked to be an Inspector, but declined, as he wasn’t prepared to accept a ‘responsible’ position which could involve working indoors. The family in England had a history of tuberculosis and Stephen always wanted to work in the open air.

Conductor Stephen Simpson.



Stephen and Eleanor started a family. Their first child died in infancy (Mabel Alice Mary in 1897). Their son, Stephen William was born on 16th May 1898 in Hawthorn, Victoria. Their daughter, Maude Elizabeth Eileen, was born on 29th September 1901 also in Hawthorn, Victoria. The family moved to Randolph Street, Hawthorn and later moved to College Street, Hawthorn. Stephen William became known as “William, Willy, Will or Bill”. Maude Elizabeth Eileen became known as “Eileen”.

For the sake of clarity for the reader, the narrative will refer to the participants as:

Stephen Charles Robert Simpson – “Stephen” Simpson

Eleanor Mary Simpson – “Elly or Nelly” Simpson.

Stephen William Simpson – “William, Willie or Bill” Simpson

Maude Elizabeth Eileen Simpson – “Eileen” Simpson.

Stephen continued to work for the tramways while the children grew older and became good students. His son, William Simpson, wanted to become a chemist and started his apprenticeship with a chemist in Kew when he was aged 15. A year later, in August 1914, the Great War broke

out in Europe and the Middle East, and many young men his age, being sixteen, felt it was their duty to enlist. He entered the army medical service and was soon placed on duty in that capacity in many parts of the world. His father, Stephen Simpson, died in July 1918, while William was overseas with the military forces.



*Cable tram staff at Richmond.
Stephen Simpson is third from left, standing.*

Revenue Clerk, Richmond.



Eileen was at home with her parents throughout his absence and becomes the narrator for the basis of the notes written below.

Her father, Stephen Simpson, helped plan the Tearooms for Miss Launders, which opened around 1915. The tearooms were located in Bridge Road immediately between the Richmond Cable Tram Depot and the bridge over the Yarra River. Eileen went to work there in 1918. Tram crews called in to obtain meals, pies, lollies, stationary, etc. She had a big Union Jack flag in the window plus other patriotic flags, as the war was on. She had good sales of Union Jack flags. Eileen would take a meal to her father at the Depot and would sit with him on the grip cars whilst he ate his meal. There were no mealrooms. She would bring along tea in a lemonade bottle. In those times tea was made hot, then placed in the bottle. The horse tram to Hawthorn had ceased to run, but the Victoria Bridge to Kew horse tram was still running. Eileen remembered the horse bus service from Hawthorn Bridge to Camberwell along Riversdale Road.

She travelled on it when she was about 12 years old, riding on the top deck. She also enjoyed riding on Saturday nights, visiting Mr. Hobbs, Tramway Inspector, living in Westbank Terrace, Richmond. The Simpsons by now were living at 6 College Street, Hawthorn.

Eileen also remembers travelling on the horse tram that ran from Victoria Bridge to Kew Cemetery. She would walk to Church Street to catch the tram at the Beehive Hotel.

Bill Simpson in his military uniform.



At the Richmond Cable Tram Depot there were; Mr. Watson, Depot Manager, who eventually transferred to Malvern Depot, Mr. Stephens who worked at the Cash Counter. Mr. Fargher who was a Shunter and the men pushed the trams in and out of the shed. Her father was paid 2 pounds 8 shillings (£2/8/-) per week. It was paid as 2 gold sovereigns and 4 shilling pieces. Out of his wages he had to pay eleven shillings (11/-) a week rent. At that time a house could be bought for 200 pounds (£200). As a Conductor he had to supply one pound in change himself.

Eileen left the Tearooms and commenced working at Duband's Clothing Company in Flinders Street, where the former Herald Sun building now stands.

On 1st June 1918 her father strained his heart lifting a box of Bell Punches and was 'off work' for a month. It was agreed he could go back as a Conductor. He was due to recommence on the Monday and spent the Sunday pressing his uniform and cleaning the buttons with Brasso. He died of a massive heart attack in the back yard of his home after getting up on the Monday morning of 15th July 1918. His death was a great shock to his wife, daughter and friends. Of interest is that the kitchen clock stopped at 11:30am, as did his watch, whilst the funeral party arrived at the Booroondarra Cemetery, Kew, at 11:30am. A procession of cable tram crews accompanied the funeral procession from 6 College Street, Hawthorn to the cemetery.

