

## CHAPTER 2

# BIRCHIP TO WOOMELANG EXTENSION

The arrival of the railways at Birchip in early 1893 led to agitation from the settled areas to the north, west and north-west of the town to extend the line to service those areas. Already Marlbed, Karyrie, Kinnabulla, Ballapur, Reedy Dam, Pinegrove, Curyo and Watchupga districts were settled and producing grain, principally wheat, in increasing quantities. While the haulage of their produce to Birchip was an infinite improvement on having to transport it to railheads at either Donald or Wycheproof, the settlers felt that they deserved further consideration. Consequently several unrelated meetings took place promoting individual rail causes. These were later to be consolidated into a League with one voice, albeit not without some division of opinion, regarding the route which the proposed line should take.

The first district to put their proposal into action was Marlbed. Even before the line had reached Birchip, the residents of Marlbed staked a claim for an extension to Sea Lake via Marlbed. A deputation proceeded to Melbourne in early March 1893 to wait on the Premier with a view to having the extension to Marlbed proceed immediately. A survey had been made some time previously when the Wycheproof to Birchip and thence to Mildura extension was being proposed by Wycheproof interests.

The deputation met with Minister for Railways Patterson. While it failed to receive any definite promise from the Minister, it did provide the opportunity to learn that the government was inclined to favour the construction of Mallee lines on the land grant system. It gained the impression that if a syndicate could be formed to provide the land free of cost to the government, the construction of an extension via Marlbed to Euston would be favourably considered. Minister Patterson raised a problem with the Marlbed proposal that it would pass through land occupied by two large Block-holders and this would require a good deal of financial compensation for the unexpired portion of their licence. The government was not presently inclined to consider this cost. The deputation, in fact, was only seeking a 10 mile extension to Marlbed and produced statistics to support their request. The line would open up an area of 251,000 acres of settled land of which 70,000 acres were presently under crop.

As only one major line was to be constructed that year, Minister Patterson would not give the deputation any firm promise.

During the course of inspections and discussions regarding the ultimate extension to Mildura, Mr E. H. Lascelles made the offer of providing a 5% profit guarantee on a Hopetoun to Minapre (later named Lascelles) line, after the imposition of a special local freight rate. He later agreed to make a similar offer in relation to a Birchip to Minapre via Marlbed extension and agreed to deposit £5000 as a sign of his good faith in this regard.

The Parliamentary Railway Standing Committee met in Melbourne on 14th May 1895 regarding the Marlbed extension. Peter Scott and Robert Kersel of Marlbed had given a written offer of constructing the earthworks for the line at threepence per cubic yard. The prevailing price for this type of work was sixpence a yard. The saving was the equivalent of sixpence per bag freight on an estimated 135,000 bags of wheat that would be carried on the line. They also stated that the residents would be prepared to give a guarantee to pay the interest on the capital outlay and working expenses. No decision was made by the Standing Committee.

Meanwhile agitation mounted for the extension from Birchip northwards via other than the Marlbed route. In the *Birchip Advertiser* of 24th April 1895 it was reported that the people of Curyo North (later Curyo) district were making arrangements for a deputation to the Standing Committee during their visit to the area for the purpose of taking evidence regarding the recommended Birchip-Marlbed-Sea Lake-Mildura extension. In early June, a meeting of the Birchip-Minapre Railway League was held at the home of Mr Coonan. It was resolved that the whole of the Kinnabulla country, including the present parishes of Curyo, Kinnabulla and Watchupga and all the country east of the vermin-proof fence be canvassed for statistics as to areas under cultivation. Messrs Brown, Gould and McPhee were appointed canvassers at a gross remuneration of £5/10/-. The statistics were to include the distances which farmers were presently carting their wheat. The collectors were given one week only to gather the information.

Giving evidence before the Standing Committee in June 1895, Mr Lascelles was adamant that the line should pass through the best country because of its production potential. He was equally certain that the best land lay in the Birchip-Minapre extension via Curyo instead of Marlbed. Mr Murphy, a settler on the proposed extension gave similar evidence. Murphy

also presented a petition signed by a large number of farmers on mallee holdings situated in the area between the proposed Sea Lake and Hopetoun extensions. He also said that the farmers would give the land free and would guarantee to pay such freights as would secure the Government against interest on the cost of construction. Lascelles was recalled and stated that he was selling considerable areas of his Blocks. He was also convinced that settlement would continue with large numbers of South Australians coming over. The population of the Mallee was steadily increasing. He was prepared to give up 38,000 acres of his land within four miles of the terminus of the proposed extension. Under questioning Murphy said that the petition was signed by 170 genuine farmers. He owned 487 acres in Block 55A (Watchupga) and cultivated 150 acres last year. He owned six horses and a four-furrow plough. He employed one man on a permanent basis and sometimes had a further two men to pick up sticks.

A further argument advanced in support of the Curyo proposal was that it was a Government town with a township surveyed into allotments. Murphy felt that people would come and buy sites for building purposes. He considered that the land was worth £1 per acre with wheat at 3/- per bushel. With a railway within eight miles, he thought it would be worth £1/15/- to £2 per acre. Only one or two township allotments had been sold but with the coming of the rail he thought sales would be made at high prices.

Mr Kersel of Marlbed also gave evidence stating that he would probably make an arrangement with the Minister for cultivation of his Blocks which previously had a grazing licence only.

