THE NORTH STAR CHRONICLES – a newsletter primarily for the model railway fraternity

Volume 3 no 9, September 2015
Editor: David Cairns
e-mail: shares@iafrica.com
Website for back copies: https://sites.google.com/a/steamtrains.co.za/steam/garden-railways/the-north-star-chronicles
Phone: +27 82 653 5642

Editorial
Having featured mainly “offshore” subjects this year, the lead article this month is an “onshore” subject, namely the South Western Railway (the “Forest Railway’ or more fondly the “Coffee Pot Railway” which was located in Knysna. I am indebted to Herman Steyn for permission to use the results of his research and additional photographs.
http://www.herman.rula.co.za/ Most of the section on the history of the line was drawn from Wikipedia which in turn is a synopsis of two Millwood House Museum Newsletters, nos 36 and 37 of November 1990 and February 1991 respectively, authored by Margaret Parkes and V.M Williams. These newsletters can be accessed via Herman’s website.

The South Western Railway
This was a 21 mile long, 2’ gauge line built to transport timber (mainly yellowood) from Deep Walls to the quay in Knysna in the days when the lagoon was still designated as a commercial harbour (decommissioned
in 1954). The SWR was one of South Africa’s only two forest railways. (The other was the Evelyn-Pirie Forest Railway 16 miles outside King William’s Town). No Shays, Climaxes, Heislers or Garratts operated on this line but for South Africans looking for a local narrow gauge prototype to model this one cannot be beaten.

**History of the South Western Railway**

Initially, (late 19th century) the rich forests surrounding Knysna were exploited using mules and oxen to extract the timber logs. Capacity problems emerged as many drivers were drafted for military service during the Boer War (or Second War of Independence depending on your political viewpoint). A steam tractor was tried as a replacement for oxen and mules but this was a failure as the tractor bogged down in the muddy roads. So a decision was made by a consortium of local businessmen (Thesen, Parkes and Templeman being prominent names involved in the timber trade) to build a narrow gauge railway. The project was supported by the Cape Government and Cape Government Railways because the yellowood was used not only as a building and furniture raw material but also for the production of railway sleepers.

The photo below was taken in 1929 and shows yellowood railway sleepers awaiting despatch from Knysna station.

*Photo from “The Knysna Story” by Arthur Nimmo.*

The support from the public sector referred to above took the form of a £16625 Government subsidy (£800 per mile) and £20000 debentures held initially by Standard Bank but then by Government.
The initial estimated cost of construction was £71609 but re-surveying and the adoption of a shorter route reduced this to just under £50000. A connection to Avontuur, the terminus of the 2 ft (610 mm) narrow gauge Port Elizabeth/Avontuur line was considered but although only 31 km apart, the barrier of the Tsitsikamma Mountains would have made such a connection challenging to say the least! But as an aside, one cannot help but speculate how wonderful a narrow gauge tourist line would be today between Port Elizabeth and Knysna via the Langkloof and the Tsitsikamma/Knysna forests………….

Construction of the line took 3 years, the opening taking place in 1907, 20 years before the Cape gauge line from George reached Knysna.

**Route of the railway as drawn by Sydney Moir – 24 inches apart**

The 22 mile (31km) rail line from the Knysna lagoon climbed 1407’ (430m) above sea level to the terminus in Deep Walls (Diepwalle). I prefer the latter and in all my visits to Knysna I have never heard anyone refer to Deep Walls but Mrs Parkes insists this is correct!

The trip to Deep Walls took about four hours with speeds above 15 kms per hour rarely exceeded. There were three intermediary railway stations: Bracken Hill, Park Station and Temple Mans. Bracken Hill and Temple Mans sawmills were located in Parkes, a small settlement. The platform at Deep Walls which served as a depot for timber cut in the area is still visible today.

The railways transported not only logs and cut timber from the sawmills to Knysna, but also supplies from Knysna for the sawmills and settlements. A few passengers were carried in a single, roofed car that accompanied the freight trains.
Locos
The South Western Railway owned four locos, all side tanks. Three were Orenstein and Koppels all wood burners.

Photos below except one on the right of SWR no1 (courtesy Hannes Paling) Sydney Moir – 24 Inches Apart.
Orenstein & Koppel no 1775 50HP 0-4-2T of 1906 - SWR Loco No.1

Orenstein & Koppel no 2240 100HP 0-6-2T of 1907 - SWR Loco No.2

Orenstein & Koppel no 4880 150HP 0-8-0T of 1911 - SWR Loco No.3
Another view of no 3 photographed in front of the Knynsa Station. Photo courtesy Hannes Paling

In 1934 another locomotive was purchased, a second hand coal burning SAR NG3 class no 4, Hawthorn Leslie no 2687 of 1907. Photo courtesy Hannes Paling

Another view of NG3 no 4 courtesy Transnet Heritage Foundation
The photograph below shows Orenstein & Koppell 0-4-2T No.1775 (SWR no 1) on the left and the Hawthorn, Leslie and Co. No.2687 4-6-2T (SWR no.4) on the right. Photo courtesy Wally Greig

Rolling stock
There was a total of 33 wagons. 16 were bogies and 1 covered bogie (presumably the passenger carrying wagon); 14 small flat trucks (disconnects); 1 large flat truck and 2 bogie body trucks. A photo of disconnects with logs and attached with chains appears below..

