

ORBOST & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.

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NEWSLETTER

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DON JOHNS

18-9-1930 — 20-7-2013

Train Driver, Orbost, c.1970-1987

In 1987, Don drove the last train into Orbost.

Interviewed by May Leatch 15th June 2007, also present Marilyn Morgan.

I wasn't born in Orbost. My father was a labourer at the Maryborough railways round house, (where you put the trains to bed and all the work is done on them, etc.) then he went to Mildura as a contractor on the coal stage. He used to get 3d. a ton for shovelling coal onto the coal stage and 3d. a ton into the barrow. I learned a lot about that from him.

I joined the railways in Mildura and did my training at Maryborough railway school for a month or so, where we learned about steam engines, coal, regulations, etc. I was just 18 years old and I think that I joined the railways on the 24th September 1948.

There was a coal stage which was higher than the train. Coal was pushed up on a line to the coal stage. It was loaded into barrows of 18cwt or 24cwt I think they were on rails. You could push them out and tip them up. Some places, we used to have to shovel the coal in. At Wangaratta, we used to have to shovel the coal onto the stage above you, and then into the barrows which we tipped into the engine. There was a lot of work involved it was black coal. There was also pulverised brown coal but it was too dangerous.





**The Orbost Station Master's Office and Goods Shed and the two Series 3 'T' Class Diesel Locomotives which brought the last train to Orbost on 21st August 1987.
Don Johns drove this last train to Orbost.
He then retired from Vic Rail and lived in retirement at Orbost.**

There was a fair bit to know, how much energy was in coal, BTU's in a ton of coal. I have my steam driver's ticket somewhere. Everything that happened had to be accounted for. If we stopped to get a bit of steam, or run over a cow, or hunted it off the line, we had to explain why. It took 4 to 8 hours from when an engine was fired to when we had steam to move, and that was from dead cold! The engines used to be tied up over the weekend the lighter-up would come on at midnight to start the fire. When we put the engine away, we used to have to load the cabin with wood for the light-up. If the engine was in the workshops, we had to barrow the wood around. We had to learn how to wash the boilers out, how to light them up, how to prepare to run a train, and what to do when running a train. Some engines would sweat if forced and we'd have to dry them out before they would absorb heat.

Maintenance of engines was done at Traralgon. Other places in Victoria were Newport, Maryborough, Bendigo, Ararat and Geelong, these were steam depots.

Passenger trains travelled at about 50mph, the 'Spirit' was 70mph and goods trains about 40mph. Later engines were kph.

After the training, I went back to Mildura and around Ouyen, worked there for a while. I worked at Wangaratta as a fireman. You started off as a cleaner, then became a cleaner qualified to fire, then a fireman, then a fireman qualified to drive, then a driver. It was a lot of learning on the job. Some blokes did 6 to 8 weeks in a signalling school in Melbourne learning about signals. I didn't want to do that.

I started off on about £2 per week. Your pay gradually increased. I think also that we had to do two years before we were made permanent and

we had superannuation. We had the A.F.U.L.E. (Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Employees) union, I have the badges.

You had to apply for jobs. I was there for a number of years till I became a driver. Then I went into Benalla and worked around there. That was about 1954-55. Then I was transferred to Bairnsdale relieving. This was all on coal trains. And general freight.

Then I went from Bairnsdale to Hamilton and was there for many years until they closed all the lines down. Then I went to Sale, but my blood pressure blew up, and I wasn't allowed to drive a passenger train for more than 40 minutes at a time. This was after a bloke died on the Southern Aurora. So I worked mainly on goods trains.

I eventually came up here (to Orbost) onto this line. I drove between Orbost and Bairnsdale. That would have been in 1979, 1980 and I stayed here till the line closed in 1987.

We used to run two trains a day from Orbost. We would go down to Nowa Nowa and meet the train coming from Bairnsdale.

There was a wood/timber train which went out about 5 o'clock from Orbost. It picked up (timber) trucks from Waygara, Bruthen, and then got general freight from Bairnsdale. There would be two or three trucks of sleepers per week. They used to be stacked and inspected and stamped on the end if they passed. We picked up sleepers at Bruthen. The mills at Waygara cut sleepers sometimes.

We picked up coal in Bairnsdale. There might have been a coal depot here at some time. We had water here at Orbost, Nowa Nowa, Bairnsdale and Sale. If we had a steam train, we started off from Orbost with full water, then topped up at Nowa Nowa and at Bairnsdale.

Speeds were restricted over the trestle bridges to 25kph or 15kph. The one at Tostaree had 5kph and if we came in there with a long train (e.g. a timber train), there was that much run-in and run-out (slack in the couplings), we'd move the engine forward, but the back half wouldn't move. So by the time we took up the slack, we were doing more than 5kph.

It was quite interesting looking out when going over the bridges. We would see koala bears. There was a tree on the Nowa Nowa end of the Stony Creek bridge which had a female koala and baby in it. One day, when going up the hill from the Stony Bridge I looked up and saw a koala sitting above the canopy of the forest. It was very high tree.