Debate in Parliament on further rail extensions ended in a stalemate. The Minister for Railways thought that any further extensions in the mallee until land settlement had been placed on a more satisfactory basis "*was extremely unwise*". However Mr Cameron, Chairman of the Railways Standing Committee, thought that the matter should be referred back to his Committee for further inquiry. In February 1896 Mr Jones of the Railways Department made an examination of the land along the Birchip-Minapre extension route. He visited Marlbed, Minapre, Kelly's Plains and Reedy Dam. Afterwards he said that the Quambatook-Ultima extension had preferential claims but the Birchip-Minapre extension was a future possibility.

In late April a meeting of the Curyo-Minapre Railway League held in Taverner Hall at Kelly's Plains resolved

that a deputation should attend the Minister praying for immediate steps to be taken to have the extension commenced. The response given was for a team, under Mr Shanaughan to arrive and start work on a survey of the route. The survey ran through the Karyrie homestead paddock and proceeded as far as Jacobi's mallee allotment No. 45 at Curyo North. A further meeting of the League in the Curyo Hall in late June 1896 was chaired by Mr Wakefield in the absence of the President, Mr Philip Grogan. The principal reason for the meeting was to deal with a movement initiated to deviate the proposed line to Minapre towards Reedy Dam. This late proposal was "*viewed with much disfavour*" as it was considered that such a move would delay construction of the line as presently surveyed. Mr Cox was appointed as a delegate to represent this point of view to the Watchupga meeting where Messrs Louttit, Jenkins, Miethke and others were present with Mr Louttit occupying the chair. The meeting was unanimous that construction should proceed on the route as presently surveyed. However the residents of Ballapur and Kelly's Plains were not to be denied. They approached Mr Campbell, officer in charge of the survey team, at a meeting at Lewis' Commercial Hotel at Birchip to point out that the best farming districts would be served by a deviation west towards Ballapur thence north to Curyo North. Campbell promised to visit the districts.

On 10th July 96 a further meeting at Curyo North Hall was attended by 60 persons including representatives from Minapre, Watchupga, Cronomby (later Woomelang), Marlbed, Ballapur, Reedy Dam and Pinegrove. Mr P. Grogan occupied the Chair. The meeting resolved that the League rescind their support for construction of the line as presently being surveyed in favour of a deviation via Gould's Lake as now put forward. An amendment moved by Mr Kersel (Marlbed) and seconded by Mr Cox (Curyo) that it be left to the Railways Standing Committee to make the final choice was carried by the narrow majority of 2 votes. This decision was fortified by a further motion by Mr Hague (Marlbed) and seconded by Mr Patterson (Ballapur) that construction of the line, without mentioning any particular route, proceed without delay. A delegate from each district was appointed to form a deputation to meet with the Minister for Railways to urge action on the line.

Immediately following this meeting, a further meeting was held at Ballapur to press their claim for the deviation to better serve that district. The deviation sought was towards Fletchers (allotment 4 Ballapur). Chairman Patterson felt that the statistics, which showed that 31000 acres were under cultivation,

indicated the strength of their claim. Messrs Bolden Bros. moved an amendment that a direct line from Watchem to Curyo South be sought. By 50 votes to 6 the amendment was defeated. Mr Patterson was elected to deputize for the district and was allowed £5/5/- for expenses.

Each district elected a delegate to meet with the Minister on 23rd July as follows: Messrs Milte (Minapre), Wakefield (Watchupga), Patterson (Ballapur), Hood (Cronomby), McPhee (Curyo). The Marbled delegate is not known but it would probably have been either Hague or Kersel. They met with Minister Williams, with Messrs Pratt MLA, Wheeler MLA and Anderson MLA in attendance, and presented statistics showing 84000 acres under cultivation and a further 8/9000 being prepared for cultivation. Mr Lascelles' guarantee of £5000 was a strong point as was the willingness of residents to pay special freight rates and to purchase the land required for the line. However the Minister advised that he was obliged to refer the matter to the Standing Committee and that the statistics presented by the deputation were very much at variance with those of his department. The department figures showed that a loss of £1784 would accrue to the line operations. These figures would need to be checked before any commitment could be made. Mr Jones from the Department visited the area shortly afterwards. Although Mr Jones did not disclose the details of his recommendations, the general impression was given that he would report in favour of a deviation of the line to Gould's Lake, thence to Curyo North and advise its early construction. The survey was completed on the 11th November and cost £650, a rate of £20 per mile. The permanent survey would follow Ministerial authority for construction.

By February 1897, the residents were becoming anxious that construction be commenced in order that rail services would be available for the next harvest. A meeting at Jacobi's at Curyo North on 3rd February, with Mr Peter Scott JP occupying the chair, resolved that Mr Taverner MLA be asked to obtain a report from the Minister on the position regarding the line. A further meeting was convened in June to stimulate interest in the project and to petition the Minister for action. About 100 farmers attended a similar meeting on July 26th with representation from Ballapur, Marbled, Watchupga, Cronomby and Minapre. Mr P. Grogan was Chairman. A contingent from Ballapur argued for a detour to be made in favour of the Reedy Dam district. While those opposing the idea did not deny the justice of the claims, it was felt that the matter should be left to the authorities so that nothing might prejudice the immediate construction of the line. It

was finally decided by a majority of one that the detour of the line via Gould's Lake and through Curyo North be requested. Another deputation was arranged to present these points of view to the Minister. The deputation was successful in having the Minister decide on a personal visit to the area. Elaborate arrangements were made to ensure the success of the visit. The Minister and his party were to be given refreshments at Curyo North and would dine at Cronomby.

