RAILS AND MAILS

The R.T.P.O. Story in New Zealand

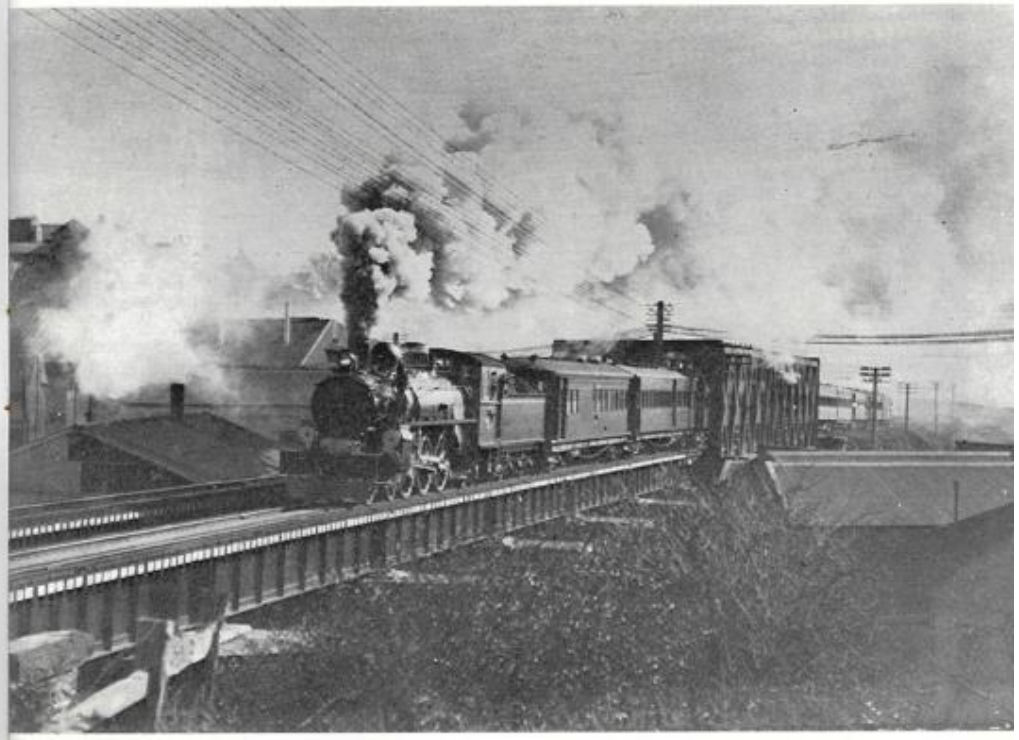
By David Leitch

SIX nights a week, from Monday to Saturday inclusive, until 4 September 1971, an aluminium-sheathed van could be seen attached to the rear of the overnight expresses running between Wellington and Auckland over the 423-mile length of the North Island Main Trunk. A legend in red letters on both sides of the vehicle both identified it and proclaimed its function: "Railway Travelling Post Office". The three R.T.P.O. vans in use, one in each direction nightly and one spare, when the operation came to an end were the latest in a long line of vehicles to bear this designation, and they ran on the last of eight routes that once had regular R.T.P.O. schedules.

Mail was first carried by rail in New Zealand on 27 April 1865. This was on the wooden Makarewa railway in Southland when heavy rainfall made the adjacent unmetalled road impassable. "Lady Barkly" was the locomotive used on that historic occasion. Suggestions of earlier carriage of mails on the Christchurch-Ferrymead line are not borne out by the Postmaster-General's reports of the time, which state that such mails were delivered by coach.

Extension of railway mileage in the 1870s resulted in greatly improved mail delivery services. Not only was the carriage of mail by rail instrumental in speeding delivery and ensuring reliability, but free carriage of mail by the Government Railways enabled the Post Office to spend money on improvements to other essential postal services. This money would otherwise have been used up in meeting the cost of transport.

By 1878, therefore, carriage of mail by rail had become commonplace, and in October of that year, only one month after the completion of the Christchurch-Dunedin section of the South Island Main Trunk, a new development occurred. A Railway Travelling Post Office was provided over the route. On 22 January 1879 the rail link through to Invercargill was completed, and in the following month R.T.P.O. cars were attached to the Dunedin-Invercargill express trains. The Postmaster-General, in his report of 31 May 1880, noted: "The travelling post offices . . . have proved to be a great convenience . . . Railway carriages adapted for Post Office purposes have been placed at the unreserved disposal of the (postal) department. The necessary alterations and fittings were undertaken and supplied by the Railways Department . . ."

