

Working the trains

At the Top

From 1884 to 1973 a Chief and two other Commissioners controlled the network, largely from the 1893 Spencer Street headquarters (now the Grand Hotel). The prime staff positions were there, including 130 female office workers employed by the mid-1920s. Of note is Chief Commissioner Richard Speight (1884-92) who sued *Age* proprietor David Syme for libel. Carriage names are associated with Sir Thomas Tait (1903-10), Charles Norman (1909-20) and Norman C. Harris who started as a draughtsman in 1912, rose to chief mechanical engineer in 1927, Commissioner in 1933 and succeeded Sir Harold Clapp as Chief in 1939, a position he held until 1949 when a Railways Board replaced the Commission until privatisation in 1999.

'The Great Family of Railway Workers'

That was how Harold Clapp, Chief Commissioner 1920-39, described rail workers who in turn dubbed him Australia's greatest transport man. At its peak in the 1920s and 1950s, the permanent Railway workforce was about 30,000 spread across Way and Works, Rolling Stock and the branch with staff most in the public eye, Transportation. It comprised drivers and their offside firemen, goods handlers, shunters, signalmen, porters, cleaners, guards, gatekeepers and office staff, telegraphists and stationmasters. Those in charge of minor stations were called caretakers, disguising the fact that by the 1920s more than 300 of them were women.

These were jobs for life secured after rigorous examination. Excellent sight and hearing were essential, as were good general health, a 5 foot 6 inch minimum height, a good standard of education and unimpeached character. A recruit started at the lowest rank and strove for promotion to the highest of Station Master.

Time-keeping was at the heart of their work. An accurate watch and knowledge of timetables were crucial to keep the network running smoothly. Lapses in time-keeping could lead to administrative chaos and at worst, horrific accidents. Watches were set by the railway clock installed at every station and linked through the telegraph system to a master clock at Spencer Street station. On main lines, the clocks were adjusted precisely on the hour through an electro-magnetic impulse. On branch lines, stationmasters corrected the time according to a time signal received at 10am every day except Sunday.

At smaller stations, roles might be combined. Some railway families included the father as ganger, and mother the station and postmistress, cleaner and office worker. Women from a railway family might also act as gatekeeper at suburban and country stations. After 1950 recruitment of female station staff added to the diversity begun with thousands of postwar migrants, who were sponsored by the Railways and accommodated in hostels or prefabricated houses imported from England.

Associated workers were those on mail sorting vans, the travelling post offices which ran from 1865 to 1932. For a further 50 years, rail staff handled dwindling numbers of mailbags and parcels until mail despatch converted wholly to road and air.

Unions

The Australian Rail Tram & Bus Industry Union, formed in 1993, arose from a merger of unions, some with deep Victorian roots. The Victorian Locomotive Engine Drivers

Association formed in 1861 has claims as the world's oldest continuous Union, via a Federated Association which led the Federal Arbitration Court register in 1921 as the Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Enginemen. A strike in 1903 was a reaction to banning the Drivers Association from affiliation with Trades Hall.

The Australian Railways Union, also registered federally in 1921, had members who were not drivers and not associated with a craft union. Its Victorian branch began as a Mutual Service Association in 1884.