

CHAPTER 11

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

- 1882 Rail services reach Donald.
1883 Rail services reach Wycheproof.
1886 Rail services reach Warracknabeal.
Application made for extension Donald-Wimbirchip.
Wycheproof-Warracknabeal via Morton Plains line promoted.
1888 Wycheproof-Birchip survey completed.
1890 Extension Donald-Corack included in 1890 Railway Bill.
Parliament establishes Railway Standing Committee (RSC).
1890 Railway Bill not passed by Parliament.
1892 3rd March-Construction commenced on Donald-Birchip extension.
5th Dec-Parliament officially approved extension works.
1893 10th Feb-Last spike of construction works driven at Birchip.
28th Mar-Official opening of Donald-Birchip extension.
Mr M. Sullivan first Station Master arrived.
March-Deputation seeking Birchip-Marlbed extension.
1st May-Post Office transferred from Lockwood's to Rly.Stn.
-Telegraph services commenced at RS.
10th May- Testimonial accorded John Clark-League Secretary.
1894 Parliament abolished the Special rate on Don-Bp extension.
1895 April-Curyo district applies for Birchip-Cronomby Tanks extension. Wimbirchip officially renamed Birchip.
1896 Water Trains used to bring supplies to Birchip district.
1898 18th Aug-Parliament passed Birchip-Cronomby Tanks(Woomelang) extension.
Aug-Work commenced on Birchip-Woomelang extension.
Oct-Birchip Shire expedition to Mildura.
1899 Cronomby Tanks renamed Woomelang by Railways Department.
18th Sep-Birchip-Woomelang extension officially opened.
Nov-Guarantors Donald-Birchip line prosecuted re land claim.
1900 July-RSC Recommended construction of Woomelang-Mildura line.
1901 17th Oct-Parliament authorized construction Woomelang-Mildura line,
1902 Dec-Deputation seeking Charlton-Birchip line.
1903 27th Oct-Mildura line officially opened.
1907 Minapre renamed Lascelles.
1909 20th Aug-Widespread floods disrupted most country services.
1910 Application renewed for Charlton-Birchip line.
1911 Feb-Floods washed line away at Watchupga and Kinnabulla.
March-New Birchip Station buildings opened.
1914 8th July-RSC rejected provision of Warracknabeal-Birchip line.
1919 April-Kinnabulla-Minyip League formed to obtain line.
1920 21st Sep-RSC decides against Kinnabulla-Minyip line.
1923 25th Aug-Refreshment rooms opened at Birchip.
1927 Dec-RSC deemed it not expedient to construct Charlton-Birchip line.
1929 Nov-Liquor licence granted to Refreshment rooms.
1930 Dec-Floods washed line away at Kinnabulla.
1937 Motor train service Woomelang-Birchip commenced.
1939 Bulk handling of grain commenced at Birchip and district silos.
1950 Dec-Eight weeks strike by railmen ended.
1953 Diesel locomotives in use on Mildura line passenger service.
1962 Standard Gauge line Melbourne-Sydney in operation.
1965 Last steam train withdrawn from Mildura line service.
1966 13th Feb- Closure of Birchip Refreshment Rooms.
14th Feb- Introduction of decimal currency for fares/ freight charges.
First GJX bulk grain wagons in use.
1968 Wheat quotas introduced.
1970 Second class travel abolished, Economy class introduced.
1972 Sunlight service to Mildura ceased. Vinelander service started.
1973 Railways Board established. Commissioners role abolished.
Air-conditioned sleeping cars provided on Mildura line.
1974 Freight Centre concept introduced.
1975 Passenger services withdrawn from Kinnabulla,Curyo,Watchupga.
1976 Railways Board adopt "VicRail" as name of department.
1977 18th July-Buffer service introduced on Vinelander.
1978 21st Nov-Donald Freight Centre opened.
1980 New record of grain movement for year of 3.705,000 tonnes.
1983 Two way radio control introduced.
30th June-VicRail ceased to operate. Public Transport Authority(now Public Transport Corporation) established.
Metropolitan division became Metro.Transit Authority. Country services known as V/Line.
1985 Feb-Donald Freight Centre closed.
1986 Birchip awarded prize for Best Station in Western Region.
1990 Train Orders system using radio control introduced on Mildura line.
3rd June- Coach service introduced on Mildura line.
14th Dec-Birchip station demanned.
17th Dec- Graeme Taylor commenced V/Line ticket agency.
Coach service introduced on Mildura line.
1991 Birchip Shire leased Railway Station buildings.
Sep-S and J. White establish electrical business at station.

CHAPTER 12

ODD SPOTS

Runaway Trike

During the late 1930's, Repairer McGowan and his family were stationed at Karyrie. They used the rail trike to travel to Birchip for Mass. On occasions, Ganger O'Connor of Birchip would use his motorized trike to bring the family to Mass and later to return them to their home.

