

## TOILING ON THE TRACKS

The construction of the early trunk lines in Victoria was achieved under contract arrangements. There were many irregularities and heavy financial costs involved in this process. Consequently the government decided that future construction work should be carried out in a more efficient and economical manner. To this end, by Act 1171, it established the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Railways in 1890. This Committee directed the Railway Commissioners to introduce cost saving measures in future works, including the proposed extension from Donald to Birchip. As a result of this direction, the extension construction was carried out by the Railways Department itself, using day labour as the base for most of the work. It introduced the "butty gang" system for the earthworks and other tasks wherever possible. "Butty gang" is a term originating in the coal mines of Wales, wherein one man bid for a piece of work and then shared the reward of their labour with his mates. Known as "Wheeler" gangs, groups of 5, 6, or 7 men did work of the Donald-Birchip extension at so much per yard. It was measured each fortnight and payment made accordingly.

Extracts from the *Donald Express* of 1892 indicate the work conditions that prevailed in that era of rail construction. Most of the men engaged to work on the line were unemployed men from the metropolitan area. The works, in fact, were brought forward as an unemployment relief measure before the extension was passed by Parliament. The paper of 25th March 1892 stated that "men continue to complain of being underpaid and having to work ten hours a day for from 3/- to 5/- a day. The most absurd feature of the proceedings is that the ground is being picked instead of being ploughed". It went on to state that "this is on a par with a farmer digging up a wheat paddock with a spade and in these days of time and labour saving appliances is an outrage upon common sense".

The average earnings of the men employed on the track ranged from £1/9/- to £2 per week. For this they were obliged to work long hours; from daylight to dark, in the winter months. One concession that applied to the work was a bonus of one penny a yard during the early stages of construction due to the hard and dry nature of the earth they were working. This payment ceased when the rains came and the earth became softer.

The paper was outraged at the low wages and the "sweating" that the government was engaged in. Social problems ensued. It quoted "many were driven to dishonesty through not being able to pay their debts. The rest were driven to drink to counteract the paralysing effect of their hopeless, profitless, grinding toil. And yet there are influential labor members and temperance advocates in the House. The latter should remember that nothing begets intemperance in drink like intemperance in toil". Certainly the early rail workers lot was not a very happy one.

The financial savings as a result of this policy were considerable on the Donald-Birchip and Warracknabeal-Beulah extensions. According to Minister for Railways, Mr Wheeler, £100,000 was saved by this method of construction. The cost per mile was £2127, the lowest average cost so far achieved in the colony. This was attributable, in no small measure, to the use of day labour under the butty gang system and the usage of small contracts that were adopted in the process. Other factors, such as the free gift of land and the flat nature of the terrain were also important elements in achieving this cost effective outcome.

By the time the extension beyond Birchip to Cronomby Tanks was undertaken improvements in construction methods were introduced. Horses, ploughs and scoops were used in place of the back-breaking pick and shovel of the previous era. Drays replaced wheelbarrows as the medium of moving earth over a distance. Many farmers en route of this extension were engaged in the construction works. Mrs Eveline Thomson (nee Barber), of Kinnabulla, many years later recalled that the "farmers who gave their land free of cost for the line got their money back by putting men and teams of horses to work on it. Additionally they got the rail service as a bonus".

By 1901 when the Mildura extension from Cronomby Tanks started, the *Birchip Advertiser* of 18th Sep 1901 stated that employment for 200 men at each end of the line had commenced. It is simply a question of "how fast horses, ploughs and scoops can be obtained to do the work". Mr Jim Kelly of Watchupga recalled recently that he was told by his father that he put a team to work on the line to earn off-farm income during the slack times on the farm. It was an accepted practice of the day to "go on the track" to earn some cash income. However there were no boom times. Engineer-in-Chief Rennick stated that it was not intended to "pay labourers anything like 10/- a day".



*Norman Goodwin patrolling at the 373 kilometre mark (Curyo crossing) on his motorized trike in December 1987.*

*Railroad vehicle in use from 1988 for patrol duty on the tracks. This unit operates the section from St. Arnaud to Woomelang. It is equipped with radio communication and air-conditioning.*



However despite this inauspicious introduction to working on the track, a certain pride emerged in the course of time. Rail people united in the "rail family" philosophy of working as a team. This brotherhood was exemplified in most sections of the rail workforce. None more so than those who worked on the Permanent Way. Ganger R.J. (Bob) Harrowfield of Birchip took such pride in his work over all of the years that he worked on the track that he won several prizes for excellence. He was awarded First Prize for the Best Kept Length in the Northern and Midland District in 1924. This was followed by other prizes in 1934, 1935, 1938 and 1940. Members of his gang shared in the money that accompanied the awards. Bob and his family were well-known in the Birchip district and his son, Jack, still lives in the town. The Kinnabulla gang won First Prize for the Best Improved Length in the Ballarat District in 1950. The Birchip station staff won the prize for the Best Kept Station in the Western Region in 1986.

