

# ROUGH RIDGE REMINISCENCES

By W. J. Cowan

**M**OST of us who are interested in railways in general, and the steam locomotive in particular, remember some period and place of railway interest with special affection. For the writer, the appeal of the Otago Central railway takes precedence over memories of "Wab" power at Puketeraki and compound "A"s shunting at Lawrence.

For four years during the last decade of steam operation in Central Otago, I lived and worked at Otarehua, a small township situated near the head of the Ida Valley. Even without the attraction of the railway, Otarehua is a fascinating place. Although it is a farming community, this place has known a wide diversity of other industry, ranging from quartz mining and coal mining to the manufacture of windmills and farm machinery. Otarehua and Ophir are often rivals for the distinction of having the lowest winter temperatures for the year. Often both places record 32-degree frosts, when the mercury dips to zero on the Fahrenheit scale. Like all of Central Otago, the area swelters under an intense sun in summer. But by April the days are cooling off and the colours of autumn are unfolding against the grey-brown of the landscape.

Otarehua station, once known as Rough Ridge, lies one hundred miles from Dunedin. Five miles beyond is Ida Valley station while Wedderburn is situated seven miles to the south-east on the edge of the Maniototo Plain. From Wedderburn the line climbs on a 1 in 51 grade to a little over two thousand feet at Mackay's Crossing, the highest point on the line, and then drops down the north side of Rough Ridge for two miles at 1 in 50 before easing slightly to reach Otarehua. Between Otarehua and Ida Valley the line crosses the valley, skirting as it does the Idaburn dam and the remains of an old ballast pit once used during the line's construction.

When I arrived in mid-1958 I was about 25 years too late to see any of the legendary "Ub" class locomotives in action, though one or two local people remembered them well. By 1958, regular steam-hauled passenger workings had ceased, and diesel-electric locomotives of the "Dh" class had infiltrated the region as far as Omakau. But there were compensations; tablet working between Ranfurly and Omakau had still six months of life left, and there were plenty of "Ab"s around in spite of rumours that another year would see a complete diesel take-over. Otarehua was then a busy station with a stationmaster and an assistant.

Daylight-hour railway activity on a week-day in the latter half of the year would be opened by the passage of the Dunedin-bound railcar at precisely 8.25 a.m.; the Vulcan railcars always ran strictly to time. In spite of bus competition, railcar loadings were moderate.

Peace would settle over the village until about midday when goods train 345, bound generally for Cromwell but sometimes only for Omakau, would sneak round the curve near the school and head down into Otarehua. Up front would be a dusty "Ab" which had worked the train right from Dunedin. (If No. 345 terminated at Omakau, the same engine would work the return service — train 352 — right back to Dunedin, a round trip of some 240 miles.)

The arrival of train 345 brought papers, bread and mail to the district; there were always a few people around just to watch



Photograph: W. J. Cowan

The Alexandra-Dunedin railcar climbing the 1 in 64 grade past Oturehua School in 1961.

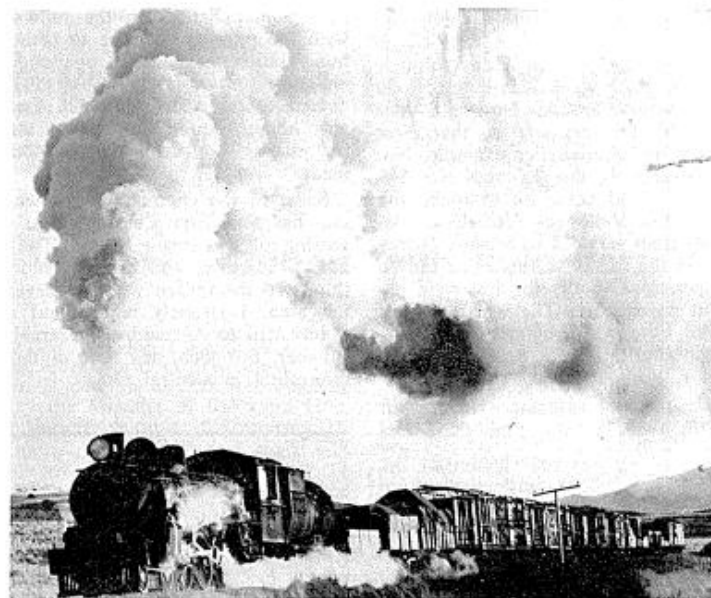
No. 345 come and go. After a brief stop the train would be off, complete with the tablet for the section ending at Lauder, though there might be intermediate stops at Ida Valley and Auripo. A few hundred yards out from Oturehua station, the train would pass near Peter Darling's tin hut. Peter, one of Oturehua's identities, had been living in the area for over 50 years and now, in his old age, he chose to live beside the line which he had helped to build.