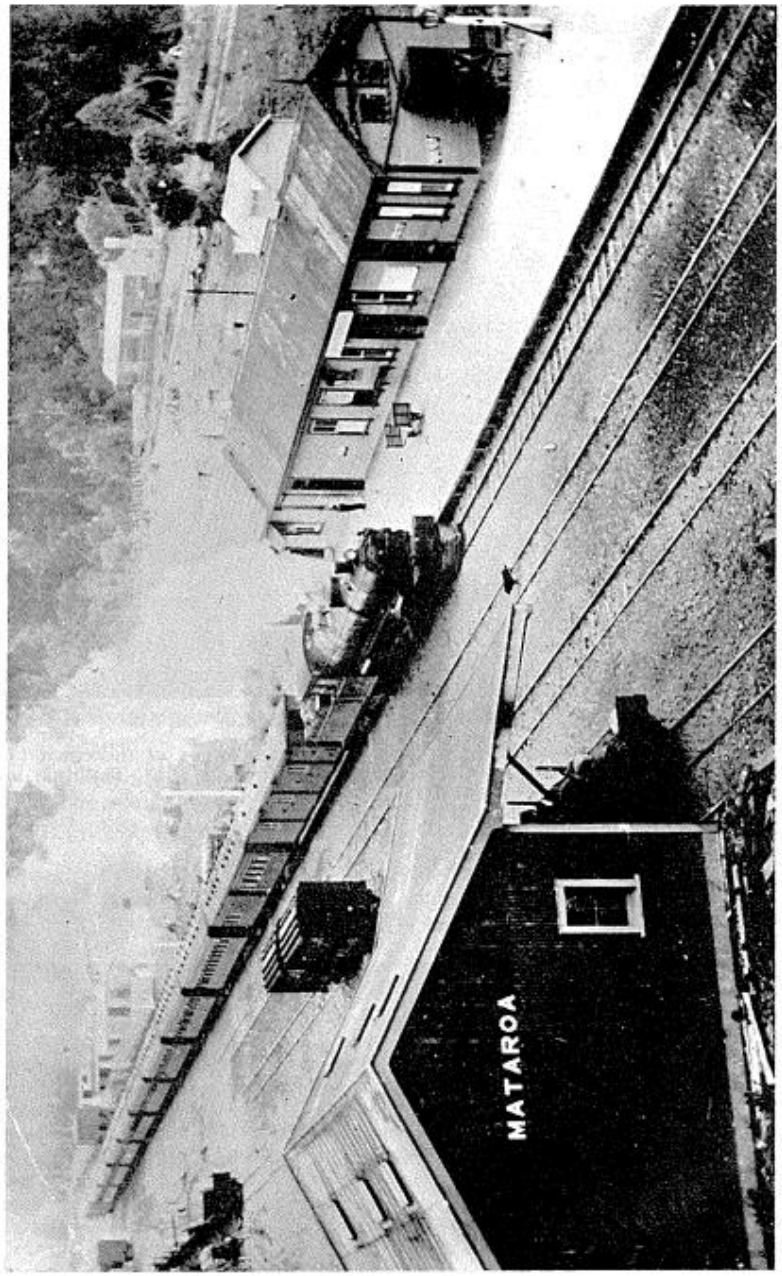


Photograph courtesy N.Z. Railways Publicity

Storming out of Auckland across the Parnell bridge at the beginning of the climb to Remuera, 4-cylinder compound "A" class Pacific rouses the echoes in 1912. The train is the Thames express with a postal car behind the tender

The first R.T.P.O. cars in New Zealand bore little relation to the vehicles used in more recent years, being mere compartments built into one half of a normal passenger car. Facilities were primitive by present-day standards, but the R.T.P.O. nevertheless presented a notable advance in the speedy handling and delivery of mail. When the Christchurch-Dunedin service began operation, the mail clerks changed over at St. Andrews, but when a large shipment of overseas mail arrived, the Dunedin clerks travelled right through to Lyttelton and went back with the Christchurch clerks the following day assisting with the sorting of mail. The Dunedin and Invercargill clerks changed over at Waipahi, later at Balclutha, and on the northern section the changeover point later became Studholme Junction.