WITH THE TRAMWAYS BOARD

William returned from the war to his widowed mother, Nellie, and sister, Eileen, and became the breadwinner for their small family. When he was discharged from the army they moved to 45 Barry Street, South Yarra, and after many varied attempts to find work that would appeal to him and support his family, he approached old friends of his late father, and was subsequently employed by the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board in 1921.



Trammies at Kew Depot in 1924. William Simpson is in the front row, 5th from left.

He commenced work at Kew depot as a Conductor. He trained for the job in his own time, as there was no pay provided for trainees and he wore his own clothing, as the uniform was not provided until the prospective employee had passed the entrance examination and was fully employed. However, a tramway cap was issued to allow the prospective employee free travel on the trams.



*Left:
The Motorman and
Conductor of tram 64, Kew
Depot.*

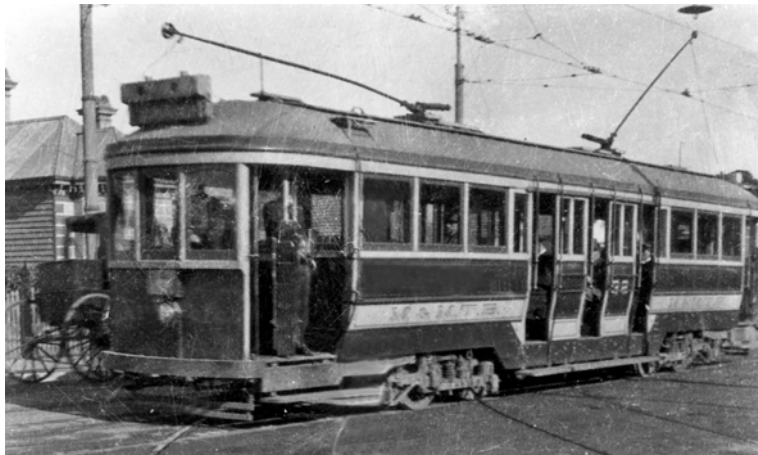
Photo: William Simpson



*Right:
Motorman 'Matey' Clark
and Conductor Kemp of
Kew Depot.*

Photo: William Simpson

*Trammies in Barkers Road Cutting in 1922.
Photo: William Simpson*



*C class tram 32 in Barkers Road outside
Kew Depot in 1924.*

Photo William Simpson



*Conductor William Simpson with B
class tram 24 at Mont Albert
terminus in 1922.*

*The tram class letter system was
adopted after the newly formed
Tramways Board took over the
municipal council tramways in
1919.*

The Tramways Board urgently required drivers at the time and 48 hours training was provided in the employees own time. This was usually taken up by operating one trip after a days' work of conducting, over a succession of days. He could recall learning to drive trams at the Hawthorn Depot Driving School, and about that said "A Mr. Barker taught us to drive the little Meadowbank trams". Other trams were referred to as 'jumping ginnies' and 'pony wheelers'.



A Conductor and E class tram 39 at Kew Depot in 1922.

Photo: William Simpson

William was working at Kew at the time of the level crossing accident on 4th August, 1923, at 11:30pm, when tram No. 65 was struck by locomotive F187, which was hauling the Deepdene train on the Outer Circle railway, at the Whitehorse Road crossing. He recalled the tram driver was Frank Wessell and the conductor was George Cartwright. It was an open level crossing and the regulations stated the tram conductor flagged the tram across the railway when all was clear. The damaged tram was taken to the Malvern Depot Workshops, which was at the rear of where the new section of the Malvern Depot now is. The De La Salle College, at the front of the workshops was eventually demolished, as was the workshops, to allow the new Malvern Depot to be built.

