

Archer Park Rail Museum: Lynn Zelmer interviewing Blair Jamieson, 8 Oct 2008.

LZ: This is Wednesday 8 October 2008. I'm Lynn Zelmer with

BLAIR: Blair Jamieson

LZ: and we're at Archer Park Station.

LZ: You were saying that you and Bill feed off each other. What sorts of things did that remind you of?

BLAIR: Well, Bill would talk about some safe working things or where we had electric staff; he was never involved a great deal with electric staff until later on in his career because we didn't have those machines in service in this area and where Bill worked in the Western areas. They worked all their trains on a safe working staffing ticket. Of course, it's all gone now and it's a new system altogether.

Other things that Bill would talk about -- his work at the station, what he would do and it's a vast difference from what he did to what I did, seeing I was an electrician and I lived through the whole time era of Morse code and old signal cabins with big levers. And it's all changed to CTC and ATP, which is CTC is centralised traffic control. And then we had ATC -- automatic train control -- and then we've gone to what's called ATP -- automatic train protection. I don't know whether the system's working really successfully yet or not; it certainly had some complications and maybe it might have been wiser for QR to have had some other railway to install it first and iron the bugs out of it before we bought it.

LZ: Do you want to explain the difference between those systems? Start with the oldest system and explain it and the reasons why they changed.

BLAIR: The CTC, the centralised traffic control, was first brought in somewhere around the 1970s. We had it between Yarwin and Gladstone, Gladstone on the Moura line. It was installed by Westinghouse Brake and Signal Company. The company's headquarters was at Stephenson's Road, Spottswood in Victoria, in Melbourne.

And they installed it and while it had its advantages, a shower of rain on the track and we used to block it out and they fed very small voltages like 450 millivolts through contact which was not really good. And so we modified quite a bit of it. Our own engineers and our own electricians who would come up with bright ideas and then they went to automatic train control which was just an up version of the CTC which was much better.

We installed the CTC and the ATC between Rockhampton and Gladstone. That was done by a company from New South Wales, from a place on the north side of Sydney there, Chatswood -- that's where the headquarters were. They came and they installed that. It worked quite well; it improved traffic conditions, like did away with station masters, trains didn't have to stop at stations to pick up a staff or something like this. They just went straight through. They'd get their green lights and all this sort of stuff. It was all controlled from the Rockhampton control room.

The ATP was a new thing altogether; it was worked mainly by radio and the finer working of it I never got to get to grips with it because it was sort of coming in when I was leaving. And they had to rewire the locomotives with special cable because there's a computer on the loco that would pick up information from the tracks, between the tracks.

Information would be sent out to these spots between the tracks and as the locomotive passed over it, it would pick up the information that was radiated from these spots and that's how that

came up on a diagram in front of the driver and he could tell what the signal ahead was going to be and in the early days it would tell you what speed he was supposed to be doing at the next curve and all this sort of thing. So I lived through a really great transformation period from pld time stuff up to the latest. I was very lucky that I lived through that era.

LZ: How is it that we can still get a train running into another train, the back end of or head-on crashes or whatever?

BLAIR: It does happen but very rare occasions and if you try to think back to the last one in Queensland, it's very difficult to think of. There was one somewhere around Newcastle -- old 38, the big 3801, was pulling a passenger train, electric train and ran into the back of it somewhere between Newcastle and Gosford.

That happened because of the track circuitry and whether there'd been a bit of rain or the driver'd been using a lot of sand, it would appear that the track circuits didn't work, and the track relays, in our terms, they bobbed. They picked up quickly and once a track relay picks up it can feed current to umpteen places, so that's what really happened down there, I believe. But other places we have human error. It comes into it, but taken all round, you don't hear of too many now because the signalling provides that if a driver goes past a red light, the brakes go on and he doesn't control that at all. That automatically happens with the computerisation on the trains.

LZ: So basically what there is, is an electric current or a sensor in the track, the locomotive triggers it, perhaps the train all the way down the length of that train, something triggers that sensor to show that the train is there and then the automatic system knows what's in the section ahead or the section behind and can direct from there. Is that right?