Further delays occurred in consideration of the Birchip-Minapre extension as Premier, Sir George Turner, intervened. Under pressure from bodies interested in the Mildura area, he requested that the Standing Committee treat the matter as a whole subject of further rail extension into the Mallee. Subsequently the Standing Committee made an extensive tour of inspection including Hopetoun, Minapre, Cronomby and Curyo. A large assemblage of farmers of the district met the party at Curyo, where they were entertained with a sumptuous lunch provided by the local ladies. Other refreshments were also provided. Evidence under oath was presented to the Committee by Philip Grogan. He stated *"the people in the mallee were enduring bad seasons and hard times and it was evident to all that they could not make a success of farming in the district unless they had water supply and railways. Without the latter all the money the Government proposed to spend in its water scheme for the mallee would be wasted"*. He continued to say that *"he had 20 years experience in farming but the result of the last few years was exhausting all his means and resources. Since 1892 he had obtained an average of two bags to the acre and he cultivated about 600 acres. His land was seven miles from the school building (where the evidence was being heard). The proposed line would not be nearer than five and a half miles to his property. The construction of this line would serve some of the best agricultural land in the mallee, including the Ballapur and Reedy Dam districts. The people of these latter districts were agreeable to the proposed deviation"*. In other statements Mr Grogan said that *"no farmer should have to travel further than 10 miles to a railway"* and that *"without railway communication, it was not worthwhile living in the mallee"*. Mr A.J. McPhee supported the evidence of Mr Grogan. The line would suit him as surveyed but he thought that the deviation would suit the greatest number. Presently he took all his produce to Birchip, a distance of 16 miles, the cost being 11d per bag. He would not grudge giving half that rate to the railway. Others to give evidence were H. A. Trewin, John Bankin and J. Noske of Ballapur, E. Marchmont of Kinnabulla and W. Murphy of

Watchupga. The Committee later proceeded via Gould's Lake to Birchip and were impressed with the excellent quality of the land traversed.

On return to Melbourne the Committee wasted little time in making their report. The recommendations included extension of the Birchip line to Cronomby Tanks- 25 and a quarter miles; Quambatook to Ultima, 30 miles and Jeparit towards Albacutya, 17 miles. The matter of the Mildura extension was deferred for separate decision. It also went on to consider other aspects of mallee development. Comments offered included that in order to conserve and foster the wheat traffic on the railways the committee would suggest that the consecutive cropping of mallee land should be strictly regulated to prevent exhaustion of the soil; that the holding of areas for speculative purposes should be prevented as far as possible; the cultivation of each allotment made compulsory with numerous timber reserves to be excised from mallee areas to act as breakwinds for the protection of crops and to provide firewood and shelter for stock. The survey of roads should be so integrated as to fit in with the sites fixed for stations on the railway survey. At present great loss was experienced by the settlers in having to cart their produce over long distances to a station by having allotments surveyed in square blocks without any reference to railway stations.

Following a tour of inspection by Mr Rennick, Engineer-in-Chief and Mr Kernot, district engineer, along the proposed Birchip-Cronomby extension in June 98, a deputation comprising Mr George Goudie and Mr Philip Grogan proceeded to Melbourne to urge the government to make the deviation in the line to serve the interests of Ballapur and Reedy Dam farmers. It would involve an extension of two and a half miles. The proposal was debated by the Birchip Shire Council at its July '98 meeting but not supported as it was thought that interference with present plans would only serve to delay the construction process.

Hansard of 4th August 1898 carried the introduction of the Birchip-Cronomby Railway Construction Bill. The Bill contained the schedule of construction detailing the Standing Committee recommendations of the Engineer-in-Chief. The recommendations included the deviation to the west on leaving Birchip but fixing the limit of the deviation to five miles. It passed all stages of legislation. Act No 1550 authorized construction and was passed on 18th August 1898.

The following week 50 men proceeded to Birchip to commence construction. However as the land, in the first eight or ten miles passed through freehold

properties, it was necessary to resume the land required for the line. If this was not done very promptly the line would revert to the original survey line. The deviation would proceed north-westerly to a point about one and a half miles north of Gould's Lake and then turn northerly towards Curyo. This route was an alternative to serve Ballapur and Reedy Dam farmers. A bond was required guaranteeing the land required free of cost to the department. A number of farmers met and objected to the deviation and the expense of providing the land free of cost. The most vocal of the protesters were located in the Marlbed, Jil Jil and Whirily areas which would be most inconvenienced by the deviation proposal. Kinnabulla farmers were taken by surprise but would guarantee the land required for the deviation. A meeting held on the property of Messrs Wilkinson and Barber (allot 34 Kinnabulla) on the following Monday with about 30 farmers attending, signed a guarantee by 24 persons offering the land required free of cost if the deviation as proposed was constructed. However the document that they signed was later found to be defective and not complying with the legal requirements of the department. This caused a delay in the commencement of the work but it was eventually sorted out with little impact on the works programme.

