

Archer Park Rail Museum: Lynn Zelmer interviewing Blair Jamieson and Bill Head, 3 Sep 2008.

I'm Lynn Zelmer and this is Wednesday, the 3rd of Sept 2008 at ARCHER PARK STATION talking to Blair Jamieson and Bill Head.

LZ: I suppose the first question would be, "What's your background and how did you get here to Archer Park?" Bill?

BILL: Well, I was aware of Archer Park. It more or less was open as a museum but, same old case, I'd never bothered to check up on it because when you live in a place you've got plenty of time to get there, you see.

But how I came to get introduced to this place was when Blair and Jim Leyland built the Morse code table down there and they introduced it here in June in 1991. And they asked me if I'd just like to come over when they put it in.

Well, immediately I came into the place, had a look around, and seen what was here, and so much railway memorabilia, and after being in the job myself for 46 1/2 years, I took an instant liking to the place and I said to Dennis there, "Put me down" and I joined as a member straightaway; and that's when I started, back in June 1991.

LZ: And Blair?

BLAIR: Yes, well I came just a little bit before Bill, but my background in the railway was, I served my time as an electrician in what was then the Telegraph Engineer Section in Roma Street. I spent two years in the little machine shop in the Roma Street yard, and then we went and worked outside around the stations, round the signal cabins and automatic signaling around the suburban area of Brisbane and then power and light works, putting in power points, lights and all that sort of thing, in the Station Masters' houses and Stations.

And from there I think I was transferred to Rockhampton in 1950. I came here for 18 months and then I eventually went back to Brisbane, to Nambour, and I looked after the North Coast equipment and staff instruments, telephones, pumps, everything between Caboolture and Gympie.

But we'll digress a little and say I came here in about 1991, Bill, just before you?

BILL: Yes, that's right.

BLAIR: I had been working as a volunteer out at the Spire on the main southern road out of Rockhampton. I had a bad knee and I got my knee replaced and when I came back from that I never went back out there. There were some little problems associated with that place, and Jim Leyland who was a control clerk and an operator in the Telegraph Office here in Rockhampton in those days, he was always at me to build this Morse code table.

I couldn't be bothered because my leg wasn't real good. Anyhow, when I came back from Brisbane with a new leg and new knee I said, "Well Jim, we're off, we're running." So we built the Morse table, and it's here now and it's the greatest asset to the place. And as Bill said before, he came down with us when we installed it. He was over in the shed where we built it and he came down the day we installed it and put it in then. And it's a marvelous interest, the staff instrument down there that I keep an eye on and look after. And the old master clock that's down there in the Station Master's Office. And the great attraction about the Archer Park Museum is the variety and diversity of people who come here. We get them from all over the world and we really enjoy their company.

Even last week we had some people in here who were so thrilled with the place they put quite a sizeable donation in the donation tin. And we have lots of laughs and we really enjoy the company of the people who come here. We've got all these different exhibits and I'm sure that Bill will take over and talk about the carriages, the two carriages we have here. He worked in one of them, so I'll let Bill talk about 1007 as we call it.

BILL: Well, I joined the job first on the 2nd of February 1946, and in those days when you joined the railway as a 'lad porter' you had to do six months probation in the railway refreshment rooms before you went out onto the station platform. So, the job I was allotted was on the dining car stationed in Rockhampton -- we used to run between Rockhampton and Mackay. It was on the Sunshine Mail in the days of wooden carriages before we got the air-conditioned trains in 1953.

And my job allotted was as a junior worker on the dining car. We used to serve lunch and tea on the trip up, camp overnight in our quarters, and seven o'clock next morning we'd pick up the southern bound train, the Sunshine Mail, serve breakfast and lunch, be detached here in Rockhampton at two o'clock in the afternoon.

And I was highly delighted when Dennis told me one morning that they were negotiating to get an old sleeping car which had to be restored. And he said, it's a JCS # 1007. I said, "Not 1007," and Dennis said, "why?" And I said, "well I can distinctly remember as plain as if it was yesterday." #1007 was frequently a part of the Sunshine Mail back in my days in 1946 and early '47.

And 62 years ago now, or over 62 years ago, many's the time I walked through the passageway of that old sleeper, announcing that, "the first sitting for breakfast is now being served in the dining car." "Second sitting for lunch," and so forth, and it really,... it takes you back years,... makes you feel so much younger. When you just reminisce in your own mind and think of those days -- it was really great.

