

SOME BRANCH LINE REMINISCENCES

1 RAILS INTO THE BUSH . . .

The Catlins River Branch

By Russell Glendinning

A REMOTE branch line curves away from the Main South Line at Balclutha, 52 miles south of Dunedin. Where the main line turns westward, the branch continues in a general southerly, and then south-westerly direction over swamp, hill, river, and gully until it reaches Tahakopa. Here a clay heap announces that the rails go no further. This is the end of the Catlins River Branch, part of the story of which I would like to tell, as readers may find it of some interest, not so much as a history, but as an article.

I was brought up at MacLennan, a small station near the end of the line—it was 38 miles from Balclutha—so I had many opportunities to observe the comings and goings of the trains from our front gate; but I will go back a little further than that to give you a little insight into this interesting branch.

Generally the track follows the easiest route possible. In common with most early branch lines it is very tortuous, with deep cuttings. Because of the nature of the country, many steep grades are encountered, but there is only one short tunnel, ten chains in length. There are many bridges, the two most notable being at Houipapa (over the Catlins River) and at MacLennan (over the MacLennan, a tributary of the Tahakopa. Both have steel girder spans carried on large wooden piles, and when I wrote this in 1966 they were quite sound despite their years.

This branch saw an unusually large number of terminal depots as it was pushed forward towards Tahakopa. They were successively at Romahapa, Owaka, Ratanui, MacLennan, and finally Tahakopa; but now even the Tahakopa shed is gone. In its last

days it was maintained in a more or less upright position by No. 8 fencing wire.

As a child I can remember seeing only a few classes of locomotives working on this line, these being the "Q", "A", and "Ab" Pacifics; but from what an old driver told me there could have been few of the older classes that did not find their way down through the bush at one time or another. These included the "D" 2-4-0T, "F" 0-6-0T, "Ba" 4-8-0, "Ub" 4-6-0, "Wf" 2-6-4T, and "V" class 2-6-2. Many a time he cursed the small locomotives with their correspondingly small water and coal capacities; especially when it needed four trips to get his train section by section up the 1 in 40 grade from MacLennan to Puketiro, the steepest bank on the branch. He said it would have been quicker to walk. In fact, some of the passengers did, the train stopping for them on its last trip up!

My own experiences on this branch consisted of market-day trips to Dunedin, and later to attend woodwork classes at Owaka. The Tuesday market-day train comprised passenger stock entirely to connect with the northbound express in the morning, and the southbound one in the evening. Quite often

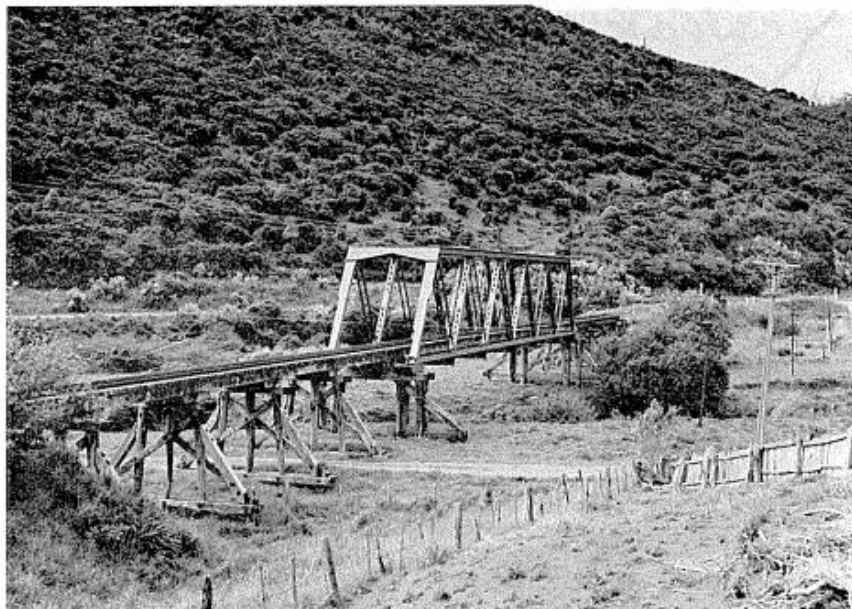


the express was held at Balclutha for the branch connection, but I think quite my most exciting trip was the day the van was derailed at Tahakopa. The train had to leave without it, resulting in everything going into the carriage. Oh boy, what a collection! Passengers, chooks, dogs, various farm produce, including cans of cream, and a box containing a pig. We kids certainly enjoyed the trip, but that is more than can be said for the poor harassed guard and porter. They were at their wits end by the time Balclutha was reached, especially when one of the chooks got loose, causing quite a commotion in that carriage.