The deviation finally adopted by the department was referred to as the middle deviation. The original survey was for a direct line from Birchip to Curyo North while the southern deviation was for a line to Gould's Lake thence northerly to Curyo North. Mr W. Barber of Karyrie, proceeded to Melbourne and had an interview with the Minister for Railways supporting the southern deviation on behalf of the Ballapur people. The Minister suggested that the request could be granted subject to only one station being provided on the entire extension. This idea was discarded when the Minister advised "*that the request cannot be complied with*". The line eventually proceeded as planned by the department.

While this delay was being experienced on the southern section of the extension, work commenced on the 18th Aug 98 from the Cronomby Tanks end. Four miles of earthworks were completed by September with some of the heaviest cuttings being encountered at that end. Work on the Birchip end finally commenced in early October with about 120 men engaged on the project. It was estimated that up to 350 would be employed at the peak of the programme. The works were estimated to cost £49000 at a rate of £1953 per mile. The butty gang system as successfully used in the Donald to Birchip extension was implemented. Farmers who gave their land free of cost for the

railway were able to put teams of horses to work with scoops putting up the earthworks for the line. They were thus able to recoup the losses of the land value and additionally to receive the benefits of a rail service.

Curyo farmers were indignant at the ravages being made amongst the pine tree conservations on their holdings by men employed by the railway department cutting posts and poles for fencing the line. No area was sacrosanct as the precincts of farmhouses were denuded of their tree shelters for this purpose. Work proceeded slowly with the earthworks expected to be completed by the end of the year. Delays were experienced with the supply of sleepers and rails for six weeks. It was hoped that the line would be ready for traffic by the latter end of February as the department was anxious to have the line completed by the earliest possible time. This forecast was to prove extremely optimistic.

*Birchip Advertiser* of 7th September carried a report that "surprise and disgust is being expressed by the people of Curyo district that the Railway department have decided not to establish a railway station at the township of Curyo. The Lands department, if it have an eye to the sale of township allotments to the best advantage, should use its influence to see that the claims of the Government township site receive due consideration at the hands of the railway officials". The Birchip Shire Council entered the fray. Councillors Scott and Goudie presented a protest to the Minister. Commissioner Mathieson promised that he would visit the area in about six weeks and decide as to the position of the station.

The *Argus* newspaper speculated on the likely names to be given to the new stations. It suggested that the names likely to be adopted should be Barber, Glover, Curyo, Watchupga and Cronomby. The Birchip Shire Council had suggested that native names should be preserved and advised that Karyrie and Towma were considered as appropriate names. It was up to the Railway Commissioners to make the final choice. It is now a matter of history that Karyrie, Kinnabulla, Curyo, Watchupga and Woomelang were adopted. The Minapre district was not to receive rail services until the Mildura extension was undertaken.

Plate-laying commenced during the middle of February. The slowness of construction was frustrating to the district farmers who, at one time, had high hopes of the line being open for the harvest. The ordinary means of transport of wheat as in former years was again requisitioned. The loss was also shared by the Railway Department as they were

deprived of the freight traffic. Editor Grantley of the *Birchip Advertiser* was moved to write that the delay "was attributable to the penny-wise-pound-foolish cheese paring policy of the Railway department". By the end of April the line had been laid as far as Curyo station and it was calculated that at the present rate of progress it would reach Cronomby in 24 days time. Ballasting would commence when the line reached Jess' (allotment 46 Watchupga) which was the ballast site. Delays again occurred due to the shortage of sleepers when the line reached 15 and a half miles from Birchip. This point is about three miles north of the Curyo rail station. Work was again in full swing by the first week in May and was proceeding at the rate of 23 chains a day. By the middle of May it had reached Collins' allotment (No 35 Watchupga parish) on Block 55A.

Editor Grantley again vented his frustrations in the edition of 30th May when he wrote at length. "Some surprise, not to say amusement, has been created by the announcement presumably by the departmental heads of the Railway department, from whence all blessings flow, and who are the source of all wisdom, that it is expected that the construction of the Cronomby line will be finished in about four months. It will certainly be a characteristic and meritorious performance if they can contrive to string it out so long because there was an evident rush of business on Sunday last when the local engine was employed (much to the disgust of church-going people), in conveying material to various points along the line".

