

Archer Park Rail Museum: Lynn Zelmer interviewing Bill Head, 15 Oct 2008.

LZ: Today is October 15th. We're at Archer Park Station; I'm Lynn Zelmer interviewing

Bill: Bill Head.

LZ: You were saying that some of these kind of incidents that you talk about from your old days just couldn't happen any more. Why do you think that?

BILL: Well, it's a different set-up now. You take for argument's sake, when Ivan was talking to me about the staff era, when he was in Mount Morgan. When the guard arrived at the station, and he has got to cross the train, well, the staff shouldn't have been there. That was when an error was made when the last train coming into Mount Morgan brought what we call a 'ticket' instead of the staff.

He should have brought the staff in to allow that other train to go back, I think it was Walmul was the siding, to cross that other train. Well, by mistake, they didn't check with the control and they came in and the fireman wrote out a ticket instead of coming in on the staff.

Well, the first thing that the trainman used to do when he arrived at the station like that to cross another train, particularly like a station that was unattended, they'd get onto Control and say who they are, "This is 106; we've arrived at Walmul, where's that 95? (the train they've got to meet)". And Control said to him "well, he's on his way over to you now. And the Guard said, (the Guard had checked in) " But he said, "He can't be. The staff's still here. "

Well, the old saying, that let the cat among the pigeons, see because that other train shouldn't have been on the way to Walmul. Well, when things like that happen -- both sides knew where the trains were, so the driver, he said to the officer on duty, "Well, she'll be right, I'll go across without it", see. There was no danger 'cause they knew what was going on, but, of course, that was highly against the regulations. You didn't do those things, although anybody in the railway, station masters, guards, drivers and firemen, through their whole career in the railway, if any of them ever made the claim they were never a party to squaring up a staff error, well, they're living in fantasyland.

I've never yet struck anybody that sometime in their life, during their career when they were handling trains and staff working, all were (if you like to use the word) 'guilty' I suppose, but it was always done with the utmost safety. When you had to square up something like that, well, everybody knew what was going on. There was no danger of anybody getting hurt, or being in a smash or anything like that, but strictly against the rules and regulations.

They had a pretty dim view of that and that particular incidence that Ivan was talking about, well all the staff, they were reduced in classification, I think it was for a period of, I think it was 12 months. That was the punishment that was meted out.

But today, it's a whole completely different set-up. We don't have all of the trains, all these little crossing places now. Like in those days we had mixed goods trains, and coal trains -- there was a lot of traffic. Now you see trains going past here -- a goods train, one driver on it. There's no staff involved where you can make an error now. It's all traffic control; it's all centralized traffic control. It's all controlled by the Controller with red and green lights, and I believe if a driver overshoots a red light, he's only got so many seconds, it's a very short time, to apply the brakes, or the train would come to a stand-still.

Well, you can't make those errors now because of technology really. And, of course, there's only one man involved now. Those goods trains we see going up here, there's only one man on those now, he's the driver. Whereas in the age of steam there was the driver and a fireman and a guard

on the back. And in this particular incidence that Ivan was talking about, the driver doesn't get off the train, but it was the fireman had to change the staff or get his working, as we used to call it, either whether he had a ticket into Mount Morgan or a staff.

Well, the fireman, he just didn't do it. He's just forgot, or automatically took a ticket... see when you go into isolated sidings, you might leave one railway station -- there might be six or seven stations where trains can cross before you get to another manned station.

Well, when you leave the first manned station, the driver and guard is given a written instruction, "Proceed to such and such a town on ticket, on to the next one on ticket and the next one on staff. That adjusted the staff and the ticket for the crossing of trains, you see.

Well, that sort of thing now, it doesn't apply, so you might go to seven stations with trains to cross and there's nobody on duty; but, you had your written instructions, and the normal practice was, the train got into a siding, a crossing station that's unattended. He'd get straight away in touch with the control and identify himself as, "105, just arrived here at whatever the station might be... How is that 105 -- is he on his way?"

Control might say, "There's been a delay further down the line. " And they might do what we used to call 'line clear' him over to the next station.

