

STOCK TRAINS & STEAM TRAINS.

Heather Smith

In 1951 at the age of 17 years my husband Kevin Phillip Smith commenced employment at the Riverstone Railway station as a Junior Porter. His duties were to sell and collect the tickets, attend to the parcel office, clean the waiting room, secure passenger's bicycles on the station, fill the kerosene lanterns on the signal poles and open and shut the gates at the crossing. The station was fully manned twenty four hours a day, seven days a week by a staff comprising Station Master Jim Howes, Assistant Station Master Frank Coates, Shunter Frank Toole, Porter Neville Wiggins, Junior Porter Kevin Smith, Clerical Officer Charlie Egan and Relieving Station Master Frank Jeffries.

In the 1950s Riverstone was a thriving town which existed around the Meatworks. If the Meatworks was the heart of Riverstone the railway was its life blood - hundreds of head of livestock were brought in by the goods trains. Massive steam engines hauling 65 trucks which shunted back and forth in the night.

From Riverstone Railway station the trains diverged into five lines running into Richards siding (the Meatworks) and for three hours the steam engine hauled the full trucks down to the cattle yards situated behind the textile factory and up under the skin shed where the sheep were unloaded and penned up ready for the next morning's kill. The empty trucks were then re-assembled back onto the main line for the return journey to Sydney.

The skilful manoeuvring of this complicated procedure was known as shunting and was the responsibility of the Shunter, Frank Toole. Frank joined the NSW Government Railways in 1941 at 18 years of age. He commenced as a Porter at Shoalhaven and then came to Blacktown where he did a course in shunting while working as a Porter. He then trained as a Signal man and relieved at Rooty Hill, Kurrajong, Richmond, Windsor and Riverstone. He married a Kurrajong girl Violet Simmons in 1946 and settled in Windsor. In 1948 he was appointed to the permanent position of Shunter at Riverstone Railway station a position he held for 27 years, before moving onto Richmond station where he remained as Station Master until his retirement in September, 1985.

The longest livestock train ever to pass through Riverstone comprised 85 trucks and two brake vans. The engines were P class 32 (engine capacity) and 58. Frank remembers the Railways experimenting with a 59 engine, however it was so wide that it scraped the sides of the platform and was taken off the run.

Some nights up to 25 trucks of horses consigned to Burns' Knackery would be unloaded onto the main Riverstone platform and herded into yards where the car park is now located adjacent to the railway station. Stockmen drove them up Garfield Road to the knackery paddocks at Rouse Hill. The stockmen from the knackery controlled the horses with electric prodders, however it was not unusual for horses to break away from the mob and gallop off in different directions around the streets of Riverstone. Worse still they could fall between the platform and the vans and have to be pulled up by ropes or injure themselves so badly that the local Police Officer Charlie Crawford was called to put the poor beast out of its misery.

The average freight bill incurred by Riverstone Meat was 150,000 pounds per month (\$300,000.00). Invoicing and payment was handled by Frank Toole. At the beginning of each month the Meatworks would forward to Riverstone railway office a cheque for 30,000 pounds, this was duly banked and entered into a large ledger. As each goods train was unloaded the costs were entered into the ledger; when the credit side of the ledger was hovering at three to four thousand pounds Frank would attend the office of the Meatworks Manager Mr. Leeson and he would be presented with another cheque for 30,000 pounds. The freight transaction continued in this manner each month.

Frank reported to work each afternoon at 2.00pm and spent the next two hours until 4.00pm balancing the freight account and once the manifest arrived from Sydney he would notify the Meatworks Head Stockmen, Syd. 'Squeaker' Strachan (cattle) and Ted Follet (sheep) who then organised the stock men and their dogs for the night. Bert Wheeler, Barry Strachan and Georgie Cafe were a few that Frank and Kevin could remember.

When the fully loaded livestock train arrived the skilful juggling of unloading and shunting commenced. One wrong move would create chaos on the five lines into the Works. Guiding their movements was Frank who sometimes rode in the guards van or hooked himself onto the outside step of the steam engine, jumping down into the tracks with his own 'key' which diverted the points guiding the trucks into position for unloading by the stockmen and then shunted onto sidelines to be picked up by the engine as it passed by them again.

Meanwhile as the stock unloading continued, Frank was also responsible for the dispatch of the meat train which had to steam out of Richards Siding promptly at 9.20pm each night. Gordon Minturn supervised the night loading of fresh meat (beef and lamb) from the days kill from the chillers at the front of the Meatworks onto MRC and TRC refrigerated vans for delivery to various meat depots at Hay Street Sydney, St Leonards, Hornsby, Wollongong, Granville, Kogarah and Liverpool ready for early morning trading by the butchers when they came into their respective depots to purchase the days supply of fresh meat for their shops.

The main labour force for the Works was drawn from the town; as well an influx of workers arrived by train each morning especially those who hoped to obtain a days work 'on the gate'. These casual workers were selected by the Industrial Officer Peter Grealey assisted by a young Dennis Graham, and the number of casual labourers selected depended on the size of the kill anticipated for that day.