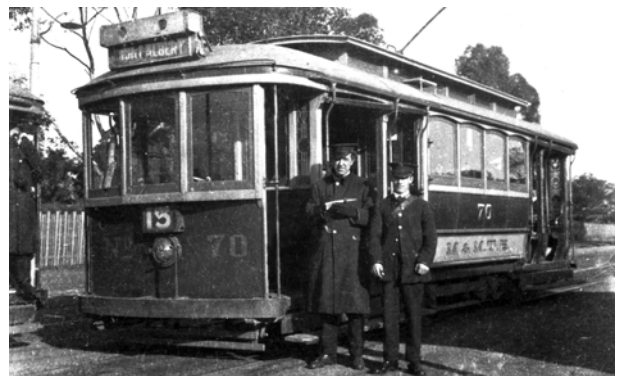


Tram 65 at the rear of Kew Depot after the Deepdene level crossing accident. This tram was repaired and in 1928 sold to operate on the Geelong system. It was transferred to Ballarat in 1936. This tram is currently stored off site by the Ballarat Tramway Museum.

Photo: William Simpson

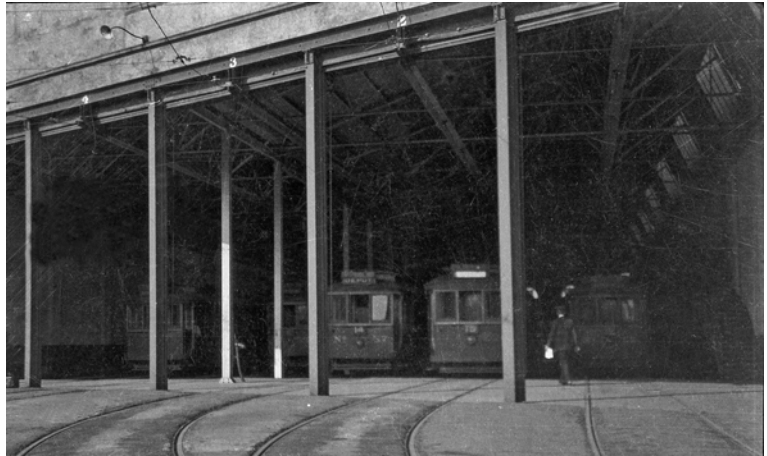
J class tram 70 and its crew.

Photo: William Simpson



The Kew Running Shed in 1924.

Photo: William Simpson



William Simpson was transferred to Malvern Depot on 16th May, 1926, and in his own words “commenced there the day the electric trams started running in St. Kilda Road”. William enjoyed long walks and if he was due to start his roster before the tram service commenced, he would walk to work from Barry Street, South Yarra to Kew Depot, a distance of around six kilometres, and later the lesser distance of around five kilometres to Malvern Depot.



Eileen Simpson.

In the first of the early shifts he would arise at 2:00am and his mother would also rise to get his breakfast.

Around this time, Eileen changed jobs and left Duband’s Clothing Company in Flinders Street and commenced with another tailoring business, located in Brunswick, near where the Sarah Sands Hotel stands. She travelled by cable tram to the city then the Brunswick cable tram to complete the journey. She was well known by the cable tram crews on the Chapel Street route and many of them rang bells when passing Barry Street if Eileen was at the front of the house.

At this time, his sister Eileen met William Rawson Duthie, who lived in the South Yarra area. Of interest is that his father, William Nicholson Duthie, was employed in a supervisory position at the Toorak Cable Winding House in the early part of the twentieth century. The Duthie family entered the hotel trade, and therein is another story.

Eileen subsequently married William Rawson Duthie circa 1923 and they had two daughters, June Edith Duthie and Gloria Mancell Duthie. June Duthie eventually married Richard Alfred Gilbert and had a son and a daughter. The author of this article, Richard Gilbert, is the son of June Duthie. Gloria Duthie married an American Serviceman, Ed Portillo and has lived in the U.S.A since 1946.

William had an interesting experience in the 1920s whilst walking home after the last tram had run for the night, when a big black car pulled up and the driver said “do you work up at the

Depot". William replied "yes" and the driver said "get in. I'll give you a lift home". During the journey the smartly dressed small man said "do you know my brother, Stan, he works there. Stan Taylor". "Yes", said William, "then you are Squizzy Taylor?". Squizzy Taylor was a 'gangster', albeit Australian style unlike some of the famous American folk heroes, and he was gunned down in a house at Carlton in 1927.

This where the story of the hotels blends in, as the Duthie family at the time had the Market Hotel at Prahran and 'Squizzy' was a good customer there. He would turn up well dressed with a fur collar and a little hat and was a real gentleman. Arthur Alexander was 'Squizzy's' friend and accompanied him to the hotel.