What the express passengers thought I will never know, for we must have looked

a sight alighting in the old Balclutha dock platform to troop along to the express, which was waiting at the main platform. I am absolutely sure such a thing could never happen anywhere these days, but nevertheless on looking back, what an enjoyable experience that day was. Well, for us kids anyway!

The Thursday train to woodwork was a mixed, with an old "birdcage" carriage or bench-seated car next to the van, and preceded by a full load of logs and timber on the front. What trips we had up the grades, with the old "A" slogging every foot of the way, and every time she slipped, which was often, bang would go the drawgear, only to stretch out again when the engine "picked



Photograph: N.Z. Railways Publicity

The bridge across the Catlins River near Houipapa on the branch line from Balclutha, showing its relatively light construction suitable for a maximum axle loading of about 12 tons. November 1965.

up its feet". With the resultant jerking in the carriage, we thought this was great fun, often walking up to the engine to ask the driver if he would like a push, or some such remark. We were not in the least perturbed by the looks we received from that worthy gentleman. Looking back now, it amazes me how the drawgear took such punishment without failing.

It is interesting to recall how few of the passengers complained of the hard seats, the cold carriages, the "push backs" for another go at a steep curve, or the slow, jerky uphill trips. The train crews were everyone's friends. They always found time to stop at a road crossing or farm gate to pick up or set down someone whose home was far from a station; or they would pick up a youngster to give him a ride on the engine, or perhaps even pick up a cast sheep. It was all part of the job.

I myself used to stand with large round eyes watching the train, and many was the

time I was hoisted into the cab by those kind men, given a mug of billy tea and a great sandwich to chew at—much to the envy of my school mates, to whom I used to brag as boys are wont to do. At that time I never would have thought that I would be the last fireman to be stationed at Tahakopa, and would be privileged to work the last Tahakopa-based train from that depot.

This branch line used to be a favourite hunting ground for those "mystery trains", that feature of the 1930s. These were usually a full load for the two engines, but even when they were double-headed I can remember the sound of the returning excursion blasting its way from Macleannan to Puketiro, taking anything up to an hour to cover the six miles. Double-heading was fairly rare on this line, but when it did occur it was usually two "A"s or an "A" and "Ab". I cannot recall ever having seen two "Ab"s coupled together on this branch,

CATLINS RIVER BRANCH OPENING DATES

(Note: Mileages in this table are from beginning to end of rails, whereas other mileages quoted are from centre to centre of stations.)

Section	Miles	Date
Balclutha-Romahapa	7.95	15 Dec 1885
Romahapa-Glenomaru	6.23	7 Jul 1891
Glenomaru-Tunnel	0.41	6 Mar 1895
Tunnel-Tahora	3.60	16 Dec 1895
Tahora-Owaka	1.14	22 Jun 1896
Owaka-Catkins River (Ratanui)	3.46	1 Aug 1904
Catkins River-Houipapa	2.37	17 Dec 1909
Houipapa-Tahakopa	17.67	4 Feb 1915
(Extension)	0.12	31 Mar 1920
(Adjustment)	0.07	1 Apr 1956

but I believe it did occur once in 1966. I can remember once seeing a "Q" and an "A" battling out of Macleannan, a rather rare combination, I should think.