I was told that there was once a fellow and a girl on the Stony Bridge, in the middle, when a train came along, and they had to get out on one of the safety platforms. The fellow had to jam the girl into the corner and hold her there because she was going to jump off.

You'd never know where you'd be likely to see anyone. Coming around the bend near the old Orbost Road was a big blackberry bush, and sometimes there were women and kids picking blackberries.

With the coal burners, we used to boil our Billies in the fire, do some cooking. We had a 'honkie' of $\frac{3}{4}$ inch steel rod with a hook on the end of it. We put the billy on that and put it into the fire. When aluminium Billies came out, we quickly found that the handles melted off.

I did a lot of night driving. One night, coming home from Mt Gambier, I thought I saw a house sitting on the line, and it turned out to be a herd of dairy cows, some lying down some standing up. Maybe it was an hallucination.

Some times the line was slippery and wet. One time, between Nowa Nowa and Bairnsdale, it took 5 hours. We kept stopping and starting. Traction was a problem. Going up the hill from Bruthen, one of the gangers had been a fireman and he jumped on the running board and belted the sand box all the way up the hill to put sand on the line. Sometimes, the fireman put ballast on the line to get traction. The sand might have come from Coleraine. It was heated and sieved to get the stones and sticks out of it, and it had to be dry. If it wasn't used for a while, like in summer time, it would pack hard with the vibrations, so we'd have to mix it again.

There was also thick fog at times. Out of Traralgon one night, I could not see the main road. I was doing 50-60 kph but had no sense of movement in the fog. Another night going towards Glen Thompson in a fog, and out comes the head of a cow in front. We could not see the cow, just the head and a bit of the neck.

They cut back to one train a day on the Orbost

line. It used to run out at night and then come back. The line was closed in 1987 it wasn't getting enough traffic. Everything started to go by road. The general condition of the line got to a stage where the maintenance could not keep up with it. It had been let run-down, it was an organised run-down of the line.



Station Yard Office showing a full yard, 1979

A lot of lines were closed from the 1970s. When I was at Hamilton I had a chap riding with me to Warrnambool. He was assessing the amount of scrap metal from the line and all things that could be sold. They closed that line, then Coleraine, Casterton, Balmoral to Horsham.

There were a lot of timber bridges on the Orbost line, particularly from here to Bruthen. They put Armco pipes in some of them to take the bridges away.

Diesel driving was a lot more boring than steam. There was not so much to do because you only had to move the throttle up and down. Steam was more interesting. There were more people around. There was the driver and the fireman, and then when we pulled up at a station and clean the fire and take water etc, we'd interact with the station staff. That was all cut out when the diesels came. A lot of people lost their jobs then.

They went from coal to oil, originally diesel burners, residue oil and then back to diesels. Hamilton and the western district were about the last area to change to diesels I think.

Timber and general goods were the main things on the Orbost line. Timber was the main thing. That was in the 1980s, the last 10 years of the line. I wasn't here in the floods.

I had a few derailments. One of the last ones was coming out of Bairnsdale and I put a truck of 'super' on the Paynesville Road when it came off the line. Another time, I hit a car with a woman driver on the crossing coming out of Bairnsdale, near Howitt Park. Her car was knocked about, but she was not injured. I also heard of an accident which happened before my time, near the old road (? at Newmerella), and some of the gangers got

killed. Ray Legge was the patrolman.

I brought the last train into Orbost in the morning, and I saw it go out. Billy Buckley drove it out. Then I retired here.

Don Johns, 15th June, 2007.

Other people who worked at the Newmerella railway station & on the trains recalled

by Don Johns & Marilyn Morgan:

- John & Ike Cowell – Shunters, Orbost
- Teddy McNamara – Driver / Fireman
- Jack Cross – Guard
- Clare Reynolds (nee Shanahan) - Clerk in goods shed
- John Brunt – Clerk in goods shed
- Robin Rix – Shunter, Tractor driver
- Mick Le Sage – Shunter, Tractor driver
- Mario Candian – Gantry crane
- Wally Stewart – Gantry crane
- Val McMasters – Driver

- Roy Flett – Driver
- Ray Barling – Station assistant
- John Casey – Station Master
- Jimmy Ventry –
- Rolf Frank – Guard, the last guard on the line
- 'Coconut' Smith – Relief driver (from Traralgon)
- Ray Legge – Patrolman
- Billy Buckley – Train driver drove the last train out of Orbost 1987
- Pat Leo – Driver on steam engines
- Wally Dwyer – Guard
- Lindsay Kay – Station Master
- Fred Pitts — Railway ganger
- Ron Wregg — Railway ganger
- Joe Lyons —
- E Morse — Railway ganger
- Stuart Muller — Assistant Station Master
- George Pryor — Station Master
- Joe Perez — Goods Clerk
- Tom Keely — Train driver



The last train leaving Orbost - from 'Grandview', Newmerella.