

THE TAKAKA TRAMWAY

By F. H. E. KING

JUST AS they are today, Takaka and the Takaka Valley near the northern tip of the South Island were in the 1870s a rather remote part of New Zealand. In those days, however, the only means of communication with the rest of the country was by sea. The valley was rich in timber, especially kahikatea or white pine, and in due course a total of seven sawmills were established between the village of Takaka and the upper reaches of the valley. The small port of Waitapu, about two miles from Takaka, became very busy with shipments of timber to various destinations, and I have read that a thriving trade in white pine developed between Takaka and California until the unfortunate consumers of the timber found that it was being eagerly shared by the local borer beetles or their equivalent.

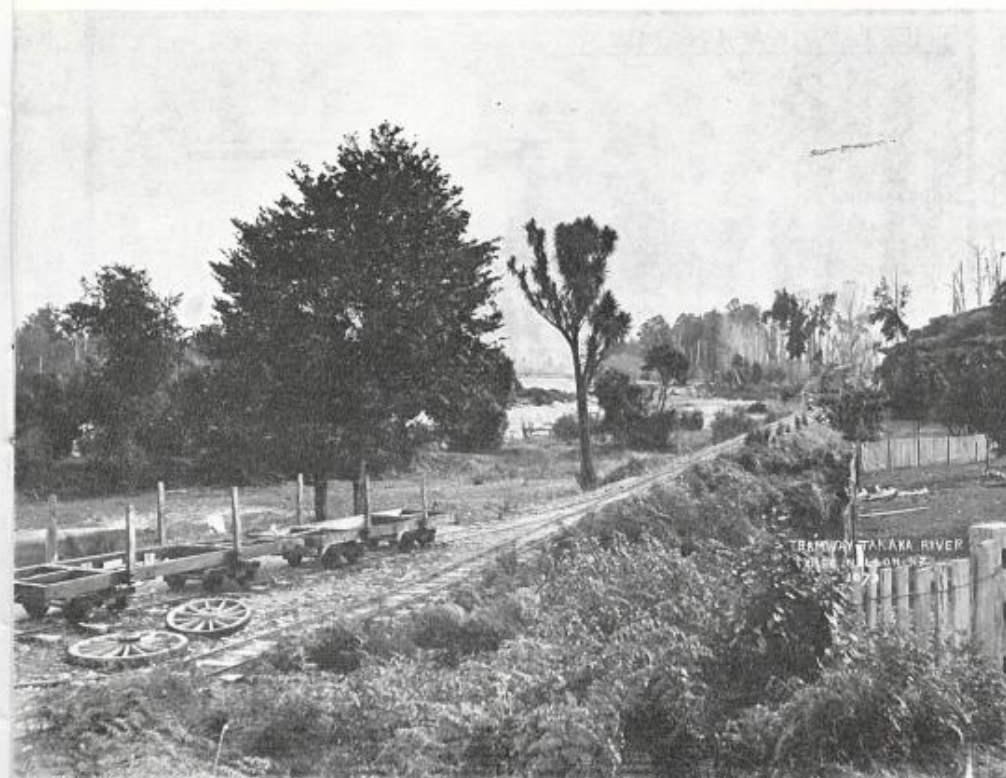
However, be that as it may, the seven sawmills, although not large by today's standards, generated in total a good volume of timber over the Waitapu wharf, all of it being carted to tidewater on bullock wagons over the local roads. These, because the local stone is not of high quality, could not stand up to the wear and tear they had to suffer, so something more satisfactory had to be devised. Accordingly a steam tramway was planned and surveyed to run for 8 miles 25 chains (13.4 km) from tidewater at Waitapu to a point at the crossroads between the East Takaka church and the Takaka River by way of Takaka village and the east side of the valley. The survey plans, prepared by the well known surveyor John Rochfort (at the time surveyor to the Nelson Provincial Coun-

cil) were signed by him on various dates in November and December 1881. The Takaka Road Board, with the sanction of the Council, applied for permission to build the tramway. When this was granted, a company called the Takaka Tramway Company Limited was formed and regulations governing the conduct of the line were gazetted by the Governor of the Colony, Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon.