Well, that sort of system, it's not there any more, so that those sort of errors that you could make a blue and square up, you can't do it. Well, it doesn't arise now. All the new technology with the centralized traffic control to when I started on that sort of stuff nearly 60 years ago, it's all history now, it doesn't exist.

So the scope for a lot of these hair-raising stories that we can tell of what we did in days gone by, it won't happen any more because it's just a complete different ball game now. I tell you, if ever you made a mistake like that, it would give you a few anxious moments until you sorted it out. Now what else?.....

LZ: The staff system.... the staff was a physical object that you carried from one place to another

BILL: yes, that's right.

LZ: It ensures that there was only one person, sorry one train, on a particular section of track - yes?

BILL: Well with staff and ticket... with 'electric staff' like we've got down at that very bottom end [of Archer Park Rail Museum] you can only have one train on one section of the track at a time. Because the driver's got to have one of those electric staffs and once you've taken one out, you can even make the circuit again, you can't get another one out.

It's impossible but this other system that we were talking about earlier, that is what we called the 'staff and ticket' system. You see, there was a box with a staff that was like a big key and inside that was a book of what we called 'tickets' -- details of the station from-to, the time, the date, the train number; the station master signed it.

Well, in some instances where that system was in operation, which was the greater part of the Queensland railways in my earlier days, it was two trains to go from my station to the next one before there's another one to come back to me. The first one was given what we called a 'ticket' and the ticket was locked in that box. So the staff opened that box; I wrote out a ticket -- it was in duplicate with all the details -- the train number, the station to, and so forth; you gave that to the driver, but you had to show the driver the staff, that you've got the staff that was the key to that box.

Well then, you let him go and it just depended on the type of trains. You might have had an old, slow goods train that's come into your yard, and we put him in your 'loop line' as we called it, and you've got a passenger train following -- a fast passenger train.

Well, if it's an old, slow goods train that you've got in your loop, you gave the first, the passenger train, you gave him a ticket. Well, if it was good open, flat country, it was good vision, and it was a slow goods train, you could let him follow probably five minutes clear. You only had to give the passenger train five minutes' clearance. Well you let him go, then the next one, the goods train, you gave him the staff; then he took it over there to the next station.

That gave him the staff then. He might have two trains to come back to me before I've got one to go to him. The first one might be given the ticket, shown the staff, and the next one would be given the staff. The staff was regarded like a key to the section. That's how it worked.

But you had two boxes in your station -- they were yellow, red, blue and white, and on the end of them had a different shaped head. The yellow one was a half diamond; the red was diamond, the blue was round and the white was square. There was a brass plate on each side, just "Rockhampton to Bundaberg - Bundaberg to Rockhampton. "

And you had two boxes in your office; the yellow one would be for trains going that way, the blue one to that way. And the next station, he's got a 'blue' one that matches up with yours; then he might have a red one to go to the next station.

The policy usually was they only ever used the half diamond at a junction station, but it wasn't strictly -- they could use it in other places, but it was mainly at a junction station. And as I said, we had the four colours -- yellow, red, blue and white.

Sometimes things would get out of kilter and the train has broken down. And I've got the staff here... to send a train to the next station. And this train that I've held the staff for, it's broken down. And there's a train in ten minutes' time that is going to be at the station over there that I should have had a train to send over for the staff to come over to me.

Well, we had a system that was called, 'line clear'. In my first early days on the job we had a long box, and you had a padlock -- it had a number on it. It was kept unlocked in the safe, in the station safe.

The key to it was held by the station at the other end of the section. And what you used to do, you'd get the staff out, put it in this red box, you'd padlock it; then you send a telegram to the station that's got the train to dispatch to me, 'I've got the staff here'.

So you'd telegraph him from the SM at such and such a place to the SM at the other station -- success, train staff secured with lock number '38' and the train number, whatever the train might be, may proceed to Rockhampton, say, the station where I am at,

So he writes that out, countersigns it, gives it to the driver and, in addition, gives the driver the key that when he gets over to my station, I can unlock the box and get the staff out.

Well, in later years they done away with that system. They only ever used that in the earlier days when there was station masters employed. They also had that same system, what they called them 'gate keepers'. There would be a lady in charge, and if ever that happened, the control would get in touch with her, but they'd done away with the lock and the key, and she'd have to lock the staff in the safe and there was no key involved there. It was perfectly safe, but the earlier days I locked it and he had to send the key over.