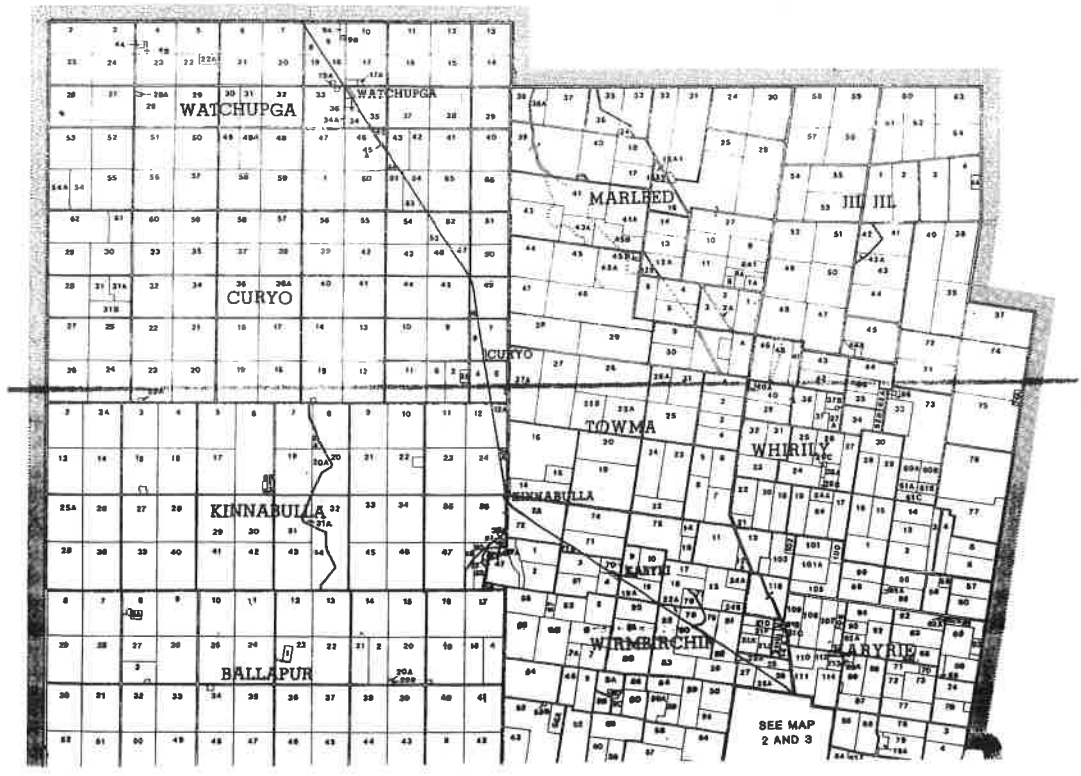
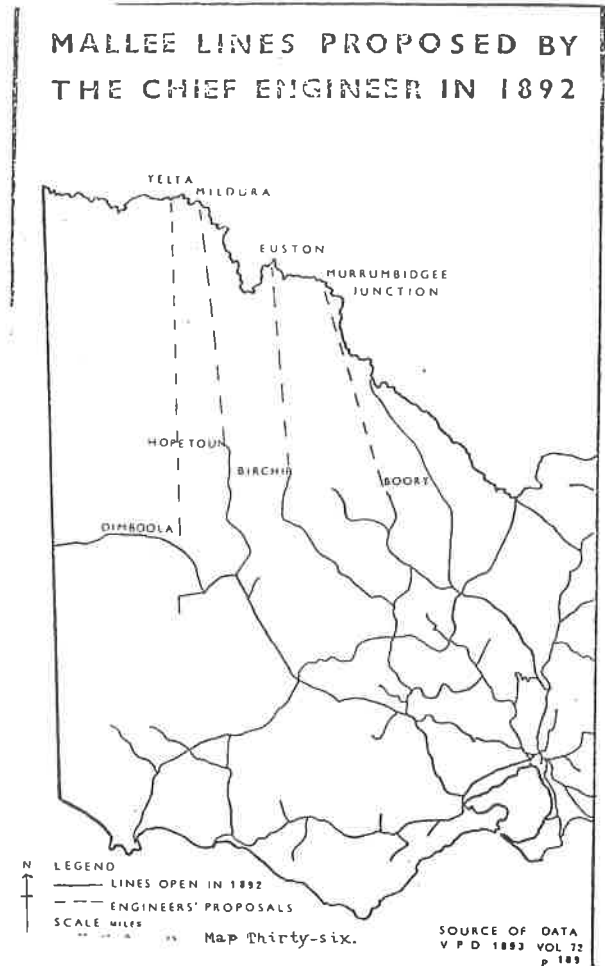
The quality of water caused problems for the locomotives. It was so thickly charged with matter in solution that it fouled the inside of the boilers. Foreign substances included magnesia, alumina, clay and salt. For every 22000 gallons of water evaporated, one cart load of clay had to be removed from the boiler in addition to troublesome incrustation of other mineral constituents.

Eventually the works reached a stage by 12th September that Chief Commissioner Mathieson and a contingent of his officers inspected the 26 and a half miles of construction. They arrived by special train in Birchip and were accompanied over the extension by the Shire President, Cr Neyland, Shire Secretary Gorrie, several Councillors and prominent citizens. En route they were met at Karyrie by Messrs S and W Barber Jun. with a request that a 25 feet platform be provided and that the station be named "Woodlands". It was agreed that a loop line be provided but the name must remain as "Karyrie". Further along the line it was decided that Curyo, Watchupga and Woomelang



would be fully appointed stations and Kinnabulla and Karyie would have 25 ft platforms and loop lines. Ten acres had been reserved at Woomelang for a station site and for terminus facilities. Several large tanks were excavated and a pumping plant installed for engine water supply. A turntable site was selected and provision made for engine sheds. The cost of the extension was £35650.0.8 at an average rate of £1345.5.0 per mile. This figure was considerably less than the original estimate.

Final arrangements were made for the official opening of the line on 18th September 1899. A special train ran from Birchip to Woomelang. Fares were; children 10pence and adults 2/6. To celebrate the occasion a picnic sports afternoon and dance in the evening was held at Curyo. A tri-weekly service was established. The train left Birchip on the arrival of the Donald train on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays at 6.40pm, reaching Woomelang at 8.30pm. It returned the next day, leaving Woomelang at 9.5am arriving at Birchip on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays at 10.55am. The fare from Birchip to Woomelang was 4/10 first class single and the same for a second class return. Second Class single fare cost 3/3 while a first class return was 7/3. Stops were made at all intermediate stations. Further details of fares and timetables are included in the section on those topics.



