

TRAVEL EXPERIENCES AT FIFTY-TWO SOUTH

by Ken Mills

Bitterly cold and strong winds howled across the bleak plains and filtered through the broken windows, badly fitting doors, and the damaged floor boards. The only source of welcome warmth was a red-hot coal stove around which sat four shivering travelers huddled on comfortless wooden benches, staring at the singing kettle. If this sounds like a description of the Yukon during the gold rush, let me tell you that it was our home for some nine hours on a late-summer day in March of 1972. The setting was a railway carriage at the rear end of a train traveling on the southernmost railway in the world.

It all began in Banfield, a quiet residential suburb of Buenos Aires. There I spent a wonderful afternoon with Ingeniero Porta, who must be the world's most enthusiastic and active advocate of steam power. We discussed the railways and locomotives in Argentina, France, and Britain while studying his latest propositions for the future development and improvement of the steam locomotive. The subject turned inevitably to the Rio Turbio line. "My toy railroad" as Senor Porta so nicely describes it. When I said that I had planned to visit that line during my trip, he promptly typed out an introductory letter to Senor Boichetta, the Locomotive Engineer for the railway. Armed with this letter and a couple of warm jerseys, my wife and I boarded the southbound jet for Rio Gallegos.

After a cold arrival, the first stop was a centrally heated hotel in the centre of town and then a short walk to the railway installations by the river. Although the Loco Engineer was away on business, Porta's introductory letter brought us an instant welcome. We spent the afternoon chatting with Senor Kronlund, the civil engineer, about the construction of the line and arranged a journey to Rio Turbio the next day. We were to travel in a coach to be attached to the rear end of a train of empties. It was to leave Gallegos at 9:20 the following morning but we were advised to be in the yards at 8:30 to ensure that the train personnel knew of our intended trip and obtained a coach for our "comfort."

There was time the next day to have a quick look inside the small engine sheds which resemble a large Nissen hut. Eight of the tiny but powerful "Santa Fe" engines stood in the shed or the yard and another was in the workshops undergoing its periodic overhaul. Our engine was No. 113, and the train consisted of 51 empty coal wagons, two covered vans with supplies for Rio Turbio, and a little green coach at the rear. 54 bogies in all, the train weighed 460 tons. It stretched nearly a kilometre in length. At 9:35 we moved off and crossed the main road to the north and out in the wastelands of Patagonia.

Construction of the line is quite recent. Considering the climatic conditions prevalent in this area of continuous high winds and sub-freezing temperatures, it was decided that the line would have to be completed during the summer months from October to April. In May 1950 the start was made with preliminary work of organization and transport of the equipment to Rio Gallegos which had no port at the time. Everything, including the workers' houses, engine sheds, and tracks and sleepers had to be landed on the beach. A pontoon and two steam cranes were used to unload the materials and a steam tugboat stood by to steady the unloading ships against the waves and currents. From September 1950 to April 1951 more than 50,000 tons of materials which had come from Buenos

Aires, Bahia Blanca, and Puerto Madryn were unloaded across the beach in this manner. During August 1950 the houses and encampments made of stout wooden sleepers were erected in preparation for the start of construction as soon as the weather would permit.

Permanent-way laying began in September 1950 and continued until May when, with only 2 of the 162 miles left to complete, the weather broke with a vengeance in the form of a 3 day blizzard. Work stopped but the railway was already a reality. The final lap was finished in September 1951 after the worst of the cold winter had passed. Earthwork, are unimpressive, being restricted to narrow culverts, low embankments and shallow cuttings. The only noteworthy item is a 200 yard long bridge over the Gallegos River at kilometre post 182.

Riding was smooth in the little coach, a sister to those on the Esquel line of the Roca. Over the sturdy track, with its earth ballast, the train travelled through rather uninteresting countryside, clocking a steady 20-25 miles an hour. The engine was rarely heard in spite of its hard work for its labors were far away at the front end.

Palermo Aike was our first stop at 34 kms and it is typical of station on the line with a passing loop and a permanent way encampment. Here three derelict Henschel 2-8-2s were stored along with many of the original 4-wheel wagons used in the construction of the line over 20 years ago. Eight Henschels were brought to the line from Puerto Madryn during the busy summer months of 1950 and 1951. They worked the traffic until being replaced by the first batch of the modern and more powerful Santa Fes in 1956. There was no trace of the other five engines.

From km. 50 the line starts to curve in common with the river and occasionally a white-washed farmstead breaks the monotony of the landscape. Continuous winds make living hard and the flora is reduced to a few hardy scrub-like bushes. Somehow ostriches, foxes, sheep and the guanaco, a relative of the llama, eke out a livelihood. Photography is difficult with sand and grit from the strong westerlies blowing into all the equipment.