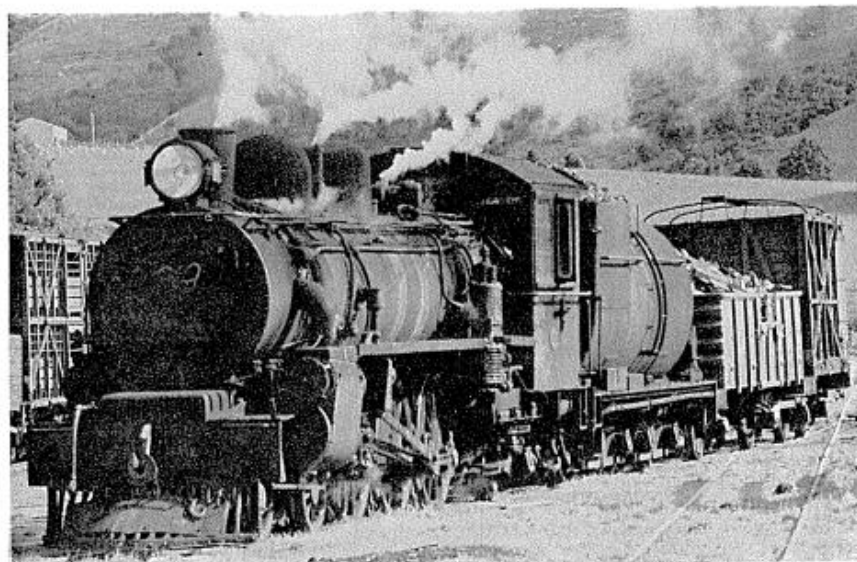
The main items of goods carried on the Tahakopa Branch were timber, logs, live-stock, lime, and farm implements, but even this has dwindled in recent years, for I can recall when, in a distance of about 10 miles, no fewer than 13 sawmills loaded their products on to rail, an output that necessitated trains six days a week, with four trains on two days of the week.

Usually trains crossed at set stations on set days, but this varied over the years to match changing traffic requirements. Those stations most frequently used were Glenomaru, Owaka, Tawanui, Ratanui, and

This view of Tawanui station, 28½ miles from Balclutha, shows typical countryside through which the branch line runs. Here the grade is climbing out of the Catkins River valley to the summit at Puketiro. The sidings are almost lost in grass and weeds. November 1965.

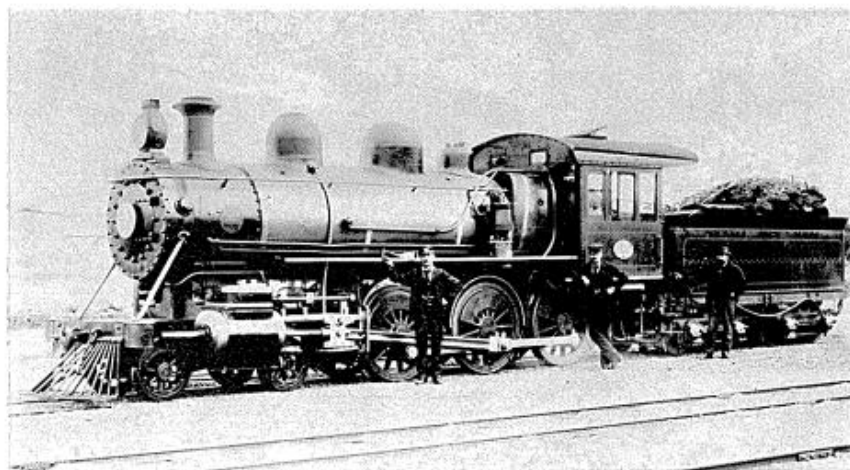
Photograph: N.Z. Railways Publicity





Photograph: C. I. Bradley

"Ab" 735 shunting at Glenomaru in February 1968.



From an old print courtesy G. W. Emerson and J. A. Dangerfield

In earlier years the "Ub" class 4-6-0 locomotives would have been among those seen on the Catlins line. Of classic Baldwin extraction, this was No. 282, a product of 1898.

Catlins River Branch Railway in 1932

Stations	Distance	Height above Sea	Goods Shed	Standing Room for Wagons on Sidings
	Miles	Feet	Feet	
BALCLUTHA	0.00	22	110 x 30	...
Finegand	2.11	16	—	32
Otanomama	3.99	22	—	34
Ramahapa	7.81	16	40 x 30	72
Glenomaru	11.94	183	40 x 30	79
Hunts Road	15.99	156	—	13
OWAKA	19.17	36	60 x 30	102
Ratanui	22.65	5	41 x 32	70
Houipapa	25.09	41	32 x 22	23
Tawanui	28.57	233	—	77
Puketiro	32.26	517	—	63
Caberfeldh	34.73	289	—	27
MacLennan	37.62	16	31 x 22	121
Stuarts	39.69	6	—	30
Campbell & Sons Sdg.	40.90	—	—	25
TAHAKOPA	42.71	28	31 x 21	60

All branch stations had loading banks, but only some had passenger platforms. There were turntables at Owaka and Tahakopa.