Some problems were encountered in those early days with the dropping of mail bags. One bag was destroyed when it fell under the wheels of the train, while another containing only a few letters apparently disappeared entirely. The mail clerks swore they had thrown it off; the stationmaster said it had not been received. The problem was solved a few days later when the bag was discovered in a ventilator on the roof of the R.T.P.O., where a Canterbury nor'wester had evidently "dispatched" it as it was slung off the train. The depression of



Photograph courtesy D. J. Huddlestone

An early Auckland-Wellington express train, headed by an "X" class 4-cylinder compound 4-8-2 locomotive, passing Mataroa about 1910. This time the postal car was the second vehicle behind the engine.

the 1930s saw the Dunedin-Invercargill R.T.P.O. service cease on 31 December 1931. The Dunedin-Christchurch run was withdrawn during the Second World War, on 15 June 1942 to be precise.

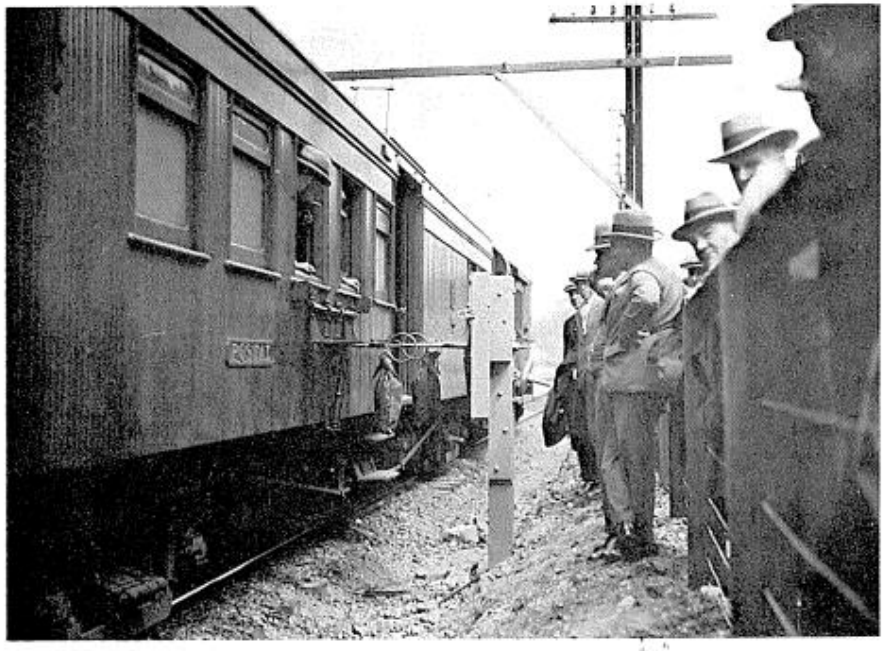
Railway reports have referred to the establishment of an R.T.P.O. between Napier and Makotuku in 1880, but the editors of the five-volume work *The Postage Stamps of New Zealand* dispute this claim, arguing that the annual reports of the Postmaster General make no reference to such a service, nor is there any record of an R.T.P.O. cancellation for this route, although cancellations for all other routes are recorded. It seems open to question therefore that there was an R.T.P.O. on this route as early as 1880. Mails were certainly carried on this line at that time, but in-transit sorting and an R.T.P.O. status appear lacking.

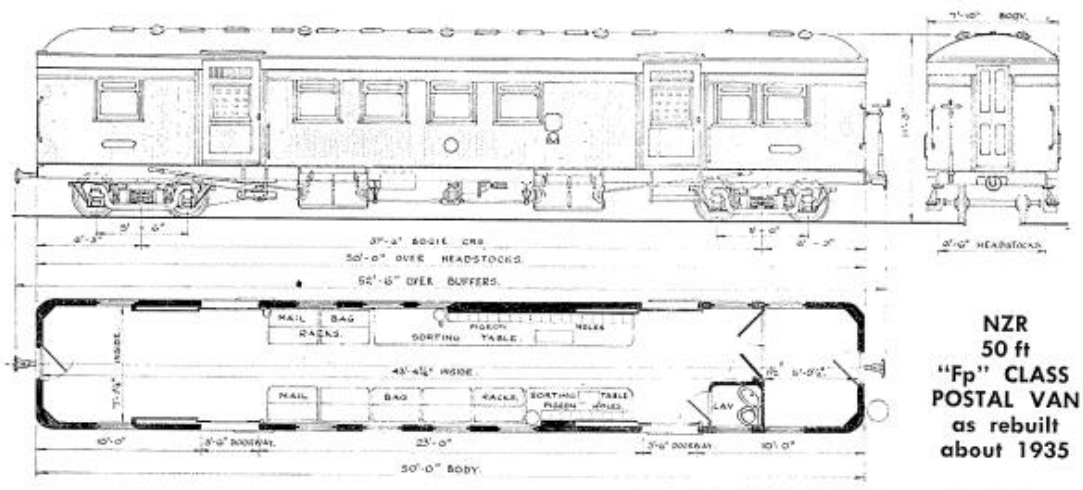
Postal records relating to North Island R.T.P.O. services accord the honour of running the first to the Wanganui-Wellington and Wanganui-New Plymouth trains in December 1886, following completion of the Wellington and Manawatu Railway Company's line between Wellington and Longburn. Through trains between New Plymouth and Wellington at first ran only twice a week, but other trains ran daily between Wanganui and Wellington, and Wanganui and New Plymouth. Postal cars on this route first entered service on 3 December 1886, and the service was discontinued just over 45 years later, on 31 December 1931.