Bella Vista, the third stop, is a tiny village nestled against rows of planted trees which are maintained by the villagers as protection from the high winds. The station boasts two loops and the usual trackmen's quarters. Train crews change at La Sofia, km. 136. From here, Turbio men take over the train for the second half of the journey. At km. 167, some permanent way operations were being carried out and No. 109 stood on-hand with the wagons of sleepers and rails. We crossed the long bridge over the river and a few miles farther on stopped at Glencross station. The nearby estancia and attendant clusters of houses made a pretty sight in the lowering sunlight.

Two passengers disembarked at El Turbio, km. 229. From here onwards, as we neared the Chilean border, small stunted trees, heather, and white flowers appeared on the hillside and river bank. Following the Turbio River, the scenery became more pleasant before we swung round the bend at La Dorotea and opened up for the long climb to the terminus in the coal washing siding at Rio Turbio. The Dorotea locomotive depot is another Nissen-hut construction and here are maintained the engines kept at this end of the line for shunting the sidings at the pithead.

Our coach was uncoupled from the rear of the train and taken back to La Dorotea by the light engine. We arrived at the depot tired, hungry, and very cold. We need not have worried because we were greeted by Senor Salvador who quickly showed us into our own personal quarters in the railway hostel. Quickly a hot meal was prepared for us, washed down with red wine, and this put us at ease while we talked

with the friendly Works Engineer.

During our meals that night and the next, the evening train for Gallegos thrashed down the hill and disappeared round the curve past the hostel at La Dorotea. I realized that this was what the line was all about, for each of those two trains were loaded up to 1,700 tons, yet seemingly the little Santa Fes made an easy task of their work. Surely the sight of a 75 cm. gauge 2-10-2 hauling a coal train of 1,700 tons nearly a kilometre long is an unusual sight and is possibly without equal in the world today. Congratulations are due to Ingeniero Porta for giving such value to the steam locomotive image in recent years.

Coal was discovered in Turbio many years ago but only in the last three decades have the commercial possibilities been investigated. Plans to export coal by rail have been altered since the first moves made in 1943 when it was decided to push a line via El Zurdo, near the Chilean border, across to Santa Cruz which already had port facilities. Pessimistic estimates of the amount of coal available brought this idea to a halt but when newer estimates of 100,000,000 tons were made in 1946, the plans were revived. By 1948, a routine topographical survey lent favour to using the Turbio and Gallegos River valleys for the new line. The advantages were that this route was 86 miles shorter than the Santa Cruz plan, that the easier gradients would allow more tonnage, and the disruption by snowdrifts would be lessened. The obvious drawback was the need to construct a new port at Gallegos.

Our Turbio day was aided by the car and driver provided at our disposal and was spent visiting the various installations at the mine, the railway workshops, and the town. One of the interesting items still intact and to be preserved was an old Sentinel steam lorry which was to truck the coal to Gallegos before the railway was built. The Sentinels were replaced by diesel trucks but they were never so hard on maintenance as the diesels. However, they consumed a large proportion of their load on the return trip to Gallegos, leaving precious little coal for export. The evenings passed quickly with a group of British mining work study experts on contract to YCF, the Argentine Coal Board.

The return to Gallegos was in a Permanent Way department rail-bus as there was no coal train until late in the evening and a night crossing the Patagonian plains in a bedless coach sounded like too much adventure and not enough comfort for us. Train services vary with mine output but there are two basic services in each direction, leaving either end at approximately 9:00 and 19:00. Present timings allow ten hours for loaded trains but with the new wagons being supplied with roller bearings and improved bogies, it is estimated that 8½ hours will be possible. Coal production could improve by 300% if present explorations are successful. Perhaps more steam locomotives may be required in the future if traffic increases substantially.

We spent another day at Gallegos in the company of Senor Kronlund while awaiting the next bus to Rivadavia. By waiting, we were able to meet Senor Boichetta who had returned from his business trip to the capital. We talked about railways in general and before I left, he presented me with a line drawing of one of the little Santa Fe type engines. He mentioned that it was difficult to retain experienced engineering staff in Gallegos. Most prefer low wages in Buenos Aires rather than the high salaries in the cold south. As our bus bumped northwards, we thought back on the pleasant 5 days spent visiting the line and the charming and helpful way in which we were treated at both ends of the line. Now, as I write this report from 52 North in England, it is hard to realize our vivid memories of Rio Gallegos occurred half a world away, at 52 South.