

ORBOST & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.

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NEWSLETTER

APRIL, 2008



ORBOST FLOOD



FRONT COVER

Repair work in progress on the flood-ravaged railway viaduct into Orbost. This was one of four points where railway bridges were washed away on February 6 [1971]. The line reopened on February 26 [1971].

Over \$200,000 damage was done to railway installations by Orbost's most damaging flood during February.

In eight hours, the Snowy River rose from 19ft. 4 in. to 34 ft. Its flood front was more than a mile wide.

To try to save goods, a train went to Orbost to clear as many wagons as possible, by was stranded.

Five railwaymen had to be rescued by helicopter; two rode a mobile crane to safety.

As usual, railwaymen pitched in, uncomplainingly, to restore the rail connection.

Here, railwaymen from Orbost area tell their stories of the February flood.

KEPT SUPPLIES MOVING

Traffic Branch chief-of-operations at Orbost was Eastern District Superintendent Stewart Rae.

Orbost station area was covered with debris and silt feet deep when he arrived.

"It was like walking on snow; it looked solid but it wasn't," Mr. Rae said. "Underneath were water holes up to 5 ft. deep".



Mr. Rae

Mr. Rae's first task was to get the station and goods shed repaired. A communication base was established in the station area, using walkie-talkie radios to a telephone post on Newmerella Hill.

Next requirement was to get traffic into and out of

town. Nowa Nowa was made the railhead and goods were brought by road to the station, then taken into town after CRB operations ceased each night. Groceries were the main goods handled.

Arrangements were made to clear loading (mainly timber) from the wagons at Orbost and to rail the timber, which normally went from Orbost, from Bairnsdale.

Ably assisted by Traffic Inspector Graham Lester and the Orbost station staff, Mr. Rae was able to get traffic flowing smoothly, even though the trains weren't operating.

Mr. Rae spoke highly of the way in which the staff rose to the occasion and met the needs of coping with alternate arrangements during the restoration period. "The time went quickly, he commented.

FLOODS THROUGHOUT SUMMER

Eastern District Engineer Angus Park, has spent most of this summer repairing flood damage.

As early as November, he was directing repairs to flood damage at Cowwarr.

Mr Park considers the Traralgon-Maffra line to be the most flood prone in the State.



Mr. Park

For a lead up to the Orbost floods, Mr. Park's duties from Tuesday January 26, were: Tuesday, attend to buckled rails at Nar-Nar-Goon; Wednesday, Beaconsfield derailment; Friday night until the following Thursday, flood damage at Cowwarr, Heyfield, and Stratford; then, Saturday, to Orbost.

Many of the workers at Orbost also worked with Mr. Park on the lead-up days to the Orbost flood.

"These fellows work in any condition when needed, and, while most of the work they do in normal times goes unnoticed, this is one time their efforts will be widely known and appreciated," Mr. Park said.

HELICOPTER RESCUE

Orbost's Stationmaster, Mr. George Pryor, was one of five railwaymen rescued by helicopter.

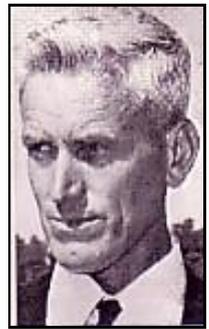
"About 3 in the afternoon water started flowing through the station yard," Mr. Pryor said. "In 10 minutes it rose 3 ft.

"There was a train coming down from Waygara and we hoped it would get to Orbost before the floods covered the line.

"Loaded wagons were pushed on to the bridge between the station and the highway crossing, and the locomotive was going to try and pull them back to high ground.

"The train arrived about 4, but by then it was unsafe for it to continue, or go back, so it was left on high ground.

"In the short time we were at the train, the water had risen higher and was flowing swiftly through the station area.



Mr. Pryor

"We could not get back to the station to ring to be rescued, so we waded through water to the concrete company's area, broke in, and called the police."

Mr. Pryor said that although at the area they were knee-deep in water, the actual level in the area was higher, but the wagons in the yard acted as a breakwater.

About 5, an Esso-BHP helicopter landed in one of the few areas left above water and lifted the five railwaymen to safety.

Mr. Pryor considers that if the wagons in the yard had not acted as a breakwater, damage to the station would have been worse.

The other railwaymen rescued by helicopter were A.S.M. Stuart Muller, Yard Assistant John Cowell, Guard Wally Dwyer and Fireman Alan Waite.

STARTED COMMUNITY RELIEF

Assistant Stationmaster Stuart Muller, found time to help those hardest hit by the floods.

Particularly moved by the plight of an aged TPI pensioner whose tiny hut on the river bank was destroyed in the flood, Mr. Muller suggested to the locals that a community effort be made to build a new hut for him.



Mr. Muller

Townpeople responded and donated building materials and labour. As early as 5.30 some mornings, Mr. Muller, with or without helpers, could be found at the site of the new shack.

