

ORBOST HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.



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NEWSLETTER

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Rail line has interesting history

The Bairnsdale-Orbost railway began operation in 1916.

Planning for the line began in 1890, but construction was delayed due to bickering by local residents concerning the preferred route.

To-day the future of the line is under review and the doubts continue.

The following article is an address by Mr A. W. Larkins to the Bairnsdale Probus Club, and details the colorful history of the Orbost railway.

Mystery of the Feather Hat.

In January, 1892, a parcel arrived at Bairnsdale Railway Station filled with garments which later enquiries revealed belonged to a Miss Emily Mather. She was the sixth victim (at least) of mass murderer Frederick Deeming. The parcel was addressed to a fictitious Mrs R. Dobbs.

The unclaimed parcel was eventually opened by Railway officials. A recent arrival from Britain recognised the hat as constantly worn by a woman who travelled out on the ship with her. The woman's companion was Alfred Deeming who was then distancing himself from the English police.

"Kaiser Wilhelm II". The Victorian police took an interest in the parcel with its flashy hat.

They soon discovered that Miss Emily Mather had also been murdered and embedded in cement under a bedroom floor at 57 Andrew Street, Windsor.

Deeming was caught, tried in Melbourne, and



Stoney Creek Railway Bridge west of Nowa Nowa

Other people soon identified the hat "Mrs Deeming" was showing off around the promenade deck of the

This saved the authorities

back in Britain a lot of trouble and expense, where he was wanted for cementing his wife and four children under a Yorkshire kitchen floor.

Railway Fever

While all the drama about Deeming swept East Gippsland, the other main exciting topic involved railways, being so widely discussed that railway lines were nearly running out of people's ears.

The railway reached Sale from Melbourne in 1878. It did not reach Bairnsdale for another ten years, 1888.



Nowa Nowa Railway Station, c. 1917

In 1890 railway surveyors advocated two lines beyond Bairnsdale, one via Bruthen and the Tambo Valley to Omeo, the other via Swan Reach and Colquhoun to Orbost, then on to Bendoc and the border.

The Years of Acrimony

There followed years of fending and argument about the route of the line between interests from Bruthen, Swan Reach, Buchan, Bumberrah, Sarsfield, Orbost and to a lesser extent Lakes Entrance. By the end of 1891 the Parliamentary Railways standing committees gave up in despair of trying to reach any agreement between the warring factions. Railway surveyors were relieved to be told to abandon further investigat-

ion of airy-fairy ideas because they were sick of drawing imaginary railway lines all over the province.

Bridging Arguments

One of the main arguments being whipped up at shire council meetings was about a new bridge across the Tambo. There was only money for one bridge. Bumberrah residents demanded the bridge be built at Swan Reach while public meetings at Bruthen were arguing in favor of their claim. The most favored

somewhere, but this was thrown out through lack of agreement. For years nobody got a bridge – or a railway.

The railway proposal never gained much enthusiasm from Lakes Entrance shipping interests.



Nowa Nowa Railway Staff Camp

In 1895, Orbost was excised from the Tambo Shire, but this did not lead to any peace, or harmony, at the council table in Bruthen.

Relations between Bruthen and Bumberrah were very strained indeed as factional interests continued to inhibit the development of the Tambo Shire.

The Australian Capital Territory Vision

In 1904 the railway enthusiasts were re-activated as hopes that the future Australian Capital Territory would be at Delegate across the border, where a railway via Bruthen and Orbost would link the two State systems.

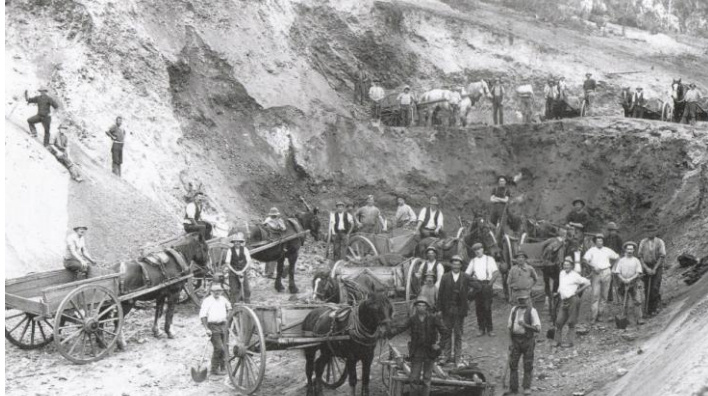
In 1906 survey parties re-appeared after an absence of 15 years. They investigated the present route of the Bairnsdale-Orbost line. The Railways Standing Committee recommended that 97 kilometres of line go ahead. The Bairnsdale-Orbost Railway Construction Bill became law on December 22, 1909.

Tambo Tedium

More disagreements followed, all originating from the Tambo Shire. The proposal seems to have been well accepted in Orbost where they steered clear of the quarrelling. Tambo's new fight was against valuations and compensations

for easements through properties.

Johnsonville and Swan Reach residents were not helping things along by wanting the line brought closer to their settlements, while Sarsfield was still pushing for a direct line from Bairnsdale to Bruthen via their township. This in-fighting continued for three years.



Construction Gang at work on the Bairnsdale-Orbost Rail Line

At last, the first sod was turned at Mossiface on January 9, 1912, the Government having toughened up enough to stick to the original system set out by the 1890 survey.

In a physical sense it also turned out to be one of Australia's most difficult railways to build.

A Train at Last

From 1916 there was a regular daily passenger and goods service from Orbost to Melbourne. As the Orbost rail works were proceeding, surveys were carried out on two other possible routes.

One from Bruthen via Timbarra to the Tambo Valley then back via Swift's Creek and Ensay, the other straight up the valley to Omeo.

Later on, a rough survey was made of a proposed line from Nowa Nowa to Omeo. However, time was running out for railways as motor transport became the order

of the day following the end of the first world war. All ideas of building the expensive railways faded away.

What Next?

The Orbost railway has continued to sustain losses throughout the post war years. With the reduction of timber quotas from the East Gippsland forests it is

destined for closure. It is no longer one of those things we can afford to be sentimental and starry-eyed about. The Lonnie report of 1980 revealed operating costs of \$2.35 million and revenue of \$1.92 million. These figures are looking



Railway Viaduct across the Snowy River Flats at Orbost

much blacker today and can only be expected to grow more grim each year.

It would seem to be out of the question to maintain the idle system in the hope that future generations may

revitalize the line for tourism or some unforeseen use.

The maintenance of the line, wooden trestle bridges, buildings, signalling equipment, communications gear and so on would be an economic nightmare and continue to drain funds from the already hard pressed road transport needs. Experience has proved the line would need patrolling and guarding from vandals and thieves who would operate open-slatheer on such things as the 60 pound iron rails.

If people want to keep the line they will have to use it. This is not likely to happen with the advantages of modern road transport weighed against rail freighting.

There is a splendid future for the easement as a walking track from Bairnsdale to Orbost. This will attract far more people than the Puffing Billy ideas and be a great tourist drawcard. There are many precedents for this proposal, both here and overseas.

Some of the bridges can be retained with the addition of safety hand rails, especially those of historic interest. Tony

Creek Bridge.

People could leave the train at Bairnsdale and enjoy portion or all of the walk over a period of days. Some buildings could be preserved as shelters. This

would be an inexpensive useage of the near 100 kilometre length of public land giving great benefit to generations of Australians and overseas visitors.