In 1926 William Simpson met his future wife who worked in the city of Melbourne and travelled to work by tram. She was a Milliner and worked at a very fashionable shop in Bourke Street. Later that year, on 20th August 1926, they were married at St. Aloysius' Church, Caulfield. Her name was Phoebe Elizabeth Turnbull and she was born at White Hills, a suburb of Bendigo, on 25th May 1902. Her parents were Charles Turnbull, born 15th January 1861 and Mary Josephine Marsh born 2nd January 1868.

William and Phoebe had 3 children:

William Charles Robert – called 'Bob', born at Windsor, 5th January 1928.

Stephen Laurence – called 'Laurie', born at Windsor, 3rd March 1929.

Phoebe Eileen – Called 'Eileen', born at Melbourne, 17th September 1935

The family home at 7 Childers Road, Malvern.



In the early 1930s William became eligible to buy a home through the War Service Commission. He decided that, as he was stationed at the Malvern Depot, it would make life easier to move to that area. He purchased a house at 7 Childers Road, Malvern for 400 pounds (£400), with a loan from the War Service Commission. During the great depression he managed to accommodate his mother, his wife and three children and sister Eileen with her husband and two daughters, all living together, whilst he, being on a government job, never missed a days' work and he provided the necessities for the large family group living there. His mother, Nelly, lived with him until her death at home in Malvern on 12th August 1956.

During the war years the tram lighting was subdued and most street lighting was blacked out. In Bill Simpsons' words, "the trams had the internal light bulbs painted in dark paint and there were no headlights. The conductors struggled with their duties as did the drivers. Around this time the shiftwork and strain of life from both wars, and life through the depression, took its toll and the medical section of the tramways agreed with William that light duties were a better option in consideration of his health.

William left Malvern depot in 1944 and worked his final years of employment at the Preston Tramway Workshops. He was employed in the electrical workshop, as this type of work interested him. He had, in early years, made crystal sets to allow him and the family to listen to the new form of home entertainment – radio broadcasts.

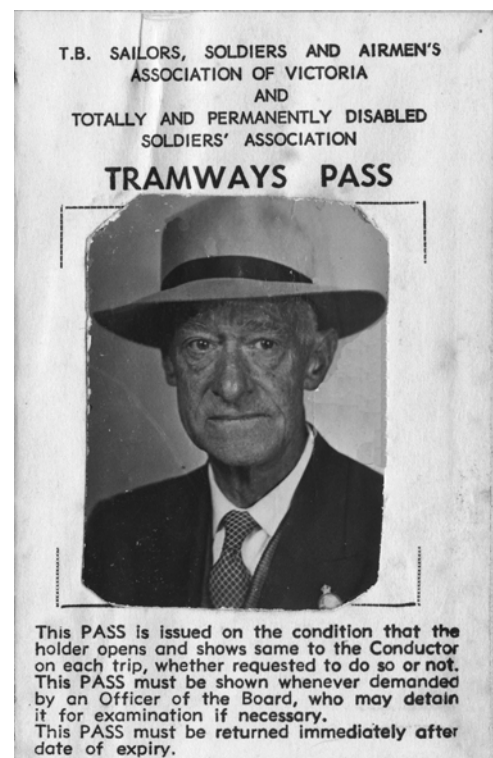


William Simpson at work in the Electrical Shop at Preston Workshops.

During his 15 years at the workshops, one particular project saw his involvement in making the ‘buzzers’ for the W class trams and tramway buses. He retired from the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board on 3rd April 1959 and had a great and happy retirement. William’s wife, Phoebe, predeceased him by 9 months in July 1984, aged 82 years. William Simpson passed away on 30th April 1985 aged 87 years.

‘Uncle Bill’ had a great life and was enjoyable to mix with whenever I visited him and Phoebe. His whimsical humour, musical entertainments and interest in his job was a product of the times when life was simpler and he would enthral me with his stories.

William Simpson’s tramways pass issued after retirement.





Melbourne & Metropolitan
Tramways Board

Certificate
of Service

Presented to
Stephen William Simpson.

on retirement.

*In grateful recognition of 37 years
of loyal service to the Board.*



Chairman



Deputy Chairman



Member



Secretary



Date 3-4-1959



Uncle Bill, in his seventies, salutes a farewell.