REMINISCENCES OF SCARBOROUGH:

by H. J. McDonnell

I arrived in Scarborough early in 1914 at the age of 14 and remained there until June, 1916 when I joined the Bank of New South Wales in Sydney.

My father had been stationmaster at Narromine and was promoted to Scarborough because it was the marshalling yard for the coal traffic through the old single-line Otford Tunnel, remains of which can still be glimpsed from the present railway line. Push-up engines were stationed at Scarborough and on a number of occasions I accompanied the driver and fireman on the trip to Otford. In those days there was no ventilation in the tunnel and it was not unusual for drivers or firemen of both engines to be "out to it" because of the excessive smoke by the time the train reached Otford. The grade was exceptionally steep and the speed would be no more than four or five miles an hour. A porter was stationed on the Otford platform for the express purpose of boarding the front engine and, if the crew were out of action, pulling up the train — and it happened on a number of occasions.

On the push-up engine we managed to breathe by lifting the flap between the engine and the tender and lying flat on the floor with heads in the opening. The push-up driver and fireman had been on the job for years and knew all the tricks.

In those early days, the line from Waterfall was single, the duplication came later — 1915, I think — and there were separate stations at Scarborough and Clifton. After duplication the present Scarborough Station was built midway between the two towns and Clifton was scrapped.

In 1914 Scarborough consisted mainly of Sardine Row. (Actually two rows) of galvanised iron cottages unpainted, a hotel, a few stores, a police station and some cottages on the left hand side of the road to Wollongong. There were also, well back off the road at the rear of the hotel, a number of one roomed dwellings for bachelors; By the way, some were occasionally occupied by more than bachelors!

Before and during the early part of the First World War the hotel was open until 11 p.m. but legislation was brought down compelling closing at 9 p.m. It's hard to get out of old habits and it was some time before people reconciled themselves to the new order. The Courts collected quite a bit of revenue from late drinkers.
Whilst on the subject of the Hotel I well remember one of the old timers coming down the street, well and truly under the influence, when suddenly he saw a brown snake crawling slowly across the road. Not too sure whether it was genuine or he was seeing things, he rushed to the nearest fence — the Police Station — yanked off a paling and belaboured the snake, with little in the way of results. He never found out that some of the local kids had tied string to a brown plaited buggy whip for just this purpose. Anyway he was fined for being drunk and disorderly and damaging Government property.

On another occasion after the outbreak of war I can remember the arrival of the “Kangaroos” — one of the many recruiting marches which were conducted in those days. I can see them now struggling and straggling up the hill from Wombarra footsore from marching on the hard macadamised road — there was no sealing in those days, and very few motor cars too. I don’t remember anybody in Scarborough owning one in my day.

When you came up the Wombarra Hill there was a general store — now demolished — at the top run by a family named Robertson or Robinson. One son put his age on a few years and enlisted when the war came and was killed at Lone Pine on his 15th birthday. Another son was musical and played the piano at the local picture show. Later on he went to the war and I took on his job at the pictures. You had to be versatile. “The Blue Danube” and “Over the Waves” for sea parts with “Hearts and Flowers” for the sentimental bits and the love scenes. The show was weekly and if takings were good I got 5/- although sometimes as low as 2/6. The programmes were partically the same “Mad Movies” as shown most weeks on the A.B.C. Television.

There was no special hall — the pictures were shown in the basement of one of the local general stores, then run by a man named Stephens, or better still, perhaps, by his wife. Dick Stephens had had a managerial job with a big warehouse in Adelaide and as Warehousing was always spelt in capital letters in those days, he had been of some consequence in the wholesale world. However, Demon Rum got him down and he finished up at Scarborough, mostly at the local pub, leaving his wife to run the show. (They are both dead now so don’t worry about any libel actions).

Seating for the audience consisted of forms with no backs to them which became a bit uncomfortable after a couple of hours. Anyway the pictures of those days were very exciting and full of suspense — you were always waiting for Charlie Chaplin or some of his friends to fall down the open sewer vents and coal holes. On these occasions I always came out with “Napoleon’s Last Charge” which helped considerably even if there was little or no fighting. Anyway it suited the Cowboy and Indian films which had a good run.
The Scarborough Colliery was the only mine in 1914. Another was built later on at Wombarra, which latter place was little more than a name at that time. Whilst I lived there the road from Wollongong was lit by electricity. I think it was extended from Thirroul. There was great excitement and the beer flowed at the local pub.

