

Edited from Interviews with Frank Bollins Growing up in the shadow of the Railway Sheds

The whole of my life I guess has been closely related to the Railway. My first recollection arises from the fact that my father was one of the initial rail motor fitters appointed in the period when rail motors first came into the system in the early 1920's. Around about 1924, he was transferred to the country railway depot at Binnaway which is between Mudgee and Coonabarabran. This had been developed as the centre the railway motor services from Werris Creek, to Dubbo and up to Gwabegar.

My father spent about six months living in Binnaway in what was called the White Way. This was a line of camp tents that had been established within the railway yard primarily for the construction work for the rail line from Mudgee to Coonabarabran. After having been up there six months and consolidating his position, my family which was my mother and two brothers, moved up there in 1925.

My first real recollection was standing on the Werris Creek station with my brother about 9.00am in the morning waiting for the rail motor service to take us from Werris Creek across to Binnaway and in the station there was a steam train, an old Baldwin type of locomotive either an O or a J. The driver noting that we were gorking at the loco pulled a whistle, it was one of these big siren types and in consequence both my brother and I nearly jumped out of our strides, because of the extreme noise. Traveling from Werris Creek across to Binnaway in the rail motor is about 90 odd miles. I don't recall how long it took, but being amazed at the size of the wheat paddocks all along the railway line and I think there was only my mother and the three of us and a couple of other people on board.

At Binnaway we were met by my father. Our furniture hadn't arrived at that period so we got to live with a family by the name of Potts. He was a railway worker who lived just at the back of the loco depot. The first house that we lived in at Binnaway was the remains of the original railway barracks. The construction was of weatherboard up to about three or four feet and the rest of it was canvas on the outside and the interior was lined with hessian over which was pasted newspapers.

One of the railway workers who lived in the White Way was a South African, Bob Weatherburn. He used to have South African newspapers sent to him and I can recall some of the photographs from the newspapers pasted to the walls and ceilings of this old house that we lived in. I don't know exactly how long we stayed in this old building, but however long, it must have been a tremendous ordeal for my mother. Both my parents and my older brothers were born in England and she had been only in Australia for three or four years before she went from living in the conditions in Bankstown into the extremely primitive conditions that prevailed in the country areas at that time. The house only was part canvas and lined with hessian and newspapers inside, there was no electricity, there was no water laid on. We were one of the very fortunate families that had a tap in the yard which was part of the railway system. The water came from the Castlereagh River. It was inadequate for drinking purposes and could only be used for washing clothes and a little bit of cooking.

The toilet or the country dugout was nothing more than a hole in the ground, there was no postal service, there was no garbage service and all of the washing that my mother did at that period was done in the kerosine tins in the open air.

The first real home that we lived in was part of a lot of houses that was built by a local builder specifically for railway workers, they were pretty much of a standard pattern, 2 bedrooms, a kitchen and a small verandah front and back.

One of the characteristics of these cottages were that they were built completely from Cyprus pine from the Piliga forest which was up in the Gwabegar, Baradine area. The interior was clear varnished rather than painted, we used to do was to lay in bed of a morning and try to count the number of knots in the Cyprus pine ceilings.

Whilst living in those cottages was much more attractive than living in the old barracks, however there was still a lot of hardship there. We had no water supply, we had to rely on a 1,000 gallon tank, the country dunny was down the back of the yard. by this time there had been a sanitary service introduced into the town, so that we were not obliged to have the old earth closet type of toilet.

Although there was one place next door to us that still had it. If there was any argument as to who owned what marbles Mrs. Flemming would grab the lot of them and would throw them down into the dunny to resolve the argument, so that somewhere in Binnaway there must be a cache of well preserved glass marbles.

Living in a small country railway centre, the whole of your life seemed to evolve in around the railway and during the early period of the 1920 depression there was always a lot of fear amongst some of the younger railway workers, that their services were going to be terminated because of the downturn in the overall industry. I can remember discussions between my mother and the father where there was great concern as to his future because of the possibilities of the sackings. He was one of the very fortunate ones and was never ever dismissed from the service, but there were a number of younger workers particularly fuel-men and cleaners who had their services terminated.