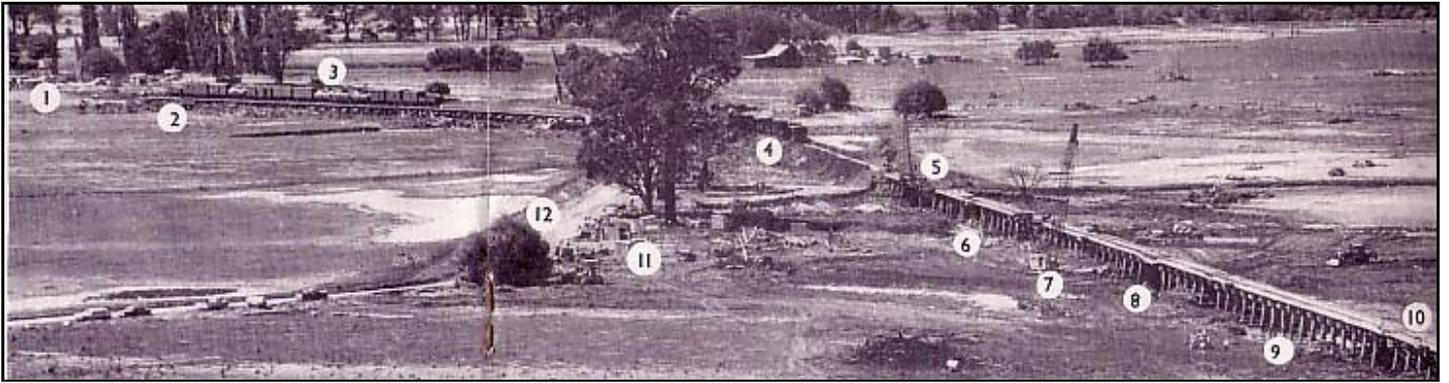
"We've built this shack closer to the bridge so the fellow doesn't have so far to walk to the town," Mr. Muller said.

"He has lived here for about 23 years and this is the first flood that has destroyed his home".

Giving his version of the flood scene, Mr. Muller said that the flooding in the station area was preceded by an exodus of rabbits, cats and mice, and one snake. "A small brown one," he added.

He enjoyed his first helicopter ride, but expressed concern at the attitudes of some people through the flood period.

"Among sightseers who came to the station area when it started to flood was a toddler of about three who was brought along by an older child. When police returned them home, their parents admitted that they had not known where their children were."



AFTERMATH. Another view of the stranded train as railwaymen set about restoring the line into Orbost. Points of interest: 1. Embankment washed away; 2. Debris at bridge; 3. Wagons stranded on bridge; 4. Stranded train; 5. Six bridge piers washed away and pile-driver at work; 6. Four piers washed away; 7. Crane assisting with bridgework; 8. Piers undermined and washed away; 9. Deep scouring and piles dislodged; 10. Decking damaged and piers dislodged; 11. Works materials site; 12. Princes Highway.

RODE CRANE TO SAFETY

Goods Clerk Joe Perez and Station Assistant Robin Rix had a lucky escape when they took Orbost station's mobile crane to safety, after water started flowing through the yard.



Mr. Rix has a quick word with Mr. Perez (seated) about their crane ride.

The mobile crane easily got through the 3 ft. of water covering the road to the bridge, but on the other side of the bridge, an SEC pole, wedged between road marker posts, blocked the way.

Using the sling on the crane, the pole was dragged free. Freed from between the posts, the pole was swept away together with the sling by the swirling floodwaters.

Mr. Perez said: "Fortunately, the sling didn't hold; otherwise the crane may have gone too."

Further along the road, a fallen tree blocked the road.

"With no sling, we had no choice but to try and drive over it," Mr. Perez said. "Luckily, the tree was rotten, and crumbled beneath the crane's wheels.

Mr. Rix had to be in Orbost that night for a friend's wedding.

"It took me until the reception to calm down," he said.

Robin Rix was a boxer of some note; he won the Victorian Amateur Featherweight Title four years running - 1963-66 - and was beaten for the 1967 title by Lionel Rose.

AIR SEARCH

Goods Guard Wally Dwyer was on the stranded train.

"When we got to Waygara, we were told that the flooding was likely to be bad and for the train to come down and pull as many wagons as possible on to high ground on Newmerella Hill," Mr. Dwyer said.



Mr. Dwyer

"We got to the bridge about 4 p.m., water and debris were at rail level.

After leaving the train on high ground, Mr. Dwyer, some of the station staff, and the train's fireman, Mr. Alan Waite, clambered along the sides of the wagons on the bridge to get to the concrete company's area.

After being lifted out by the helicopter, Mr. Dwyer later took part in an air search for a farmer who was swept away by floodwaters near Marlo.

In later flights over the area, Mr. Dwyer said it was frightening to see packs of sharks tearing at carcasses of animals swept out to sea.

"I think it will be six months before I go swimming again," he mused.

BRIDGE MOVED UNDER TRAIN

The stranded train's driver was Mr. Tom Keely.

