



NEPEAN DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY



A Chapter of Accidents

and Other Notes

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COLLISION AT EMU PLAINS, 1878.

In presenting this article, I acknowledge with thanks the kindness of Mr. R.S. Fookes and Mr. C.C. Singleton, members of The Australian Railway Historical Society, who have generously supplied and permitted me to use the more technical details contained in the narrative. H.P.

At 7.47 p.m. on 30th January, 1878, a special goods train drawn by engine No. 52 - an engine of the 48 (later 1.48) class which had been imported from the United Kingdom and placed in service in January, 1874 - left Mount Victoria for Sydney. Its crew comprised Driver John Egan, Fireman John Larkin, Guard George Perdue (or Purdue) and Assistant-Guard Brady who was riding the foot-plates. It made good time and stopped at Blue Mountains Station (see Note 1) where Guard Perdue was apparently instructed that his train was to wait on the short loop line at Wascoe's Siding (see Note 2) which had been installed in 1871 to allow the regular goods train proceeding westward to pass.

Dead on time at 11 o'clock that same evening, the regular westbound goods train drew out of Penrith Station. It was drawn by locomotive No. 103, a 93 (later A.93) class engine built by Beyer Peacock and had been in use less than three months and was, therefore, virtually new, having made its maiden run in the previous November. It was manned by Michael Stevenson (driver), John Wiggins (fireman) and Richard Elly or Elley (guard). To provide the extra power needed for the long pull up to Katoomba, this train included a "pusher" engine at the rear.

Elley, having been advised that the track - a single track, be it remembered (see Note 3) - was clear, the train crossed the Victoria Bridge over the Nepean River, passed through Emu Plains Station under full speed and soon reached the up-grade of 1 in 30 a short distance further west.

For some reason which was never clearly or definitely established, the special had not waited at Wascoe's Siding and, in the vicinity of the cemetery adjoining St. Paul's Church of England at Emu Plains, the two trains, both travelling at break-neck speed, came into violent collision. Both engines were hurled from the line - the boilers were subsequently salvaged - and were followed by five trucks from the regular and nine from the special. The wreckage was gutted by fire and practically nothing of either the rolling stock or the freight could be saved.

Great as was the loss in this respect, it would have been considerably greater but for the presence of mind and prompt action of the driver of the "pusher", Kane by name.

Seeing collision inevitable, he immediately eased his engine off the brake-van. As soon as the crash occurred, he hastened to detach the trucks still on the rails, recoupled them to his engine and hauled them clear of the fire which was beginning to blaze fiercely.

In the smash, Fireman John Wiggins and Assistant-Guard Brady were killed instantly while Driver John Egan was so gravely injured that he died some twenty minutes later (see Note 4). So badly hurt was Driver Michael Stevenson that he was never again able to work on a locomotive; Fireman John Larkin received frightful scalds and burns to which, it seems, he eventually succumbed. The two guards, Elley and Perdue, appear to have escaped with comparatively minor injuries.

It was a shocking calamity but one shudders to think what the death-roll might have been had the trains been carrying passengers instead of freight. Both the Railway Department and the general public were greatly perturbed by the accident. "How did it come about two trains were travelling in opposite directions over the same section of single track at the same time?" was the question of the hour.

Public concern was all the greater as three months earlier (5th November, 1877) an incident involving four trains simultaneously on the Kelso-Bathurst section of the Western Line (which, fortunately, did not result in any accident) showed that the workings of the N.S.W. Railways left a great deal to be desired. After the Emu Plains catastrophe an inquiry was held; this disclosed serious weaknesses in the administration of the Department as well as the existence of confusing and conflicting instructions in its Rules, Regulations and Working Orders which were subsequently revised and co-ordinated. Thus, in tragic circumstances, was the era of Safe Working on our railways ushered in.

Whether the result of negligence, disobedience to orders or a misunderstanding of the instructions issued at Blue Mountains Station, the immediate responsibility for the Emu Plains catastrophe must be said to rest upon George Perdue but, from the evidence produced at the inquiry, it seems clear that the Department itself must shoulder much of the blame for the accident. That, however, is a long story which has no place in this narrative.

George Perdue was indicted on a charge of manslaughter and stood trial at the Central Criminal Court, Sydney, before the Chief Justice (Sir James Martin) on 19th February, 1879. To its verdict of "Guilty", the jury added a recommendation to mercy and a statement to the effect that, in its opinion, railway regulations, instead of being "clear and unmistakable and rigidly adhered to", left much to the discretion of individual officials.

Perdue, who remained silent throughout his trial, was sentenced to two years' imprisonment with hard labour.