The following matters were dealt with in the regulations:

- (1) Speed. The speed of the train was to be from 6 to 8 miles per hour.
- (2) Passengers were to be carried from one terminus to the other, or landed at convenient places along the line. The charges for carriage of passengers were to be: 2 miles or under, 3d; from 2 to 4 miles, 6d; from 4 to 6 miles, 9d; 6 miles and over, 1s.
- (3) Charges for the carriage of goods were to be: Sawn timber, per 100 sup.ft, 1½d per mile; general produce, 6d per ton; firewood, 9d per cord; wool, 3d per bale; posts and rails, 1s per 100; shingles, 1½d per 1000; bricks, 1s 3d per 1000; and parcels, delivered at either terminus or anywhere along the line, each 6d.
- (4) Two trains were to run daily in each direction, morning and afternoon.

Construction of the line to a gauge of 2ft. 6in. commenced in February 1881 and took between 10 and 12 months to



complete. Contractors for the work were the four Manson brothers, a name still well known in the district. No construction difficulties were encountered, there being no great earthworks required, but a number of bridges were built. One of these still survives. It is in use as a footbridge alongside the Takaka-Collingwood highway at its intersection with Maori Road, a low-lying spot subject to flooding in wet weather.

The tramway cost £2500, and in addition the Government gave the iron rails and a grant of £2000. The locomotive and the rolling stock were constructed by the Anchor Foundry of Port Nelson, the locomotive being a diminutive piece of

