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The Perth Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History aims to promote the study and dissemination of information about the history of labour, particularly in Western Australia. It organises regular seminars and workshops for this purpose. These are open to members of the public. For further information contact:

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The style used in *Papers* generally follows that the national body of the Society has adopted. A copy of the style sheet is available from the Editors, who are happy to assist with reworking contributions to standardise style.

Front Cover: Apprentice blacksmiths and a hammer driver operating a drop hammer, c. late 1970s or early ‘80s (Courtesy Dave Moir).
Papers in Labour History No. 28, October 2004

The Midland Railway Workshops Centenary Issue

Editors: Bobbie Oliver, Geoff Davis, Andrew Gill, Stella Files & Chris Smyth

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Papers in Labour History seeks to publish material of a serious nature about the historical development of the Labour Movement, and of the history of work in Western Australia. It is intended to carry a balance of contributions from students and workers and veterans of the Labour Movements. Naturally, this raises controversial issues and no apology is made for the fact that few readers will be able to agree with all the views expressed here. While the Editors have made suggestions regarding some contributions, these have been largely of a stylistic nature and have not been intended in any way to interfere with the expression of the views of the authors.

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Since 1988, the Perth Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History has produced a twice-yearly collection of papers. The Society holds sets of back issues of Papers in Labour History, for which the single issue price is $12.50. Orders for back issues should be directed to the Editorial Committee at the address indicated inside the cover.

Acknowledgments

The Editors wish to thank the authors, owners of photographic copyright, sponsors and Uniprint, who printed this issue of Papers in Labour History. The editors accept responsibility for any errors of proof reading that may appear.
Introduction

This is the second issue of Papers in Labour History that has been devoted to the Railway Workshops at Midland, the first being No. 25 (September 2001). A second issue is not surprising, for two reasons. Firstly, the Midland Railway Workshops was the biggest industrial workshops in the State and the source of a vast fund of labour history. Secondly, the Midland Railway Workshops History Project has been the biggest project yet supported by the ASSLH (Perth Branch). The project, which the Society has supported since its commencement in 1998, has now almost completed its last year as an ARC-funded project, administered by Curtin University. The Society can be justly proud of its involvement, having contributed $20,000 in cash and well in excess of the promised $30,000 in-kind by the end of 2004.

What have we achieved with the project? It started as an oral history project to collect the stories of the workers at Midland, and this aspect has predominated throughout its life. These interviews, together with official and private documents, photographs and memorabilia, have provided the raw material for research at many different levels, as represented in this issue of Papers in Labour History. Thus the edited transcript of Neil McDougall’s interview exemplifies over a hundred hours of taped interviews, now lodged with the Battye Library for public access. Ivan McMillan’s paper is one several fascinating accounts by past employees of experiences on the shop floor, and the remaining papers are from students or staff at Curtin or Murdoch University, showing a variety of research that has been undertaken throughout this project. We wish to thank all of the authors for their contributions to this issue. Further examples of the work of Murdoch University media students may be accessed at: http://www.radio.murdoch.edu.au/

We are beginning to see the project’s major aims met. On 1 October, the Premier, Dr Geoff Gallop launched at The Midland Railway Workshops, a photographic history by Chris Smyth, a member of the Editorial Committee of this issue and lecturer at Murdoch University, and Nic Ellis, photographer at the West Australian. The end of the year will see the launch of a web page and a DVD designed by Murdoch University colleagues, Mia Lindgren and Brogan Bunt, whilst in 2005, a major history edited by Dr Patrick Bertola and Dr Bobbie Oliver, and featuring chapters by a range of academic and other scholars with specific expertise on different aspects of the Workshops is due to be published by UWA Press.

One of the project’s biggest successes has been its partnership with the Midland Redevelopment Authority and the City of Swan, which has resulted in ensuring that the workers’ stories continue to be a major aspect of any interpretation of the site. An Interpretation Centre is due to open before the end of the year, and there are further plans for the development of a Rail Heritage Centre on site. In concluding, it is appropriate to acknowledge the many people and organizations who have contributed to this project. They are listed overleaf.

The Editorial Committee, Papers in Labour History No. 28. October 2004
Midland Railway Workshops History Project

Curtin University
Dr Patrick Bertola & Dr Bobbie Oliver, Chief Investigators
Ric McCracken, Project Manager

Murdoch University
Mia Lindgran & Brogan Bunt, Chief Investigators

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State Records Office of WA
Tony Caravella, Director & Lise Summers, Archivist

Western Australian Museum
Ann Delroy, Head, History Department

And the past employees of the Midland Railway Workshops, their friends and families, who have so generously donated their time, memories, photographs, documents & objects to the project, for the enrichment of future generations.
Six months had passed since I had been accepted into the Midland Junction Railway Workshops as a junior worker in 1944. The effect this new experience had upon me was a kind of culture shock. There was however very little in the way of culture in the duties of a railways junior worker. Having arrived alone, aged seventeen, with bag in hand, freshly separated from the country air and loving family surroundings and finding myself in a strange world of grime and sweat and strange faces, was pretty devastating for this young man.

When the day came for the new apprentices to move into their respective trade’s areas according to their job assignments, I turned my back on the blacksmith shop. That dingy world of glowing furnaces and thudding steam hammers was behind me. I presented myself to the foreman of the fitting shop. He was a stern faced man with greying hair and he wore the obligatory navy pants and waistcoat, complete with a greasy tie. A pocket watch chain across his belly completed the picture. This was the uniform of the traditional British tradesman of the time it seemed, though why one would want to wear a tie in those circumstances was beyond me.

The total workforce in the Midland Workshops in 1944 numbered about three thousand. This had been swelled by the addition of a large annexe engaged in wartime armaments production. There was a large factory facility containing rows of special lathes making twenty-five pounder shells for our diggers to fire at the Japanese in the Pacific war. All the lathe operators were women. Like thousands of their sisters, they had joined the war effort to take the place of all the men of military age who were on active service.

Our Master of Apprentices was George Groves. He was a large, portly, congenial character who took us under his wing and was generally liked and respected by all of us. George gathered us around for a lecture. He explained the roles and responsibilities of a government apprentice and some of the hazards we might encounter along the way in the five-year term ahead. He stressed the importance of maintaining the workshops’ tradition for good workmanship, encouraged us to be diligent and hard working and to respect our elders and betters at all times.

“You will each be assigned to a skilled tradesman who will teach you your craft and in return will expect hard work and respect in return.” Respect for our elders was but one of the rules of the family upbringing for most youngsters, so we didn’t have a problem with that one. Polite behaviour, coupled with consideration for others were, I recall, qualities expected of us. I remember at home the stern reminders to stay in my place if ever I should attempt to interrupt adult conversation. ‘Speak when you are spoken to’ was a rule which eventually caused me some embarrassment in later life. If I wished to give one of the men in the workshops a message while he was engaged in conversation, I would hang around waiting for a lull so I could say my piece, not daring

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1 Ivan McMillan started at the Workshops in 1944 as a junior worker in the blacksmith shop and later trained as a mechanical fitter.
to butt in. I must have been standing like a timid fool one day for about ten minutes until finally one of the men turned and roared at me “For chrissakes waddya want?” It was some time before I learned that I too had rights and should learn to exercise them. This was all part of the man-making process I suppose.

I was one of the lucky ones in the draw for a tradesman partner. Jim Baker was a solid, powerful, curly-headed fellow and a top man on the tools. We got along famously from the start and I owe much of the expertise I acquired to him. Jim saved my life in fact, the circumstances about which I will explain later on. Some of the boys did not fare so well, with their senior partner turning out to be more a tormentor than a mentor. A word in the ear of the master of apprentices however, would have you transferred to another tradesman so that your training would not be disrupted. The management apparently saw the apprentice as a resource important to the survival of all the trade skills and in fact insurance for the future of the industry, so we were well looked after. The sheer number of highly skilled craftsmen in such a wide range of trades areas made the workshops an ideal training ground. I have had the opportunity since those days to compare the level of skills learned there against the best from other industries and even other countries and it was never found wanting.

From the boy’s point of view there could be a down side to this master/apprentice arrangement, as some will testify I am sure. A new apprentice, especially if he showed signs of being naive or immature, was vulnerable to the local sport of apprentice baiting. Any boy, who had not received wise counselling and warnings in the early stages of his apprenticeship, could find himself the butt of practical jokes. These came in infinite variety and many were quite elaborate and well rehearsed, with the prime object of embarrassment for the victim. It has been interesting to observe in later years that similar practices are labelled with terms like bastardisation, persecution and discrimination. We accepted all this as our lot however and I believe that on the whole it was a toughening process, albeit in a rough school where you learned to take it on the chin and come out wiser and a bit tougher as a consequence.

Tool stores were located in all the major work areas. Special tools and materials were issued from these, necessary for the work of that section.

A gangling first-year apprentice fronted up to the counter of a tool store one morning. The old shellback storeman, after an appropriate show of indifference for a considerable time, finally asks what it is that he wants.

“I want a bucket of rivet holes” pipes the lad, an innocent expression on his face, branding him a prime candidate for this scam.

“Oh now and what size would they be?” asks the storeman with a bland expression on his dial. “Cause if you don’t know, then you had better scarper back to the job and find out.”

“They want three quarter inch” spluttered the messenger, now breathing hard after his run to the distant end of the building and back.

“Yeah OK” says the helpful storeman “What thickness though. We have to know what thickness they want.”

Another trip back to the job and the victim was back again at the store counter. He passed on the required information.

“No we are getting somewhere, but we need to know the kind of steel – etc, etc, etc.” And so it went on until the storeman appeared satisfied with the requirements.
It was important to judge how far you could carry on a scam such as this before the victim woke up that he was being conned. The old hands were very good at knowing where to draw the line before going on to the next stage or calling it off.

Pointing to a row of steel buckets lined up against the wall, the storeman directed the lad to take the third one from the right.

This fairly simple scam was but one of many pulled on the inexperienced and the unwary. These particular buckets contained hundreds of steel discs, which had been punched out of heavy plate to form rivet holes. They were nothing but scrap. The weight of what was literally solid steel was considerable, and much too heavy for one man to lift, even the most powerful. The storeman could be seen trying to maintain a straight face as a gaggle of boys sweated and strained to carry the mass of completely useless ‘rivet holes’ back to their leering workmates. No doubt they would have been ordered to return the load to the store – perhaps a little wiser now, ready for the trap to be set again for the next victim.

Another well-worn apprentice scam involved the ‘struggle bar.’ When asked for this particular piece of equipment, the storeman pointed out a very large steel bar of great weight.

“You look like a strong lad,” coos the storeman to the eager young man, “Latch on to that and take it back to your job.” Struggle he did, as he half-carried, half-dragged the billet of metal back to the grinning crowd at the job site.

One bright young fellow worked at the East Perth power station and was dispatched to the store three miles distant to fetch a ‘packet of high tension volts.’ He was warned as to the dire consequences should he drop or even bump the package. Red warning stickers were plastered all over the package to this effect.

Tiptoeing the three miles back to the power station with the load grasped firmly in his sweating hands took more than an hour.

The lethal package was in fact a regular house brick wrapped in paper.

Then we all felt sorry for the pasty looking lad in the machine shop who inadvertently revealed his Achilles heel to us. He was a bit of a hypochondriac. This particular orchestrated stunt would begin with one of us stopping at his worksite and asking if he felt all right, as he didn’t look too flash. After a further appropriate time lapse, another would put a hand on his shoulder and looking into his face would remark on his un-well appearance. All this attention soon had our man drooping visibly to the point where these sympathetic comments from ‘trusted’ workmates would see him heading for the nurse’s station. Bets were laid on the odds of him booking off on sick leave. In most instances he did. Providing that you didn’t push it, this one worked every time - with him at any rate.

The inventory of practical jokes ready to be played on new boys was long and varied. Remembering that some of the senior workers had served in the workshops for up to fifty years. You can get a lot of practice in skullduggery that time. Work in industry can be monotonous and boring at times and a break from routine was always welcome. In the fresh crop of new apprentices starting each year, the likely ones were soon identified and tested for vulnerability. The system flourished in the five years I was there. It was considered very bad form to wise up a likely target and so spoil the fun. Also, anyone who was the butt of a joke and turned nasty and belligerent was in for a hard time. A sense of humour was a valuable asset.
Old Jack was a crabby coot. He was the workshop’s crane-chaser and had been treading the floor directing the overhead cranes for longer than anyone could remember. Jack’s major irritation, of which he made no secret, was apprentices. He had suffered many indignities at the hands of the boys over the years and would never make peace with them at any cost. The regular flare-ups between him and the boys were the source of great amusement so nobody tried to intervene. It might have been appropriate for the foreman to step in on safety grounds, having seen what was going on, but why spoil a good thing on such slim grounds as safety.

Keeping watch from the height of a locomotive cab at the end of the line, boy number one signals ahead that Jack the crane-chaser is coming. As Jack shuffles past the next locomotive on his way through the shop, boy number two leans over above him and delicately places a wad of kerosene-soaked cotton waste in the crown of his greasy hat. It is skilfully executed and Jack feels nothing. As he passes under the third boy in the team, the waste is ignited with a match.

Still oblivious to his hazardous condition, Jack now has a flame to rival the Olympic torch sprouting from his head. His progress down the line can be traced by the ruddy glow shed by the hat fire and the trail of smoke in his wake.

Betting among the men was fast and furious on just how far the victim would continue before the fire ate through his headgear to his shiny bald head.

There was actually no mistaking the point at which the heat had penetrated. He bellowed and tore the blazing hat from his smoking scalp. He danced and kicked and stomped on it to quell the flames – and the language! As a responsibility to my readers I shall not repeat verbatim what Jack had to say, or rather babbled in his rage. In his furious outburst he laid a terrible curse on all apprentices, regardless of race, colour or creed and upon their forebears as well.

I was witness to another rather spectacular joke pulled on a machinist with all the action being provided by the man himself after the trap was sprung.

Almost everyone carried a brown Gladstone bag. It was almost a part of the railwayman’s uniform. The phantom runner was a star athlete – well, he must have been to be able to run from his work area within the workshops to the main gate and stay ahead of most of the other two thousand-odd hopefuls at knock-off time. The phantom runner’s Gladstone bag he placed in a predetermined spot on a workbench near his starting point for the dash every afternoon. His speed, while phenomenal, was overshadowed by his agility and grace as he wove through all obstacles, especially on Tuesdays. This was the day he would meet his ladylove after work and this fact was known to all his workmates.

This particular Tuesday, after placing his Gladstone bag on the bench precisely for a pick up on the run, he moved back for the start of his dash at whistle time.

All were watching. As the notes of the whistle were still hanging in the air, he came at high speed and snatched his bag from the bench. Carried by his considerable momentum, he crashed into a cupboard, with the bag, now bottomless in his fist and wearing an incredulous look on his face. The contents of the bag were scattered far and wide while its bottom remained securely fastened as part of the timber bench top. It took him a little time to assess the situation, gather his scattered wits and possessions and find the cause for his ignominious downfall. It appeared that while someone distracted the phantom runner’s attention earlier, his bag was carefully opened and had two large railway dog spikes driven through its bottom into the timber beneath. This made it
effectively part of the bench. Without moving its position, the bag was then carefully closed and appeared as innocent and undisturbed as before. So many laughing faces surrounded the victim, he found it impossible to guess the identity of the culprit. As it was a team effort though, he would have had to blame half of the workforce, so he had to grin and bear it. It was never a good idea to stand out in a crowd in that place as they would plot and scheme until they found a means to bring you down.

As special purpose work safety boots had not been invented yet, we all wore surplus army boots, which were adequate protection. The standard army boot was fitted with a steel horseshoe plate on the heel to increase the life of the boot. One particularly vacant-looking lad was lolloping through the boiler shop one day. One of the welders spotted this likely victim and called him over.

"See this steel plate on the floor here", he said, "I want you to stand on it to hold it flat while I weld it to the other bit.” The boy stood dutifully with his big clodhopper boots on the plate as directed and watched.

"Don’t look down you dopey bugger or you’ll damage your eyes with the flash from the welder.”

I can still see the skinny figure in his big boots with his hand clamped over his eyes while the welder carefully fastened his steel horseshoes to the steel plate on the floor.

On completion of the two welds, the tradesman packed his gear, rolled up his cables and left. Sensing that nothing much was happening, still with his hand clamped over his eyes the boy asked if he could go.

Heat from the welding on the heel of an army boot apparently takes a little time to penetrate to the wearer’s foot. The temperature increase caused the boy to yelp and finally looking around at the circle of grinning faces, he attempted to walk away. Swaying like a reed in the wind, he pivoted from his anchored feet, first forward, then back and from side to side, but was getting nowhere. With the boots getting hotter and hotter he tore at the laces and ejected from the smouldering footwear in pain and panic.

The crowd roared with mirth.

The last I saw of the poor kid was the thin figure in very holey socks chipping away with a borrowed hammer and a blunt chisel specially selected for him for the attempt to free his footwear.

It was cold comfort for the lad that the fellow who did the welding job was a certified tradesman who could lay down a fillet as strong and as permanent as any engineering standards could possibly require.

The most highly organised and well-publicised scam aimed squarely at gullible apprentices was the annual Peanut Meeting. In the early part of the year a number of the young lads were invited to volunteer to be peanut kings and were given a glowing account of the importance of and the benefits to be gained from accepting this honour. This prestigious role of a peanut king they were told, involved collecting funds over a period of months from the men throughout the workshops. These donations were actually in the form of pledges, with the cash to be redeemed at a later date and used as big donations to charity. The great attraction for these collectors, which usually convinced them to take on the job, was the hint that they would be allowed to retain a percentage of the money to keep for themselves at the end. This could amount to a considerable sum, they were told and obviously the more they collected, the bigger the
bonus for each of them. The boys could later be seen accosting men throughout the works, with clipboard in hand, badgering them for promises of big donations for this worthy cause. The totals mounted up to considerable sums on their lists of prospective donors.

On the day of the peanut meeting a thousand men or more were gathered around a large makeshift stage in the yard. The master of ceremonies strode to centre stage and called for order. The six peanut kings, with clipboards in hand, lined up in front of the cheering crowd. The youngsters looked embarrassed by all the attention but also seemed proud to have played an active part in this important event. They showed up in their best clothes too as befitted the occasion and the crowd was hushed.

“We are going to show you lot just how much effort these lads have put into collecting money for the peanut fund this year. Each of the boys will read out the sum total of their collections – also the names of those men who promised the biggest donations (cheers) and the names of those miserable buggers who gave the least. (boos)”

With the formalities done the MC now comes to the important part.

“Last year we decided on the amount of thirty percent of the money to be retained by each lad. They have done a magnificent job this year and I reckon the should get more than that.”

Someone shouted that they should get fifty percent of the take, which was met with more cheering. The boys meanwhile were carrying out furious mental calculations as to the amount of wealth involved for each of them as the percentage was raised by shouts from the crowd. They still did not twig when their share of the money reached ninety percent and they were literally millionaires on paper. Millionaires one minute and destroyed the next. Someone in the front of the crowd yelled, “Give ‘em the lot!”

This was the signal, which spelled the doom of the peanut kings, and with it, destruction of their illusions of great riches.

A number of figures appeared suddenly above the stage and delivered a deluge of slime and muck down all over the peanut kings. There was no escape even then, as jets from fire hoses bowled them over in a tangle of arms and legs and clipboards. This dastardly act was also the signal for the initiation to begin for all of the new apprentices throughout the workshops. Young and unsuspecting lads could be seen being pursued in every direction. The usual treatment was to be stripped, coated with muck or painted then and thrown into a water tank. One very large and very strong apprentice was giving a good account of himself but went down under weight of numbers. After being lashed to a wheelbarrow he was wheeled under a fire hydrant to cool off. Few escaped and I was finally to meet my fate too. Taking some advice I was given earlier which suggested that if you fight, you can’t win and you may as well get it over with. With this in mind I made only a token resistance and then felt myself being lifted bodily and hurled into a tank of freezing black water in the blacksmiths’ shop. Still shivering later and with a lump on the back of my head from hitting the edge of the tank, I considered myself relatively lucky compared with some.

There was however, a delightful twist to the peanut fund activities that year. As the peanut kings began their rounds collecting pledges, one of them devised a lovely scam of his own. He discovered a group of new tradesmen who had recently been brought into the workforce and who were still unaware of the details of this tradition. Setting himself up as their dedicated peanut fund representative, he convinced them of
their obligations towards the fund, but requested the donations in cash. I believe he made a killing and there was nothing anyone could do about it. This lad would surely earn the vote for the one most likely to succeed in business.

An institution within the main institution, was that which was generally known as the foreign order department. It was a highly organised and structured de facto system of mutual assistance given to anyone who wanted a job done for them personally, as opposed to the authorised government work which all were paid to do. There were very many different crafts and skills being practised in the workshops complex. Fitting, machining, coach building, coppersmithing and locksmithing were all to be found and many more. Once you had convinced a craftsman that the article you had asked him to make was for yourself and not for the government, he would get straight on to it. Tucked away in the loco drivers’ shed there was even a fully equipped barber’s shop with all the gear and even a big chair. Having that lovely table lamp made for your sister’s wedding present was one thing, but spiriting it away back home was another. Many tales were told of the ingenious methods used to this effect. Articles like pieces of furniture, boats, bikes and racing cars, all made in the workshops, were smuggled out.

One young fellow complained to the gatekeeper that his motorbike was being interfered with where it was parked outside the gates and could he bring it in so he could keep an eye on it. The gatekeeper relented and the bike was brought inside. At knock-off time the motorbike was seen leaving through the gate. No particular attention was paid to it, or to the shiny new sidecar, which was attached to it. This new addition had been built and painted and fixed to the bike and then ridden out as bold as brass under the gatekeeper’s nose. A famous story was widely circulated about the worker who was seen wearing an overcoat on a warmish day as he left the works and headed for the train home. His workmates noted he was a little unsteady on his feet and making heavy weather of it across the footbridge. He collapsed on the station platform with apparent breathing difficulties. It wasn’t his heart which was causing his distress, but the fifty feet of steel chain wrapped in coils around his body under the coat. It is reported that once the overcoat was removed it was relatively easy to stand on the free end of the chain and then bowl him along the ground until all the chain was wound off. A stiff-legged walk on a man going home might suggest a piece of wood or metal up the trouser leg. Gladstone bags often suffered rupture from all the extra weight on the way home – and this was even after the owner had taken out his lunch!
‘The Peanut King’ and other pranks: 
Exploring working culture through apprentice initiations and rituals 
at the Midland Railway Workshops.

