



## CHAPTER 15

### BORDER RAILWAYS GONE WRONG

The pattern of railway development adjacent to the state borders has seen some strange lines on the map. They generally reflected the policies of governments regarding their ambitions of border trade. The background to this is best found, albeit at some length, on page 118 where the whole page is given to Quick and Garran.

In short, Victoria had ambitions of getting its hands on as much trade from over the border as possible and in colonial times built its railways all the way to the river boundary. New South Wales took a defensive position and constructed its railways towards the river, but stopped a little way short of the border, as it was their fear that a railway to the border would have made it easy for their own producers to send their produce south to Melbourne.

The first border railway was the private line of the Deniliquin & Moama Railway Company which was authorised in 1874. Hitherto, New South Wales had resisted the entry of private railways, and had adopted a policy that had the intention of all railways in the colony being those operated by the Government. The only other private company to gain entry into New South Wales in the 19th century was the Silverton Tramway Company (and its associated Tarawingee line).

The Deniliquin line was allowed because the distance from Sydney was so great (and more than twice the distance to Melbourne), that any hope of connecting Deniliquin to Sydney by rail was quite remote. Some sources say that it was a moment of weakness by the Parliament that the Bill was passed. The Deniliquin line was opened in 1876. It was purchased in 1923 by the Victorian Government and incorporated into their system. It remains open for service.

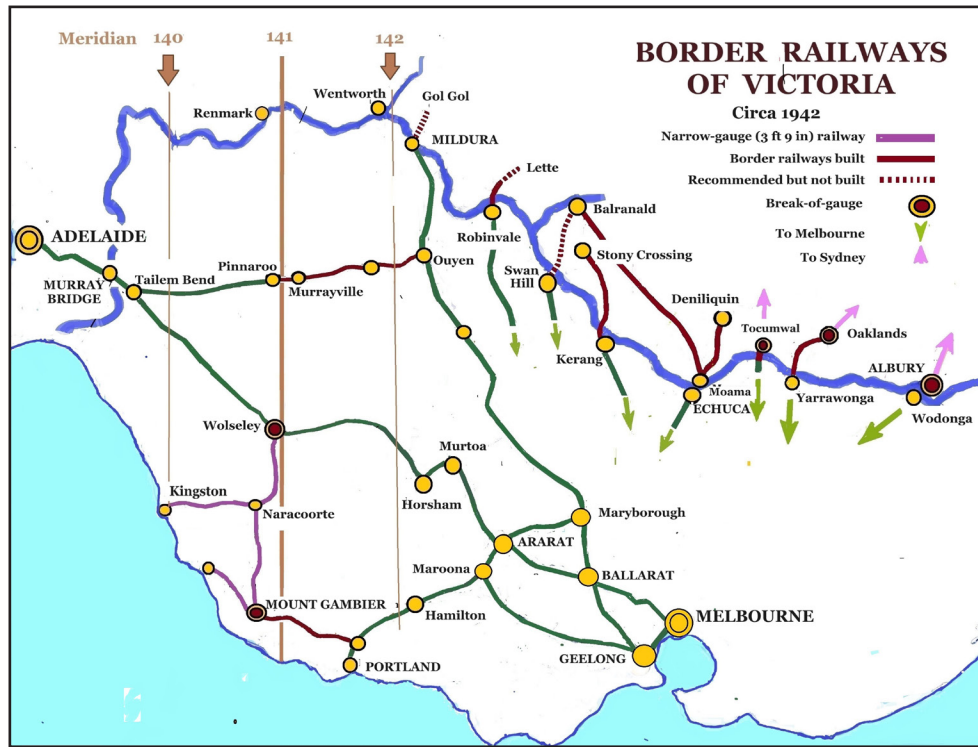
**ON THE LINE FROM HEYWOOD TO MOUNT GAMBIER** The South Australian Division of the ARHS ran a tour of the lines in the South-East of the State on the weekend of 24 April 1966, which included this border railway. **JLW.**

The gauge was 5 ft 3 in which was a logical choice given that this line was an extension from Echuca on the other side of the river. It was the first application of that gauge in New South Wales. When the Silverton line was opened in 1888, New South Wales could boast that it had operational railways of all three gauges. It was probably a dose of poetic justice, that New South Wales, having given us the break-of-gauge and having so fiercely resisted the entry of other gauges would be the first jurisdiction to fall foul of the demon. It could be argued that Victoria was the first to have all three gauges but that could be disputed because the foreign gauges at Wodonga and Serviceton were temporary.