But not telling tales out of Sunday school -- it's quite safe for me to do it now, because nobody can deal with me -- but what we used to do, just in case, these things shouldn't happen, but they did -- just in case the station master, when he sent that train across with that a line clear report, forgot to give the driver the key, and the driver forgot to ask it, we put the staff in that little lock-

up box and we put the padlock in, but we didn't click it, so that if he didn't send the staff over, you could unlock it then, just the same as if he'd brought the key over -- and you were doing the regime an enormous service.

So, in lots of cases, if you stuck strictly to all rules and regulations, I know it's probably not the right thing to say, but you'd tie things up; and by just taking those few little short cuts you could overcome some of those little unforeseen things that cropped up from time to time. We're all guilty of that, if guilty's the right word to use. We just wanted to keep things moving. But all that staff and ticket, electric staff, it's all gone.

It's just all track circuits and traffic lights now, red and green and amber lights. So it's taken a lot of the scope for doing all these things in your career -- you can tell stories about -- they're all gone. It wouldn't happen now.

LZ: They'll find new things.

BILL: Probably yes, yeah.

I'll never forget another exciting example, when I was out in Longreach back in about 1960. When the Thompson River used to flood, the Midlander used to terminate at Longreach; it never went across to Winton and the dining car girls, their book of tickets and all their floating cash was kept in the safe, naturally, in the ASM's office in Longreach.

On this particular instance, the train had terminated at Longreach and we dispatched it the next day and I was on the train, I was duty... but only going to Ilfracombe to pick up my car.

I had gone down there and it had rained. We had black soil road out there in those days and when you got rain on the black soil, you never went anywhere. So I was going down on the train; anyhow, we left the train. I rode in the guard's van, but bought myself a ticket to keep in the clear but I rode with the guard in the guard's van.

We'd gone about a mile (in the old language) -- a mile or so out of Longreach, that train stopped!

So we had a look out and we saw the conductor running down toward the engine, see, and the engine driver, he could see that he was the bloke he wanted to talk to, so he come and met him and had a bit of a conflag. The conductor come running back to the guard's van, and he said "The girls are in a heck of a stew; they forgot their tickets and their floating cash in the ticket office, in the safe at Longreach. "

So. he said, the driver said we were going to set back so they could pick it up, see. And he didn't book the time, couldn't see, it was all unofficial, and we set back to Longreach.

The train had to be on time into Barcaldine that night because the train that that crew that was fetching back was on time. So we set back for Longreach. The officer who was on duty at the time, when he went to lock up the takings of the ticket office, he could see this and he knew straight away what it was. Fortunately he was out there holding it, handed it straight to us, and away we went.

So the guard said, "We'll have a look now; we've got to square this time up".

We were allowed, I think it was close on 40 minutes to run from Longreach to Ilfracombe, so we had to try and square it up. So away we took off and we said, "We'll time him". So we left Longreach and where he normally took between 38 and 40 minutes, we run it from Longreach to Ilfracombe in 26 minutes.

So that's alright, it went off alright. I was acting station master at the time. Anyhow next afternoon, of all people who should come into the office and introduced himself, he said, "I'm

the editor of the 'Longreach Leader'. And I thought, oh this sounds good, and he said to me, "I believe the Midlander came back into town yesterday afternoon." I said, "yes, that's correct." He said, "bit unusual, isn't it?" "Yes," I said, "you could say that." and he said, "Anything serious?"

I said, "no. Nothing that would be of any interest or any concern to the public. Nothing really out of the ordinary as far as the traveling public goes, but it's just one of those things that happen."

He was a real gentleman, and he said to me, with a bit of a grin on his face, "In other words, you're telling me the incident is not for publication." "I'd appreciate it very much," I said, "you've got it in one." And luckily he didn't.

But if he'd written that the powers that be would want to know why, and I don't know what would have happened.

All of those things that happened were quite harmless, but according to the regulations not the thing to do. But those sort of things you've got to do. I reckon you have anyway.