Dr Bobbie Oliver

For 90 years, the WAGR (later Westrail) Workshops at Midland were the largest industrial Workshops in Western Australia. The Workshops trained apprentices in a range of industrial trades such as blacksmithing, boilermaking, fitting, mechanical and electrical engineering, machining, coach building and carpentry – skills required to build and repair locomotive engines and rolling stock, but which also fitted them for a wide range of trades outside the railways. The Workshops was a tightly knit community, within which a range of sub-communities, centred on the different metal- and wood-working trades, thrived in a proud and highly competitive working culture. Widespread community outrage greeted the State Government’s decision to close the Workshops, but to no avail and the gates shut for the last time in March 1990 – just over 90 years after they first opened.

From 1998 to 2004, the Workshops was the subject of an extensive history project. Commencing with an oral history programme aimed at interviewing as many past employees as possible, the project has extended (with the aid of grant funds) into an archive of documents and photographs, a collection of tools and other objects, a DVD, a web page and a book of the history of Workshops. Many fascinating aspects of working culture have come to light; this paper focusses on the quaint, and often brutal, rituals to which apprentices were subjected during their first year at the Workshops.

Using interviews and written recollections provided by the tradesmen, this paper looks at the substance and the legend of such rituals as the ‘Peanut King’, and a range of ‘pranks’ from those designed to be humiliating but harmless to those that threatened – and in some cases took – lives. The paper will attempt to answer the following questions. To what extent were these rituals a product of the locality, and how much did they retain from a strongly British industrial heritage? Were they aimed at instilling dependability into workmates in an extremely dangerous work place? Did rituals change over time? Where appropriate, comparisons will be made with existing literature on the subject. The paper will include extensive quotations from interviews, so that the voices of the workers may be heard as well as the author’s interpretation of their words.

1 Bobbie Oliver is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Social Sciences, Curtin University. From 2000 to 2004, she was Chief Investigator of two ARC grant projects involved in collecting an oral history archive of Workshops employees and producing an edited history (with Dr Patrick Bertola) of the Midland Railway Workshops.
2 Published versions of these research outcomes are due in 2004-05.
The rituals to which apprentices were subjected fall into two main categories: initiations which involved the victim in one or more dangerous tasks or in which he was assaulted, and afterwards he was regarded as having made it into the select club of tradesmen; and pranks or practical jokes which could be played on the same individual many times over, depending upon how gullible he was. Initiations were usually carried out at the end of the first year of apprenticeship and sometimes at the time of the apprentices' qualification as a tradesman. Interviews undertaken for the History project contain many accounts of apprentices suffering or witnessing such initiations, pranks and 'jokes' over a period of more than half a century from the 1930s until the 1990s. The following are just a few examples. Edward (Ted) King, turner and iron machinist, 1953-59, recalled:

New apprentices were considered fair game for tradesmen and older apprentices and there were all sorts of tricks played on them, like being sent for a long weight (wait), a left handed hammer, a bolt hole, a sky hook, a right handed drill and various other time wasting errands that usually entailed going from place to place around the shop. [M]any of the pranks played on people seem dangerous and childish [now] but at the time they were considered to be funny. My first job was on a small Hercus lathe similar to those used in high schools. When I left the machine for a short while, I returned to find one end of it jacked up so that the bed was at about 45 degrees to the floor instead of being level. What do I do now? How would I get it down again?  

Geoff Hutchison, apprentice painter from 1944 to 1950, recalled that other favourite 'pranks' inflicted upon apprentices included putting a piece of oily waste on the back on one's overalls (like a sheep tail) and bleating 'baa baa' until the victim 'woke up'; painting the handle of any paint brush left on the pot, and sending boys to the store for a tin of striped paint.  

The ritual that many past employees at the Workshops remember most vividly was certainly the most elaborate prank ever played on unfortunate apprentices there. It would appear that the Peanut King ceremony began in the late 1930s. Christmas was a focal point for 'initiations', and it appears that the Peanut King developed over several years to become the entree to some very riotous behaviour. Bill Millward, a fitter who was at the Workshops from 1930 to 1939, recollected:

The initiation of apprentices was traditional in my time and was carried out on the day before the Christmas break up which was the only day when discipline was relaxed. I avoided it in my first year by fleetness of

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3 Ted King, letter to R. McCracken, 11 November 2002. Unless otherwise stated, these materials were lodged in the project's archives at 79 Stirling Street, Perth, at the time of writing.

foot and reconnoitring good hiding places. I must have relaxed in the second year and was captured. I received a liberal covering of red lead and linseed oil paste around my genitals and the leg of my overalls was tied around a hydrant outlet that was turned full on. I eventually freed myself and from then on I was accepted by the older apprentices as one of the mob.\(^5\)

By the beginning of the 1940s, however, the perpetration of initiations upon apprentices had spread from one particular day to a week or more. Nick Silich, a plumber at the Workshops from 1938 to 1949, recalled apprentices being singled out for about two weeks before the Christmas break. 'During the 40-minute lunch break, gangs could be seen pursuing the young 'uns determined to shove their heads under three-inch diameter fire hydrants along the driveway in front of the big buildings'.\(^6\)

Whilst the earlier accounts suggest a spontaneous approach to initiations – just grabbing a passing apprentice and subjecting him to a painful and degrading experience – the Peanut King ceremony was planned weeks in advance and elaborately staged with a big audience. It had certainly become established by the time Jack Emery began as apprentice turner and iron machinist in 1940, although he referred to it as the Peanut *Club*.

Christmas was ... the time for apprentices to have some high jinks. The infamous "Peanut Club" involved the older apprentices going around the new apprentices asking for-promises of donations to a mythical Xmas 'peanut' fund. To give this operation credibility they also approached the tradesmen who responded with generous promises of money, which were added to the list in front of the unknowing new apprentices. On 'peanut day' the most gullible new boys were gathered on a platform erected against an empty locomotive tender in which lurked unseen, a group of older apprentices armed with sloppy lagging, old tins of oil, and foul slops of any kind. A large crowd gathered to hear the new boys read out lists of promised donations which they cheered or booed according to the amount pledged. The din was terrific, so nobody heard any noises coming from the villains behind the platform and concealed in the tender. In the middle of the new boys' performance, all the gathered filth and garbage was poured over the side of the tender onto the unfortunate 'Peanuts' below. When they ran out of ammunition a large fire hose was turned on those who had not fled. After this there was a fight for the hose, which became a free-for-all, with the hose and the remaining garbage as weaponry. When the fight for the hose began, the assembled crowd of adults would melt away and leave the apprentice mob to fight it out.\(^7\)

\(^6\) Nick Silich, letter to Ric McCracken, 27.10.02.
Ivan Macmillan, an apprentice mechanical fitter during the second half of the 1940s, recalled that this was ‘the most highly organised and well-publicised scam aimed squarely at gullible apprentices’ and that it required months of organization. By the 1950s, the Peanut King ceremony had become very elaborate. The most detailed account of it came from Fred Cadwallader, a moulder from 1942 to 1987, who told his interviewer that, at least in the Foundry:

[T]hey usually got the green apprentices [who] had only been there a few months. They had not been through a Christmas. One had been selected as the woolly apprentice to collect Christmas cheer for the foundry apprentices so they could have a picnic on the last day. And he was to go around with a list before Christmas and ask the different staff members how much would they contribute to the Peanut King Christmas party. So they would nominate two ‘bob’, or two and sixpence … and he would write all their names down.

On the last day before payday, a group of older apprentices would hide with buckets of mud and slush, black wash, carbon, molasses and other revolting and unidentified substances in a conveniently parked locomotive tender. Below the tender, where the crowd was to gather, a little platform was erected for the ceremony. There was a Master of Ceremonies (or compere) to read out the list of names of staff who had offered to make a donation to the ‘fund’.

Another feature of the Foundry’s Peanut King celebration was that the ‘King’ was dressed up. Fred recalled:

So he’d come out and put his crown on. They found a crown of some kind. Another year, another one of them even had a sceptre, a crown and a sceptre. There was some kind of a globe protector or something, it was like a dome shape with ribs of metal in, it had kind of a peak on it but it just fitted a bloke’s head. So, ‘hey this will do for the peanut king’, someone said, so for several years there they [used] this crown. You had to dress him up, too. He’d had to bring in a tie, you know, even though he has got his working shirt on.

The compere, who stood on the platform next to the apprentice, would open proceedings. He would say something like, ‘Righto, we got this lad here. He has collected the money, now what do you reckon we should give him. What sort of percentage, you know, how much do you think – 30 per cent?’ And the crowd might say, ‘Don’t be miserable’. So then the compere would reply, ‘I know he is experienced. He has helped me a lot. We will make it 40 percent’. And they would keep building it up to about 90 percent and then

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9 Fred Cadwallader, interview with Ric McCracken, 2 July 2002.
10 Fred Cadwallader, interview with Ric McCracken, 2 July 2002.
someone would shout, ‘Oh don’t be mean; give him the lot, hundred percent’. That was the signal for the compere to jump off the platform and run for his life. The poor apprentice, meanwhile, was left standing – wondering what was going to happen next. Just then, the apprentices hiding in the tender jumped up and tipped the sludge over him. The photographs (below) were taken at different ceremonies during the 1950s.

The apprentice is still holding the sceptre in his hand, but his crown has been washed off by all the muck. (Courtesy Fred Cadwallader)

The Annual Peanut King ceremony behind the Foundry. The Peanut King, dressed in a tie, and with a ‘crown’ upon his head, sits on a platform in front of a wagon. The compere (right) waits to begin proceedings (Courtesy Fred Cadwallader)
A different ceremony in another year, but the proceedings are the same. The victim is doused, while the compere (left) flees. (Courtesy Fred Cadwallader)

In the Foundry, unlike in the other Workshops, the apprentice was actually given the amount that he had raised – as a reward for going through the ceremony. Fred Cadwallader recalled one case of a boy who collected the lordly sum of ten pounds.

He was a bit of a scallywag. He got into trouble at home a lot. Ten pounds was equivalent to his month’s holiday pay. In other words he doubled his pay and he says ‘I can’t take this home, the old man will reckon I have pinched it’. So the shop steward had to write his father a note, ‘This is Christmas cheer to what’s his name, from the men of the foundry, signed shop steward’. And he says, ‘Ok, now I can take it home and show my father that I haven’t stolen it’. It was so much money you see. So we used to say ‘how about making me peanut king this year. I’m short of a few bob’.  

The Peanut King ceremonies ran for several decades. While it is possible that they became more elaborate as time went on, they also varied from shop to shop. Ivan McMillan recalled one ceremony involving six apprentices during the 1940s, Fred Cadwallader’s memories, dating from the late 1950s or early 1960s, are of a ceremony held at the back of the Foundry. Ted King, apprentice turner and iron machinist in the 1950s, had similar recollections of ceremonies held in the Fitting and Machine Shops in Block 3. Like McMillan, he thought the money raised was intended to go to a charity and that several apprentices were involved in each shop – not merely one selected as in Fred Cadwallader’s account and photographs – and that they were not given any money because the pledges they collected were bogus, but otherwise the proceedings were much the same.

Ted King viewed the ‘Peanut King’ ritual with some distaste, but others saw merit in the practice. Bob Wells, a car and wagon builder at the Workshops from 1963 until 1977,

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11 Fred Cadwallader, interview with Ric McCracken, 2 July 2002. Note that a very similar procedure is described in Ivan McMillan’s paper in this issue.
did not regard the ‘Peanut King’ as a victim – rather as someone who understood and worked the system to his advantage.

The apprentices that were involved in the peanut king, to my mind, knew what it was about. They had been there about a year … The apprentices started the January so their participation in the peanut king ritual [always held just before the Christmas break] was clearly understood and [they knew] what the outcome would be. They participated … for a number of reasons; part of the reason was that they became part of a team; they became socialised; they came to understand the camaraderie that existed…

Thus, Bob Wells believed that the Peanut King was ‘non-harmful to the individuals’ and that the apprentices were not forced into it. Instead, it was just ‘a part of growing up’ and assimilating into the Workshops environment. In fact ‘it became part of the norm so a person that actually became the Peanut King wasn’t the poor innocent, slowest person in the group but quite often was the extrovert in the group who was in the joke. It certainly wasn’t the case of targeting some poor slow individual and it did have to do with how they fitted into the social fabric of the shop itself’. Here his account conflicts with the experience in the Foundry. Fred Cadwallader was emphatic that the apprentice picked for the ‘honour’ was:

…usually the youngest one who wasn’t a wake-up The second year [apprentices] had already gone through it. Whether they were selected or not they’d seen the peanut king crowned. So they did not want to be in that.

Interestingly, despite his positive view, Bob Wells stated that he had not actually ever seen the Peanut King ceremony, whereas Fred Cadwallader had been present at many such occasions.

Bob Wells’ comment highlights a common strand in the accounts of pranks and initiations. Most of the narrators distanced themselves from events. As victims, they regarded themselves as clever to avoid being caught and ‘done’; when they were caught, it was a case of getting it over as soon as possible. Some apprentices managed to avoid the initiation experience altogether. Nick Silich, for example, did his ‘own ducking’ and thus avoided the humiliation, but was he then accepted as ‘one of the mob’? He commented, ‘Some furious wrestling used to go on and I couldn’t understand why the management didn’t have the practice stopped. Tradition?’. There is some unsubstantiated verbal evidence that members of the Communist Party who were employed at the Workshops, objected strongly and tried to get the ceremony stopped in the 1950s, but if they did attempt this, they were unsuccessful. Indeed, the recollections of ex-employees from the 1970s suggest that ‘initiations’ became more frequent and

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14 Fred Cadwallader, interview with Ric McCracken, 2 July 2002.
15 Nick Silich, letter to R. McCracken, 27.10.02.
more violent. Steve Smith, who began his apprenticeship as a boilermaker at the Workshops in 1972, admitted to being involved in several initiations – both as a victim and a perpetrator. Smith stated that his way of coping with being assaulted was to be compliant – ‘Go. Do it to me’ – in the hope that the ordeal would be shorter, but this did not save him from injury. Firstly, he appears to have suffered a number of assaults, which he regarded as ‘initiations’, resulting in three cracked ribs, a broken foot and being almost hanged. He also endured several dunkings and ‘greasings’ – being stripped and having grease applied to his genitals.16

The experience of initiation was commonly regarded as a ‘rite of passage’, which enabled the apprentice to enter the elite world of the master craftsman. Historian T. Sheridan, writing of the role of apprentices in one of metal workers’ unions – the Amalgamated Engineers – observed:

It is difficult to overstress the significance of apprenticeship in the history of the AEU. Generally speaking, boys were indentured at low wages for a fixed period, usually five years, during which practical instruction and observation on the job was combined with theoretical instruction at technical schools. Right into the 1970s unions and metal employers alike regarded this as the best means of producing engineering craftsmen. In addition the ancient trappings and jargon usually connected with entering indentures, and the ceremonies – dignified or bawdy – traditionally associated with a lad ‘coming out of his time’ at the end of the apprenticeship, greatly fortified the pride and sense of separateness or superiority in tradesmen’s minds.17

Sheridan emphasised that this was not just ‘an anachronistic hangover’ perpetuated by craft unions such as the AEU, but a continuing expectation well into the second half of the twentieth century. With regard to observations by the tradesmen themselves, Bill Millward commented that, after avoiding being caught the first year, he succumbed the second year and, thereafter, was ‘accepted by the older apprentices as one of the mob’.18 The inference is that, previously, he had not been accepted because he had not undergone the humiliation of initiation. Geoff Hutchison, an apprentice painter from 1944-1950, recalled being locked in a locomotive boiler, which his fellow apprentices then attacked with rivet guns and welders, all the while shouting out to him, asking whether he was ‘wanning up’. He retaliated by splashing paint on his tormenters through tube holes in the boiler, after which, ‘my initiation was done’.19 While Geoff Hutchison’s inference is that a spirited fight back could increase your respect in the eyes of fellow apprentices and, indeed, serve to cut short an horrific ordeal, the other comments reveal a sensitivity to the plight of those who lacked the necessary bravado to tough it out. Rod Quinn, junior worker and then apprentice car and

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19 Geoff Hutchison, ‘Memories of being an apprentice painter, 1944-1950’ (17/12/01).
wagon builder from 1950 to 1956, also commented on the practice of locking apprentices within a confined, noisy space, which was attacked from the outside with hammers.

Within the younger workforce, cruelty in the form of hostile teasing, 'initiations' and even physical bullying, was present. One example of this was trapping people in a water wagon. The wooden baffles inside these wagons had regularly to be checked and maintained. The repairer had to climb down into the tank to inspect and [if necessary] replace these boards whose purpose was to prevent large destabilising movements of water while the wagons were in motion. With the lid slammed and locked down, the repairer had simply to crouch in the dark while the tank was hit with hammers. Any tendency to claustrophobia would bring the victim to the point of panic. These incidents were fairly rare but they did reflect something of macho nature of an all-male working environment.20

Ted King, apprentice iron machinist, was given the task of turning a thread on tapered copper boiler safety plugs that fitted into the firebox of a steam boiler. Each plug was a different size and the hole in the boiler had to be measured. When he climbed into the boiler to do the measurements, ‘you were exposed to being either hoisted up by a crane and left dangling or worse, a boiler maker would apply a pneumatic riveting hammer to the outside of the steel boiler’. Ted commented, ‘this was guaranteed to rattle your brains or at least affect your hearing. More than one apprentice was locked inside a boiler all night after being forgotten. The effect on younger boys and their families was not good.’21

Furthermore, Geoff Hutchison’s and Ted King’s experiences show that there was a very strong element of bullying and of harassing the weak and vulnerable. Hutchison recalled:

As a 15-year-old boy [who’d] never been to the city, it was very daunting to be among a few thousand men. I learnt very quickly to have a sense of humour:
1) you had to be able to take a joke or else;
2) Be able to take it as well as give it;
3) Never crack if [you were the] recipient of a prank;
4) I learnt to always have an answer to anything (guilty or not).
5) Be ever vigilant. And never lose your temper.22

All of these elements were present in the Peanut King ceremony: the solidarity that ensured that older apprentices or tradesmen never let on to any of the victims what would happen to them; the necessity for the victim to be ‘able to take a joke’ even when it was humiliating and life threatening, and the evidence of vulnerability. While Bob Wells justified the practice

21 King to McCracken, 11 November 2002, in Midland Project Archive.
22 Geoff Hutchison, ‘Memories of being an apprentice painter, 1944-1950’ (17/12/01).
partly on the grounds that it was not picking on the weak and vulnerable, Fred Cadwallader indicated that there was an element of singling out the ‘green’ or ‘woolly’ ones – as he termed them. This differentiation, however, could indicate a change in the way the ceremony was viewed and structured. It would appear that by the 1960s, the Peanut King had achieved legendary status rather than being just a nasty prank, and there was honour attached to being it.

There were, of course, those who would never fit in, and those whose initiation experience was so appallingly violent that they could not recover from it. It one particular case:

This poor kid was a little bit sort of feminine and the tradesman said, ‘I’m going to get you one day. Me and all these guys [referring to his work mates] are going to get you’. They grabbed this kid, threw him down the pits, stripped him and they [appeared to be] going to basically rape him. This kid was terrified, screaming, crying, [although] they weren’t going to actually do it but it was the impression. This poor little kid they let him go and he ran; he was terrified I mean I felt so sorry for that little kid. Well the next day we were called up to the foreman’s office and there was his mum. [It was] the worst thing that could happen; his mum had came in and laid a complaint and so she was sitting there with the son watching all these people getting a dressing down [by the foreman] … The mother was quite happy with the end result, walked out the foreman’s office, and the foreman turned around and said to the boy, ‘You have just signed your own death warrant’ and that was the end of the kid. The kid was just physically and psychologically abused so he had to quit his apprenticeship.²³

It is noteworthy that the narrator, while owning up to committing pranks on other apprentices, distanced himself from this one with comments such as, ‘I felt so sorry for that kid’. Even more revealing, however, is the indication that the foreman knew and accepted this behaviour. Today, he would be guilty of abdicating his duty of care to the apprentice. Why, then, was such behaviour permitted on the factory floor?

Perhaps it was because these rituals were grounded in a long, British industrial tradition. In his classic book, Life in a Railway Factory, first published in 1915, Alfred Williams described similar experiences endured by apprentices at Swindon – though it was sometimes psychological, rather than physical, cruelty.

The boys were always frightened at the thought of one painful ordeal which they were told they would have to undergo. They were seriously informed by their new mates in the shed that they would have to be branded on the back parts with a hot iron stamp containing the initials of the railway company [GWR], and very many youngsters firmly believed the tale and awaited the operation with dreadful suspense. As time went

on, however, and they were not sent for to the offices, they came to
discredit the story and smiled at their former credulity.  

Williams also mentioned pranks very similar to those experienced at Midland, whereby
unsuspecting apprentices were sent to the engine-house for a 'bucket of blast' or a 'toe
punch' – the latter being a kick in the backside. These activities, however, appear very
innocuous compared with some of the experiences of Midland apprentices.

The Midland Railway Workshops had strong British antecedents. In the period
prior to the union amalgamations that occurred in the early 1970s, four major unions and
a number of smaller unions operated at the Workshops. One of these, the Amalgamated
Society of Engineers, subsequently the Amalgamated Engineering Union [AEU] was a
British union with Australian branches. Kathy Bell wrote of the inter-war period that,
‘although many of the workshops’ staff of interviewees’ generation [that is, the ten men
whom she interviewed for her study] were Westralian born and bred, a large proportion
of the craftsmen, especially the older men, were immigrants from Britain.’ Furthermore,
Bell detected similarities between the habits and beliefs of her interviewees – ‘sobriety,
religiosity, self-education, self-improvement, thrift and moderation in all things’ – and
those of the ‘“respectable” section of the British working class’.  