## CHAPTER 3

# WOOMELANG TO MILDURA

The rail extension from Birchip to Cronomby Tanks (Woomelang) was officially opened for traffic on 18th Sep 1899. The 26 miles and 45 chains of rail extension led to an intensification of the struggle between Bendigo and Ballarat for the Mildura terminal to be serviced by passage through their respective cities. Other communities joined in the rivalry as possible points of extension.

As early as 1886 the *Donald Express* carried an item stating that the Mildura railway business was settled. The extension to that area would start from Dimboola. The distance in a straight line is one hundred and fifty miles and the line would later be extended to Wentworth. However no construction took place.

In March 1890, the same paper reported that there were current proposals with starting points at Swan Hill, Wycheproof, Donald, Warracknabeal and Dimboola. In 1893 Warracknabeal and Beulah interests invited the Minister for Railways to inspect the route from Beulah to Mildura with a view to a rail extension to that district. In April 1895 the Railways Standing Committee took evidence regarding the possibility of an extension from Birchip through Marbed and Sea Lake to Mildura.

The possible points from which the Mildura connection could be made were numerous and each one had particular merits. The final choice was made after much inquiry, painstaking research and, as always, successful lobbying of the Railway Standing Committee. As early as 1889 surveys were made from Swan Hill and Dimboola as possible starting points for the Mildura extension. By 1899 the choices had been narrowed down to Ultima, Sea Lake, Cronomby Tanks, Albacutya and Hopetoun. Cronomby Tanks was given a name change to Woomelang in 1899 by the Railways as it was causing confusion with Coromby, in southern Victoria. The respective distances from Yelta to Melbourne via each of these places were as follows:-  
Ultima 352 miles, Sea Lake 351 miles, Woomelang 349 miles, Albacutya 399 miles and Hopetoun 376 miles. Depending on necessary deviations, the distances were varied marginally. A recommendation was made in November 1898 by the Railway Standing

Committee that Ultima should be the starting point. The facts, on which this recommendation were made, were hotly contested by other interests. The major limitation was substantive evidence of the nature of the country and its productive potential through which the line was intended to pass. This data, more than the distances involved, was the critical measure of the value of providing a rail service from the Government's point of view. Time was to prove this philosophy to be the correct decision. Additionally Premier, Sir George Turner, directed the Railway Standing Committee to consider the Mildura extension as integral to the entire rail development in the Mallee districts.

Mr Robert Gorrie, Secretary of the Shire of Birchip, convened a meeting on 16th August 1898 of Shires from Birchip to Maryborough to discuss the rail issue. Representatives from the Shires of Birchip, Donald, St. Amand, Bet Bet, Boroughs of Maryborough and Majorca and the Donald Water Trust were present. Cr T. Casey, Mayor of Maryborough, was elected Chairman and Mr Pearce was appointed Secretary. The purpose of the meeting was to form a League to support the extension of the line from Birchip to Mildura via Cronomby Tanks. Gorrie had initiated the meeting as he felt that it was in the best interests of all present that this route be supported before rival routes came into the field. All agreed that the Birchip via Cronomby Tanks route was the most beneficial for them and, *ipso facto*, for the colony. According to Mr Rennick, Chief Engineer of Railways, it was also the shortest by five and a half miles. Additionally it was also the nearest route to the seaboard at Geelong. The movement adopted the name of Cronomby to Mildura Extension League. In the face of much competition from other groups, it busied itself in promoting the benefits of its favoured route with the Standing Committee and lobbying parliamentarians. Mr Gorrie, later to be Secretary of the League, was outstanding in this regard displaying tremendous energy and vision.

At a meeting of the League held at Maryborough on 4th May 1899 with all of the previous bodies represented plus a few more, Secretary Gorrie presented a detailed report on what had taken place in recent developments. Amongst the letters he had received was one from E. H. Lascelles giving support for the Cronomby Tanks to Mildura route as the line on which the most good land would be found. Gorrie advised the meeting that he had compiled a report for the Melbourne papers in order to obtain as much publicity as possible for the League proposal. The report included information that "all of the proposed lines to Mildura comprising that from Ultima, Sea

*Lake, Hopetoun, Cronomby and Jeparit (the extension to Albacutya had not been completed) would meet at a "Common Point" near Hattah, 52 miles south of Mildura, hence the question to be considered is the nature of the country between these several starting points and this junction. The evidence heard as to the quality of the land on each of these routes, with the exception of that of Cronomby which has yet to be heard, is very conflicting and to a large extent imaginative, or of a hearsay character, still to commence, on the advocacy of that which is certainly the best for the colony at large, we assert that the line from Cronomby is the best. In October last, the Birchip Shire Council fitted out an expedition to examine the country for some ten miles on each side of a line from Cronomby to Mildura and the report of this expedition states that fully four-fifths of the land they inspected was first class". (A detailed account of the expedition is contained in Chapter 4). Gorrie went on to report that he was astonished that the Railways Standing Committee had not asked for evidence of this although they knew about it since last September. He continued "that a railway from Jeparit, Hopetoun or Sea Lake would have to cross this belt (of sandhills) as would the Cronomby line. The big difference was that the latter would cross it at right angles whereas the others would have to follow it for several miles". Quoting from a Special Reporter of *The Age* in August 1898, Gorrie said that evidence must be placed before the Standing Committee to show (1) that the Cronomby extension passes through more good land to the junction than would any of the other proposed lines; (2) that it will pay interest on construction as well, if not better, than any other line; (3) that it will supply the wants of the colony through market centres better than any other line and (4) that it will cost less to construct than the Ultima line as the distance to be constructed is considerably less.*

