Laurie Notley began his postal career in 1922 when he was fourteen years old. Except for a few weeks relieving at several Gippsland Post Offices, he spent his entire working life at Wonthaggi. His first annual salary of £75 (or $2.90 per week in modern terms) was fine with him since he had only been earning 7d/6 (or 75¢) a week as a delivery boy for C. V. Davis, the newsagent. In his new job, Laurie earned his money by polishing the brass-work, making the ink and the gum, and delivering the telegrams.

Telegrams were much more widely used in the early 20s than they are today. There were only 100 telephone subscribers in the town; trunk calls were expensive and often very slow. Besides telephone service then was from 8am to 9:30pm. When a continuous service was introduced in the late 20s, a boy slept on a stretcher near the switchboard and there was a large alarm bell to wake if a call came through. One lad slept so soundly that the local police had to open a window and shake the sleeper then ultimately treat him with cold water before an emergency call could be made.

Telephone service, of course, expanded greatly over the years until there were as many as 30 telephonists employed at the post office prior to the automatic service. But, for the longest time, telegrams were more important than the telephone. All sorts of messages ranging from press despatches, urgent personal calls, starting prices for local s.p. bookies to birthday and Christmas greeting travelled in Morse code across the wire. The clicking of the telegraph was a continual background in all post offices. Speeds of 30 words per minute were attained by the best, about 15 words was the necessary standard for a telegraphist.

In 1937, at the time of the 20-Shaft Disaster, there were newspapermen from all over Australia in town to cover the rescue operation. Some of the press despatches were lurid and exaggerated and untrue. One exception was the writing of Hugh Buzzy, a well-known journalist of the period. He gave a graphic but factual account of the aftermath of the tragedy.

"All the pressmen would be in the Post Office late at night waiting their turn to send press telegrams," recalled Laurie. "It was crowded and some were down on the floor writing their stories. The Postmaster, Mr Anderson, brought in a small table for Hugh Buzzy. One of the others said, 'Why does he get that a table?' The Boss snapped, 'Because he's a gentleman, that's why.'"

Once an urgent telegram was sent to a relative of a gravely ill person in the hospital. "We gave it priority," said Laurie. "We asked the boys in Melbourne to 'push it along'. Although it was late in the day, the relative got it in time to catch a train to Melbourne from Sydney. He was too late to catch the Wonthaggi train so he got one out to Dandenong and caught a lift on the highway. He was in the town before the train arrived at 11am."

One festive season, the clerk at the counter was puzzled by a message on a telegraph form that a fellow handed him.

"What's this MARIE KRISSMUS?" he asked.

"Aw, I don't know," the chap replied. "Everyone is saying it so I thought I'd send it to the old woman."

Wonthaggi Post Office was the wire centre for 36 sub-offices all around the countryside with more trees then along the roads and no underground lines. Breakdowns were frequent. People mostly travelled by bike or 'shanks ponies' then, and only in extreme situations was a truck hired from Elliot's Garage at 6 pence per mile. One time the line to San Remo and the Island was down. The PMG refused to ay any more than 5 pence for a truck. So the linesman had to set out on his bike against a howling easterly gale. He carried a coil of wire over each shoulder and had his tool bag on the handlebars. He had to walk his bike and by nightfall only made it as far as Dalyston. It took most of the next day to get to San Remo where he had to enlist the help of the pub patrons to cut a fallen tree away from the line. There were so many complaints from influential Island visitors about the delay that next time the line was down the PMG paid the 6 pence per mile and hired the truck.

Of course, the post itself was the real business of the Post Office. The mailbags were taken to and from the railway station in a handcart known as the 'rabbit cart'. This name probably came from its likeness to the street vendor's rabbit carts in Melbourne. It was all right going down to the station from the Post Office on McBride Street, but it was "darned hard work coming back up the hill", according to Laurie. "At Christmas time, we would get help from Harry Crank, the local carrier. We would help him load his parcels and then we would sit in the back of his horse-drawn lorry and drag the rabbit cart behind us."

In the disastrous floods of December 1934, Wonthaggi has seven inches of rain in twenty-four hours and the road and rail links were cut for three

days. A chap was hired to drive a car in an attempt to get the mail through from Melbourne. It left the city at 8am and after a round-a-bout drive through Warragul and the Gippsland hills, it reached Wonthaggi at 11pm!

Many tales have been told over the years of the arrival by mail of the fortnightly State Mine Pay, which was often in excess of £20,000, but Laurie never gave those stories any credence. "The truth was," he said, "the money that was paid out at the mine found its way back into the local banks and 90% of the pay would be in the town when payday came around."

At one time, the mail that came on the night train was left in the station until the next morning. One night just before Christmas the night watchman saw a light in the railway station and caught a thief in a welter of opened parcels and boxes. One of the mailbags on which the thief had been kneeling had £2,000 in it destined for one of the local banks. Laurie recalled, "The burglar was an unemployed bloke from Melbourne who'd been looking for clothes for his kids. He broke down and cried like a baby when he heard of the fortune he'd been kneeling on."

Melbourne detectives accused the telegraphists of being in league with the thief.

"You received a telegram for the National Bank the day before, didn't you?" said the detective to Laurie.

"Yes," replied Laurie, "but those bank telegraphs are in code. No one could have read them."

"Besides," the Postmaster pointed out in Laurie's defence, "If the man had known about the £2,000 he wouldn't have wasted time opening Christmas parcels!"

From then on mailbags from the evening train had to be taken to the Post Office immediately after the train arrived. It was Laurie's job to cart those bags up the hill.

"I remember one day," he said, "the manager of the bank accompanied by one of the local police came to the post office to pick up the parcel of cash for the bank. Both were carrying loaded revolvers. I had to laugh when I thought that I'd carried the mailbag containing the money up from the station in the dark the night before. I had thrown the bags into the office, locked the door and left the keys under the mat."

Wonthaggi had two outward and two inward mails each day and the letters were delivered twice daily in the business area. There were no letterboxes on the front gates when Laurie first delivered letters. He had to go right to the front door of each house.

"When letterboxes came in,' said Laurie, "there were some strange ones. Most of them made out of fruit tins with holes back and front so the letter often when straight through. It was all walking then. There were three rounds in the town and the longest one was ten miles that took three and a half hours to complete – that is if you followed the streets. We learned a few short cuts here and there.

"Dogs? Some chaps had trouble with dogs but I didn't. My dog used to come with me and he would guard the bag while I went to the end of the street. One day – we were using bikes by then – I was delivering letters up the east end and Mrs Dix's geese were on the front path. The old gander came hissing and pointing at me and stuck his head through the front wheel of the bike. There were feathers and goose muck everywhere. We got his head out of spokes eventually and he survived. The Postmaster wrote a staff letter to Mrs Dix claiming dry cleaning expenses for my uniform!"

In the 20s and 30s there were many more rented homes than there are now and a cartload of furniture on the way to different dwellings was a common sight in the streets. Notification of change-of-address was a frequent happening at the post office counter. One day, when a relieving clerk from Melbourne was on duty, the door opened at a head popped in. "Ah'm awa' tae Fahey Street," it said and then withdrew.

"What's that all about?" asked the puzzled clerk.

"Oh, that's just Mrs _____ telling us that she's changed her address again."

Laurie Notley had a very high regard fro the people of Wonthaggi.

"During all my years as the P.O. I found people very friendly and helpful. Many public servants such as teachers, bank and postal clerks were very reluctant to be placed in the mining town mainly because of untrue reports in the Melbourne papers. But most of them were also very reluctant to leave when it came time. Many turned down chances for promotion to stay in this town."