Beyond that, however, a range of indicators in the contemporary media suggest that
practices loosely termed ‘initiation’ – whether they be confined to one particular incident or
an elaborate ceremony such as the Peanut King, or a number of so-called ‘pranks’ – are
widespread in Australia and Britain – and in other societies, too. Almost any sizeable
grouping of young males, be it boarding school, the defence forces, or the factory floor, has
its ‘traditions’ of physical behaviour that today is known as ‘bastardisation’. A fellow
historian, who has had 15 years of supervising apprentices in the motor industry, has
researched similar customs among stockmen in the South West of Western Australia. Workers at the Broken Hill Proprietary (BHP) Steelworks in Newcastle have related similar
stories of pranks and tests that workers forced upon one another in this massive and
dangerous workplace. In recent years, certain incidents at the Australian Defence Force
Academy in Canberra have been publicised by the media, giving the College a reputation as a
place where bullying is institutionalised. One such ‘initiation prank’, known as ‘running

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26 Sheridan, Mindful Militants, p. 23.
27 Kathy Bell, ‘The Midland Junction Railway Workshops, 1920 to 1939, Studies in
 Western Australian History XI; Western Australia between the war 1919-1939, ed. J.
 Gregory, June 1990, p. 35.
28 Gil Hardwick, email to the author, 20 January 2003
29 Susan Marsden, email to the author, 21 January 2003, referring to Tailing out: BHP
 workers talk about life, steelmaking and the Newcastle closure, a study published by the
man’ consisted of taking a cadet up to the top of Mount Ainslie, the peak behind the college, removing all of his clothes except for his shoes and forcing him to run home naked.\footnote{According to anecdotal evidence given to the author, this practice had an antecedent in the National Service days of the 1960s and ‘70s.}

There is a common link in these accounts, moreover, between the nature of the work and the level of violence involved in the initiations. Whether the location is railway workshops, steel works, a factory assembly line or the defence forces, there is a strong element of physical danger in the work. In the clerical occupations at the Workshops, however, there was no such danger and, while there may have been a few mild pranks perpetrated, there were no parallels in initiation practices. Alan Wahl, who began as a Junior Worker in the Chief Mechanical Engineer’s Office in 1935, wrote of his relief at being selected to work as a clerk in an environment that he depicted as clean and genteel, especially when compared to the tough atmosphere of the Workshop floor. Apparently, there was not even a suggestion that clerical workers went through any sort of initiation; whereas even the day-to-day tasks on the factory floor filled Wahl with dread.\footnote{Alan Wahl, ‘My Experiences at the WAGR Workshops, 1935 to 1960’, Papers in Labour History No. 25: The WAGR/Westrail Midland Workshops, ed. B. Oliver, September 2001, p. 2.} This brings us, then, to the matter of motivation.

Evidence from interviews with Midland Workshops employees indicates that various motivations lay behind the pranks and initiations. Bill Millward recognised that while such behaviour might be viewed differently in the twenty-first century, it was essentially driven by tribal instincts to make the new members ‘prove’ themselves and in so doing to ‘bond’ with those who ‘passed through’ the ordeals earlier.\footnote{W.H. ‘Bill’ Millward, ‘Some recollections of Midland Workshops’, n.d., pp. 1-2.} There were strongly tribal practices at the Workshops, quite apart from initiation. Steve Smith, a boilermaker, remembered:

Boilermakers didn’t go into the Blacksmiths’ shop [and vice versa]; it was very dangerous ground. [If] any blacksmith strayed into our shop we’d grab them. If any boilermaker strayed into their shop [they] would grab them. There was a lot of fun and sometime those things went overboard a little bit but they weren’t seriously bad.\footnote{Steve Smith, interview with Maxine Milne, 24 February 2003.}

While the rivalry between the shops was not constant, it occurred sporadically throughout the year, and was often sparked during the slightly more lax atmosphere that surrounded the Christmas closedown and fuelled by high spirits aroused by the initiations. Fred Cadwallader recalled that sometimes a group from one shop would come into the canteen at lunch hour and see a few apprentices from another trade sitting there. The larger group would ‘come storming in, about ten of them, and drag one of them away and I would think, “gee, I hope they don’t pick me”. They’d drag him outside and under the tap’. But, once the apprentices graduated and became tradesmen, that was supposed to be the end of the tomfoolery.\footnote{Fred Cadwallader, interview with Ric McCracken, 2 July 2002.}
was not always so. The incident of the ‘pretend rape’ during the 1970s involved tradesmen—not apprentices. Despite recollecting ‘battles’ in the Foundry that were similar to those described by Steve Smith, however, Fred Cadwallader did not suggest ‘tribalism’ or ‘bonding’ as an explanation for the initiations. He said that ‘amusement’, ‘tradition’ and the need to ‘educate’ were driving motives, and that these experiences taught apprentices to be ‘sceptical’, rather than being gullible. 35

Another motive would appear to be ‘toughening up’. Drawing upon his experience in the motor industry, historian Gil Hardwick observed:

[I]t seems fair to me that this behaviour should not be interpreted outside the context of the dangerous work itself. I have received a number of comments over the years about this type of ‘blokey’, ‘humiliating’, ‘brutalising’ behaviour, although I remain strongly of the opinion that the process of toughening and sharpening trade apprentices is a deliberate and thoughtful strategy for keeping them safe.

Those who failed to get the message were inevitably dismissed as constituting a danger to their work-mates, not dissimilar to battlefield conditions requiring the similar process of bonding and mateship to ensure group survival. Anyone who has spent years in such conditions will know how quickly tragedy can strike through a moment’s carelessness, and in these early practices we can see a developing Work Safe ethic strongly supported by tradesmen everywhere. 36

It is notable that here the connection between a dangerous trade and the nature of the ‘initiations’ has been made. Similarly in the context of the Midland Railway Workshops, Bob Wells believed that menial and humiliating tasks helped to bring the apprentice into line and make him one of the team. If an apprentice was a bit cocky and started ridiculing the trades assistant, he might be sent to the stores to ask for ‘a long weight’.

The storeman being part of the same culture for years understood what the message was when the lad was sent for long weight. So he would leave them there and when he got back to the job of course the tradesman would berate him for being away for half an hour … knowing full well that’s what he went for. They would send them for obvious things that didn’t exist like tins of striped paint, or left handed screw drivers, or a box of holes, or self tightening nuts, or a number of similar items where if the lad was silly enough to go and ask from the store everyone in the shop would know about it for quite some days. In terms of other treatments [that] were dished out, it was true that they would get the occasional cuff under the ear or whatever if they didn’t do what they were told. And if they complained to the foreman, the foreman would then tell the lad that telling lies was not

35 Cadwallader interview.
appropriate for apprentices or tradespeople. It couldn’t have happened, it didn’t happen, there weren’t any witnesses to it happening. That was also part of the socialisation process. But I think as I said it was part of the training process when in the heavy type of work that was done at the workshops – the engineering that was done – there just wasn’t room for lack of trust or lack of commitment into what you were doing. And this idea of trust and commitment was something that didn’t come naturally to schoolboys.\textsuperscript{37}

There seems little doubt that from Bob Wells’ point of view, the rituals were aimed at instilling dependability into workmates and making them aware of the dangers that surrounded them. He saw a direct link between being ‘pulled into line’ and taking notice of instructions on the factory floor.\textsuperscript{38}

Bob Wells reiterated that far more dangerous situations were likely to arise if the apprentice had not been ‘put in his place’ by some type of initiation ritual than by the rituals and pranks themselves. This, he believed, was because new apprentices were often thoughtless about danger to others.

There was a definite danger to the trades and to the non-trades people working ... with apprentices who were undisciplined...[A]pprentices coming onto the shop floor unfortunately in the first year did have a tendency to say ‘I know’, and they would say this from what they knew about tech. trades that they learned at high school ...

Consequently,

... the initiation process is really not a pranks type based exercise; it’s really a question of familiarising themselves with the consequences of things not being done in the order and if they want to question its fine to lead them to question what was being asked for, but it was not fine for them to do things out of sequence if they were asked to do it, bearing in mind that the tradesman at the end of the day was responsible for fixing their work if they did stuff up. And the question of cost of materials was something that you should get home to the tradesman because it was never the apprentice’s responsibility. So the tradesmen themselves, being responsible for the apprentices, did demand they do things in certain style and if the next tradesman they went to had a different way of doing it that was fine but that tradesman expected the apprentice to do it his way not the way the previous tradesman, nor the apprentice himself, thought [it should be done]. So at all times the apprentices were under the direct control of tradesmen and the tradesmen were aware of the

\textsuperscript{37} Bob Wells, interview with Dick Noyelle, 17 January 2003.
\textsuperscript{38} Wells, interview.
consequences of things being done out of sequence or the instructions they issued were not being carried out in the [correct] order...  

While Bob Wells regarded initiations and pranks positively, he was of the opinion that the shortening of the apprenticeship term from five to four years in the 1970s, and the practice of accepting more highly educated boys worsened the situation. The shortened period of apprenticeship meant that boys were not adequately trained when they took up their trades. He also detected in some of the more highly educated apprentices a ‘contemptuous’ attitude towards trades men and their assistants. Wells observed that other changes resulted from the presence of returned servicemen (Vietnam war veterans) who served another shortened form of apprenticeship – called a ‘traineeship’. Although these men received their trade papers, few progressed beyond being tradesman, and their training was not ‘generally seen as [being] equal to the [full length] apprenticeship’.  

The Workshops, of course, had always had their share of war veterans and refugees. After World War Two, many European refugees found a home in Australia, and the ethnic mix of the Workshops changed to include men who were not native English speakers. Other workers were returned servicemen with disabilities, who were sometimes given deadend jobs which provided a livelihood but did not offer advancement. Sometimes these people were the butt of apprentices’ jokes; the intolerant young men regarded them as unintelligent because they had difficulty expressing themselves, or because they held lowly and menial jobs. The bond between tradesman and trades assistant, however, was strong and – where a relationship of trust had grown up – it overcame racial differences. An apprentice caught ‘taking the mickey’ out of a trades assistant could easily earn a clip round the ear from the trades man. Another tactic, aimed at bringing apprentices into line, was to exclude them from the camaraderie of the tradesmen and their assistants. Apprentices were expected to refer to the men by their first names but not by nicknames bestowed on individuals by their Workshop mates. Another hurdle to be negotiated was acceptance into the social club. Membership was bestowed by the committee; it wasn’t an automatic privilege that a man qualified for at a particular time in his career, so if a youth was regarded as being ‘disrespectful’ or as ‘not fitting in with people’, he might be excluded from joining the social club. Ultimately, this could carry over into whether, at the end of his apprenticeship, he was offered a place in the Workshops as a tradesman. Seen in this context, the need to ‘fit in’ became a powerful tool in disciplining apprentices.  

Both changing external circumstances and the composition of the workforce naturally impacted upon behaviours upon the factory floor. Steve Smith, the son of a bank manager, applied for an apprenticeship at the Workshops because he loved steam locomotives and wanted to learn how they worked. When he commenced his four-year apprenticeship in 1972, steam locomotives had all but vanished. He began work with the men who had practised the skills used in manufacturing steam engines – whom he referred to as ‘the old tradesmen’ – and who were steeped in tradition. He had to call his tradesman ‘Mister’,

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40 Wells, interview 27 January.
41 Wells, interview 27 January.
whereas many younger tradesmen permitted their apprentices to call them by their first name. There was a strict ‘pecking order’ observable by the requirement that an apprentice walk behind his tradesman and next to the labourer (not in front of him). At the end of every working day, Steve Smith had to get two buckets of water, warm them up using the steam injector from the boiler, and place them down for his tradesman to wash himself. After the tradesman, the trades assistant washed in the buckets; then the apprentice was last. In the third year of his four-apprenticeship, Smith went to work with younger tradesmen and he found them entirely different. For one thing, their language was crude and he soon developed a ‘disgusting’ vocabulary.

He recalled that the 1970s:

...was an era where ... in the final year of your apprenticeship the mining companies were coming around and poaching you. They would make offers because we were reportedly the best trained of tradesman around; we did steel, aluminium, we had such diversity. It was there [among the younger tradesmen] that I saw a lot more initiations and one had to be more careful. The other thing that was [happening] ... was that the workshops was [becoming] such a diverse culture. We had Jews ... Nazis ... Serbians ... Croatians. We had such cultural diversity and most of these people were labourers [and] trades assistants ... I mean you put a Serbian and Croatian in the same room and there is 400 years of conflict between those two races. Of course it happened within the workshops; it was no different, and I think there was a lot of conflict that was going on because we had these ... displaced persons from the war who came [with unresolved issues from their past] ... and of course every now and then it would bubble over ... When we used to get changed, we had big long rows of lockers [where we kept our street clothes] ... a lot of the older blokes wore long johns but every now and then you would see their tattoo and you would work out [from the rumours that went] around you would [say to yourself], ‘Ah so they were in an extermination camp. That’s why they won’t work or talk with that person’.

Smith’s experience varies considerably from some of those who had undergone earlier apprenticeships. In one incident, where he admitted involvement, an apprentice was stripped and anointed around the genital area with fibreglass resin which subsequently hardened and burned, causing the boy agony. Smith was horrified and ran away, but some of his fellow perpetrators justified their actions by saying they were merely handing down what they had suffered, with a bit more added. But Smith believed that the whole business of initiations had got badly out of hand. In his opinion:

There is a difference between being greased up [or] painted with blue dye [and] a group of guys saying, ‘We’re going to rape you’. That’s totally and utterly different and I think that was the whole change the shift in the

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42 Steve Smith, interview with Maxine Milne, 24 February 2003.
workplace from steam to diesel; from then a craftsman to being someone working on production line – a whole shift in respect for themselves, respect for the workshops, for management.\footnote{Smith, interview.}

For some apprentices, however, even ‘being greased up’ was incredibly traumatic. A man who had completed his apprenticeship as a painter at the Workshops, recalled an incident in 1977 when an apprentice painter suicided. Although it was put down to ‘relationship difficulties’ he knew that the boy had been ‘greased up’ not long before he took his own life.\footnote{Email, R. McCracken to author, 15 April 2003.}

Nevertheless, Smith’s conclusion is a thought-provoking one. He imputed the rise in violence to the frustrations brought about by changing circumstances – the move from an old craft-based system where value was placed in the skill of an individual to a mass-produced product created under assembly line conditions. Consequently, the believed, the younger tradesmen lost their respect for the craft and adopted a careless attitude to their work. The discipline on the shop floor declined and this was reflected in initiations ‘getting out of control’. He did, however, also mention the presence in the workforce in 1975 of members of the ‘Club Deroes’ bikie gang, some of whom were caught manufacturing firearms.\footnote{Smith, interview.}

There is not the space in this paper to explore the contention that discipline relaxed on the factory floor during the 1970s, although a number of other ex-employees had a similarly negative opinion of the outcomes of technological changes and from the shortening of apprenticeships from five to four years.\footnote{For a more detailed discussion, see B. Oliver, ‘Transforming Labour’ at the Westrail Workshops, Midland WA, 1940s to 1990s’ in B. Bowden & J. Kellett, eds, Transforming Labour. Work, Workers, Struggle and Change. Proceedings of the Eighth National Labour History Conference, Griffith University, 3-5 October 2003, pp. 247-252.}

According to Bob Wells, who began his apprenticeship in 1963, the shortening of apprenticeships from five to four or fewer years meant that people were not fully trained when they came onto the shop floor. Although the educational level was higher – boys were required to have their Leaving Certificate before applying – the four-year apprenticeship in the electrical trades and fitting trades did not ‘provide the time for the apprentice to actually learn the significance of what they were doing’. Not only were these new apprentices ‘not as dextrous as they ought to have been’ but, in Wells’ opinion they were not well suited to the Workshops as their higher level of education made them look down on the trades people and, especially, the trades assistants. They failed to understand that the ‘education they were about to receive on the shop floor was a physical education in how the work was to actually be done’. And ‘they tended to look for answers out of books as to how a tradesman did their work and that’s not how tradesmen work’.\footnote{Wells, interview 27 January.}
Bill Kirkham, Master of Apprentices from 1974 to 1988, was similarly sceptical about the value of the extra two years at high school.

Most of our apprentices were from year 10, some year 11 and 12 also. With the year 12s we found that they were not smarter than the year 10s … In some cases it only showed that their parents were able to afford to keep their kids at school for another two years. A lot of [the year 12s] thought the trades were a bit tedious and they would much rather be involved in the professional side such as becoming academics and bank managers, whereas the year 10 – all he wanted to do was something with his hands, none of this academic stuff.48

In summary, the change from steam to diesel meant considerable upheavals in trades such as the blacksmiths and boilermakers, who gained work in new areas but lost it elsewhere. With dieselisation, the Workshops began making aluminium wagons instead of the old wooden ones; thus work that had traditionally been ‘woodies’ (carpenters) became blacksmiths’ work. Blacksmiths had been a dying trade at the Workshops because the skills required to refit a steam locomotive were no longer needed. When a steam ‘loco’ came in for a refit, everything had to be cut off with an Oxyacetylene torch, con rods lengthened or shortened, the wheels fitted with new tyres that had to be shrunk on by the blacksmiths before being machined. Initially, nothing ever fitted, so every little bracket had to be machined to fit. Consequently, the change to diesels meant a steep decline in the tasks performed by blacksmiths that even the work involved in the change to Standard Gauge could not halt. According to Don Underdown (a blacksmith at the Workshops from 1949 to 1991), once the ‘steamies’ went, the number of blacksmiths operating individual fires in the main shop went down from around 87 to 19.49

In the 1980s, the atmosphere changed again as Workshops management strove to comply with the demands of new Occupational Health and Safety legislation. Safety equipment was issued free, and workers were expected to comply with regulations and wear protective gear. With the lowering of the incidence of genuine industrial accidents, the risky pranks that had in the past resulted in severe injuries or fatalities were less likely to be successfully passed off as ‘accidents’. This tends to be supported by the comments of two men who were apprentice painters in the early 1980s. One recalled that the ‘bastardisation’, as he termed it, ‘faded away in the mid 1980s’ and the other stated that by 1982 ‘you just didn’t put up with that stuff at work any more’.50 The experience of Mae Jean Parker, one of the few females trade apprentices, who was an apprentice electrical fitter from 1991 until the closure in 1994, suggests that initiations and pranks did not cease entirely, however.51

48 Bill Kirkham, interviewed by Kate Ferguson, 7 May 2002, transcript p. 3.
49 D. Underdown, interviewed by M. Milne, Jan-Feb 2002, transcript pp. 10 ff.
50 Email, R. McCracken to author, 15 April 2003.
51 Mae Jean Parker, interviewed by Helma Lowande, 20 March 2003. Parker spoke of being ‘crucified’, having her overalls pumped full of grease, and being chained up.
This paper commenced with a number of questions about initiation practices at Midland. The evidence examined here suggests that the practice of rituals was well established in British workshops, and in other workplaces in Australia, and was particularly common in overwhelmingly male workforces in the blue collar industries, and especially in workplaces were there was a high level of danger. The workers themselves usually regarded the practice as useful for instilling discipline in young workers; but some saw it as degrading and objectionable. Although few used such concepts as ‘bonding’, ‘developing tribal loyalties’ or ‘superiority’, many of those interviewed believed that such practices helped to develop a sense of responsibility and ‘camaraderie’ among apprentices, and spoke of ‘the culture’. The rituals changed over the period examined, and became significantly more violent in the 1970s and early ‘80s; yet the main factors in these changes occurred around Australia and worldwide, as well as at Midland. Was there anything specifically unique about the rituals at Midland? It is possible that the Peanut King is of entirely local origin. It is yet to be proved otherwise.
Aboriginal People and Apprenticeships at the Western Australian Government Railways (WAGR) Midland Workshops in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s: A Preliminary Investigation

Skye Smith

Introduction
In their 2001 paper, Host and Milroy demonstrate that much needs to be done to write a comprehensive labour history involving Aboriginal people. As they point out, current papers on Aboriginal people’s contribution to Australia’s economy are generally located in books concerned with other issues, such as race relations, cultural and military histories. To bridge such a ‘gap’, Host and Milroy and others are currently undertaking collaborative research using archives and oral history programs in the area. It is hoped that this research will ‘help to dispel the myth, propagated in recent political discourse about welfare dependency and the ‘Aboriginal industry’; that Aboriginal people are the recipients of unearned advantage and a burden on mainstream society’. Thus for them, recognising Aboriginal labour history will be part of the reconciliation process.

It is in this context that I situate my research paper. Little research has been completed on the contribution of Aboriginal labour to the Western Australian Government Railways (WAGR) Midland Workshops, and, given that this was such a large and successful department, I feel this to be a necessary investigation. Thus my research focuses on Aboriginal people gaining employment at the Workshops; more specifically, Aboriginal people who attained apprenticeships. Due to the scarcity of material written on the subject and my own time constraints I must first point out that this paper is by no means a

1 Skye Smith completed a BA (Cultural Heritage Studies) at Curtin University in 2003.
comprehensive exploration of Aboriginal labour at the workshops. Rather, it is a preliminary investigation in a yet-to-be completed, larger project. Future research needs to be conducted that collects the personal stories of the Aboriginal apprentices themselves. Such research will enrich the historical interpretation of the workshops and will also serve to counter past representations of Aboriginal people as solely the ‘object’ of research. For now, however, this paper will focus on how, why and when Aboriginal people acquired apprenticeships at the workshops using mainly an archival approach.

**Background**
To put such questions in context, I wish to begin my investigation by looking at a photograph that was featured in the *Daily News* in 1961. The article and photograph were to commemorate a retired Master of Apprentices (below).

![Captioned ‘Master finishes his time’, this Daily News photograph, published 23 May 1961, shows the retiring Master of Apprentices, George Groves (seated) with his successor, Ted Holdsworth (left) and two Indigenous apprentices, Harold Foley (centre) and Lance Hume (right).](image)

The interesting aspect of the photograph is that the apprentices accompanying the Master of Apprentices, George Groves, were two Aboriginal youth. This raises many interesting questions. How did these young men attain an apprenticeship when they were still denied the basic human and civil rights of non-Aboriginal Australians? If most Aboriginal people in the South-west of the State were employed in work that was considered to be ‘unskilled’, how did these youth get apprenticeships? Does this mean that there were schemes occurring at the time to assist young Aboriginal people into employment? Where did WAGR fit into all this? More specifically, why were these boys chosen to have their photograph taken? Further questions such as, what assistance they received, how many applied, the trades they chose and how many were accepted, also arise. As I explore such questions I will focus on the period of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.

**The 1950s and 1960s: negotiations**
Prior to and during the 1950s, the majority of Aboriginal people who were employed generally had ‘unskilled’ ‘unskilled’ jobs. In the southern division, for example, Aboriginal people engaged mainly in seasonal work such as clearing trees and burning,
making fences, shearing and fruit picking for farmers and local authorities. In the north, the employment was generally within the cattle and pearling industry while in the eastern districts Aboriginal people mainly found work on railway and road maintenance. However, the seasonal nature of this employment meant that during off seasons, recessions or periods of drought, Aboriginal people were the first to be unemployed.

In the mid 1950s to 1960s, the Native Welfare Department felt that a higher standard of education was the best long-term solution to this problem; thus a greater emphasis was placed on child education. As the Education Department had been granted full control of ‘native education’ in the 1940s, the Department was free to focus on providing opportunities for youth to pursue post primary studies at secondary schools in regional or metropolitan centres. Secondary education bursaries and scholarships were granted to students in each division by the Department so as to assist in accommodation and additional expenses. Between 1961 and 1964, 31 Aboriginal students received such awards in the central division alone.