I had some great experiences in the railway. As I said the other day, when I worked in the dining car, I worked under the railway award on the whole of the staff, I got a shilling a week -- in today's language it was equal to ten cents. It covered all overtime whilst running between Rockhampton and Mackay. We did that trip six times a week -- three times north and three times south.

Anyhow, we used to work a total -- it would have been getting close to 70 hours all told for the whole of the week. It was a 44 hour week then, and I got a shilling a week that covered all this overtime, and I think the seniors, that was the waitresses, the head waitress and the chef I think they got about three shillings a week, or 30 cents. Well, you know, my wage in those days was one pound, seven and ten pence a week; or in decimal currency, that would be \$2.79 a week.

LZ: What would that have bought? What would that \$2.70 have bought in terms of buying power of the time...

BILL: It didn't buy a great deal, Lynn, not really. I used to go to the pictures about three times a week. In those days if you went into the cheapest seats you could get in for one and thrupence. But the little bit of spending that you done, we got by on it, but there wasn't much to spare, you know. But we were fortunate; as far as I was concerned I was fortunate; because the rate of pay was a little higher than that, but they kept so much for your board and accommodation, you see. But it didn't really buy very much. But, of course, way back then, this was in 1946, a lot of the things that part of life now, particularly for a young person that you want, they didn't exist then. It was pretty...

LZ: No ipods,

BILL: No ipods, no tvs, and even when you turned 17, no such thing as a motor car. In fact when I was a youngster, I didn't even have so much as a push bike.

So even though it was \$2.79, it didn't buy very much. But, as I say, we got by on it, because all these extra things that are an integral part of life now, we hadn't even heard of them.

Anyhow this trip to Mackay six times a week. Well then, in 1947 before they built the high level bridge over the Burdekin River up the north here, every season it used to flood up there -- never missed. They'd take the trains and a certain amount of goods trains. They'd come from Brisbane to Rocky, over to Longreach, up to Winton, across to Hughenden and across to Townsville that way. It was really a long way round.

Well, we did that for a fortnight, backwards and forwards. We might leave Rocky at 11 o'clock this morning, and we might hit Winton at 5 o'clock tomorrow afternoon, enough time to go over to the quarters and have a shower, and we might be there an hour and a half and we'd pick up the Sunshine Mail.

Well, we did that backwards and forwards for a fortnight. Well, of course, that invalidated that clause in the railway award, because it distinctly stated you got paid this higher allowance of a shilling or ten cents a week, I got, and the seniors thirty, whilst running between Rockhampton and Mackay.

Well, we weren't running between Rockhampton and Mackay; we were running between Rockhampton and Winton. And I can remember when we got payday, and of course it was pounds, shillings and pence then, when payday came I got this beautiful, lovely blue five pound note, and a ten shilling note and a great handful of silver. I'd never seen so much money in me life before.

And that went on for a fortnight. We had a sleeping car similar to this JCS out here [at Archer Park Rail Museum], or identical to that, and the first class berth was our accommodation; in the second class berths, that's where we put our stores. And wherever we came off at Winton, it stayed with us for the whole fortnight. And we lived on the train for two weeks. A great experience though, it was.

When I look back on those times, when you reminisce, well I do, when I look back on those days -- hard work, we worked long hours, but the older I get the more I enjoyed it really, you know. If I could turn the clock back, I'd do it all over again. It was really great, it was.

Oh, I don't know, the atmosphere and employment -- everything was different; it was a different world then.

Another experience I had when I was Assistant ASM in Blackall, out there, there would be no need for it now because they're pulling the railway line up, but they had out there a little, what they called a 'rail ambulance'. It was a little bigger than those little flat-tops we have out there [Archer Park]; about long enough that with a few inches to spare you could lay a person down.

It was a little four-wheeled, flat-topped sort of thing, covered over and everything, and had a T-model Ford engine in it. And it was mounted sort of in the middle and facing outwards, you didn't get the draft. It was typical of the modern day motor car, like east-wests. It had plenty of power; it was a bit of a character set up. And we got a call one Saturday; we'd just finished work about five o'clock. The station master come out and he said, "Would you like a trip out to Eurakka, it's a hundred miles out. I said, "out to Yaraka? There's a big rain out there. "

"Yes", he said, "there's a young chap out there". I remember his name, it was Stan Pytlik. He said, "he's had an accident with his motor bike, it caught on fire and he's badly burned. They've got him in bed over at the hotel. " So he said, "they want the rail ambulance to go out and fetch him in."

