

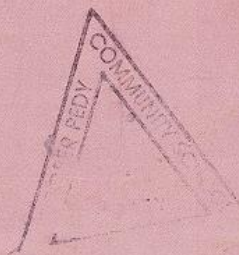
HISTORY *matters*

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Featuring in this edition:
“Material Culture”

NULLARBOR LIFELINE:

Tea and Sugar Train - 1912-1996

The 'Tea and Sugar' train – the supply train of Commonwealth Railways - operated across the Nullarbor Plain for most of the twentieth century, from 1912 until June 1996. The origin of the Trans-Australian Railway line was intimately meshed with the processes of federation and was a major inducement for a reluctant Western Australia to join the new Commonwealth. Due to extreme parochialism and inter-colonial rivalries dissimilar railway gauges existed in 19th century Australia. The construction of the East-West railway line was therefore the first federal-state venture of the new century and a physical, economic and symbolic link of the Australian mainland states.

The Trans-Australian Railway line was built simultaneously from Kalgoorlie, in Western Australia, and Port Augusta, in South Australia, and took five years to complete. The route across the Nullarbor was arid, desolate, almost entirely uninhabited and there was no surface water over its entire distance. All building materials and the essentials of life – including water – for the vast mobile camps that accommodated the thousands of workers and animals engaged on the project, were ferried to the twin railheads by the forerunners of the Tea and Sugar train. The tracks were finally united near Ooldea in October, 1917.

Once completed, there was an ongoing need for a labour force to service the trains and for fettling gangs to keep the 1,690 km track in good condition and to replace the timber sleepers periodically as they were susceptible to termite infestation. In the steam era, which lasted until the early 1950s, there were 56 railway sidings dotted across the Nullarbor because trains needed frequent stops for coal and water. For generations of railway workers, their families, nearby pastoral holdings and for itinerant and settled Aborigines, the weekly Tea and Sugar train service – a mobile extension of the Commonwealth Provision stores in Port Augusta – provided an amazing array of goods and services.

But, in spite of the extreme isolation of the Nullarbor, oral and indirect primary sources reveal that the social, cultural and technological changes of the twentieth century resonated well beyond the major coastal cities. Indeed, the Tea and Sugar train and the transcontinental railway line reflected many of the major national and global influences that helped to shape modern Australia.

The First World War broke out soon after construction of the line began and the railway line was affected by wartime shortages. As well, spurred on by the AIF recruiters and patriotism, many workers responded to the national call to enlist and fight for 'King and Country'. Regional newspapers also indicate that the 1919 influenza pandemic extended onto the Nullarbor and affected many people.

During the Depression years the railway line was a magnet for hundreds of unemployed men attempting to 'jump the rattler' and seek work, particularly in Western Australia. Throughout this period, Daisy Bates drew attention to the plight of the desert Aborigines, who had been dislocated by the advent of the railway line and the appropriation of their precious water supply and traditional camping grounds at Ooldea. She provided a sanctuary for them while observing

and recording their rich and diverse language, culture and traditions. Bates was also a staunch believer in the erroneous 'doomed race theory' based on social Darwinism.

During the protectionist era of the 1930s, the surviving Aborigines were rounded up and settled on missions until after the 1967 federal referendum when many returned to the Nullarbor. Ironically, the railway line helped to facilitate the survival of aspects of Indigenous culture by enabling some Indigenous People to travel across the Nullarbor between the missions and north, by bus, from Kingoonya to Alice Springs for traditional ceremonies.

During the Second World War the Nullarbor became home to Italian POWs and civilian internees, who were based at several locations and employed on track maintenance and other labour-intensive work. In the post-war period many 'displaced persons' from Europe were seconded to work on the railway line but very few stayed on once their mandatory two-year contract expired.

From the early 1950s, diesel-electric trains capable of travelling 1,000 km without refuelling were introduced. Other improvements followed such as continuously welded rails, track-tamping machines and (from the mid 1970s) concrete sleepers. Consequently, the number of railway sidings on the Nullarbor gradually reduced and living conditions for the workers and their families improved. The tent-houses and primitive living conditions common of the steam era evolved into air-conditioned homes. In the 1990s solar-powered technologies were initiated.

The Tea and Sugar train evolved over the decades from the hybrid Butcher's Van of the pre-refrigeration era, in which live cattle, sheep and

pigs were killed and prepared between stops, into a traditional butcher shop with cool room. By 1983, individual orders of meat arrived, pre-packaged, on the Tea and Sugar train. The Provision Van, which once resembled a corner shop evolved into a 'self-service' mini-supermarket.

Entertainment had once been a communal experience in the form of an occasional live theatre or film shown in a tiered mobile cinema parked at a small siding or in a community hall. However, from the mid-1980s videos and, within a few years, satellite television predominated and community life on the Nullarbor virtually disappeared.

In the mid-1970s, the Welfare Car housed almost every imaginable social service: health personnel, a baby clinic, social workers, clergy, selected government officials, union representatives and, occasionally, hairdressers, entertainers and dentists. By the 1990s, technological progress and improvements meant a decreased need for a large labour force. The Tea and Sugar train service was increasingly superfluous and Australian National on economic grounds, could not justify its continuation.

The evolution and history of the Tea and Sugar train is a metaphor for many changes occurring at national and global levels during the 20th Century. Without the regular service of the train, in its various incarnations, it would have been impossible to build and maintain the Trans-Australian railway line. Its distinctive and unique character and vital importance as a lifeline to Nullarbor communities has thus earned the Tea and Sugar train a significant niche in Australian history.

Kay Merry