Education was already a focal point in the 1950s for the wider population. A shortage of schools in the post war period led to an expansion within the system, especially in terms of secondary education. Similarly, due to a deficiency in skilled workers during this period the emphasis was also on apprenticeship training. Thus technical education facilities expanded, in the form of many new colleges and courses.

After a brief decline in apprenticeship registrations at the end of this developmental period, the newly elected government instigated an inquiry in 1962 into the

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8 Adult education came later, in 1964.
The inquiry found that a major impediment in the employment of apprentices was the cost for employers, and thus recommended more employer assistance. The inquiry also forecast a need for 12000 apprenticeships by 1967.\footnote{White, M.A and Birman, W. (1981) ‘The apprenticeship system in Western Australia: A history’, in \textit{Melbourne Studies in Education}, Melbourne University Press, p 176-7.}

In this context of increased encouragement for vocational education, the Native Welfare Department stepped in to boost the number of Aboriginal children involved in such training. Fearing that the educated Aboriginal children would ‘drift back to camp life’\footnote{Annual Report of the Commissioner for Native Welfare, year ended 30\textsuperscript{th} June, Perth 1957, p. 12.} or ‘unskilled’ labour after secondary education, the Department focused on channeling children into semi-skilled and skilled trades and employment.\footnote{Annual Report of the Commissioner for Native Welfare, year ended 30\textsuperscript{th} June, Perth 1961, in Western Australian Votes and Proceedings of Parliament WAV\& P, 1961, 3rd session of the 23rd parliament, vol. 2., p. 41.} The Commissioner for Native Welfare was confident that improved education and the expanding industrial front would make this task relatively easy.\footnote{Annual Report of the Commissioner for Native Welfare, year ended 30\textsuperscript{th} June, Perth 1960, in Western Australian Votes and Proceedings of Parliament WAV\& P, 1961, 3rd session of the 23rd parliament, vol. 2., p. 37.} Financial assistance was provided for those youths undertaking apprenticeships and semi-skilled work that were required to live away from home. The Department also issued an initial clothing grant of 30 pounds, a tools-of-the-trade grant of 20 pounds and 2 pounds 10 shillings for incidental expenses, which increased to 4 pounds 10 shillings by 1962. By 1968, assistance was the same as the child welfare rate for state wards, which was a maximum board rate of 10 dollars and $3.50, $4.00 and $5.00 for 15, 16 and 17 year olds respectively. Youth stayed at either Departmental hostels such as McDonald House and Katakutu Hostel that were specifically for accommodating Aboriginal boys in trade apprenticeships and semi-skilled work or boarded at private accommodation.\footnote{Circular memorandum No. 182, 21/7/55. ‘Employment of Native Youth Special Allowances’, Department of Native Welfare, Acc 993 AN 1/7. Item no. 654/51, SROWA: Letter, special allowances as from 23/8/68 in ‘Apprentices and Training’, Department of Native Welfare, Acc 2817 AN1/27, Item no. 12-3, SROWA; also Annual Report of the Commissioner for Native Welfare, year ended 30\textsuperscript{th} June, Perth 1961. McDonald House was run by the Department until 1961 when it was handed to the Church of England Mission. It still provided some funds after this date.}

So where did WAGR sit in regards to this increased push for vocational training? Every year, WAGR placed an advertisement in local newspapers calling for boys to fill ‘situations vacant’ in a variety of trades offered at the Workshops.\footnote{Trades such as blacksmith, boilermaker, patternmaker, moulder, electrical fitter, mechanical fitter, coppersmith – to name a few – were advertised.} Boys, preferably aged 15 or older, with sound education and good physiques, were encouraged to apply to...
the chairman of the Apprenticeship Application Board. Most advertisements were displayed during the months of September and October, although there were advertisements as late as March calling for supplementary intakes. Advertisements were placed in 8 newspapers across WA until 1967, when only the Sunday Times and West Australian exhibited them.

But while WAGR made these advertisements publicly available it also took the time to correspond with the Native Welfare Department directly to advise it of apprenticeship vacancies. The Industrial and Staff manager for example, wrote to the Commissioner of Native Welfare in 1957 stating that ‘advice for vacancies for apprentices in this department may be of interest to your officers who are seeking suitable employment opportunities for wards of your department’. He also enclosed a brochure that gave details on the trades available at the shops, the selection process, rates of pay, terms of indenturing and training and amenities available. This correspondence continued between the department and the railways well into the 1970s.

The Department of Native Welfare saw WAGR apprenticeships as favourable avenues of employment for Aboriginal youth. As early as 1956, the Minister for Railways wrote to the Commissioner of Native Welfare alerting him to the WAGR’s apprenticeship vacancies. He asked that, if the Commissioner knew of any ‘suitable lads’ from the missions or McDonald house, he ‘would be prepared to approach the apprenticeship board to ensure that coloured boys receive every consideration’. While the Commissioner wrote to all field officers and mission superintendents, and asked them to contact schools in the district and any other youths suitable for the apprenticeship, the responses to his requests were not numerous. No youths were judged ‘suitable or having the desire to take advantage of these apprenticeships’ in the north-west district; only one application was received from the northern district and two were submitted from the central division.

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18 See ‘Employment of Native Youth Special Allowances’ posters in Department of Native Welfare, Item 654/51, 6/11/56.
19 The country newspapers were: the Kalgoorlie Miner; Geraldton Guardian; Albany Advertiser; Southern Times; Narrogin Observer. See ‘Apprentices and Training’, Department of Native Welfare, Item 12-3.
21 ‘Apprentices and Training’, Department of Native Welfare, Acc. 2817 AN1/27, Item no. 12-3, SROWA.
22 This is evident in the files 2817, 12. 3 and 993, 654/51.
23 Letter 3/11/56 from the Hon. Minister to the Commissioner, ‘Employment of Native Youth Special Allowances’.
25 Letters from A.O.Day, Port Hedland, dated 10/12/56; S. Beharell, District Officer, Derby, n.d., to the Commissioner, Department of Native Welfare, and letter from the
Thus there were three boys in total, who applied for apprenticeships in 1956 through these negotiations. The Minister for Native Welfare for example, asked the Honorary Minister for Railways in 1957 if he would request the Master of Apprentices to give ‘sympathetic consideration’ to the youth who applied, as ‘it must be borne in mind that these boys have suffered many disabilities and have not had the opportunities of white children’.26 While these boys were not selected, the Minister was assured that the selection boards were aware of these differences and assisted where possible while not disregarding the average standard of applications.27 Thus it seems from such correspondence that the period of the 1950s and early 1960s was one of negotiations rather than a specific scheme to place Aboriginal youth into apprenticeships with the WAGR.

Perhaps the first real scheme began in 1967. An arrangement between the Department of Native Welfare and the Commonwealth Department of Labour and National Service resulted in an ‘apprenticeship nomination’ scheme that it was hoped would increase the number of Aboriginal youths in apprenticeships and semi-skilled work.28 Each Native Welfare superintendent was instructed to forward nominations of youths who ‘were anxious to obtain an apprenticeship and who in the view of the superintendent had... the required education and social background.’29 All youths who were nominated assembled in Perth to undertake a vocational guidance test and interview, the week’s costs being covered by the department. In 1966/67, nine were nominated under this scheme and two received apprenticeships.30

But this scheme did not guarantee an increased number of applicants. The selection board in Perth reported that ‘the lads (were) generally unimpressive at the interview and the board members, making full allowance for their special circumstances could not see the others...meeting the demands of apprenticeship...’. While the poor verbal test results were disregarded, the board ‘could not ignore the poor results for the other areas, particularly arithmetic skills’ and felt that the youths, apart from one, would be more suitable for general labouring duties.31

In fact, the number of Aboriginal youth in apprenticeships at the time was small.

Patrol Officer, Central Division to the District Office, Central, dated 15/11/56, in ‘Employment of Native Youth Special Allowances’ file.
26 Letter Minister Native Welfare3 to Minister for Railways, dated 10/1/57, in Ibid.
27 Letter from Commissioner for Railways, dated 25/1/57, in Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Letter dated 16/12/70 from the Assistant Principal, Counselling Services, ‘Employment and Industry – General’, Department of Native Welfare, Acc. 2817, AN1/27, Item no. 12-1, SROWA.
Statistics indicate that statewide there were only 18 in apprenticeships in the 1964/65 period. Of this number, 16 were from the central division and two were from the southern division. The other divisions, northern, northwest, north central and eastern had no youth completing apprenticeships at the time. At WAGR in Midland, of the ten Aboriginal people employed, only one Aboriginal apprentice finished his term as a coachbuilder with WAGR in 1965.

While there is no doubt that this small number was partly due to the low population of Aboriginal people compared to the rest of society, it seems that it was also because the youth could not reach the required education standard. It may also have been due to the fact that District Officers did not give enough youth the opportunity to apply because they might not have been ‘suitable’ by their standards.

It may now be useful to again look at the photograph. While it is not clear what these youth did or if they were even apprentices at all, a few inferences can be made in the context provided above. One of the boys in the photograph was still at Forrest High School in Perth, completing his third year, in 1960 and possibly applied for an apprenticeship that year in September. The other youth, from Roelands Mission southern division, applied also at this time. If both these boys were indentured early 1961, then they were both first year apprentices in the photograph. Hence in 1961 they were possibly the newest ‘acquisition’ of Aboriginal apprentices at the workshops. A letter in 1962, from the Minister for Railways, stating that two boys were currently completing their apprenticeships, reinforces this supposition.

So if this were the case, that they were the only Aboriginal first year apprentices, it can be argued that placing these two boys in the photograph is a tokenistic gesture, which might also be construed to suggest that there were more Aboriginal youth being trained than these two. This can be viewed as a mechanism that could be exploited by the department to justify its role as ‘assimilator’. It is a chance for them to demonstrate how successful the Department had been in converting ‘many natives’. Thus the photograph may have had propaganda value as ‘evidence’ that money was being used effectively and that ‘natives’ were ‘becoming ...working citizen[s] whose productive value becomes an

33 Letter, reporting numbers, dated 16/6/65: ‘Employment and Labour Requests for Males’. Department of Native Welfare, Item 12-4, SROWA. WAGR employed some 233 Aboriginal people all over the states, mainly as ‘gangers’ maintaining the railway lines.
34 Annual Report of the Commissioner for Native Welfare, year ended 30th June, Perth 1960, p. 6
In summary, the 1950s and 1960s was a time of negotiations between WAGR and the Department of Native Welfare so as to facilitate Aboriginal youth into apprenticeships. The next period demonstrates that more formal schemes were in place.

1970s: Commonwealth assistance
For Aboriginal people in the 1970s, there was a move towards self-determination. This began at the Commonwealth level in 1967 when the constitution was altered so that the federal government could finally apply legislation to Aboriginal people. At a state level, Western Australia repealed the Native (Citizenship Rights) Act in 1971 that had been in place since 1944. This meant that Aboriginal people no longer had to apply for certificates of citizenship and were now citizens. That same year the WA premier introduced three bills: the Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority (AAPA) Bill, the Community Welfare Bill and the Aboriginal Heritage Bill. The first bill passed to form the AAPA Act in 1972. This immediately repealed the Native Welfare Act 1963, replacing it with the Community Welfare Act 1972. Aboriginal people were now also given the same welfare measures as other Western Australians.

In response to the recession in the 1970s, the Whitlam Government worked towards an increase in funding for employment related education. Huge Commonwealth schemes were implemented in this period, such as the National Apprenticeship Assistance Scheme (NAAS) which supplanted the previous 1966 Country Apprenticeship Scheme (CAS). The Commonwealth Rebate for Full time Training (CRAFT) replaced NAAS in 1977.

It was in this climate that the Commonwealth Minister for Labour and National Service suggested that a scheme for assisting Aboriginal youth into employment and training be set in place. He felt that ‘special action’ was needed to stimulate opportunities ‘for many of them who are capable of undertaking more skilled work’. By 1970 the scheme, titled the Employment Strategy for Aboriginals (ESA) was in place and was administered by

40 ‘Apprentices – Away from Home Allowance’, Department of Labour Acc. 3914, WAS 469 Item no. 000105.2.
41 Dockery & Thorsten, op. cit., p. 10.
the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES).\textsuperscript{43} It aimed to assist Aboriginal people to acquire work and develop skills, which would equip them for continuous regular employment. In the scheme, private employers and local government bodies were offered a subsidy for each additional apprentice employed: 30 per cent of the award rate for the first three months; 25 per cent for the next, followed by 20 and 10 per cent respectively. To encourage Aboriginal youth to undertake employment, assistance was also offered in the form of a living away from home allowance, transport fares and a clothing grant. For an apprentice under 21, who was earning less than $16 a week, for example, the government paid half of his/her accommodation costs, up to a maximum of $7 per week, a $40 annual clothing grant and $1 per week in fares during an 18 month period.\textsuperscript{44} The scheme was amended in 1974 so that all government bodies and instrumentalities received the subsidy and rates increased both for employers and youth.\textsuperscript{45}

By 1978, ESA was replaced by a National Employment Scheme for Aboriginals (NESA). This, too, was a major Commonwealth campaign administered by the Commonwealth Department of Employment and Industrial Training to identify suitable training opportunities within government departments, state and federal, for Aboriginal people. Government departments were invited to identify available positions for Aboriginal people\textsuperscript{46} and the full cost, unlike the other scheme, was to be recovered from the Department. A circular issued to all departments advised that each was to devise and implement an action plan that addressed this matter.\textsuperscript{47}

WAGR received such a letter. The Secretary for Railways responded by issuing a letter to all railways branches informing them of the new scheme. He stated that ‘...branches employing apprentices should consider whether they (Aboriginal Youth) could be additional to the number in their budget approval’.\textsuperscript{48} Responses from the 10 branches were varied. The Chief Mechanical Engineer, for example, stated that while his branch already employed one tradesman, two apprentices and three semi-skilled men who were of Aboriginal descent; he was pessimistic about the likelihood of employing additional apprentices. Of the seven boys who had applied for an apprenticeship during the year, he felt that ‘to place these youngsters in situations where failure would be almost inevitable,

\\textsuperscript{43} Press release, ‘Employment of Native Labour’ WAGR Acc. 5704, WAS 1208, Item no. 02019 v. 1, SROWA.
\textsuperscript{44} ‘Employment subsidy for Aborigines – Commonwealth assistance’, Department of Native Welfare Acc. 1724, AN 1/16, Item no. 434/69, 1969-73.
\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Ibid.} The new percentages of award rate were to 60, 40, 25 and 20%. Similarly, youth aged 15 received an amended amount of $14, while at the other end of the scale a 20-year old received $4. Fare rates went up to $2 and youth under 17 received a $45 clothing allowance.
\textsuperscript{46} Press statement, ‘Employment of Native Labour’ WAGR Item no. 02019., v. 1.
\textsuperscript{47} Circular, 12/9.78: Press release, in \textit{ibid}.
\textsuperscript{48} Letter 19/9/78 in \textit{ibid}. Other correspondence quoted in this paragraph is as follows, and all letters are from this file: CME 30/10/78 to Secretary; Chief Traffic Manager to Secretary, 16/10.78; Chief Officer of Stores to Secretary, 13/10./78; Motive Power Engineer 13/10/78.
may in fact produce more serious results than exist at present.’ He offered employment for another six Aboriginal youth, but only in junior worker positions. The Chief Traffic Manager insisted that ‘no restrictions are placed on the employment of Aboriginals in this branch as it is not so much a matter of race as the ability to perform which governs such employment’. He employed 15 Aboriginal youth, but only as junior station assistants, shunters, guards and enginemen. An even less positive view was that of the Chief Officer of Stores, who wrote that, ‘experience with this type of employee in this branch in the past has not been particularly satisfactory’. Hence no Aboriginal people were employed at the branch but he suggested that two could be added. In a similar vein, the Motive Power Engineer wrote that, in his opinion, ‘areas of work should not be reserved for a specific group of people who in the past have indicated by their performance, that they do not deserve a continuity of employment’.

With these results, the Secretary for Railways wrote to the Public Service Board, and argued that WAGR did not practice racial discrimination and employed ‘virtually every national background represented in the Australian population, including Aboriginals’. Summing up the responses, he stated that ‘as everyone is well aware’, the ‘majority’ of Aboriginals were not competitive and ‘most’ were unreliable in regard to work attendance. In terms of the action plan, he concluded by reporting that if there were vacancies, ‘suitable Aboriginals would be considered’ as long as they could read and write and had a respectable appearance.

From this correspondence it can be argued that the results were especially poor, considering it was a cost free project. Why wasn’t WAGR taking up this offer? After all it did seem that the employer was to gain financially from the scheme. So why didn’t WAGR employ more Aboriginal people?

Apprentices at WAGR had a wide and varied training. While youths rotated within the shops to learn additional trade skills, they also acquired experience by traveling to other WAGR depots – such as Forrestfield diesel depot, Kalgoorlie, Narrogin, Geraldton and Bunbury – and even transferring to other departments such as the Public works, the Water Authority and State Electrical Commission. In their final year, they were encouraged to work independently, so as to prepare them for trade life. Thus, upon finishing their apprenticeship, they possessed training of a very high standard. WAGR had a very good name amongst employers, and worked to maintain this high standard. It appears that Aboriginal people were not employed because they did not meet the required standard. But it can be argued that the comments demonstrate some racial prejudice. The secretary’s remarks such as ‘most’ and ‘majority’ and ‘everyone is well aware’ tend to generalize. Similarly, it can be argued that the Chief Officer of Stores’ reluctance to

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49 Letter 17/11/78 Secretary for Railways to Chairman, Public Service Board, ‘Employment of Native Labour’, WAGR item 02019.
50 Ibid.
51 Mr Bill Kirkham, interview with author, 17th October, 2001, tape in possession of Westrail Workshops (Midland) History Project, tape 1, side 2.
employ due to unreliability was an exercise in discrimination. In trying to be equal and fair, the WAGR branches were overlooking the fact that Aboriginal people were at a disadvantage because of the history of invasion. They were missing the whole point of the NESA: that it was especially formulated to try to increase employment opportunities for Aboriginal people, to work towards alleviating the situation.

But on the other hand there is evidence to suggest that Aboriginal youth were taken into consideration. Bill Kirkham, a Master of Apprentices at the Workshops from 1978 until 1988, stated that while he never practiced favouritism towards Aboriginal youths when they came before him on the selection board, he believed that it was necessary to exercise what he called an ‘inner sense’. In this case, he generally took the applicant’s background into consideration. The youth may not have had the same opportunity as other applicants and may have found (for example) mathematics or science difficult because of this. If this was the case and the youth showed potential as a tradesman, he would be offered a less academically demanding trade, such as painting or carpentry. Similarly, if the board were faced with two identical youths who could not be separated in schooling, attitude or aptitude and one was an Aboriginal youth, Kirkham states that:

I would prefer the Aboriginal lad to get the job, than the white lad. The reason being, the Aboriginal lad hasn’t got many chances; the white lad... if (he) was refused an offer with us...could possibly apply at another instrumentality and get another job whereas the Aboriginal lad may not.²²

Thus, in comparison with the comments from each of the railway branches, Kirkham’s discretion seems more personal. This is probably because of Kirkham’s position amongst the apprentices at the shops. As Master of Apprentices, he was, among many roles, a counsellor and guidance officer for young apprentices. This type of discretion was not favouritism but rather an intuitive assessment, and was perhaps more equal and less discriminating than the preceding correspondence. It seems that he found a balance between fulfilling the requirements of the job and social justice. This possibly led to an increased number of Aboriginal youth being employed as apprentices.

Conclusion
In the 1950s and 1960s the Native Welfare Department attempted to reduce the unemployment rate amongst Aboriginal people by offering Aboriginal youth employment in semi skilled work and apprenticeship training. As part of this process the Department provided accommodation and other subsidies to help the youth. It can be argued that the changing apprenticeships system created the climate necessary for this to occur. The Western Australian Government Railways (WAGR) played a part in all this. As a result of inter-departmental negotiations Aboriginal youths were placed in positions at the railways. These informal negotiations occurred until 1967, when a scheme was developed in conjunction with the Commonwealth Department of Labour and National Service. The number of apprentices employed at this time however, was still relatively small. This was

²² Ibid.
due to Aboriginal youth not being able to reach the required educational standard for application.

The money spent on vocational training schemes in the 1970s also resulted in large schemes for Aboriginal youth. All government departments were eventually called upon to take action. WAGR, however, did not change its procedures dramatically in light of the scheme. Although there was racial prejudice inherent in attitudes expressed by some WAGR staff towards employing Aboriginal youth, it would appear that the high standards required of apprentices – which many non-indigenous youths failed to meet – may have been a significant factor in the small numbers of Indigenous boys accepted for training in the skilled trades. Despite this, it has been demonstrated that there was some special consideration given to Aboriginal youth who came before the selection board.

I have tried to avoid placing Aboriginal people as the ‘research objects’ in my paper, for this is often the case in research involving Aboriginal people. While I may not have succeeded in escaping this danger I hope that this study contributes some background contextual information surrounding WAGR’s employment of Aboriginal people as apprentices and in unskilled or semi-skilled work. The next step in the research process is to juxtapose the negotiations and schemes of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s with the experiences of the apprentices themselves.
A New Apprentice at the Workshops

Neil McDougall

An Interview by Bonnie Mitchell

BM: Can you tell me what it was like on your very first day walking into the Midland Workshops?

N McD: I can tell you exactly what it was like on my first day because on that day there were only two apprentices starting, I can even give you the date ... It was the 14th of April 1961. The other apprentice that started is now my off and on business partner, we have been friends since the day we met at the gate for over 40 years, we still go out on a pub crawl about once every fortnight, we go fishing together and we have been working together in a loose association since I became semi-retired and we set up our own businesses working for ourselves.

What it was like? I came from what was Governor Stirling High School — I'd actually seen that opened, and gone to the old Midland School which was later the Midland Tech, and to go back even further I'd gone to the Midland Infant School the year that it was opened, and that was in the early 1950s. So with all of that new structure, Midland finally had a high school that went on to what was known then as the Leaving Certificate, which is now the TEE. I was a bit different from probably some of my mates, because I was fairly young, and normally people that decided to go for trades went through what they call a technical stream, and those that probably wanted to go into professions went into professional. I was too young to get an apprenticeship, by the time I'd done my Junior, so I went on and did my Leaving, with a view to becoming a school teacher which is something I really didn't want to do. What I really wanted to do was get into engineering, but in those days the only way you could get into engineering was by going directly to university and working class parents couldn't afford it.

The other way was to go and serve an apprenticeship and through night school studies proceed to drafting qualifications and then onto engineering qualifications. And it was all done through tech school. And so that's why I decided, and my father wasn't too happy about it, but eventually he gave in, knowing that you get the best out of people who do what they wanted to do.