Federation would bring promise of the demise of the many customs houses along the borders and there was a new spirit of co-operation. Premiers Joseph Carruthers of New South Wales and Thomas (Tommy) Bent of Victoria conferred on the matter of the border railways. Tommy Bent has been a boon to historians, and particularly those with a sense of humour.

Victoria had opened a line from Numurkah to Cobram in 1888. Strathmerton was on that railway and in 1905 that line was extended to the Murray (about 8 miles) where it was opposite the town of Tocumwal in New South Wales. An agreement was made between the two Governments that provided for a bridge across the Murray and extension of the line to Tocumwal. That was completed in 1908 and thus became another to add to the list of break-of-gauge locations.

That spirit of co-operation between Victoria and New South Wales did not translate into an early agreement to construct other border railways. Nothing further happened until 1922.



It would be on Victoria's other border that there would be the next border railway action and it would come with yet another break-of-gauge.

We now need to go back to 1835 when some well intentioned, but ill-informed, English gentlemen gathered around a table in the Colonial Office in Downing Street, peering down upon a map of our great antipodeal continent and picked out the 141st meridian. This, they declared would be the eastern boundary of the soon-to-be proclaimed Province of South Australia. They could have chosen the 140th or the 142nd meridian. We are left to wonder by what science they selected the 141st. That eastern boundary line of South Australia would, by default, become the western boundary of Victoria and New South Wales.

The country that stretched from Portland westward through Mount Gambier to Millicent, was a region that had good reliable rainfall, and rich volcanic soils. Economically and environmentally it was one well-defined region.

Borders can do funny things to people (as both individuals and populations) and have a profound effect on the channels of commerce. That in turn has had effect on the placement of railways on the map.

The placing of the border had split this region in two, out of which there were the 'have-nots' and the 'haves'.

The South Australian side perceived themselves as the 'have-nots'\* and were probably correct in making that call. They were about 300 miles (480 km) from the capital whereas those on the Victorian side were closer (250 miles - 400 km).

\* The application of the terms 'the haves' and 'the have nots' is my own.

It is not hard to imagine how this region could have developed if it had not been split in two. A railway from Portland to Mount Gambier would have been quite logical and almost mandatory as an early requirement for an undivided region.

When we consider the railways that were built in the 19th century, and look at their current usefulness over those routes, we are struck by the conclusion that most of them were built to the wrong places for the wrong reasons. Such is the case of the railway from Wolseley to Mount Gambier. It was designed to run as close as possible to the Victorian border with the aim of poaching commerce from the neighbouring colony.

In the new Federal order of things, that round-about railway next to the Victorian border was no longer relevant but the South Australian traveller still had to go the long way around, and to add to their travel burden was the requirement to change trains at the Wolseley break-of-gauge, usually in the very small hours.

By 1908 matters between the two halves of the community had become quite tense. Portland was by far the best port along that coastline and had the added bonus of a freezing works. The four ports in South Australia could serve small coastal vessels.

About this time the talk about the railway joining Mount Gambier and Portland got louder, but the reaction on the South Australian side was negative. Many in South Australia believed that the solution to their woes was for one of their small ports to be developed into a port that was worthy of the title. The proposed railway would kill that plan.

The reality, however, was that not one of those four little ports in South Australia could have been developed into a port facility approaching Portland.



**THE TRANSFER PLATFORM AT WOLSELEY 1912**

The sacks have a bulging appearance that suggests they are full of potatoes, which would give them some weight. But look at the worker who is the centre of attention and then look at the expressions of amazement on the faces of the onlookers. STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

PRG/280/1/15/172

Of course every producer in Victoria was eager to have a railway to their town.

Victorian Premier, Tommy Bent, came to Portland and left this message to be heeded by the South Australians.

