

A History of Fraser Island Tramways

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As the Fraser Island Transport and Access study proceeded during 2001-02 interest in light rail on Fraser Island increased. Many people would be unaware that light rail was used on Fraser Island by the timber industry from 1905 until about 1935 when it was displaced by motor transport. The Queensland Government (Environment Protection Agency) engaged consultant historian John Kerr who has extensively researched Queensland's rail history to prepare a study of Forest industry heritage Places Study: Sawmills and Tramways South Eastern Queensland. This is an extract of a report he presented in January 1998

There has only been one sawmill on Fraser Island, not particularly successful, but tramlines played an important part in logging the island prior to the adoption of motor trucks, as the sandy environment was a difficult one for bullock and horse teams, particularly the lack of feed.

There were three main tramlines built on the island, all running to the west coast which not only suited the Maryborough sawmills, it was a practical necessity as the sharp descent from the high dunes to the eastern coastline made the west coast the only practical destination for logging operations. The northern tramline ran to a log dump near Bogimbah Creek and was eight miles long with two branch lines each about three miles long. The central tramline ran to McKenzie's sawmill and wharf at White Cliffs, and was about 6 miles long with a terminus near Lake McKenzie and had two short branches. The third line roughly followed Woongoolver Creek, also ending at a log dump. There is some doubt whether an early horse-hauled wooden-railed tramline to a loading ramp near Deep Creek was actually built. The main three tramlines were steel-railed and operated by locomotives of three foot six inch gauge.

Timber getting on Fraser Island lasted for more than a century from the late 1860s. Three parties of timber getters were at work in the Aboriginal Protection Areas of the island in 1869 "with the full approval of the Lands Department".²⁸

Wilson Hart and Co. had timber getters on Fraser Island by 1877.²⁹

After the success of the Cooloola tramway, the Maryborough Chronicle reported in 1876 that Pettigrew and Company intended to lay a tramway across Fraser Island to the rafting ground in Hervey Bay to tap the stands of Kauri pine near the eastern side of the island.³⁰ Apparently the idea was dropped, possibly because Pettigrew could not secure tenure over sufficient resources to justify construction.

Considerable effort was put into establishing pine plantations on the island for regeneration but without much success.³¹

Wilson Hart and Hyne had seven miles of steel tramway and steam locomotive by mid 1906 and were proposing another mile and a half extension.³²

The first tramway was built about 1906 from the beach at Yerang Creek using grade of 1 in 16 and a 28 tonne ex-Queensland Railways tank engine. It tapped the Poyungan and Bogimbah Creek area. By 1909 the tramway was reported as 10 miles long. The rails were moved to Woongoolba Creek about 1915 and closed around 1928.³³

The new line had been laid by 1921 when visitors were reported as being taken on the company's "engine and tender" four miles to the forest station [Central Station]. A survey had been made in 1920 of both road and tramway five miles to Ungowa but the road option was built in 1922 despite the lack of herbage for teams.³⁴ In time motor lorries overcame the feed problem. Postan's logging camp, which operated from 1935 to the close of logging in 1991, was the base for logging contractors. Initially Neville Smith

and A.R. Postan used a variety of equipment. Postan, the former employee, bought out Smith in 1940. Much of the equipment remained on the island until it was superseded. Improvisation and adaptation were key elements.³⁵

After the original railway was put out of use, 8 1/2 miles of tramway was sold by Hyne and Sons to Moreton Mill in 1922.³⁶ Note, however, that if the second line operated until 1928, the 1922 sale of rails means that Wilson Hart and Hyne laid the second line before the first was lifted.

Forestry purchased McKenzie's tramline and wharf in 1925/26 for œ5000.³⁷ The Department sold the rails from McKenzie's tramway in 1935 and the locomotive in 1941.³⁸

In 1918 Hepburn McKenzie, a large New South Wales timber merchant, contracted to buy the timber off 10,000 acres of Fraser Island harvesting 100,000 super feet per month from 1 April 1919 for ten years, building a sawmill at the Quarantine Reserve, White Cliffs and a tramline system.³⁹

The venture was not particularly successful and in 1921 H. McKenzie (Queensland) Limited was registered to acquire the rights under the 28 March 1918 agreement with the state Director of Forests. It was registered in Brisbane on 24 June 1921. Most of the shares were held by H. McKenzie Limited, the parent company, and the company's unprofitability presumably made sale to the public impracticable. In 1925 the shares were written down to one third of their face value. In 1926, after auction of the mill and sale of the tramway and wharf to the Forestry Board, it was resolved to wind up the company voluntarily.⁴⁰

The company found it difficult to sell the timber in Queensland, with local prejudice against using turpentine and brush box as commercial timbers and had to sell its output in Sydney, necessitating expensive added transport costs. With the cost of using watersiders from Maryborough for loading, it lost around œ100,000 on the whole venture.⁴¹

Philadelphia Hanley applied to the Under Secretary for Lands in June 1906 to lease timber land so he could enter a contract to export 250,000 sleepers from Fraser Islands. Essentially he wanted a concession which he could then offer to an investor. McMahon, Director of Forests, wanted proof that Hanley held a contract already. An area of 14 square miles was put aside, to the west and south west of the area already set aside to the Wilson Hart-Hyne joint venture. Wilson Hart and Company wrote on 12 July to the Minister pointing out that the timber on the island was nearly all suitable for milling, needed to supply the Maryborough mills, and should not be sacrificed for railway sleepers. They pointed out that species such as turpentine, box and others should not be so used until proved unsuitable for milling.