Well, in early 1947 I completed me probation and was appointed a 'lad porter' in Blackall, out in the far west. And then with the 46 and a half years, I worked at various stations, 32 locations all told, all in the Central Division of the Queensland Railways -- only had one break; some may have only been for one day, but in the 46 and a half years I worked at 32 different locations. Only had one break from '61 till '62 up at Torrens Creek at the loco depot which was situated between Charters Towers and Hughenden, and other than that I spent all my time in Central Queensland.

And if the powers that be could turn the clock back and said, "Righto Bill, you're a lad of 16 years of age again now, you've got your whole working life in front of you, what would you like to do?" I'd say, "Turn it back to the 2nd of February 1946, and I'll do it all over again."

I loved every moment of it. Like all jobs, everything's not always straight sailing, you get your ups and downs and your busy jobs, but throwing it across the whole 46 and a half years, I wouldn't have wanted to do anything else. I've absolutely enjoyed every moment of it -- really did.

LZ: - Blair?

BLAIR: - Well, as I said, I came to Rockhampton in 1950. I was here for 18 months and then I went back to Nambour, and from Nambour I went to Gympie and I looked after the signal cabin in Gympie. There were only two of those in Queensland, one in Gympie and one in Mayne Junction. I worked on the one in Mayne Junction when I was an apprentice and it had 125 levers, very small levers and the signalling was worked by 45 pounds of compressed air and about 20 volts.

And the one in Gympie had 65 levers. Unfortunately they're both all gone now, what a shame.

From Gympie I went to Cairns. I was in Cairns for about two years -- 18 months, two years -- and from Cairns I came to Maryborough in about 1965, and in 1967 I was transferred back to Rockhampton as 'in charge' and that's where I've stayed ever since. I've seen so much improvement in the railway working from the old fashioned signalling to some of the most modern stuff in the world and the basic signalling that controls the trains between Rockhampton and Caboolture is all French.

It comes from a company called Compagnie Signalling Electrique Enterprises and it's very good equipment and that's the stuff they use in France to control those high speed trains, the TGBs at 300 k. Of course, we haven't got up to that yet, but it's been a very interesting time and I wouldn't have swapped it for anything and a lot of that knowledge that I gained years ago and the work that I did in the workshop when I started work has come in handy because I'm still, to this day, restoring equipment, and, at the moment, I'm building another Morse Code table to go in the museum in Gympie. So it's a great thing. And, as I said before, the people we meet here really make our days.

LZ: What sort of questions do people have? What is the kind of things that people are interested in here at Rocky?

BLAIR: They ask how the staff instruments work, what they did, the photos on the wall of these people, did they work here?

Yes, they worked here, they were on the staff here and, of course the soundscape that operates at Archer Park tells quite a bit. They ask a myriad of questions about railway working, about the old steam engines, what times did they run? Did they run the same times as diesels, and of course they didn't, and there are a myriad of questions.

They ask about the old tram that's here, although that really wasn't in our era although I do recall seeing a tram when I was about eight years old and came to Rockhampton for a holiday, but questions about the tram and a myriad of questions they ask about Queensland Railways. And if we can't answer them between Bill and I there's not too many questions they can ask that we can't answer. As Bill said, he was in the station-master's grade and he was a station master in that area for 47 years and I completed 48 years as an electrician in the signalling and communication engineers.

BILL: Now the beauty....when I started in the railway in 1946 the Queensland Railways alone had a total population employment of about 26,000. Well, throughout the whole of Australia and all the other states, being the type of industry that it was, well they would have had big numbers too.

Well it's very strange really, you get those people who come in and very rarely you'll get those people who come in that haven't had their father was in the railway or their grandfather, or their brother-in-law and there will be no end of questions, queries thrown at you, particularly about the days of steam locomotives.

And you can tell the difference about how things have improved with the enormous trains that we drove now with electric locomotives in the coal traffic, whereas in the days when I joined the railway, in places with steam locos you'd have to have two steam locos attached to pull the load. Well, irrespective of the total capacity of the two locomotives, you might have to haul on the train, in those days we couldn't drag a train any heavier than about 650 tons; that was the limit.

The structure of our road gear and the vehicles, you couldn't have it any heavier than that. Well, now we drag trains thousands of tons so that it's remarkable in that time since '46, the time that I was in the job and the drastic changes that we saw. For quite a few years, particularly in the post-war years, you didn't see a great deal of changes in the railway because to a large extent there was a lot of rehabilitation had to go on, because Queensland Railways got a heck of a lot of a flogging during the war years because everything from the south came up through Queensland Railways.