Life as a worker on the track is well illustrated by Mattie O'Neill in the course of an interview by Eddie Butler-Bowdon for his historical rail book "*In the Service*". Mattie, son of Jim and Jane O'Neill of Birchip, commenced his working life at Kinnabulla during the Depression years. He worked there for his uncle, Wilson Taylor, doing regular farm work. He later married Miss Kathleen Kilby, whose father was a railman and her mother, caretaker of the Kinnabulla station.

Mattie started work on the railways in 1938 as a member of the Watchupga gang. In the days when employment preference was given to married men, it was a tribute to his persistence that he got a start at all. The work kept him in top physical condition. There was no mechanization at all. Daily patrols of the entire length, nominally about ten miles, was done on a hand pulled trike. Much later in his working career trikes became motorized, with the worker providing the motor and the department supplying petrol and oil.

Sleepering and ballasting was hard work, particularly in the century plus heat and dust of mallee summers. It became an art form with the trade being learnt on the job "*through the soles of your feet and the palms of your hands*". Because the ballast was brought from down country as backloading during the wheat season, it had to be shovelled out of ordinary GY wagons rather than the specially designed wagons of more recent times. Gangs would combine to "*gallop out*" the ballast while the train moved slowly along the track to spread the ballast out as evenly as possible. This method saved much back breaking work when it was later being placed into position.

"Burning off" was a hazardous seasonal occupation. The entire length was chipped free of grass to a width of three feet along the fenceline by shovel to provide firebreaks. At frequent intervals a further strip three feet wide was made at right angles to the fence to cut the area to be burnt into sections. This arduous task was later modified by contracting out to local farmers who ploughed the breaks, wherever this was possible. There were no firefighting units. The gang depended on their judgment of conditions and a lump of soft leather on the end of a handle to control the flames. Mattie said that "*when you had a good day you would go as far into the night as possible; it was very tiring work*". For all this effort and worry about not having a fire get out of control, the ganger was paid an extra fourpence per hour. The extra money was mostly shared by the ganger purchasing a Tatts ticket for the gang.

Despite working a forty-eight hour week, annual leave was restricted to four days a year, rising by one day per year, to a maximum of eight. To qualify for this amount, work had to be continuous for the whole twelve months. This was often aborted by the authorities having a break intervene in the period of service, resulting in no annual leave at all.

Mattie was generous in his praise of Mr Harold Clapp, Chairman of Commissioners, and J. J. Brown, longterm Secretary of the Australian Railways Union. Mr Clapp was an excellent administrator and did much to improve service to the public and at the same time raise the esteem of all rail workers. He was very humane in his dealing with the workers and would turn a blind eye to anyone who was seeking to augment his lowly income in order to provide for his family when that practice could lead to dismissal. J. J. Brown was instrumental in making many gains in working conditions. He was successful in obtaining sick pay when none existed and in having temporary workers, euphemistically called "*supernumeries*", made permanent employees after two years of satisfactory service. Formerly, it was possible to be a "*supernumery*" for all of one's working life, carrying with it the uncertainty of tenure of employment.

Mattie worked at several places during his working life. From Watchupga, he went to Ouyen, on the Galah run; thence to Newlyn and to Avoca for fourteen years. At Avoca he was promoted to the rank of Ganger. He finished his rail career in the metropolitan area, retiring in 1980, then being Secretary of the Permanent Way Division of the ARU.

During the Depression years a track laying programme of relief works was carried out in this district. Dr Hanley of Birchip provided free treatment for any of the workmen requiring medical attention. Such humane action was in marked contrast to earlier procedures. During previous construction works, a workman on the line near Woomelang had his foot crushed when a rail was dropped on it. His workmates pushed him in a wheelbarrow into the town for treatment. On return to the job, the party had their pay docked for the period of absence.

Norman Goodwin has been working on the permanent way in the Birchip district since 1968 and has been a permanent railwayman since 1979. Norman started as a repairer in a traditional four-man gang, patrolling the Birchip-Watchem length by motor trike. He has been part of the revolution that has characterized track maintenance in recent years.

Holding a Ganger's certificate, Norman is presently classified as Track Inspector. Since August 1992 he patrols his length in the air-conditioned comfort of a road/rail vehicle covering an extensive area from Curyo to St. Arnaud. Not all the inspection routine is done from the driving seat. It is mandatory that two kilometres of track are walked each day by Norman and his mate. Thus four kilometres are closely inspected daily. Minor repairs such as tightening loose fishplates and dogs are attended to while anything of major repair is reported by radio to the mobile gang stationed at Donald for their attention. The main problems experienced are broken rails and bolts snapped during heavy frosts in winter and buckled rails caused by the heat of summer suns. Periodical upgrading of the line is done by major project works gangs equipped with heavy construction equipment and machinery. In fact, the size of the ballast now in use is incapable of being handled manually; nor could the long rails now in use on all major routes be handled other than by mechanical means. Over the course of years rails have been upgraded from the original 60 lbs per yard to 50 kilogram (110 lbs) per metre rails placed in the new loop at Birchip in 1989. On most mainline tracks, the 90 feet rails used for many decades have been replaced by rails of much longer length. The familiar clickety-clack sound made by the carriage wheels passing over rail joints has been reduced in some areas and eliminated altogether in other parts of the State. Passengers on the Vinlander trying to sleep during the night journey to Melbourne receive a welcome break from the environmentally unfriendly noise of the 270 feet long jointed rails when the train reaches Dunolly. From that point onwards, the 94 lbs per yard rails are welded into

continuous unjointed lengths. Speeds of up to 110 kilometres per hour are achieved on the southern sections of the Ballarat via Geelong route. Regular re-sleepering and ballasting of the track are the province of major works gangs.

Routines are occasionally broken by incidents of greater excitement. In Feb 1973, following a heavy downpour of rain, the track was washed away at Buloke. Similar but less spectacular flooding of the track occurred at Birchip on the same day when the line had to be breached in the vicinity of St. Mary's School to allow the trapped floodwaters to escape. No passenger trains or carriages have been de-railed but occasionally a wagon or two from freight trains have jumped off the tracks. Between Kinnabulla and Curyo a wheat rain spilled its contents for hundreds of yards when several GY's came off the rails in December 1981. Flood rains in Feb 1911 and Dec. 1930 caused washaways at Watchupga and Kinnabulla creating delays to the passenger services.

The presence of railway people and their families at every station is no more. Railway families were of much social and commercial benefit to local communities. Their children played an important role in keeping up the numbers of pupils at schools, particularly rural schools. The continuing decline of the rural population is, in part, due to the changed work practices and policies of government departments, including the Railway Department, VicRail, V/Line, Public Transport Corporation or whatever other name is currently being used to designate the rail system operating in country areas.

## CHAPTER 9

# SPECIAL TRAINS

Special trains have always been a feature of rail services. In the early days of rail when that mode of transport was at its peak, there were many special trains, cheap excursions and other extra services. Within days of the rail reaching Birchip from Donald and before it was officially opened for traffic, a special train was organized for a sports event. The opening of the extension from Birchip to Cronomby Tanks was celebrated with a special excursion to Woomelang. Similarly, when the rail to Mildura was completed, the dignitaries of the State travelled in a special train to that point to mark the historic occasion. Governors and Princes have valued this utility to convey them and to provide accommodation during official visits to distant parts of the State.

The suggestion for a special train to run from Donald for the Birchip races on 24th February 1893 was put forward before the line was officially opened for traffic. The Railway Commissioners were receptive to the patronage and advised that it was possible to organize a special train given two or three days notice. However there is no evidence that this train actually ran. The first special train known to emanate from Birchip took place on St. Patrick's Day 1893. It took patrons to the St. Patrick's Day sports at Donald. The train consisted of two mallee carriages. It left Birchip at 9.20am and was scheduled to arrive at Donald at 11.05am, returning at 10.25pm that night. Tickets cost 4/4 return. No concession was given for passengers joining the train at intermediate stations.

The use of special trains for sporting events was a feature of this area for many years. Firstly initiated by the North-West League, the fore-runner of the North-Central League (est 1928), a line competition comprised teams located on the between from Woomelang and St. Arnaud. In the first instance it ran on Wednesdays, the half-holiday for those towns at that time. This allowed many of the better footballers to play in this competition on Wednesdays and for other teams on the Saturday. The competition ran during the 1920's and up until the beginning of WW2. The competition comprised Woomelang, Birchip, Watchem Donald and St. Arnaud for most of the time but changed composition at different times. Curyo and Litchfield also fielded teams during some of this period. It was a most convenient form of transport and accommodated most situations. On one historic occasion it was found when the train reached Morton Plains, that one of Birchip's star players, Austie Hogan,

had been left behind. So what did the train crew do about it?. They reversed the train back to Watchem and collected the missing player. No official complaint was recorded.

One of the highlights of the social and sporting year was the annual excursion to Mildura. Commencing in 1904, over 200 people made the journey from Donald northwards to compete in a variety of sporting and social events. The train, due to arrive at 8pm was half an hour early, a rare occurrence indeed. The welcoming party was caught unprepared and was not present when the train arrived. However shortly afterwards, headed by the Rifle Club Band, the Mayor and corps arrived to give a true Mildura welcome. A dance and social was held that night. After an inspection of the town carried out in drags, buggies and gigs on the following morning, sporting events of football, rifle shooting and bowls were played with Birchip successful in all events. A monster tea was provided that night and the train departed at 8pm for the return trip. The annual excursion took place until the beginning of WW1.

Show specials were a feature of earlier times. In August 1893, Agricultural and Pastoral Society President, Mr Joseph Lockwood, advised that a special train could be run for the Show, which was Birchip's first, if a guarantee was paid to the Commissioners. The amount required was £25 for a train commencing at St. Arnaud and £20 for one beginning at Donald. The Committee decided to opt for the Donald train. It ran on 8th Sep 1893, commencing from Donald and was scheduled to arrive at Birchip at 11am. The return journey commenced at 6.30pm. The "specials" tradition was continued for many years. The regular service was able to be utilized for those coming from the north but a special was required to provide for those travelling from the south. The practice fell into disuse when cars became the universal transport mode. However in 1933 the roads were so wet that a Show special ran from Woomelang bringing supporters and entries. Due to the lack of horse carriages, draught horses stood in open waggons for the trip without incident. As far as is known this was the last special to run for the Birchip Show.

### **WATER TRAINS:**

From the point of necessity and, indeed survival, water trains were the most important specials to serve the community. As early as March 1896, requests were made for the Railways Department to bring the precious liquid to the parched areas of the north. The request for free water was denied by the Minister but fixed the rate at 5/- per 400 gallons as being a



reasonable charge. A meeting of townspeople and ratepayers appointed a deputation to wait on the Minister to have the water provided free of cost. They were partially successful. The 5/- charge remained but for a truck load rather than for each 400 gallons of it. Water trains were a feature of life for many years. The 1902 drought was particularly severe and water trains ran daily. A request for two trains a day was not granted. The Shire, or more precisely, the Birchip Water Trust (comprised of Shire Councillors) constructed dams at all of the railway stations in the district. Hand pumps were erected on stands. The arrival of the water train was a major event. Farmers from miles around wended their way to the railhead to collect their needs. Square iron tanks of 400 gallon capacity, mounted on waggons, usually two per waggon, were used to transport the water back to farms. It was not intended that the water would be used for human consumption but so scarce was the vital commodity that, in fact, it was used for drinking and cooking in many homes. The Water Trust recognized this emergency and fenced in the dams to keep out dogs, wild animals and straying cattle from poaching the precious liquid and fouling the water. So that some semblance of order was maintained and farmers and townspeople received an equitable share of water, Caretakers were appointed at each site. A charge of threepence per 100 gallons was set to cover costs. The warden received twopence and one penny went towards the cost of the water. There was no sophisticated method of discharge from the trains. Earth drains ran alongside the track and the train tank taps were turned on. Water disgorged from the rail water tanks and raced down the drain into the dam. It naturally was not of the purest quality but was welcomed as a means of survival. In some cases the drains were lined with sheets of galvanized iron shaped to form a trough. The last water trains to serve the Birchip district was in 1912. The first part of that year was very dry but improved later to turn out to be a reasonable season. The construction of the Wimmera-Mallee channel system was speeded up by the Government as a means of providing a regular and assured water supply for the mallee districts. The 1902 drought had increased the urgency of such a measure. The water trucks were still in usage well into the 1960's as a source of supply for railway families living in departmental residences where no town supply existed such as at Kinnabulla, Curyo and Watchupga.

#### **STOCK SPECIALS:**

Special sheep trains were used freely for the transportation of stock, notably sheep. *The Birchip Advertiser* of 14th Nov 1906 reported that four special

trains were used on the one day to move 100 trucks of stock, probably lambs, between Birchip and St. Amaud, to the freezing works. The sheep trucks normally carried 132 fat lambs. All available trucks were requisitioned for the task.

In times of drought, the movement of sheep out of the area for agistment to better parts of the State, was almost exclusively done per medium of special sheep trains. A free rail pass was accorded one drover or attendant to travel with drought stock. Again, when the drought or lean period passed, stock were returned to the area in reverse fashion. The large stock companies often financed whole train loads of sheep, for sale to approved clients or groups of clients at the one location. This also applied to cattle but to a much lesser degree in this area. At one time or another all of the stations in this district would have experienced special trainloads arriving for offloading for local farmers or groups of farmers as arranged by local agents. The last sheep special to arrive at Birchip was in the 1960's when the late Jack McLean bought a trainload of sheep out of Yelta to stock his Woolbrook and Winyimbah properties.

#### **BETTER FARMING TRAINS:**

Better Farming Trains were introduced in 1924 to travel around rural Victoria demonstrating to farmers recent innovations, methods and techniques to increase farm productivity. Lectures and displays were essential elements of the brightly coloured yellow train which toured country Victoria. It stopped at strategic points and attracted large crowds eager to learn of the newest scientific and farming techniques. Special carriages and waggons were modified to carry top quality sheep, cattle, horses, pigs and poultry. Crop displays included fodder, cereals and also potatoes. The mobile lecture room was a carriage converted to accommodate 80 persons. Fertilisers were a special feature showing the beneficial effect of its correct application and usage. The lecturers were mainly officers of the Department of Agriculture, including Professor Wadham, an acknowledged authority on matters of agriculture and rural commerce.

In 1925 a special women's section was added to the train. For this purpose two carriages were rebuilt as lecture rooms. One was a mothercraft and child welfare unit and the other, which accommodated 60 persons, was equipped with an up-to-date kitchen and cooking equipment to provide for cooking demonstrations. A further car known as the Public Health car was added at the request of the Health Department in an effort to upgrade practices and thus improve the general health of country people.

Initially four to six trips were made each year but with the onset of the Depression this was reduced to one per year. The service ceased in 1936. The Better Farming Train visited Birchip several times during its progress throughout the State. It was shunted into the loop and stayed there for the entire day. Later on, one of the passing trains coupled on to it and took it to the next port of call. It was always well patronised. The last known trip to Birchip was made in 1928.

### **RESO TRAINS:**

The full name of the train was "*Victorian National Resources Development Train*". It was shortened to "*Reso*" for popular usage and the clients were known as Resonians. The Reso trains were specially equipped to enable leaders of industry in the metropolitan area to travel throughout the countryside for several days at a time to gain a better knowledge of country people, their prospects and problems. It was a Railway Commissioner initiative to bring country and city closer together and commenced in 1922. The train was self contained with catering and accommodation facilities and described as a first-class hotel on wheels.

The Reso train visited Birchip on 23rd July 1926. It arrived at Birchip at 8.45am and had a list of 69 passengers from a wide variety of backgrounds including Members of Parliament, journalists from Melbourne daily papers, bankers and others with some affiliation with rural production such as merchants and manufacturers. The party was welcomed by Cr Lockwood and the cavalcade of local cars, impressed for the occasion, conveyed the tourists around the town and thence out to Porter's farm at Ballapur to witness a farm demonstration of quite some proportions. Eight teams of horses, including some of ten horses, took part in the exhibition. A tour brochure produced for the visitors described in detail the journey and places of historic interest en route, including the Wimbirchip Station and Wild Dog Fence. On the way back to Birchip the party travelled via Kelly's Plains, Kinnabulla and Karyrie to finally depart Birchip at midday. Many letters of appreciation were received by Mr Lockwood thanking him and the Shire Council for so successfully organizing the visit. These included one from Chairman of Commissioners, Mr Harold Clapp, whose was the instigator of the train.

### **WIRTHS' CIRCUS:**

Prominent in the minds of the children of the era of rail dominance was the biennial visit of Wirths' Circus. The entire circus travelled by special train. Animals had their special wagons while the elephants travelled in open wagons swaying continuously to and fro with the momentum of the movement of the train. On

arrival at Birchip (and other stopping places) they became the beasts of burden to pull the crates of other animals into place for the zoo section of the Childrens Special matinee. On one occasion the goods platform was cluttered with bales of comsacks, each weighing 700 lbs and impeding the unloading process. On command from its keeper, one of the larger elephants put its head against one of the bales and kept pushing it and all of the other bales in the line of motion out of the way, some going overboard onto the ground in a wholesale clearance of the platform.

The first known visit of Wirths' to Birchip took place on Tuesday, 1st October 1907. It was advertised, inevitably, as "*The Greatest Show on Earth*" for one night only near the Railway Station. It came in three sections in what was described as the largest train ever brought to Birchip. The last recorded visit by train was on 27th November 1961. The Big Top, capable of seating 3500 people was erected in the station yard for the "*incomparable*" night performance. During the afternoon, a zoo, featuring a newly born baby camel, was open for the children. After the show was over, it was dismantled, re-loaded and prepared for travel to the next stop for another performance the next night. The circus troupe lived on the train in their special carriages during the country tour.

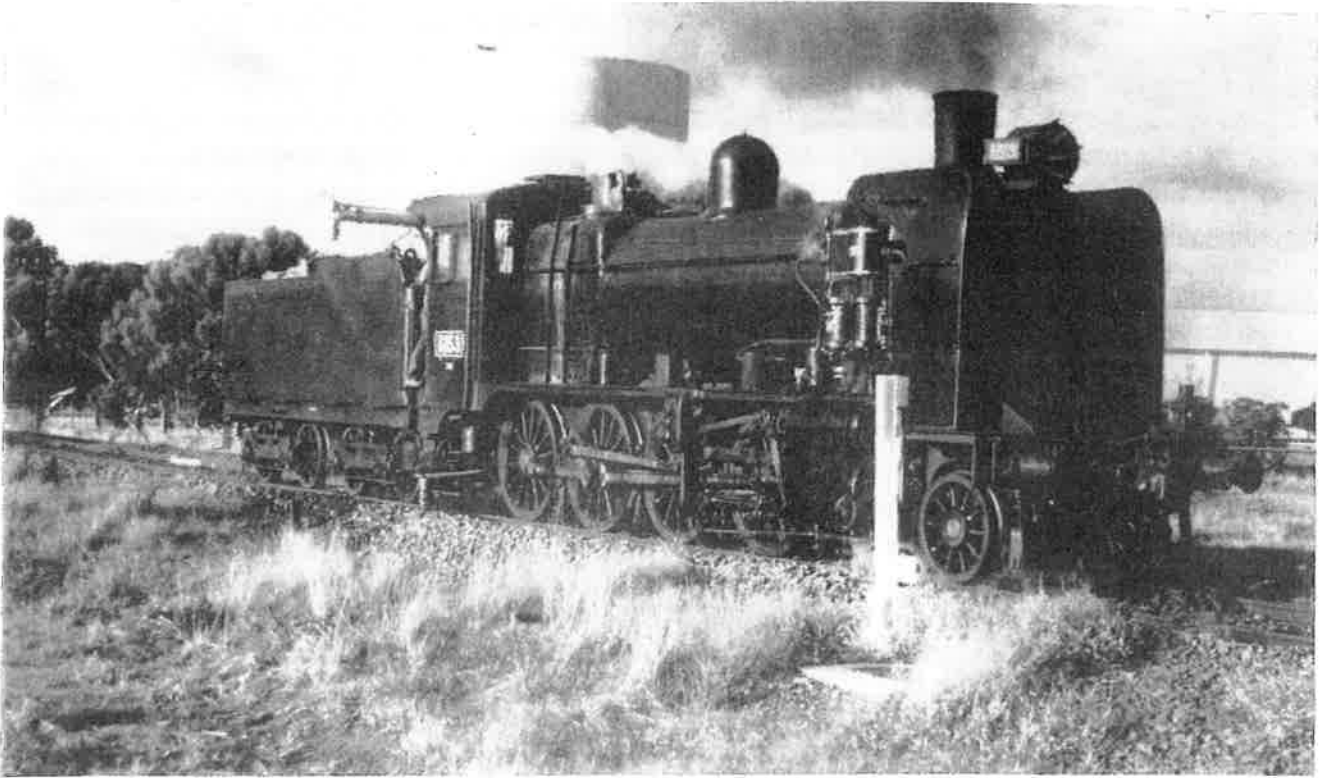
Although Wirths' was the best known of all the circuses that travelled by train, it was not the first to come to Birchip by rail. In October 1903, Fitzgerald Brothers arrived and staged a one-night performance to a moderate crowd in the Birchip station-yard.

### **CENTENARY AND JUBILEE TRAIN:**

The centenary of the establishment of the Victorian Parliament and the Golden Jubilee of the Commonwealth took place in 1951. A special train of ten specially fitted out cars travelled the State as a mobile exhibition of development during that period of time. The displays featured all of the important aspects of both State and Commonwealth progress. Defence forces of RAAF, RAN and AMF, Post-Master General's Department (now divided into Telecom and Australia Post) Snowy River project, Immigration, Education, Art, Performing Arts and Art treasures, Victoria Police, Public Works, Agriculture, Crown Lands, Forestry. Country Fire Authority, Highways and Roads, State Rivers and Water Supply, Health, Railways, Mines and Fisheries were all graphically depicted with models presented for public scrutiny.

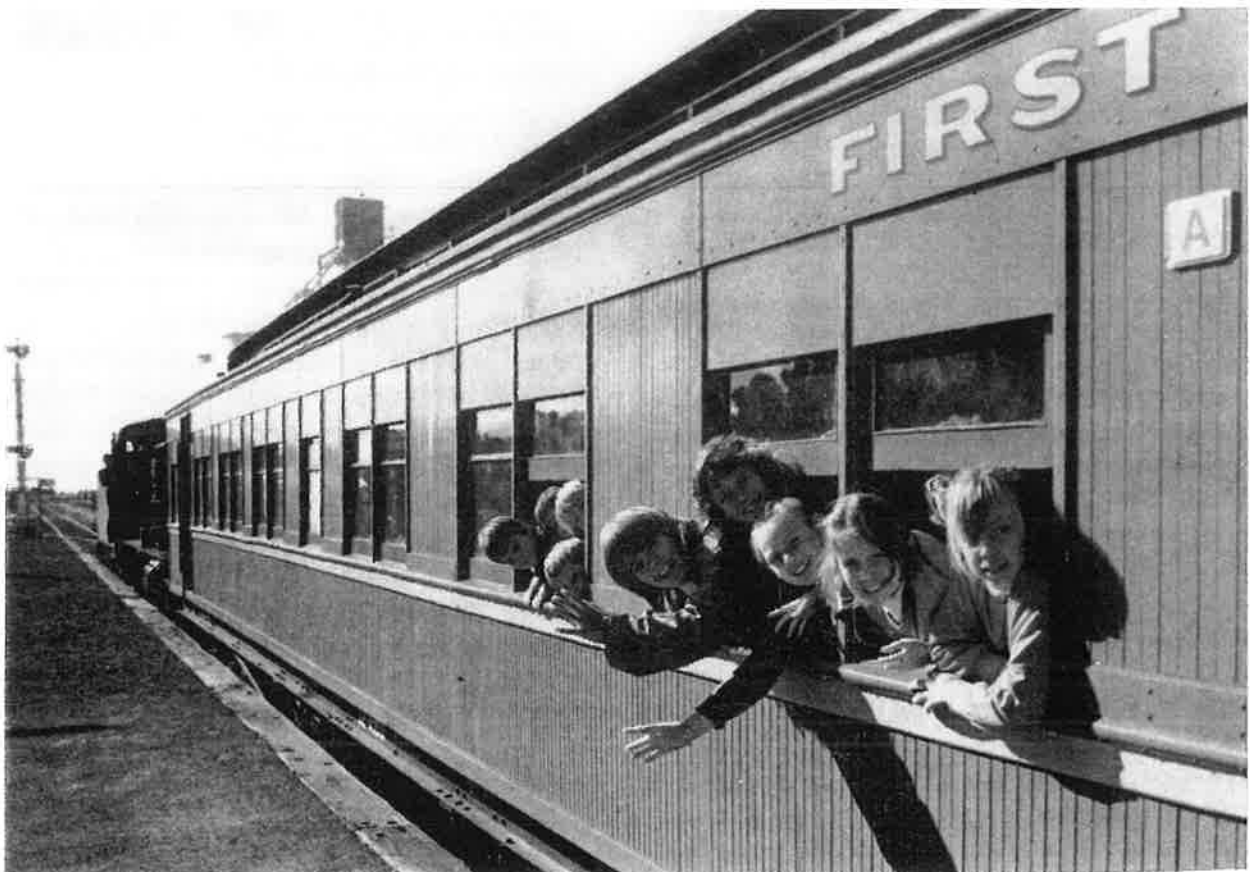
The train itinerary included a day long stop at Birchip on 28th May 1951. Additional to the train display, a marquee was erected in the station yard adjacent to





*K153 taking on water at Birchip on 29th May, 1987 during its visit to country Victoria.*

*K153 moving tender first from the Birchip station en route to Watchupga with 410 school children aboard. It was part of a State-wide steam rail project in 1987.*



the train. As well as being used during the day for display purposes, a free concert was presented that night. Approximately 1450 people attended the displays. The concert at night featuring famous soprano, Strella Wilson, was attended by 1500 people. State and Federal Governments and all relevant departments met the cost of the exercise. The train had a staff of 70 personnel.

A subsequent essay competition conducted by the Birchip HES was won by Wendy Peters.

### **SCHOOL CHILDREN'S STEAM SPECIAL:**

On 29th May 1987, the schoolchildren of Birchip and district were treated to a special occasion by courtesy of Steam Rail enthusiasts. On that day, 410 excited children from schools at Watchem, Wilkur South, Nullawil, St. Mary's, Kindergarten and the Birchip Community Education Complex were taken on a joy ride from Birchip to Watchupga aboard the K153 Special. Drawn by K class locomotive, K153, many experienced their first, possibly their only, trip by steam train. Proceeding tender first, the train travelled out as far as Watchupga. There K153 shunted around to return to the front of the train for the funnel-first trip back to Birchip.

The Birchip excursion was arranged by Mr Iain Atkin, a member of Steam Rail. It was part of a two State project. After leaving Birchip the train went to Mildura where it joined with a similar train that had been touring South Australia. The returning train from Mildura to Melbourne consisted of 12 carriages and the two K class locomotives.

### **V.I.P SPECIALS:**

The Railway Commissioners made annual visits on all lines within the State. This was accomplished per medium of *"The Commissioners Special"*. It comprised sleeping and catering facilities and was drawn by Engine No 100 until it was taken out of service in 1916. The replacement steam engine was of antique origins. It was always presented in full glory of paint and polish for the grand tour. The party normally included the Chief Commissioner and heads of the various departments. In the days of Harold Clapp, a great promoter of *"Eat More Fruit"*, children who met the train were always assured of being given at least one piece of the fruit on special. Apples and oranges were the chief varieties dispensed. Special Peach and Pear trains ran for for some years but not in conjunction with the Commissioners visit. They were more of a sales type commercial activity of the Goulburn Valley orchardists.

The advent of diesel locomotion and the removal of coal bunkering and watering facilities meant a changeover of engines. Mr Harold Glowrey, Chairman and General Manager of the Grain Elevators Board, always travelled with the Commissioners on the Mildura line. While the Railway officers did their inspections and received deputations, Mr Glowrey walked across the tracks to inspect the silo installations and inquire as to the season's prospects or other matters relative to the times.

The Governors of the State have a special car and carriage for their personal usage on Vice-Regal occasions. It would not be possible to detail the number of visits made to Birchip by the various Governors. Sir Rohan Delacombe was known to arrive unheralded and unsung on many occasions as he indulged his great love of field shooting in the district. The only evidence of his presence was the sight of the Vice-Regal carriage in the station-yard and the presence of the duty policeman on site. Sir Brian and Lady Murray came by rail to Birchip for the centenary of the town in 1982 but the chauffeur drove the Rolls Royce up for the party to attend the official functions and tour of the Shire. One local dog was known to disgrace itself by jumping up on the boot and leaving his muddy imprints all over the shining bodywork. Much to the relief of the dog's owner, the driver responded with a good grace.

During the centenary celebration of the State in 1934, Prince Henry, Duke of Gloucester, used rail to visit this part of the State. Although he did not include Birchip in his official programme, the townspeople and dignitaries made the trip to Woomelang by special train to await the arrival of His Highness at that point. Passengers were picked up at Karyrie, Kinnabulla, Curyo and Watchupga along the way. After an inspection of the Guard of Honour of WW1 veterans and Boy Scouts, the train moved off to Mildura for further ceremonies to mark the historic occasion. The Birchip visitors to Woomelang enjoyed a sports afternoon before returning to Birchip with stops at all intervening stations en route.

### **ORDINARY "SPECIALS":**

As mentioned in the beginning, special trains were frequently used in the early days of settlement as the only practical means of transport. The word *"special"* is something more mundane than the title suggests. Trains did not run very frequently and therefore any train that was not a scheduled or time-tabled one was regarded as a *"special"*. They never rated capital letters in the lexicon of rail jargon. Nevertheless they were of great significance and were always well patronized.

As a guarantee of money was required to meet possible losses of revenue, the sponsors made sure that they were well used and therefore at no cost other than the arranging of the train. Excursions to Melbourne and Ballarat in early 1900's are good examples. Eighty passengers entrained at Birchip for a Farmers Excursion to Melbourne in February 1900. On a similar excursion in March 1905, 70 passengers embarked between Watchugga and Birchip. This number was outscored in March 1908 when 115 passengers entrained at Birchip for the Ballarat excursion. The Ballarat excursion was in connection with the annual Railway Picnic.

The "special" trains were a feature of rail travel right up until WW2. Thereafter they disappeared from the railway scene as the motor car gained ascendancy.

*Crowd, including Resonians, who travelled by special RESO train, attending a farm demonstration at Porters farm at Ballapur in July 1926. Cr. Joseph Lockwood is the figure on the extreme right in the foreground.*

