



“Family Commitments”

Having a young son has often meant that I’ve had to decline invitations to attend ‘Steam-Ups’ with my garden railway buddies. This is even more so now that he has joined the local Scout group and his father became a scout leader.

Well, another weekend has just passed and my pals have spent another enjoyable day running little steam engines in the garden while I was hefting a 15 kg backpack on a two-day trek through the leech infested Warburton Ranges east of Melbourne (another Scout Hike). Well as it turned out the hike included a 17 km section along the formations of the old logging tramway from Starlings Gap to the ‘New Federal Mill’ site that ran for almost 15 years from 1935 to 1949*.

Those who know of my passion for narrow gauge industrial railways will appreciate the excitement I felt as we made our way along the formations and cuttings that were once this railway. Imagine discovering a section of trestle bridge still standing ghost like and cloaked in moss, barely distinguishable amongst 60 years of regrowth in a seemingly impenetrable rain forest. Then there was the old mill camp with its immense boiler and winding gear gently rusting amongst the tree ferns at the base of a steep incline and pieces of rolling stock with wide treads and deep flanges for negotiating tight curves on wooden rails.

An exciting find was the unmistakable relic of a small steam locomotive at the abandoned “Ada River Saw Milling Co No 2” site. Just a gorgeous little saddle tank on its own with no other part of a loco to be found, sitting mournfully in the long grass like a child lost from its mother. A small pear shaped "ogee" saddle tank with its distinctive bulging sides, flat top and holes for the chimney and dome. The mystery of its existence... why was it there, all alone and what of the locomotive from which it came?

Well I might have missed out on a steam-up with my buddies, but my fascination for little logging railways has been exponentially enriched. The next time I see a miniature logging train snaking its way through the shrubbery of someone’s manicured garden, my memories from this weekend will animate the setting – narrow cuttings carpeted with dripping mosses and flanked by giant tree ferns and immense mountain eucalypts; curved trestle bridges spanning deep gullies and the sound of Lyrebirds mimicking a distant steam whistle. (Oh and leeches!)

* Barrel Staves for Barley Sugar from “Mountains of Ash” by Mike McCarth

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