



ON THE 18th of December, 1900, the very first train pulled out of Fern Tree Gully, a township some 20 miles from Melbourne, Australia, to link the capital with people who lived in the range of hills known as the Blue Dandenongs, rising to more than 2,000 ft above sea level and from where the aborigines had looked in amazement at the ships bringing in the first settlers many years earlier. The new railway service climbed slowly into these hills, calling at picturesque stations named Upwey, Tecoma, Belgrave, Selby, Menzies Creek, Clematis, Emerald, Nobelius, Lakeside, Cockatoo, Fielder, and Gembrook. Because of the quaint high-chimney engines, the locals soon nicknamed the train "Puffing Billy" and for many years the service linked the hills with electric trains from Fern Tree Gully to Melbourne. When the author was in Australia on loan to the RAAF he rented a house at Tecoma and made many trips on the little train which actually ran through his garden, the crew sounding their whistle in friendly greeting to warn off any animals.

After more than 50 years of chugging through Victoria the little train was brought to a halt in 1953 when torrential rains caused a landslide between Belgrave and Menzies Creek. For two years no trains ran beyond Fern Tree Gully and the Chief Railways Commissioner announced that the line would be permanently closed and one of the two engines would be placed on exhibition in the National Park at "The Gully," on a short stretch of the 2 ft 6 inch narrow-gauge track. The Commissioner added that plans would now go ahead to build a full-size electric line into the hills, reducing "Puffing Billy's" time of 30 minutes to Belgrave to 10 minutes on the climb and 8 minutes on the descent. To his amazement there was an immediate storm of protest at the proposal to destroy the narrow-gauge railway and a Melbourne schoolmaster—Mr. H. L. Hewett—formed the Puffing Billy Preservation Society, backed by the publicity of the "Sun-Herald," a powerful newspaper. Railway enthusiasts—many of them emigrants, including Welshmen who missed the Snowdonia railways—joined to fight for the survival of "Billy" and at last the Victorian Railways gave in and agreed to run the little train between Fern Tree Gully and Belgrave only on

public holidays, subject to support.

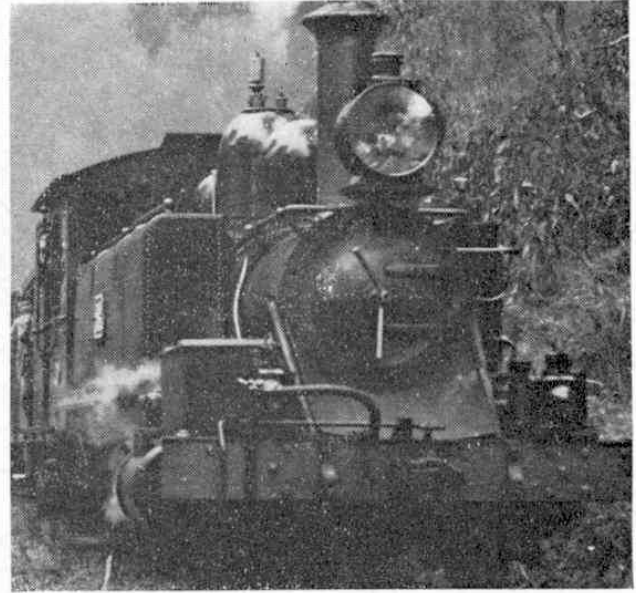
The cost of the double journey was £A25 (£A10 for fuel and £A15 for wages) and many prominent people donated £25 to pay for a trip for orphanages and other children. Then, in February, 1958, came an even greater blow—the Commissioner announced the start of electrification on that very section now allotted to "Billy" at holiday periods. Nothing daunted, the Society decided to try to reopen that section of the line blocked by the 1953 landslide (which the Commissioner said would cost £A10,000 to clear). Permission was granted for the Society to tackle the job and volunteers rushed to help, giving up weekends and vacations to work on the mighty task. Boy Scout troops and a Citizen Military Forces unit (similar to our Territorial Army) offered assistance, the part-time soldiers of No 3 Field Engineer Regiment building a new engine-shed at Belgrave, a coal-stage, ash pit and inspection area. Then they made a huge earth barrier at the crucial spot on the line, 350 yards of earth being man-handled, including a two-chain curve, to give a completely new stretch of track within the old threatened area. The other volunteers then laid the new track as the soldiers moved ahead and constructed a new terminus—at Lakeside.