Yellowwood logs on SWR Co. timber trucks type NG 8-E-3
Trucks supplied by the Hungarian Railway and Wagon works
Photo courtesy Millwood Museum Knysna
Trains
SWR no 3 (0-8-0) heads a train delivering corrugated iron water tanks to a destination up the line. Showing in front of the loco is a portion of the safety wagon – an open wagon pushed ahead of the loco, the theory being it is easier to rerail a wagon than a loco should a fallen tree be encountered across the track. Also visible but at the rear is the line’s sole means of passenger transport.

Left: SWR no 1 (0-4-2) operated at Knysna itself as a shunter in the goods yard and on the quay. Photographer unknown
Below: SWR no 3 again at Knysna station with safety wagon in front and pulling the load of corrugated iron tanks. Photos above and below S.A Mirror
Another view of Knysna Station. This photo and ones below Eric Conradie courtesy Herman Steyn. Loco no 3.

A festive occasion? No 1 at Knysna station
It will be observed that the gent below with cloth cap features in a number of the photos! Loco no 4.
**Profitability**
The railway was always a marginal operation from a financial perspective being barely able to pay salaries and maintenance and cover debenture interest costs.

In 1916 substantial flood damage was experienced from heavy rains. Several bridges were damaged or destroyed. The damage was repaired and the line back in operation within a month. Over 16000 tons of material had been deposited to replace what had been washed away. However the effects of the First World War could not have have been all bad for the South Western Railway as in 1919 the first (and only?) dividends were paid to shareholders. Unfortunately in the same year a railway sleeper factory was moved from Knysna to Mossel Bay which eliminated not only the outward transport of the finished sleepers but also inward freight of the creosote for impregnating them.

**Decline and closure**
In the mid-1920s the South Western Railway helped construct an embankment for the new Cape Gauge railway line from George. When this line reached Knysna in 1927, the port together with the South Western Railway faded in economic significance. Any hopes that the SAR would take over the narrow gauge railway were quickly dashed because the SAR considered the narrow gauge lines obsolete. However, the SWR continued to work, sometimes on the verge of financial collapse as it lost more and more customers to competition from road trucks.

In 1944, a 3 man SAR committee concluded that the heavily corroded rails were no longer suitable for safe operations and recommended the closure of the railway but because of the shortage of motor vehicles during and after the Second World War replacement rails were laid. The work was completed in 1946 and although the replacement rails which were second hand would have allowed operation of the railway for the next 20 years, instead what happened? The line closed 3 years later! How often has this happened in this country? The cynic used to observe that a sure sign of the imminent closure of a railway line was the replacement of the track!

In 1947 there was the only serious accident on the railway when a child lost a hand during a collision. This case contributed to the suspension of operations on the 7th of November 1947.
The last train drove on 30 April 1949 and the entire operation was then sold to scrap merchants for £11000. The track had been completely lifted within a year and much of it allegedly ended up on a Natal sugar estate.

There is uncertainty regarding the fate of the locos. The article below from the Cape Times dated 17th November 1951 states that three locos (nos 2, 3 and 4?) were trucked to Merebank Natal. It is possible (likely?) the scrapping operation was conducted in the SAR workshops at Bayhead.

According to John Middleton, SWR no 1 survived on the Witwatersrand as an industrial locomotive until 1957 when it too was scrapped.

In 2005 rails could still be viewed on a quayside in Knysna but today few traces remain of the railway.

**Modelling Potential**

Earlier I made reference to the South Western Railway being an excellent prototype for South Africans to model, particularly those interested in narrow gauge forest railways. A layout could include not only the forest but a harbour, a Cape Gauge interchange station and a Cape Gauge line crossing the lagoon. Rolling stock, particularly disconnects would be relatively easy to build in just about any scale but the locos appear more problematical. The models of O&K locos on the internet seem to be mostly 0-4-0 or 0-4-2 so perhaps something appropriate may be available to represent SWR no 1, but nos 2 and 3 are more problematical being 0-6-2 and 0-8-0 respectively. Please would anyone with knowledge of any models in any gauge which might be suitable inform me accordingly. It is the Hawthorn Leslie loco that interests me. This was designed by D A Hendrie Locomotive Superintendent of the Natal Government Railways for use on the 98 mile Esperanza Donnybrook line. The 6 locomotives in this class had outside plate frames and used Walschaerts valve gear. A live steam model of this loco in 16mm scale would go nicely with a NGG16 and a NG15………
Incidentally, the NG3 class was followed (not surprisingly) by the NG4 class, very similar in design to the NG3 and built by Kerr Stuart. Sandstone Estates has a NG4 – NG 16, Kerr Stuart 1344 of 1913. 

*Photo courtesy Hannes Paling*

A one off model of a NG3 would be seriously expensive (well certainly in Rand terms). I can’t see it being produced for much under £3000 (or maybe £2500 if you get the VAT off). Probably the only way to reduce the cost would be to commission a run from one of the manufacturers such as Accucraft. But to make that a proposition a run of at least 50 would be required. If anyone is interested in a model of such a loco, again please let me know.

*Take the train!*