

Travelling to School on RM22.

By Margaret Howie of Castlemaine

Story Edited for Press Release

I spent my first 17 years of life in Ballan, the population of the entire Shire was about 1000. I attended the Ballan State School, a three teacher school with about 100 pupils. Graduating on to Secondary School was a massive change for us country students and entailed a lot of traveling by train to school. Ballan had its own 'school train', a service which was introduced in 1927, on which the majority of the town's secondary students travelled. It was called the 'Shanghai' by the older generation!

Each morning we rode our bikes or walked to the Railway Station, then we had to travel 23 miles to Ballarat. 'Our' train was a rail motor (RM22) and trailer. Two carriages to us! The girls travelled in one and the boys in the other. The driver kept an eye on the girls and the guard watched over the boys. The Education Department reimbursed us for our train fare each term.

The train was supposed to leave Ballan at 7.40am, which rarely happened as we had to wait for the Overland train, traveling from Adelaide to Melbourne, to pass through, and it was notoriously late.

Train travel was pleasurable in summer but absolutely freezing in winter. Our train was 'parked' overnight, on the disused turn-table, and on extremely frosty nights, the train would be white. The high louvre windows along the top of the main windows rarely stayed closed and as the train travelled along, the ice would blow off the windows and inside onto us passengers.

Our scheduled time of arrival at Ballarat Station was 8.40am. We then had to catch a bus to our various schools. If our train was late the bus would leave without us and we would have to catch a tram or walk the three miles back to Ballarat East. The School Principal became very concerned at our late arrivals, occasionally as late as 10am. As a result, negotiations were made to have the train stop just near Caledonian Bridge, Ballarat East, at the foot of the steep descent from Warrenheip, where we had to jump, or climb, down from the train. This was not easy when carrying a heavy book laden bag! Many a bag, and many a student, often went for a slide down the embankment, which was daily entertainment for the remaining passengers. However we did arrive at school much earlier!

We travelled by bus into Ballarat after school. Our train left for Ballan at 4.30pm and never a minute later! We were supposed to arrive at Ballan at 5.25pm but it was more likely to be much later, again depending on another passing train, a very long goods train from Melbourne.

On a few occasions, during the six years I travelled on the train, 1956-1961, it actually 'broke down' and we had to be taken home by bus from wherever we happened to be, and this made us very late.

On one occasion when we were traveling on our return journey between Wallace and Millbrook, the motor began to 'play up' and the driver left some of us girls to drive while he went up the back to the 'engine room' to check out the motor. It was only a matter of holding down a lever and pulling the cord to sound the horn as we approached each crossing! The driver managed to return before the next station.

The train service was eventually terminated in 1968 and replaced by buses.

Railmotor RM22 spent several years after retirement at the ARHS (Vic Division) Railway Museum in Williamstown before being transferred and meticulously restored by the volunteers of the Yarra Valley Railway.

Our train comes to life once again!