AS IT WAS:

One tends, at any given time, to regard the way of life and conditions then existing as being more or less the ultimate in progress and with little more to be expected in the future.

As schoolboys over half a century ago we would have been very sceptical of the idea that trains would be hauled by diesel power and the familiar steam locomotive just a fading memory. Similarly with moon landings, space satellites, nuclear power, jet engines, 400 seat aircraft, hovercraft, hydrofoil ferries, helicopters, television, radio broadcasting, stereograms, automatic telephones and domestic electricity and all its associated home appliances. What we did not have we did not miss nor did we visualise that such science-fiction innovations would become commonplace part of our lives in our own lifetime.

A day in the existence of a schoolboy travelling from "south" to Wollongong by train during World War I would provide a convenient peg on which to hang some facets of things as they were then.

On leaving Unanderra station the train slowed down again in passing the "Cokeworks" signal box which controlled the main line crossing with the Mt. Kembla colliery line to Port Kembla. There was an exchange of signal staffs between the engine crew and the signal box operator Norman Smith, the then Mayor of Wollongong.

Passing through what was yet to evolve as the suburb of Coniston it was usual to see the horse drawn mail and passenger coach at full gallop along the "Thumb" road, late as always, heading for a rendezvous with our train.

Wollongong station at that time consisted of the original single platform from which there was an uninterrupted view westwards along the floor of the valley—occupied by a couple of farmlets and windmills—into the wilds of Woodlawn and Mangerton.

On entering the station the engine slowed down to a crawl while porters Rubenach, Catterill and Benniss locked successively the doors to all the dog-box type carriages, then with the train safely at rest the doors would be unlocked, tickets examined or collected and passengers released in a mad rush for the refreshment rooms, where those who had been travelling since early morning would mop up vast quantities of porridge, sausages and bacon and eggs. During this wait stationmaster Powell, bearded and a replica of King Edward VII, raced about bawling orders to which nobody seemed to listen.

While the locomotive was taking in water an examiner walked the length of the train performing the macabre task of tapping wheels with a hammer to check on any possibility that they might collapse. Then the loco shunted to the storage siding to collect two extra carriages for addition to the front of the train.

With passengers fed and re-embarked the train headed north for a rendezvous with a helper engine at Stanwell Park which assisted in the slow and suffocating 1 1/2 mile uphill haul through Otford tunnel to emerge at Otford station for more water and a crossing with the morning train from the city to Nowra.

Further on at Waterfall there was another short wait during which time an old character named Murphy hurried from carriage to carriage with a basket of fruit. His chant of "Any fruit, any fruit, any
rotten pears, any sour apples, all skin and no juice" was well known to South Coast train travellers.

Every few weeks a consignment of bullion was sent to Sydney by the E.R. & S. Company and would be waiting on a luggage trolley at Wollongong station for the train’s arrival under the eyes of two men armed with shot guns.

The contract for “express” delivery of parcels from the railway to businesses and private homes was held by one Jim Bugden, whose horse drawn open cart was usually in process of being loaded up at the parcels office as we left the station.

The walk up Station Street to Crown Street was made to the accompaniment of screaming circular saws and the chuff of a steam engine at Waters’ sawmill at the rear of the present store. Parsons’ sawmill, at the rear of their hardware store beside the Methodist church in Crown Street, in similar fashion created daylong noise problems in the Courthouse area.

The sight of McQuirk’s vans and wagonettes delivering casks of beer to hotels and cases of merchandise to businesses in Crown Street was an indication that either “Benandra” or “Bodalla” of the Illawarra Steam Navigation Co. had visited Wollongong overnight with a consignment of general cargo from Sydney.

As we trudged down Crown Street headed for the High School (then known as Wollongong District School and located in part of Smith Street primary school) the various shops were usually arranging their outside display of goods: Cram’s general store on the west corner of Atcheson Street festooning the frontage with tubs, buckets, brooms, wash boards, working boots and mops; drapery shops such as Lances, Wallers and Connollys had doorway displays of bolts of dress materials, flannels and footwear.

Each shop swept its own footpath area and it seemed mandatory that this chore should be carried out by the proprietor or manager in person; the object presumably was “to see and be seen” and today would be known as good public relations. However, the mind boggles at the thought of today’s department store and business managers performing similarly with the aid of a broom and a bucket of wet sawdust. One such friendly footpath operator was Mr. V. Hannam, who ran a small furniture business near the present Commonwealth Bank frontage. It was a tragic event when, returning to Wollongong after delivering furniture in the Dapto area in an open cart and jogging through the township during a thunderstorm, he was struck and killed by lightning.

Throughout the day, school was conducted to the accompaniment of the shrill whistling of the Mt. Keira coal trains as they emerged from the Church Street cutting beside the present-day Master Builders’ Club en route to the harbour, and gave warning to street traffic at Kembla Street and Corrimal Street level crossings. This standard gauge line merged with the 3ft. 8½in. gauge line from Mt. Pleasant colliery, which traversed the sea front from Stuart Park.

From the schoolground there were usually visible the masts and funnel of a collier loading coal in Belmore Basin; “Five Islands” and “Undola” were regular visitors in this trade, but in 1918 the latter disappeared without trace between Wollongong and Sydney after
possibly striking one of the floating mines laid by the raider "Wolf" in South Coastal waters.

Our walk back to Wollongong station after school often coincided with the progression of a funeral along Crown Street. It was customary as the horse-drawn hearse moved slowly along for all shops successively to close the front doors until the cortege had passed and for male pedestrians to lift hats and caps. This was the period when it was de rigueur for close male relatives to wear a black armband for three months and a black tie for the rest of the year. Female relatives hastened to buy black dresses, in which sombre garb many always appeared in public for the rest of their lives.

The long wait for the 5.30 p.m. Kiama train home was enlivened each day by the arrival of several "miners" trains bringing coal miners home from collieries to the north. With pit-top bath houses and change rooms still in the future, these men travelled in their wet and coal-impregnated work clothes and with faces, and undoubtedly throats, coated with coal dust; most carried either a large lump of coal on shoulders or else a sugar bag of smaller pieces for their kitchen stoves. There was always a general stampede into the railway refreshment room bar for a preliminary dust remover before heading for downtown hotels and a more thorough job of thirst quenching. The Railway Catering Department advises that in its heyday the refreshment rooms at Wollongong station employed twelve barmaids in addition to kitchen, counter and table staff.

Has the advent of all the items enumerated at the head of this article brought a corresponding upsurge in contentment and satisfaction with the daily round? I doubt it.

—B. E. WESTON.