

## CHAPTER 10

# OPERATIONS AND TIMETABLES

### RAIL FREIGHT RATES

One of the conditions applying to the construction of country lines from the period commencing with the Donald-Birchip extension was that a surcharge be applied to all traffic until the cost of operations and interest on construction was recouped out of revenue derived from operations.

In the proceedings prior to construction of the above extensions many offers of willingness to pay extra for the convenience of rail services were promoted. However once the service was provided equally as many efforts were made to have the additional impost removed. Indeed, even prior to the official opening of the Birchip extension, the Birchip Progress Association wrote on 23rd Feb 1893 to the Railways Department seeking relief from the special goods freight rate. This was denied by Minister Wheeler. A further request in September of the same year received a similar response. However this time a public meeting was held to protest the additional charges. Mr Simpson stated that he paid 15/- freight on a hundredweight of nails that cost 16/- to buy in Melbourne. He also paid £1/6/9 freight for a consignment of coal costing 8/6 to buy. The meeting registered its discontent as *"a great injustice to a struggling community"* adding that an additional threepence to fivepence per bushel was added to the costs of producing wheat. A deputation was arranged. Editor Grantley devoted a lengthy editorial to the subject regarding the present system as *"like a pendulum that refuses to oscillate because its swing is too great and is too rigid"* going on to comment on extravagances occurring in rail services elsewhere while *"squeezing our hearts out in the fulfilment of their mission to make income balance expenditure in the Railway Department"*. However this emotive approach cut no ice with the Commissioners and the special rates remained. The Commissioners contended that the 4% interest charge on construction costs had not been achieved. Additionally the new lines had attracted business away from previously constructed lines. In practical terms it became an economic proposition for flour to be railed to Wycheproof and roaded by bullock waggon to Birchip rather than being railed direct.

The battle for rates to be reduced to the level applying in other areas continued unabated through 1894. The

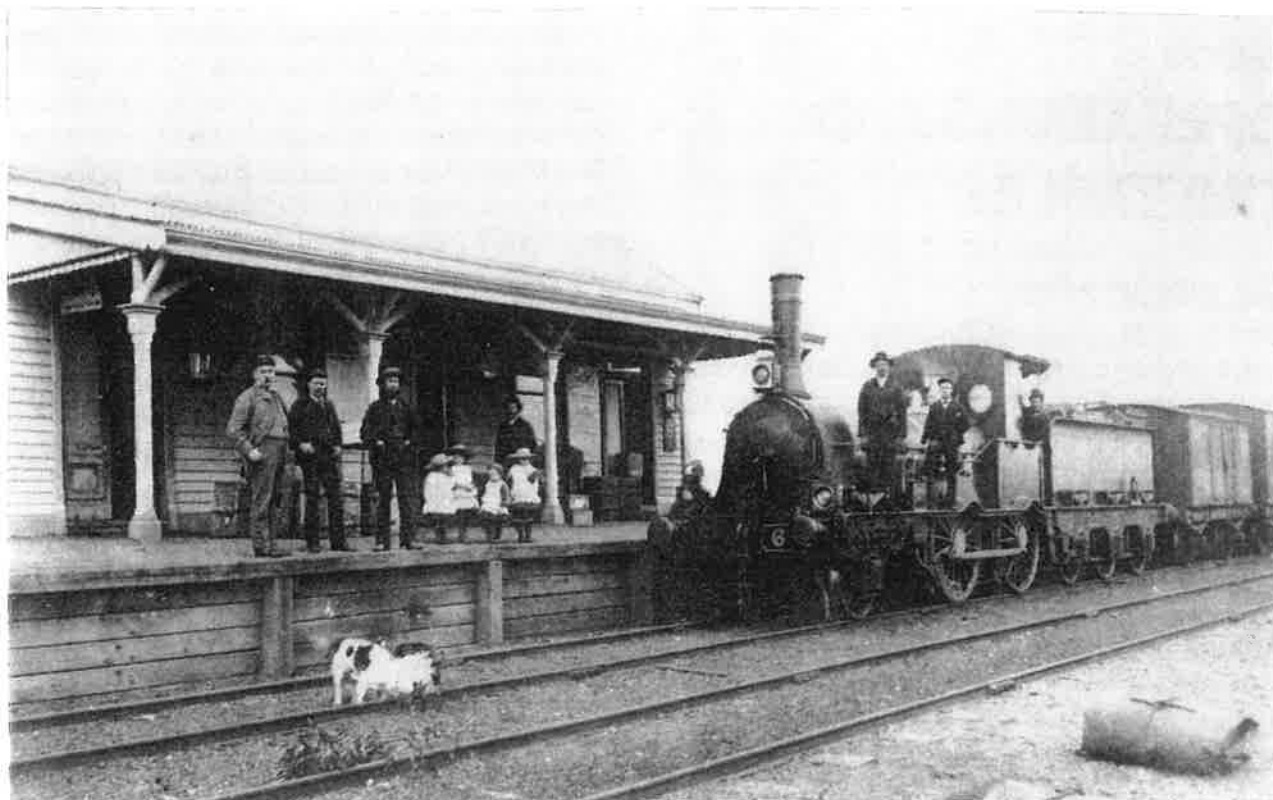
line was showing a profit but insufficient to also pay the interest costs of construction. In April the Commissioners advised the St. Arnaud Shire Council that it could not see its way to reduce grain freights. The Minister further advised that until the whole matter had been reviewed by Parliament it was useless for a grain freight deputation to wait on him. The squeaky wheel was getting some attention by July when a Bill was introduced into Parliament to abolish the double rates. However it was a sleight of hand move. The rates on wheat were reduced by sixpence a ton for loads over 8 tons but the general rate for other goods was increased from 71/- per ton to 76/- per ton. This action further outraged Birchip traders and farmers who protested that the line was paying profitably.

