

PLOD ESSAY: A Hive of Activity by Jack Moyle

*On 26 October 1912, the Wonthaggi Railway Station building was completed. The Telegraph Office was moved from its temporary office on the weekend and the Station was ready for use. For Jack Moyle, it was the centre of his working life from 1949 until 1977 when the trains stopped. In remembering the days when the railway station was the centre of Wonthaggi's commercial and social life, he describes it as a **Hive of Activity**. What follows is the 'History of Wonthaggi Talk' he gave at the Museum this summer:*



Our family started carrying in 1924. I left school at 14 in 1949 and came to work in the family business.

Back when I started carrying, virtually everything came to Wonthaggi by train and left by train, which made the railway station the commercial and social centre of the town. It was, therefore, the focus of the carrying business. There were two passenger trains a day and a goods train every day. The different trains came in on different tracks: cargo trains pulled in at the Goods Shed where the crane could lift heavy cargo off the open trucks, and the passenger train came in beside the station platform. Everything came: shop goods, feed, machinery.

Because I entered the family business when I was 14 but couldn't get a licence until I was 18, I carried goods from the passenger side of the railway station with a horse and cart with rubber-tired wheels. The passenger train had one goods van on it and it normally had perishables like ice creams, cakes and parcels for the drapery stores. The ice creams came in canvas containers holding two steel cylinders filled with dry ice to keep the ice cream cold so that's how the ice cream came to Wonthaggi and when you delivered it to the shops you had to know how to handle those ice cylinders. Although there were pastry makers in Wonthaggi, Addams Cake shop had cakes delivered from Melbourne in a huge

box that was filled with sponges, and all sorts of beautiful things. Up until I was 18, I was in-charge of getting the goods that came in on the passenger trains to the shops on the horse and cart. The horse would walk along, say, Graham Street and I would run parcels into the shops and houses as he went, and bring other parcels out to take back to the station. It was good.

Also, on the passenger train, crates of racing pigeons came in. The owners of the birds put all their pigeons in baskets that were kept in the guards' van. The guards would look after them and then let all the birds go at once right on time exactly as they were instructed. The guards took pleasure in ensuring the pigeons were well looked after. It used to be that they always went by rail to wherever they were to be released so they could race home. So pigeons came to Wonthaggi from other places to be released from here and Wonthaggi's pigeons went from here to distant places where they were released to fly home.

Over where the cars are parked here for Woolworths, that used to be a paddock, and at Taberner's Hotel they used to have two house cows in there that they milked everyday to use the milk for the pub.

Back then Worth Circus used to come in on the cargo track. They had their own train, which had all their accommodation and equipment and the lions, tigers, monkeys in cages. The circus ponies had their own stable car, and at the end of the train there were three big flat trucks that the elephants were on. They were just standing on the open truck. There was nothing around those elephants except for a chain around their ankle. When the train pulled in, they let the elephants off and straight away they got to work. They knew what to do. The circus men would hook them to the big animals cages (lions and tigers) that were on rubber tires to be moved. When they put the big tent up they get the pole and put an elephant on, and you know the way the big tents get pulled up the pole? The elephants would do that. The elephants just worked like men. They were gentle as anything with their trunks. The trainer would point to something and the elephant would pick it up as gentle as can be. It was a real experience to watch the circus come and unload.

The station was a hive of activity all the time. The railways at that stage had their own cattle yards down where Big W is now. A branch line ran down there and the railway had a big set of stockyards for sheep and cattle, usually bullocks coming in and going out. The local farmers that had bought stock at Newmarket – bullocks and sheep – would wait for their animals to be offloaded into the yards. If they had stock to sell at the

eastern Market in Dandenong, it would go out by rail. All that to-ing and fro-ing was interesting to see. There weren't trucks to take the cattle away then. The farmers would come from the outlying districts on horses with dogs and they drove the cattle home. It was interesting to see cattle being driven out to past North Wonthaggi having quite a job hazing the bullocks and the sheep out through the town. That was a hive of activity.