From the *Portland Guardian*, 1 May 1908:

South Australia won't help you and it will prevent others from helping you, but there is one thing that can't be prevented and that is the Victorian Government from building a line from Portland to the border. With the accomplishment of that you will be in easy touch with Melbourne. And the south-east, instead of isolating and an absolutely isolated place will, in a few years become one of the most thickly populated and prosperous district in the continent. You have the land, the class of farmer and the machinery to put it to its best and most productive use. All you want is a suitable port with a freezing works and a cheap and easy means of reaching it.

There were matters other than the Mount Gambier railway that were calling for a closer dialogue between the two States. There was a need to resolve the matter of the Murray waters (nothing's changed!). There was the dispute over the position of the border but that was now *sub judice* and not for discussion. But they could talk about the non-payment by South Australia for the Serviceton railway station.

And accordingly the two Premiers, along with some of their Ministers met in January 1910 at Mount Gambier. The Railway Commissioners, Thomas Tait from Victoria, and Alex Moncrieff of South Australia were also part of the entourage.

Regarding the border railways there were four on the list:

A railway between Mount Gambier and the Victorian Portland, Branxholme, Casterton lines.

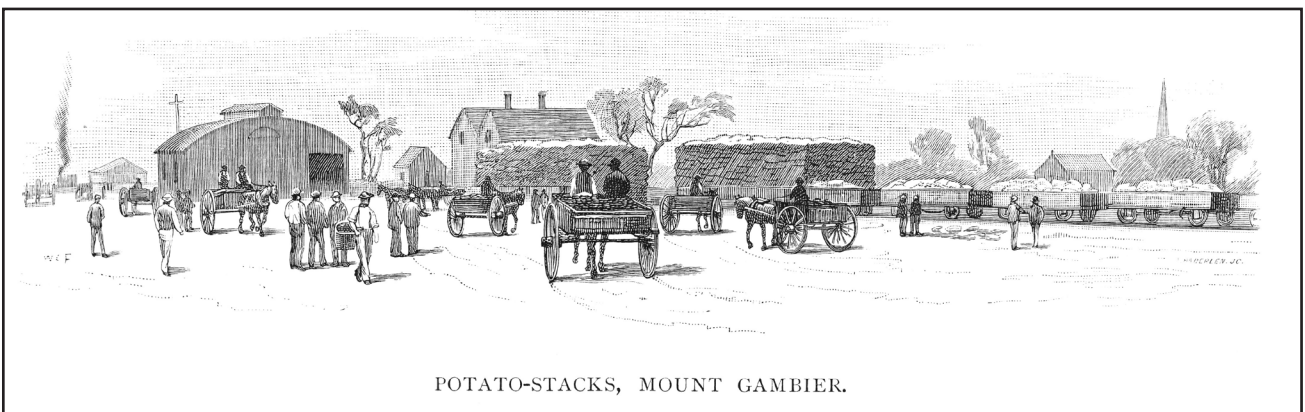
A railway between Goroke and a point on the line from Wolseley to Naracoorte.

A railway from Pinnaroo to connect with the proposed Kow Plains to Ouyen line.

A railway from some point on the Victorian Nowingi Mildura line to a point on the still-to-be completed line to Browns Well.

The genesis of the railway from Tailem Bend to Pinnaroo had been for the purpose of opening up the country for agriculture and closer settlement. The country around Pinnaroo had soils and rainfall that were favourable to cereal growing. The first wheat grown in the region was in 1904 but there had been no economic means of transport and that crop had become stock feed. The line from Tailem Bend to Pinnaroo was opened in 1906.

*The Picturesque Atlas of Australasia 1888*



POTATO-STACKS, MOUNT GAMBIER.

The activity on the South Australian side of the border soon attracted the attention from the other side, with the emergence of Murrayville and Underbool as the main centres. The railway from Ouyen was built to service these settlements and if a connection was made at Pinnaroo it presented those settlers the option of sending their produce to South Australia.