*The Age* newspaper of 5th October 94 disproved the Birchip contention of the line being a paying proposition. It quoted freight on wheat to Melbourne at 16/4 per ton for the first 200 miles, 2/8 extra for the next 100 miles and a further 2/1 for the next 100 miles. A total of 19/- per ton ex Birchip was thought to be reasonable. If the special rates had not been applied a loss of several hundred pounds would have been incurred.

Finally in December 1894 the special rates were abolished on the Birchip and Beulah extensions. The resultant saving was 1/8 per ton (approx one halfpenny per bushel) Freight on cattle was reduced by 8/10 per truck.

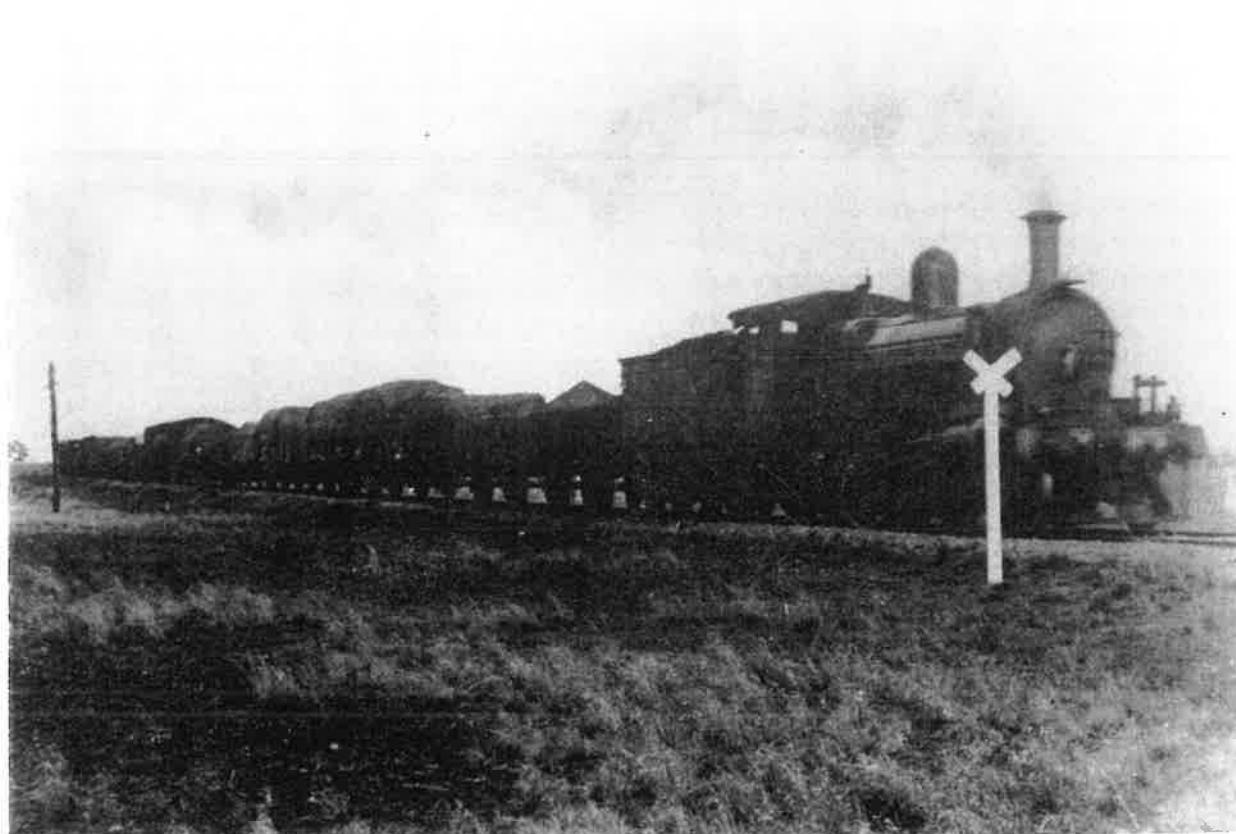
Similar episodes took place on the Birchip-Woomelang extension regarding the special rates applying on that section. In September 1901 the Birchip Shire Council requested the Railway Department to abolish the special rates. Local member Taverner agreed to use his best influences to have the matter redressed. However the Minister was intransigent despite the advice of the Commissioners that it should be removed. It is not known when the special rates were removed from this section but in January 1912 a reduction in freight rates enabled trucks of mallee roots from Watchupga, Curyo or Kinnabulla to be sent to Melbourne for 7/- as against the previous rate of 10/- per truck. Later that year all special rates were abolished by Act of Parliament.

