

CQ CITY RECALLS COLOURFUL

Puffing billies carried everyone

By ANNE LLOYD

"Pie carts" they called them, or "puffing billies". But Rockhampton's steam trams won many a race against the city's buses, forbidden as the races were.

Between 1909 and 1939 they serviced the city, running on 3ft 6inch (1 metre) gauge tracks along 6½ miles (10.4km) of streets.

Blasts of steam shot up from their miniature funnels and occasionally sparks would fly, when a driver, acting against regulations, stoked up the boiler with a hefty piece of timber.

The old trams transported thousands and were responsible for open-

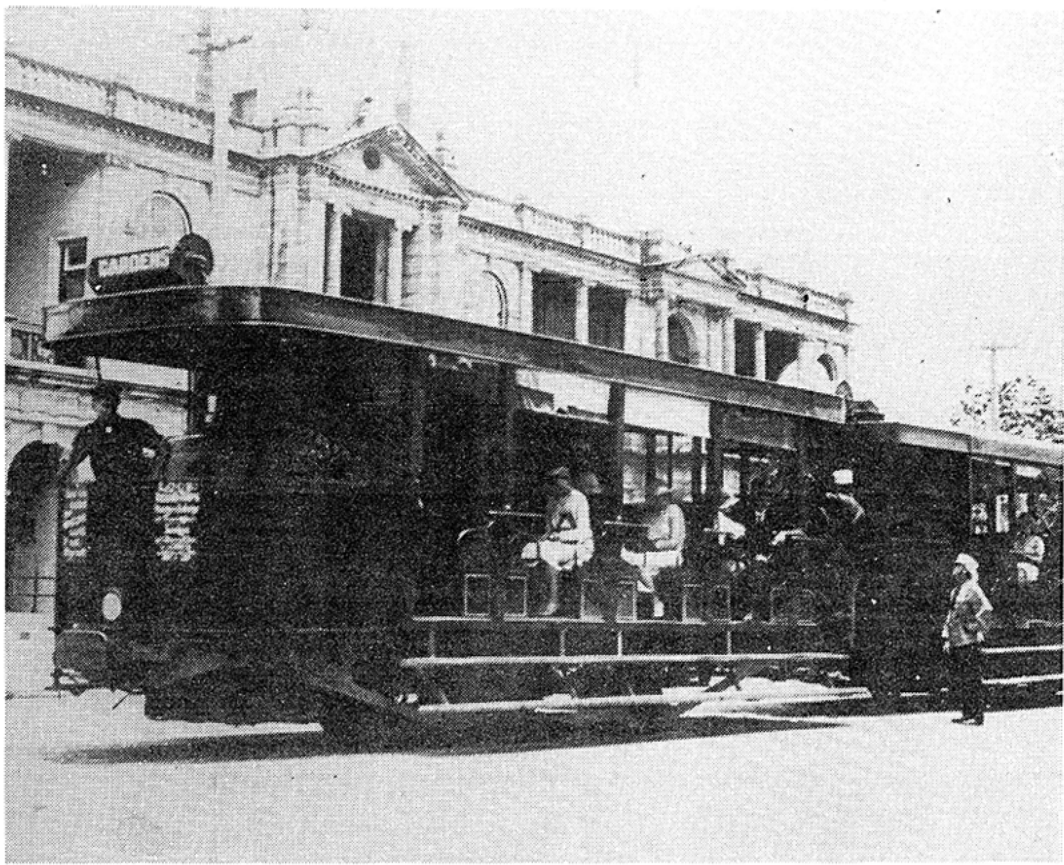
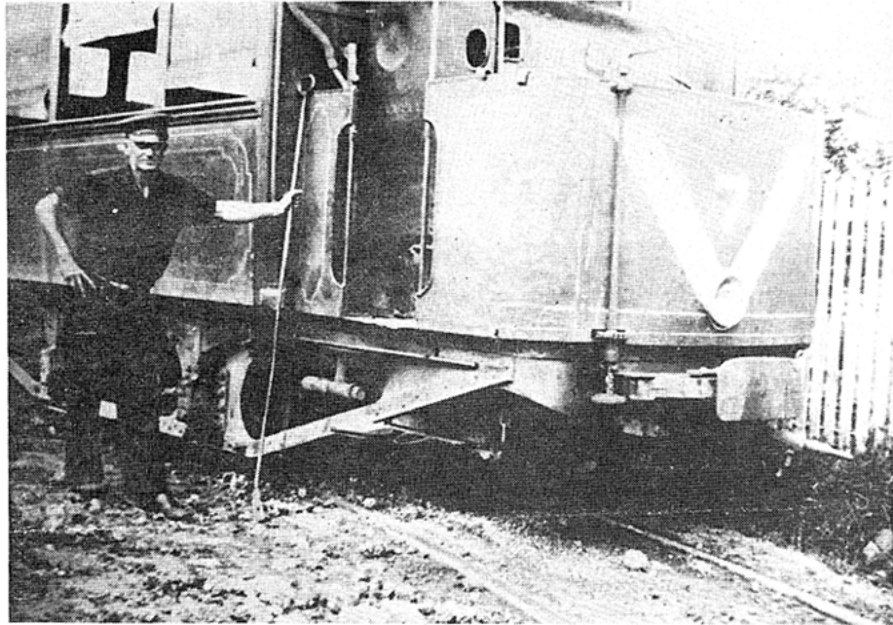
ing up a number of the city's residential areas.