So on that first day, one of the first things that pretty well struck you was, when you were going to school in those days, you started at nine o'clock and knocked off at three o'clock. Well, when you started at the workshops you started at 7.30 in the morning, and you didn't knock off till 4.15pm. So it was a one-day transition. One day you were at school, the next day into the workshop. And it was a fairly long day, that

1 Neil McDougall entered the Workshops, serving an apprenticeship as a fitter. He later became a draftsman, assistant engineer and engineer.
first day. And the second thing is that standing at those gates was a little bit like standing outside a prison.

You were pretty well brought into the place, taken across to the then master of apprentices who gave you a bit of a pep talk on what to do and what not to do, while a myriad of clerks came up and handed you pieces of paper for you to sign because you were entering a five year indenture, and it was a pretty strict indenture: it was an agreement between yourself, your parents and your employer and it was legally enforceable. And in those days apprenticeships were five years. Probably as I later on recognized, and still think a bit without being a stick in the mud, I think a five-year apprenticeship, for the type of thing it gave you, was about right. You went in as a young kid of about fourteen or fifteen, it took you a couple of years really to get out of the boyishness and by the time you came out of your apprenticeship you were twenty-one, you were fairly mature, and many guys I served my apprenticeship with probably didn't buckle down until the last twelve months when they suddenly realized that in twelve months they were going to be out the gate, because Westrail had a policy then that when you finished your apprenticeship, in the main, you had to leave, go and work as what they called a journeyman, for at least twelve months with some other private firm to prove that you could do your trade, and if you wanted to and there was a job available, you could apply to be re-employed in the workshops.

But on that first day probably the biggest thing was walking: walking the slow mile, because we were taken by the masters apprentice, so as I was saying, there was myself and the other chap that started with me and we were taken down to the fitting shop. Now the fitting shop was far from the gate, it was really on the last block so it was a long walk that was all new to you. You'd never been in the place, there were three thousand men, nine hundred apprentices, you were one of a hundred and fifty and you were taken into this huge shop where there were things going on, and there were a hundred and fifty men in the fitting shop all working. You were taken down through walkways and that, and it took you a week to find out how to get out of the place because you were pretty well lost, and you not knowing what was going on, then you were taken up to the foreman, who in those days was a little tin god, who had his office above everyone. A gentleman by the name of Binko was my first foreman. Foremen generally didn't become foremen until they were in their mid-fifties, and worked till sixty-five, so they were at the end of their career, but they were generally selected on the basis of proven management and trade skills. That changed later on when they started taking thirty- and forty-year olds as foremen, not so much interested in their trade skills as their man management, but there was no mistake when you were taken up the steps, because you climbed the steps to that office, and there was the foreman and his clerk, you were given some papers, the master of apprentices introduced you and then left. You were then under the control of the foreman who was a pretty pleasant bloke, a rough old bugger, but make no mistake. Within the first five minutes, he put you in your place, he told you who you were, who you were, who was the boss, and what he'd do to you if he caught you doing anything wrong. And then he'd get his foreman's office assistant and he'd look through the list of where he was going to put you, and that's where he put you. I started on what was known as the frame pit.
The fitting shop was divided virtually into two halves. It was a diesel shop that only did diesels and probably only about a quarter of the tradesman worked in that, the majority of work going through the fitting shop was steam engines, and probably a hundred out of a hundred and fifty men were engaged in steam engines. There were men that were experts in their trade. Some of them would have worked there for thirty or forty years, and more likely than not on the one job. There was no diversification of job, where you got put was where you were at, it was a matter of luck. Certainly if you upset the foreman you earned yourself the worst job in the place and you could be there for life.

He had that power and no one could take it from him. If you didn't get on with the foreman you got the worst jobs in the place probably for life. On the other hand if you got on with him then you probably got the best jobs, particularly so if you happened to be related to him.

After you were indoctrinated by the foreman, you were taken by the foreman's clerk down to the pit that he had selected. Now the fitting shop at that time probably had about eight pits in it. They were numbered but they were also known by their names. I started at the far end of the fitting shop, which was known as the stripping pit, and that's where locomotives coming in for overhauling were brought in to be completely stripped down. It was a pretty dirty place, there is no great skill involved in the stripping pit and hence a lot of the fitters that were down there were not the most qualified, and not the brightest. Sometimes they were the bad boys that had been sent down there but conversely they were paid dirt money continuously so they actually made more money than anyone else in the place.

But it was basically stripping down locomotives, and I might add, stripping asbestos out to the point where the whole of the fitting shop was like a snowstorm, with asbestos, and now people are dying from it thirty years later. I and everyone else that worked there are registered on their list just in case. The next pit along the road from the stripping pit was basically for a breaking down of the spare locomotives and then a building up of locomotives so that in the stripping pit, everything was stripped, it was cleaned and it was sent away for either replacement or repair. Wheels and axles were sent to the wheel press, where they were pressed off to put new wheels on and new axles.

The next pit was the frame pit, where all the locomotive frames were laid out on trestles and they were repaired either by boilermakers or fitters, putting new horn stays on and doing everything up and painting the frame, so it could be a very noisy place. The riveting was done by boilermakers with rivet guns — there was no hearing protection, and the boiler shop was even worse. The boiler shop was a hellhole, noise-wise. Every boilermaker I knew including my two grandfathers was pretty deaf by the time they were sixty or sixty-five. It was known as boilermakers deafness. A few of the guys put a bit of cotton wool in their ears or chewing gum but they were regarded as sissies. The boilermakers that didn't have any degree of deafness were generally judged not to have done any hard work.

Getting along from the frame pit, next in line with that was the boiler pit where the boilers were stripped. They were carted across to the boiler shop where they were rebuilt. After having been rebuilt in the boiler shop they were brought back in the
fitting shop, where all of the bits of work that we'd been doing on the boilers such as lagging the boilers — they used to lag them with asbestos blankets and then have metal lagging done by two boilermakers in the fitting shop whose sole job day in day out was making the lagging for all of these locomotives. Incidentally my grandfather had worked there as a boilermaker for twenty years on the lagging pit, and the day that I first started working there. I was introduced to the boilermaker who had been on it for the last twenty years, a gentleman by the name of Brickie Winthrop. He turned round to me and said: “You know, for the first ten years I was on here until the old foreman retired, every time he came across to talk to me, he'd say: ‘You’re doing Ernie Oldham's job are you?’” That was my grandfather. He said: “It was only after ten years until the foreman retired that I found out I was doing my own job!” And no doubt after he retired it was always Brickie's job.

Moving on from the boiler pit: adjacent to that was where the wheels and axles were done and that was a pretty precise sort of work because most of the bearings on the steam locomotives they were plain journal bearings. They weren't roller bearings, some of them did have roller bearings, but there were journal bearings and that meant that every journal had to be hand scraped, which was very precise work. The old fitter that did that had come out of the merchant marine, he'd been on the boats for many years as a fitter, and he taught me how to scrape and how to cut an oil groove with a chisel so that you couldn't tell the difference from the machine, then past the frame pit you came to an area where the locomotive that had been stripped was starting to get put back together.

In the frame pit new steam cylinders were put on and there were a couple of machinists permanently attached to the fitting shop who set up a specially designed boring machine to bore the cylinders on the frame.

When that had all been done. the boiler was then picked up and put on the frame, and then once the boiler was put on the frame, the frame was picked up and taken up to what was really the last stage before it went out to the assembly pit, where the wheels and axles were brought up, the frame was lowered onto them and they were connected up.

The boilermakers got to work on rebuilding the cab, fitters fitting steam valves, coppersmiths doing all the pipe work, boilermakers fitting in spark arresters, and then all the motion - the side rods and driving rods that drove the engine — which had come from another part of the fitting shop known as the motion bench. This was regarded as a precision little area where all the bits were brought in from the machine shop, put together, rods straightened in the blacksmith shop and then they were put onto the locomotive.

One of the expert fitters — and there was an expert fitter on the weighbridge where, when the locomotive was finally put out, it was taken and weighed and every set of wheels was balanced had quite an important job — and the guy who did that had to do a fair amount of calculation, but the other thing he did was set the valves, because all of the valve mechanisms that operate a steam engine are all in precise patterns of geometry. He would come across and the fitters would mark, with chalk on the floor, the marks on the wheels. Then they pushed the locomotive backwards and forwards to get the right piston strokes and then they'd work out whether to advance or retard the
valves by inserting washers. It would probably take a full day to do that. Recently, probably ten years ago, when one of the historical railways had to get their valves set, they had to bring that guy out of retirement because he was probably one of the few guys who knew how to set valves. I still do, I've still got the paperwork there but I wouldn't be able to do it off the top of my head now.

Getting back to the fitting shop, as an apprentice you were put with a tradesman on a pit for three months, and you could be moved from shop to shop. My first job was on wheels and axles with an old Scots tradesman and a Polish mate, and that was the team. The funny part about it was that these tradesman — most of them had been on the same job for many years and knew it backwards — didn't really want to change, and their assistants had been with them for many years too. They never changed. A lot of the assistants were migrants that had come out here in the 50s, but most of the tradesman weren't. They were British or Australian, and they became like a little family. They lived with that man day in and day out for years, and I think all prejudices went by the board. I know a lot of the tradesman were not so much negative but really didn't have much time for what they called foreigners, but after a period of years, those guys were the ones that were invited to the assistants' daughters weddings and any animosity between nations and races broke down pretty quickly in that place.

But it was a funny place, There were many people there and every one of them had a background story — some of them came out the “Boy's Own Journal”— and you only believed half of a lot of them, but I got caught out many times because there were men there in 1960 that were in their late sixties and had been working since the First World War.

I remember working with one old chap who spent a long time telling them how he'd been in the Imperial Camel Corps for the British army in Egypt One of the other tradesman said to me: “Oh yeah?”. Well the next day in he came with his certificate of discharge from the British Army, and photographs of him in the Imperial Camel Corps and all his World War 1 medals.

But there were darker sides. There was a Russian, who I knew as Ivan, and anyone who worked at the fitting shop would know him. He was a crane attendant, the overhead crane attendant. He walked up and down with the crane doing the loads. He was a big man and he'd been fighting with the partisans in the Ukraine during the war. At the time when I was working on the wheels and axles pit, there was a little German fitter, can't remember his last name, his first name was Karl — pleasant enough little bloke, never said much. But anytime he and Ivan got within twenty feet of each other, it was almost a punch up. and I couldn't understand this. I got talking to Ivan one day and he said: “He's SS.” I said: “What are you talking about?” and he said: “He's bloody SS.” I thought: “Yeah, Russians and Germans.” He said: “I'm telling you, he's SS.” He said: “When you're getting changed, you have a look under his arm. He's got an SS number there.” And being a fourteen or a fifteen-year old kid and being game as hell, when this bloke got changed, I said: “Oh what's that. an SS number?” Straight away he came back and said: “Oh, how do you know?” And I said: “Oh”, and he said: “Yeah, it was an SS number. I was only fifteen or sixteen when I was in the SS, it was like the Boy Scouts.” Later on when I talked to Ivan, he said: “Yeah it was like the Boy Scouts! The fifteen year olds are the ones that were in charge of he concentration
camps like Dachau. That's why I won't talk to him. And he got in to Australia probably because at the end of the war, there was nothing against him.”

A lot of migrants had all sorts of reasons for coming here and some of them were to get away from where they were. There were a lot of Dutchmen that had been out to Australia during the war and were on the Dutch naval ships, and I knew a lot of them. There was no hesitation in engaging them, they were top tradesmen, they were pretty well regimented, and they liked this country.

A number of Italians that I worked with there had been prisoners of war here and they'd been sent home at the end of the war. The first thing they did when they got home was to get married and apply for the next boat back to Perth. So it was a very cosmopolitan place. But it was also very regimented, there was a pecking order, a deliberate pecking order and I'm not talking about the official pecking order - I mean the foreman was God, and the sub-foreman was next to God and nicknames abounded.

One of the sub-foreman who had a habit of every twenty or thirty minutes or so of coming out of his office going round the pit and then going back into his office three, four times a day, so because of that, he was named Sputnik, because at that time the Russians had put the first satellite into space that went round the earth, and he was Sputnik for the rest of his life.

There were a large number of people that came from a variety of backgrounds. Most of them when I served my apprenticeship were either Australian-born and second and third generation of those that had worked in the workshops. A large number of them were British, and there was a fairly good predominance of Scotsmen there. Most of the time the people who worked there had an accent of one sort or another. There were some very nice men there, some that you might pass the time of day with, others that you might cross the street if you met them, but that was, I considered, the education I was getting. Maybe I didn't see it until afterwards, but it wasn't just an education in a trade it was an education in life. You went in there a naive fifteen year old boy and by the time you came out at twenty-one you'd better be pretty wise — what they call street-wise — because you wouldn't survive otherwise.

But there were strict levels of hierarchy: the tradesman knew they were tradesmen, they were craftsmen, they knew they were craftsmen, they knew their work, no one could criticize their work and they were never criticized by their foreman or sub-foreman for their standard of work. They might be told they weren't working fast enough, but then again, there was an age range there of men of twenty-one up to men of sixty-five and that was the way it worked. Naturally enough, people couldn't retire until sixty-five and the Workshops kept them there, and when they got a little bit older they maybe were shifted onto a light job, but they still did their job. They were there right till the day they retired. so there were complete strata of men that had come from the different eras, been brought up in different eras. They were children of the British Empire. With a lot of them, half of their attitude was that they were there to obey orders and half were those that wanted to overthrow all sorts of authority — they had had enough of it from where they came from. The tradesmen looked upon their assistants as something lower down the scale. The difference in money was about £5 a week, which was a reasonable amount, because when I came out of my
apprenticeship, the basic wage for unskilled labour was £14.19.6 a week, which is now about $30.00 a week, and tradesman got a margin for skill of £4.16.0 just under another £5. A tradesman was earning just under £20 a week. That equates to about £1000 a year or about $2000 a year. There was a line that they drew when I came out of my apprenticeship and worked as a tradesman on that figure. When I was first appointed draftsman my wage went from £19.19.6 to £20.5.0 a week; it was only four or five dollars more at the bottom of the ladder, but it was over the £1000 line and the average tradesman looked upon anyone over £1000 as on the gravy train. The aim was to get £1000.

Of course most of the men would earn £1000 a year because they worked a fair amount of overtime, and Saturday work, but that wasn't your post pay. It wasn't so important how much you earned in a year, because that could vary, it was how much you were guaranteed to earn in a year and if it was £1000 you were on the gravy train. There was a definite class distinction there and it went further that that. There were a number of guys in there that did not hold indenture papers. They held papers that they got through working during the war and they were known as dilutees. They were granted a tradesman’s rights certificate by the government, which the unions had verified, and they were able to work as tradesmen, get tradesmen's rates but they didn't hold tradesmen's papers. They were officially known as dilutees but to my friends in the fitting shop they were known as five/eight fitters. Presumably a full fitter was an eight/eight fitter. From time to time, just to really press the point, probably once or twice a year, the unions would deliberately — nothing to do with management — call a day to bring in indentures to show to the shop steward. That was done deliberately so that these poor blokes that didn't have indentures but had a certificate of trade could pretty well be sneered at.

One of the other things going on that was pretty discernable fairly easily was that the unions at that time at the workshops had a reasonable working relationship with management but they were feeling their power growing and they were starting to niggle at management. They had been beaten in a major strike in 1956, which was knows as the fitters strike where the unions concerned were out of work for about 6 months and they'd been blackballed in other industries. Their names had been circulated so that if they applied for a job when they were on strike, they wouldn't get it, but a lot of them worked under assumed names. By the time I started my apprenticeship in 1961, which was only five or six years later, that was still bitterly remembered, and every tradesman would unfailingly tell you as an apprentice which blokes had been the black legs during the strike.

The biggest and most powerful fitting union was the Amalgamated Engineering Union of which I was a member. Its motto was 'Educate, organize and control'. The other major union power was the Boilermakers Society and there was a smaller but quite active union, the Electrical Trades Union, which looked after electricians. The Australasian Society of Engineers (ASE) was despised by everybody because they had not gone out in strike in 1956, and they basically followed the government line everywhere. They were known as the kangaroos because they wore a little red kangaroo badge - some said that was the only thing red about them — they paid their fees to a union and never went on strike. The rest of the non-tradesmen were covered generally by a union that took in labourers, fitters, guards all untrained people and
they were generally viewed as being — well they weren't a trade union according to trade unions. […] 

When I got there in 1961 it was still pretty rigid. Steam was king, diesels were coming in, but the old steam fitters didn't want to know about them. The young diesel fitters didn't want to know about steam, they wanted to get onto diesels. The diesels that had been bought immediately after the war, when the WAGR bought about forty-eight S class, were a shambles. They'd been designed using a British navy submarine engine as a basis; it wasn't suited to run on rail. We had no choice. The better locomotives came from America, but under Empire agreements we had to buy from Britain. We bought them. For ten years they gave nothing but trouble. The design office redesigned them. Completely redesigned them. And anyone who knows them knows just how much effort was put in. At one time I was talking to the foreman fitter and he was telling me about them in the late 50s — I knew him again as a family friend — and he nearly went off his head. He said: “We had forty-eight S Classes and at one time we had forty of them lined up outside the diesel shop with broken crankshafts.” So it was no wonder that the government of the day bought somewhere about sixty of the latest steam engines and they really kept the show going until ten years later, when they managed to get the bugs out of the S Class. The S Class stayed in service for almost thirty years and for the last twenty years of their run they were pretty reliable. That was all the engine drivers knew and it was a bit of a problem when newer, differently designed locos were brought in because a lot of the engine guys that had cut their teeth on the diesel from steam and had spent twenty years on S Class couldn't adapt to anything else.

But then again they were probably deaf too. I once recorded 120 db in the cab of an S Class and if you worked in an S Class and they were doing ten and twelve hour shifts, when you came out, your ears were ringing for an hour and you were literally shaking. They vibrated and they were noisy. I'm afraid most of the engine drivers that worked on them ended up deaf.

B: So were there a lot of those health and safety sorts of things where there was lots of noise, lots of accidents that kind of thing. Was that generally run of the mill back in the 60s or did it change?

N McD: No in the 60s it was, was run of the mill and it was run of the mill by two ways. And the workshops in Midland were quite advanced in one way compared with heavy industry around the place, in that they had their own ambulance room and they had an ambulance attendant. At one time they had laid on several others that did it part time. But they had a nurse called Maudie\(^2\) and I think she came out of the Crimea. She was a real battle-axe. “What? Your hand’s hanging on by a thread? Well you know, don't be a crybaby.”

The guy that was the ambulance attendant most of the time was known for his feather, because if anyone got anything in their eye he would dip in some strange concoction and scratch your eye with a feather. It got that most people most of the time who did have an eye injury that was reasonable would absolutely refuse to go to him and

\(^2\) He was referring to Sister Mary Ashton, called ‘Iodine Annie’ by the workers. She was World War 1 nurse and worked at the Workshops from 1925 until 1944.
would demand to go straight to a doctor. But his attitude was that he tried first and then if he couldn’t get it out, then he gave you the certificate to go to a doctor. You couldn’t just walk out to a doctor, you had to go to the ambulance room first and he decided. There were a number of people that actually suffered from some fairly severe eye injuries that basically can be traced back to some of the treatment he gave. He shouldn’t have done it.

But never the less he was there to treat the usual cuts, bruises and all that sort of stuff. But better still, it didn’t matter where you got the injury, he was there. So Monday morning if you had some footy injuries or if you fell off your bike or something, you would line up on Monday morning and he would treat it and dress it and it was all free of charge, and it was all done by working time. I guess nine times out of ten, most of injuries he was dealing with had nothing to do with work injuries. It was pretty rough.

As far as health and safety in the Workshops went: I think in a lot of cases, the powers that be, whoever they were — and they may not even be the Workshops management at Midland, it may not have even been the railways, it may have been more likely the department of health, certainly knew things about asbestos going back to the 20s but decided it was best kept under the mat because one of our biggest exports out of Wittenoom was blue asbestos. When I was a kid at school, it we were all taught that it was the greatest thing since sliced bread. When I was in the workshops, anything to do with steam was lagged with asbestos. All the pipes were lagged with asbestos and they were quite often raw lagged — they didn’t have metal lagging over them, they were bandaged. Both of the steam fitters that worked for twenty years on the lagging pit died of lung cancer but afterwards it became a bit suspicious because they never smoked and they’d worked with asbestos all their lives. Likewise the boilermaker on the lagging pit. Same thing. And when they would strip a steam loco, you could stand at one end of the fitting shop and you couldn’t see the other. It was like snow. They used to bring in the asbestos in big manila bags and we used to get the job of opening the bags and pulling the asbestos out— no breathing apparatus or anything — and putting it into half four gallon drums and mixing it with water to make an asbestos mortar. As they put the lagging and as they put steam valves on, just like you’d lay cement, you’d get this asbestos motor or asbestos pug as it was called and lay it on the trellis. So we were exposed to all that.

As far as noise goes, there was no protection for noise, there was none offered. Certainly not in the 60s. In the early 60s right through until probably the mid 60s, there was no protection offered. Some guys that were a little bit aware of what was going on and wanted to protect their hearing would roll up a ball of cotton wool and push it in their ears or sometimes a wad of chewing gum and they’d be pretty well derided by guys as being sissies.

That was another culture too — I don’t know whether it was fostered by management or by the men. You were expected to grin and take it. When they bought the first masks in, the guys wouldn’t wear them: sissies. Ear muffs? Sissies. By the late 60s early 70s, stuff started coming in and health and safety was mandatory. Management’s biggest problem wasn’t refusing to bring it in, they did bring it in. Their biggest problem was getting people to use it. Like wearing safety glasses and earmuffs. Most of the time these things were available. Men had them there but they wouldn’t use them. And as for injuries in the place. Well it was heavy industry: cuts,
bruises, all sorts of things were a daily thing. It was no big deal if you got your finger flattened or split. You had to go to the ambulance room and the attitude of the tradesman was: if he looked at your finger and it was half mauled, then he'd say: "Well don't be a sissy" and you were told to get on with it. To get to the ambulance room, you had to go the sub-foreman, and he'd say: "Oh well there's nothing wrong with it, go in your lunch time." Then if you went there, you were just as likely to get another reaction. They'd say: "What are coming here for, ya sissies." Then you'd get scrubbed with a brush, iodine put on it and be bandaged up and back to work, unless it was reasonably serious. Mind you, there were some serious injuries. I can remember several men being killed in there. I can recall one guy in the machine shop working on a slotting machine and something went wrong and he put his head under the slotter and it smashed his head like a walnut.