Well, it took us a long time to catch up but of course the last twenty to twenty-five years or so with all the coal traffic has come in, well, of course they've upgraded the tracks with heavier rail, blue metal ballast, concrete sleepers, and it's hard to imagine what we see and what we drag now that it is the same railway that I started working on in 1946.

LZ: It isn't the same railway, that's for sure.

BILL: That's true. It's not. It's a far cry from the original railway that I started on in '46.

LZ: What would be from a personal point of view. What would be the biggest differences you see these days?

BILL: Oh, well, to me in my particular job, being in the station master's grade. You go to a railway station now and the whole system's completely changed, you see. But in my earlier days you went to a railway station and there'd be the portering staff, they'd be loading a lot of parcels traffic, that was controlled at the main station, separate to goods traffic.

There was a lot more activity. It's really hard to describe. There was a lot more jobs; there was portering staff; there was shunting going on. With containerized traffic now it's all bulk loading, you haven't got all those staff to do those jobs; those jobs they no longer exist so that unless there's a passenger train coming in or ready to depart from a passenger station, a railway station is dead now.

LZ: Well, is there even any station in the state that's got a lunch room in the station?

BILL: Well, that was a common thing many years ago. You had refreshment rooms at all the various little stations. But of course now, with the advent of air conditioned trains and dining cars, and that sort of business, they're all long since gone.

See, I can remember the time in the war years, and even for many years after, it was known in Australia far and wide a chap by the name of Petty -- you'd heard of him Blair, wouldn't you? -- he had a pie, a little business down at Bororen down south of Gladstone, Well, Petty's pies was known far and wide in Australia.

And he had it made in this regard. Bororen was a watering station and the train had to pull up there to take water, would spend about ten minutes there. Not only that, but those were the days when you had wooden carriages, well, he just had to stroll up the car, sold them through the window.

Well, of course, when air conditioned trains came on the scene and diesel-electrics came those stops weren't made then. There were two things against him -- in the first place the train didn't stop and in the few minutes that it might stop to put passengers on, well, he wouldn't have had the time, and the whole carriage was sealed, whereas you could serve them through the window with these old-time wooden carriages. It's remarkable just how things were completely changed.

LZ: And Blair, the biggest change for you?

BLAIR: Oh, the biggest change and modernization in my sector was signalling and communications. We went from having exchanges which were operated by girls with the cords and the switches and all that sort of thing to automatic exchanges. We had a little tiny one at Mayne Junction with 20 lines and I used to look after that with another fellow. It was a work of art to keep it going.

The signalling, the automatic signalling and the centralised traffic control (CTC) that came and then the ATC and now they've gone to the ATP (automatic train protection).

So the advancement in the signalling and the communication area is just phenomenal and we'veI think we had fibre-optic cable prior to Telecom, we had that; we had teleprinters very early in the piece. They've gone now but the optic fibre was a great asset. You could send hundreds of conversations down the optic fibre on the beam of light. Yah, there's a lot in the electrical world that really opened our eyes to new horizons, new technology, and I think it's probably all for the better. The improvements are immense.

BILL: One of the things I notice with people with our Morse table down there is that people are quite amazed at how it all worked.

And they'll say, "oh gee, I don't think I could learn that." I always tell them that a lot of people make those statements I suppose, but if one person can learn something, there's no reason you can't. And, of course, the beauty of that old Morse in my earlier days in the job, that was our main means of communication. You see, now days you've got emails and fax machines and everything, but in my early time in the job from the main administration centres, and even between stations, that was our main means of communication -- the telegrams between one another.

It was all carried out by Morse telegraphy. It's a great old system and it's one of those things, something you learn you never forget it. People will often ask me, "How do you learn it, what's this all about?"

Well, I always tell them, "It's like when we learn to read and write. We go to school, we learn the alphabet and then, as time goes on, we learn to write and learn to read. Well now, when you pick up a newspaper or a magazine and you read it, you don't look at every letter of a word to decipher what it is, that combination of the various letters of the alphabet, you know straight away when you see them together what word it is. Well, morse telegraphy is much the same. You sound read it because each letter and each digit is a different combination of dots and dashes and consequently each one has a sound distinct rhythm.

When it comes out of the sound box, soon as it hits your eardrum, your brain sends a message to your hand and you write it down. You know what it is because it's distinct. One letter might be a dash and three dots, well when you take it, you're not listening to count the dots to work out what letter it is. As soon as you hear those combinations you know straight away what it is. It was really a great invention really when you think of it, but it's a museum piece today, not used at all.

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