The Hawke's Bay line was another that saw R.T.P.O. service in its early days. Postal records indicate that the first R.T.P.O. between Napier and Palmerston North ran from March 1891, when the line

Before experiments were conducted at Levin in March 1928 (see page 79), preliminary trials with this mail-bag exchange were held alongside the Hutt Road south of Petone.

Photograph: N.Z. Railways Publicity





NZR 50 ft "Fp" CLASS POSTAL VAN as rebuilt about 1935

Traced by D. M. Cole from an NZR diagram.

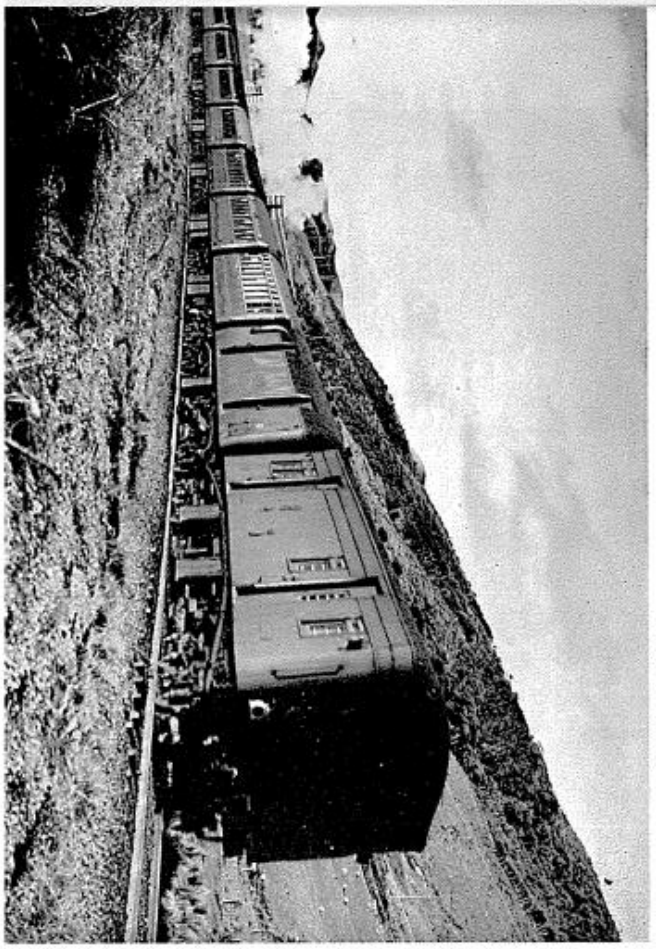
A 50ft POSTAL VAN ON NEW ZEALAND RAILWAYS

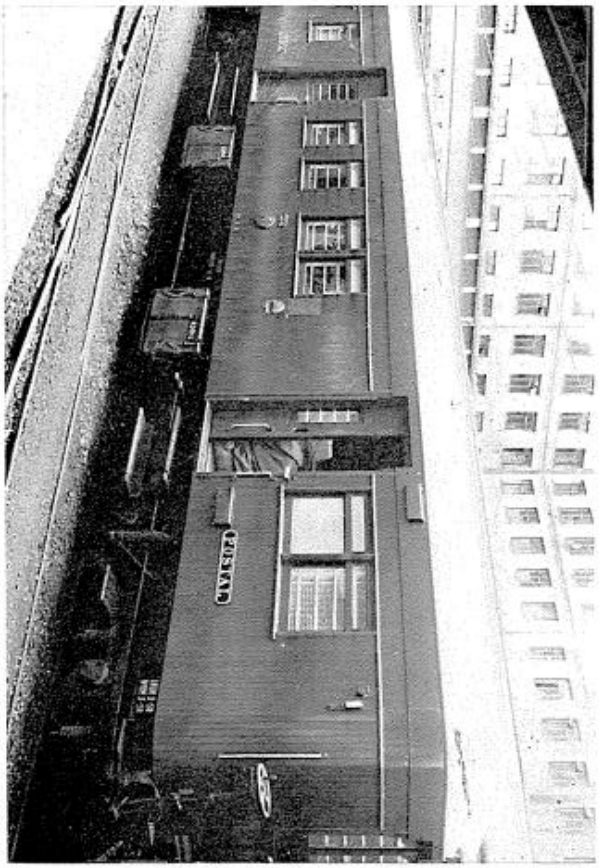
IN readiness for the introduction of through express train services between Auckland and Wellington following completion of the North Island main trunk railway, and partly also to replace older stock, ten 50 ft postal cars were ordered in 1907 and built in 1908. Their total cost was £8,485, or about £848.10s. each. Apparently eight were built at the Petone Workshops, and two at Addington.