On one occasion, the *Good Samaritan* had returned the family to Karyrie and began to push the trike to start it for the return trip to Birchip. Just as the motor fired, O'Connor lost his footing and stumbled. The riderless trike careered off. Being a Sunday, no staff were on duty at Birchip or other stations along the way. The trike, unburdened by any load, passed through Birchip at a fast rate of knots, raced down through Morton Plains, into Watchem and, as long as the fuel lasted, would continue its headlong southern flight. However word was passed by phone to the resourceful men of Massey. They placed wheat bags on the track and brought the fugitive to an ungainly but undamaged halt.

Jumping the Rattler

During the Depression years of the 1930's large numbers of unemployed men travelled the countryside searching for work. Sunraysia area was a favourite destination at fruit picking time. The long distance encouraged many to seek a free ride on the trains destined for that area. *Jumping the rattler* became an accepted sport and mode of transport. It also provided a challenge to dodge the many railway detectives and local police along the way. Hiding under tarpaulins, becoming camouflaged amongst the freight and even riding under the passenger cars were favourite ruses. Riding in open empty waggons was by far the most popular form of travel during the summer months.

On many occasions literally hundreds of itinerants were off-loaded, at Birchip and other stations along the way. Temporarily deprived of free transport and chased out of town by the local police, they humped their blueys northwards to the next strategic boarding point. In the case of Birchip, Kinnabulla, nine and a half miles distant, provided an excellent opportunity to rejoin the rattler. Walking en route to that point, calls were made at every farm and requests made for butter, dripping or even axle grease. At Kinnabulla a

slight rise, known as Crosbie's hill, lay just north of the station. The train would have to slow down to negotiate the loop points and then the driver would open the throttle to climb the hill. At this strategic spot, the would-be travellers greased the rails with the dripping, butter and grease they had collected on the way. With the wheels of the locomotive spinning furiously without sufficient traction to climb the rise, the men emerged from their hiding places alongside the track and had little difficulty in boarding the train. The fittest always went first and helped the succeeding waves of men to get them and their swags aboard.

Mouse Plagues

Periodic mouse plagues have always been a feature of country Victoria. The mallee area is no exception. In fact it is probably the worst area of infestation during years of plague proportions. The years 1917, 1931, 1940 and 1980 stand out in this regard. In the first three instances grain was then being handled in bags and stacks were built alongside the loops for later outloading.

Despite the stacks being enclosed within mouse-proof fences, it did not keep the hordes of mice out and in a very short time they would collapse the stacks across the loop line and sometimes even manage to have the main line obstructed. At Watchupga, during the 1940 plague, mice built up in such numbers that the train was unable to start up until the gang removed the mountain of dead ones killed by the spinning wheels of the locomotive.

Driver with a Mission

The late Jack (Pedro) Foletti, who so tragically lost his life in a level-crossing accident at Irymple, was one of the most colourful personalities in the rail industry in north-west Victoria. Jack was an engine driver stationed at Donald. He regularly drove the fast goods out of Mildura on Saturday mornings. He was also an avid supporter of the Donald Football Club and well known to all train controllers.

The fast goods from Mildura was always assured of being on time, or a little ahead of schedule, if Donald was competing on that day. This fact was well-known to train controllers. On occasions when shunting and other operations delayed Jack's southward progress on football Saturdays, he would invariably request the officer on duty at Birchip to advise train control that the locomotive was under stress and seek permission to off-load non-urgent waggons into the loop at Birchip. Permission granted, Jack would take off with maximum throttle, to the point of stalling the engine, and head

with his lightened load for home base at Donald. A cheery blast on the whistle announced his homecoming in time for the most important event of the week.

Real Horse-power Locomotion

The Birchip Advertiser of 20th May 1903 recorded this incident in the following terms- "During the strike, the experiment was tried by Mr Lilburne of Birchip of haulage by horses of a consignment of goods from Donald to Birchip along the railway line. Naturally many obstacles, apart from cattle pits etc., were found in the strict observance of 'staff' regulations and officials always punctilious in their observance of their duties were more than ever pronounced in their exactions, and for once forgot to 'wink their eye'. However, these obstacles being swept aside, the journey was undertaken with a light draught horse attached to a truck carrying 6 tons 18 cwt of goods (chaff and oats). The trip occupied 10 hours. The cattle pits were negotiated by means of a barge gangway carried for the purpose and no difficulty of any consideration was experienced in getting through. One very appreciable advantage of the experiment was the reduction of the price of chaff by 20/- a ton".