Notes:(1). Blue Mountains Station, now Lawson, together with a staff residence, was completed at the time the line from Penrith to The Weatherboard (now Wentworth Falls) was opened in 1867. It derived its name from the Blue Mountains Inn, a coaching post about fourteen chains west of the present-day station and was, in fact, often referred to as the Old Blue Mountains Inn Station. The present brick station was erected in 1879 and at the same time the name was changed to Lawson.

(2). Wascoe's Siding, now Glenbrook, was, from the opening of the line in 1867 till 1870, for obvious reasons, known as Watertank, the water for the locomotives being brought from the lagoon half a mile to the north-west. It was located on what is now the Great Western Highway in the vicinity of the Glenbrook Garage. A crossing loop was installed in 1871 and about the same time the name was altered to Wascoe's Siding but to avoid its being confused with Wascoe's (now Blaxland) it was renamed Brookdale in 1878 and Glenbrook in 1879. Its first passenger platform was erected in 1874. In 1913, the deviation of the line to its present position led to the demolition of the earlier platform and the erection of a new station about four hundred yards to the South.

On 15th November, 1818, Sir John Jamison, while escorting a party of naval officers and naturalists over the southern end of Emu Plains, named Glenbrook Creek. As far as can be ascertained, the name was confined to the creek itself till it was chosen in 1879 to designate the railway station.

(3). The original line consisted of a single track only. Duplication of the line from Glenbrook to Mount Victoria was carried out just after the turn of the century; the section Penrith to Emu Plains was undertaken in 1907 and the Emu Plains-Glenbrook link was not duplicated till 1913.

(4) Of the victims, Prady and Egan were buried at St. Paul's Cemetery, Emu Plains, and Wiggins in the cemetery in McCarthy's Lane, Castlereagh.

ACCIDENT ON LAPSTONE ZIG-ZAG, 1886.

(The leading article from The Nepean Times, of Saturday 27th March, 1886, which is included in this account, has been reproduced by courtesy of Mr. R. H. Colless, of Penrith, to whom we express sincere thanks for his generous and public-spirited action in making this historically valuable document available to our readers. H.P.).

It was by a strange quirk of fate that the collision just described should have occurred on a straight stretch of line - a spot which held practically no hazards - while a couple of miles away was the Lapstone Zig-Zag where serious accidents might easily have happened.

The descent from Watertank was, in certain circumstances, a perilous undertaking and we read of height-raising experiences of engines making the down trip on wet, slippery rails and failing to grip. There was the ever-present fear, under these conditions, of trains skidding over the dead-end at Lucasville (see Note 1) and plunging headlong into Knapsack Gully.

During the first ten years of the Zig-Zag, Westinghouse brakes had not been fitted to N.S.W. trains; it was not until 1877 that they were introduced on all passenger trains and on a few goods trains while another thirteen years were to elapse before all trains in the colony were equipped with these invaluable safety devices (i.e. in 1890). When approaching the points of the Zig-Zag on eastward journeys not only were the ordinary brakes applied but the engines were thrown into reverse in order to avoid overrunning the mark. To negotiate this section of line successfully called for efficient and expert driving.

Despite the dangerous nature of the line and thanks to the care and skill of the drivers, there was only one mishap of any magnitude here. This occurred on Monday, 22 March, 1886, when a tourist train from Bathurst consisting of an engine, nine carriages and a guard's van overran the points at the top wing of the Zig-Zag, crashed into the buffer stops and was in danger of crashing down into Knapsack Gully. Though two carriages were destroyed and a number of passengers injured (Note 2), it could by no means be classed as a serious accident.

As a safeguard against a repetition of this incident, the Department of Railways immediately set about laying a short section of track on a steeper up-grade a little to the west of the original line and sinking the buffer stops deep into the hillside. This proved highly effective and was completed within two months of the derailment.

Though stricter safety precautions had been instituted as a result of the 1878 smash at Emu Plains, this accident on the Zig-Zag led to a great deal of misgiving on the part of the travelling public who felt that train passengers were still exposed to undue danger and that the Safety Working regulations of the Railway Department were due for close scrutiny and more stringent enforcement. To give readers some idea of the reaction of the public, one cannot do better, perhaps, than reproduce verbatim the previously mentioned leading article from The Nepean Times.

"The recent accident at Lapstone Zig-Zag, some particulars of which have appeared in the daily papers, show that full and complete enquiries should be made, not only with regard to the competence of the men employed in this class of work, but with regard to the general working of our railways. Of course it is difficult at all times for the press to get any information on these subjects from railway officials, more especially with us, where every railway man is known and he is to a certain extent boycotted. In the present article we shall have but little to say upon the accident, or the amount of injury; that is pretty well known, but shall confine ourselves to the cause.

"On Saturday previous to the driver starting from Sydney he positively refused to go with the engine offered him owing to the defective state of the air pump, but he was eventually compelled to do so. The carriages used on this particular train are picked up any and everywhere, and are scarcely ever examined to see if their air pipes are perfect. The brake van was of the composite class, very wide, without any air pipe or indicator for the guard to manipulate, and very light. One of the stipulations with regard to the working of the Westinghouse air brake is that a pipe shall be available in the guard's van and that an indicator shall be placed there. The pipe is generally available, but the indicator until lately has scarcely ever been placed in the brake van. The object of placing an indicator in the brake van is that not only can the driver see what pressure of air there may be in case of need, but the guard can be equally well informed.

"There are one or two matters in connection with the air brake that require attention. We are informed that on the two previous Mondays the brakes were working badly between Penrith and Bathurst, still nothing was done in the matter, and it is a general complaint with nearly every train of late, on which we have travelled, that the air does not work properly, and full and complete enquiry should be made. The present instance shows that something must have been very much at fault with the air, and that neither the driver nor the guard at times had any control of the train and this was certainly caused by lack of experience. The air pump was repaired at Bathurst, and we hear very little being the matter until the train came to Linden Station. At this station, the train should have stopped and was signalled accordingly, but what we find is that the train rushed past and did not pull up within a quarter of a mile. Had a train been standing on the main line, which is often the case at these stations, the results would have been most disastrous. From this point the train appears to have travelled fairly well till it reached Lawson.

"Shortly after leaving there the brakes were powerless, and neither driver nor guard could bring the train to a stand-

still at either Hazlebrook or Woodford, but passed the platform at a considerable distance. On arriving at Springwood it was evident that the guard was "skeered" at the pranks of the Westinghouse, and asked the night officer to take charge of the brake in the brake van whilst he did similar work with the car brake. Now was there any occasion for this at all? Had this man known the road and his brake have been in good order, the driver and fireman equally as conversant, they could have managed the train without the Westinghouse; but all through they showed that they were utterly incapable. En passant it would be as well to state that the Traffic Inspector here (i.e. at Penrith) has always favoured the appointment of experienced mountain men for these trains and to show what regard he has for public safety, we have noticed on many occasions during holidays where new men were sent on through trips that he would send an experienced guard from Penrith.

"The train arrived at Glenbrook in due course without further mishap and started on its journey again. From Glenbrook to the middle of the 17th cutting there is an incline we are informed of 1 in 66, and on passing this there is a decline of 1 in 33 to the top points and from this to the buffer stops there is another incline of 1 in 100. The morning was not foggy at Glenbrook, nor were the rails slippery as stated, and considering the short distance the train had to travel down the decline with a rise at the other end, there should have been no difficulty.

"Our opinion is that the driver became unnecessarily alarmed and in reversing his engine skidded the wheels and this caused all the damage. In future with trains of this class nothing (sic) but experienced men should be employed, and if they have not sufficient men in Sydney we have the very men in Penrith suitable for the work; men who know every inch of the road, and men who have hundreds of times brought much heavier loads - without the assistance of air brakes - without the slightest mishap, in foggy weather and with "greasy" rails too.

"Fortunately no lives were lost, nor was there any great damage done, either to the rolling-stock or to the parties travelling. Had the accident occurred after leaving the bottom points where there is a decline of 1 in 30 for nearly a mile, the result would have been very different. Before concluding we would like to ask why the accident chest, which should be carried on every train, except suburban, was not on board this train. A word of praise is due to the railway officials one and all for their kind attention and to Dr. Swayne for his prompt action in proceeding to the scene of the accident.

"An old railway servant sends us the following:- "The recent accident on the Lapstone Zig-Zag has given much scope to the uninitiated to talk and say the blame is on the air brake not working or that the guard was in fault or that no caution was used

as there should have been. Perhaps the experience of an old railway servant who has for years travelled over the mountains, might possibly enlighten the authorities. A few years ago a Sydney guard or driver was not allowed to run over the mountains owing to the danger of running over the steep gradients - none but experienced mountain drivers and guards went in charge of a mountain train. At that very time the line over the mountains was very slippery, owing to damp, wet, foggy weather such as no longer prevails, so slippery in fact that it was dangerous to travel over the lines except to those of experience. The trains at that time usually consisted of nine carriages and a brake van, and these could stop where required and run to time, unless in extra foggy weather. Now, however, with the improved Westinghouse brake, non-experienced men can take a train anywhere, but when the air brakes fail, they do not know what to do, as they don't know the road, and don't know where the platforms are so as to be in readiness to stop if required. My opinion is, had the driver and guard been experienced mountain men, the accident would never have happened. Of course, any person can be a guard - it takes a long time to be a driver - but still they want the necessary experience to take trains over the mountains in bad weather.

Without air brakes, why, the two brakes that were in use, with the assistance of the engine and tender brakes, should have held the train, which only consisted of nine carriages. So you see a mistake has been made somewhere, and who made it? "

To answer the question of the old railway man which was asked by hundreds of others as well and see who made the mistake, the Railway Department conducted an inquiry. Its findings were tersely reported in the Nepean Times of 3rd. April - "The result of the inquiry into the recent accident at Lapstone Zig-Zag shows that not only were the brakes in a faulty condition but that the driver did not use necessary care. The driver, Frame, has been reduced from a first class to a second class driver and the fireman and the guard have been exonerated."

Notes: (1) Lucasville: A platform near the upper points of the Lapstone Zig-Zag opened on 15th. April, 1878, for the benefit of local residents, the most prominent of whom was the Hon. John Lucas, M.L.C., whose house, "Lucasville", was situated very close to the site of present day main building at R.A.A.F. Operational Headquarters. A concrete platform and steps cut in the hillside leading to Lucas's home may still be seen.

(2) Passengers Injured: The Nepean Times of 27th March, 1886, lists the following casualties:-

"Mrs. Innes, Manor House, Mount Victoria (later the Grand Hotel, now Cooper's Grand Private Hotel -H.P.).
shock and scratched face;

Mrs. Ausburn, Penrithville, injury to forehead and shock;
 Mr. William Baird, storekeeper, Katoomba, severe shock with injury to side and back;
 Mrs. Hughes, scalp wound, expectorating blood;
 Miss Hughes, wound over eye;
 Miss Macpherson, slight injury to hip;
 William Cahill, 9 years, sickly, injury to head, scalp wound;
 Mrs. J.D. Brown, injury to wrist and shock;
 Robert Henning, bruise on cheek;
 Mrs. Addison, wound on forehead;
 John Bardsley, bruised leg;
 Mr. C. Woodford and a child named Cranny is (sic) also reported to be rather seriously injured".

TWO UNUSUAL ACCIDENTS.

"A peculiar though not very serious accident occurred at Glenbrook early this week. The "shov-up" engine of a certain train "burst" (sic) through the brake van. Three guards were in the van, two of them jumped out but the one who remained, Guard Leavy, was a good deal injured about the legs. No further particulars can be obtained owing to the secrecy (sic) observed by railway officials". (This report appeared in the Nepean Times of 3rd July, 1886).

For the era in which it was constructed, the Lapstone Zig-Zag was a bold imaginative piece of engineering carried out by the Engineer-in-Chief of Railways, John Whitton, in the face of discouragement and opposition. Travel over it was slow and hazardous but for 25 years it served an exceedingly useful purpose. In an attempt to speed up traffic and to reduce risks on the line, the Railway Department, in 1892, opened a deviation which included a tunnel, 2,165 feet long containing a 12 chain radius curve and a grade of 1 in 33. (See Note 1).

This was not as successful as expected; moisture seeped the roof making the rails slippery and rendered it difficult to hold the locomotives on the down grade as well as preventing wheels from gripping on the up-grade when clouds of smoke from the engines often overcame passengers and crew alike. Mishaps were frequent. The following incident, related to me by Mr. W.H. Williams, of the Nepean District Historical Society, is but one of many stories which could be told in this connection:-

"In 1908, a goods train working up the hill (Lapstone)

and through the tunnel aided by a pusher engine behind stalled in the tunnel and the crew of the pusher-up engine were so overcome by smoke and fumes that they decided to drop back out of the tunnel for air. Just as they decided to return, the crew of the train engine who by then were in bad shape decided to back the whole train out and in doing so collided with the push-up engine coming in. The wreckage caused a complete blockage of the Western Line for two days". (No one, apparently, was hurt - H.P.).

Note (1): Tunnel: This tunnel must not be confused with that now in use in the Glenbrook Gorge which was not completed till 1913. The original tunnel curved round from the head of Tunnel Gully, under Mount Street (Glenbrook), under the present Western Highway and emerged on the western side of the land now occupied by R.A.A.F. Operational Headquarters, Glenbrook.

NEW BOOKS.

GEORGE WILLIAM EVANS, EXPLORER.

Written by A.K. Weatherburn, a great-great-grandson of the explorer, and published by Angus and Robertson, Sydney, this invaluable contribution to Australian historical literature fills a long-felt want.