About 200 yards away, Wonthaggi had its own sale yards, too. It was a nice little local sale yard. Everything was done by horse then. There was a chap called Ross Batten, who did quite a lot of droving and locals who had beasts ready to go to market would just call on him. I'd often go with him on my horse. We'd ride out to the furthest farm first to pick up their lot – a few cows maybe – then we would head them towards the next farm and pick all these animals up. We'd go from the farthest farm out one at a time and drive them all into the yards. That was fun to do, but all that changed after WWII.

The Grey Fergie

There are no photos of it, but there were big mullock heaps about 50 ft tall and 300 or 400 metres long. That was the overburden from the mine – the rubbish that comes out of the mine. The heaps are not there anymore because they've all been used for road works and running tracks, but they were there in 1946 when the Little Grey Fergie Tractors came out. Glen Humphries, who was the agent for the new tractors, used those heaps to show the hill farmers – who had always used horses – how the Fergie tractors went on the hills. It was a good demonstration. You would see three or four tractors going up and down these mullock heaps soon after the trains carrying them arrived at the station. The Grey Fergie was a brilliant tractor.

So, all the horses that had been used forever, disappeared when the tractors came in. We had a property on the Cape Paterson road and opposite was a knackery owned by Jock Wardle and they used to kill the old or injured horses from farms or from the mine and sell the meat for dog meat. Back then there was a terrific dog-racing track over where the Miner's Rest Hotel is and nearly every miner was racing greyhounds back then. Wardle's used to supply the meat for greyhounds.

What really struck me when the Grey Fergies came was... Well, it was when we had the farm and all these beautiful horses started turning up at the knackery. We would put our own spuds in with a single furrow plough and Mr Wardle would lend us one of these beautiful horses to help pull the plough and put our spuds in. Working with these horses was like working with a person. They were used to working with people; lovely big working horses; they'd plough a furrow down and at the end while you

were turning the plough around to come back, the horse would move to where he had to be by looking over his shoulder at you then he would stand there until he saw you were ready to go. Then you said, "Righto," and off he would go to end of the next furrow. They were really lovely to work with, just big beautiful gentle horses. We tried to buy some of them, but Jock wouldn't sell them to us. He said the owners said they might have been mistreated and they had to be destroyed. So, unfortunately, when I was about 14 to 16 I'd go to bed crying because you'd work with one of these horses and go back up to the farm the next morning and you'd see Jock leading it up to be slaughtered. So the Grey Fergie was great but, gee, it decimated the horse population. It's sad, but I had to learn that's the way life is.

Back to the station

We carted beer, groceries, pollen, bran, flour... We carried for the bakeries. Sixteen Tonne of flour would come in every fortnight and we would have to divvy it up and deliver it. All the Co-op goods came by train. There was super phosphate, wine and all that. There were a couple of local chook farmers and because they get it cheaper, they never bought their feed in bags but they bought it in bulk, just an open truck with a tarp over it full of loose wheat. The farmers supplied the bags and we had to fill them. Back then you could buy a ready-made tin [corrugated iron] chimney and so we had one of these and put some hooks in and hung it on the side of the truck, then hung bags on the end of it. We used it as a chute for the wheat. So there would be two of us shovelling the wheat down the upside-down chimney to two others, one bagging it and the other sewing it up. We couldn't stop until it was all done. Big job. That was just the way it was. You did it all by hand. Very interesting.

When I was in school the bottled beer came in crates. That was two dozen 26 oz bottles in a wooden crate and they were heavy. And it came in barrels. A whole shipment was 56 gallons: a barrel was 26, 18 or 9 gallons. We were supposed to pick the 9 gallon barrels up one in each hand to carry them off the train. We had to put the barrels down in the cellars of Taverners and the different pubs. You had to slide the big barrels down the ramp into the cellar through the special entry in the footpath. With the big barrels we would wheel the barrels at the top of the ramp and put two ropes on each one and we had to use all our strength and weight to hang onto it usually wearing gloves so the rope wouldn't burn our hands.