Irregular Train Stop

In the Watchupga area a little poem was associated with an unusual incident of a train stoppage. It ran:-

*There was a man named D...
He was a man of fame,
He did many silly things,
He even stopped a train.*

During one of the very wet years of the 1950's, the local identity became bogged in his car on one of the roads near the railway line. In his state of agitation, D... flagged down a passing train with a bag and asked for a "push" to get him out of the bog. An altercation ensued with heads being hit in the process by the abovementioned bag, on the one hand, and allegedly, a mail bag on the other. Eventually the train moved off leaving D... still bogged and in the course of time, facing a session in the local court. Claim and counter-claim was sorted out by the Magistrate with D... suffering indignity and a hefty fine for his actions which he claimed was only to seek help to get out of the bog.

Patrol Hazard

Well-known Birchip born railway patrolman, Max Neville, of the Woomelang gang was patrolling between Ouyen and Woomelang on his motorized trike when he fell victim to an unusual wild life hazard.

Quietly motoring along at 15mph on the track near

Gypsum, Max observed an emu coming out of the scrub and intent on crossing the line just in front of him. Concentrating on the bird, Max failed to see a second emu bearing down directly on him. Without warning the second bird crashed into the trike, derailing it and sending Max sprawling onto the jagged bluestone ballast. Skinned, bruised, bloodied and battered, Max regained his composure sufficiently to survey the scene. He found the emu trapped beneath the trike at the side of the track. He lifted the trike off the struggling emu only to find that it had broken a leg and couldn't run off. He dealt with the stricken bird as humanely as possible, got the trike back onto the track and slowly limped down into Speed. Liberally dosed with mercurochrome by the Speed SM and looking more like a Red Indian than a patrolman, Max returned to base to record "an unusual incident" on his report sheet.

Sand on the Track

As early as 1902, sand blown onto the track proved a troublesome problem. In that drought year, the train crew was forced to shovel the track clear at Massey to allow the train to proceed. In the more northern areas, even in some relatively good years, duststorms or heavy winds would cover the tracks with varying depths of sand. Light's Hill, between Curyo and Watchupga was a trouble spot in most years. The introduction of wind chutes during the 1940's proved helpful but did not entirely overcome the problem. On many occasions, the gang was called out at all hours of the day or night to shovel sand off the track to let trains pass safely through.

Order Restored:

Guard Tiger K... was a man who enjoyed an after-work bottle or two of relaxation. He often procured the anti-depressant goods from the Refreshment Rooms at Birchip on his way back to base at Ouyen.

On one occasion he left his purchases on the counter while he attended to other matters. He then gave the "all clear" and sent the train on its way, intending to board the guard's van as it approached his position on the platform. At the very last moment he remembered the parcel on the counter. Sprinting into the Refresh. he grabbed his two bottles and pursued the train. Alas! he ran out of platform before attaining the safe haven of the van. The train continued on unaware of the drama taking place at its rear end.

Station Assistant Pat Connelly became aware of Tiger's dilemma. He responded immediately. Bundling Tiger and his precious parcel into his car, Pat took off at high speed to catch the train and restore correct working procedures. He chose Curyo as the

rendezvous and reached there several minutes before the train arrived. The look of dismay on the faces of driver and fireman at seeing their guard standing on the Curyo platform waiting for them to arrive was, in Pat's words, "a rare sight to behold".



Birchip yard looking north from the platform in the early 1960's. Since then the "Pig Pen," a wartime bulkhead for the storage of grain (on the left of the photo), the sheep and cattle yards, the house and water tank have been removed or demolished.

EPILOGUE

The achievement of one hundred years of life or service is an occasion worthy of recognition. In the case of the coming of rail services to Birchip and district this milestone will occur on 28th March 1993, the 100th anniversary of the date on which the extension from Donald was officially opened. That the line reached Birchip some weeks previously is beside the point. The community of Birchip and district propose a celebration to suitably mark this historic event.

The coming of rail services to this developing area brought great joy and much benefit to the struggling pioneers. They had endured much hardship from isolation, little or no communication with the outside world and lack of all but the barest necessities of life as they struggled to carve out an existence from the virgin soil. The ravages of drought, the depredations of rabbits and other vermin, together with the lack of a reliable water supply, led many to fall by the wayside. Those who survived have left us a heritage which we are proud to acknowledge. We recognize that the provision of rail services did much to lighten the burdens of their isolation and improve the quality of their lives. We are grateful that this was so.

In all of the testimony presented to the various inquiries into the provision of rail services one salient feature was common to all. It was stated over and over again that without such a utility this vast new land would never be opened up and developed; its potential would never be achieved. It is to the everlasting credit of the early governments of this colony and the perseverance of the pioneers that the Victorian Railways planned and constructed the rail network that served this state so well for so long. Despite the disappointments of many who sought further extensions of the network and were denied the service, most of those projects would have been costly and short-lived. Time has overtaken much of the initial value and benefits of rail services.