In order to better compete with the growing road transport competition, the Commissioners made special contracts with provincial cities and large country towns for the exclusive rights to carry goods. The Birchip Traders sought to have the same privilege extended to them in 1932. However, Chief Commissioner Clapp, in the words used in the *Birchip Advertiser* of the time gave the idea a *"positive*



*Birchip station with goods train headed by J6, a 2-4-0 locomotive built in England in 1859. Photo taken C1900.*

*A mixed goods train of four-wheelers headed by "D" class locomotive steaming down the rise two miles on the Kinnabulla side of Birchip. Photo taken by Mr. Eddie Kirsch in 1919.*



*negative*". Shortly afterwards the Commissioners relented on the basis of the alarming competition railways were facing with road transport and agreed to similar concessions being provided as that being granted to major towns and cities.

Freight rates have always been a source of contention. As bulk grain is the only commodity of any significance to be railed in this district it is interesting to note that the current rates for bulk wheat is \$19.60 per tonne to Geelong ex Birchip. As a Central Receiving Point it receives concessional rates. Kinnabulla, not being a CRP, has a freight rate of \$21.30 per tonne, whereas Morton Plains receives similar treatment to Birchip in the matter of freight. This imbalance in charges has led to distortion in the delivery pattern of grain from the previous defined silo areas system. Barley, being of greater bulk than wheat, is charged at a higher rate per tonne. Peas, of similar volumetric dimensions to wheat, is charged the same freight as that grain.

## OPERATIONS AND TIMETABLES

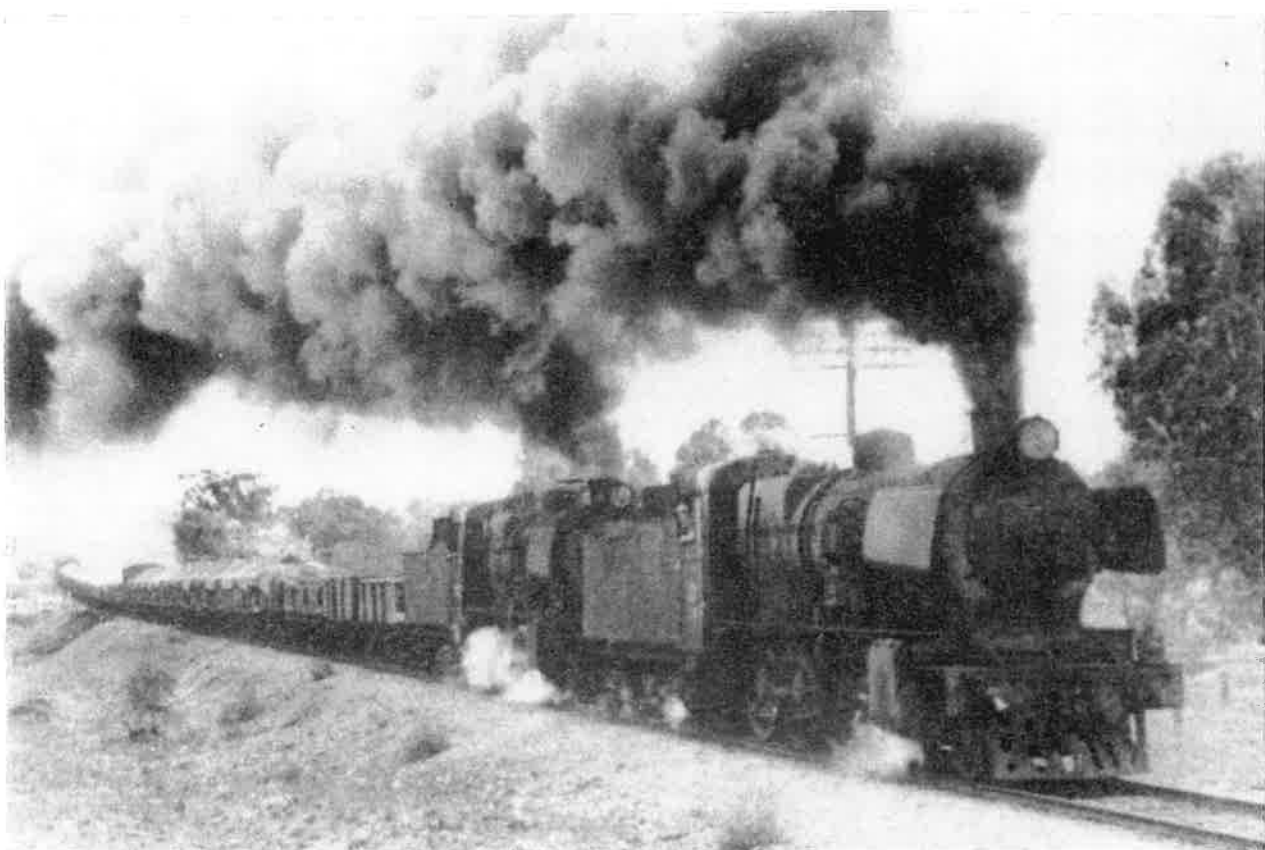
Neil Fietz arrived at Birchip in December 1965 to take up the position of Assistant Station Master. He remained in that role for the next twenty-five years. During that period he saw many changes to the system of operations. On arrival Neil was a member of a staff of four—Station Master, himself as ASM, Lad Porter and Yardman. At the end of his service in 1990, Neil was the only duty officer. Sadly, today the station is entirely unmanned.

The present state of affairs is partly due to economic necessity and partly to technological advances that have made the transition achievable. The decline in revenue and patronage due to the ascendancy of road transport in all but the carriage of bulk commodities, occurred over a long period of time. Passenger traffic has dramatically diminished from an all time high of 11176 outward journeys in 1910/11 to 168 in the year 1991/92. Passenger revenue in 1910/11 was £2176.19.1. Train bookings are now made at the general store of Graeme Taylor in the main street. In addition to making bookings for journeys commencing at Birchip, Mr Taylor also issues tickets for local people making journeys commencing at Donald and Wycheproof. Since 3rd June 1990 road coaches replaced trains on the Mildura-Melbourne route on two nights per week each way. The coaches adhere to the same time-table as trains. The present passenger fare to Melbourne is \$113.60 first class return and \$81.20 economy class return. Single fare is half the return fare, while concession rates are half the economy charge. No specific class, first, economy or concession is provided for on the coach service.

Previous to the introduction of the coach service a mixture of "*Sunraysia*" daylight and "*Vineland*" night trains ran the Melbourne-Mildura link. The daylight service lost its impact after an initial tourist attraction and was discontinued mainly for lack of patronage.

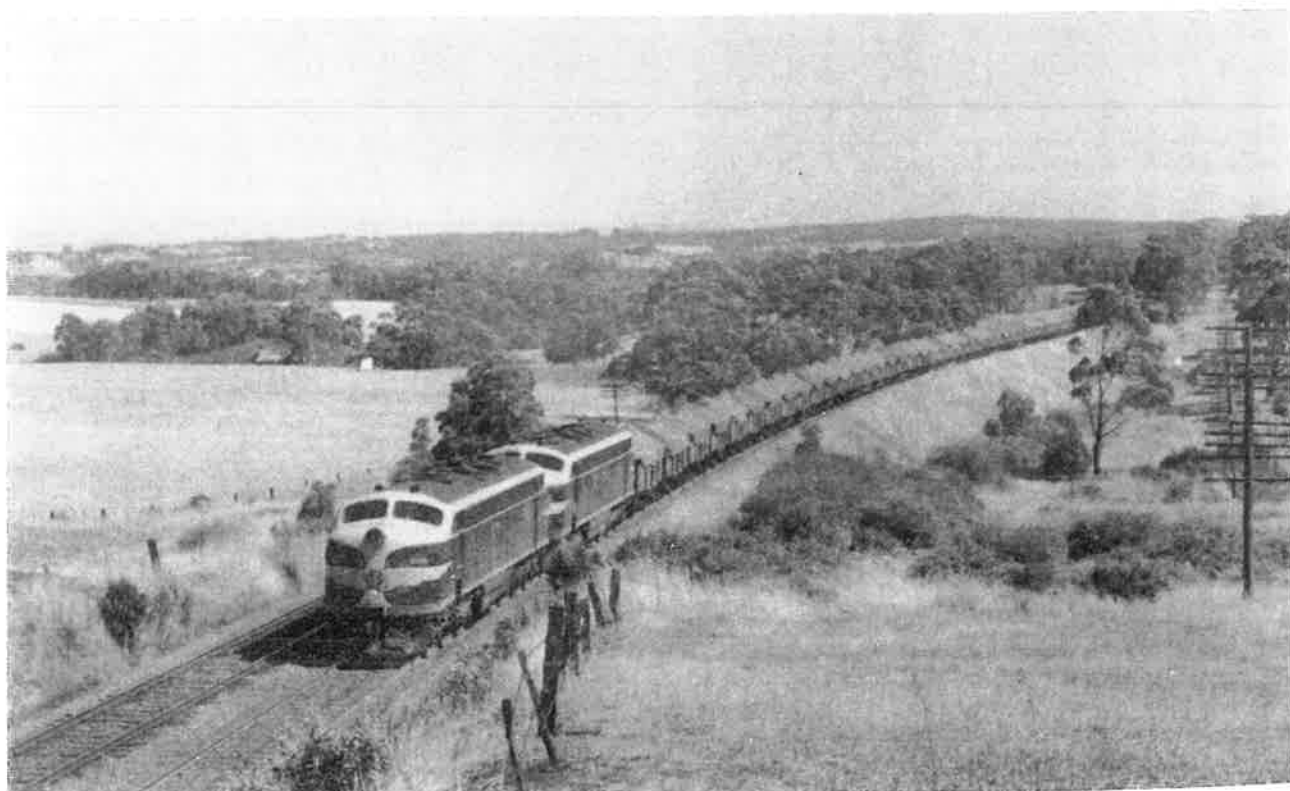
Birchip owes its present rail existence to being located on the Melbourne-Mildura line. If it was not so situated, there is no doubt that it would have fared no differently to countless other stations of yesteryear and could well be just a name on a map. In the course of the past almost one hundred years many modifications have been introduced into the operations of this section of the Mildura corridor. These are well illustrated in the accompanying Historiogram compiled by noted railway historian, Mr Jack McLean of Box Hill. Travel times have also been reduced significantly as Jack so amply and clearly illustrates in the graph he prepared at Appendix 9. Details of early and present timetables are included at Appendix 10. Without going into a dreary list of data, it will be noted that the very first train journeys between Melbourne and Birchip and vice-versa in 1893 occupied twelve and a quarter hours on the UP journey and eleven hours and fifty-five minutes on the DOWN trip. The route taken was via Maryborough-Castlemaine with change of train at Castlemaine and sometimes also at Maryborough. When the extension to Woomelang opened for traffic in 1899, the journey was extended to points north of Birchip. Travel times taken to and from Birchip with a Woomelang termination were basically the same each way. Trains were of a mixed composition of passenger cars and goods wagons. Leaving Birchip at 6.40pm, the run to Karyie took 25 minutes for a fare of 1/1 first class single. Kinnabulla was reached 15 minutes later for an extra ninepence. Curyo, a further 14 minutes away called, for an additional sixpence for a total of 2/4. Watchupga was the next port of call and took 28 minutes to reach with a fare of 3/7 from Birchip. The train terminated at Woomelang at 8.30pm after a total journey of 26 and a half miles occupying one hour and fifty minutes including stops at all stations. If shunting was done it was often much later on arrival. Second class fares were two-thirds of the cost of first class and a return journey was priced at one and a half times the single fare. Thus a second class return fare was the same price as a single first class fare.

When Mildura became the terminal of the line in 1903 the total journey from the Murray to the sea occupied twenty-three hours. Those early trains stopped at all stations along the way picking up and unloading passengers, bags of mail, cans of cream, boxes of eggs, sheep and rabbit skins, parcels, groceries and



*The 0900 Up goods hauling its load up Simpson's Crossing, 4 miles from Maryborough with Driver Alan Kenley and Fireman Bill Higgins in the lead loco C7 and Driver Cassidy and Fireman Cliff Smith in the Banker C10. Photo taken in June 1960.*

*A train load of G.Y. wagons full of Mallee wheat being hauled up Warrenheip bank headed for Geelong in 1960. Two diesel electric double-ended "B" classes provide the locomotion.*



a variety other items. It is interesting to note that the Special train which took parliamentarians and other dignitaries to Mildura for the official opening of the line did not stop at any of the wayside stations and completed the journey from Melbourne to Birchip in eight hours thirteen minutes actual travelling time. It was a schedule that was not again achieved for some thirty years.