I can remember another guy getting caught with his overalls on a rotating miller, and losing his arm. I can recall a man in the blacksmith shop losing an arm under a steam hammer. And I can recall one of the apprentices, who I was serving my time with, falling off the side of a locomotive and he didn't come back to work. He died that night. So it was pretty catch as catch can.

On the other hand most of the tradesman who worked there and most of the people that worked there were pretty safety conscious. They would never send a boy, as they called you, anywhere where you were likely to get hurt. If it was a risky job, they would do it and make you stand back. I worked with a guy setting steam valves in the boiler shop. His name was 'Deafy'. He was totally deaf. His job was setting the valves on the steam loco. It was under steam and that's what sent him deaf. It was like standing alongside a jumbo jet and he could set the valves because he couldn't hear anything. When you were his apprentice you were allowed to repair and build the valves, but when it came to testing them you weren't allowed to go with him. He knew that he was deaf and you weren't going to be.

Each pit had a so-called first aid attendant but they really weren't. They had a military stretcher from the First World War that was up on the wall. They were designated as first aid attendants, so the idea was that if somebody got hurt, they'd get on the ends of the stretcher, chuck you on the stretcher and take you over to the ambulance room.

One of the funniest things I ever saw was a man working on the side of a steam locomotive and he slipped and he knocked himself out. One of the four stretcher-bearers was the man known as the Jew boy. He was a moneylender, and I'll talk about that in a minute. He was about four foot tall and four foot round. There was an Englishman that was about six foot six and built like a beanpole, and a couple of other guys that were well past it. Anyway this guy fell off, they got the stretcher and put him on, and as they went out the door — they used to go out the door at the end of the fitting shop and then run across to the ambulance room. There used to be a big pit immediately where the steam engines used to sit while they were under steam before they went out the door. Of course what happened was that they got this guy on the stretcher with a six foot bloke on one corner and the four foot bloke on the other and the two others on the opposite corners and they took off at like a million miles an hour. After about the first twenty feet, they just simply got so puffed they couldn't move, and as they went round the corner, they tipped the guy out of the stretcher. He had just recovered consciousness and he fell in the pit and broke his leg. So when he
came back to work about three months later, he said that was the last time he'd ride in a bloody stretcher.

But as an offshoot of that and most people would know this, there was a bloke called Bill Orrich who worked on the motion bench. He was known as Jew boy and was a Jewish moneylender. His wife had a license and he used to lend money, but he didn't always lend money. He also had a little shop on his bench. Most people knew. Management couldn't touch him and he was working under his wife's license - I suspect half of management borrowed off him anyway. He used to lend money with no security, except that if you didn't make a payment, you were banned for life and you were never lent money again. He would never lend more than a pound until you had worked out a line of credit with him. He never lent more than £20 and most of loans were of £1 or £5.

Bearing in mind that most people got paid once a fortnight and on the off fortnight things got a bit tough, Bill would lend you money. Bill’s interest rates were interesting. He charged two shillings in the pound interest per week. Now someone actually did out a calculation one time, and that's something like 600% interest over a year and it was cumulative. So you could borrow £5 and if you paid it back the next week, then you paid £5.10.0 back. But if you didn't pay it back and you kept it, then that was ok because you just paid the ten shillings on and on until you paid the £5 back.

When people were coming to borrow money from him it was interesting. They would sidle up, very sheepishly, not wanting anyone to know they were borrowing money. Then they would tell him how much they wanted, and he would pull his wallet out and slip them money and they'd slip it in their pocket. On payday immediately they were paid, there were men lined up. Sometimes twenty men lined up to pay the money back to him. He used to have a little cabinet on his bench and he used to sell lollies, cigarettes, tobacco, all cheaper than you could by in the shops— there were no supermarkets in those days — but cheap. But he made a quid out of them. He made a lot of money out of that.

I was working with him at one time and I used to get a free packet of tobacco a week for filling his bucket up. There were no washing facilities in the workshops. You got a half four gallon drum, you'd clean it out and put a handle on it and most times you washed in cold water with Trusol. That's what they issued. Trusol was what was issued. There were a number of guys who never emptied their water in a week so it would have a thick green ring around it and they didn't care one way or another.

Bill was a little bit more precise than that. He wanted a clean bucket for the three times a day he washed in it. And he wanted it hot. So if you got the job with him of cleaning his bucket, filling it with clean water, you'd take a steel block across to the blacksmiths shop, put it in the fire until it got red hot and then what you'd do every time, or just before he was ready to wash his hands, you'd go across with a wire hook, pick the red hot block, take it backand drop it in the bucket so that he'd have hot water. For doing that I used to get a packet of tobacco worth five shillings once a fortnight on off pay weeks, which was a life saver.
I got talking to him in later years and he frankly admitted he was earning £20 a week as a fitter there and he was probably earning more like a £100 a week as a sideline. Very profitable. I don't think he was ever tackled by any management because I think quite often, a lot of the time, a lot of them — the supervising bosses — would borrow money off him, the only difference being that they'd borrow large amounts because he knew he'd get it back from them.
Photo Essay

Chris Smyth

A new pictorial history book of the Midland Railway Workshops has been released in the Workshops centenary. The pictures feature people at work in the Workshops, at meetings and at leisure through the 90 years of its operation. A key feature of the book is the capture of the emotional moments of the Workshops' closure taken by co-author, award-winning photographer Nic Ellis, of The West Australian. His colleague Chris Smyth, a journalist and lecturer at Murdoch University, has gathered together anecdotes from workers, including from the archive of the oral history project, which has been supported by the Society for Labour History.

The book is published by St George Books and costs $24.9
Car and Wagon Shop

Tarp Shop
Flagpole Meeting

Practice Shells
‘Like an Everlasting Picnic’: Christmas Camps at Busselton

Judi Murray

During their time at the Western Australian Government Railway (WAGR) Workshops at Midland, employees experienced difficult working conditions while labouring in a large, dangerous and noisy workplace. The external forces of the Depression in the 1930s and the war in the 1940s added to the workers’ feelings of stress and anxiety, spilling over into the home environments and effectively influencing their working class culture. George Royer, a former worker at the Midland Railway Workshops and a visitor to the Busselton campsite during the 1940s, has provided a copy of a ‘ditty’ titled ‘An Aussie Prayer.’ This poem expresses the political and social attitudes of the period, as experienced by the industrial proletariat and indicates how important holidays were to the workers at the Midland Railway Workshops.

An Aussie Prayer

Our Prime Minister,
which art in Canberra,
Curtin be thy name,
thy taxation come,
thy will be done in Perth
as it is in Sydney.
Give us this day our deferred pay,
and forgive us our A.W.L.
As we forgive the fifth columnists
who strike against us.
Lead us not in to the Army
but deliver us from the Japs
for thine is the Manpower
the War Loan and taxation
Without holidays and Santa Claus
For Evatt and Evatt
A Dedman.¹

Consequently, the workers’ annual holiday by train to Busselton featured strongly in the lives of many, and has been keenly represented in interviews with those who participated in the author’s research. As well, the interviewees, now the older community, may have felt a ‘need’ to pass on their history to the young people of today, while generally expressing a feeling of the ‘good old days’. This sense of arcadia and the value

of the place in itself lie in its symbolism of the visitors’ shared past, a fact reflected in the interviews.

The Midland Railway Workshops were not unique in offering free transport and camping facilities to enable workers to take their families away on an annual seaside holiday. Research by scholars, such as James Walvin, has uncovered a tradition from the 1870s of British employers treating their workers to seaside visits – but this beneficence was limited mainly to day trips on public holidays. Factors, such as the rarity of paid holiday leave and low wages, combined to make an annual holiday away from home an impossible dream for millions of British working poor. The gradual introduction of paid leave in the early 20th century, and the advent of camping under canvas as a means of cheap holiday accommodation, changed that. The British Civil Service established a holiday camp at Lowestoft in 1924, and by the end of the 1930s, thousands of holidaymakers chose this form of accommodation every year. Lever Bros established not only holidays with pay and works’ savings-schemes, but also an ‘austere, army-like’ – but nevertheless popular – camp near their factory at Port Sunshine. This period also saw an increased demand for family holidays.2

In Australia, workers enjoyed generally better conditions, paid holidays and a climate more suited to camping, as well as an inherited tradition of ‘roughing it’ and ‘making do’. This paper examines the social history of the annual holidays arranged by the WAGR for its Workshops employees at Busselton. It draws mainly on a series of interviews by with ex-employees and their families – in particular those who recalled attending the camps as children. The aim of the interviews was to gain research information on the train trip to Busselton, and the timeframe of the camps as well as to receive details of the physicality of the campsites (including photos) and to record the shared social experiences of the holidaymakers. The interviews were conducted in a manner that was deliberately unstructured and free flowing, allowing the interviewees to openly discuss ‘their’ most important memories and experiences of their time at the holiday camps. This methodology enabled the social and cultural history of the event, to be strongly represented through the views of the holidaymakers. The homogeneity of popular memory became apparent, as the interviewees individually repeated many of the important details surrounding the holiday, giving credibility to their stories. The repetitive nature of the interviews tend to reinforce the soundness of the interviewees’ stories while discounting the idea that oral history is compromised due to its humanized form. Kate Darian-Smith argues that:

The validity of oral history is sometimes questioned because it relies on human memory, which may be faulty and prone to fabrication, and on the collaboration between interviewee and interviewer. However, these concerns have given way to a more sophisticated understanding

that what gets remembered, and how, is of critical importance in the process of remembering.\textsuperscript{3}

The cultural history of the camps soon became evident in the oral discourse, and, due to the lack of literary sources, tended to become the main thematic focus through the many and varied interviews undertaken with campers and their families. Social history pertaining to minority groups has often been overlooked in local history research, however ‘it has become apparent that small, demotic groups, which have been ignored in earlier studies are now vocally asserting their right to be included.’\textsuperscript{4} Interviewees who have contributed to the oral history archive of the Midland Workshops History Project are aware that the social history has previously been undervalued. As a result, they keenly responded with personal information, reinforcing the view that ‘the oral histories serve the purpose of granting the historian (or interviewer) access to the personal views of people who may never have spoken publicly.’\textsuperscript{5}

Yet, despite the abundance of information about the camps, some basic facts are hard to discover. For example, when exactly did the Busselton annual camps begin and end? The varied comments pertaining to this issue, suggest that the starting date was somewhere between 1905 and 1926. Because the Welfare Committee was formed in 1925, Kevin Mountain (a former committee member) believed that: ‘The committee may have been responsible for officially formalising the holiday camps rather than formulating them, as it appears certain that Midland [Private] Railway workers were already holidaying in Busselton long before this date.’\textsuperscript{6} The holiday camp was conducted from the last Friday night before Christmas for a two-week period that concluded one day before work resumed at the Workshops.

The annual Midland Workshops train trip to Busselton began in the Midland marshalling yards, where the luggage had to be dropped off in advance. Don Manning related how ‘many parcels were required by the families to deliver all the “gear” needed to take care of [their needs] over the fortnight break’; his family – consisting of six people – would take about 25 parcels. The storage containers were made out of ‘chaff-bags and wheat bags sewn up, with a white patch and labelled with black texture pen, and often cupboards were made up out of boxes and filled up with gear to use at the

\begin{thebibliography}{9}


\bibitem{5} Bobbie Oliver (2003) \textit{Unit Outline, Heritage Studies 212: Local History}, p.16

\bibitem{6} Kevin Mountain, letter to Ric McCracken (2003). The Midland Railway Company operated a private line from Midland to Geraldton, which included Workshops in Midland. These were closed in the early 1960s, and the staff were absorbed into the WAGR.

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campsite. Alf Entwistle's father 'made compact cupboards that could be packed at home and transported easily when holiday time came around.' He added that he still had them 'in his possession.'

The workers’ train left Midland at 6pm on Friday night and travelled to Perth, stopping at stations along the route to pick up passengers, and departing Perth for Busselton at 8 pm. George Royer insisted that there was only ever one train and that the number of carriages depended on the demand for seating; however, it usually consisted of about four or five. There was no charge to the workers for the train trip, with the only cost being incurred if they were to purchase a pie and 'cuppa' when the train stopped at Pinjarra for a half an hour. George remembered that, 'men would run over to the pub and buy a couple of bottles of beer. They would throw the empty bottles out of the window onto the track and smash them.' Besides Pinjarra, train stops included Brunswick and Picton Junction where people from the Collie Mines joined the group for the ride to Busselton. Mabel Bell, who was interviewed for this paper, was from Collie. Her experience coincided with that of many Midland Workshops holidaymakers. At Picton, the engine reversed and then pulled the train on to Busselton.

The train trip to the campsites was deemed to be a relatively comfortable one, with the carriages having a passage down one side to enable the travellers to move around, and it was common for 'men to whistle at the sheilas from the back of the open carriage.' Each carriage contained its own toilet. George remembered fondly how 'each row of seats had three lovely paintings [prints] over them. He remembered, also, that emus ran alongside the carriages and how the train driver and fireman would climb up onto the roof and throw coal at them.'

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7 Don Manning, telephone interview by J. Murray (18 September, 2003).
10 Ibid.
11 Manning interview
12 Royer interview
13 Ibid.
Mabel Bell [nee Vernon] recalled:

The train would arrive in Busselton at approximately 4am. The Midland train had a special spur line built for it to bring the railway workers to the camping ground. The spur came from the round house and there were shunting yards down along Adelaide Terrace near the cemetery and close to Brown Street. Another rail line continued on to Flinders Bay and Margaret River. The Midland train had lots of carriages and was so long it took up most of the spur line.\(^\text{14}\)

George Royer also remembered the 4am arrival, when:

…it was ‘black as the ace of spades’, and the railway staff would unhook the trucks containing the gear and shunt them down the spur line and leave them there, while the passengers got off at the Busselton station.\(^\text{15}\)

Conflicting information regarding the transporting of the tents arose, however. Some interviewees recalled how family members would travel to Busselton by train preceding the holiday, to set up camp for the family. Other interviews failed to reveal any information regarding setting up the tents prior to the arrival of the train at Busselton. Mabel Bell remembered how ‘when the train pulled in, a member of the family was immediately dispatched to claim and hold a tent site.’\(^\text{16}\) Don Manning, however, recalled

\(^{14}\) Mabel Bell [nee Vernon] interview by C. Campbell in Busselton (21 August 2003)
\(^{15}\) Royer interview
\(^{16}\) Bell interview
how 'my father would come down to Busselton a fortnight before to set up the tents for the family (as they would all be very tired on arrival at 4 am) and everything needed to be organised, as everyone was irritable by the time the train arrived in Busselton.'

Dale Theil confirmed Don’s account; however she added that both her mother and father ‘went down to Busselton two weeks before the annual holiday, to set up their gear.’

Transport was provided to deliver the luggage to the campsite. In the 1940s, the carrier’s vehicle ‘consisted of a flat top four-wheeled cart with pneumatic tyres and one Clydesdale horse.’

The McKenzie family were at the camps from 1930 to 1937, and Jill [now Coates] clearly remembered ‘the carrier as being Mr Cooper who had a horse and cart.’ After the war, the local carrier ‘Scotty’ would carry the gear from the train to Marine Terrace in a truck, charging only a couple of ‘bob’ to do so, as the visitors used to help him to load and unload the luggage. Some of the train passengers continued on with the carrier and travelled to Dunsborough for their holiday.

‘Scotty’ appears to have also been a representative for the local Shire responsible for running the campsites. He lived in [or used as an office] a little cottage situated between No. 2 and No. 3 camping grounds, and filled with camping gear. Presumably, ‘Scotty’s’ duties included collecting camping fees. Before the war, the Shire charged a weekly fee of 2s. 6d. for each family to stay at the campsite. ‘No matter how big your family was, the price was the same and the shire would provide enough poles for how ever many tents you put up.’

Another Shire representative, ‘Dixie’, was also associated with the running of the Shire sites; however, the comparative timeframe of the two shire employees is unclear.

There were three campsites within the camping area at Busselton. The sites consisted of: No. 1 between Adelaide Street, Brown Street and the cemetery; No. 2 in the middle (where the permanent camps are now) and No. 3, situated in Adelaide Street, which had a picket fence at the back facing the Richarsons’ house. In 1928, three pensioner cottages were built on Marine Terrace. George Royer was unsure how the cottages were connected with the Midland Workshops visitors, but assumed they were to be used by the white-collar workers. The houses had ‘big 4’ tin fences around them and were dated 1928-30. They were pulled down after a couple of years due to objections raised by the locals.

There was thick scrub along the beach front with few tracks through, so the campers ‘nearly always went down along the road past our dunnies and water pumps to the main beach and jetty.’

17 Manning interview
18 D. Thiel, telephone interview by C. Campbell (24 August 2003).
19 Manning interview
20 J. Coates, interviewed by J. Murray in Busselton (14 September 2003)
21 Ibid.
22 Royer interview
23 Bell interview
There were two jetties that joined together approximately 500 metres out to sea, continuing on as one. The railway jetty serviced the harbour while the public used the main jetty for fishing activities. The public jetty had a pavilion located near the ‘diving’ point, as well as a building containing change rooms used by people wishing to swim off the jetty. According to Mabel Bell, ‘they all smelt of wee. I think people used them as toilets’, and ‘the railway jetty was out of bounds because it was busy with timber trains and workers.’ On the shore, there were large weatherboard change rooms and beach shelters, situated parallel to the beach. George remembered: ‘how one wall of the change rooms collapsed in a storm one year, and that they just stood it up again’. To the left of the main jetty, at the end of Queen Street was a fish and chips shop, no longer extant. Tennis courts were a prominent feature of this landscape; however, none of those interviewed mentioned playing games of tennis.

Awaiting the visitors on their arrival at the campsites, were wooden poles that were always blackened and dirty – many interviewees complained about the burnt poles – which were supplied by the Shire in readiness for the erection of the tents. Don Manning described how the ‘10 foot to 14 foot long redgum and jarrah saplings were used for the ridgepole and sides of the tents...The poles came from Collie and were the regrowth from trees, left over from the time during the Depression when people on sustenance would ringbark trees.’ Mabel Bell recounted that ‘the tent poles were left at Mr Streams’ house on the site of the [now] No. 3 caravan park.’ The tents were erected end to end, with a kitchen in the middle that was made out of hessian bags. Don Manning’s father ‘dug a total of 38 holes, which were 18 inches deep, to take the poles for the two tents and the kitchen.’

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24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Royer interview
27 Manning interview
28 Bell interview
29 Manning interview

64
Setting up the tents at Busselton in 1940s

(Courtesy Royer and Murray)

The floor of the kitchen was made out of sugar or wheat bags that had been opened up and sewn together. Campers stretched these out to cover the floor of the tent so that they could be swept with a straw broom. A table was always set up outside near the open fireplace and some of the families had the luxury of a camp oven, while others simply buried a kerosene tin in the sand to use for cooking. The women had a difficult time trying to cater for the needs of their families, as few facilities were on hand. Coolgardie safes were only available to the ‘white’ collar workers while the others had to make ‘do’ with ice that was delivered to the camp. The workers were very resourceful in lean times and working at the Midland Workshops helped considerably. All the machines and tools were available for any creation and one of the most prolific items to exit the Workshops were stoves to take on holiday to Busselton.\(^{30}\) They were small ovens with a cook-top.

While the parents were ‘making do’ with their limited facilities, the children were sent down the street to ‘scrounge’ wood from the karri trees in Churchill Park. Mabel Bell remembered how:

\begin{quote}
the bark was good for kindling and it was our job to collect it for our campfire. We also pinched the coal out of the rail trucks. They had been shunted up the line and were supposed to be empty, but we found there was always a chunk or two left in them or on the ground.\(^{31}\)
\end{quote}

\(^{30}\) Royer interview
\(^{31}\) Bell interview
Beds were made up out of poles and hessian bags filled with seaweed from the beach were used as mattresses. Mabel's mother 'made huge covers out of hessian chaff bags and when we arrived we all took them down to the beach and collected seaweed to fill up each bag. They were then sewn up and used as our beds. At the end of the holiday we emptied them out and they would be used again next year. They were comfortable as beds.'

Another hessian tent contained the toilet, were newspaper served instead of toilet paper. Several people commented how the people inside who were holding a torch would be exposed to anyone standing outside at night. At the Workshops, hessian was used in the railway carriages to hold wheat in place, and the holiday workers were given permission to use whatever material was left over to take to the campsites. According to George 'inevitably, more than just the left over portions were removed by the workers to use for their holidays.'

In the early days, facilities were limited to only one tap per campsite, and many of the interviewees remembered that 'waiting their turn to collect water in a container every day was deemed to be quite a social event for the women.' Facilities at the campsites, however, gradually improved, and No.1 camp was to eventually provide several taps, two showers and two toilets with a urinal. There were separate toilet blocks for men and women, situated on alternate corners of the site. It was much later that the facilities were improved on No. 3 site, with only cold-water showers being available to the visitors until the 1950s.

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32 Ibid.
33 Royer interview
34 Mrs McKenzie, interviewed by J. Murray (14 August 2003)
There were two major shops in Queen Street, Busselton, these being Killerbys and Peakes general stores. Mrs Gill, at Killerbys store, saved kerosene tins during the year for the visitors to buy at 6d per tin, for use as water containers. Sugar bags were also purchased at 3d each to carry herring back from the jetty.\textsuperscript{35} Fish was the staple diet for the campers. Dale Thiel remembered that in the 1940s to 1950s:

Each tent or family at the park had its own canvas smoker to smoke their fish. There were so many fish caught that you never went without a feed and it seemed that the smokers were everywhere.\textsuperscript{36}

Barnacles were taken off the jetty to be cooked at the campsite and used for bait to catch the fish. The ‘locals’ weren’t too happy about this situation, as it deprived them of their fishing ‘rights’ over the area. Alf Entwistle recalled that the ‘Busseltonites’ referred to the Midland holidaymakers as ‘the Railway Invasion’ and accused them of robbing ‘all their bait.’\textsuperscript{37} However, it appears clear that the visitors and the locals had a ‘comfortable’ relationship, and that the extra trade brought into the town would have helped convince the business people of the commercial advantages to be had by having the holidaymakers in the area. Many of the visitors formed lifetime friendships with the locals and continued to visit Busselton long after the Midland Workshops held their last camp.