Mr Gorrie was thanked for the energy he had displayed in presenting the report which the meeting adopted. The meeting also decided to invite the Railway Standing Committee to Maryborough to hear evidence in support of the proposed extension. Meanwhile the Premier promised that each line would be put on the same basis in regard to evidence. As a trial survey was being carried out from Hopetoun, the League asked that a similar one be undertaken from Cronomby and the support of local members of Parliament be sought. Shortly afterwards, a conference of Shire Councils interested in the Mildura extension was held at Ballarat. The meeting was heavily stacked with delegates having Hopetoun and Sea Lake interests. Despite the Cronomby supporters efforts, the meeting carried a recommendation that lines from Hopetoun

and Sea Lake should be commenced simultaneously and that they should meet at the south-west corner of Block 13A (some 12 miles south-west of Ouyen). This was not the Common Point previously spoken of as the junction for all competing extensions. The Common Point was near Hattah. The reason for Ballarat interests pursuing the western link rather than the Cronomby extension was that at that time and for some years afterwards traffic for stations north of Maryborough were serviced through the Castlemaine-Maryborough connection.

During the subsequent survey, the Cronomby supporters thought it was not being conducted in their best interests. A protest meeting was held at Birchip to voice their indignation that the Premier was not meeting his promise to place all lines on an equal footing before a decision was made regarding construction. An urgent letter was despatched to Mr Taverner to seek fair play in the matter. Taverner later advised Gorrie that the Minister for Railways had instructed the Engineer-in-Chief to have the surveys made in accordance with the Premier's promise. Later Gorrie was able to give first-hand evidence to the Railways Standing Committee at the Maryborough hearings in October 1899 by effectively using statistics of land classifications gained on the expedition to support his statements. Gorrie's evidence was supported by Peter Scott and John Neyland who were the other members of the expedition. Under intense examination by the members of the Standing Committee the group provided compelling evidence of the advantages of the Cronomby extension as opposed to others, including the Ultima link, which the Standing Committee had previously recommended.

As 1899 drew towards a close with no decision regarding construction of the Mildura rail connection in the immediate offing, a conference at Ballarat of all interested parties was convened in an attempt to have the government approve construction of the first 52 miles southwards from the Mildura end as far as the Common Point. This would expedite a connection from whichever point was finally selected for the extension. The decision was fortified by a previous undertaking by the Shire of Mildura that it would contribute one shilling in the pound of the rateable value of the Shire towards the cost of construction. The conference also carried a further motion that, in effect, recommended that the extension point be one of the western (Albacutya or Hopetoun) links. The Cronomby extension amendment moved by Gorrie was soundly defeated. But Mildura was becoming impatient with the delays taking place and urged the Standing Committee to carry out an inspection of the



southern section of the Cronomby line and implement action before parliament went into recess. A flying survey was ordered and the Committee proposed to drive right through the mallee land. Frustrated by the seemingly endless delays and the tactics of some of the other aspiring Leagues, in February 1900 Gorrie wrote a letter to the Editor of *The Advertiser* complaining *"It is to be regretted that such a great amount of time has been wasted and that there has been so much truckling of public money with the object of defeating the aims of the Cronomby to Mildura League and in endeavouring to foist upon the public less worthy extensions"*.

The Railways Standing Committee inspection itinerary commenced at Bendigo on 28th March; Ultima on 29th; Winnambool, 30th; Lake Hattah, 31st; Ouyen 1st April; Minapre and Hopetoun on 2nd April back to Ballarat on 3rd and to Melbourne on 4th April. The Cronomby to Mildura Extension League resolved to accompany the Standing Committee on the tour from the Common Point via Ouyen to Minapre. The party consisted of Gorrie, Neyland and Scott, the members of the expedition of 1898. It was to be an ill-fated but very interesting enterprise. Planning to meet the Standing Committee at Winnambool (about 12 miles north-west of Manangatang) they set out from Birchip in a four-in-hand conveyance and arrived at Winnambool at the expected time of arrival of the Standing Committee. Alas! nobody else arrived. They then moved to a camp four miles away where there was water for themselves and their horses. Next morning they set out for Lake Hattah to meet the Rail party. Again nobody turned up. So on to Ouyen. Similar results followed. Some consolation was gained from meeting with the Sea Lake start point supporters who were also bewildered by events. Returning to Birchip via Minapre enabled the party to find out what went wrong. The eight parliamentarians and their staff encountered heavy rain making the roads barely passable. When nightfall fell before they had reached their camp site at Winnambool, members of the party were obliged to walk ahead of the vehicles carrying lanterns to show the way. As the report stated they displayed *"devotion to duty worthy of all praise"* and set off for Lake Hattah early next morning in spite of the continuing heavy rain. They got within 10 miles of Lake Hattah when the track petered out. Ahead of them was nothing but mallee scrub and primeval space. With the rain falling in torrents they sought shelter. But where!! The driver knew of a slab shelter on the Murray, some indefinite distance away. Further troubles were awaiting the party. The horses began to tire and finally knocked up entirely. Drenched and hopelessly lost, the party did their best to shelter from

the merciless rain. They had no tent, nor food for the horses. Next day they decided to head for Euston on the Murray. They reached there on Sunday night from whence they returned to Melbourne.