Editor Grantley of the *Birchip Advertiser* was always ready to highlight the deficiencies of the rail service. In one of his editorials on the slowness of the passenger trains he told of a buggy and pair with three passengers and luggage beating the Donald-Birchip train trip of 30 miles by 25 minutes. He also recorded as true a conversation overheard between a passenger and a conductor which ran; Conductor, *"Well sir, I've been on this train, man and boy, for twenty-five years"*. Passenger was heard to reply *"Good heavens, which station did YOU get on at"*.

The introduction of diesel locomotives in 1953 heralded a marked improvement in train working schedules. From that point onwards time gains were obtained by elimination of the number of stopping places, the closure of refreshment rooms and the provision of on-train buffet cars. Due to congestion on the Ballarat-Sunshine section of the route via Bacchus Marsh, the Mildura-Melbourne train since mid 1980's has been routed via Geelong North. The additional distance of some 27 miles is compensated for, to some degree, by the less hilly terrain encountered on that route than via Bacchus Marsh. At the end of 1992 the UP train departed Mildura at 9.10pm, Birchip at 12.23am and arrived Spencer St at 6.40am for a total of nine hours and thirty minutes. The Birchip-Spencer St leg is completed in six hours and seventeen minutes. The DOWN journey departed Spencer St. at 9.55pm, reached Birchip at 4.17 am and arrived Mildura at 7.30am. N class locomotives normally provide the motive power with First and Economy class cars, sleeper accommodation and Motorail facilities. In railway terminology trains always run Up to the capital city.

Several attempts to have the schedule altered to mitigate the inconvenience of the unearthly arrival hours allocated to Birchip commuters have failed. It is emphasised that the time-table is drawn up for the convenience of Mildura travellers and accommodation houses. The point is made that if Birchip was not located on the Mildura line it would not have a passenger rail service at all. The train and coach stops at Birchip only if there is a passenger to alight or join the service. In October 1992, St. Arnaud became

the latest station to suffer the doubtful distinction of being accorded similar status in this regard to Birchip. All passenger services to other local stations were officially discontinued on 10th Nov 1975. However for all practical purposes it ceased in 1966/67 when the *Sunlight* day train was replaced.

Additional to the dramatic changes to passenger traffic, there are significant alterations to the operations of other services. As mentioned previously, the need to reduce costs for economic reasons was a motivating force in developing new systems of operations. The time honoured safe working system of electric staff and staff and ticket operations required manning of each section to enable the safe passage of trains from one section to the next. The operation of the manual signal system, coincidental to the electric staff system ensured that only one train was moving in any one section at any given time. It was fail safe and the record lack of mishaps testifies to its efficacy. It was a source of much admiration of the dexterity of train drivers and station staff as they exchanged staffs while the train was in motion. But the niceties of the system had no place in the harsh reality of economic survival. It was imperative that the use of manpower be savagely reduced or, if possible, eliminated altogether. The present system of Train Orders evolved from this necessity.

Today all country train movements are controlled from Level 3 of Transport House located at 589 Collins St. Melbourne. Instructions are issued to train crews by radio. A series of radio masts along each route enables transmissions to be despatched and received at all points. Conductors talk down drivers at stopping places. Cross-overs are effected by medium of hydraulic spring loaded trailable points. A pre-recorded message is transmitted to the driver advising him that he is completely in the loop. A complementary device on the opposite end of the loop advises him that he has departed the loop. The end of train marker which activates the recording system is euphemistically known as *"the skinny guard"*. Solar power ensures batteries are always kept in an operational condition.

Further developments presently being trialled for universal usage in country areas include the transmission of train order movements by medium of radio, computer screens and print-out devices installed in the driver's compartment. The new system which will operate on the entire section of line between North Geelong and Yella will be known as Section Authority Working. It was trialled in December 1992 and is expected to be in operation on this line in 1993. The system was fully invented by V/Line and is being

