



STEAM RETURNS TO

Colourful railway celebrates a nostalgic century

"Look, Dad," called a young passenger on a steam train puffing up the Pichi Richi Pass from Quorn, in South Australia's lower Flinders Ranges, "there goes that little short bloke again."

Mother of three Meg Atkinson, alias the "little short bloke," has fooled other passengers when she dons her fireman's uniform with the old-style peaked cap to join the crew of a steam train taking tourists for a nostalgic bit of smut-in-the-eye travel on the historic Pichi Richi Railway.

Meg, her microbiologist husband Max, and their children are one of many families in South Australia who have helped to put trains back on the colourful old railway again.

They are members of the Pichi Richi Railway Preservation Society, formed by country and city people in 1973 to save the railway for posterity and restore it.

This year the society is celebrating the 100th anniversary of the construction of the railway which passes through rugged country renowned for its natural beauty — a wildflower paradise.

The Pichi Richi Railway was originally planned to service copper mining ventures and agricultural needs. It was

built as part of the Port Augusta and Government Gums Railway and formed an important section of the Great Northern Railway.

At first it was operated by the South Australian Railways and later by the Commonwealth Railways.

British stonemasons, including Cornishmen who had emigrated to South Australia during the copper mining boom, worked with Chinese coolies on the railway's construction.

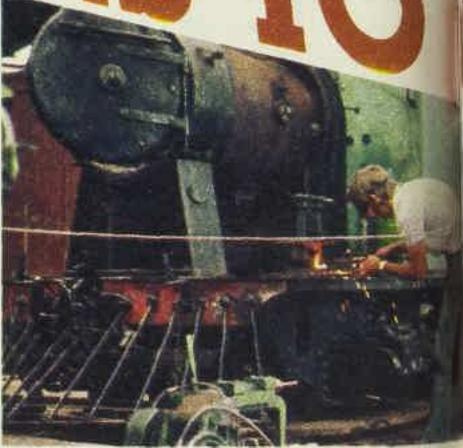
It negotiated steep grades in the harsh country. Splendid examples of drystone walling embankments and fine bridges remain today as a tribute to the craftsmanship of its builders.

The railway's busiest moments were during World War II when it handled military supplies and troops, and following the development of the Leigh Creek coalfield, when it carried up to 2000 tonnes of coal a day.

For many years the famous "Ghan" passenger train used the line.

The decision to build a new standard gauge track on the western side of the Flinders spelled the end of the Pichi Richi line and brought dismay to the railway centre of Quorn.

In 1957 the Port Augusta-Maree line



was opened and through trains left Quorn forever.

The railway deteriorated. Stock grazed on grass springing up between its rusting rails.

Then in 1973, spurred on by a rumour that the Commonwealth Railways intended to dispose of the track, local people and history-minded supporters from as far away as Adelaide formed the Pichi Richi Railway Preservation Society and began restoring the track.

It was a formidable task.

A lot of the money needed was, and



PICHI RICHI PASS

TOP LEFT: A typical Pichi Richi Railway train crew. From left, Tom Rosser (guard), Bill Bennetts (auto instructor), Michele Gray, Lorna and Heidi Hart (refreshments), Malcolm McKay (station master) and Max Atkinson (conductor). On the engine, Max Munchenberg (driver) and Meg Atkinson (fireman). LEFT: Bob Yates at work. ABOVE: A dream realized.

still is, being raised by allowing the public to "buy" a Pichi Richi Railway sleeper for \$1.

Members of the society camped at a cottage on the outskirts of Quorn owned by past president Trevor Ward — the dollar sleeper certificate was his idea — and began the backbreaking work of salvaging the track from the encroaching bush.

Later, they built a workshop at Quorn with facilities for members and their families who came there for weekends and holidays to work on the track and

restoration of engines and carriages.

A search for steam locomotives resulted in the society buying two British built 1951 "W" class steam locomotives formerly owned by the Western Australian Government Railways and a 70-year-old "T" class once operated by the SA Railways and overhauled at a cost of more than \$35,000, and that excluded voluntary labour.

In 1974, amid much flag-waving and jubilation, Quorn came to life again as a railway town when the Pichi Richi Railway was re-opened as far as Summit

by the then Governor of South Australia, Sir Mark Oliphant.

The line, which is being re-opened in stages, was later extended to Pichi Richi, a distance of 12.5km from Quorn. A further stage to Woolshed Flat was officially opened at Easter this year.

Pichi Richi Railway Preservation Society members are now restoring a unique 1905 vintage steam railcar affectionately known as the "Coffee Pot," along with another "W" class engine and other passenger carriages.

— NOEL RAIT