My father had to give one of the rail motors a comprehensive service. I don't understand the details of it but it was decided unofficially that he would take it for a trial run on a Sunday from Binnaway to Coonabarabran and back. Well despite the fact that Coonabarabran was only 22 mile distance, it became quite an event and there would be a special excursion. It wasn't only the railway workers families that availed themselves on the trip, a number of local residents also traveled. One of the families there had a child who was in the Coonabarabran hospital with diphtheria and so it was arranged that they would travel on the special and would bring the kid back to Binnaway.

I was extremely proud of the fact that my father drove this rail motor, whether he was in breach of the regulations, I don't know. I don't think so, I think he had a ticket for driving outside of the loco and I recall standing alongside him and he allowed me to blow the filter of the rail motor whenever we were going around the bend, and I can recall the wind from the air heater blowing up the sleeve of my shirt.

We lived not far from the loco, say 200 yards, and as a consequence we spent a great deal of my boyhood days meandering around the railway. On a number of occasions I managed to get myself into little bits of strife with some of the more officious railway personnel. My dad had shown us how he as a kid in England he had made little hand warmers out of tobacco tins. You had a tobacco tin and punched a hole, with a little bit of cotton waste with a little bit of kerosine on it and lit it and it used to smoulder and you used to carry it in your hands and warm your hands. Well we had these one day and I remember the station master bailing us up and then ultimately dobbing us in to my father for being in the railway yard with these little tins with smouldering cotton waste in them on the argument that we could have set fire to some of the carriages.

My father was always a very humane sort of a person and I recall that on one of my excursions down by the river, I discovered a nest of kittens that somebody had dumped there, so I took them home, and my mother was very distressed at the fact that I had done so and didn't know what to do with them. She didn't have the heart to burn them, and I actually saw this happen and didn't understand the significance of it at the time, but my father had arranged with one of the engine crew to take these kittens in a sugar bag further out the line and dump them. Well railway workers being what they were, I'm quite certain that they decided that they were going to have a bit of a joke at the expense of Frank Bollins, that was my father, so as the loco was passing the loco shed itself, through one way or another, they got my dad out onto the embankment near the loco to watch this train go through. So they had my father lined up there and I could remember seeing all of those railway workers standing for this loco. I didn't understand the significance of it, but as the train passed where my dad was standing the driver with a great flourish picked up this sugar bag which my father thought had these kittens in it and then waved it around his head and opened the fire box and threw the bag into the firebox of the locomotive. My father was a very humanitarian sort of a bloke and he was terribly upset at this very cruel action the driver had taken to dispose of these kittens. However when he got home he found the kittens still at home, because what they had done they had taken the kittens out of the sugar bag put a few chunks of coal in there and threw the coal into the fire box rather than the kittens. What ultimately happened to the kittens I do not know, I suspect they may have been drowned.

When I was 9 or 10 I got into very serious trouble with my father, it was the only time that I could recall that he really belted me, that is with his belt. One of the other kids Bob Nickles, became a junior porter (his father was a storeman at the loco at the time), and one of Bob's duties was to go out once a week on his tricycle and refill the fuel cisterns on the seven day signal lamps. On one occasion he asked if I would like to go with him on the old push trike where you sat astride with a flipper type action. I think he did it because I would have been a help to him get up some of the hills. However having replenished some of the kerosine supply in the signals we then proceeded to return to Binnaway. It was a single line working and anyone out on the trikes always had to observe the timetable to see there were no trains when they were traveling on it. Bob had apparently had made a

mistake in figuring the timetable, because as we were coming down the hill to Binnaway we were being followed by a goods train. The driver and fireman observing us on the trike ahead of them apparently decided they would have a bit of fun with us, so they started to blast the siren of the loco.

Well it caused a bit of interest in the crew in the loco shed itself when they heard this repeated whistle blowing, they all climbed outside to see what was causing it, and here is Bob Nickles and myself going flat out there down the hill towards the loco with this goods train following us and blasting us with the whistle. Cause I suppose this could have been quite serious but nobody other than my father saw the serious side of it and the railway workers got a lot of enjoyment,

When my father got home from work the first thing he did was to take his belt out of his trousers and he really gave me a leathering and I was banned from going anywhere near the railway sheds for a long time after that.