The most unusual or awkward thing we had to cart was drums of tallow. The butchers used to render their own fat in their back yards and then put the tallow into drums and it went to Levers Kitchen in Melbourne to be made into soap. We would go to the back yard of the butcher and there would be three or four 44-gallon drums to pick up. Of course, they were filled to the top and they were all greasy and sticky. We couldn't lift them so we had a set of skids to let us slide the upright drums up onto the back of the truck, by pulling them up with a rope. If

you were working on your own, you could do it, but it was really hard and you'd get it almost to the top and it would slip and slide to the bottom and all the fat would get all over you. Skins and hides also went from the knackeries to Melbourne. They'd be packed and tied and sent to be made into leather. We used to have to unload drums of molasses, and the large crates of rolled paper for the newspapers. They weighed half a tonne. A couple of us used to get a hold of them and move them end over end. As a carrier, you get good at swinging loads about, but the tallow was the worst.

The Crane



The crane that is still out near the Goods Shed has been out there all my life. Initially, you had to crank it by hand. You could lift a lot of weight that way, but it was slow. You could slide a cog across and make it even slower but lift a lot more weight. Then they changed it to electricity and then you just had to push a button. The crane was in use all the time. I remember all the steel used by the Cyclone Factory came in and it was all unloaded by the crane. And then Pages Machinery, which was up across where Aldi, is now, made all sorts of different farm machinery and exported it all over the place. All that was loaded or unloaded with the crane.

Back then after the war, Volkswagen cars came in crates on the goods train. They were unloaded with the crane. They would unload the crate with the car in it and when they lowered it to the ground, they would undo a few bolts and all the sides would drop down. All they had to do was just put a bit of petrol in the car and drive off. They were all complete. We bought a lot of those big car crates and made sheds on the farm with them. They were beautifully made crates with good timber. People would get them to use as playhouses for the kids. They were terrific.

Something else I remember about the crane: back in 1937 Dad was going to buy a new Ford truck. The

local agent said wait until next year because they are coming out with hydraulic brakes. So Dad waited until the new year and got the new truck. Lovely truck. Because we used to cart a bit of furniture all over the place and there were no motels then, Dad got the Ford motor company in Geelong to put a special cab on it with a back seat you could make into a bunk bed for two people. That worked out very well. Then when the war broke out, the army commandeered it for the war effort because it had hydraulic brakes. That was a bit rough, but Dad was glad to do it for the war effort. After the war we got a very nice letter from the Army asking us if we would like a new truck? Well, Dad said yes, of course. So in 1946 we got a

new Ford, but the army had painted it in 1938 colours and trim absolutely exactly the same as the one they had taken. The only way to get it off the railway car was with the crane. So they put slings around the vehicle and they wound it by hand and put it on the ground ready to go. I remember we were carting super phosphate out to the farms just then. We had already loaded three trucks ready to go out and so we put some super on the new truck just arrived ready to put her straight to work, but before we could get going, the local Ford agent came in to pick up the newly delivered truck. He had a fit when he saw that she

was already loaded.

“Aw, Bert, you shouldn't have done that. I'm supposed to do a service on her before she goes out!”

Since the truck was loaded, we told him we'd bring it in the next day. It went fine. So it came off the train, was loaded and delivered its load before it went in for its first service.

Just the story of the crane unloading the big truck, tells you how important that piece of machinery was to Wonthaggi. It unloaded roofing iron, timber, cars, trucks... it was in constant use. It is still standing out there right now all newly painted and as clean as a whistle. It is now an important historical display. It stands next to a polished up Goods Shed and across the track – no longer there – from the passenger side of the Station that itself is polished up and on display. Standing out the front of the station, you can imagine the activity that took place there: when the passenger train came in at lunchtime the car park would fill up with taxis to take the passengers away. There was just constant coming and going. The station was certainly central in my life. It was a hive of activity in our town right until 1977.

- edited by C. Landon