Local businesses called daily to the campsites to take orders for fruit, vegetables, meat and bread. To supplement their diet, Dale and her siblings were sent to meet the Flinders Bay train, which carted potatoes from Margaret River. When it pulled up there were always some potatoes that fell through the slats. They were picked up and relished for several meals. In this fashion, Dale said, she ‘had never been so well fed’.\textsuperscript{38}

One year the kids had a real find when they dragged in a dead shark that was in the water at the beach. It had lots of crabs on it so they tied a rope to it and sent it out into the water again. Next day they went down and pulled it in to find another bounty of crabs. This way they had good feeds for many days.\textsuperscript{39}

The children had a great time at the camps, and often stayed all day fishing and swimming. Mabel’s mother

…used to bring down a jubilee twist that she bought from Edwards bakery and that had to do us all for lunch. There could have been seven or eight of us, as there were eventually thirteen in our family. We didn’t get home until nightfall.

\textsuperscript{35} Royer interview
\textsuperscript{36} Thiel interview
\textsuperscript{37} A. Entwistle, telephone interview by C. Campbell (12 September 2003)
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} Thiel interview
Then we would have fish for tea at night, and for breakfast we had Nestles milk on Weetbix, or bread.  

The children used to go to Higgins’ place to fetch the milk for the day but later Gavin McGregor used to bring milk around to the campers. Mulberries and figs grew all around Busselton and the children were allowed to pick them. As well as being a source of fresh fruit for the family, the mulberries and figs were used to make jam. Mabel had memories of a cow coming into the park and eating her mum’s fig jam (that was made at the campsite), which was cooling in a pan without a lid. ‘Poor mum lamented the cost of the sugar.’  

Apart from free food, there was also free entertainment, and opportunities to form new friendships. There were lots of people in the camping grounds, so the Salvation Army came down to play for the crowd and tell stories for the children. ‘We sat on the spur line for the performances and that was where we also played at nighttime. “Moonlight Starlight” – and such games that we thoroughly frightened ourselves.’ Religion did not appear to be an issue at the camps; however Mabel remembered making friends with a Catholic girl ‘who one day couldn’t play with me because she had to go to confession to wash away her sins.’ Mabel thought that:

...she must have done something really bad but she said she couldn’t think of any sins that she had committed but that she would make one up because she felt clean after she had been to confession. She was from a wild red headed Irish family.”

A sandcastle competition was held every year on the beach between the jetties, until the competition got too big and it wasn’t held any longer. George Royer won the competition twice, with the prize being a welcome two ‘bob’. Money could be obtained by other means, too. The children used to dive for bottles to claim a refund on the deposit. There were many sporting events for the both the adults and children, and Jill Coates spoke about the ‘Cobblers Club’ and how she had to sign a pledge to be allowed to join in. Oliver McNair, during his time at the camps played ‘cowboys and Indians’ with the children. George remembered that McNair always took the part of being the Indian chief.

According to Alf Entwistle:

Xmas was a great time for the children and the welfare committee organised games to make it a special day. Mr Jack Gibbon would dress up as Father Xmas and come around on a truck and give out lollies.
Ron Bowen and Stewart, Peter and Graham Royer dressed up as Indians at No. 3 camping ground, 1950s. (Courtesy Royer & Murray).

Playing outside all day had its drawbacks for the children, resulting in ‘sandy blight’ which made eyes ‘very painful and sensitive to light and sun. We had some treatment in our eyes – it was dark brown drops that hurt and you ended up with brown oily muck smeared all over your face.’ Furthermore, ‘the mosquitos drove you mad at night, but the worst thing of the whole holiday was the flies’.46

If Christmas was the fun time for the children, New Years Eve was designated for the adults. A large party would be held every year at the camps and this event was always a huge success, with some of the locals joining in with the visitors to have a great night. The Shire contributed to its success by providing a piano for the party. This would arrive from the Weld Theatre on the back of a truck, where it remained until the party was over. Ralph and Dot Baillie would provide the entertainment with Ralph playing the saxophone and Dot on the piano and several people would sing. In later years, Jackie Johnson, from the Workshops, was always the MC for the parties and dances as well as being responsible for helping to organise the events.

Mabel remembered how:

... a dance floor was built out over the beach at the jetty, and how at that time, in the 1920s, ladies wore short skirts, bobbed hair and long beads. It was so

46 Bell interview.
47 Entwistle inte.rview
fascinating to watch what looked like goddesses doing the Charleston etc. “Shuffle off to Buffalo” was a favourite naughty song then. I still remember most of it. The men were all dressed in striped blazers and baggy slacks and had their hair slicked back.48

Don recalled that the children ‘went to the pictures once a week, and that as they got older attended dances at the Catholic Church hall situated opposite the Post Office.’ He added that young local girls would ‘hang around’ the beach hoping to socialise with the visitors.49

The trip home from Busselton was always a major event in itself, as the packing up took the whole morning to complete. The parents had to organise all of the packages and sew up the chaff bags, getting them to the train by mid morning as the train left Busselton at noon. On its journey home, the train stopped at Bayswater to drop off the luggage and finally arrived in Midland at between 8 and 9 pm. Don remembers how difficult it was for the adults, adding that: ‘Parents had it pretty hard with hearts like frying pans.’50

Research into the Midland Railway Workshops holiday camps in Busselton has yielded much information about the social life of workers and their living conditions, types of recreation and the historical significance of the event. The social history of the Workshops annual holiday in Busselton enables us to interpret the importance of the annual event to the workers and their families. An obvious attachment to the area was strong, as is testified by the fact that many families decided to relocate to Busselton after the Workshops closed down, while other workers and their families continued to holiday in Busselton, long after the establishment shut down. The camps arranged by the WAGR, however, had ceased long before the Workshops closed.

This event was held over a 25-year period and the extended timeframe is reflected in the interviews, by exposing both the physical and social changes that occurred at the campsites. It is unclear whether the camps were held every year, as Alf Entwistle recalled an announcement at the annual ball, in Midland 1943, that the holidays were to be abandoned for that year, due to the war. They may have been abandoned again in 1944.51 The majority of interviewees, however, could not remember whether or not, there was any disruption to the annual camps. Evidence from several of the interviewees indicates that camps officially ceased operating in the early 1950s, although some families continued to go to Busselton individually.

Despite the differences in accounts, there appears to be a homogenizing element to the interview material, with a number of details alluding to the social history of the

48 Bell interview.
49 Manning interview.
50 Manning interview, ‘hearts like frying pans’ refers to people being able to cope with big, solid situations, a term used by workers at the Midland Railway workshops.
51 Entwistle interview.
place being repeated many times. This repetition of information is important as it gives credibility to the oral history of the holidays, by reinforcing the accounts of the visitors and promoting their stories and experiences. It has become exceedingly apparent that the parents carried the main burden of making the holiday a successful one, with the majority of interviewees [who were once the children of this group] looking back in appreciation at the sacrifices made by their mothers and fathers. Don’s comment that the parents ‘weren’t aspro hearts’ is particularly apt.

From the children’s perspective we can share the memories of Mabel when she reflects on her time at the camps:

But my lasting memories are of lovely never ending days – happy and free-shared with my family – the feeling of forever summer; to me it was like an everlasting picnic.53

\[52\] Manning interview.
\[53\] Bell interview.
Car and Wagon Builders at the Midland Railway Workshops

Susan Hall¹

The Western Australia Government Railways relocated from Fremantle to begin operations at Midland in 1904. In the 100 years of the Midland Railway Workshops operations, many trades were involved with the construction, maintenance and repair of the railway carriages and wagons. The car and wagon builders had a strong history of contributing to the provision and maintenance of the railway stock that augmented the growth in the early years of Western Australia’s economy. After World War II, however, changes took place in the railway industry on a state, national and international level. The impact of these changes was such that work for car and wagon builders declined, and by 1967 apprentices were no longer accepted into the car and wagon trade at the Midland Railway Workshops.

The railways gave Western Australia the opportunity to more fully access the resources of the State, such as the farm produce, mineral resources and timber, and it enabled the settlement of townships. Trains could move people, products and resources to interstate markets and to seaports for overseas distribution. To effectively meet this increasing demand, the railways of Western Australia needed to be self-sufficient in supplying its locally built rolling stock, making good use of the car and wagon builders to construct the coaches and wagons.

Until the closure of Midland Railway Workshops in 1994, workplaces such as the railway yards were regarded as institutions with a never-ending life. They functioned not only to keep the trains rolling but also as a major employer with a responsibility to training the next generation of workers in their chosen trade. This could be in the railway environment or for the private sector² as Rod Quinn who worked at the Midland Railway Workshops until 1956, had summed up:

WAGR fed an endless stream of skilled journeymen into the non-government workforce. This long-term infusion must have provided a significant ‘shot-in-the-arm’ for the State’s later economic boom. ³,

1 Susan Hall is completing a Graduate Diploma in Applied Heritage Studies at Curtin University.
Despite their economic, social and political importance to the State, the Midland Railway Workshops have only recently become the subject of scholarly research, and published sources are still few. Very little information is available in commercial publications. Consequently, most of the research for this paper has been based on primary sources, including taped interviews and transcripts held in the JS Battye Library of Western Australian History. These interviews are the recollections of former employees and – as with all oral history – they are subject to the vagaries of time. For some men this may be 50 years or more! Opinions often differ regarding the ‘facts’. Other sources included the Chief Mechanical Engineer’s reports for the Western Australian Government Railways Commission, which generally dealt with overviews, productivity and finance rather than with the details of the trade workforce. Supplementary, or general background information has come from historical writings such as Watson’s book, *Commemorating the centenary of Midland Junction, 1895 – 1995*. An indication of Midland’s production capacity comes from Watson’s inventory of the Railway Workshops outputs for the first seventy years, that is, up until 1968 when the last of the steam locomotives were operating in the Perth suburbs. Rolling stock included: 111 steam locomotives; 126 coaches; 6,790 wagons and 47 railcar trailers.  

The Workshops site was another useful resource when researching this paper. Several of the original workshop buildings were demolished after the closure in 1994, making it difficult to visualize the enormity, and the complexity of the production process that took place in the workshops and yards in their hey-day. Nevertheless, the major buildings – all erected by the 1920s, comprising seven and a half hectares, and housing the pattern making, blacksmith, boiler, car and wagon workshops, the brass and iron foundry, a locomotive erecting workshop, paint, machine, electrical, and copper workshops – remained on site at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

As can be seen from the above list, the car and wagon workshop was just one of the many at the Midland Railway Workshops, each workshop meeting the various demands involved with keeping the passengers and freight moving on the railways of Western Australia from the early 1900s until 1994. The focus of this research paper will be on the car and wagon trade at the Midland Railway Workshops. The following questions will be investigated: How did a worker become a car and wagon builder for the Western Australian Government Railways at the Midland Railway Workshops? What were the skills that made the car and wagon trade initially so vital to the production and maintenance of the Western Australian Government Railways? What tasks were undertaken in the car and wagon workshop?

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For the majority of car and wagon construction, wood was the essential material. Was it the change from wood construction to metal construction and the use of plastics that had an impact on the car and wagon trades at the Midland Railway Workshops? Did the car and wagon trade remain an active trade at the Midland Railway Workshops until the closure in 1994? In seeking answers to these questions, this paper will explore the appointment and training of car and wagon builders; their skills; changes that influenced the viability of the car and wagon trade, and car and wagon building between 1967 and 1994.

Employment with the Western Australian Government Railways (WAGR) for most workers represented a secure job with a steady income, and to enter as an apprentice also meant gaining a valued trade qualification making the apprenticeship positions highly sought after. The application and selection process for car and wagon builders was the same as for all other apprentices. Application forms were made available, usually once a year, but sometimes twice a year. The selection process was often in November/December for a January intake, and then sometimes in April/May for a mid year intake. Eligible applicants were notified and invited to meet the selection panel.

Jack Emery recalled that the WAGR’s selection process was based on age; physique (height and weight); an interview by the respective trade panel members; an aptitude test; level of schooling (usually 8th grade or Leaving level or sub-junior); testimonies by teachers or previous employers; and work experience if schooling was not adequate or the applicant was older than the accepted range of 15 - 17. Candidates could be eliminated at each stage of the scrutinizing process and if a teenager made it all the way through to the final interview then it was most likely that the applicant was successful and would be sent a letter of confirmation and a start date for late January.

According to Murray Butterworth, who worked in the Midland Railway Workshops records office from 1959 until 1987, changes were brought into the apprenticeship selection criteria in the 1970s when four year and then three and a half year apprenticeships were introduced. The higher an applicant’s academic achievements, the less time was spent in an apprenticeship. This was in ‘recognition of their greater learning ability’. It also meant that the apprenticeships were completed more quickly than with the previous system of accepting applicants with a similar schooling level of Grade 8 or Junior Certificate. This may have coincided with the demand for skilled workers needed for the resources boom in Western Australia and with the tendency for youngsters to remain at school for longer. Shorter apprenticeships may have been to provide an incentive for the young men to pursue a trade, who, possibly because of the labour shortages, could otherwise earn an adult wage for unskilled manual labour.

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6 Minutes of the Apprentices Application Board 1939 - 1979, [hereafter AAB Minutes], held in the Archives of the Westrail Workshop History Project.
8 Interview with Murray Butterworth, conducted by Maxine Milne, May-June 2002
immediately upon leaving school. Labour shortages meant that the young men could earn an adult wage for manual labour immediately upon leaving school.

A measure of the strength and demand for the services of a workshop was the intake of the apprentices. The appointments to the car and wagon shop were fairly consistent until the early 1960s but by 1967, the Workshops offered no new apprenticeships in this trade. This was some 27 years before the closure of the Midland Railway Workshops in 1994. Table 1 (below) shows the rise and decline in the number of apprentices in the period 1945-75.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Car and Wagon apprentices</th>
<th>Total number of apprentices appointed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. The appointment of car and wagon apprentices over ten year periods 1945 to 1975. Source: Minutes of the Apprentices’ Application Board 1939 - 1979

‘The Minutes of the Apprentice Application Board meetings 1939 to 1978’ outlines the application and selection procedures for acceptance of trainees into the workshops. The Minutes recorded the names of all the applicants and of those selected to fill the vacancies. The variations in selection criteria were given and the names of the members of the selection panel were listed, along with the number of declared vacancies for each of the trades, and the number of vacancies filled. The Chief Mechanical Engineer of the Western Australian Government Railways was responsible for the advertising of the apprenticeship vacancies; for setting the closing dates; and for the call for applications being sent to the State’s major newspapers: the Albany Advertiser, the Bunbury Herald, the Geraldton Guardian, the Kalgoorlie Miner, the Weekly Notice [a WAGR newsletter], and the West Australian. Emery recalled that, ‘Perth Tech. students were advised to watch the newspapers at the end of the school year for advertisement offering apprenticeships.’

The Apprentice Application Board had the responsibility for interviewing and selecting the young men to take on the apprenticeships at the Midland workshops. Presumably those men were skilled in the respective railway trades and in administration procedures, but the Minutes do not indicate how the selection panel was formed. Bob Wells, car and wagon builder, 1963 to 1977, remembered that, ‘[The] unions themselves

9 AAB Minutes.
10 AAB Minutes.
were asked to nominate a tradesperson in the selection panel,’ so at least one member of the panel was a trade representative.  

The workshops trades were divided into groups. The Apprentices Application Board had two meetings associated with each apprenticeship intake. The first interview and selection panel dealt with Groups II and III. The second meeting dealt with the Group IV trades. Group I was not mentioned, but possibly was dealt with by the second selection panel. Table 2, below, lists the trade groups, as of 1942:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group I</th>
<th>Moulders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group II</td>
<td>Boilermakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group III</td>
<td>Coppersmiths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blacksmith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fitter (mechanical)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fitter (electrical)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Turner and iron machinist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pattern maker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group IV</td>
<td>Car and Wagon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Painter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Plumber and Tinsmith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Saw doctor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wood machinist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Watch and clock repairer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trimmer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. The trade groupings at the Midland Railway Workshops
Source: Minutes of the Apprentices Application Board 1939 - 1979

The preliminary acceptance of apprenticeship applicants depended upon the attainment of the ‘expected educational standard of a normal youth obliged to finish his schooling at 14 years of age’; that is, after eight years of continuous schooling and at an eighth grade level, or sixth or seventh grade for a rural applicant. A second requirement was that applicants generally needed to be between 15 and 17 years of age, but as near to 16 as possible. (A 17 year old could be considered if he had been working in a related trade and had testimonies to verify his suitability. This could be equated to one or two years of an apprenticeship). An application form could be rejected if the letter of application was postmarked after the closing date; the application form was incomplete; and if the handwriting was illegible and the form untidy. An applicant could be rejected if he did not meet the age requirements; if his physique was ‘below standard’\(^\text{13}\), that is, his height and chest measurements were insufficient; if he did not pass the written aptitude test; or if too many other applicants had nominated a particular trade as their first preference.

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12 Interview with Bob Wells, conducted by Dick Noyelle, 17 January, 2003
13 AAB Minutes.
The newly appointed car and wagon apprentices were given three months’ probation and then their father or guardian was required to sign a contract of apprenticeship indenture. This committed the young apprentice to completing his five-year apprenticeship training. Implicit in some of the statements from workers is that the WAGR was somewhat of a universal training opportunity for youths of many different academic and trade abilities, and that once the trade indenture was completed, then there was no obligation for the Midland Railway Workshops to employ all the tradesman, nor for the tradesmen to remain with the Railways. They could seek employment in the private sector. By the 1970s, it was common for only about half of the graduates to be employed at the Midland Railway Workshops. Two other changes that had been introduced by this time were the acceptance of more highly qualified applicants for apprenticeships and the reduction in the number of years spent as an apprentice.

The Western Australian Government Railways provided financial assistance of £10, as an allowance for tools, to the new apprentices. Most spanners were supplied but when it came to working on the wagons, woodwork tools had to be purchased privately. All tools were inscribed with the workers ID number. For Allan Bright, this was B99. The opportunity to practice the learned, or emerging skills, came with the making of tools, and other items called ‘foreigners’, in the workshops when time allowed.

Training for the apprentices was two-fold. On the job training and the more formal training, through attendance at technical school, commonly called ‘Tech. School’, for one day every two weeks. For the Progressive Trade Examinations for Car and Wagon Building, geometry, mathematics, workshop drawing, trade drawing, trade theory and other subjects were studied, as shown in Table 3 (below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years 1 and 2:</th>
<th>Years 3 and 4:</th>
<th>Final year:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geometric drawing</td>
<td>Building construction</td>
<td>Window, door, and staircase - (models) construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authographic drawing (3 views of an object)</td>
<td>Trade mathematics</td>
<td>Roof construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machine drawing</td>
<td>Quantities</td>
<td>House and factory construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade mathematics</td>
<td>Timber house construction</td>
<td>Trusses and forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brick veneer and double brick houses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Concrete construction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Floors, lintels, arches and columns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Subjects studied by Allan Bright at Technical School, 1949-53

These theoretical studies were targeted at the house building trade, not specifically to the car and wagon trade, with an emphasis on the use of wood and included the techniques

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14 Progress certificates for Allan Bright, copies held by the Midland Workshops History Project, originals in Mr Bright’s possession.
for carpentry, joinery, lock fitting, and turning. Emery\textsuperscript{15} and Bright\textsuperscript{16} remembered that the skills were applicable to employment outside of Western Australian Government Railways. Certificates of achievement were issued at the end of each year of study. When Allan Bright completed his technical course in 1951, he was advised to purchase of a six-volume set of books, \textit{Joinery and carpentry}, from a salesman who came to the Midland Technical School, at a cost of £35 or £40. This was the equivalent to eight weeks wages. Equipped with this set of books and five years of study and experience gained from working with qualified tradesmen, a young graduate apprentice was ready to tackle many aspects of woodwork associated with carriage and wagon construction. If working with the railways no longer suited, the skills were transferable to the construction of houses, or, as in the case of Bright, a manual arts teacher in a secondary school.\textsuperscript{17}

According to Jack Emery, having learnt a trade in the 1930s gave the men ‘a sense of power, commanded respect and was a guarantee of permanent work’. Bright would add that, within the Workshops, having a trade, such as carriage builder, also meant better working conditions. A carriage builder had less dirty and less physically demanding work than the wagon builders who were required to repair the cattle and sheep wagons. Once qualified, a tradesman could then progress along the ‘achievement scale’ of tradesman, super-tradesman (paid extra for skill), leading hand, sub-foreman and foreman. A tradesman could become a supervisor of an apprentice within a few months of graduating.\textsuperscript{18}

Apprentices’ wages were notoriously low. Allan Bright received the wages, as listed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Junior worker</th>
<th>28/6 per week [Twenty eight shillings and sixpence]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st year apprentice</td>
<td>27/6 per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd year apprentice</td>
<td>£2 per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd year apprentice</td>
<td>£3 per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th year apprentice</td>
<td>£3/6 per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th year apprentice</td>
<td>£5 per week</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textit{Table 4. Apprentice wages, 1947 to 1953 at Midland Railway Workshops\textsuperscript{19}}

\textsuperscript{15}Emery, ‘Learning a trade’.
\textsuperscript{16}Interview with Allan Bright, conducted by Susan Hall, 9 September, 2003
\textsuperscript{17}Allan Bright, interview.
\textsuperscript{19}This would change in 1954 with an Arbitration Court ruling that more than doubled the wages of apprentices. See B. Oliver, ‘The Apprenticeship System at the Midland Railway Workshops’ in P. Bertola & B. Oliver, eds, \textit{The Midland Railway Workshops}, forthcoming 2005.
A major adjustment for many of the newcomers, straight from school, was to the working week of 44 hours. The day began at 7.30am and finished at 5.00pm. This included a one-hour lunch break, with morning and afternoon tea breaks. Later, with changes to working conditions a 40 hour working-week was established, beginning at 7:30am and finishing at 4:15pm, which included a half hour lunch break, and a morning tea break.

At the workshop, the young workers experienced on the job training in a range of work skills under the supervision of qualified tradesmen. This system enabled a great many skills and crafts to be developed, honed and passed on to the next generation of young workers who came in as apprentices.20 Two practicing tradesmen, who comprised a team in the car and wagon shop, supervised each apprentice.21 The apprentice stayed with the tradesman until the job was completed, possibly three to four months, and then moved onto another team. This was a planned routine and enabled the trainee to gain a variety of experiences and skills around the workshop. According to Bright, the apprentices were allocated to the more skilled tradesmen as they themselves became more skilled. On the job training meant precisely that. No textbooks were available for reference. The trade knowledge came from the technical school training and the fellow tradesmen. The more skilled the tradesman, the better was the apprentice's own skill development. The young apprentice was usually welcomed into the two-man team as an extra pair of hands, but, for better or worse, he did not have responsibility for any of the work output or of any of the duties. The supervising tradesman was fully responsible and required to 'fix up any of the stuff ups the kid made'.22 Times could be tough for a young, new worker since tradesmen were not always tolerant of mistakes or of having to re-do a job.

