CHEERFUL YESTERDAYS

Reminiscences of Life with Steam Locomotives

As Narrated by Bert Brown to Joe McNamara

MY thoughts drift back to about 1902-3, when Mr Ben Verdon was Loco. Foreman at Timaru. A son of his, who was my chum at school, proudly showed me through the Loco. shed one Sunday afternoon. After admiring the iron monsters of the road, we climbed into the cab of a "D" class shunter. As she was not in steam, Doug., my pal, gave me an excellent demonstration of the simple method by which the reversing lever controlled the "ahead" or "astern" movements of a locomotive. The regulator, also within easy reach of the driver, was demonstrated. When he told me there would be a fireman to "twirl the armstrong" (hand brake) and keep up an abundant supply of steam, that settled the question of my future. I was convinced the only worthwhile job for any chap would be on the footplate.

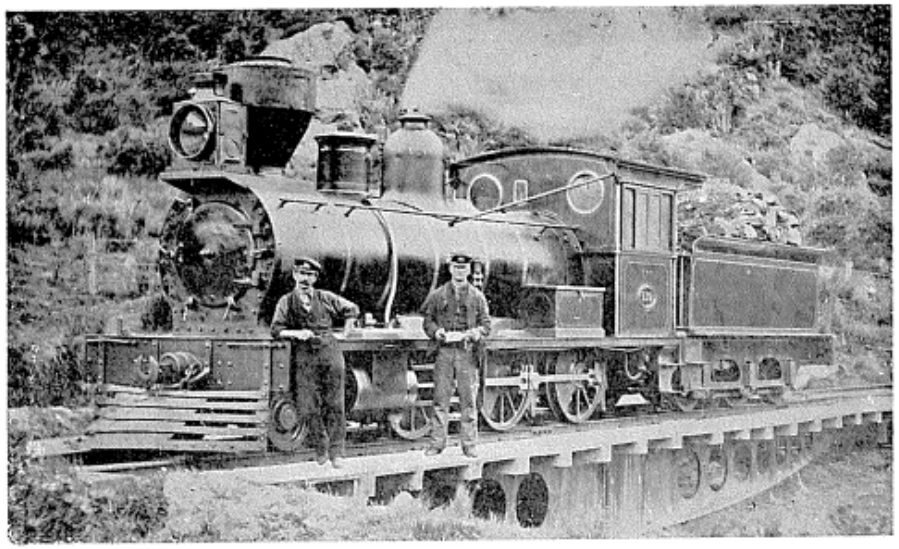
After that first tour of inspection, I did many phantom trips, usually on the express, of course. Finally, at 10 p.m. on 4 September 1905, I actually went on duty, joined the "Buck Fatties Union" and, after the customary initiation, realised that I had taken the first step towards achieving my boyhood ambition.

Cleaning days (more correctly nights) were not bad, and I found I had a friendly mob of chaps to work with. The only fly in the ointment was that we were not issued with an abundance of stores in comparison with the standard of "shine" we had to apply to our engines. But we found a way of adjusting matters. There was no night foreman, so the key of the store was placed in an OHMS envelope (never addressed) and put in the left-hand top corner of the letter rack to be collected by the senior cleaner (a very important joker), who was supposed to come on duty also at 10 p.m. and issue our stores. But, perhaps on account of late parting with his girlfriend, it was more often 11 p.m. before we saw him.

In the meantime a cleaner was posted on guard and we "borrowed" the key, thus having access to the store to secure extra rations. There was always a supply of envelopes in the store, so we were able to replace the key, and only the "gang of thieves" were in the know. For some reason, the "key-in-the-letter-rack" method was later discontinued.

We then discovered how to get into the fitting shop and, by removing the beading from the glass panel of a door to the store, could reach through and unlock it and still obtain our extra rations. But one night a clumsy clot dropped the pane of glass, and the old storeman (Jimmy Wingham) discovered why his waste, kerosene, colza oil, etc. was always short at the end of the month. The doors between the shed, fitting shop and store were immediately and permanently blocked. Another door opening into the yard was built, and we were again short of stores.

When I had been about three months on the job, I was sent to relieve the cleaner at Waimate. Jim Hendron was the driver,



From the S. A. Rockliff Collection

Bert Brown's first trip on the road was from Timaru to Orari on "J" 119, seen here, probably in later years, at Kingston.

and "F"76, a shining jewel which Jim fairly treasured, was the engine. About the third night there I went to a dance and, returning to my hut as cold as a frog, I lit the fire and climbed into the bunk to thaw out a little. The process must have been extremely soothing because the next thing I knew, Billy Divers (the fireman) was shaking the tar out of me, and informing me that there was no steam, no fire, the engine had not been cleaned, and old Jimmy would be here in a minute.