It presents the reader with a concise and authoritative account of the life and work of Evans; but what is more important, it brings to the notice of students a great man who has been notoriously neglected by historians and denied the honour and recognition his efforts so richly merit.

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EARLY RAILWAY PIONEERS. - WILLIAM SIXSMITH.

William Sixsmith, the first locomotive driver of the Railways of New South Wales. Born at Wavertree near Liverpool, England, on 18th November, 1815, Sixsmith began working on the construction of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway before he was twelve years old. His first task was carrying picks for the stone-cutters at Olive Mount Cutting where all stone for the line was quarried. "The rails" he remarked shortly before his death, "were laid on large blocks of stone about 2 feet 4 inches to 2 feet 6 inches square and about 18 inches deep placed corner to corner diagonally, in place of sleepers". (This was common practice in the early days of the railway in the United Kingdom and Europe though it was never adopted in Australia).

Eventually becoming an engine driver, he was employed in that capacity for almost twenty years, first on the Liverpool and Manchester Railway and later on the Liverpool-Birmingham Line. He drove, too, construction line engines on the Paris-Rouen Railway in France under the supervision of Thomas Brassey of the English contracting firm of Peto, Betts and Brassey, of Birkenhead, a company afterwards associated with the building of railways in New South Wales. Sixsmith also saw service as a driver in Ireland where Sir John O'Neil was engaged in constructing lines.

Lured by tales of the gold rush in Australia in the 50's. he migrated to Sydney and travelled alone and on foot to the Beechworth Field in Victoria where his dreams of wealth were not fulfilled. He walked on to Melbourne whence he worked his passage back to Sydney as a coal-trimmer on an inter-colonial steamer.

He soon found work in Sydney with William Randle, a contractor then constructing the Sydney to Parramatta Railway, as driver of the ballast train on the new track. This work was duly completed and on 26th September 1855 - the thirtieth anniversary of the opening of the Stockton-Darlington Railway, the first line in England - Sixsmith, with William Webster (q.v.) as fireman and Richard Darby as guard, drove the Vice-Regal train carrying the Governor, Sir William Denison, and his party from Sydney to Parramatta to mark the opening of the first railroad in New South Wales. Sixsmith's was not the first train to make this journey as one conveying members of the public, driven by Samuel Twist with Peter Wood as fireman, made the run two hours earlier, nor was the Governor his first illustrious passenger; he claimed to have driven the Duke of Wellington in England and King Louis-Philippe of France prior to coming to Australia.

When the railways of N.S.W. passed into the hands of the Government in 1856, Sixsmith transferred to the Department and was listed as driver Number 1. During his long association with railways he drove trains over practically every mile of line in the colony but served chiefly on the Sydney-Goulburn and Sydney-Bathurst runs and earned the reputation of being a skilful, safe and reliable driver.

Sixsmith lived for nearly forty years in the State of New South Wales dying at the age of 77 at the residence of his sole surviving son, George, Cleveland Street, Redfern, on 24th October, 1893, and was interred in the Church of England Section of Rookwood Cemetery, Rookwood, Sydney.

WILLIAM WEBSTER.

William Webster, first fireman on the New South Wales Railways, was born at Wouldham near Rochester in Kent (England) on 29th September, 1833, son of David Webster, farmer, and his wife, Mary Eleanor (nee Kelligrew). At the age of fifteen he went to London where he remained till 1852 when he sailed for Victoria in the hope of making his fortune on the gold fields.

At the end of 1854, with his fortune consisting of one pound weight of gold, he made his way to Sydney where in February, 1855, he began working as a labourer on the Sydney to Goulburn Railway line then being constructed. A few months later he became a fireman and was employed on the ballast trains working on the track from Sydney to Parramatta. On the completion of this line he acted as fireman to William Sixsmith (q.v.) who drove the train conveying Governor Sir William Denison and his suite from Sydney to Parramatta for the opening ceremony on 26th September, 1855.

When the New South Wales Government assumed control of the railway system of the colony in 1856 he was appointed a driver and was chiefly employed on the Southern Line as this was completed, section by section as far as Goulburn. He drove, too, for a number of years over the Western Line from Sydney to Bathurst.

By the time he retired in March, 1902, he had served the Railway Department of N.S.W. for 47 years and had reached the rank of Locomotive Inspector.

After a residence of 55 years in the country of his adoption, (nearly 2 years in Victoria and 54 in N.S.W.) he died at Wentworth Falls at the age of 73 on 1st. April, 1907, and was buried in the Presbyterian Cemetery at Rookwood near Sydney.