A common first job for a new car and wagon apprentice was to assist with the repair of the cattle and sheep wagons. The young apprentice had to climb into the pit under the wagons and remove bolts to dismantle sections of the wagon. This was no easy task as the pits were cramped and poorly lit, the tools very basic, (spanners and hammers, with no power tools) and the wagons dirty from usage. Often one apprentice held the spanner whilst another hit the spanner with a hammer. Trust and accuracy were of paramount importance under these circumstances!

It might be assumed that the term 'car and wagon' builder was a general term that included builders of either coaches or wagons; however, two sources of information suggest that this was not necessarily the case. Two leather bound volumes, entitled: *Midland Railways Workshops. Staff 1912 to 1966*,23 list the total staff for each month and for each year, from 1912 to 1966. The carriage builders and wagon builders are listed

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21 Interview with Allan Bright, conducted by Susan Hall, 11 September 2003
22 Interview with Bob Wells, conducted by Dick Noyelle, 17 January, 2003
23 *Midland Railways Workshops. Staff 1912 to 1966*, held in the Archives of the Westrail Workshop History Project.
separately. The second reference to a separation in the two trades occurs in an article in the January 1968 issue of the Railways Institute Magazine.²⁴ At the time this article was written, there were 55 car builders; 13 wagon builders and 10 apprentice car and wagon builders working in the ‘Car Shop’, located in Block 1, in which many different jobs took place, from coach repairs to diesel-powered refrigerator repairs. No other references have been found to this split in the respective duties of the car and wagon trade, and no mention is made in the various WAGR or Chief Mechanical Engineer’s reports. An explanation for the possible division of the car and wagon tradesmen could have been the economic boom of Western Australia’s resources. This required increased production of wagons. Perhaps the less skilled workmen undertook the wagon construction and the more precise skills of the coachbuilders’ were reserved for the carriages.

Information, which specifically states the skills of the car and wagon builders, is difficult to come by. It is only by deduction, from books such as Joinery and carpentry, that these are the most likely carpentry skills of the carriage builders, and by looking at the construction instructions for the wagons in Webster (1884)²⁵ and Richardson (1892)²⁶ for the kinds of skills needed in wagon building. Bob Wells²⁷ remembers “two tradesmen would work together in pairs year in year out” and Allan Bright²⁸ added to this that an apprentice could also be part of the team and that very rarely did a man work by himself.

According to Allan Bright, the materials for the wagon construction were pre-cut in the mill and then delivered to the wagon construction team. The builders had to use their initiative to complete the wagons because no assembly instructions were provided. Often, the wagons were custom built depending on how they were to be used. Each wagon was therefore somewhat unique in its design and construction. The plans were often drawn after the construction was completed. A great variety of trucks, or wagons, were produced or adapted at the Midland Railway Workshops. These included those used for general cargo, coal trucks, vans, wheat wagons, cargo vans, refrigerator vans, shunter floats, sheep trucks, louvered vans, guard vans, and flat tops.

To ensure that the wagons and carriages were well maintained, frequent inspections were made and a piece of coloured card attached to the outside of the wagon indicated repairs were necessary. Different coloured cards indicated the degree of repairs needed. For example, a wagon with a red card attached needed light repairs at the workshop or depot. Brown/yellow cards indicated that a general overhaul was needed or

²⁶ Richardson, M., 1892, Practical carriage building, Richardson Co., New York.
²⁸ Allan Bright, interview, 9 September, 2003.
major damage had been done. The most common repair jobs were the replacement of brake shoes, along with the repair of the buffers and safety chains.

The article, ‘Midland workshops: the car shop’ describes some of the work, which the carriage builders undertook. By 1968 much of the work involved the ‘modernization’ of the older, long distance coaches. The coaches were remodelled internally, according to Foreman Allan Gillet:

With the current accent being centred on internal flush panelling, the recovering of certain areas with plastics such as Formica and stainless steel. … [Other treatments included]… Vynex wall coverings, and plastic floor coverings, and a change of interior décor and colours” and making general improvements for the comfort of the passengers. 29

By 1968, the emphasis was on prolonging for the coaches’ usefulness, reducing on-going maintenance with the use of more durable plastics, and in general ‘dolling up’. 30

A summary of the rolling stock as at June 30th, in the WAGR annual reports for 1959 to 1968, indicated that no additional carriages were added to the Government rolling stock, but some were made obsolete in that time. The holdings were 158 coaches in 1968. This figure excludes the diesel cars and trailers. The holdings of the wagons by 1968 were in the order of 200,000 (standard and narrow gauge stock), far in excess of the coaches. Whereas in 1913, wooden coaches and wagons were the mainstay of the railway stock, by 1966, metal carriages and wagons were rapidly replacing their wooden counterparts. 31

According to the Railways Institute Magazine, [1968] article, the work in the carpentry section of the Car Shop incorporated the manufacture of office equipment and furniture, loading pallets, and was responsible for the maintenance and repair of stools and ladders throughout all the workshops, and provided other types of woodwork not necessarily associated with coach building. A telling quote comes from Foreman Allan Gillet:

It must be realized that the construction of wooden coach bodies has been superseded by an all-metal construction. This type of construction reduces the demand for car builders, although we have a fair measure of work in the laying of floors, the fitting of internal and ceiling panels, and the assembly of doors and windows, and the installation of polyurethane foam. 32

31 Midland Railways Workshops. Staff, 1912 to 1966.
32 ‘Midland workshops: the car shop’.
A major change was also reflected in the apprenticeship opportunities at Midland Railway Workshop. Bob Wells recalled that:

From the time I was 15 to 28, I was in the [work]shops and [in] that time there was a savage reduction in the number of building trades apprentices and that was achieved by outsourcing them to a number of government departments and that happened around 1966/1967.33

The Minutes of the Apprentices Application Board34, indicated that only five apprentices were appointed in 1966, and after that, none. The staff listing, 1912 to 1966, also shows that, after the boom time for car and wagon builders in the mid to late 1950s, the numbers decreased.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Car builders</th>
<th>Wagon builders</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Car builders</th>
<th>Wagon builders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>1962</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>82</td>
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<td>116</td>
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<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Numbers of car builders and wagon builders employed at MRW, 1954 to 1966.
Source: Midland Railways Workshops, Staff, 1912 to 1966, 2 volumes, held in the Archives of the Westrail Workshop History Project.

These changes had actually commenced during World War II, which hastened the development of a number of technological changes that had an impact on the railways of Western Australia. These included the diesel locomotive and engine; the increased use of metal as a construction material and mass-production manufacturing technologies. These developments were rapidly incorporated into the railways to meet the demands of moving large quantities of freight for the war effort. Ironically, the factors that encouraged growth in the use of railways ultimately brought with them challenges to the way in which

33 Bob Wells, interview, 17 January 2003
34 AAB Minutes.
railways had traditionally functioned, and to the role of the car and wagon builders in the construction and maintenance of rolling stock.

Diesel locomotives had been introduced experimentally in the United States in 1923, with the first passenger diesel locomotive, the *Zephyr*, being put to service in 1934 and freight diesels in 1940. This new form of powering the railway work horse, the diesel locomotive, was proving reliable, required less maintenance, was less hazardous to the environment and was a very efficient form of energy. The diesel locomotives, when put into combinations of "connecting units", or several diesel locomotives coupled together, provided extra haulage power. More freight could be transported effectively and efficiently than with steam locomotives in similar combinations, and by the early 1970s, diesel electric locomotives had replaced the steam locomotives in Western Australia.

The principle of the internal combustion diesel engine was also applicable to the development of large motorized vehicles such as trucks and buses. The benefit of this versatile method of transporting goods and people meant that destination and collection points were not limited to the location of railway depots and train lines. The concept of bitumenised road surfaces, in combination with trucks and buses, proved to be another challenge to the viability of the railways. Permanent roads provided the link between outlying areas and major railway depots and a more economical proposition was to restrict the railway operations to fewer but larger strategically located stations in country regions. The durability, resistance to damage, malleability and suitability for use in mass production methods of metals such as steel and aluminium were exploited during the war effort in the construction of aeroplanes, motor vehicles, and diesel-electric locomotives. Metal had many advantages over wood as a construction material.

After World War II, the developments in the forms of transportation and methods of manufacture were readily incorporated into both industry and community life. The further development of aircraft during World War II had enabled the transportation of civilians, troops and goods in a fast, maneuverable and efficient manner that was readily applicable to use in peacetime. An outcome of the rapidly increasing use of cars and aeroplanes was the reduction in the demand for railway passenger services.

A directive from the Secretary of the Railways, in 1955, gave the official sanctioning to the closure of many of the branch lines and, by 1956, 17 sections of rural railways had been closed. Decreased demand and increased operating costs, as indicated in the Chief Mechanical Engineer's reports, 1961 - 1972, led to the closure of more Western Australian branch railway lines, with each successive year. These lines were replaced with bus services.

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36 Western Australian Government Railways Commission annual report, 1960 - 1972
This was both a practical and economic decision. Passenger patronage was decreasing and at the same time the railways were becoming financially strapped and ways of reducing the operating costs had to be found. Labour costs were becoming a significant factor in operating costs, along with the need to “rehabilitate” the railways with the replacement of steam locomotives with diesel, wooden wagons with metal wagons, and the replacement of the rail tracks with those having the strength to carry the heavier diesel locomotives.

A decrease in the number of passenger coaches in use reduced the maintenance costs, and in turn reduced the workload of the car and wagon builders. There were fewer coaches for repairs and maintenance, and fewer, if any, coaches to be constructed. The development of the metal-based industries and production-line manufacture and assembly perfected during the war effort gave rise to an alternative to wooden railway stock construction. Coaches and wagons no longer had to be of wood. Metal and plastic alternatives, and assembly line production techniques, meant quicker production and less ongoing maintenance.

One of a new era of rolling stock: Aluminium oil tanker, 1973. (Courtesy Bill Gallop)

The car and wagons builders, with wood as the basis of their skills, were no longer needed for construction purposes, but merely for repair and maintenance of the old stock. Their skills were transferred to the building of office furniture as reported by Affleck. The following statement by Jack Austin, a car and wagon tradesman, 1948

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38 Affleck, *On track.*
until 1994, indicates the fate of the once vital tradesmen: ‘In the later years, we were on
the benches doing joinery work ...and later making picture frames’. 39

A review of the annual reports for the Western Australian Government Railways
1960s to 1972 indicates that as the dieselisation of the train services took place, the steam
locomotives were retired and the wooden coaches were gradually replaced with those of
metal construction. Many of the coaches that had been used for country passengers’
services were converted for use on the suburban routes, and by 1963, 62 percent of the
suburban stock was more than 50 years old.

A WAGR rehabilitation programme to replace the old suburban railway stock
with diesel rail cars and trailers during the 1960s resulted in the removal of the steam
locomotives from service by 1968. The changeover to trailers made from metal brought
about a differentiation of suburban rail stock from the interstate and intra-state rail stock.
The maintenance and repair of the wooden coaches was restricted to those still being used
for the country routes.

The Chief Mechanical Engineer commented in the 1965 WAGR annual report
that:

... the car stock was kept abreast of the modern standards by merely ‘dolling up’,
but this did not provide for the future, the cars were now dangerous and
must be condemned or rebuilt... [and] the long distance stock was no longer
functionally adequate and being of wooden construction, was high in
maintenance and structurally weak

In 1966, fires severely damaged two wooden carriages while in use. The directive
from then on was to refurbish the coaching stock with non-flammable material where
possible and to ensure that signal modes, brakes, track standards, employee training,
and fire safety standards were satisfactory. It was difficult to apply these regulations to the old
wooden coaches and so the occurrence of the fires strengthened the argument for
discontinuing their use. By the 1970s, at the recommendation of the Chief Mechanical
Engineer, these carriages were retired as ‘obsolete and dangerous’. The services of the car
and wagon tradesmen, with their carpentry and joinery skills, were no longer pivotal to
the construction and maintenance of the Western Australian railways.

The use of fibre-glass coatings on the flat surfaces of the wagons and the
development of plastic paints extended the life of the wagons. Thus, the need for the
constant maintenance and repair was reduced and eventually the metal wagons
systematically replaced the old wooden wagons. Furthermore, the resources boom
brought about a rapid development of Western Australia’s freight train operations. The
demise of the steam locomotives and the increased use of metal meant that the
boilermakers and blacksmiths, skilled in working with metal, moved into the car and
wagon construction.

39 Interview with Jack Austin, conducted by Ben Dahlstrom, 3 May 2002
Another change in the circumstances of the car and wagon builders, or perhaps, more precisely 'repairers', as reported in the WAGR annual report for 1966\(^{40}\), was that more wagon repairs were undertaken at the depots such as North Fremantle and Geraldton, rather than at the Midland Railway Workshop. The cost of repairs to the aging steam locomotives, carriages and suburban cars was increasing, but the expenditure on the maintenance of the wagons and diesel locomotives was decreasing.

The opening of the standard gauge rail links between Perth, Kalgoorlie and the eastern states brought with it purpose-built stainless steel rolling stock. The Western Australian narrow gauge locomotives, passenger carriages and wagons which had been used to connect at Kalgoorlie with the Trans-Australian Railway were redeployed to replace those worn wooden coaches on the various regional train routes. Modern marshalling yards were built in Kewdale and Northam to handle the standard gauge stock and the maintenance and repair of the standard gauge stock of coaches and wagons. As for the suburban railcars, maintenance depots, such as that in East Perth, were established for “on the spot” maintenance and re-fuelling. Again, it was less necessary for suburban trains to go to the Midland Railway Workshops.

The workload at the Midland Railway Workshops was in effect decreasing with the trend to regionalize the maintenance and repair of the cars and wagons and with the replacement of old rolling stock with new and more robust metal ones. Collectively, the changes and developments in railway stock production and railway operations significantly reduced the need for car and wagon builders and altered the role of the Midland Railway Workshops in the functioning of the WAGR.

These changes affected a number of trades. In a study by Oliver\(^{41}\), a table comparing trade vacancies in the Midland Railway Workshops in the 1940s and 1970s shows how the use of metal in the construction of cars and wagons affected the apprenticeship intakes at the Midland Railway Workshops. This was particularly so for the car and wagon builders. Thirteen per cent of the vacancies in the decade 1940 to 1949s were for car and wagon builders, but zero in the 1970s. The opportunities for electrical fitters, motor mechanics, and plumbers increased in the same period. Steve Smith\(^{42}\), an apprentice boilermaker in 1972, recalled: ‘With the demise of steam, boilermakers were now structural workers... building wagons and bridges... ‘ According to Don Underdown a blacksmith at MRW from 1949 until 1993:

\(^{40}\) WAGR Commission annual report, 1966
With dieselisation, the workshops began making aluminium wagons instead of the old wooden ones; thus work that traditionally required woodies’ (carpenters) skills became blacksmiths’ work...  

Charles Coote, who left the workshop in 1977 or 1978, remembered that up until the time he left, the car and wagon shop could go 18 months or more with no new jobs. The workers would often play cards or read the newspapers to pass the time while waiting for jobs to come in requiring their skills. The apprentices were either dismissed or re-located to ‘traffic or as firemen at East Perth’. Work agreements for the permanent employees meant that the men could not be sacked. Coote added that some men undertook retraining, or went to the ‘locomotives’ to work as engine cleaners, but for the most part the car and wagon trade had generally faded away by 1994 when the Midland Railway Workshops closed.  

The car and wagon builders were a very important part of the history of the Western Australian railways. Their skills, derived from those used to construct the horse drawn coaches and wagons, were invaluable in the construction of the coaches and wagons used on the railways from the 1880s until the 1970s. Many factors had a detrimental effect on the car and wagon builders’ continued existence at the Midland Railway Workshops. The decrease in the passenger services as road and air transportation increased; financial constraints which gave incentives to the Western Australian Government Railways to economise on the operational costs; the expansion of the metal industries and mass production technology having an impact on the use of wood for carriages and wagons; and the establishment of the standard gauge railway links to the Eastern States, all contributed to the cessation in apprenticeship opportunities for the young school leavers and also to the loss of work opportunities for the car and wagon builders at the Midland Railway Workshops, and elsewhere. The skills of the blacksmiths gradually displaced those of the car and wagon builder.  

The wooden coaches and wagons had become obsolete because of safety issues, their flammability and structural weaknesses, their age and high maintenance needs. Carriages and wagons made from the more modern and practical construction materials of metal and plastic replaced them by the mid 1970s. As the coaches and wagons were replaced, the skills of the car and wagon trade became obsolete, leaving the tradesmen with the situation of having to re-skill, seek other places of employment, or as some chose to do, remain under employed at the Midland Railway Workshops until the closure.

43 Underdown, D., cited in Oliver ‘Transforming labour’ at the Westerail Workshops, Midland WA, 1960s to 1990s, Unpublished conference paper, used with permission.  
44 Interview with Charles Coote, 2003

This book is a labour of lengthy and precise archival research as Andrew Gill sets out to further prove the point he raised in a shorter and earlier edition, *A Register of Employers of Parkhurst Convicts ‘apprenticed’ in Western Australia 1842-1851* (1993), and also *Forced Labour for the west. Parkhurst convicts ‘apprenticed’ in Western Australia, 1842-1851* (Perth, 1997). This is that the 243 young inmates from Parkhurst Prison, who were transported to Western Australia between 1842 and 1849, were just as surely convicts as the 9,600-odd convicts who came between 1850 and 1868 – a fact which, Gill argues, appears to have been ignored or misconstrued by successive generations of the State’s historians (pp. 1 ff). This is partly because there are differing opinions on whether transported prisoners could correctly be called ‘convicts’ before Swan River was a penal colony. According to Gill (p. 8), in the 1840s, those who supported a penal colony argued that making such a distinction was ‘hypocrisy’. Chapter 4 discusses alternative definitions of ‘convict’. Gill argues that his definition of convict: ‘A prisoner convicted in a British court and sentenced to “Transportation beyond the seas”’ makes the sentence crucial, rather than the destination, which he asserts is the determinant in definitions by A.G.L. Shaw and other historians (p. 97).

The book asks and sets out to answer: ‘Why Parkhurst convicts were sent to Western Australia in 1842, as a result of decisions taken by the colonists in 1839’ (dealt with in Chapters 1 and 2), and ‘Why convicts on ticket of leave were sent to the colony in June 1850, as a result of the declaration of a penal colony in June 1849’ (dealt with in Chapters 3 and 4).

One of the book’s strengths is its explanation of the assignment system for the Parkhurst Prisoners. The system was redolent with reform strategies and a sense that these prisoners were minors. Firstly, the term ‘apprentices’ – more normally applied to boys learning a skilled trade or craft – was applied although most Parkhurst convicts worked as ‘farm servants’ or ‘shepherds’ (p. 55). They were not trained in any but menial and repetitious tasks, a strategy approved by Perth tradesmen who did not want them competing with colonial boys (p. 67). Two Guardians of Apprentices, appointed by the colonial government, were to visit ‘apprentices’ three times a year (p. 22) to safeguard their welfare and assist them in their restoration to ‘social order’ (p. 27). With 136 apprentices scattered over an area extending from Moore River to Busselton, adequate supervision was soon impractical. Masters were obliged to pay half-yearly allowances, half of which was collected by the Guardian and deposited in a savings account for the apprentice when he completed his indentures. Guardians were sometimes lax in collecting these payments.

Chapter 3 details the end of the ‘apprenticeship system’. A number of factors are discussed, including the resentment that only certain sections of the colony benefited
from the presence of the Parkhurst prisoners (p. 71-2), who brought no capital or purchasing power with them. Gill argues strongly that the precedent of the 'apprentices' paved the way for wider acceptance of a penal colony (p. 76).

Extensive footnotes and tables add to the reference value of Convict Assignment in Western Australia 1842-1851, but the book's layout makes it a formidable work to access for information. This reviewer would prefer to see the book published in standard paperback format. The A4, spiral-bound format is cumbersome and difficult to locate on a bookshelf because of the lack of a title on the spine. The footnoting system is not user friendly (with numbers re-commencing at 1 for each section of each chapter, rather than maintaining consecutive numbering throughout the chapter as is the standard practice). Finally, the four separate indexes should be amalgamated for ease of reference.

BOBBIE OLIVER
Curtin University


This issue of The Hummer devotes almost half of its pages to three papers presented at a Symposium on the impact of the Khrushchov Secret Speech of 1956 on the Communist Party of Australia.

Two of the three papers, by Bob Walshe and Elaine Bryant, are essentially reminiscences of their personal responses at the time and subsequently. The third, by long-time CPA leader Eric Aarons is more analytical.

Walshe and Bryant relate how they obtained and read the speech, their subsequent ostracism by the CPA leadership, their support for the CPA oppositionists Helen Palmer and Jim Staples and Outlook the discussion magazine they started, and their eventual departure from the CPA.

As a young CPA member at the time, and a very loyal one at that, ready to follow the line of the Party leadership at the time, I duly ceased buying Outlook and supported the leadership. It took ten years more of thought, observation and experience before I came to understand and support the movement for change in the CPA.

As Walshe and Bryant point out, the line being pushed by the CPA leadership was that the Secret Speech, published first in the West by the New York Times, was a CIA fabrication, and this was the line followed by the WA CPA leadership. Rivo Gandini, at that time an organiser and state executive member has confirmed to me that they not only knew it was genuine, but that he and Sam Aarons, the WA CPA secretary and a Central Committee member, were advised to read it. The combination of the speech, followed so closely by the uprisings in Hungary and Poland later that year, had a marked impact in the CPA, particularly among intellectuals, and the WA organisation was not alone in seeing the departure from its ranks of many of the intellectuals who had joined it in earlier times.
As the future proved, the collapse of the Stalin myth was the beginning of the end for the CPA and indeed of Marxism-Leninism everywhere. It is true to say also that despite its initial reluctance to accept the truth of the speech, the CPA, especially as its younger and less dogmatic leadership gained the top positions, did begin to change and especially after the removal of Khrushchov from Soviet leadership in 1964.

This was particularly true in WA where the 1967 state conference went so far as to debate the essential organisational principle of the Communist parties, democratic centralism, which entrenched the dominance of the top leaders. Despite initial hostility by the national leadership, the CPA began to democratise its structures and practice, and internationally, became more openly critical of the Soviet Union, its satellite states and their practice. This culminated in opposition to the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, and CPA national secretary Laurie Aarons’ public criticism of the invasion at the last ever meeting of Communist Parties in 1969.

This issue of *The Hummer* also contains an extensive review by Bob Gould of a three-volume study, *The People’s Choice: Electoral politics in NSW*. Most of the review is devoted to an examination of the ALP and elections from 1901, providing a very useful summary of Labor governments and their rise and fall over the 20th century.

GEOFF DAVIS