BLAIR: That sums it up to a certain extent but what actually happened in the old circuits was that we had a positive and negative feed from a battery feeding into either rail and then we used to feed in 450 millivolts, which is less than half a volt, and it operated a track relay at the other end which only had 4 ohms resistance and it was pretty sensitive. But as soon as the train hit the battery end or the relay end, it shorted out the battery and the relay dropped.

Well now, if the train didn't short it out, which was very, very rarely, we'd get it in sidings sometimes where there was rust on the rail or things like that, but on mainline traffic it would happen, you know, 999 times out of a thousand. Maybe, in fact I've only ever seen a couple of them fail to drop the track relay and that was in a place where there was a lot of rust on the lines, and the wheels didn't make a good contact to short out the battery, so that's what happens -- it shorts it out. That's the basic start of signalling in those early days. Now, we don't have insulated joints in a lot of places to divide the track up into sections. We have signalling on the basis of a, what's the word, a tone... a frequency. Frequency tracks!

We send a frequency down... and it gets shorted out and runs into another frequency and they don't seem to mix up. We have just a different frequencies -- frequency tracks, a new era.

LZ: Do all locomotives have the automatic protection that if they go through a red signal that they'll stop?

BLAIR: Oh yes, that's provided by the fact that it shorts out the track. That's what does that, if you go past the red light you've hit the next track and you'll short it out, put the signals in "danger" and, yeah, most locomotives do have that facility built into them to put the brakes on. Yes, you get what they call a "penalty application" or you get a full application of the brakes if you go past a red signal -- BANG -- and that's it.

LZ: So that would be suburban trains, the city trains and so on, that would have it?

BLAIR: Yes, the City Trains, they have it.

LZ: Long haul coal trains, everything else?

BLAIR: I'm not too sure now whether the long haul coal trains have it. They may very well have it; I'm not too sure, I can't say.

LZ: And what about GPS these days? How does that get involved with the system?

BLAIR: Well, we're only using GPS in, I think, one place in Queensland as far as I know, and that's up around Cairns. Cairns to Mareeba to Kuranda; and I don't know whether it goes out to Almaden or not or Machulba but that's where they have a bit of it around Mareeba. I do know that, but whether we've got it in other places than that I don't know because I've been gone for years now and there's things that have happened down there that I don't know about.

LZ: The cane railways are using GPS location quite a bit these days.

BLAIR: Yes, yes, very good.

LZ: To kind of flesh the picture out, in the days that you were working, how many people would you have on a train -- let's take both passenger and freight. How many people would you have on a train and what would their responsibilities be in terms of the signalling system and so on?

BLAIR: Well, there was the driver and the fireman up the front and in latter days they were still referred to as fireman or driver's assistants, because there were no fires; the steam engines were gone. And then later on they abolished the guard and the guard's job was at the rear of the train just to keep an eye out on things. But we've abolished guards now and we've abolished the fireman too in lots of trains where there'll be a driver only, because there is so much safety signalling and safety protection built in that we don't need the fireman.

But the fireman, one of his duties in those days was to provide assistance for the driver and the safe working of the whole show: the electric staff, to collect it, read it, see it had the right name on it for the right section. Pass it over to the driver and the driver would hang on to it till the next station and the driver, of course, had the responsibility of keeping it on the tracks, not going too fast. Although I very seldom know of having a train coming off because it was allegedly going too fast. We had one tilt train roll over because it was allegedly going too fast, but I'll pass on that.

And we had a big smash in 1947 or 1948 at Camp Mountain outside Brisbane, a tourist train, a picnic train, rolled over going down Camp Mountain. It rolled over; it was going too fast and the driver didn't know the track too well and the fireman knew the track and he must have thought it was going alright and anyway it rolled over and I don't know how many were killed there or not; that was in 1947 or 48.

Then we had a big smash at Tamaree on the 16th of October, 1947. There was half a dozen or a dozen people killed there. That was two passenger trains. That was a night officer just pulled the levers off and put one train on top of another. The Sunshine Mail from Brisbane to Cairns ran into the Rockhampton Mail that was going from Rockhampton to Brisbane. It was standing at the platform at Tamaree, the Sunshine Mail came round the corner at Tamaree and ran straight into it. And that happened in 1947. And the engine numbers were 849 and 891 because I went out to the scene of the crime about 7 o'clock in the morning.