But for Victoria, which had long been the interloper in the Riverina, that State now found itself under threat. The matter of the railway connection on the Victorian end was contentious. A report by the Melbourne *Age*, **28 November 1908**, noted:

The Pinnaroo railway yards are filled with harvesting machines and bales of wheat bags. The general conversation is about land and wheat. A feeling of buoyancy prevails not unlike that on or near a promising goldfield...if the proposed Ouyen to Cow Plains\* line was extended 30 miles west so as to junction with Pinnaroo, the whole of the trade between the two points and Mildura would be diverted to Adelaide.

Premier Peake of South Australia was reported by the *Argus*, **28 January 1910**:

The proposition to connect Mount Gambier with Portland was dealt with. It was pointed out and it was admitted that such line gave advantage to Victoria of the whole Mount Gambier district if not over a large portion of the South-Eastern district of South Australia, a proposition that the South Australian Parliament would not be likely to accept unless some compensation could be given in another direction - it might be by way of the proposed line from Goroke to Frances.

The task from there was for each of the Parliaments to appoint a Royal Commission. They would report in 1912. The Pinnaroo line offered some advantage to South Australia in that the distance to Adelaide was much less than the distance to Melbourne.

From the *Age*, **26 June 1912**, reporting the opening of the railway extension to Murrayville, the closing part of the speech by the Victorian Minister of Lands, Mr McKenzie:

There was only one way for the country to advance and that was by enabling people to use the market which was best suited geographically. South Australia should project her lines into Victoria and we should act similarly. In some cases Victoria may lose, as was

probable in the case of the Murrayville to Pinnaroo connection, but on the other hand Victoria would gain by the Mount Gambier to Portland junction line.

The Victorian Premier at that time was Jack Murray - and indeed he was the origin of the Murray in Murrayville. He saw opportunity where others saw threat and gave his support for the railway extension to Murrayville.

The initial strike westwards from Ouyen had been authorisation of the 56 miles to Kow Plains (Cowangie), The Premier, Mr Murray moved in Parliament that the matter of a 5 foot 3 gauge railway from Kow\* Plains to Murrayville be referred to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Railways. The proposed railway would be an extension of 11½ miles from Kow Plains which was the terminus then under construction.

The mood of the people had been read and reported by the *Mildura Cultivator*, **14 December 1910**:

There is a good class of settlers and the land in cultivation is making rapid headway. Those settlers now obtain access to markets by Pinnaroo and the South Australian railway system and are cut off from Victorian markets by the absence of railway communications. As Victorians, they strongly desire trade relations with this State and the short railway extension now proposed will link them up with the Victorian railway system. The Railway Commissioners have estimated the probable traffic on the new line and report that a large amount of business which would otherwise go to South Australia will be brought to the Victorian system and the new line will have sufficient traffic to produce an annual revenue...

The first section of the line from Ouyen to Cowangie (56.5 miles - 91 km) and the extension from Cowangie to Murrayville (11.5 miles - 18.5 km) were opened on 25 June 1912. The final link across the border was on 29 July 1915.

This was achieved without any conflict of railway gauges. but Pinnaroo is an important part of the break-of-gauge story and will later appear in Chapter 23.

\*There are two spellings. Most of the Victorian newspapers refer to Kow Plains but the *Pinnaroo & Border Times* is top of the list that refers to Cow Plains.



**PINNAROO.** On 14 April 1968, the Victorian group, the Association of Railway Enthusiasts (ARE) organised a steam tour of the north west of Victoria. They were met at Pinnaroo by a group from the ARHS in Adelaide. The event was promoted as the *Pinnaroo Rendezvous*. Locomotives 526 *The Duchess of Gloucester* of the South Australian Railways and Victorian Railways J class 515. **JLW.**

## **Other border railways from Victoria to New South Wales.**

With the exception of the Tocomwal line, these were the railways that were recommended as a result of the Border Railways Agreement of 1922. Construction was slow to happen, and was continuing in the 1930s. The Depression and the motor truck were significant factors in the poor results of these lines.

**Strathmerton to Tocomwal.** This was one of the railways into NSW that involved a break-of-gauge. The 4 ft 8½ in gauge line from Narrandera to Tocomwal was opened in 1914 and was closed in 1988. Refer page 140 re break-of-gauge trials in 1915. During WW2 Tocomwal saw 5 military trains each way each day. (ARHS August 1994).