By the time Jim turned up, Divers and I were smacking up red pine and kauri. A lovely fire was going and old 76's boiler was sizzling "good-oh". Old Jimmy was sizzling too, but not so good-oh, and I was glad my mother wasn't there to hear of my new reputation.

Among the things I learnt about myself was that I was a "no hoper" and was to pack up and get back to Timaru. I wondered why I didn't get a kick in the pants to help me along, but the fact that Jim was handicapped with an artificial leg probably saved my ham-bone.

Before he left for Studholme, Jim came to the hut, gave me another dollop of "ear bash" and, after extracting numerous promises, pledges, and "yes Jims" out of me, permitted me to cancel my return in disgrace to Timaru.

Evidently having taken heed of at least some of that advice, I eventually completed two years' cleaning and passed the fireman's exam; Alex McKenzie was the examiner. After a short period on shunting engines, my first trip on the road was on "J" class 2-6-0 No. 119, firing for James Johnstone on a ballast train to Orari.

We left Timaru about 7.30 a.m. with nearly a dozen empty "M" lowside wagons and a four-wheel van. In my anxiety to maintain steam and give service with a smile, I'm sure, had it not been that my mate knew I was a greenhorn, I would have used, or wasted, about three tons of coal by the time we reached Washdyke (three miles). Under his guidance coal consumption was substantially reduced, and we arrived at Orari with the lead plug still intact.

In those days most of our coal was "Pelawmain" from Australia, which was slightly dirty but excellent for steaming, with rich black smoke and the "white feather." It was the joy of every fireman and the bugbear of many women living close to the railway. On washing days it frequently resulted in many vicious looks and feminine threats of violence. One disadvantage of this good coal, for those reared on it on the Canterbury section, was that it caused the deflation of our egos when transferred to Southland, where we had to learn the art of firing on Nightcaps coal, a very inferior soft coal not much better than lignite. As firemen's duties then included keeping a high standard of shine on brass and paintwork inside the cab, we hadn't a great deal of spare time for admiring the scenery or the friendly young ladies, whose smiles and waves were intended to brighten the journey.

In the shunting yard drivers were forbidden to use the air brake and, although we kept the thread and collar well oiled and clean, screwing the handbrake for an eight or twelve-hour shift kept a fellow busy.

About 1908 I was transferred to Invercargill, where William Hunter was foreman. After only a few short shifts in the shunting yard (on Nightcaps coal), I was booked on a mixed train, firing another old "J" 2-6-0 (No. 123) for an old-time driver named Bob Salisbury. Long before we reached Riverton, he discovered that soft coal and I weren't mixing too well and, as he wanted to get the train over the rather stiff pull up the Longwood bank, old Bob gave me an unfriendly glare and yanked me into his corner with instructions to "watch how to fire this coal". I watched and was eventually told to get back on my own side and "keep that damned pricker out of the fire."

With experience gained by firing for a number of mates I gradually improved, especially after we were issued with a much better quality of soft coal fom Ohai, when the Nightcaps mine caught fire and burnt its own coal before it reached the surface (loud cheers from all firemen). I believe the mine is still burning.