As I say our whole life centred around the loco, there was a tennis court at the back which we all helped to build and I recall the opening was quite a gala occasion event for a small country town.

We lived there until I think 1931 and out of nowhere so to speak my father came home one evening to say we were moving out, going to leave Binnaway and move down to Auburn. He had applied for a transfer as a rail motor because my brother Jack had just passed the intermediate certificate but being a small country town there was nothing there as far as a job was concerned. We were in the throws of the great economic depression of the late 1920's early 1930's.

I remember being very upset about the hurried leaving, I didn't understand the significance of the transfer and I had a thoroughly enjoyable boyhood and my life was very much akin to Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. I remember I was rarely ever at home particularly during the school holidays.

There was a large number of unemployed workers that would come around the town, mainly to get themselves the dole but coming and knocking on the door of our home and other peoples homes and asking for either a bit of bread or any old cast off clothing. Being a kid I didn't understand or appreciate the problem but there were many young fellows who were 16 to 18 who have been compelled by economic necessity to leave home to get the dole.

We had just formed a scout troop in Binnaway in that period and we would invite scout people to the meetings. They would give us the benefit of their experience of the scout movement in the city which we greatly appreciated. The country copper used to give a heave ho to see that they got out of town as soon as he paid the dole to them. Well, it was a very tragic period in the history of the State to see so many young people and others wandering from point to point, they weren't allowed to stop in the country town.

As this was in the 1920's so there was still a lot of ex servicemen from the first world war around. One returned serviceman down on the river bank became ill. This poor bloke had been carrying a lot of his relics from his time as a soldier in the trenches in his swag. He became so ill that he was no longer able to do so and he left a lot of his mementos in a bit of a cave that he dug. We came across them and some of the things that I got from it were buttons off German soldiers uniforms and a couple of maps of some of the front line situations in Belgium and France. I hung onto those for many years. I never forgave my mother because she threw them away just after I got married.

I was 14 at the time we moved from Binnaway, and after the first year I went to Granville Tech as a secondary student. In that period there was still a massive amount of unemployment. When we came down to the city my father got an appointment of railmotor fitter at the Clyde loco and as a consequence we got a cottage in Auburn and I lived in that and another cottage in Auburn until about the early 1940's when I got married and left home.

My brother was unemployed for quite a considerable period before he became apprenticed as a fitter and turner in the railway and when I approached the age of 16 my father encouraged me to apply for a position of an apprentice within the railway system.

I was interested in the woodworking trades and I developed a bit of appreciation of woodwork and sign writing. I applied as an apprentice carpenter, apprentice pattern maker, apprentice carriage builder or an apprentice sign writer, and I was apprentice to none of those trades.

I always recall the trauma of preparing for the examination. I must say this, but from memory I was pretty dumb at mathematics, which I attributed this largely to the poor facility of schooling in country areas because never in any of the classes that I've been through that I had a teacher for a single class. At Binnaway you would be either in 2nd to 4th class, or 5th to 9th class with the one teacher.

My father pouncing me years before I went for the examination because strangely enough my elder brother, who was always very bright at school, failed in his mathematics when he first went to the apprentice examination causing great discomfort to himself and my father. So that it was almost a foregone conclusion with me being what I was, I was going to fail the examination first up. However, it was not so because when the results were announced I had got top marks both in the mathematic section of the examination and on the spelling.

We were sent straight from our examination room around to the medical branch so I didn't get home until late in the afternoon around about 5.30pm and both my mother and father were extremely worried as to what had happened to me, because I think it was the first time in my life that I'd ever been down to the city on my own at the age just on 16.

I received the proposition to become an apprentice toolsmith. In that period we were classified as at the Chullora Signal Branch, and again whilst I desired an apprenticeship in the wood trade, because of the scarcity of job opportunity in that period, I readily grabbed the opportunity. That decision has determined the whole future and character of my life since that date.

In that period, getting from Auburn to the workshop one had to get several trains. It was a rather complicated procedure first up. Having got on the train as we were going up the hill to the signal branch, I spoke to a worker and asked directions to the tinshop. He said "Oh! You must be the new apprentice".