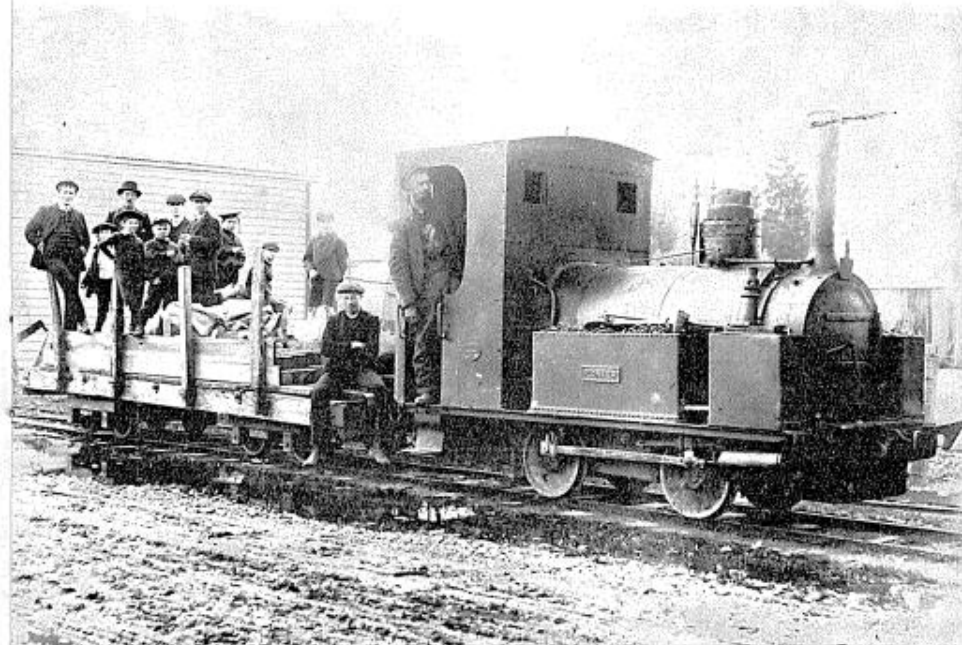
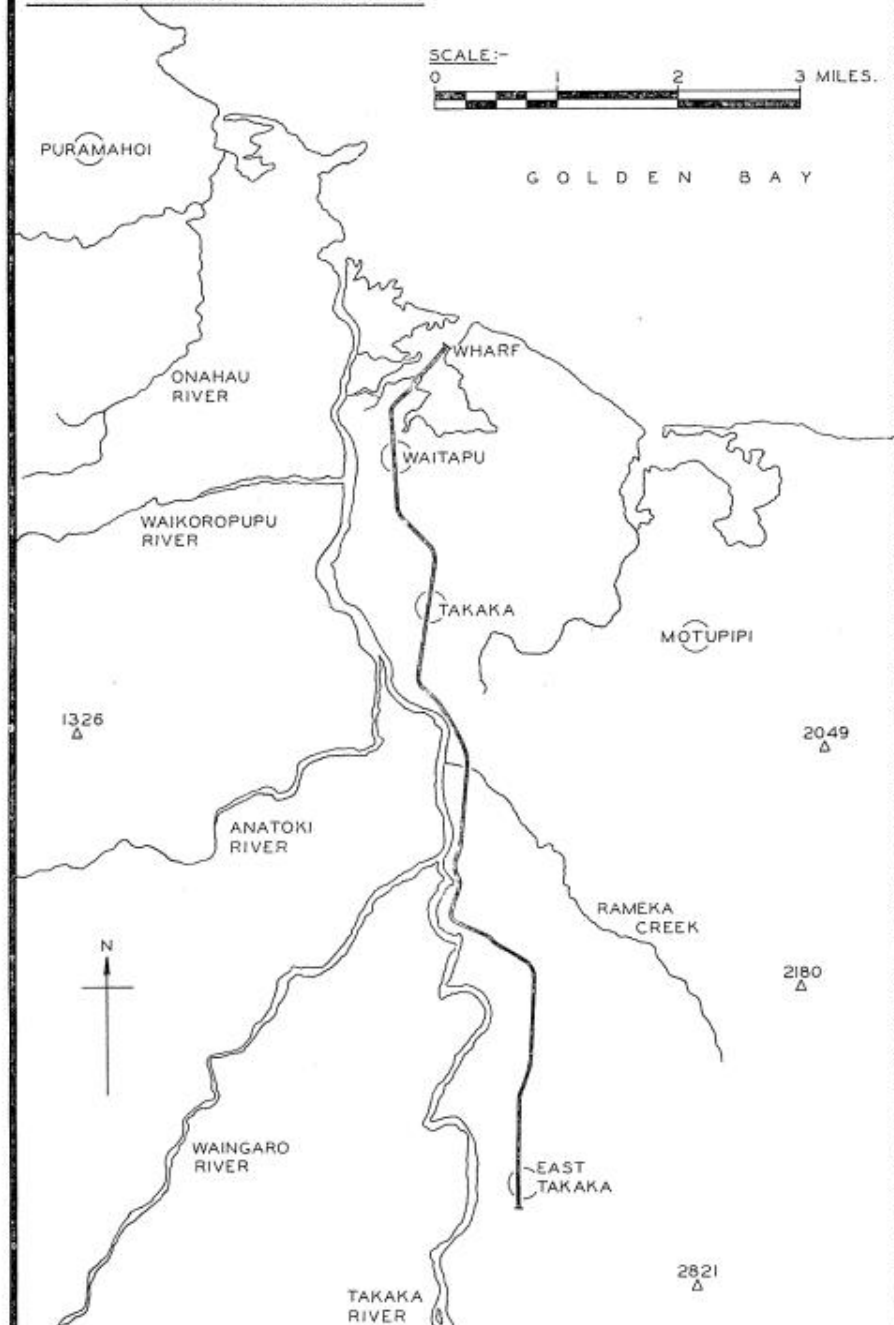
machinery mounted on four wheels, while the goods trucks were carried on 4-wheel bogies. For the conveyance of passengers there was also a small carriage (wheel arrangement not known) with longitudinal seats that could hold seven or eight people per side. The trucks could each carry 2000 to 3000 board feet of timber.

