

Tramlines track our history

Review - "The Era of the Bush Tram in New Zealand", by Paul Mahoney

IPL Books 1998, 192 pages. Reviewed by Peter Berg.



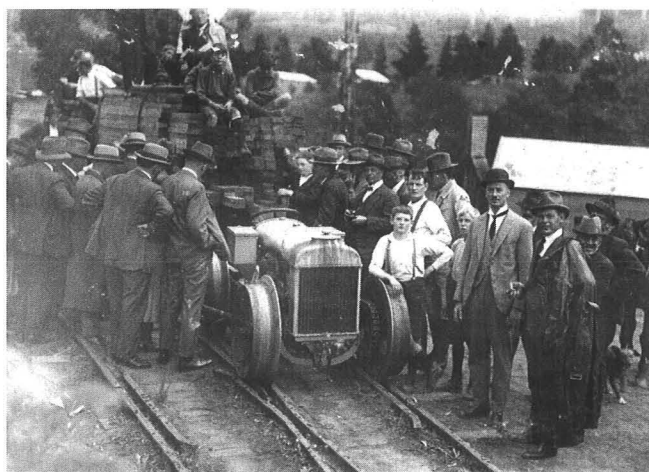
The extensive bush tram network rivalled the government's. (Jack's Mill)

In many respects the early colonisation and development of New Zealand was paralleled by the clearance, harvesting and utilisation of the country's native forests. Both bushmen and sawmillers were busy meeting the growing demand for timber for local construction, and logs and lumber for export. New Zealand's forest industry enjoyed premier status in the local economy, a situation that it is only now returning to but this time based upon the extensive pine plantations established through the twentieth century. At this time the local sawmill was as much a part of the fabric making up rural New Zealand as the local dairy factory-the skeletons of both are still quite common-place in many localities.

The very limited infrastructure available throughout much of the country during the nineteenth and early twentieth century meant that other methods were required to shift logs from the forest to sawmills, and sawn timber from there to the expanding towns and cities, or where ever else the product was destined. To assist with this hundreds, even thousands of kilometres of primitive railways, known as bush trams were built throughout the country, and as Mahoney notes "...rivalled the length of the Government Railways network".

"The Era of the Bush Tram in New Zealand" is the first attempt to comprehensively document the history of these bush tramways, and can be strongly commended for its coverage, outstanding illustrations and the easy-to-read style adopted by the author.

Paul Mahoney's interest in bush tramways relates in part to childhood outings to explore the Piha tram and his father's role as co-founder of the New Zealand Railway and Locomotive Society.



Bush trams played an integral role in sawmilling development. (J. Hermans tramway Warburton)

Later, more wide ranging family outings and access to father's library of reference material stimulated this interest. Subsequent training as a civil engineer, and since 1981 work in heritage management with first the Forest Service and later, the Department of Conservation (his present employer), has given him particular insight into the intricacies and merits of the various form of tram and locomotive developed. This insight helps the reader to better appreciate the achievements of those involved. Couple this with 20 years of data gathering, several hundred interviews with old-timers who had actually designed, built, driven or in some other way been associated with the operation of bush

trams, many personal visits to examine sites and machines, and you have the formula for what is undoubtedly the only truly comprehensive and living account of our bush trams.

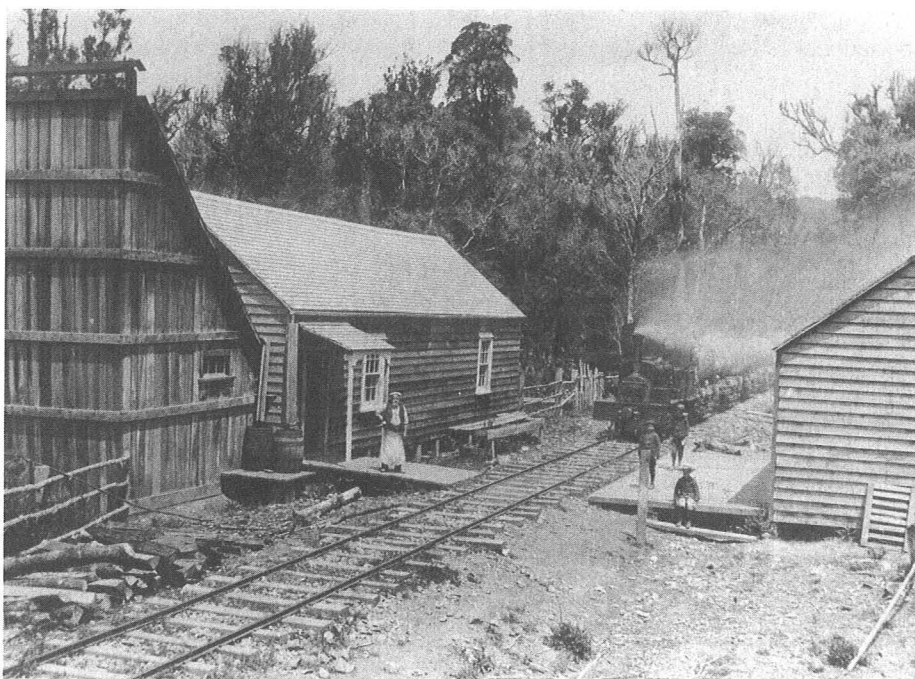
Operation of bush trams was both a hazardous and demanding occupation, consequently those who operated them were men of character, rough and ready but also men of ingenuity when circumstances required. Their anecdotal experience adds colour, interest and a realism that many other historical treatises lack - and gives the book its life. Thus it is easy to feel for poor Tom Kelly, crushed by his own tram in 1873, and for mill manager Tibbles and his three young charges who survived a high speed runaway and de-railment. In the early 1930's.

Mahoney explores in some detail the chronology of locomotives ("lokeys") that powered the trams, from purpose built

steam engines to the far simpler but still effective backyard built tractors (often a modified farm tractor, truck or even car). He also traces the path from simple horse drawn carriage running on wooden rails to the later and much more extensively engineered steel-railed tram ways with their carefully designed trellis bridges and even tunnel systems.

The book is completed with detailed registers of those tram ways still able to be visited and walked, Bush Lokeys and Rail Tractors that operated in New Zealand in chronological order, and details of references. Mahoney is to be particularly congratulated for ensuring that fully sourced and referenced copies of his manuscript have been deposited at the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington to assist any future research in this area.

Whenuakite - reflecting the proximity of communities, milling and bush trams.



Early Davidson loco with inside gears, D class boiler.



For those of us with an abiding interest in forestry, and particularly its contribution to the development of this country, this book is a must read. In many respects it evinces the character of the industry at the time, at times bold and inventive, at others rough and ready but almost always able to find a way - the same "kiwi" character that is associated with so much else that is New Zealand.

The book itself is A4 size and of coffee table quality. Layout is clear and logical and as noted earlier the book is extensively illustrated. It is a book that would sit well on the bookshelf of every New Zealand forester (and most other New Zealanders) hankering to better appreciate their (forestry) heritage.

Well done Paul Mahoney.

Footnote:- The book can be purchased from the author at 11 Huntingdon St, Wilton in Wellington for \$62.95 include p&p.