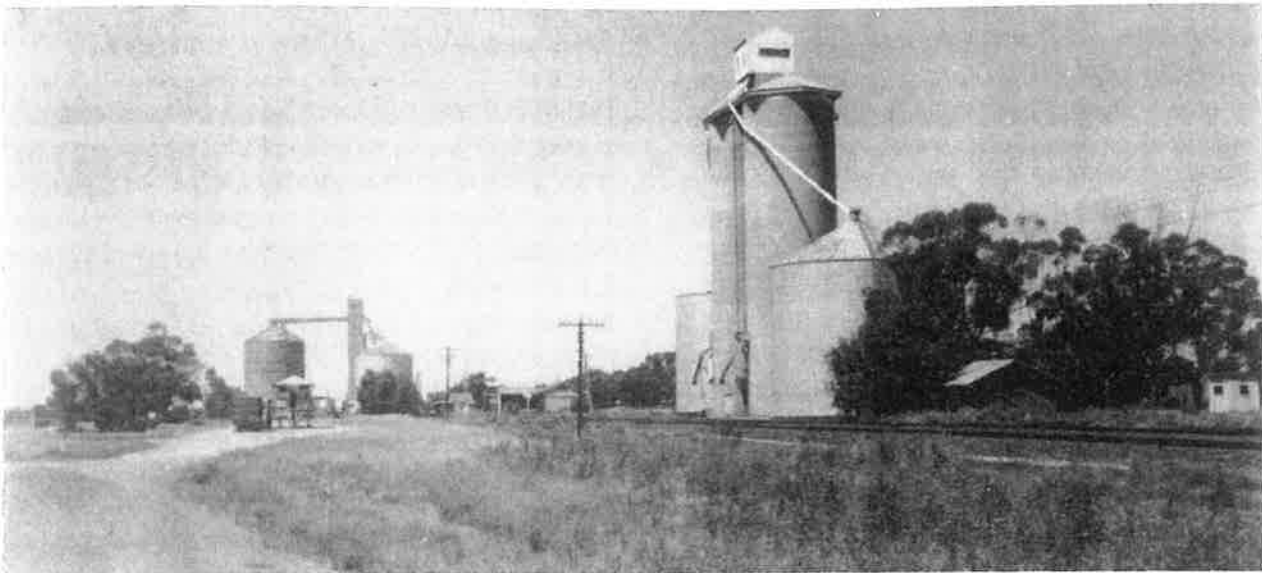




*Mildura to Melbourne "Sunraysia" train arrives at Birchip on Monday, 4th January, 1988, headed by N460. Note the exchange of Staffs taking place. Both miniature and large staffs being used.*



*Peak hour at Birchip on 5th January, 1988 with goods trains to and from Mildura in the yard as N457 heads the "Sunraysia" passenger from Mildura to Melbourne.*

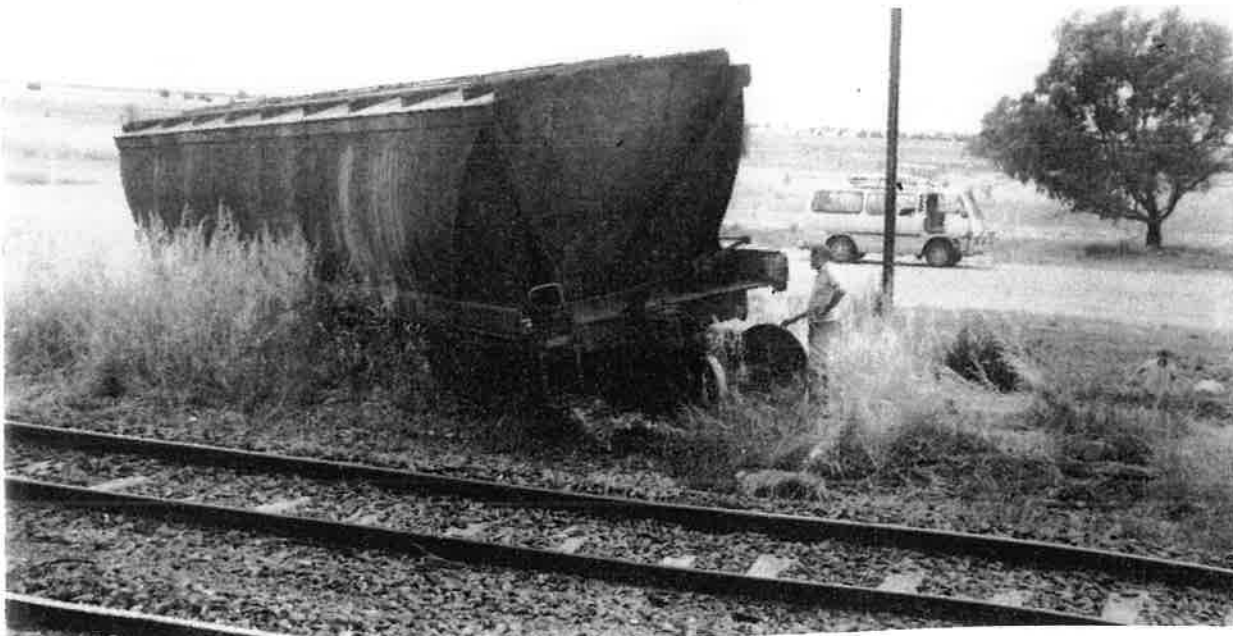


*View of Birchip silo complex looking south with the testing shed in the foreground. Photo taken in 1993.*