Despite the misfortunes of their trip, all was not lost for the Birchip contingent. They found that the scrub line cleared for the survey from Minapre had taken a course other than that which the original Birchip expedition recommended. The line was passing through sand ridges and the least productive land between Minapre and Ouyen. Gorrie wasted no time in contacting the Railway department advising them that the contractor was off line. This was later confirmed by their engineer and the contractor was obliged to cut the track as originally directed. This fortuitous event was significant in the final analysis.

Gorrie, Neyland and Scott were indefatigable in their efforts to have the Cronomby extension approved. They inspected the proposed Sea Lake extension route as well as that from Hopetoun. Because both of these routes veered towards the Cronomby line to obtain the best land and to avoid sandhills (rather than sand ridges of lesser height) it proved conclusively that the Cronomby line was through the best land. It led Gorrie to conclude in his final report to the League in May 1900 that *"while political influence may finally decide against Cronomby, I am confident that taken on its merits and free from political influence the Cronomby route is the best for the colony of all the routes to Mildura"*.

On 16th July word was received at a concert in Birchip of the Standing Committee decision. A telegram was read announcing that the recommendation was for the Cronomby (Woomelang) extension. Amid rejoicing for the decision was an enthusiastic three cheers for Gorrie by the audience and a *"tiger"* for *"Bobs"*. The voting had been close with no fewer than eight divisions before a majority vote was established and the Ultima, Hopetoun and Albacutya proposals voted out. As the Woomelang extension had been carried, the Swan Hill and Sea Lake proposals were not subjected to a vote. The distance of the extension was 124 and a half miles to Yelta and the estimated cost was £275,145.

Several protest meetings were held by those opposed to the Woomelang route decision. The Bendigo and Ballarat Leagues lodged formal protests. The Mildura and Western District Association joined in the fray. However as many others favoured the recommendation, the Cronomby League resolved to seek a deputation to the Premier supporting the Standing Committee recommendations and the

Mildura Shire resolution "that it would be manifestly unfair to punish this growing settlement by further prolonging the battle of the routes".

The Minister for Railways, Mr Outtrim, referred the matter to his department for estimates of expected revenue and expenditure associated with the extension. This data would then go back to the Standing Committee for a final recommendation before it was placed before Parliament for decision. When the report was placed before Parliament in September 1900 it contained information that, based on a wage of 6/- per day, the cost of construction per mile would be £2251, the gradient would be 1:75 and the gauge would be 5' 3". The estimated annual revenue would total £13125 and operating costs of £19665 would leave a deficit of £6530. This latter loss would be offset by the £1250 guarantee from the Shire of Mildura based on the promised 1/- in the £ rate collection. The Bill did not have an easy passage through the Legislative Assembly. At this eleventh hour further moves to have other routes adopted by Parliament were put forth by various members of Parliament. Each one seemed to be motivated by the area they represented. One member, Mr Morrissey, stated, amid laughter, that "the construction of the railway would merely be a Red Sea passage to enable the present settlers at Mildura to sell out and get away from the place. But unfortunately the passage would not close up after the passing of the Israelites". Most speakers prefaced their remarks by saying that they did not wish to deprive Mildura of their rail link but then went into great detail why it should not proceed as recommended by the Standing Committee.

The debate was not resumed until October when further information was provided showing that 834 tons of dried fruit and 4170 tons of fresh fruit were despatched from Mildura in 1898. 20,000 cases of citrus and 100,000 gallons of wine were produced with 500 acres of vines planted. When the division of the House was finally taken on 17th Oct 1901, the voting was 37 votes for the Woomelang extension and 22 opposed to the motion. Again there were protest meetings and appeals against the decision of Parliament. These eventually faded into oblivion when the Minister for Railways said that he would have the Railway Standing Committee inquire into a link between Hopetoun and Sea Lake through Minapre. Gorrie was feted for his tremendous effort in successfully promoting the Woomelang extension. A copy of the testimonial presented to him is included at Appendix 8.

Work on construction eventually got under way with an estimated workforce of 400 men engaged on the project. The line was opened in stages. Woomelang to Hattah, a distance of 68.79 miles was opened for traffic on 15th Jan 1903. The next stage to Nowingi, 11.94 miles on 25th May 1903; to Yatpool 16.19 miles on 25th May 03 and finally to Mildura, which opened for traffic on 27th Oct 1903. The extension to Yelta did not take place for a number of years. The line went to Merbein in 1910 and Yelta was connected in 1925. Construction was not without its problems. Work was delayed for some time when only 20 miles short of completion through lack of funds to complete the task. A major strike also added to the delays.

JANUARY 11, 1899.

### THE PROPOSED MILDURA RAILWAY.