The only reminders today are a little remaining tram line in Wandal Road (the rest has either been removed or covered with bitumen), occasional records and mementoes the nostalgic have treasured, and memories.

Rockhampton City Council's tram system was opened with two cars and two trailers on June 5, 1909, by the then Premier the Hon W. Kidston.

It would appear the system was opened in great haste in time for the 1909 Carnival, despite its incomplete state and apparently without anyone knowing very much about how to operate or maintain it.

A Brisbane daily newspaper described this sorry state of affairs



● RIGHT: A Rockhampton steam tram outside the post office
● FAR LEFT: Rockhampton's No. 7 steam tram.

Council to build tram model

Rockhampton City Council will reconstruct a working model of an old steam tram to commemorate the city's 75 years of public transport.

RCC transport manager Mr Doug Press said the model would be an exact replica of the trams which served the city between 1909 and 1939. It would be fired by coke.

A sub-committee comprising Rockhampton City Council and National Trust members, and Rockhampton scrap metal merchant Mr Steve Kele, were working jointly on the project.

"We have a number of parts and Mr Kele has some parts which, with drawings, can be used as models for the tram," Mr Press said.

"Nothing we have is functional."

Mr Press said the committee had been given several leads by a man resident in NSW, Mr Ken McCarthy.

One lead had resulted in locating an engine in Brisbane, the property of the Antique Machinery Restoration Society of Queensland.

There was also a rumour that one of the original steam trams was down a mine shaft at Strathplane, south of Hobart in Tasmania.

"If the story is true, it would simplify matters a lot."

"But I'm not getting excited yet."

"The tram is said to be a Purrey car fitted with two hoppers, and we believe that Rockhampton's car with two hoppers was converted quite early."

Mr Press said the Railways department was trying to locate plans of the Purrey Car and steam tram.

Mr McCarthy had also been in touch

with the manufacturing firm in France, and had been told that the Rockhampton steam tram relics were probably the only ones remaining in the world of trams manufactured between 1880 and 1920.

A reconstructed steam tram would hence be an item of international significance.

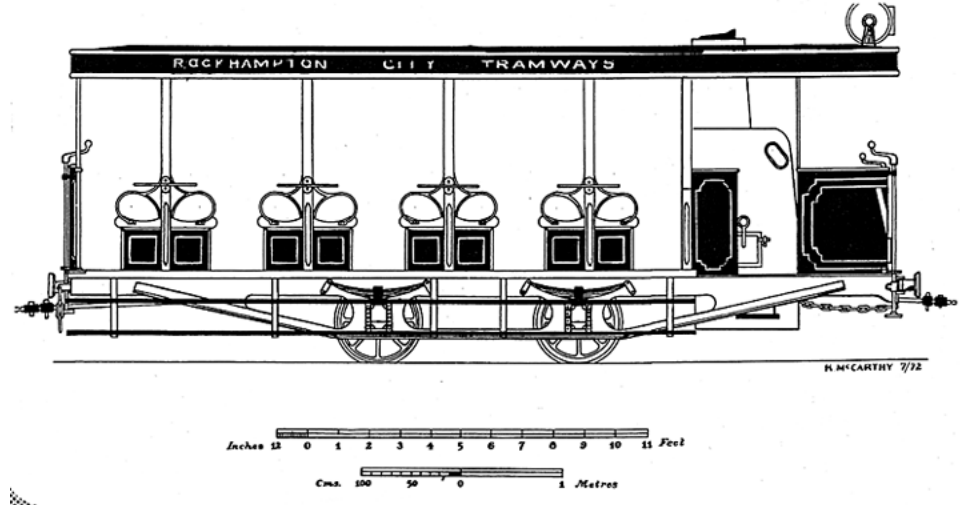
"The first step is to build it and get it running."

"When that happens the route will be decided," Mr Press said.

He said the project would involve considerable time, effort and money.

But the tram would be a big attraction for the city and could also provide public transport.

Mr Press said all proceeds from the Transport Ball, to be held at the Municipal Theatre on June 8, would go towards reconstruction of the tram.



CHAPTER FROM AGE OF STEAM LOCOMOTIVES

as "one of the most melancholy failures of municipal trading on record". Apparently the service was either completely discontinued or operated irregularly in 1910 until October 24 when a full service was restored.

The original system comprised four routes — Botanical Gardens, Upper Dawson Road, Show Grounds and Canning Street, where the depot was situated, and which was joined to the junction of the Dawson Road and Gardens routes to form a loop, or "belt line", around the inner city (see diagram).