It was quite a mess, yeah. I could tell you a little bit of what happened... I went home for the weekend from Brisbane; I was an apprentice electrician in Brisbane, and went home to Gympie for the weekend and the phone rang about quarter past one in the morning and it was the Gympie ambulance station ringing me to see if I would go and call a chap called Alec McPherson who lived over the road from me in Gympie. He didn't have the phone on and they rang me and asked me if I could go and get him to come to the phone and ring them. They needed his services; there'd been a big train smash at Tamaree.

In railway terms it was 241, the Sunshine Mail ran into 112A, the Rockhampton-Brisbane Mail. And Alec McPherson, he came over and talked to the ambulance and the ambulance fellow in charge who rang me, his name was Lou Deam. So they took a lot of people out there that night. They worked on it for quite a long time. The driver and fireman on the Rockhampton train were both killed. The fireman's name was John Joseph Heiniger and the driver's name, I think it was Knight. Yes, I knew John Heiniger -- he was a Gympie boy. In fact, this day, and we have said earlier the 8th of October 08, his wife is still alive in Gympie, Mrs Heiniger. In fact I know her.

LZ : What -- you said you went out at seven o'clock in the morning. Describe what you found and what the circumstances were.

BLAIR: The two locomotives were badly locked together.

LZ: So it was locomotive to locomotive.

BLAIR: Yeah, locomotive to locomotive... smashed together... coaches were broken because they were all wooden ones and the people that were injured or killed were in the front cars of the Rockhampton Mail which were all sitting cars.

The sleepers were always on the back of the train, not like it is today, sleepers are up to the front now with the sitters at the back. And they were in the front of the train. I can't recall how much damage was done to the Townsville Mail, the one that was Brisbane-Townsville, but I do know that quite a few people were killed and of course all the bodies had been taken away by this time, by this time when I got out there.

And it was only the first station out of Gympie, so it was only a matter of a ten-minutes drive -- 15 minute drive -- north of Gympie. It runs Gympie, Tamaree , Harvey Siding, Curra and up to Thebine and then on to Gunalda and Theebine and Tiaro up to Maryborough. It was right close to Gympie where it happened.

And that was because there were no grade safety devices to rely on. It relied on human element to do the right thing in the signal cabin. You can see here at Archer Park they have what they call 'collars' on the lever and it was obvious that the night officer didn't put the collars on the lever when he allowed one train to come into the station from the other end.

Incidentally his name was Vince Gilleland. He was the night officer that created the crime, the scene. He was later tried for manslaughter in the Gympie courthouse and he was acquitted, probably on the grounds that he was very young -- I don't know how old Vince was at the time; he might have been about 20-21-something about 19 and the railway then gave him a job in the goods shed at Roma Street. But he died a relatively young man, I believe. I don't know what age, but you'd say relatively young, you'd say up to 36 or 35.

Yeah, Vince Gilleland didn't live a full life. It must have played on his mind a bit.

In fact a few months ago I acquired all the cuttings and copies of the Gympie Times of the Tamaree smash and I got them for someone here [Rockhampton] and there's a person in Proserpine whose name is Heiniger. He was the son of the fireman that was killed and at the time his dad was killed he was about 3 or 4 year old. He lives in Proserpine now. So I acquired all the cuttings from the paper for someone, and someone else here in Rockhampton, they were talking about the Tamaree smash and these two people were talking and one of them said to the other, "find Blair Jamieson; he'll tell you all about Tamaree ", so they found me and I went to the trouble of getting them copies of the paper from Gympie, the Gympie Times, all about the Tamaree smash. Long time ago.

LZ: You mentioned 'collars' on the signal boxes. Can you describe the process of setting the signals, setting the -- presumably the switches work, the points work at the same time that the signals are set. Can you describe that process and what the safe working should have been?