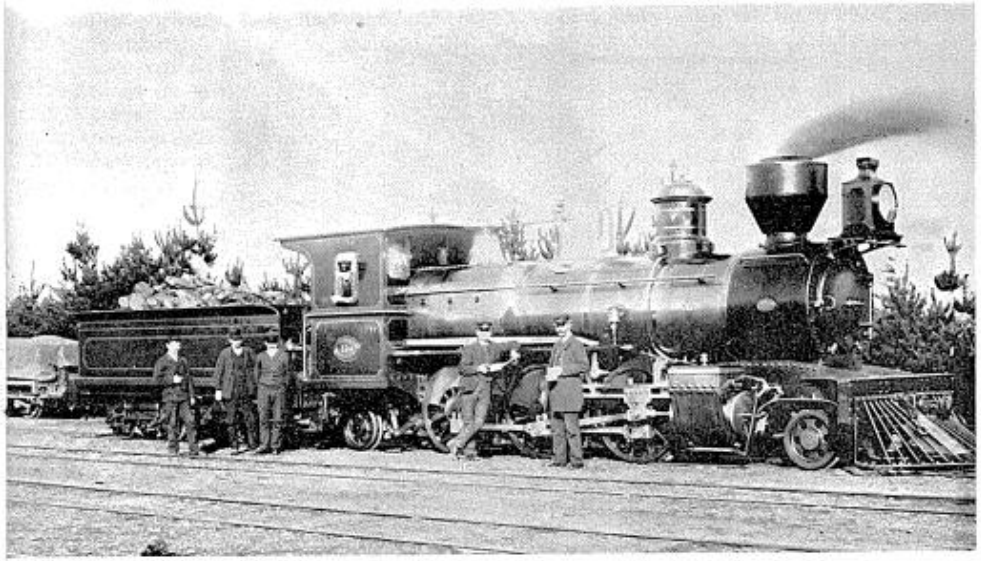
I was on the "V" class bell-funnel 2-6-2s for a while, some of which were No. 125 (driver, Alf. Banks), 132 ("Froggy" Woods), 129 (Dave Scott), also 127 and 128. They were mostly good engines, but cracking up huge lumps of coal for nearly every fire on the Invercargill-Kingston run —87 miles each way during a 12-hour shift, at the end of which we coaled up with a hand winch—was real work.

On the Invercargill section I fired for many good mates. An outstanding one was the late Robert Ramsay, who died a few years ago at the age of 96. We had 438 on the mixed trains to Bluff, also on the "Gore goods", and I was happy in my work with a mate who never "did his bun", and an engine that never let us down.

During my experience as a relieving fireman, I had my first "cut" on the express, firing for Bill Cawley on "Ua" 4-6-0 No. 176 at Clinton while Gordon Whiting, later Loco. Foreman at Invercargill, was on holiday. We ran a mixed train to Invercargill in the morning and all went well. But on the express (Invercargill depart 1.30 p.m.) things were not so good. The steam gauge needle sulked, water in the glass worried us, old Bill was extremely fidgety, and I was on my toes well and truly when, going across to Morton Mains, the loveliest thing happened . . . for me. A burst brake hose gave me the chance I was longing for. During my mate's temporary absence, a few artistic touches with the pricker and both injectors turned on, soon restored conditions to normal, while another "blow-up" running down Kamahi bank set me right for the rest of the journey.

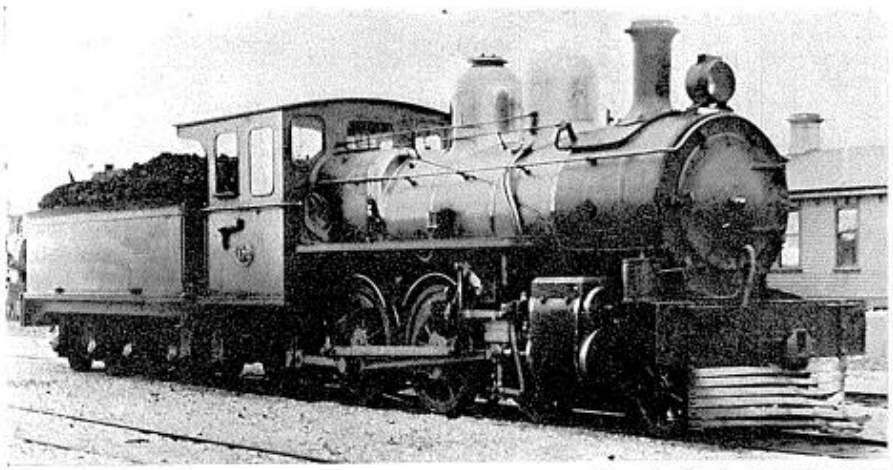
An incident I recall happened in Timaru on 15 January 1909, after I returned from Invercargill. That day the present post office at Fairlie was officially opened by the Postmaster-General, Sir Joseph Ward. My mate, Jack Campbell, did not turn up for work so they grabbed an old driver called Watty Bowes off the shunt to run the morning trip to Fairlie on "J" 83. Watty had no idea of the road, and the fact that the Ministerial car was attached put the old chap in quite a dither. After completing a shunt at Waitohi Road, he told the guard (Billy Gillespie, a good joker) to "let me know if I'm running too hard, guard." The reply was "Run like hell, mate, and you'll still be late into Fairlie"; we were too, by about 20 minutes.