At that time postal cars were classified and numbered in the passenger-car stock. We have identified "A" cars 729-735 and "A" 1110 as built at Petone in 1908, and "A" 1057 and 1058 as built at Addington. No. 732 was rebuilt in 1920 as a suburban passenger car following an accident in 1919 that severely damaged its body.

Always known in earlier years as "postal cars", these vehicles were described as "postal vans" in the Railways Statements from 1931 onwards, but they were not reclassified and renumbered as vans until 1949. Meanwhile Nos. 731 and 733 had been converted to service vehicles in 1940, and No. 735 in 1943. The remaining six were reclassified "Fp" in 1949, Nos. 1057 and 1058 becoming 702 and 703, and the others 704-707. "Fp" 703 was written off in 1959, and Nos. 704-706 in April 1965.

Nos. 704-707 were rebuilt in the mid-1930's, and in their later form, with electric lighting and two doorways on each side instead of one central entrance and gas lighting, they weighed about 23 tons.

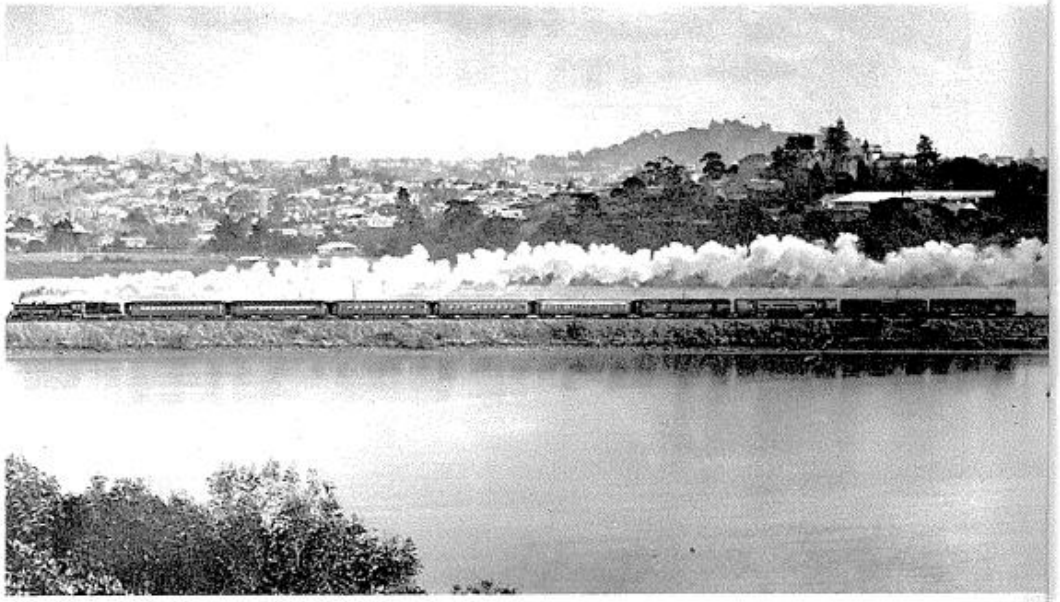




"Fp" 707 at Wellington station in 1959 (above), and (below) the R.T.P.O. at the rear of the Wellington-Auckland express, train 626, seen here north of Paekakariki.

Photograph courtesy N.Z. Post Office

Photograph: N.Z. Railways Publicity



Photograph: W. W. Pryce

Train 227, the 3.40 p.m. Auckland-Wellington express, leaving Auckland on 2 July 1964. Headed by "Ja" 1278, the train comprises two second-class cars, two first-class cars, a sleeping car, guard's van, postal van, and two "Z" wagons for storage mails and parcels.