So we headed off just on dark. There was myself, the doctor, two ambulance bearers. We headed out for Yaraka, see.

Anyhow we two big four gallon drums of water and a big enamel jug. They didn't have a radiator cap on this T model Ford engine, it had a sort of a funnel fitted into it, see. Because of the lack of air it used to start to boil. So we took it in turns; we had to keep our eye on it. As soon as she started to smoke we'd get some water into this jug and some water into the funnel, and that would cool it down for awhile, see.

And we got as far as Emmet, that's about 60 miles out, and I found out the generator had thrown it in. So to preserve the battery we had to travel in the dark -- no moonlight that night, pitch dark -- out to Yaraka.

We picked this poor young fellow up and he was badly burnt. So all on the way back the doctor was giving him -- what's that stuff called? blood plasma isn't it? And the doctor was giving him that all the way in, and we landed back in Blackwater about half past seven on Sunday morning.

And this old rail ambulance... the way it was rigged up it had plenty of power, but you'd just have to hit it with a jug of water every so often or she'd start to boil.

While I was out there I held the record for trips on it. I had two trips to Eurakka, and another time I went out to Benlidi to fetch a pregnant woman in. She was close to having to go into hospital, but that trip was a little bit better because they'd modernised things a bit; they'd thrown the old T-model Ford engine out and they had a Ford Prefect motor in it and that was a little better set up.

It was a great thing for wet , for anyone out that way, if they could go into the railway line, we'd go out and fetch them in. So I had three trips on that.

But I don't know where it is now, but it would be something worth preserving because of the work that it really did, you know. They won't have it there now because the line's been closed from Blackwater to Yaraka and I believe that they've started to pull it up. That's another great experience I had.

It's really great, but see the world we live in today, those sort of things are gone now. When we had a trip like that we never charged the ambulance simply because it was an ambulance job, you know.

The superintendent of the ambulance a couple of weeks after, he said to me "We could book the time on the railway sheet. Then the railway would pay us and in turn they would debit the ambulance", but being the ambulance service you didn't do that. And he said to me, "Did you book the time against that trip to Yaraka?" and I said "No, we don't do that for the ambulance". And he said, "Well, you should have. Because", he said, "We would have paid the railway, but if you'd wanted to do it for nothing, you could have made it a donation back to us; we'd have had our money and you would have got an income tax deduction".

Never thought of that, you know. A trip like that, it's the last thing you think of, to want to be paid for it, you know. But there were great old experiences on the railway -- loved every minute of it.

LZ: I think there is a rail ambulance preserved somewhere in Queensland but I'm not sure where.

BILL: I couldn't tell you where, but there was another one somewhere. But this one they had at Blackall, it was originally in Baralaba, in the Dawson Valley. That's where they purchased it from. Well, I was out in Blackwater, went out there first in about 1951 and they had it then, but as I say it was equipped with this Ford T-model engine.

LZ: It must have been fairly large if it could have four men plus....

BILL: Well when we all got in it there wasn't very much... we were like sardines. I suppose as long as from here to the corner of that table there....

LZ: About two , two and a half metres

BILL: Probably. That would be about the limit of it. It was rigged up, the gear box was rigged up, you didn't have to turn it. You could just throw it over and start it and would go the other way.

LZ: Would it take a stretcher?

BILL: Yes, they had it built with a stretcher to one side. Of course they couldn't have it right in the centre because the motor encroached on a certain amount of it, see, but they had the stretcher on one side and we just... sort of little benches. It wasn't a comfortable trip. But under those circumstances you've got to make do. You had limited room to put anything, but by the time the four of us got in there, and our two drums of water and the jug, and the doctor's equipment, well space was at a premium, I tell you.

Great old days they were. No there's lots of other stories. You've basically got to rack your brains to more or less memorise them and think of them, you know.

ENDS