Well I said "Yes" and he said "You come with me, I work in the tinsmith shop and I will take you there". So that as we alighted from the train the first thing he said to me "You see that big blue nosed bastard over there " and described the bloke to me as I was walking ahead and I said "Yes" and he said "Never you will have anything to do with him because he is no good". I subsequently learned the big blue nosed bastard was the leading hand in the shop and apparently there had been some feeling between the two because, I won't use his name, other than Sam (the big blue nosed bastard) had knocked Jimmy off his position as leading hand. But it also went much deeper than this.

Jimmy had been classified for a period of time as a second class tinsmith and through the services of the then very primitive union in the industry, he had been elevated to that of first class tinsmith and as a consequence received a certain amount of money in back pay. Well Jimmy was a bit of a punter as well as being a bit of a boozier, so Jimmy didn't tell his wife about this backpay that he received. Sam's wife was notorious for being a bit of a chatter box. Sam went home and related to his wife that Jimmy had got this backpay, and the first thing that happened was that Sam's wife had met Jimmy's wife one morning and said "Oh! Mrs. So and So wasn't that wonderful of Jimmy getting that back money". Of course Jimmy's missus didn't know anything of it. When Jimmy arrived home his wife held out her hand for her share, but unfortunately for both of them Jimmy had punted it all away.

Jimmy claimed he had been dobbed in by Sam and as a consequence there was a great deal of enmity between them. Incidentally I took no notice of Jimmy's directive that I shouldn't have nothing to do with the blue nosed bastard and ultimately became quite friendly. I used to walk both home and down to the station with Sam practically during the whole of my apprenticeship. Within the first 18 months to 2 years of my apprenticeship the term was changed from tinsmith to sheet metalworker and I completed my apprenticeship in 1939 as an apprentice sheet metalworker.

My apprenticeship of five years was very quiet. I must have been a reasonable sort of apprentice it wasn't very long before I was doing the work of a fairly detailed nature. I remember I thoroughly enjoyed the work, the first job I ever did was to help a guy by the name of Frank Christie make flare lamps of a particular style. Within six months of starting, I had been given a job by the foreman to make the patterns for a new style, a new shape of a flare lamp and I did many of those flare lamps before I finished my apprenticeship. I must have been a reasonable model apprentice, in that over the period of a five year apprenticeship I only lost just a little over one week. I had only one week to make up for my service before my services were terminated in 1939.

In that period it was a standard practice for all apprentices other than those who got an honest pass in the higher trade certificate to have their services terminated. From memory it didn't constitute a problem. I don't remember giving it a great deal of thought, but in that period there was still quite a considerable amount of unemployment in existence and I think it might have been more of a problem for my parents than it was for me, the knowledge that come the time when my apprenticeship would finish that I would be dismissed from the service.

I always recall the last day or couple of days before I concluded my apprenticeship. I was sitting at my bench working away there and I could sort of sense someone standing behind me and I looked over

my shoulder and it was then the Assistant Works Manager, his name was Jack Allan, he was very tall with a cadaverous face individual and a very austere type of person. The average person there lived in some degree of fear of Jack Allan because of the fact that he was always on the go watching what you did or didn't do. And here he was standing right behind me, I was extremely nervous. He said "Look son I have come to apologise to you" he said "we thought so much of you as an apprentice that we have done everything we possibly could to have you retained in the service but unfortunately it is the policy of the Department to dismiss all apprentices at the conclusion of their apprenticeship and I am very sorry to see you go"

During the period 1938,1939 in the build up period to the commencement of the second world war, there was a great deal of interest by numbers of workers as to the future of mankind. The Workers Education Association, W.E.A. used to conduct lunch hour discussion courses and I can remember being invited along with workers in the sheet metal section. Les Ruly who was to become a life long friend of myself and my wife encouraged me to get involved in these lectures on International Affairs and so we used to go along during our lunch hour and one of the tutors from the WEA would come out and talk to us about the issues, I remember Poland, Czechoslovakia and all of the circumstances leading up to the onset of the 2nd World War being discussed. In this period I also became a member of the Left Book Club because the WEA was sponsoring the circulation of Left Book Club publications. That was my early beginning of my political activity. I didn't get involved in any union activity in that period we were not encouraged to join the union until our final year of apprenticeship.