

From "Provincial Pride" No 8, August 1962

WAGGON WAYS

by MARGARET S. SHAW.

With the present preoccupation with roads and transport, travelling times, petrol consumption, reduced mileages, etc., etc., it is relaxing to look back on the days when travel was leisurely and distance a reality, when grandfather went on foot about his business or relied on horse for conveyance. By the year 2048 the day of the horse will occupy a very small space in Otago's story, and that of the working bullock even less. They will probably be described as a picturesque, and necessary, phase of life introduced from the "old world" and quickly disposed of with the advent of mechanism. Last winter's champion ploughing match on the Taieri demonstrated the interesting, and sad, fact that an exhibition of horses drawing a plough already attracts crowds of curious and excited spectators, children and adults alike.

I intend, here, to write a little about early horse transport around West Taieri, basing my information on notes and reminiscences supplied by the older folk during the gathering of material for the Taieri Centennial history.

Possibly the oldest direct highway running north and south through the Taieri is that which skirts the base of the North Taieri hills and Maungatua, passes Lake Waihola on the west, and continues southwards.

The Maoris certainly followed a track this way, the surveyor Tuckett made note of it in 1844 and several of the first settlers on the Taieri came this way.

For years after 1848, settlement on both sides of the plain developed separately, the bogs dividing them, and while the east route, the present Main South road, increased in popularity with travellers in general, the west route continued to be patronized by carters and drovers. The reason for this preference is explained in an advertisement in a "Witness" of 1857 where the west route is described as : "...the high road by which all cattle and sheep travelling from Canterbury to the southern portion of this Province are in the habit of passing, as they avoid the expense of ferrying the Taieri." Among the notables who came this way was Mackenzie, the sheep stealer, who occasionally supped with a friend in north Taieri while the Rhodes brothers of S. Canterbury were putting a price on his head in a bid to trace their missing sheep !

At that time the river could be forded at West Taieri, some way below the present traffic bridge, and the track south continued directly through the site of the present town of Outram. Sheep travelling from Canterbury to Central Otago, via the Taieri, at that time would come by way of the treacherous road over Swampy and Flagstaff, and, from West Taieri inland, they would follow a route almost as hazardous. After fording the Taieri river the road turned sharply to the right and ran for a short distance towards the Richardson's property in what is now known as the Outram Glen, at the foot of the Hindon road. At an early date Thomas Richardson set up a flour-mill in the Glen and picnickers today are indebted to him and his enterprising, garden loving family, for the trees which shelter and beautify this quiet corner. The road to Central Otago, however, turned up-hill before arriving at the flour-mill and, passing the site of the present reservoir, continued over the hills, crossing Lee Stream, Deep Stream, the Rock and Pillar range, and Rough Ridge, into the bleak highlands of the interior.

One of the first to drive a bullock waggon this way was young Donald Borrie, son of James Borrie, of Huntly, a boy of seventeen. Mr. Thompson, who had engaged Donald to cart stores to his Central Otago sheep run, rode ahead as guide, a very necessary precaution as in places the tussocks were so tall the young waggoner could only see the rider's head and shoulders above them. They took three weeks to reach their destination. By 1861 it is recorded that at least five drays had made the journey inland this way.

The West Taieri centre of population, until the mid 1860's, was Woodside, then called Maungatua, a settlement of farm steadings and sawyers' cottages set in the bush which then extended well down on to the plain. Back in Lee Creek glen was Mann's sawmill. The road between the settlement and the river was more closely settled than it is now and, during the gold rush, hotels, stables, stores and smithies were also added with a greater concentration of building and business near the ford which, sometime earlier,

had been supplemented by a ferry. In fact, until the settlement was given the official name of Outram, it was generally referred to locally as the Ferry.

The first rush was to the Tuapeka goldfields, and those going by West Taieri, after crossing the river, followed the original Central Otago track to a point above Harvey's Flat where they then branched off up a spur of Maungatua, passed along the north west face of the mountain, over the tussocky hills around Waipori and down into Gabriels Gully and Weatherstones. The local waggoners were soon out on this trail loaded with swags, flour and timber, the latter carted by bullock waggon by Mann himself from his mill in Maungatua glen. The spectacular hold-ups by Garrett and his gang took place on this route, in the bush high above Woodside.

The epic journeys inland, however, took place during the Dunstan rush when diggers and drays followed, with vexatious deviations and variations, the original track inland taken by young Donald Borrie and the store waggons. Here is a description of a trip to the Dunstan made by D. Jenkins and J. Hughes in 1862 :—"With a dray and three horses each their loads consisted of twenty diggers with swags—a total of forty-two men all in the prime of life...Occasionally one dray at a time would have to be hauled up the steep places (the six horses working together) the diggers carrying most of the dray loads on their backs. If a creek looked boggy the horses were unyoked, the drivers taking them on a detour to find a safer crossingand the dray and contents would be hauled across the bog by sheer man power. The track was defined by piles of stones here and there. There being no rabbits at this time and fires not having denuded the hills and valleys of their vegetation there was plenty of natural food for the horses. At night some of the diggers slung their tents between the two drays, others sheltered among the rocks or, if available, crept under the tall snow-grass tussock. The charge for the trip was £10 per man with his gear"

And that was a comparatively easy trip !

I have not come across any account of a coach having climbed the hill above Richardson's Glen. Early in the gold rush the present road above the West Taieri church was made. It crossed the Tuapeka track above Harvey's Flat and joined the original Dunstan road further on and was thereafter known as the Mountain Road. But, though access to the beginning of the road was made easier, the precipitous grades, the bends, and bogs were not eliminated, nor the dangers from storm and snow on the Rock and Pillar range, and eventually this route was abandoned by the coaches, though not by the waggoners, for the road via Palmerston and the Pigroot.