Whether the next train movement, No. 352, would leave Oturehua on time at 3.50 p.m., or not, would depend very much on traffic. During the stock season, train 352 would have a full load of 250 tons for its "Ab" to haul out of Oturehua. At other times, this train might only be a "sports model" consisting of three or four wagons. It was a memorable sight to see a heavily-laden train crawling along the shoulders of Rough Ridge. Behind the train as it weaved slowly through the cuttings and the tussock the black smoke would lie, marking well the efforts of the fireman.

The Alexandra-bound railcar would clatter down the grade at 8.07 p.m., scattering any pheasant and quail that might be lingering near the track. During the night, trains 440, a Cromwell-Dunedin goods, and 439, its opposite service, would steam through; No. 440 shortly before midnight and No. 439 about two o'clock. The latter was known locally as "the prowler."

By mid-January, fruit and stock swelled outward tonnages to the point where extra trains were needed. A new timetable would then be implemented which added two extra trains each way over the whole line, as well as some weekend working. In February 1959, a Sunday stock special from Alexandra to Dunedin was inaugurated, hauled by twin "Dh" diesel-electrics. These trains left Alexandra in the early afternoon, and it was a wonder to see the loads they carried and the ease with which they climbed the hills.

Trains in this area were manned by either Ranfurly or Cromwell crews. Those from Cromwell worked to Omakau in the daytime and to Ranfurly at night. Ranfurly



Photograph: W. J. Cowan

Goods train 352, Cromwell to Dunedin, headed by an "Ab" class locomotive near Idaburn Crossing in 1961.

crews became friendly and familiar over the years. Different drivers had different styles of attacking the climb out of Oturehua. One Ranfurly man would take his train leisurely and quietly up the hill, while others had a more aggressive approach and would set their trains at the grade with as much speed as they could muster after clearing the level track in the station yard. One particular driver who used to work in the area during the busy season seemed to be an expert at getting a good run at the hill. He would march his train up the grade with a crackling exhaust from the engine which seemed always to be on the point of slipping—but it never did.

Some drivers were artists on the whistle; there were many level crossings and as many opportunities to practise the art. Trains 441 and 458 used to cross at Ida Valley during the autumn. On a clear night, the hills would echo to the whistles and heavy exhausts of these trains as their drivers got them moving again.

On occasions, a Ranfurly engine would double-head No. 440 from Chatto Creek to Ranfurly. The assisting engine would flash through Oturehua shortly after the railcar and wait for its train at Chatto Creek, a station at the foot of the notorious Tiger Hill. In the opposite direction, No. 439 was often assisted from Ranfurly to the top of Tiger Hill. During my stay at Oturehua I saw only one daylight steam double-headed goods train. This was in May 1960, when train 352 had an extra engine which was being worked back to Dunedin after being stationed at Cromwell during the autumn.

With two exceptions, "Ab" and "Dh" engines worked all the trains. A railfan special in 1960, and a work train in 1961, were both hauled by "A" class locomotives. In May 1961, "A" 417 came up to Omakau for a week or so to handle ballast trains originating from Alexandra. After making one or two sorties, it failed and was returned to Dunedin, but not before making history as the last "A" to travel the line.

as well as being the last engine stabled at Omakau.

Diesels worked one train a day through Oturua, but there were often long periods when they weren't around. Now and then a train would run very late, so that crossings had to be altered. For example, No. 352 from Cromwell, due to cross No. 345 at Omakau, would come on to make the crossing at Ida Valley or Oturua. Disruptions to train services were rare. Heavy snowfalls, in the nature of those that handicapped operations in the thirties, were expected but never came. The worst hold-up was caused by a wash-out at Eden Creek, near Wedderburn, which closed the line for about a week.

It was with some reluctance that I left the area in 1962. By this time there had

been some changes in the railway scene, with the promise of more to come. Oturua station was now unattended, and diesels often worked trains 439/440 between Ranfurly and Dunedin. Empty railway houses dotted the countryside as the first moves to centralise track gangs were made.

Some of the character of railway operation has gone from Central Otago with the passing of the steam engine. The line remains, however, and this is the important thing. To the railfan who has never visited the area, I strongly recommend a return railcar trip to Alexandra, preferably in the summer. But then, any time of the year is interesting in Central Otago.



Photograph: N.Z. Railways Publicity

## NEW WESTPORT STATION

**T**HIS distinctive new building at Westport was officially opened by the General Manager of Railways, Mr. Ivan Thomas, on behalf of the Minister of Railways on 25 February 1971, to replace the old Westport railway station, which had been largely destroyed by fire. The new premises incorporate offices for the Chief Stationmaster, N.Z.R. Road Services Branch Manager, and administrative staff, as well as up-to-date facilities for the conduct of public business. It offers 5,500 square feet of floor space. Architectural features include a suspended aluminium verandah with sheet-rubber guttering, a lantern-style skylight, and the use of local native heart timber behind the asbestos cement wall covering.