There have been many slips in the road at Scarborough and there is now little or no room between the railway and the sea. In my day there was a fair-sized paddock running from the hotel to the Public School. I remember it well. After one of the slips of those times local children and myself slid down from the top to the beach on pieces of galvanised iron. Good sport but when I look back fraught with plenty of danger. Anyway we didn't worry. That's what parents were for.

As I had passed the Q.C. (twice) when living in the country I went to High School. There was no room at Wollongong (Keira St) so I went to North Newtown Intermediate High School near the Sydney University. The train left Scarborough at 6.25 a.m. and returned at 9 p.m. the same night of course. It ran from Wollongong to Sydney and the guard was a well known identity, Joe King. The train both officially and unofficially was known as JOE KING. During his lifetime and for many years afterwards Railway people never referred to it by the official number — it was always "JOE KING." King was a most kindly man and during the day in Sydney carried out many small commissions for people on the coast.

When the duplication of the line was in progress I was particularly impressed with the skill shown by the men — generally in their 50's — who put the finishing touches on the cutting with nothing more mechanical than a pick. Excavation in those days was done by pick and shovel and a horse and tip dray and a very good job they made of it. The workmen lived mostly in shanty towns along the line made of oat bags with a roof of canvas, and they were quite weatherproof.

Adjacent to the Stationmaster's residence an overhead passenger bridge was built to make access easy to the mine which was a hundred yards or so farther south. There were no such people as juvenile delinquents in those days and on Sunday afternoons a few of us used to enter the colliery buildings and remove handy light bulbs and drop them down the shaft to hear the excellent explosion that took place when they reached the bottom some hundreds of feet below. There was another entrance in the ocean cliffs which was used mainly to bring out the pit-ponies, over the week ends and holidays and when a strike occurred.
In those days no miner trusted the Company and all pay envelopes were closely checked by some competent person employed by the men. I remember that a young chap greatly retarded but exceptionally good at mental arithmetic did the job, and was never known to be wrong.

Just across from where I lived was the fan-house and I remember I was most interested in the big fly-wheel and the other machinery in the building. The engine driver was a man named Wilson who had a wooden leg, having been severely injured in an accident some years before.

Scarborough in those days had a population of say 250 but then the total population of the present City of Greater Wollongong was only 6,700 of whom four and a half thousand lived in Wollongong.

Surfing was becoming popular along the coast and, whilst Scarborough did not have a life-saving club, we had a reel, and it was the particular delight of young boys to get down ahead of the grown-ups, attach the belt to themselves and swim out to the full length of the rope, and then be pulled back to the beach, half drowned in the process. It was good fun, believe me!

When I was in Scarborough we had plenty of military training. There were junior cadets (12-14), senior cadets (14-15), and militia (18 to 25), I think I was in the seniors and thoroughly enjoyed it. We had real rifles and real bullets to play with. One hot Saturday afternoon when for some reason or other there was no parade, another young chap and myself "borrowed" two rifles and about 200 rounds of ammunition from the local tin shed where they were supposed to be safely locked up. Well, they weren’t. We had no trouble breaking in and getting the stuff.

Then we made our way up over the mountain and blew limbs off trees, filled the trunk of others with lead and had a go at anything living but got nothing. After dark we got our rifles, pretty thickly coated with lead, back to the shed and went home to a well-earned tea. After tea we wandered down the street only to find that the local Sergeant of Police was looking for the birds that had been making such a dreadful row up in the hills. We thought it advisable to retreat according to plan, as they say, and, much to the surprise of our mothers, said that instead of going to the pictures we would go to bed. Anyway there were no ill effects other than a sore shoulder and a aching trigger finger. I reckon we got out of that one lightly. Of course I think the fact that there were no juvenile delinquents in those days helped quite a deal.
Scarborough, for a brief moment, became somewhat famous during the 1914-18 war. Wombarra practically didn’t exist in those days. All that part was known as Scarborough. There was a fine two storey brick building set up amongst the gum-trees commanding a wonderful view of the Pacific Ocean. Well, one day a train debouched a dozen or more detectives, both civil and military, who hired a couple of cars, drove down to this building which was being used as a boarding house and arrested a suspected spy. She was of Austrian origin. There were one or two German sea-raiders about and it was said she was signalling these boats every night. She had an aerial going up the chimney and thus well away from prying eyes. Naturally nothing appeared in the papers and the excitement petered out. But I believe it was genuine. The enemy ships were receiving information about shipping in the vicinity of Sydney.

This is not an historical essay and is not intended as such. It is no more than my own personal impression of those days which are as correct as my memory allows.