Salt Clay Creek accident

Wayne Doubleday

The ill-fated mail train consisted of engine and tender, a second-class carriage, a sleeper carriage, a first-class carriage, a mail van and a brake van. At designated places during the trip, all trains were routinely checked by carriage examiners; this train was inspected at Junee as usual and the brakes, wheels, etc. were in order.

An ill-fated train

This train left Bethungra at 7.14am and arrived at the washed out culvert at 7.45am. As the train turned the bend it was evident the embankment had washed away and Driver Moody slammed on the brakes. Sadly, this action came too late and the engine tumbled first, almost standing upright. The second-class carriage and the mail van went next, crashing alongside the engine; the sleeping van followed with the first-class carriage falling and telescoping it, splitting the roof and sides. The brake van was the last to fail.

Immediately following the accident, the area was a scene of confusion. It was dark and pouring with rain; on the Cootamundra side of the creek there were about 30 people who had managed to escape from the carriages before they toppled into the creek.

Seven people were killed: Mrs Mary Hodson, wife of John Hodson, ironmonger of Fitzmaurice Street Wagga; Joseph Campbell, railway freeman; travelling as a passenger; Alfred Wilson, railway guard; John Hade, 5 years old from Cooma; William Bergren, 25 years of age from Carcoar; John O’Drayer and Harry Holmes.

An hour passed before medical assistance could reach the site. One of the Cobb and Co’s coaches tried to manoeuvre through to the scene but the wet ground would not take the weight. After being forced to abandon several light buggies, they managed to get through.

Mr M Solomon’s Assembly Hall was used as a temporary hospital and by midnight all the injured were accommodated except for one man – Mr Stone – who proved to be very difficult to move from the site and he was admitted about 1am.

There were about 23 passengers who sustained slight to severe injuries, including spinal and internal injuries, broken ribs, severe bruising, broken bones, cuts and abrasions. Driver Moody was badly shocked.

The passengers who escaped without injury were Henry Giles and JW Wood of Albury; J McDonald, Fidsy Petersen, Oscar J Knowman, Wellesly Willman of Wagga, Lamby of Dunedin; Zunker, B Murphy and E Gomm of Bay and Mrs Ryan of Temora.

Continued difficulties

FURTHER tragedy was averted when the guard, Samuel Murray, who was not injured, remembered that a goods train was following. He managed to get some fog signals and a red light off the rear of his van. He ran back on the line and when he met the goods train he stopped it and the crew were able to get back to Bethungra.

A wire was sent to Inspector Roberts of Junee informing him of the accident.

Mr Roberts arrived at the scene in a special engine from Junee and arrangements were made for a temporary railway line to be constructed over the gaps.

However, owing to a heavy thunderstorm, realising 128 points of rain on Tuesday, January 27, the temporary line was completely washed away stopping railway traffic once again.

Until arrangements could be made for the reconstruction of the permanent line, passengers were compelled to walk a distance of about 300 metres to join a train and continue their journey in either direction.

A comprehensive coronial enquiry report of this tragic accident can be read in the Wagga Wagga Advertiser in the editions of January 27 and 28, 1885.