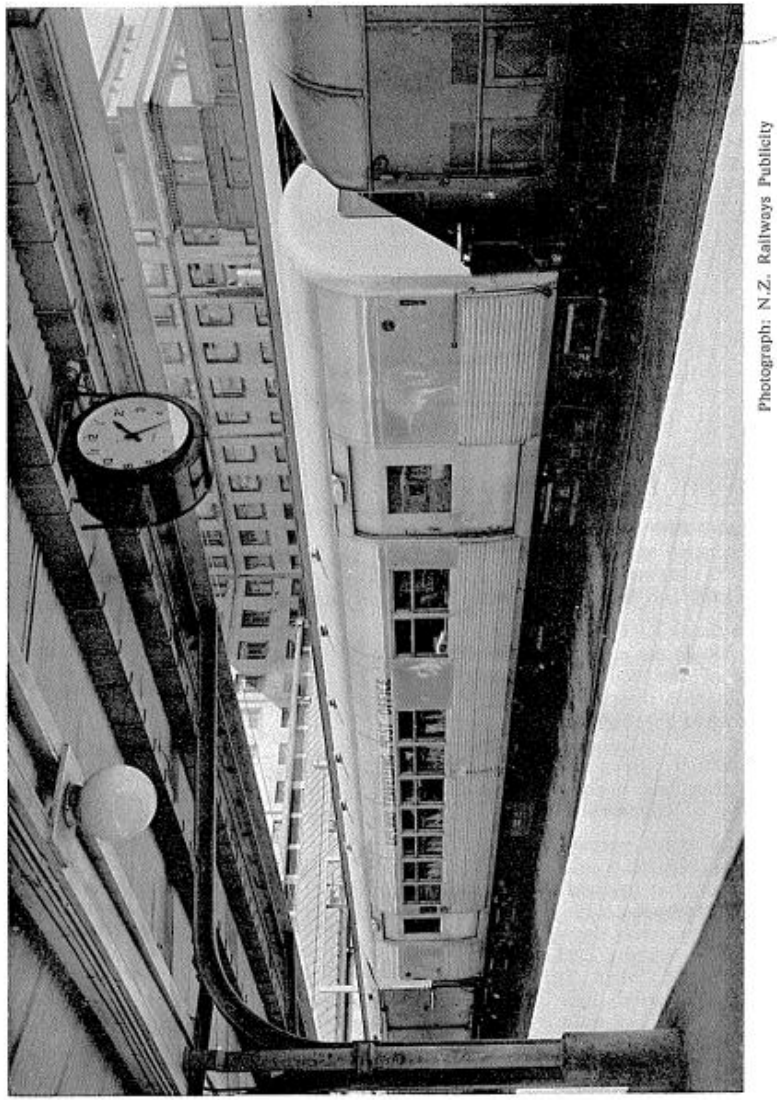
was completed, until December 1897. On 31 December of the latter year, following the opening of the final section of the Wairarapa line to Woodville, the R.T.P.O. service was diverted to run to Wellington via the Wairarapa. The trains crossed at Pahiatua, which was also the R.T.P.O. changeover point. The Hawke's Bay mails went via the Wairarapa until almost a year after completion of the Main Trunk and acquisition of the Manawatu line by the Government. On 7 December 1909 they were diverted again to run via Palmerston North, until this service too was withdrawn on 31 December 1931. Makotuku and Matamata were at different times the usual changeover points on the Napier-Palmerston North section.

Three other secondary R.T.P.O. services ran at various periods. On 17 October 1900 one was provided between Christchurch and Culverden, but this was short-lived, being terminated on 30 September 1909, after fewer than ten years of operation.

On 19 May 1901 an Auckland-Hamilton R.T.P.O. commenced running until it became absorbed into the Main Trunk service, and on 22 June 1903 an Auckland-Thames run was established. The terminal of this run became Paeroa instead of Thames from 18 June 1928, and the service was withdrawn altogether from 1 October 1931.

The last R.T.P.O. service to be established in New Zealand proved to be a durable one. On 15 February 1909 it was inaugurated on the first regular through express trains between Auckland and Wellington. It saw its golden jubilee, and only came to the end of its career on 4 September 1971.

The vehicles provided for this service in 1909 were a tremendous improvement on the dimly lit half-and-half passenger cars previously used as travelling post offices. They were comparatively roomy and well



Photograph: N.Z. Railways Publicity

"Fp" 711, one of the three aluminium-sheathed 60 ft. postal vans, 25.7 tons tare, built at the Otahuhu Workshops in 1961-62. The bogies were imported from Japan.

lit, and provided some creature comforts for the postal agents. Measuring 50 feet in length and weighing 20 tons unladen, each car included steam heating, toilet, drop chairs and table, and gas lighting and cooking. Electric lighting replaced the gas in later years.