**Swan Hill to Balranald.** The line to Balranald was not built from Swan Hill, but was built from Barnes, which was the first station from Moama to Deniliquin.

**Robinvale to Lette** (32 miles - 51 km). Construction got as far as Koopakee (half-way) but the line was never completed to Lette. The intention was for it to be handed over to the Victorian Railways in 1932 but that did not happen and it was closed in 1943. (ARHS April 2000).

**Mildura to Gol Gol.** (38 miles - 61 km). This construction was not commenced.

**Murrabit (on the Kerang to Koondrook line) to Stony Crossing** (39 miles - 62 km). Opened in 1928 but was not a success and was closed in 1943.

**Yarrawonga to Oaklands** (38 miles - 61 km). The construction of this line was prompted by coal deposits in the area. It was opened in 1938 and thus became the second break-of-gauge border railway in Victoria/NSW. The standard-gauge line from The Rock (NSW), was out of use by 1977. The broad-gauge line from Benalla was closed in 2007 but has been subsequently converted to standard gauge and re-opened in 2010. (ARH May & July 2010 and January 2011).

**For more detailed information** there is an excellent article by Neville Pollard - A New Spirit of Co-operation - The Border Railways Agreement of 1922. *Australian Railway History*, June 2013 Vol 64, No 908.

## **REFERENCES USED ON THIS PAGE**

**ARHS** refers to *The Bulletin* of the Australian Railway Historical Society. From 2004 the ARHS rebadged the Bulletin as *Australian Railway History* - **ARH**.

## **Some 'might have been' border railways. These are railway concepts that had some substance that supported them and for which there is supporting documentation.**

Top of the list is the **Very Fast Train** which has been a favourite topic of politicians and dreamers up and down the east coast for about 20 or 30 years. On the matter of gauge it seems that the 4 ft 8½ in gauge works well for the fast trains in Japan, Europe and China.

But some say that if we want to go faster then we need to go wider. So when I did my newsletter about a couple of years ago I included a little item that invited comment whether we could do better than the 1435 mm (4 ft 8½ in gauge) and I specifically mentioned, more out of frivolity than serious intent, the 7 foot gauge of the Great Western Railway. The reaction was a convincing 'thumbs down'. I don't think they had anything against the GWR gauge - I think they rightly reasoned that Australia has, for too long, been mucking around with gauges.

**Port Augusta (SA) to Hay (NSW)** and variations that included Broken Hill and Quorn. Refer page 116.

**Orbost (Vic) to Bombala (NSW).** There were serious surveys about 1925 for a line between Orbost and the NSW Border but the intentions of NSW were vague and were based on a standard-gauge railway with 5 chain curves and a 1 in 25 gradient. The break-of-gauge station proposed was to be well within NSW. (ARH October 2014).

**Apsley (Vic) to Naracoorte (SA).** Refer page 95.

**Goroke (Vic) to Frances (SA).** Refer previous page.

**Morkalla (Vic) to near Taldra (SA).** There is some evidence about 1959 when the local Parish included it on a map but it was never a serious plan (ARH September 201).

**Nowingi (Vic) to the Brown's Well line (SA).** This was briefly entertained during discussions by Victoria and South Australia in 1912.

**Bogabilla (NSW) and Goondiwindi (Qld).** The Boggabilla branch line (opened in 1932) was authorised mainly to 'ensure that the output of the graziers in the area went south, and not north across the border to Goondiwindi'. (ARHS Feb 1993).

**Mungindi (NSW) to Dirinbandi (Qld).** The line to Dirinbandi runs parallel to the border at a distance of about 40 km. The town of Mungindi is unique in that it straddles the border. The railway to Mungindi from Moree was completed in 1914 to 'regain the wool and stock traffic "poached" by the Queensland line'. (ARHS May 1995).

**Murwillumbah (NSW) to Qld.** This route from Northern NSW to Queensland has been floated intermittently but seems to have been put to rest with the completion of the direct railway in 1930. There is a map from a 1903 newspaper. (ARH Feb 2013).