INFORMATION SHEET 31

REPRINTED MAY 1980

FORESTS DEPARTMENT WESTERN AUSTRALIA
PRODUCTION RECREATION CONSERVATION PROTECTION

A TRIP ON A BUSH LOCOMOTIVE

M. SOUTHCOMBE

What was it like to work on a timber mill locomotive? Let us take an imaginary trip and find out.

The story starts on a dark winter's morning. The mill town is in total darkness except for the glow from the firechute at the mill where the waste timber is burnt. In a large shed near the mill a young man is throwing wood into the firebox of the loco by the light of a "slushlamp", a contrivance like a coffee pot with a wick issuing from the spout emitting a smokey flame.

Having finished the fire, the cleaner dons a waterproof coat and with the slushlamp in hand, heads out to call the crew.

It is still dark when the glimmer of a hurricane lamp and voices announce the arrival of the driver and fireman. They immediately set to work, the driver oiling the working parts of the engine while the fireman busies himself in the cab raising steam, etc.

Having finished the oiling the driver climbs into the cab and the engine moves out to the wood stack where all hands throw firewood on to the tender until it is stacked high. Then having filled the tender with water they move on over the points and back to the waiting rake of empty log trucks.

Exactly at six o'clock the loco gives a shrill blast on its whistle and with a clatter of choppers the train is on its way. The only illumination is from an oil lamp which throws a feeble glow a few feet ahead. From the funnel of the engine a steady stream of sparks sail high into the air to fall back half-way along the rake where the guard sits huddled in his coat trying to keep dry in the driving rain.

Little can be seen for the first few miles, but as the wintery dawn breaks, huge trees can be seen growing almost to the edge of the line, for this is the heart of the jarrah forest which feeds the mill with logs.

Locomotives "Pioneer" and "Samson No. 2" with rake of logs, Jarrahdale Jarrah Forest and Railways Ltd., about 1897 (became Millars in 1902).

Soon the train comes to a branch in the line, and the guard turns the points and then enters a small tin shed which houses the telephone—the lifeline of this tiny railway system. Here he leaves the staff and fills in the book, giving the name of the loco, time and direction of travel.

Another blast of the whistle and the train is on its way down the branch line to the bush workings. On both sides of the line can be seen evidence of man's work. Tumbled forest giants lay on the ground denuded of their branches and bark. Soon the bush landing comes into sight. On one side is a huge iron monster, with a boiler and steam engine at one end from which a thick wire rope disappears into the bush. This is the steam hauler which was last used during the 1930s.

On the other side of the line is a small winch and boiler which is used to load the logs on to the train. A full rake is loaded, waiting, and the engine shunts the empty rake into a siding, then hooks on to the full one.

Slowly, and with much skidding of wheels, the train gets under way. The train now is much longer than the empty one owing to the long steel bars being placed between the trucks to make them long enough for the logs to rest with one end on one truck and the other end on the truck following. If the log is very big, only one is placed on each set of trucks. However, the smaller ones are loaded two and sometimes three to a truck, the guard sitting on the last truck.

As the train gathers speed the logs sway alarmingly, but it is seldom that any leave the trucks.

On the steeper downhill runs, the loco sometimes gives a short blast on the whistle as a signal to the guard that the loco is unable to hold the load down to a safe speed. When this happens, the guard starts from the rear of the train and applies the brakes on the wagons, running along the top of the logs to get from one truck to another.

At the junction the fireman again picks up the staff if they are the only loco using the line. If not the staff is left and a ticket is written out as before.

Now it is possible to see the country that we traversed this morning. Mostly the forest is composed of massive jarrah trees but occasionally the line goes through a gully which is thick with bracken fern and redgums and blackbutts take the place of the jarrah.

A long-drawn out blast on the whistle warns that we are nearing the mill and soon the clearing comes into sight, with the small timber cottages of the workers on one side of the valley and the mill buildings on the other.

As the train draws into the landing the timber clerk is waiting to measure the logs before they are unloaded. The loco is uncoupled and makes its way again to the wood-stack to replenish the almost exhausted supply of firewood.

Soon, amid a thunder that shakes the very ground under your feet, the logs are rolling down the landing ready for the mill, but that is another story.

Our loco is now filled with wood and water, and as soon as the rake is unloaded we wave it goodbye as it starts on another trip to the bush.