In consequence of the coaching stables, police headquarters, court house and general business being established near the river, Outram gradually superseded Woodside as the chief settlement in West Taieri, and, during the years following the gold rush, the new township became the hub, so to speak, of a thriving carting industry. Indeed the tradition has continued to the present day with the fleet of trucks carting gravel from the river to the new airport at Momona.

During the 1870's until the branch railway from Mosgiel arrived at Outram, bullock and horse transport carted goods far and wide on the plain and the hills. A familiar sight was W. Petrie's waggon on the Berwick road "sixteen or eighteen bullocks trudging slowly round to Richardson's flour-mill in the Outram Glen, or on its way to the miners at Post Office Creek" (Post Office Creek being back on the Waipori goldfields). It is pleasing to relate that this great waggon has been preserved and may now be seen in the Otago Early Settlers' Museum in Dunedin.

Another picturesque character on the road was 'Night and Day' Smith who, as the name implies, had an insatiable capacity for work. "At early daybreak Smith was up," writes Dr. R. V. Fulton in his book on early days, "his horses fed and he himself ready for the road before the other fellows had stirred. In this way he prospered...."

Later, when Outram became the terminus of the branch railway, carting was directed chiefly into the hills and the station yard and goods-shed became the depot for goods for the distant sheep stations, stores for the remaining miners in the hills, and gear for the new project, the hydro electric works . at Waipori. Timber and firewood for consignment inland from Mann's Woodside sawmill was stacked at the foot of the hill near the West Taieri church. Year by year, however, as roads improved and the combustion engines increased in power, the motor truck took over, the carters and their teams pulled out until, by the time Otago was celebrating its centennial year, there was scarcely a horse-drawn vehicle on the road.

With their passing we are the losers for, apart from the character of the drivers, there was surely never a grander sight on the roads than a well matched, well kept team of draught horses bringing in the season's wool clip. The contribution of the working horse to the opening up and settling of our country—making it safe for the motor cad—compares very favourably with the deservedly lauded efforts of our grandfathers themselves.

Here are some reminiscences of H. McBryde, one of the last of the West Taieri waggoners who, in his youth, knew many of the original drivers to the back country.

"Caught in the big snow storm in July 1903, J. Hughes and I had to leave the waggons loaded with dredge timber. We were on the way to Waipori. It started to snow about three in the afternoon, in a short time I could not see past the shafters, the other team was following close behind. I had to walk up to the leaders, keeping them on the road, and was glad when we reached the hut to camp. In the morning two large heaps of snow was all that could be seen of the waggons. Catching a horse each we drove the others back to Outram. It was six weeks before we got back to shift the waggons."

On another occasion, J. Hughes, W. Ferguson and H. McBryde left Outram with three eight-horse waggons to cart wool from Blackstone Hill station to Dunback. Two of the waggons were loaded with stores, one with oats for the horses and their first stop was at Walsh's Deep Stream Hotel where the waggoners spent the night. Unfortunately they left the waggon with the oats camped in the dry bed of the stream. "A warm wind was blowing," continues the writer "which at night increased to a gale. Coming out of the hotel in the morning we were surprised to find the stream in flood, the water flowing over the waggon wheels—the warm wind had melted the snow on the Lammerlaws. It took us two days to dry out the oats, spread on tarpaulins."

Here is a true tale of chivalry—"Camped one night at the Eldorado Creek, on the road to Waipori Falls, Mick Black and I had our waggons loaded each with a large pipe for the Falls. We had gone to bed in a small hut when we heard a vehicle coming down the hill. Going outside we found two Salvation Army lasses with a horse and dog-cart. Someone had directed them on the wrong road. The roads were bad and their horse about done. We fed their horse and themselves and gave them the use of the hut. Mick and I slept inside the pipes."

Here is the story of a hazard encountered on the old "Mountain Road" which the waggoners continued to use long after the gold rush. To be weatherbound on the Lammerlaws was not such an ordeal—making for a shepherd's hut one always found plenty of mutton and a good peat fire to sit at. On one occasion, having part of a load for an old miner he insisted on me staying for a bite to eat. After feeding the horses I went into the hut, the inside was dark, the place black with peat smoke. He had plenty of mutton, and had just baked the last of his flour and produced a large, round loaf out of his camp-oven. With mutton, bread and butter, washed down with hot tea I was enjoying everything only, now and again, striking hard bits in the bread I placed them round the edge of my plate. "There's not much taste in these seeds, Jim," I said He replied, "They're not carraways, the fact is the mice got into my flour—have another piece." "No thanks, I've done fine !"

"The horses did not like the appearance of the cyclist or motor car. The waggon horses being well fed and full of life anything strange caused the drivers to be on the alert. Once meeting a cycling club of 20 or 30 members on a bend near the West Taieri church the leaders simply turned round. One had to jump from the waggon seat and catch them by the head. This completely blocked the road. One by one the cyclists jumped off until a heap of cycles were all over the road. This was the day of the high wheel known as the "Penny Farthing".

"On another occasion at Lee Stream Hotel when the horses were feeding round the waggons, preparatory to starting the day's journey, the chug-chug of a motor car caused a stampede. Fortunately they ran into a paddock. The motorist was Mr. Hunter-Weston of Cottesbrook Station and, getting aboard, I had my first ride in a motor car, to the top of the hill where the horses had gone."