A photograph of the locomotive appeared in *The New Zealand Railway Observer*, Volume 14, at page 90 (and is repeated here), but I have been unable to secure any information about it other than that it was "gaily painted" and bore the name *Pioneer*. Regrettably a fire destroyed the Anchor Foundry's records in 1964.

ABOVE: A view of the Takaka Tramway looking north, showing timber trucks on a siding.

From a Tyree photograph in the Alexander Turnbull Library.

THE TAKAKA TRAMWAY.



From the A. P. Godber Collection, courtesy Alexander Turnbull Library.

The little locomotive built by the Anchor Foundry at Nelson in 1881 for the Takaka Tramway, and one of the bogie timber trucks used on the line.

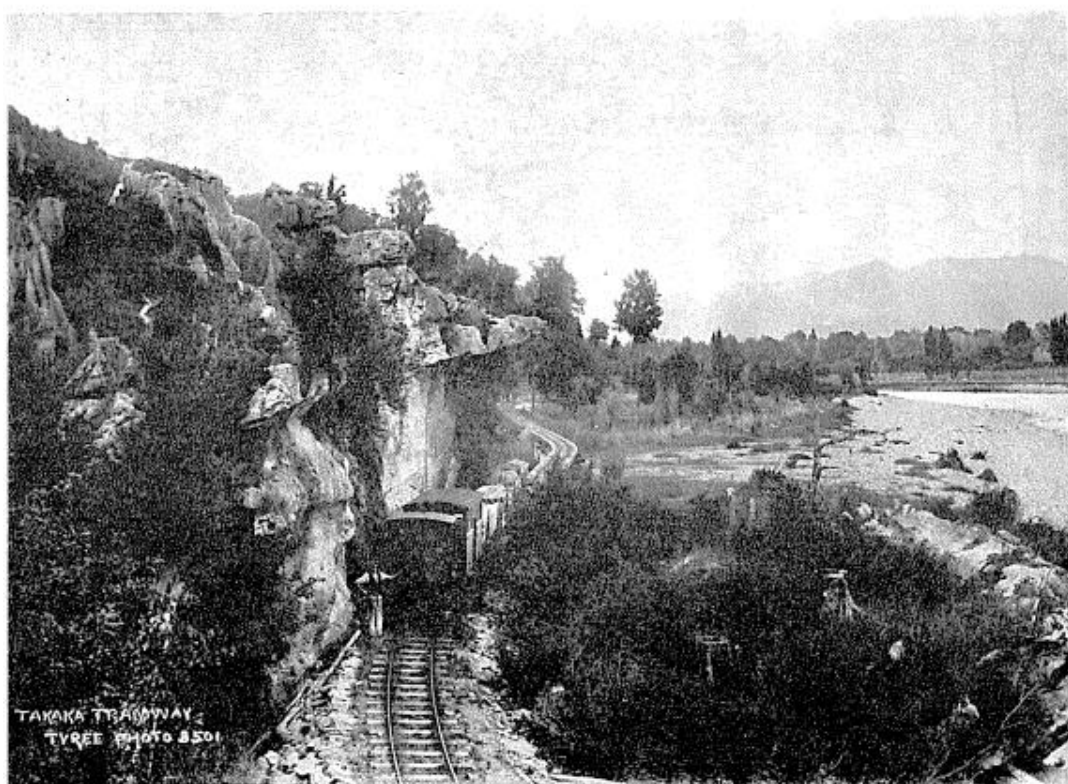
The tramway soon became integrated into the community, running as it did along Takaka's main street and past the school. A local resident told me that her mother was proud of the fact that when she was a small girl she took part in an attempt — an unsuccessful attempt — to derail the train. The presence of a curve in the line at the school corner was a great temptation to the children. The space between the outer rail and the guard rail would mysteriously fill with stones and cause derailments, and should a train pass the school at or near home-going time it would suddenly gather unto itself many unauthorised passengers against whom the driver was powerless. All he could do was shake his fist and blow his whistle. Evidently the train crew consisted of only one man who, on frosty mornings, would throttle the engine down and walk in front scattering sand upon the rails.