Houipapa. As I recall it, the peak was about 16 trains per week, excluding the excursions, which ran often because the line passes through some really lovely native bush before levelling off at MacLennan to skirt the Tahakopa River for several miles.

Two private mill railways brought timber to the railheads at MacLennan and Tahakopa. The one at MacLennan used Johnston steam locomotives, while the one at Tahakopa used an ex-NZR 2-4-0T No. 47 of the "D" class. These systems consisted of 20 or 30 miles of track and form a story of their own.

As the years passed by, passenger accommodation was done away with, and goods traffic dwindled, so that only a few trains run now: a goods from Balclutha to Tahakopa and back on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and one from Balclutha to Owaka and back on Tuesdays. Passengers are catered for by buses. There have been threats of closure for some years now, but somehow the line seems to struggle along.

When I was old enough, I joined the job, and was appointed to Balclutha as a cleaner, and later as fireman. Later still, when the regular Tahakopa crew was transferred elsewhere, I was transferred to Tahakopa as the relief fireman. The regular crew

worked to Balclutha on Friday 3 August 1956, did the final changeover, then worked the train to Tahakopa where a driver and myself took over for the final week. What a sad trip it was, for there were stops everywhere to receive little farewell gifts for the train men, who had made many friends on this run. When the driver pinned the throttle shut for the last time at Tahakopa I thought I noticed a wee tear in his eye. It would not be surprising, for he was the cleaner at Tahakopa, later fireman, and finally senior driver. What stories that man could tell.

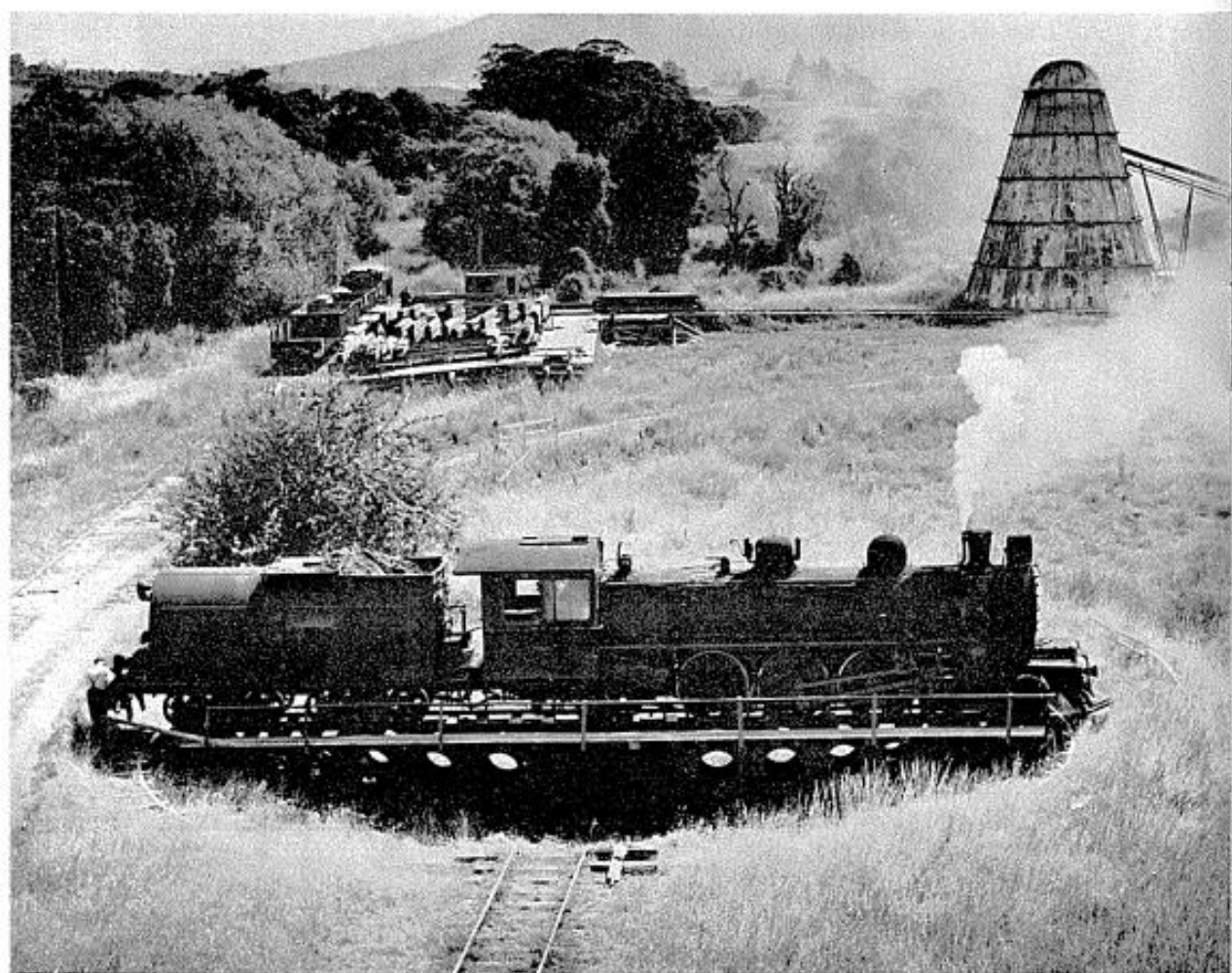
On Saturday 12 August 1956 we marshalled the train at the station in preparation for the final trip of a Tahakopa-based train with most of the residents there to say goodbye. The locomotive, "A" 476, was completely decorated with all sorts of greenery, and a great laurel wreath was placed on the front of the smokebox. At departure time we were placed in a circle on the platform, and all assembled sang "Now is the Hour" and "For They Are Jolly Good

