

**LOCOMOTIVE 521** of the South Australian Railways was named *Thomas Playford*. This locomotive was the last of the South Australian fleet to carry the name of a Premier. **JLW.**

## CHAPTER 21

### UNCLE TOM

Tom Playford was a benevolent dictator. His Government came to power on 5 November 1938. He remained Premier of South Australia until 1965. He was the grandson of the Hon. Thomas Playford who had held the office of Premier of South Australia in the 1880s and early 1890s. Thomas Playford (the grandson) came to office following the resignation of Richard Layton Butler who had commenced his role as Premier in 1933. So, between Butler and Playford, South Australia was a Liberal State for 32 years.

Tom Playford, like his grandfather (and his father) was a market gardener/orchardist in the Adelaide Hills. He was a Gallipoli veteran of the 27<sup>th</sup> Battalion and badly wounded. He had been brought up in a home where his mother had been a devout Baptist. Playford lived and governed according to Baptist principles. But it was his adherence to those puritanical traditions that was probably out of step with the community in the 1950s, and definitely in the 1960s, that eventually saw him out of office.

P A Howell has written the entry for Playford in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* and I shall draw upon a few quotes to illustrate the man. Having been brought up in the Playford era myself, these glimpses resonate deeply and I hope that those who were not of South Australia at that time will understand that we lived in a sort of Utopia that had been shaped for us by this man whom, we affectionately knew as 'Uncle Tom'.

Over six feet and carrying 16 stone, Playford generally charmed people by genial behavior and a love of jokes... he dominated cabinet... if charm alone could not secure his objectives he could resort to bluff and bullying. Any minister who disagreed could find himself wrestled to the floor because the premier long retained his youthful delight in horseplay. He frequently concluded deals with interstate and overseas industrialists before informing his colleagues... He became a legend in South Australia and notorious in the rest of the country for his success in winning federal financial support... claims on the Commonwealth were usually more carefully prepared than those of any other State... his view was that Federal politicians were fair game because they had violated the balance of the Constitution by building up central power at the expense of the state governments... Nevertheless he had become friendly with the Labor Prime Minister, Ben Chifley... After 1949 Playford's dealings with Menzies were generally more fruitful than the latter's first term of prime-ministership... He courted those trade union leaders who sought better benefits for their members rather than promoting revolution... he was often described as a 'good South Australian but a very bad Australian'... Mick O'Halloran had been the leader of the opposition in the South Australian House of Assembly from 1949 to 1960 and had described Playford as 'the best Labor Premier South Australia ever had'.

He was described as an artful negotiator. When he came to office the South Australian economy was reliant on primary production. He had brought manufacturing industry to South Australia and he had done it with water and electricity.

There was the General Motors Company and the Chrysler Corporation. They needed skilled labour and he was able to get more than his fair share of immigrants, and built the satellite city of Elizabeth to house them. South Australia had been reliant on black coal from New South Wales for its electricity and suffered during the coal strikes of the late 1940s. South Australia needed more than just electricity. It needed cheap electricity.

The brown coal deposits at Leigh Creek had been discovered in 1888 by dam sinkers putting in water sources for the Great Northern Railway. There had been attempts to use it for locomotives, but it was only after a visit to the region by a group of parliamentarians in January 1894, that the futility of persisting became obvious. Thomas Playford (the grandfather) was the Treasurer and Minister controlling the Northern Territory in the Kingston Ministry at the time, but was not one of that group. Perhaps, if he had been, he may have told the story to his young grandson, who would have discovered the easy way, that locomotives, engine crews and the travelling public had no love for his Leigh Creek coal.

It became the source of South Australia's cheap electricity and it was this that secured those American corporations. The engineers of the Electricity Trust of South Australia were able to make the necessary changes to the turbines but it was an inefficient means of generating power. At first the coal was sent by rail to the Osborne power station, at the rate of about 2600 tons per day. This transport itself was inefficient, with trains dispatched from Leigh Creek every 6 hours and south from Quorn, then to Terowie, where the coal was tipped into broad gauge trucks.

On the broad gauge, 720 class locomotives headed the trains south with train loads from about 900 to 1100 tons. The 720 class locomotives had been fitted with extended smoke-boxes that allowed them to burn a blend of coal based on the Leigh Creek coal mixed with a better grade of coal. But they struggled and it was an inefficient means of transport.