In 1922 the line was extended from the Show Grounds to the end of Wandal Road, opening up a new residential area.

Four tram cars were originally ordered from the firm of V. Purrey of Bordeaux, France, and two trailers from the Brown Engineering Company of London.

It is known that one of the cars was delivered as a chassis only and used as a ballast motor during construction.

In 1910 the ballast motor was converted to a passenger car and the last car of the original order put into operation.

A further two cars entered the service in 1911 and a further two in 1912, indicating its success. A locally made trailer was also added in 1911.

Business was booming in 1913. During that year 1,114,488 passengers were carried — an increase of 30,000 over the previous year.

But by 1922, tramway finances were beginning to suffer a setback. Rockhampton's motor bus fleets were increasing in popularity.

But 1936 the decrease in tram passengers was alarming. Only 606,436 passengers were carried that year and in 1939, buses finally replaced trams.

In their 30 years existence the steam trams travelled 7,243,088km over the same four routes. They carried 40,314,924 passengers and receipts totally 355,476 pounds — an average of just over tuppence a person.



● PICTURE: Jim Henkel, 70, (left) and Cec Murphy, 76, with some of their tangible reminders of Rockhampton's steam trams. Cec spent 21 years working on the trams and Jim 52 years on the trams and buses.

Veterans recount exciting times

When old timers Jim Henkel and Cec Murphy talk about Rockhampton's trams, it's hard to believe 45 years have passed.

Jim keeps to this day an old leather conductor's satchel, with its separate compartments for halfpennies, pennies, and weekly concession tickets.

Cec, a former driver, keeps his share of memories too, his eyes twinkling wickedly when he tells some of them.

Jim Henkel began work on the trams at the age of 13, cleaning the lines. But he progressed to the position of conductor at the age of 18.

He remembers well the conductor's "uniform", a blue coat in the winter fleeced from policemen new to town.

"We didn't have a uniform as such, but we asked the policemen for their old blue coats and that became our winter uniform," Jim said.

"We took the numbers off of course."

Jim also remembers the crowds outside the football grounds and the special piece of line where an extra trailer could be parked. Young scalliwags would release the hand-operated brakes and send the trailer rolling away. When the grounds emptied, 150 to 200 people would bundle onto the tram and its two trailers.

"Conductors used to pull the bell once for the tram to stop."

"Two bells was go and three bells an urgent stop. We could stop within half a foot if we had to," Jim said.

"No, we never had much trouble stopping them," Cec nodded.

"It was starting then that was the problem."

In fact, drivers used to illegally carry pieces of wood in case the steam died down.

"We'd chuck a block in and pile the coke on top, and the sparks would come flying out," Cec said.

The haul up the steeper hills in town was often too much of an effort for the asthmatic trams, particularly if the lines were slippery with leaves. Sand would be thrown on the tracks to give a better grip.

With a had attack of the wheezes, the tram would lurch forward a few metres and then stop, exhausted. When it got up a bit more steam, it would splutter forward a few more metres.

But, if worse came to worse, passengers would get out and push.

"If passengers could see we were having trouble they'd jump on while the tram was moving so we wouldn't have to stop," Cec said.

Downhill, it was a different matter. The old trams tore around bends at a breakneck speed while passengers gripped hats, bags and handrails.

In summer months the rear seats of the trams or trailers became the most popular, as passengers removed themselves as far as possible from the hot boilers situated directly behind the driver's cabin.

"No one wanted to sit anywhere near us," Cec said.

But in winter there was a rush for the front seats and many cold feet were warmed against the boiler wall.

Regular travellers made a fetish of always sitting in the same seat every morning and afternoon. A stranger who inadvertently sat in one of these "reserved" seats was frowned upon.

Jim and Cec remember their customers fondly. "Did you see Mrs X passed away last week?" Cec asks Jim sadly.

It was nothing for a driver to hold up his tram for a regular customer. In cases of sickness or annual holidays it was wise to send a message to the tram, otherwise it would waste time waiting.

And it went without saying that drivers would do their utmost to get people home for dinner and back in time for the afternoon's work. Give and take was the order of the day.

Chemists assistants in the city would hand conductors bottles of medicine and purchase a ticket for each parcel. The medicines would be picked up by white capped nurses outside the Mater and Leinster hospitals (now Bethany Home for the Aged).

Neither were conductors beyond delivering fish and chips for a customer's tea, or hurling the evening papers from the moving tram.

On Mondays passengers were few and far between.

"Monday was wash day. Wherever you looked there was washing flapping on the lines," Cec said.

Only after the midday meal would custom pick up as housewives headed into town to do the shopping. Timetables, naturally, fitted around day-to-day routines.

The first morning trams left Wandal or the Gardens at 7.35am and arrived in town at 7.50, in time for those with an 8 o'clock start.

They returned to town at 8.20, in time for the opening of the shops, and again at 9am — "For the bank Johnnies".

Four trams serviced the city between 9am and 12, five from then until 7.30pm, and four again from 7.30pm until the pictures finished.