In his speech Sir Joseph poked fun at "the shattered nerves of the speedsters on



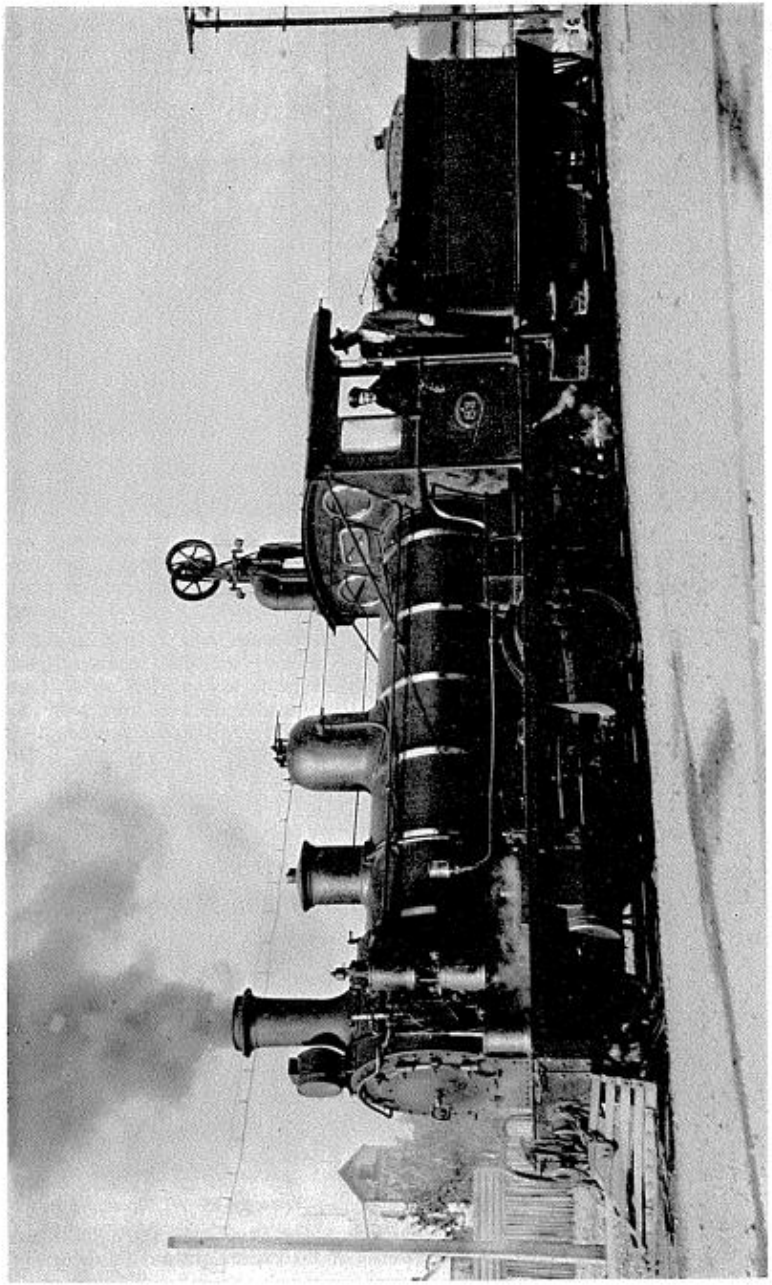
Photograph: courtesy G. W. Emerson

One of the "V" class 2-6-2 locomotives, an English product of the 1880's. Several locomotives of this class were used in Southland.



From the W. W. Stewart Collection

Class "Ua" 4-6-0 locomotive No. 172, one of six built by Sharp Stewart in 1899. This class was used between Invercargill and Clinton on the express trains.



From the W. W. Stewart Collection

This old "J" class 2-6-0, No. 83, figured in an exciting run for Bert Brown from Fairlie to Timaru on 15 January 1909, after the new Fairlie post office had been officially opened by the Postmaster-General, Sir Joseph Ward.

the engine." This hurt the old mate's feelings. All he said to me was "the old so-'n-so'll get a ride on the way home, mate. Stone the crows." He steamed round those curves about Cricklewood and kept me busy grabbing gear that would otherwise have gone over the side. The way old "83" rolled and rattled along was a test for anybody's nerves.

During 1909 in Timaru, where Dick Treasure was then foreman, I fired on various engines and for various mates. There was Arthur Sherlock, who was noted on the social programme for his special song, "Where Did You Get That Hat?", also Albert Leopold, and Peter Cochran, who was fond of his game of crib. They were all on the shunts. On the road I was with Alick McDuff ("Uc" 362), Bill Cooper ("Uc" 368), Ted Slowey ("U" 215 on the express), Jack Campbell ("Uc" 365), and Dave Foster and Jim Reid with "J" 83 mostly on the Fairlie Branch.

