



The Deniliquin & Moama Railway Company

When paddle steamers first reached Echuca in 1853, they travelled up from South Australia with the intention of delivering goods from that state to the Echuca region and taking back wool from the Riverina sheep stations.

The Victorian government reacted by building a railway line, which was already being constructed to the Castlemaine and Bendigo goldfields, to the Murray.

It reached the river port in 1863 and was immediately successful in stemming the flow of trade to the bottom end of the river.

However for the people of Deniliquin it was nothing more than a tantalising glimpse of the benefits of a new technology. They were serviced by Cobb & Co coach, the fare for which, to Echuca, was greater than the rail fare from there to Melbourne. The journey also took longer. They began lobbying for a rail connection to either Sydney or Melbourne.

In fact Deniliquin had been gripped by rail fever from the start. At about the time the line from Melbourne had reached Bendigo the following report appeared in the Deniliquin *Pastoral Times*:

TRAMWAY BETWEEN DENILIQUN AND ECHUCA.

We are authorised to state that a gentleman owning large squatting property in the district will give £1000 towards making a tramway between this town and Echuca. Perhaps at the meeting on Independence the matter may be put in such a shape as to lead to steps being taken for carrying out such a desirable project.

Who this philanthropist was we do not know but the report is indicative of the excitement generated by the coming of this new form of transport.

By 1865 a survey for a possible route between Deniliquin and Moama had been completed. "The line commences at a point on the Murray river opposite the Victorian railway, runs due north for about eight miles to the end of the box timber, thence in a direct line to Mathoura, Red Bank township, leaving Moira Station 2½ miles to the west, continues for three miles in a line with the streets, and again due north...", the

Pastoral Times reported.

The following year the recently-formed Murray and Darling River Railway Association again petitioned for a light railway between Deniliquin and Moama. It was given the green light by a select committee of the New South Wales parliament but according to the *Pastoral Times* was rejected in the Legislative Assembly (the upper house) "by an overwhelming majority", apparently on the assurance of Sir James Martin who told the members that "two drays a week would supply Deniliquin with all its requirements" and that "only a few townspeople who wanted to sell out were getting up the agitation that the country people around Deniliquin had no sympathy with it." More lobbying followed. Contrary to Sir James Martin's assertion, freight charges were crippling the local economy. Just before the railway arrived the cost of sending a ton of goods from Echuca to Deniliquin was quoted at between £5 and £6, more than double the cost of bringing the same goods from London to Melbourne.

The *Pastoral Times* reckoned it was adding over 30 per cent to the cost of goods in Deniliquin, compared to prices in Echuca. No doubt the same costs were being borne by the people of Mathoura and there would have been many locals who joined the call for a railway.

Persistence eventually paid off with the governments of both Victoria and New South Wales agreeing to allow private enterprise to develop a line. And so was born the D & M Railway (for Deniliquin and Moama but affectionately known as the "Dad & Mum").

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In January 1876 the *Pastoral Times* reprinted the following report from the *Echuca Riverine Herald*.

The Government engine to be used for the ballasting in the laying of the Deniliquin and Moama line of railway is now at work (says the *Riverine Herald*) and is giving a great impetus to the operation. The engine is small, but its capabilities are more than sufficient for the work of ballasting. Since its temporary consignment to the new company it has been utilised to the fullest extent, and almost without intermission within working hours. Its services will greatly facilitate progress and materially lighten the labour of the men employed on the line, who had previously to propel the loaded trucks by force of bone and muscle. The company's contracts for the supply of rolling stock are approaching successful completion. Messrs. Tozer of Melbourne, entrusted with the building of thirty trucks, have already furnished and forwarded five, and others are in active course of erection. The engine and passenger carriages, of English make, are expected shortly. The latter will be a foot longer than the Government carriages, and will be furnished in a superior style, both for first and second class accommodation. The line, it is now anticipated, will be opened about June next. About twenty plate-layers are employed.

The venture struck trouble again when, with the line almost completed, procrastination by both state governments meant that the promised iron bridge over the Murray at Echuca was not ready. The D&M built its own bridge, a timber structure erected in a few months with the company's own money to get the trains across the river.

When the line opened in 1876 the trains were greeted with cheering crowds and great partying. At Deniliquin Melbourne caterers were brought in to produce a feast for those attending the grand ball. At Moama a whole bullock was roasted for the occasion.

Unfortunately bullocks at Mathoura caused the first reported accident on the line. About a week before the official opening took place two light coloured bullocks, probably owned by Sir John O'Shanassy of Moira, wandered onto an unfenced section of line

just south of the town and took a nap. They were almost the same colour as the gravel with which the line was ballasted. As the evening train approached "the engine was upon them before the driver knew of their presence" and they were killed instantly. "There was some detention caused", reported the *Pastoral Times*, "but nobody was hurt. The line, we hear, will be completely fenced next week." As an additional precaution a pilot engine preceded the official train when the line was ceremoniously opened a few days later.

Mathoura, as the central point on the line, became important as a refueling stop for the trains which ran twice daily in each direction.

The boilers of the locomotives were fired, not with coal, but with the abundant and thermally effective local red gum firewood. Large stacks of fuel are visible in early photographs at not only the water tower (which still stands near the site of the now-vanished railway station) but also at the pumping station on the Gulpa Creek which supplied the water not only for the steam trains but also for some of the townsfolk. They had been allowed to connect to the railway supply.

While the train halted here, its passengers alighted to partake of refreshments at the Railway Station Hotel which was built on the platform. Early in the 20th century the morning train from Deniliquin arrived in Mathoura at lunch time and travelers took their mid-day meal here.

Under the agreement negotiated with the state governments the D & M, which had remained profitable for almost 50 years, was taken over by the Victorian Railways in 1923.

Today the line carries most of the processed rice from the Deniliquin mill and a good deal of the region's other grain products with an occasional train stopping at Mathoura to pick up cereal grains.

Research and written by David Joss for the Mathoura Visitor Information and Business Centre

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