The little train joined in the life of the community in many ways. For

example, when the Anglican Church was dedicated in 1884 the steamers *Lady Barkly* and *Charles Edward* brought 69 people from Nelson and more from Motueka. All were hauled from the wharf to the church in a gaily decorated train.

Because the tramway's chief freight was sawn timber — this was of course its reason for existence — it followed that, when the forest was milled, the tramway withered and eventually died, officially at any rate. On 16 May 1893 a resolution to wind up the company voluntarily was passed at an extraordinary general meeting of shareholders held in Takaka. The resolution was based on the grounds that the company could not, by reason of its liabilities, continue in business. The company was therefore wound up in January 1894 after 13 years' service to the district.

It is remarkable how institutions like this railway attract and spawn yarns and legends. References to the line by J.



From a Tyree photograph courtesy Nelson Historical Society.

A northbound train on the Takaka Tramway pauses for its picture beneath an overhanging limestone bluff alongside the river. Note the small passenger car next to the locomotive.

Halket Millar in his book *Beyond the Marble Mountain* speak of its 20 years' service, and another story tells of the Relief of Mafeking in 1900 being celebrated by treating all the school children to a ride in a decorated train from Takaka village to the wharf and back. This was six years after the tramway company folded up. Maybe, I wondered, the line kept going after all. I then came into possession of a photograph of a trainload of wool in the main street of Takaka, a photograph that bore the date "Dec. 22, '03". This called for more investigation.

It appears that, after the liquidation of the tramway company in 1894, the saw-millers in the valley found continued

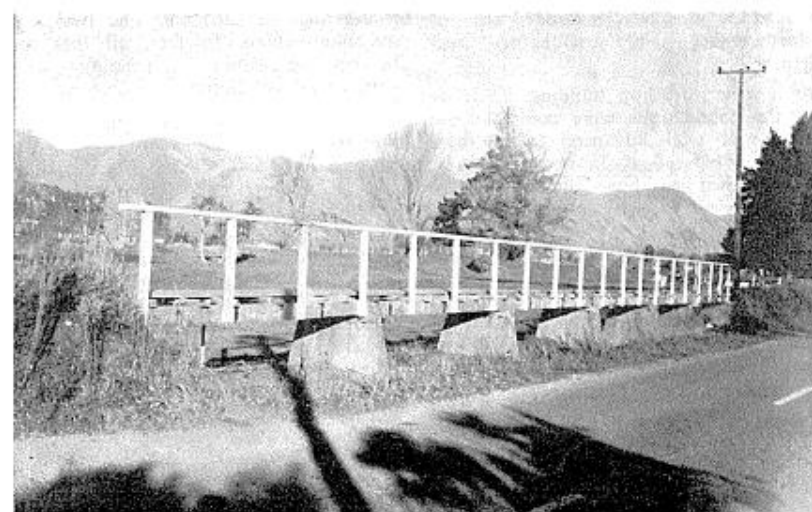
operation of the line to be expedient, so they each paid £500 or thereabouts to meet the company's debts and enable the tramway to carry on, which it did until about 1906.

Without wishing to derogate the district in any way, for I am one of its staunchest supporters, I would postulate the theory that Golden Bay in those days was deemed so remote, so far away (like the West Coast), that the authorities did not concern themselves unduly with what went on. At all events no properly constituted company was formed, so far as I can discover, to supersede the Takaka Tramway Company, and the line just "boxed on" until its usefulness to the community finally came to an end.



From an old print courtesy F. H. E. King.

A train load of wool at the south end of Commercial Street, Takaka, on 22 December 1905.



Photograph: F. H. E. King.

This footbridge at the corner of Maori Road and the Collingwood highway in Takaka, photographed in 1972, was once used by the Takaka Tramway.