For many years the postal cars ran immediately behind the locomotive, but after the postal authorities expressed concern about the possibility of mail losses in the event of an accident, a practice was adopted of running them behind the guard's van at the rear of the train. The postal cars were originally classified and numbered in the passenger car series, but in 1949 they were reclassified "Fp" and numbered in the list of vans.

In December 1961 the first of three new aluminium-sheathed postal vans was placed in service, and the old wooden vans were shortly retired from regular service, although one was retained for occasional relief purposes. With pressure ventilation, fluorescent lighting, and comfortable amenities for the crew, each new van was 60 feet long and 8 ft 9 in. wide. The amenities included toilet, washbasin, drinking water, tea urn, steam heating, gas oven and ring, chairs and tables, and a sink.

A trip on the R.T.P.O. was an interesting experience. Down the windowed side of the main body of the van ran the mail-bag holding racks with their removable destination signs, while the opposite wall supported two sets of pigeon-holes, one for the Auckland district (going north) and one for the intermediate main trunk stations, separated by a letter-sorting tray.

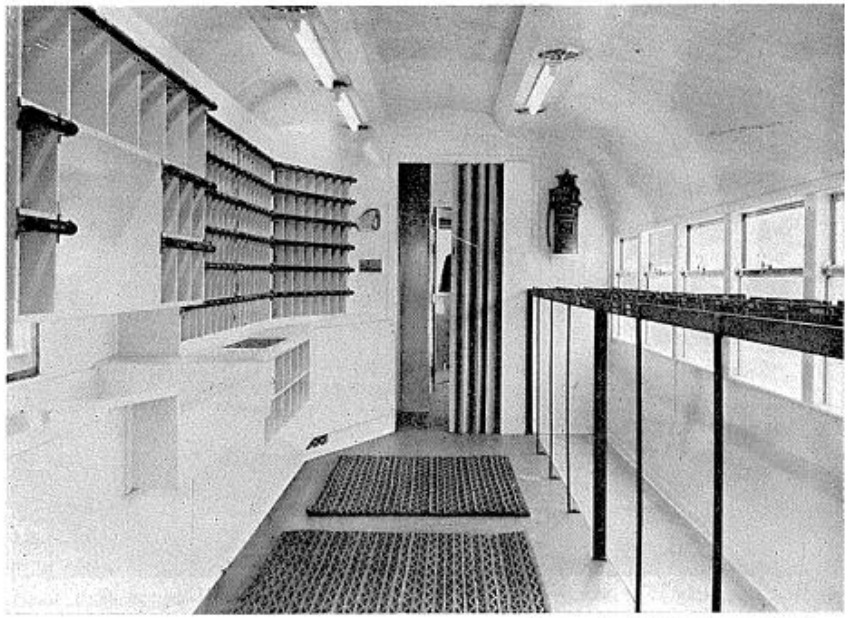
Two postal agents normally travelled in the van. Mail was received at the station stops as the express pursued its way along the line. Generally the mail was presorted into destinations, and the bundles were tossed into the waiting sacks, but other mail marked only "Main Trunk" had to be individually sorted into the waiting pigeon-holes. When the train left Wellington these pigeon-holes contained name plates (on rollers) for the southern Trunk, but when Palmerston North was passed the signs were revolved and intermediate and northern town names took over. Further revolving of the name plates produced Wellington district names for southbound sorting.

Photograph: N.Z. Railways Publicity

In diesel days, the Auckland-Wellington express is seen about 8 miles out from Auckland with a "Da" at the head end and the R.T.P.O. on the rear.

The Wellington agents worked northward to Taihape, reached about 9.30 p.m. after the 4.30 p.m. start, and joined the southbound express at 1.30 a.m. for the return journey. They had a busy time, especially northbound. All Manawatu, Hawke's Bay and Wairarapa mail had to be sorted before Palmerston North was reached, while mail kept coming aboard at every stop.