On his way to work on the morning of the floods, he checked the river gauge and anticipated a flood. He suggested to the station staff that No. 2 Road be left clear, as No. 1 Road was flood prone.

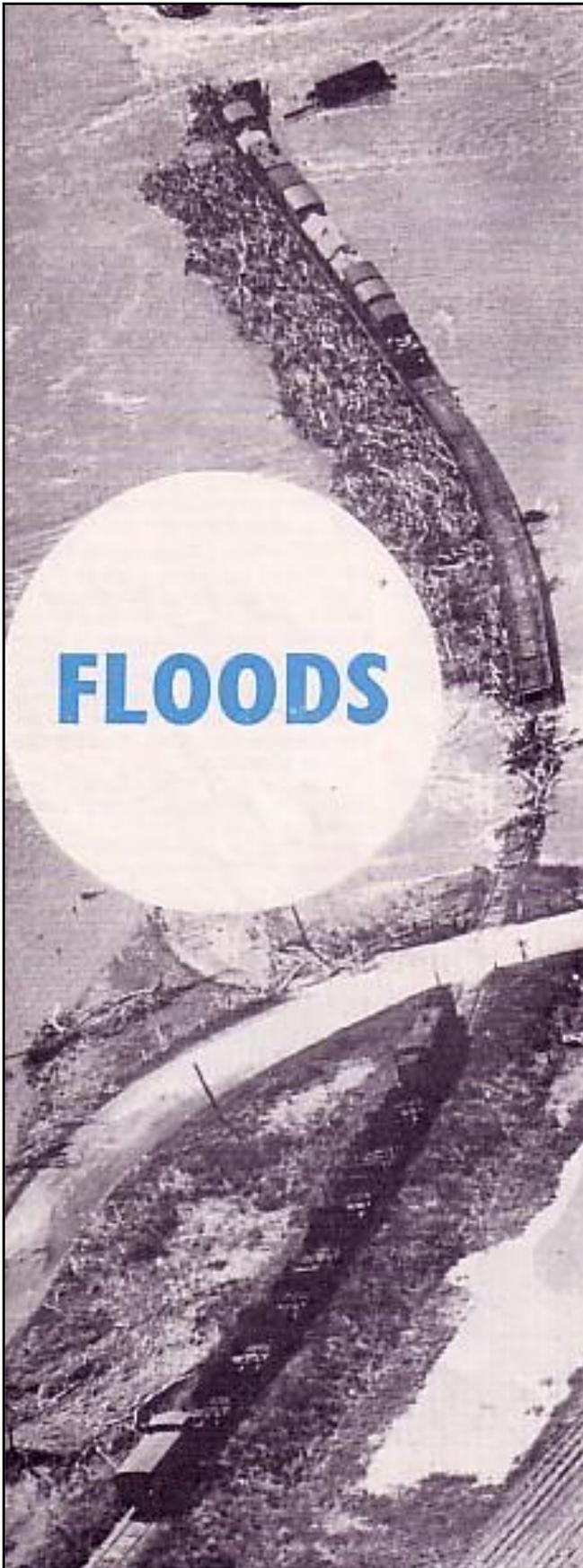
As he brought the train down Newmerella Hill, he saw the extent of the floods.

"If we could have got the locomotive into Orbost an hour earlier the move would have succeeded," Mr. Keely said.



Mr. Keely

I took the train across the bridge dead slow, and could feel the bridge moving under the weight of the locomotive.



FLOOD FURY. "The Sun" photograph shows a train stranded at Orbost on a flood-cut bridge.

"When we reached the crossing, the bridge ahead, with wagons on it, was flexing too badly to venture onto it. It was the same with the bridge we had just crossed.

"The guard and fireman went into Orbost while I secured the train.

By the time I finished, the bridge into Orbost was flexing too badly to safely clamber along the wagons to reach the yard, so I went back across the long bridge towards Newmerella.

"It was frightening crossing the bridge while hearing and seeing trees slam into the debris piled against it, then feeling the bridge shudder.

"The water must have been flowing at 30 m.p.h., Mr. Keely contended.

A rescue boat tried to reach him but became entangled in fences. He then went to Newmerella where he stayed until the following Monday.

WAGON CLEAN-UP



After the flood, every wagon in Orbost yard - more than 100 - had to have its break gear and axle boxes examined and cleaned of silt. Going about their monotonous task in a flood damaged road when *News Letter* visited the area, were (from right to left) Traralgon Depot Foreman D. Robson, Train Examiner D. Westland, Fitters Assistant M. McDermott and Train Examiner R. Haines. A fifth member of their group, Train Examiner C. Dickenson, is not in the photograph.



RESTORATION. Bulldozers prepare a replacement embankment between the station yard and smaller viaduct.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Bairnsdale to Orbost railway line officially opened on Monday, 10th April, 1916. The line was officially closed on Monday, 24th August, 1987.

[Source: VICSIG - Infrastructure - Line Data Orbost Line.]

The last train departed from Orbost Railway Station on Friday, 21st August, 1987, at 4.45 p.m.