

THE GREAT TRANS-CONTINENTAL LINE

But by far the most outstanding achievement in the story of Australian railways was the construction of the trans-continental line between Port Augusta, South Australia, and Kalgoorlie, Western Australia. Before the laying of the last rail, 1,000 miles of almost waterless desert had been traversed and conquered, four-fifths of it totally uninhabited land. For five years an army of workers laboured hard and long in the burning desert wastes hundreds of miles from civilization and its comforts. Thirty of these men lost their lives in accidents or from disease. Total cost of construction was £6,674,278.

The story of the trans-continental railway really begins with the remarkable surveys conducted over the area in 1909 by J. F. Furner from the east and R. J. Anketed from the west. After enduring untold hardships, a route was mapped out by these men, and the 1,000-mile long railway more or less followed that route.

On September 14, 1912, to the cheers of crowds and amid general rejoicing, the first sod of the line was turned at Port Augusta by the Governor-General, the Rt. Hon. Thomas, Baron Denman. This was the beginning of the mighty five-year task. On February 12, 1913, the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. Andrew Fisher, performed a similar ceremony at Kalgoorlie, and from that day work progressed steadily from both ends.

It was a tremendous undertaking from every point of view. Starting with a staff of 30 persons and 161 construction workers in September, 1912, by 1916 the staff had increased to 306 and the number of construction workers to 3,395. This presented immense catering and accommodation problems, and a little "canvas town" was built near the rail head with schools, offices, recreation rooms, sports grounds, a bake house and other shops.

All supplies for the base camp had to come by way of the newly-constructed line; supplies for the advance clearing camp were conveyed from there by camel pack. The greatest single problem was water, for apart from the limited quantities obtainable from wells and artesian bores, all supplies required

by the workmen, their families and the many horses and camels employed on the job had to come by rail. Among other measures taken, eight asphalt-lined dams were constructed for the storage of water.

Day after day, month after month, year after year, the workmen toiled incessantly in the blistering desert heat laying sleepers, fitting rails, screwing bolts and driving heavy spikes. Day after day could be seen the same strange scene, the men bent diligently over their work, sweat glistening on their sun-burnt bodies, while all around them stretching as far as the eye could see lay the vast, treeless, lifeless, monotonous desert. At one stage in the Nullabor Plains area the line ran for three hundred and thirty miles without a single curve — still a world record for a straight railway line.

In all, more than nine hundred accidents occurred, twenty of which proved fatal. One hundred and twenty persons were attacked by disease and ten of these died.

At last at 1.45 p.m. on October 17, 1917, the rails from east and west met in the desolate sandhills near Ooldea. The task was over. Five days later, on October 22, at 9 a.m., the first train to run on the new line left Adelaide carrying the Governor of South Australia, and Sir John Forrest and his wife as passengers. Then on November 12 the great trans-continental line was finally opened for traffic.

MLA CITATION:

Blanche, Horace. *The Story of Australia Illustrated*. North York, 1955.