Unfortunately there was not a great call for skilled female office workers at the Works so most young women travelled out of town to work further down the line as secretaries and shop assistants. My mother said that she could always tell the time by the sound of the train whistle.

If my memory serves me correctly firstly the ten past seven to Central was packed with office workers destined to Town Hall and Wynyard. The ten past eight carried the Parramatta workers and students to high schools in Homebush, Parramatta and Blacktown. The ten to nine was the 'shoppers special' excursion train. The returning passengers usually commenced with the half past four, then the twenty past five, the ten past six and finally the ten to seven saw everyone safely home and preparing for the next day's exodus.

With only a single line from Blacktown to Richmond and double lines at Quakers Hill, Riverstone, Mulgrave and Richmond stations, safe progression along the line was secured by a metal 'staff' which guaranteed 'right of way' along the line. Carried by the engine driver the 'staff' was exchanged at each station with an attendant.

As the train from Blacktown entered Quakers Hill station a simultaneous exchange of 'staffs' took place. The 'staff' from Blacktown was then inserted into the 'staff clearance' machine indicating the train from Blacktown had arrived safely. The fresh 'staff' was then carried on by the engine driver and the exercise was repeated again at Riverstone, Mulgrave and Richmond stations. This simple precaution ensured the safety of trains travelling in the opposite directions. The two 'staffs' were short metal rods. So that they could never be confused one was carried in a leather case mounted onto a cane hoop which the porter could hook onto his arm as he exchanged the other from hand to hand as the train entered the station.

The 'staff' worked in conjunction with the signals. The signals were worked from the signal box located on the western end of the station. A large lever operated the switch points of the rail line switching trains to the second line. The signal was another 'right of way'. Situated a short distance from each end of the station platform was a tall wooden pole with a metal arm extending from it and lit from behind by two kerosene lanterns. When the arm was in the horizontal 'stop' position it allowed the red lantern mounted behind it to show and the train came to a halt. Once the line was clear and the arm dropped down allowing the green lantern to show the signal was indicating 'go' and the train proceeded into the station. The rail line points were controlled by a steel arm which ran from the signal box. Separate wiring controlled the arms mounted on the signal pole however they were both controlled by the lever located in the signal box on the platform.

Livestock and passenger trains were supervised by a staff of three. The engine driver and fireman up front and the guard in the guards van at the rear of the train. Tons of coal was packed into the coal tender hooked onto the engine at the Enfield coal depot and was shovelled into the huge furnace at the front of the engine by the fireman. There was also a small coal depot at Richmond station. However there was only one water tower on the line and that was at Riverstone. Situated at the eastern end of the platform the huge square steel tank was mounted on scaffolding about 15ft above the platform. It contained approximately 50,000 gallons of water. A canvas hose 12" in diameter was attached to a swinging steel arm which was pulled into place above the engine boiler by a chain and the boiler filled with water. Frank remembers the engine driver or fireman thought it a great joke to wait until he was walking past and then they would swing the arm across drenching him with water. Sometimes the engine on its way to Riverstone would run out of water and limp into Blacktown station. The station staff then had to run back and forth to the engine filling it up with watering cans so they could get up enough head of steam to reach the Riverstone water tank.

The trains also had a parcel van hooked onto it and many a shopkeeper waited for their goods to be unloaded each day, ice cream, newspapers, pigeons, dogs and various consignments of parcels arrived from all over the State. There was a goods' siding at Schofields to unload goods for Williams' Produce store, another at Mulgrave to unload straw for the mushroom growers and a third at Windsor to unload for Taylor's Produce store.

Trains also had their role in flood time. As the waters encroached from South Creek across the Meatworks paddocks and into the houses along 'Butcher's Row' formally known as Richards Avenue the vans would be positioned along the line facing them and the householders assisted by townspeople would load their furniture into the empty vans for safe keeping until the flood waters subsided.

Gradually the livestock trains were phased out and road trucks took over as the preferred method of shipment of cattle, sheep and horses. The Meatworks ceased trading and the people of Riverstone were left wondering why? Then before we realised it the steam train was leaving our station for the last time on 25th October, 1969 - motor rail and diesel snuck in and soon a steam train became a novelty.

No longer would mothers use the rolled up corner of a handkerchief to gouge cinders from their children's eyes - no longer would the children cling to their mother's skirts as the giant engines pulled into the station, great puffs of steam blowing up ladies' skirts and frightening little girls - no longer would the residents of Riverstone fall asleep lulled by the crashing of the empty vans as they joined up, the impatient whistle from the engine driver demanding the railway gates be opened for them so they could be on their way - their wheels spinning on the slippery rails as they headed up the hill to Schofields and out of our lives forever.

Written by Heather Smith from information supplied by Frank Toole and Kevin Smith. June, 2003.