*View of bunker storages at Birchip in the closing stages of 1992/93 harvest. From the right of the picture No. 1 bunker holds 9390 tonnes of feed wheat; No. 2 contains 5000 tonnes of Schooner malting barley; No. 3 holds 9000 tonnes of field peas while the southern section of No. 4 holds 3000 tonnes of A.S.W. wheat. A fifth bunker was opened up for field peas. The silos hold further quantities of grain. The tops of the silos in the background are one kilometre away.*



*The gradient of 1:250 proved too much for this 55 tonne GJX wagon loaded with grain on the newly constructed silo loop at Birchip in 1988.*



marketed throughout Australia. Interest is also coming from overseas. Efforts to commercialize railway transport in country areas have not been successful. The door to door or farm to market service provided by road transport, with its greater convenience and more personalized attention has gained all but the bulk goods traffic. Gone are the days when special sheep trains out of the Yelta market arrived at local stations. Nor can the despatch of 671 sheep trucks, 125 cattle and 56 horse trucks out of Birchip in 1920 ever again expect to be emulated. Nor can the days be revisited when several truckloads of headers and farm machinery for Vern Connelly and O'Connor Bros and containers of Case tractors for A.D.Hillgrove were lined up under the Birchip crane for off-loading and local assembly. Times have changed irreversibly.

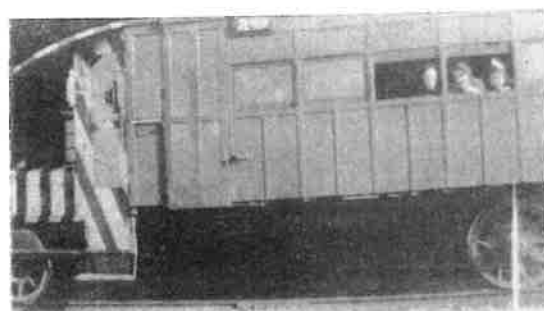
Locally, bulk commodities of superphosphate and grain remain principally as rail freight. However these are affected by the deregulation of grain marketing and bigger, faster and often more economic road haulage. Aberrations in the grain and legume trade as experienced in 1991/92 harvest period are not likely to be often repeated. It is confidently anticipated that, in most years, the bulk of local grain and legume production for market will continue to pass through the rail transport system. It was the lack of rail facilities during the developmental years of the mallee districts that impeded progress. It would never have entered the thoughts of the pioneers that one day rail would be supplanted to the degree that it is by other forms of transport. On its arrival, the first train drew alongside stacks of wheat awaiting outloading. Of the £8913.16.8 received in freight revenue in the first year of Birchip operations, most of it was for freight on the wheat already stacked there. The record outloading during the days of bagged grain was in 1932/33 when 101037 bags (8419 tons) were despatched. The previous best year was 1926/27 with 94118 three bushel bags (7843 tons) handled. These figures have been eclipsed on many occasions since bulk-handling was introduced in 1939. Since Birchip became a twin Central Receival Point with Watchem in 1984/85, deliveries have increased significantly. The record receivals are 34,227 tonnes of wheat in 1986/87 and 14,563 tonnes of barley in 1983/84. Pea receivals to 21st January '93 for the 1992/93 harvest set new heights. A total of 9300 tonnes had been received into the bunkers and a further 1500 has been registered as yet to be delivered. Almost all of this amount is railed out through Grain Elevators Board facilities.

The first OIC of the silos at Birchip was Mr Allison Connelly. He occupied that position from 1939/40 until 1964/65. He was succeeded by his son, Pat, who

continued in that role until 1986/87; a family total of 47 years service to the GEB and local community.

In 1967 GJX 57-tonne bulk grain double bogey wagons replaced GY's and modified GY's for the movement of grain. GY's of 22 tons capacity with single fixed axle wheel configuration had been used exclusively prior to this date to move bulk grain from the country areas to the seaboard or other destinations. They were used for general freight during the year and redeployed to move the overflow grain from silos during the harvest period. Thereafter GY's moved the stored grain as required during the remainder of the year. Presently the movement of grain is a year long operation as opposed to the previously unsuccessful method of endeavouring to move overflow grain from each of the country silos during the harvest receival period.

No regular freight train service is currently available to Birchip and district. The nearest approach to a service is the sight of the daily passage through the district of 9142, *Fruit Flyer*, from Mildura en route to Melbourne markets. Bulk fuel train 9139 Corio to Sunraysia three times weekly and 9138 gypsum train out of Cowangie periodically are reminders that another era has all but passed us by. The future is clouded as the Kennett Government called tenders in early January for provision of transport services on the Melbourne-Mildura line.



*The "Barber Shop," so named because of its red and white stripes. Powered by a 45 H.P. petrol motor, it plied between Donald and Woomelang daily from 1935 to 1950. It carried 32 passengers. Basically, it was an A.E.C. lorry imported from Britain and fitted out with an extended body.*