
THE LAST LINK.

A NATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT.

Over five years have elapsed since the first sod of the great trans-Australian railway was turned by Lord Denman — then Governor-General of the Commonwealth — at Port Augusta, and yesterday connection between East and West was completed. The “metals” were linked up a few miles west of the Ooldea Sandhills, which have been the most serious physical feature operating for delay in the work, some 623 miles east of Kalgoorlie. So long has lingered this vast undertaking — unexampled in some respects in the history of railway construction — that it requires a mental effort to realise its actual accomplishment. But, isolated as Western Australia has been from the rest of the Commonwealth during the

Years Which Have Elapsed

since Federal establishment, the connecting link could not have been forged at a more opportune moment. Our mails, our butter and sugar supplies, and hundreds of other every-day requirements for which the State depends upon oversea communication, have been interrupted, suspended, cut off — except for chance shipments — during nearly two months by eastern strike troubles and their sequences. The trans-Australian line comes to our rescue at a most momentous period in our history — a period of world war and industrial conflict in Australia.

Historically, the story of the trans-Australian line is almost coeval with the political history of the Commonwealth. In the first Australian Parliament, Sir John Forrest — who 47 years ago accomplished the first overland transit from West to East — set forth the essentiality of this great work to true federation. From 1901 onwards he kept this steadily before the Federal Legislature; and in office and out of office he persistently urged its claims. Gradually — very gradually — the

Eastern States Were Educated

to an appreciation of what they had contemptuously styled “The Desert Railway.” It was not until September 21, 1911, that the Bill that finally authorised the construction of the line was introduced in the House of Representatives. The third reading was passed on October 14, and, after considerable opposition in the Senate, the Bill was taken through that House in November, 1911.

Nearly another year elapsed before an actual commencement of work was made. The first sod was turned by Lord Denman, Governor-General of the Commonwealth, at Port Augusta September 14, 1912; and five months later (February 13, 1913) a commencement was made at the Kalgoorlie end. It was then anticipated that the line would be completed in three years; but strikes, political troubles, and war have not only subverted that anticipation, but have immensely increased the cost of the work as compared with the estimates. It will be time enough to go into the question of cost and its underlying causes when the full figures of expenditure are available. Just now the most salient fact is that the work is at last accomplished.

This railway is one of the world’s greatest utilitarian works. It did not, however, present any severe engineering difficulties, and its length (1,050 miles) was not unexampled. But it differed from all other enterprises of the character — from the Canadian-Pacific, the Trans-Siberian, the Cape to Cairo, and the United States Trans-American lines — in that it had to be constructed over 1,000 miles of entirely unpeopled, reputedly arid, and desert country. There was not even a village between Port Augusta West and Randalls (51 miles east of Kalgoorlie). The embryo settlements which stud the long straight course of the railway — Koronie, Zanthus, Rawlinna, Loongana — live, breathe and have their being in the railway, to serve which they were called into existence.

But the present is merely the birth-stage of occupation on the vast limestone plateau — in bygone ages merely sea bottom of the Great Australian Bight — now opened up to

Pastoral Development and Enterprise.

The “desert” theory of past years has been exploded. The rainfall of the plateau may be un-

certain, yet wells and bores throughout the long straight course of the railway demonstrate the existence in abundance of sub-artesian water, varying in quality from absolutely fresh to “good stock” standard. The heritage of this vast treeless plain, with its temperate climate and humid sea coast influences, will, ere many years have elapsed, support myriads of stock. It is infinitely more promising and attractive pastoral country than that to the north west of Port Augusta, which has been studded with thriving sheep stations for the last 35 years — though previously the aridity of that country had turned back the most intrepid Australian explorers.

Seventy-six years have elapsed since the dauntless Eyre forced his foodless way overland along the shores of the Great Australian Bight, from Fowler’s Bay to Albany. Thirty years later, Sir John Forrest crossed the limestone plateau from Western Australia to Port Augusta — a place he never again visited until he saw the first sod of the trans-Australian line turned there five years ago. In that famous journey Sir John recorded his deep regret that such a vast expanse of rich pastoral country should be waterless. The trans-Australian railway construction has shown that the water is there, in abundance — below the surface.

From the picturesque viewpoint this straight, level line for 1,050 miles will not present spectacular attractiveness to the thousands of Eastern people who will soon travel over it. From Kalgoorlie, 385 miles from Perth, and at an elevation of 1,240 feet above sea level, the railway passes through lightly timbered country of the familiar diorite goldfields character for some sixty miles, and then enters on a granite belt, where mallee and spinifex appear and where

Great Reservoirs Have Been Excavated,

not in vain, to conserve the rainfall. Then about 150 miles east of Kalgoorlie the railway slopes gradually down to the vast treeless limestone plateau, which in imperceptible undulations extends over 600 miles eastward at elevations varying from 600 to 300 feet.

The South Australian border crossed at 455 miles east of Kalgoorlie makes no difference in the

monotony of the aspect; but at Ooldea, 630 miles out and 420 miles from Port Augusta, sand hills — very trouble-some sand hills — vary the scene. It is near here that the two railheads met yesterday, while the official “opening” ceremony will be at Wynbring, 140 miles further east, where the tableland drops to 389 feet above sea level. Thereafter, on a rising grade and in a timbered country, the line runs to once golden Tarcoola and to pastoral Kingoonyah. At the Pines it descends, from a stony tableland to the old sea bottom which, saltbush carpeted, extends 100 miles to Port Augusta.

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