Schoolboys (and some girls) hacked the undergrowth—much of it blackberry—to allow the soldiers and others to erect stands for two 1,000-gallon water tanks (mainly rain-water, for there was no piped water, and if the tanks ran dry a nominal shilling was charged for the fire-brigade to refill, plus £A9.15.0 for labour-costs!!). That is why bush-fires are such a menace, since few have water to spare in the summer (November-April) and rely on their two or three tanks for every domestic need. Once the tanks were in position and filled, a passenger platform was constructed and a loop so the engine could change from one end of the train to the other for the return trip. Special certificates were printed and for a donation of two shillings you were informed that you had helped "Billy" nine inches towards Gembrook, the old terminus, which one day is the ambition of all enthusiasts to see reopened.

At last came the great day and the Governor of Victoria, Sir Rohan Delacombe, opened the extension from Menzies Creek to Emerald, two-and-a-half miles

An interesting 2' 6" narrow gauge railway from "Down Under" described by Leslie Hunt

At left, Puffing Billy crossing Horseshoe Bridge at Selby with a full load of passengers. Right, Puffing Bill, a 2 ft. 6 in. gauge, side tank locomotive, sporting an acetylene headlamp. Below, the wooden coaches, with metal underframes, have roll blinds in the two-door passenger cars.



of track being used for the first time in twelve years when, in July, 1965, the Governor rode in a special coach for the round trip of 13 miles which was now possible. During the magnificent labours on the line by the hard-working volunteers, no fewer than 350,000 people had also helped, by travelling on the Belgrave-Menzies Creek section in the three seasons of the repair-work. Now, thanks to these splendid railway enthusiasts, thousands—perhaps millions—will enjoy the unique experience of a journey through the Dandenongs where—on the upward run, one can leave the cattle-box-like coaches to pick flowers, or photograph your friends hanging on to the footboards or—for privileged passengers—actually on the engine, a gesture reserved for those who have given practical help with coaling or watering.

It seems a long time since the author rode on "Billy" but he—and his sons, schoolboys then and now married—will never forget the thrills for, on every trip there was something to remember. Once the vigilant fireman spotted a car crash on the main road some distance away: "Billy" was halted and as the fireman sprinted across the fields to render first-aid, the driver shinned up the next telegraph pole and informed the nearest station to alert the police and hospital. On an-

other of our journeys a dog, alas, was killed—the only fatality in all the years of the little trains. The train stopped and, using their shovels, the crew buried the animal by the side of the line, amid a profusion of glorious wild-flowers.

One day—in 1906—there was nearly a bad accident when, rounding a bend near Selby's horseshoe bridge, Puffing Billy jumped off the track, trying to make up lost time and going just too fast. Luckily for all concerned the train leaned over *inwards*, ending up against the hillside—a few yards further and a sheer drop of 70 feet would have brought the coaches crashing close to the main road. Once, too, a car was speeding along trying to keep the train in view when, near Upwey, it skidded off the road and hurtled down the hill on to the track. As always, though "Billy" was preceded by a trolley which cleared dangerous objects—sometimes a huge lizard and a wombat sleeping in the sunshine—from the track. On this occasion the two men on the trolley cleverly managed to edge the car off the rails, after attending to the bruised and shaken motorist and his passenger. All in all the little narrow-gauge has seen its share of excitement and, we think, will long continue to delight all who visit this part of Australia.