BLAIR: Well what happened at Tamaree was and the process was that the line would have been set normally for a train to come into the main line and the signalman, the night officer, would have pulled off the outer 'home' and the home signal let the train come into the main line and it would stop at the 'starter' -- the starter being the signal to allow it to go on to the next section -- it would have stopped there. That's where it stopped.

Then the night officer should have gone to the other end of the frame and put a little collar, a little thing so that it doesn't lock the lever, but it stops you pulling it. And he should have put that on the home signal to the main line so that if he went to pull it, it would click and stop. It would stop him from pulling it and he would say, "Ha, what's wrong?" and he didn't do that, he just went and pulled off. The railway expression was "pulled off" the signal to come in. If he'd had the collar on he'd have stopped and have said, "Oh, what's wrong? Oh, I've got the mail down here at the platform." I've got to make the loop points to put the other one around him.

Any how, he didn't, he. In fact, in practice today he'd have probably.... -- well, not today but later on, he'd probably have brought the Rockhampton Mail into the loop, stopped it and then put the Sunshine Mail through the main line, straight through, but he didn't and so this is what happened. Whether he was under the impression that he'd brought the train into the loop and then have the points set for the other train to go through the main line I don't know. Just such a long time ago now.

LZ: And so a young person, stupidity or carelessness is not the same as manslaughter so....

BLAIR: No, no. He was quite a good fellow, a nice guy. It could happen to anyone you know. Every station that had a signal box and levers to pull, it could happen. There was no real safeguards in those days except for the collar on the lever. It was really error... human attention that would have to put the collar on the lever.

LZ: These days with the computer control and so on, I assume that the interlocking is all with the software in the computer rather than a physical collar or something.

BLAIR: Oh yes, yes, it's all tied up now. Years ago you'd never cross two trains moving. One had to be brought to a halt before you'd bring the other one in. And now they can set the computer up to cross them. And they slow right down and the driver will see a light blinking or he'll have an intermediate signal to tell him that the next one's a danger and he'll just come in very slowly and he'll know that he's going to cross a train there. It's all really gone ahead. I haven't been down to the control rooms here in Rockhampton for a couple of years but I spent a lot of time there.

LZ: On Saturday we were up in Mount Morgan and one of the fellows there who'd been a fireman was talking about an accident where a train that was in the loop hadn't quite cleared; it was too far forward so there wasn't really clearance and they took all the windows out of the passenger train. Apparently as they just caught the corner of it as they went through but you know, again human error, thinking "ah there's enough clearance".

The American accident that just happened a few weeks back, there was apparently no automatic controls even though it was on a fairly heavily used piece of track. The locomotive apparently didn't have the automatic controls in it or something.

BLAIR" I didn't hear about that one.

LZ: We've been pretty lucky actually. Given that when you look at the history of Queensland Rail and Queensland Rail really cutting costs from time to time. Parsimonious would be a good description. We've been pretty lucky actually.

BLAIR: Considering the number of train miles we've run in a year, we've been pretty lucky, although is it luck? It's well managed and when people are aware of safety as young people.

We were, particularly as electricians you have to have a fair amount of safety sort of drilled into you. Everything was "safety first". Our old foreman, when I worked around the Mayne Junction signal cabin which was a pretty busy place at peak time and suburban traffic. It had an EP cabin and little tiny levers and it was a pretty busy place and safety was always sort of drilled into you. It was drilled into us but it sort of came natural too; you seemed to sort of accept the responsibility of the job that you had.

And I was lucky... I was thinking most of my fifth year as an apprentice I was paid as a tradesman and the other boys of the same year we were paid as tradesmen because we were so short of tradesmen. There was a transition period after the war in 1949-50 and they used us as tradesmen because they were so short. Makes you grow up a bit quicker.

LZ: So your apprenticeship program was five years long?

BLAIR: Yes, a piece of cake now. They go along and they do a semester and they have an exam; do another semester and another exam and then at the end of the year they sit for their final semester and that's it. When I did it there was an exam after every term and at the end of the year you had an exam on the whole year, and then when you finished your fifth year you had an exam on five years.

ENDS

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