CATLINS RIVER BRANCH

Condensed Timetable May 1935

DOWN	487 M, W, S	491 Thu.	489 Tue., Fri.
	a.m.	p.m.	p.m.
BALCLUTHA	dep. 10.30	1.15	6.30
Ramahapa	" 11.00	1.45	6.58
Glenomaru	" 11.15	2.00	7.12
OWAKA	arr. 11.50	2.46	7.40
"	dep. 12.10	4.00	7.45
Houipapa	" 12.37	4.25	8.07
Tawanui	arr. 12.52	—	—
"	dep. 12.57	x	x
Puketiro	" 1.22	5.05	8.35
MacLennan	" 1.52	x	x
TAHAKOPA	arr. 2.15	6.00	9.15
UP	478 Tu., Fri. a.m.	484 Thu. a.m.	490 M, W, S a.m.
TAHAKOPA	dep. 6.40	8.40	11.30
MacLennan	" 7.00	9.08	12.02
Puketiro	" 7.25	9.43	12.40
Tawanui	arr. —	—	12.50
"	dep. x	x	1.00
Houipapa	" 7.53	x	1.15
OWAKA	arr. 8.13	10.53	1.45
"	dep. 8.18	11.25	2.05
Glenomaru	" 8.46	11.51	2.35
Ramahapa	" 9.00	12.06	2.57
BALCLUTHA	arr. 9.25	12.31	3.30

x Stops if required to pick up or set down passengers.



Photograph: D. L. A. Turner

End of the line. "Ab" 728 is being turned on the turntable at Tahakopa in February 1964. The wagons at the timber loading skids in the background are standing near the end of the rails.

Engine Load Ratings, Maclennan-Puketiro

Locomotive Class and Type	Goods Trains	Mixed Trains
	Tons	Tons
A or Ab 4-6-2	220	190
B or Ba 4-8-0	190	160
U 4-6-0	130	120
Ua or Ub 4-6-0	140	130
Uc 4-6-0	150	140

By comparison, a "Dj" class diesel-electric locomotive can haul 360 tons up this 1 in 40 grade.

Fellows". It was very touching for, as we began to move slowly away to the sound of exploding detonators, those kindly people once again broke into "Now is the Hour", sadly this time, as if they were saying goodbye to an old friend. Gone now is the personal touch between the train crew and the local residents, but such is the price of changing times. The past is now only a pleasant memory to most of us who were associated with the Catlins River Branch over the years when the train crews were based at remote Tahakopa.