Early in 1911 I exchanged with Geo. McIntosh (known as Rob Roy), a fireman at Gore, where I fired mostly for John D. Thomson on "D" 47. The other loco. crew was Jack Leishman and Val Campbell, an old cleaner pal from Timaru. They ran the Waimea express, called the "Kingston Flyer", from Gore to Riversdale, where they changed with the Kingston men, and brought the "Flyer's" counterpart back to Gore, afterwards relieving us on the shunt.

A few days before the notorious flood of 1913, when the Mataura River went on the rampage and caused considerable damage in Gore and surrounding districts, I was again transferred to Invercargill and fired for Jim Hay on "U" 51 on expresses on the run to Clinton. Then I did some relieving at Orepuki on "Ua" 177 with Fred Clapp.

I sat my 2nd-class driver's ticket early in 1914. George Bowles was the examiner. Later in the same year I was transferred to Kingston, firing for Billy Patterson on the "Flyer" to Riversdale and back. Our engines were three Rogers "K" 2-4-2s Nos. 88, 92 and 94. They were built for speed, not heavy loads. Three cars and a van made a tidy load with which we could chew off the miles and run to time without any bother.

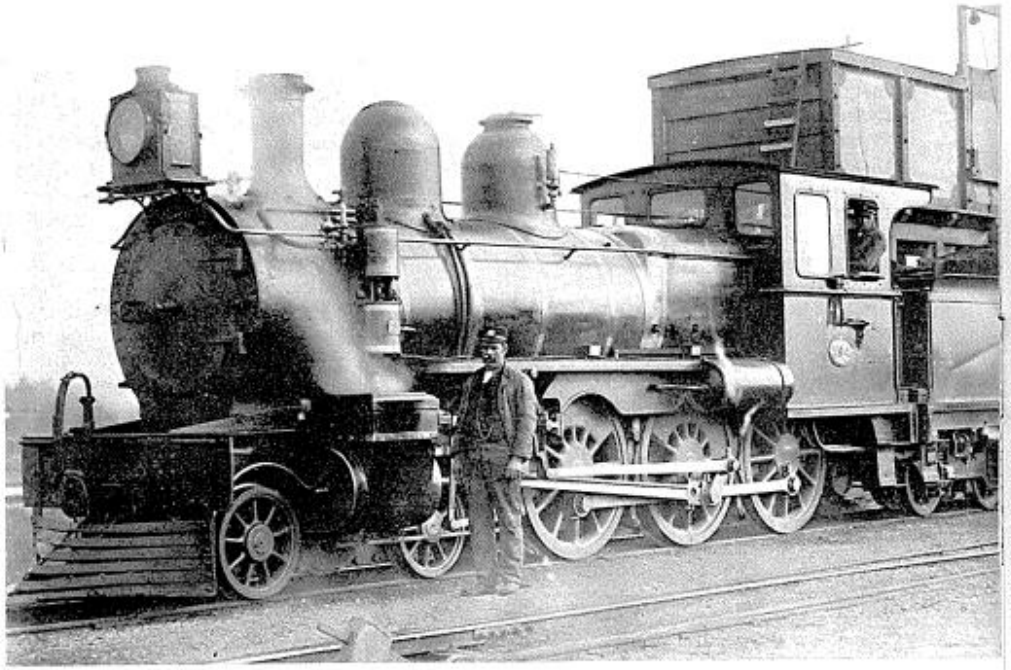
Leaving Kingston one morning, and starting fom scratch on a fairly stiff grade, we did only a couple of train lengths of our journey when the steam chest joint on my side blew out with a terrific bang. The sudden reduction in steam pressure and water level left no option but to drop back to the platform and tackle the job of repacking. Having no sheet packing in the tool boxes, I was sent to explain things to the engineer of the *Earnslaw*. He obliged by bringing a sheet of Klingerite packing and did the job for us most professionally. Much of the time lost was made up by the "Flyer" almost flying on the down-grade run to Lumsden, where Jack Plank the guard did great work by persuading the passengers to drink their tea a little hotter or go without, thus reducing the 20-minute refreshment stop to a minimum. Another hurried "scoot" on the down grade across the Waimea Plains probably resulted in an on-time connection with the Dunedin express at Gore.

The fact that this job at Kingston was an all-daylight run (11.05 a.m. to 4.25 p.m.) rather compensated for living in such an isolated place. I had to trim the old kerosene headlamp only about twice during my 2¼ years there, when we had to run specials back to Lumsden after finishing with the "Flyer".

On one of these trips, while climbing the Eyre Creek bank on the return journey, I noticed fire about five wagons from the engine. Sparks from the straight-shooter funnel—we were burning soft coal—had ignited the canvas covers over some rowing skiffs bound for the Queenstown Regatta. We played fire brigades at Eyre Creek water tank, on arrival a couple of minutes later, but considerable damage had already been done.

On 4 August 1914, while we were taking water at Riversdale, Jack Thorn, then firing for Gilbert Smith on the Switzers Branch, informed us that war had been declared and he wanted a cobber to enlist with him. I handed my name in at Lumsden an hour or so later but was turned down, medically unfit. Jack Thorn was accepted, but failed to get further than Trentham Camp because pneumonia stopped him before the Germans got a chance.

In 1916 I was transferred back to Invercargill for advanced work, and early in 1917 I went to Linwood, near Christchurch, where I fired for a number of mates, including Dick Stone with "Ab" 608. I was with Andy Ternent, on "A" 407 or 409,



From the W. W. Stewart Collection

for a long period. We were on a roster which included runs to Ashburton, Arthur's Pass, and Parnassus, which was then the northern terminus of the present South Island Main Trunk. On the Parnassus run we worked a train up on Tuesdays and returned to Christchurch on Wednesdays.

Late in 1917 I was transferred to Southbridge to do half-time driving. Bob Ingles (previously at Dunedin) was the senior driver, and Arthur Batt was the fireman. The fact that Arthur was old enough to be my father, and also had a beard, made me feel rather embarrassed to have him firing for me. But for reasons best known to himself, he did not possess a driver's ticket and was evidently quite contented, because he had been there for many years. I found him a very conscientious chap, a good fireman and an independent one too, because as often as I offered to give him a spell he always declined.

The chap whose place I took was a Maori called Moses Manaheri. He was a happy-go-lucky fellow who, when on the engine, delighted in pointing to Arthur and singing "I've got a white man working for me." This certainly did nothing towards sustaining good relations between them.

The engines we had at Southbridge were "Ub" 285 and "U" 378, both good ones, but I preferred 378 perhaps because I had fired her for Jack McNamara, a friendly old mate from Timaru.

In 1918 I went to Little River and took Gordon Buchanan's place as half-time driver. Jack Paul was the regular driver and Stan Frame was the fireman. "J" 59 was our regular engine. She had a low pressure boiler, but as our job of running a daily mixed to Christchurch was certainly not "high pressure", old 59 fitted in very well. While she was in for washout and repairs, we had "J" 119 on which I had done my first day's work. I always had a special respect for this old "moke" until one day when I was firing for Jack Paul. We were drifting into Lincoln, heading for Christchurch, when an alarming and unusual noise in the firebox caused me to rip open the door.

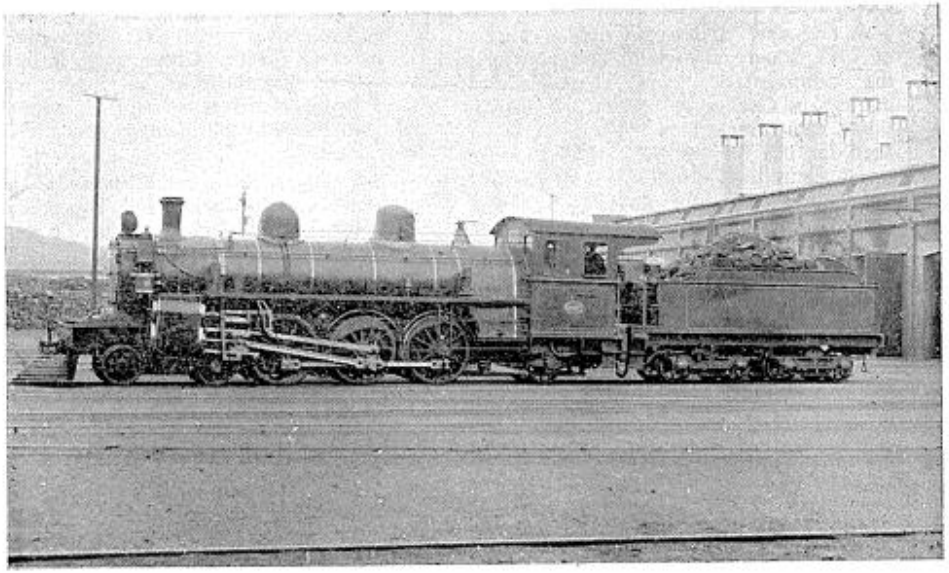
LEFT, UPPER: Class "U" No. 194 when in express service at Invercargill about 1910.

LEFT, LOWER: An "A" class 4-cylinder compound Pacific, No. 407, at Dunedin.

BELOW: A Rogers "K" with the Kingston Flyer, preparing to leave Kingston Wharf for Gore.

From the W. W. Stewart Collection

From the S. A. Rockliff Collection



Photograph: D. L. A. Turner

Two "Wf" class 2-6-4T locomotives, Nos. 383 and 401, in shunting service at the south end of Timaru station yard in February 1966.

"Hell," said Jack, "a damn tube." I pushed the shovel in to hold the flame down while I had a look.

"Hell nothing," I said, "a damn plug."

Sure enough, that was it. We hurriedly did our stuff by dumping the fire, etc. Both glasses had been showing three quarters of a pot, but when we tested them nothing happened. They had been packed with those deathtraps, rubber washers, and as usual the rubber had melted and fouled the waterways. We were dragged into Linwood depot very crestfallen.

My mate was fined a quid but the Department must have allowed me a little discount because I was knocked back for only ten bob. We tested the water "when stepping on the footplate first thing in the morning" (as required in the rules) but had neglected the bit about doing so "frequently during the day", as we had also promised in our exams. I don't respect old 119 as much as I used to.

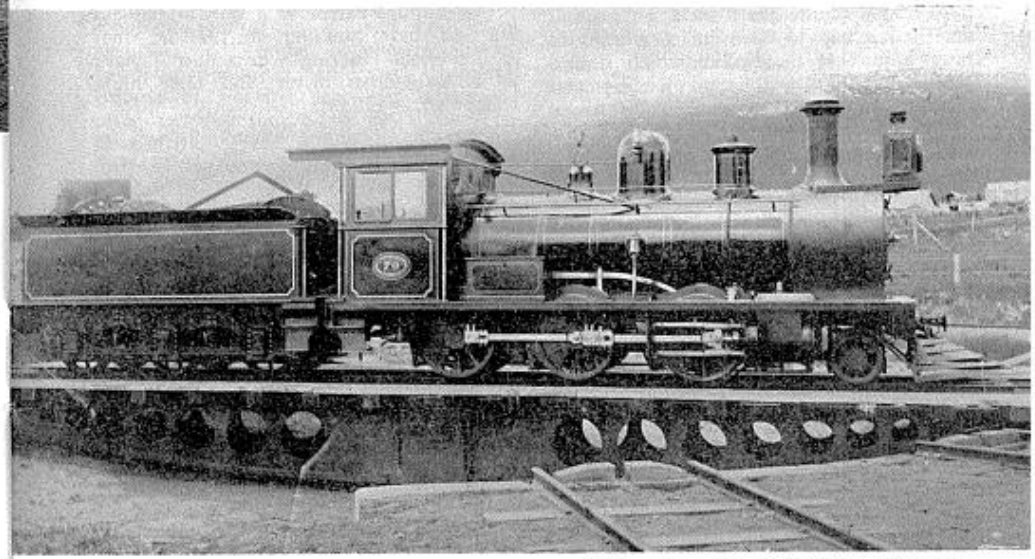
At Little River there was a not so brilliant porter who used to relieve the guard on Tuesdays. On those occasions he was a mixture of everything, including importance, "knowledge" and officiousness. The poor chap hadn't the brains to do the simplest shunt at an intermediate station, and anything more intricate than "one off, one on" had him boxed. He relied on us to give him help to ensure that we arrived at our destination today instead of tomorrow.

One morning, when I was driving, he gave me the "right away" from Little River, but I wouldn't move. It was raining in torrents and I drew his attention to a couple of half-drowned women and two or three kiddies, who were not far away and were running flat out to catch the train. He nearly dislocated his shoulder, almost blew his brains out with the guard's whistle, and did various portions of a haka, all of which viciously conveyed his message: "Get going!" I beckoned to the women as a sign of encouragement, and when they were safely aboard away we went.

At Lincoln, where he had quite a good audience, he gave me an excellent dressing down for not obeying his signals. He threatened to report me forthwith and yelled, "I'm in charge of this train, not you." I grinned and informed him that he hadn't the gumption to be in charge of a derailed wheelbarrow in a forsaken ballast pit, which caused giggles from the audience. In my reply to the inevitable "please explain", I detailed the circumstances and heard no more about it. We never lifted a hook for his nibs after the incident, and he was never known to arrive on time again.

My health had been failing for months and I was medically advised to get off the footplate. I eventually applied for a tablet porter's job and asked especially for a station where I would have opportunities to improve my position in the Department. But they persisted in offering me some kind of a job in Addington Workshops and, with equal persistence, I continued to respectfully decline.

After a great deal of humbug, I was sent to Southbrook, near Rangiora, to learn the tablet system. As the porter there was to be transferred to another station we both thought I was a sitter for the vacancy. But it was not my luck, and I eventually received notice of transfer to Erua. I had never heard of the place, and after diligently searching my "Atlas of the World", discovered that it was situated only a few miles north of Ohakune, actually right here



Photograph: courtesy N.Z. Railways Publicity

Another "J" class 2-6-0 locomotive, No. 70, one of a batch of 12 built in 1883.

in New Zealand! I eventually packed my traps and, after a session of questions and answers, stepped off a night express and landed fair in the centre of a howling gale and thunderstorm at Ohakune.

Quite a few hours after dawn I was in the guard's van of a goods train completing the remaining miles of a tedious journey. When the guard discovered I was the new porter for Erua, the look on his face and the expression in his voice as he mumbled "poor cow", did nothing to comfort me.

When I asked him what kind of a place Erua was, he said: "When we come to the clearing at the edge of the bush you'll see for yourself." Stone the crows! What I saw was a cluster of four railway cottages (two unoccupied), two railway huts, and a wooden structure with a black-and-white sign saying "Erua". However, the porter gave me an extra warm welcome, made a pot of tea and produced a tin of biscuits. When I discovered that he was the chap I was releasing from the place, I immediately understood the warmth of the welcome. There was nothing I could do, except make the best of a poor bargain.

There were two porters working alternate day and night shifts. When off duty one day, I squared the guard on a goods train and had a trip to Raurimu. I wanted to have a look at the Spiral, which is descended on the northbound journey and climbed on a very stiff grade going south. On the uphill return journey, I rode the engine and pestered the old driver to let me have a go at the shovel. He explained that he needed every ounce of steam, but I skited about my extensive experience on traction engines and so forth until he and the fireman had a sly grin at each other, and reluctantly agreed to let me make a fool of myself. Off came my coat and the fireman operated the injector while I manipulated the "banjo" from the bottom to the top of the Spiral. When we stopped at Waimarino (now called National Park I understand), the old chap asked: "How so-and-so long were you in the Loco., mate?" I replied: "About 20 so-and-so years, cobber." He told me that as soon as I spread my feet and put on the first fire he knew I was an ex loco. man. The locomotive was an "X", a stranger to me. Firing it was an experience which cost me quite a few drops of perspiration, but which I enjoyed.

I suffered Erua for a few months while I wrote many woeful letters to friends and relatives down on the "Mainland". The result was that an old friend, who had a general store at Havelock in Pelorus Sound, offered me a position. Feeling certain that I was the up-and-coming salesman of butter, cheese and eggs, etc., I saw that things were jacked up, and the most interesting article I've ever written was my immediate resignation from the New Zealand Railways. The District Traffic Manager at Ohakune tried to persuade me to withdraw it, but I explained that I had suffered what I considered to be unreasonable retaliation for turning down the workshops job, and my resignation stood.

The residents of Erua, population about seven, did not turn out to bid me farewell, because they were all asleep when I took off on a goods train about 3.30 a.m.

(Mr Smith's career as a railwayman did not end there, however. In 1927 he went to Smithfield Freezing Works near Timaru as a locomotive driver and later night watchman. — *Editor.)*

From the foregoing remarks it will be seen that the part of my life spent as a locomotive man came substantially short of the full 40 years' service. Nevertheless, the decision I made in the cab of that old "D" class engine one Sunday afternoon so long ago has repaid me handsomely in many ways. I cherish the friendships of good pals still with us, and many who have gone "over the hill". Now that I am long past my own milestone of three-score-and-ten, nothing gives me greater pleasure than to meet an old or recent loco. man, delve deeply into my storehouse of memories, and yarn about many "Cheerful Yesterdays".