**LOCOMOTIVE 523.** The location is near Custon in the South-East of South Australia between Wolseley and Naracoorte. This section of railway had been built as a light narrow-gauge line in 1880. In 1950 that line was rebuilt as a broad-gauge line to the heaviest standard. This was done with a large contribution by the Commonwealth under the pretext of rail standardisation. This train was a special by the ARHS, in April 1966. Locomotive 523 was named *Sir Essington Lewis*. He was the industrialist who had guided BHP into the steelmaking industry and had been the wartime Director of Munitions. This locomotive is preserved at the National Railway Museum.

**PHOTOGRAPH JLW.**



At the close of the war, the UNRRA placed an order with Clyde Engineering NSW for 40 standard-gauge MacArthur locomotives that were destined for China. But China then had its revolution and the locomotives needed a new home. Tom Playford could see a bargain on offer and South Australia purchased ten, which became the 740 class. These locomotives were based on the design of the SAR's 700 class of 1926 and could be gauge-converted. The Commonwealth Railways acquired ten of the standard-gauge locomotives but were considerably less enthusiastic about it. With the Commonwealth Railways these standard-gauge McArthurs were designated the L class, but they arrived after the diesels and some were never put in steam. **Photograph** - the delivery of one of the 740 class in pieces. Doug Colquhoun collection of the National Railway Museum.





#### THE COAL TIPPLER AT TEROWIE

The coal trains arrived at Terowie from Quorn, with each one being hauled by two T class locomotives. There was a train every 6 hours. The tippler was a system of pulleys and counter balances that turned the truck upside down and emptied the load into a broad-gauge truck. **Photograph from the Lionel Noble Collection.**

Meanwhile work had commenced on the construction of two power stations at Curlew Point near Port Augusta. They were named respectively the Thomas Playford A and B Power Stations. The Leigh Creek coal now had a much shorter journey but the narrow-gauge railway with its up-hill gradients at Hookina Creek and again up-hill to the Summit at Pichi Richi Pass, and the tight curves on the other side were not intended for this volume of traffic.

But Playford had struck a deal with the Commonwealth that had the Commonwealth Railways incurring a loss. In 1954 the first of the Port Augusta power stations was on line and required a cheap and efficient means of getting that coal from Leigh creek.

He was a natural ally of Menzies and they both dominated their respective political circles in the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s. However, Howell reports that Playford's relationship with Menzies was difficult during the latter's first term as Prime Minister from 1939. It was better during Menzies' second term from 1949. However Ron Fitch, who was the Commissioner of the South Australian Railways, commented that Menzies was 'luke warm' on matters of rail standardisation.

Playford negotiated with the BHP to build ships at Whyalla and to ensure that the steelworks and the town had reliability of water. He built the Morgan to Whyalla pipeline. He sold the water to the BHP at less than cost but sold it to the Commonwealth Railways at Port Augusta for five times the amount. The rate that was set for the Leigh Creek coal haulage was well below the rate for the other great haulage contract in South Australia - the Broken Hill concentrates.

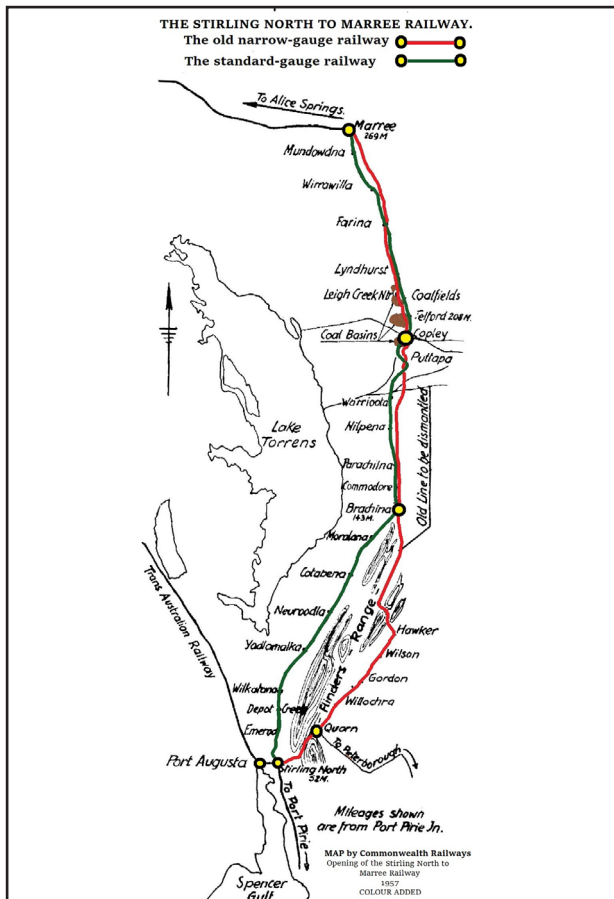
He used the South Australian Railways where necessary such as building short industrial lines to Hendon, GMH Elizabeth, and the railway to the Chrysler plant at Tonsley Park, but he was an advocate for road transport. Over time there was a decline in the traffic over the South Australian Railways. He made use of the South Australian Railways, but in time it suited him to consign them to a slow slide to oblivion.

Another of his admirers was Senator George McLeay, a fellow Liberal from South Australia who was the Commonwealth Deputy Leader of the Government in the Senate and Minister of Shipping, Fuel and Transport. He evidently had access to large amounts of funds. Much of that money was handed to Tom Playford for his standardisation schemes, and the suspicion is that few questions were asked.

On the railways, the Leigh Creek coal was blended with a better grade of coal. There was a conversion of many locomotives to burn oil or a mix of brown coal and oil. The Commonwealth Railways already had one solution to this haulage contract with the new GM12 class of diesel electric locomotives.

Their other pitch at achieving efficiency was the route to the west of the Flinders Ranges. This was the route that was to have been taken by the railway to Government Gums back in 1878. This was where the South Australian Government had disregarded its Surveyor General, Goyder and sent the railway through Pichi Richi Pass and on to the Willochra Plain (Chapters 6 & 9). But the Commonwealth's proposed route would have by-passed Quorn, and once again, like we had seen at Terowie, there was a vocal population that was loud enough to be heeded. The result was a bitter and prolonged Royal Commission.

Once again, we find the old battle of the State of South Australia vs the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth needed the consent by South Australia to build its preferred line. But South Australia was in for the fight. South Australia made the case for keeping the coal trains going through Quorn. The plan was to undertake major earthworks in Pichi Richi Pass and run the coal trains using the 740 class/L class steam locomotives that had been built by Clyde Engineering in New South Wales with the original purpose being an order by China.



But despite all these inefficiencies associated with the Leigh Creek coal, Tom Playford was able to swing one last deal that would secure the cheap electricity so vital for the industries he was gathering. He struck a freight rate so low that all the inefficiencies no longer mattered. South Australia could thus deliver its cheap electricity.

Des Smith recalls that Pat Hannaberry, who was Commonwealth Railways Commissioner from 1948 to 1960, long agonised over this deal that had his coal trains running at a loss. At the time, the Leigh Creek coal haul was the largest bulk rail shift in Australia. Hannaberry had good cause to be bitter. Playford had done this deal with Senator Collings.

Collings was a Labor stalwart in the Chifley Ministry. Tom Playford had a knack for driving home a bargain, irrespective of the political allegiance of the other party. But the best part for Playford was that the rate the Commonwealth Railways was stuck with would apply in perpetuity! This was not lost on the Broken Hill mining companies, who had long been the cash cow of the South Australian Railways and would have been rightly aggrieved at such an inequitable arrangement.

In the case of the South Australian Railways, it was also losing money on its Leigh Creek coal haulage. But Playford was running the State and he could tell the Commissioner of Railways what to do. When John Fargher, the Railways Commissioner in the 1950s, made known that the SAR was carrying coal at a loss, Playford brushed it off (**News, 9 November 1953**). Actually, the South Australian Railways Commissioner enjoyed a degree of independence from the Government, but the Government provided the railways with a financial subsidy, so in practice, Playford had the Commissioner over a barrel.

The South Australian Railways Commissioner in the 1940s was Robert Chapman and he passionately supported the effort to do the major works in Pichi Richi Pass and run the coal trains through and keep Quorn alive, but the Commonwealth's alternative was the obvious solution.

The railway from Port Augusta to Leigh Creek (the loading point for the coal was at Telford) would replace the old narrow-gauge railway that was on the way to Darwin. Tom Playford had secured funding for this coal line in the name of railway standardisation.

But he didn't stop there. The line north from Port Augusta carried considerable traffic in addition to the Leigh Creek coal. It was Alice Spring's umbilical cord. There was a large traffic in cattle from the stock routes that converged at Marree. There was destined to be a break-of-gauge. The pastoralists in the north were sustaining heavy stock losses on the slow narrow-gauge line north of Leigh Creek. This would only get worse by subjecting them to a break-of-gauge at Leigh Creek. Marree was on the way to Alice Springs, which was on the way to Darwin. So Playford swung another deal to have standardisation money pay for the extension to Marree. It did wonders for Marree which became one of the busiest break-of-gauge centres in Australia.

When the ceremonial silver spike had been driven home at Marree, it was removed, and given to Tom Playford who declared that he had no use for it and turned to Betty Smith and presented it to her. That was an example of Tom Playford laying on the charm. It has travelled with Des and Betty Smith throughout their various shifts and has a special place on the wall in Des' den.

But the Marree project, whilst it was bigger and bolder, was not the only gauge conversion project. It had been preceded by the gauge-widening of South Australia's narrow-gauge lines in the South-East of the State. We had looked at the origins of this network in Chapter 10 (*Bordertown Both Ways*).

**DES SMITH'S** den is a repository of all manner of trinkets, one of which is the silver spike that Tom Playford had hammered into place for the ceremonial opening of the standard gauge line to Marree. Des and Betty also keep a scrap book. The silver spike is chrome plated. **JLW.**



In addition to the break-of-gauge at Wolseley there had been another break-of-gauge at Mount Gambier in 1917 when a connection was made with a broad-gauge line that had been constructed from Victoria (see Chapter 15). It was a typical South Australian lightly-constructed railway using 41 pound (per lineal yard) rail. The Kingston line was even lighter with 35 pound iron rail that had been laid when the line was built for horse traction.

There could have been a case for this line to be converted to standard gauge and it would have been connected with the standard-gauge networks of South Australia and Victoria when that happened. But there was no firm nor immediate plan for standardisation of the broad-gauge lines of those states. To convert that flimsy narrow-gauge network to standard gauge would have resulted in two break-of-gauge stations still being break-of-gauge stations.

The deal that was done was Commonwealth money to replace that worn-out network with broad-gauge track of the highest standard and capable of carrying the heaviest locomotives. When the South Australian and Victorian broad-gauge lines were eventually converted to standard-gauge, the South Australian Government would convert the track to Mount Gambier at its own expense.

The broad-gauge trains to Mount Gambier stopped in 1995 when the Melbourne to Adelaide route was standardised. The rails are still there but we can't vouch for the condition of the sleepers. The railway precinct at Mount Gambier has been redeveloped as urban space. One could contemplate that the Commonwealth has a case for taking the State of South Australia to the High Court for its failure to honour its part of the deal, but that would be idle fancy.

The whole of the new railway from Stirling North to Marree was done by Commonwealth Railways and demonstrated how modern construction should be done. By contrast, the job on the South-East lines was a labour intensive demonstration of the South Australian Railways being behind the times. It was a ten-year job.

What do we have to show for all this now? The standard-gauge railway north of Leigh Creek had been built for the benefit of the pastoralists and their cattle. Within a few years the cattle were going by road and in 1980 the trains went to Alice Springs by the new standard-gauge line. The line north of Leigh Creek has been ripped up. Des Smith is philosophical about surviving longer than the track he built. The track to the Leigh Creek coal is still there but environmental issues have closed the mine.

So for all that was spent in 1949 we don't have an inch of operating standard-gauge railways.

By the end of the 1950s there were many changes but in a word, it was about lifestyle. In the wake of the 1956 Olympic games, Melbourne became the place to visit. People caught the 'Melbourne Express' just for a weekend away and to see *My Fair Lady*. In 1957 Adelaide got its new airport terminal. Air travel became respectable. 1959 was the year that Adelaide got television. 1959 was also the year that Playford broke the record for the longest term of office by any premier in a British jurisdiction. Or more correctly he was now Sir Thomas Playford, having been knighted in 1957.

Social clubs could charter a bus to Wentworth and play the pokies or maybe a weekend in Broken Hill at the Muso's Club. And there was an awareness that the other states had lotteries but not South Australia. And there was that curious 6 o'clock swill that had been a statute since 1917.

Labor had been in the wilderness for more than two decades but there were changes in their ranks. The Member for Norwood was a suave young lawyer, Don Dunstan. He used the television well to get his message across. Tom Playford had previously used radio well but lost the media race against Dunstan.

**ON THE STANDARD-GAUGE LINE** about 5 miles (8 km) north of Parachilna.. This loading would have been mostly for Alice Springs. There was a substantial workforce at Marree for shifting this lot into narrow-gauge trucks. **JLW.**



1962 was not a good year for Uncle Tom. He took South Australia's case to the High Court, regarding the failure by the Commonwealth to complete the north-south transcontinental railway and lost. The agreement did not contain a time clause. The Liberals lost the 1962 election but there were a couple of independents in the Parliament who gave him their vote. Tom Playford survived as Premier until 1965. He survived in Parliament as leader of the Opposition until 1968 but he had lost his spark.

Frank Walsh was the Labor Leader during the early 1960s. He was a stone mason by trade, one of the old-style of Labor orators with the rhetoric and prone to the occasional malapropism. He gave the people of South Australia their lotteries. But he was no match for the smooth-talking Don Dunstan.

By the mid-1960s the South Australian Railways were looking old-fashioned. They became the scapegoat for South Australia's woes. It became fashionable to 'kick the railways'.



Here we must stop and contemplate the state of the South Australian Railways, which was becoming a burden for the State Government.

It was carrying a lot of debt and there was a sizeable amount of interest that had to be paid every year. Some of this debt related to railways that should never have been built.

It had always been used by governments to provide a social service. Like the railcar that did the daily run from Kadina to Brinkworth and back. Most days there were no passengers, but it was the means for the Public Library to get its parcels of books to the rural community.

The South Australian Railways carried a large workforce.

And of course, there were the break-of-gauge inefficiencies. In the mid-1960s there were Terowie, Gladstone and Port Pirie that provided much employment in the mid-north of South Australia. The Commonwealth Railways also operated a large break-of-gauge yard at Marree.

**THE MILANG RAILCAR** was another of the rural passenger services that was poorly patronised - 10 August 1968. **JLW.**



**FRANK WALSH** at the opening of the Tonsley line. Ron Fitch looking on - 1 July 1966. **JLW.**

Historically, the Labor side of politics had been more a supporter of rail than the Liberal side, but in rapid succession both Labor and Liberal in South Australia had taken the hatchet to the railways.

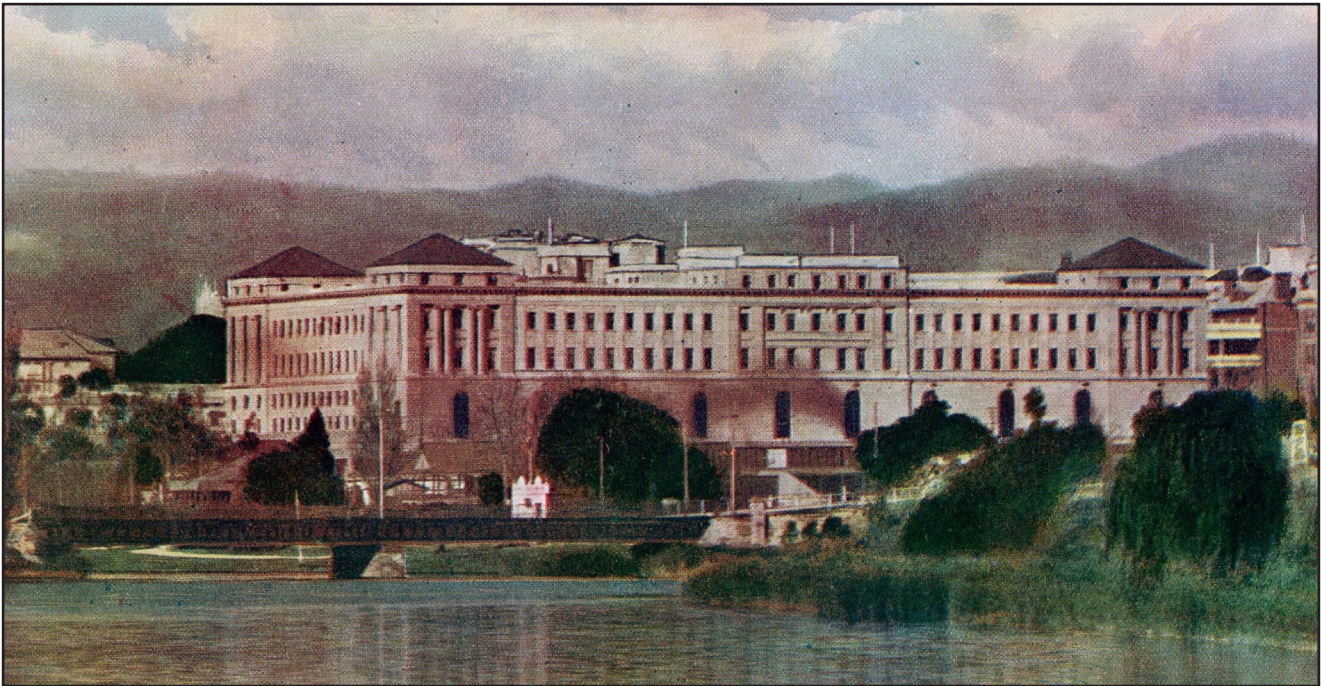
South Australia, in common with the other states had historically provided some degree of transport control that offset some of the cost burdens associated with rail.