Sentiment and nostalgia are very human responses to events of the past. The countless thousands of men and women of the "railway family" of years past and present have made a notable contribution to the advancement of this State and the operation of its major transport system. The sight of smoke and steam added a glamour to the life of the country that is no more. What small boy of generations past did not dream of being an engine-driver with his hand firmly

on the throttle; or a fireman to stoke the fiery furnaces with coal and smell its pungent aroma!!!. But time marches on and with it has come change.

The decline of the railway from its pre-eminent peak of the first quarter of this century has been slow but inexorable. Its once huge workforce has been constantly reduced over time. Technology and circumstance have combined to dictate the system we presently have. The proposed standardization of the national rail gauge, over a hundred years in the unmaking of mixed gauges, will breathe new life into the service. It will never die but will continue to have a diminishing role in most of our lives. The very same economic forces that drove the initial construction and operational programmes are now propelling the system in reverse mode throughout most of rural Victoria. The Kennett Government in early January 1993 announced its intention to call tenders for the private operation of nine major regional lines, including the Mildura-Melbourne line.

The people of Birchip and district will gather over the week-end of 6th and 7th March 1993 to celebrate and be thankful for the coming of the rail to this district one hundred years ago. It is hoped that they will be joined by many who dedicated their working lives on the track, in the yard, at the station and other spheres of operations that made the rail system such an integral part of local life. No doubt there will be many stories told of "those good old days".

It is pleasing to record that the successor body to the Victorian Railways, the Public Transport Corporation and its rural arm, V/Line, has acknowledged the significance of the occasion and has allocated a G class locomotive to be ceremoniously designated "Birchip" in recognition of the achievement. A restored diesel electric rail motor, RM56, will bring visitors to the celebrations on a special excursion commencing at Maryborough. The trip will mark RM56's official return to service. Additionally an enduring marker in the form of a plaque will be unveiled at the station site by Mr Tom Connellan. Tom commenced his railway career as a Lad Porter at Birchip in 1949 and subsequently rose to the position of Superintendent Western Region.

The inscription on the plaque reads:-

CENTENARY
THIS PLAQUE
WAS PLACED HERE TO
COMMEMORATE 100 YEARS
OF RAIL SERVICE
TO BIRCHIP.
1893-1993

APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Conversion Tables

Currency Conversion

One pound (£1)	= \$2
Ten shillings (10/-)	= \$1
One shilling (1/-)	= 10 cents
One penny (1d)	= .83c
Twelve pence (12d)	= one shilling
Twenty shillings	= One pound (£1)

Weight Conversion

One pound (1lb)	= 454 grams
One quarter	= 28 lbs
One hundredweight	= 112 lbs
One ton	= 2240 lbs - 1.02 tonnes
One tonne	= 2004 lbs - .98 tons
One kilogram (1kg)	= 2.24 lbs
One tonne	= 1000 kgs

Linear Conversion

1 inch	= 25.4 millimetres or 2.54 centimetres
12 inches	= 1 foot - 304mm - 30.4cm
3 feet	= 1 yard - 912mm - 91.2cm - .91metres
22 yards	= 1 chain
100 links	= 1 chain 80 chains = 1 mile - 1.61 kilometres
1 millimetre	= .0394 inches 1 centimetre = .394 inches
1 metre	= 39.37 inches - 3.28 feet - 1.093 yards
1 kilometre	= .62 miles

Comparative Values

Year	Bread (2lb)	Tea (1lb)	Sugar (1lb)	Butter (1lb)	Potatoes (14lbs)
1876	3.5d	21d	4d	15d	7d
1900	3.0	16	2.3	11	10.1
1910	3.5	15	2.5	13.9	11.3
1920	5.9	28.5	5.4	28.4	26.5
1930	5.5	25.2	4.6	21.4	22.1
1940	6.0	29.5	4.0	19.0	27.4
1950	7.9	36.1	5.0	29.00	46.6
1960	16.2	78.4	10.2	55.7	73.6
Converted to Decimal currency					
1961	14.8c	64.2c	9.2c	48.5c	89.4c
1970	21.0	56.8	11.0	54.4	82.6
1980	80.7	130.8	19.3	95.3	247.9
1983	103.2	143.5	26.1	148.9	406.8
1990	191.0	292.0	55.3	212.1	438.3

Note: The dollar value in terms of a basket of goods it could buy in 1900 is only worth 6 cents in 1978/9. Therefore what could be purchased for \$1 (10/-) in 1900 would cost \$15.70 in 1978/9.

The Retail Price index adjusted for all Consumer Price index measurements using 1912 as the base figure of 100 is as follows: 1900=81; 1910=97; 1920= 193; 1930= 162; 1940= 159; 1950

VICTORIAN RAILWAYS SYSTEM

AT ITS MAXIMUM ROUTE MILEAGE, 1942

SHOWING LINE AND TERMINAL STATIONS ONLY

SCALE OF MILES:

