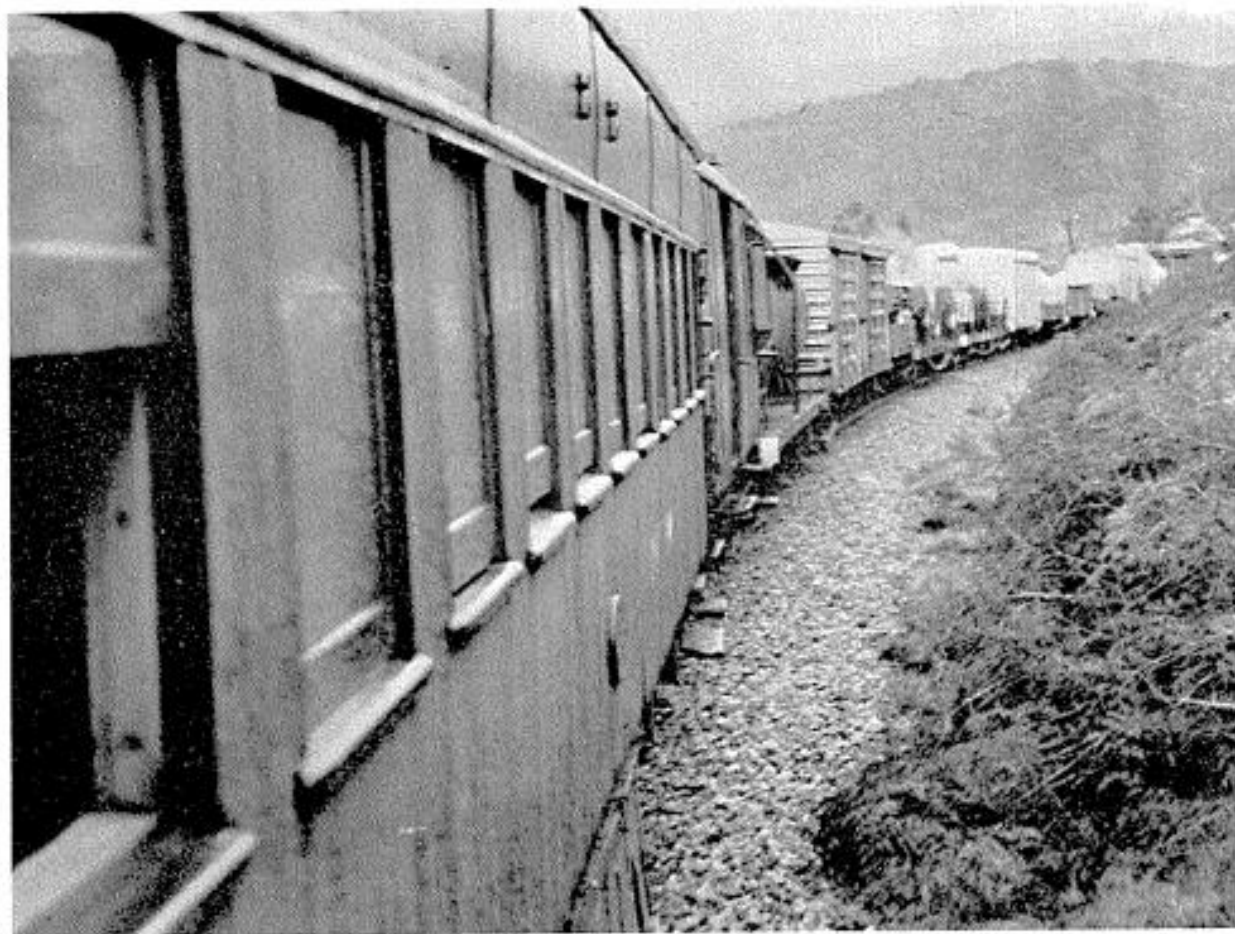


DAVID LEITCH REPORTS

THE LAST RUN OF THE LAST MAIN TRUNK MIXED

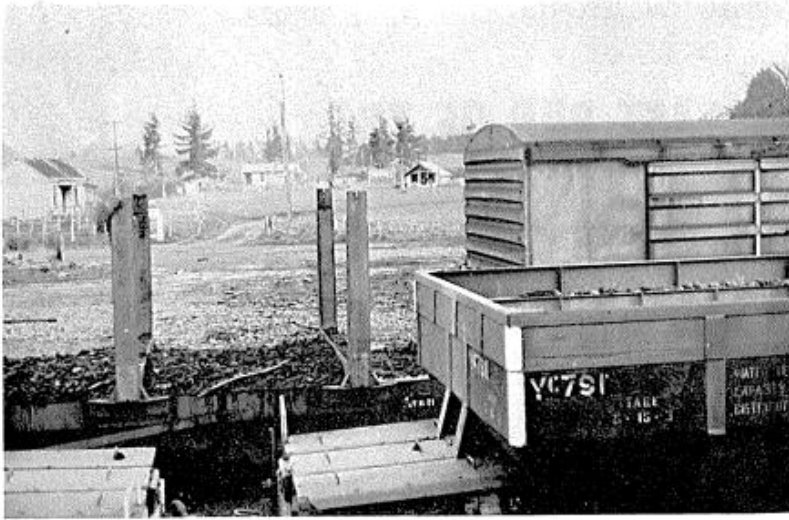


Photograph: David Leitch

A last look back as train 434 winds up out of Ongarue on its last run as a mixed.

THE last of the once-numerous Main Trunk mixed trains slipped quietly into history at Te Kuiti on Saturday, 4 September 1971. When train 434 slid to a halt at the end of the 48-mile run up from Taumarunui it was the end of the slow trains that once were an institution the whole length of the "Trunk".

Train 434 on this occasion was a large one, 1029 tons, 121 crossing total, hauled by "Da's" 1414 and 1542. Car "A" 1792 was attached to the head of the train at Taumarunui, and it was necessary to trek down from the station past the loco depot to join the car. To my surprise there were no other railfans in evidence.



ABOVE: Typical of the settlements for which the mixed train was once a vital communication and social asset—the Maori village of Waimiha glimpsed across the goods yard.

BELOW: However spartan they might have become in latter years, the old wooden cars had a certain air of Edwardian elegance, as this interior on the last main Trunk mixed train suggests.
Photographs: David Leitch



only a young Maori couple going home to Waimiha after an afternoon at the pictures, laden with chippies and bottles of "fizz" for the kids. Showers of cold drizzle burst over the yards as I sat awaiting departure in the battered old car. It was clean, in that the floor had been swept, but the dust of countless brake applications was thick over the windows, while some seats had obviously not been sat in for years and were grey with undisturbed grime. The tired battered leather of the seats, scuffed by countless boot heels, was in keeping with the faded varnish, while lamp covers hung down, swinging drunkenly from the huge brackets. The usual notice warned against expectorating on the floors or mats (can you recall when you last saw mats in a wooden car?) while appropriately the emergency signal notice still warned that "ten pounds" was payable for improper use of the device.

From the grubby window the rusting bulk of "Ka" 945 was seen, even in decay still looking impressive, while the departure time of 4.15 p.m. came and went. At about 4.45 the guard came through with train advices for the driver, and a few minutes after five o'clock the "Da's" klaxon sounded and the train jerked suddenly into motion. One lone photographer recorded its departure from the lineside.

The interior of the car filled with creaks and groans as the aging woodwork sounded its protest at once more being in motion, while a constant squeaking of lamp covers accompanied their rhythmic swinging as the long train ground out of the yards and settled down for the run alongside the Ongarue River. Regrettably, on Saturdays since the previous April, the passenger car for 434 had been marshalled at the head instead of the extreme rear, so the usual rear observation platform was lacking and I had to be content to stand on the windswept front platform immediately behind the thundering bulk of "Da" 1542.

The run up the river was as beautiful as usual, the air resounding with the crackle of the twin 567 engines as they hammered sound waves off the walls of the cuttings. At Waimiha the young couple alighted at the decrepit station, last painted in 1953. I wondered what the "Blue Streak" passengers thought of it as they whistled past.

Night was closing in as the "Da's" throbbed steadily up the 1 in 66 grade to

Porootarao, and then complete blackness set in as the train disappeared into the long tunnel. The lights were not on in the car, and the only illumination was from 1542's numeral lights shining back into the car to relieve the otherwise total darkness. It was certainly no place for claustrophobics!

We drew to a halt at Porootarao and the guard bustled through to switch on the lights and apologise—he had, he admitted, been immersed in a good book and forgotten all about it. At Porootarao a local farmer enthusiast and his family boarded the train for a short run to Mangapehi, to farewell the service that they had seen and ridden on for many years. It was evident that, for them, this train had been even in the 1970s the social institution and convenience that mixed trains everywhere had been 40 years before.

We had a crew change with the Auckland-New Plymouth railcar, and I joined the new guard around a cosy fire in the van as 434 rattled on up the line in the light of a rising moon, downgrade towards Te Kuiti. At 7.20 p.m. we drew slowly to a stop at Te Kuiti and I, the last passenger on the last main trunk mixed train, alighted on to the deserted platform. An anachronistic survival from an age of different social and communication standards, its last rites attended by one mourner, the final main trunk mixed had been laid quietly to rest.

"SILVER STAR"

(Concluded from page 148)

The absence of a leaflet on the train's services and facilities was regrettable, and left the customer disappointed. But all in all, there is just no comparison between the sleeper service on this premier train and that offered in the sleeping cars of its predecessor the "Night Limited" or other Main Trunk express trains; and it cost only two dollars more. New Zealand Railways are to be commended most highly for the bold and imaginative move they have made in putting this service on. Let's have more of these trains.