Playford, in 1964 and Dunstan in 1968 had made changes to the legislation that removed transport control on intrastate routes. The result was a decline in the revenue of the SAR. Ron Fitch wrote three books in his retirement. It was his last book, *Australian Railwayman - From Cadet Engineer to Railways Commissioner* that he opened up with some truths and frank comments. Of Don Dunstan he said that regarding access to the Festival Theatre site, there were 'heated and acrimonious discussions', and of Steele-Hall that he had 'demonstrated undisguised antipathy towards the SAR which he had demonstrated from the very first day that he had entered the Parliament'.

There was another problem that the railways presented to the Government. It was more a problem for the railways than the Government. It was the vast spread of land that had originally been parklands. It had suited the governments of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to take what they needed when they needed, and no one complained. For a good century the railways had been dosing that railway soil with arsenic. There was diesel oil in the ground and what else?

No one suggested that the land be returned to green open space. It was Government land and it suited the Governments to use it as they chose. First there was the Festival Theatre, then the Convention Centre, then the Cheese Grater, and the new Royal Adelaide Hospital. Maybe those can be excused on the basis that they are public facilities. But there was also the international hotel, a few extra bits tacked onto the Casino and finally a collection of multi-level office blocks.

We have seen that South Australian Governments had long gone to great lengths to keep the standard gauge out of Adelaide. But there had been some provision for the standard gauge with a strip of land that had been set aside for Platform 14. That was to be the standard-gauge platform. It is now a car park.



The looming problem for South Australia was the Port Pirie to Broken Hill railway. Chief Commissioner Webb, in the 1920s had considered converting it to 5 ft 3 in gauge but did not pursue the matter because the advice at the time was that the Broken Hill mines only had another twenty years of production. That is for the next chapter.

In the pages that follow I have constructed a chronology of events, starting with the 1920s, that conspired to perpetuate the gauge problem in South Australia. I could have started even earlier but had also set out to have this chain of events show how the South Australian Railways was on a slow slide to oblivion. The inefficiencies that resulted from the gauge problem were probably the major contributing factor. The end for the South Australian Railways was 1 March 1978. I must admit that I had broadly understood the forces and circumstances leading up to the demise of the South Australian Railways, but when I had put this table together it painted the picture even more graphically.

#### Major reference sources used for the Chronology.

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**IN 1929 COMMISSIONER WEBB OF THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN RAILWAYS** produced a book of 120 pages, *Railway Facts*, in response to a growing level of criticism regarding his expenditure, which had included the magnificent Adelaide Railway Station that had been completed the previous year. The timing of the book was unfortunate as it came almost at the time of the Wall Street crash. The lavishly produced book became even further fuel for the critics. The book was printed in sepia except for this one image.

**BELOW.** A photograph taken in June 2023 that attempts to be of the same perspective. **JLW.**

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