Perhaps the busiest section was that between Palmerston North and Marton, 27 miles, by which station Wanganui and Taranaki mail had to be sorted and ready to be put off. As the "Da" locomotive on the head end crackled up through the notches on the Halcombe hill, the surefooted agents flicked letters unerringly halfway across the van into the appropriate sacks and holes. The van rode reasonably



Photograph: N.Z. Railways Publicity

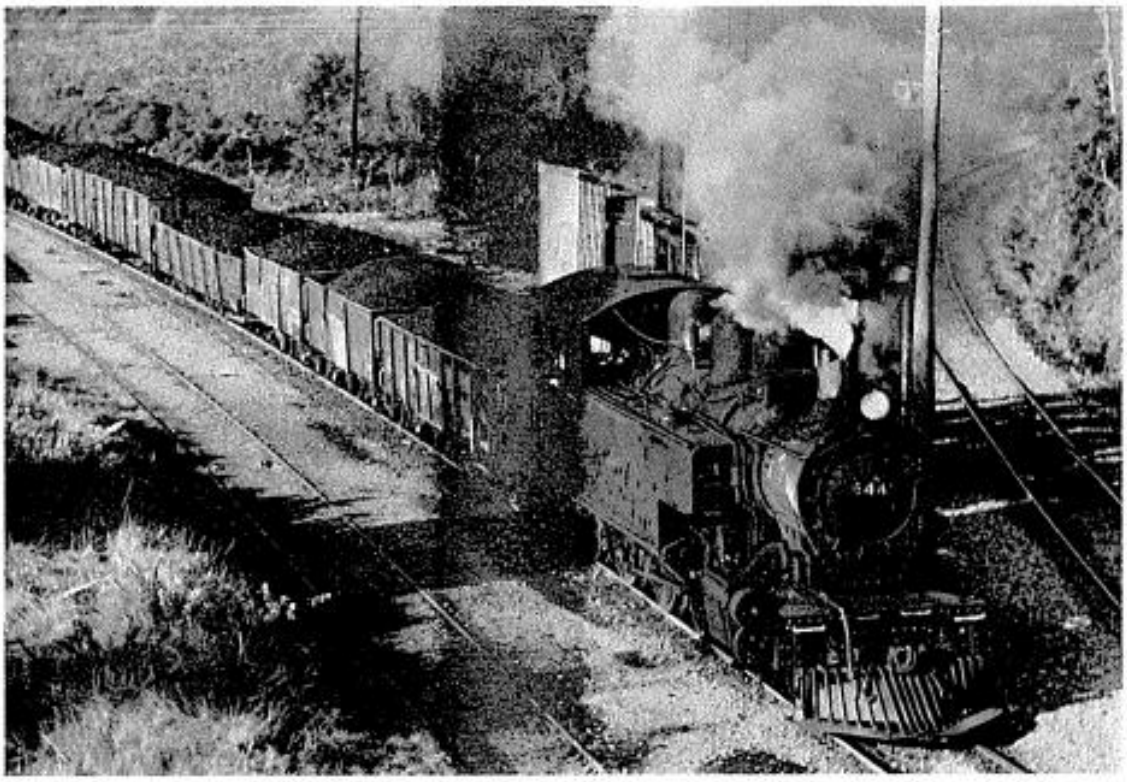
Interior of the sorting compartments in one of the 60 ft. postal vans of 1962. Mail-bag racks at the right.

well, but the rubber mats underfoot were a necessity.

Monday seemed to be the busiest night on the Trunk for the postal agents, but any night seemed to be busy to the outsider watching the well-drilled team in action. One would have been hardly human if he did not have fleeting thoughts of Jesse James or the Great Train Robbery as the wheels of the postal van clattered through the night. Some south bags were picked up, ready to be transferred to the other van for sorting on the way home, while others were put off to be picked up again on the southbound run. The Wellington men picked up their last bags at Hunterville before handing over at Taihape to the Auckland men who had come down the previous night.

Experiments with mail-bag exchangers to allow mails to be picked up or dropped off on the move were conducted briefly at Levin in March 1928. The locally designed exchanger functioned erratically, and not without some danger to bystanders. Despite the success of mail-bag exchanging on British and North American railways, the experiment was not pursued in New Zealand.

Six nights a week, with the occasional exception, 52 weeks of the year, and at the rate of some 260,000 miles a year for 62 years, the rails slid by beneath the rumbling wheels of the R.T.P.O. vans on the North Island main trunk run. Inside, busy men sorted letters at a rate of up to 3,000 envelopes an hour. The last of a one-time fleet of 20 postal cars serving eight routes, the Main Trunk Railway Travelling Post Offices were the ultimate combination of rail and postal dedication to the ideal that "the mails must go through".



Photograph: M. F. Vincent

Before and after at Waimangaroa Junction. Above, "Ww" 644 heads a train-load of coal from Ngakawau to Westport. Below, in February 1971, a "Dsc" class diesel-electric No. 466 provides the power on a similar working.

Photograph: N.Z. Railways Publicity