Gilbert Burnett, the Forest Ranger, accompanied Hanley to the area near the heads of Urang, Boyungan, Bun Bun and Doondonga Creeks, an area with large amounts of Blackbutt and Turpentine and some tallowwood, and added that most of the old trees were "piped" and only suitable for sleepers. Hanley planned to load into punts at the mouth of Boyungan Creek.

Light Rail on Fraser Island

Hyne and Son wrote on 16 July 1906 to state that the tramway was now in operation and would, when complete, be eight miles long, longer and more expensive than they and Wilson Hart had expected. They applied for another block to help them recover the cost.

McMahon went to Fraser before agreeing to auction the timber Hanley wanted. The conditions required the removal of half a million super feet in the first year and a million feet per year subsequently, conditions that Hyne and Son, writing on 29 August, considered too severe for them to meet, although they wanted to bid, having had to build 8 1/2 rather than the 5 miles of tramline they had expected.

Hanley offered one shilling per hundred super feet, double the upset price, he and Thomas Griffiths being the only bidders. Hanley took four months to put up the required £250 bond, and failed to start work. Because of the way the terms were written, the Department could not even recover the bond and the surety admitted he had no assets. Hanley was not to be found.⁴²

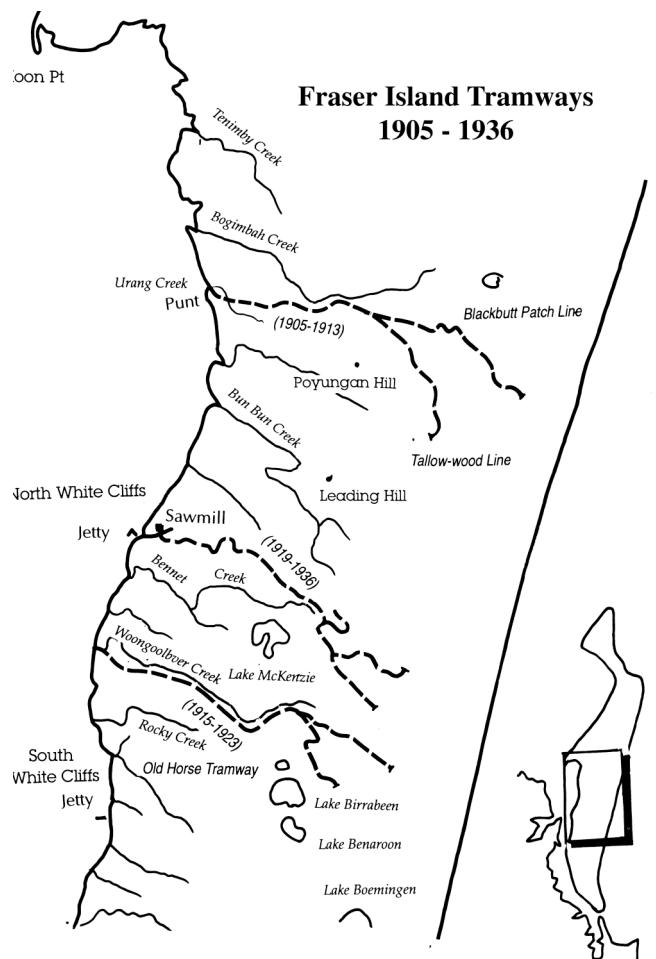
28. MC 5 October 1869 p. 2.
29. MC 16 October 1877.
30. MC 23 September 1876.
31. Mackay Mercury 10 May 1882, MC 1 August 1884 p. 2, 7 September 1887 p. 2, 6 July 1897 p. 2.
32. MC 14 July 1906 p. 2.
33. Letter Jules Tarden to G. Bond, collection held by D.J. Mewes; Dargavel, pp. 132-7; Pilot October 1909 (AUSN Co.).
34. Australian Forest Journal 15 July 1921 p. 211; PP 1921, 1, 971, 973 and PP 1923, 1, 121.
35. Karen Townrow, Postan's Logging Camp.
36. Australian Sugar Journal 14, 533.
37. Annual Report Forestry Dept. 1925-26 p. 5.
38. Letter Forestry Department to George Bond.
39. BC 4 July 1918 p. 8; Ian McNeil, Light Railways No. 104 (April 1989) pp. 11-3.
40. Company 50 of 1921, A/28529, QSA; Q 3 July 1926 p. 29, 33.
41. * River of Dreams, pp. 367-8.
42. Correspondence, Batch 113, LAN/AK40, QSA.
43. MC 13 January 1883 p. 2.

Advantages of Fraser Island Light Rail

FIDO has been advocating the establishment of a light rail people mover on Fraser Island since 1974.

The advantages FIDO sees are:

1. The physical disturbance of sand by vehicle tyres is eliminated and thus erosion which has been estimated at about 1 tonne of sand displaced for every visitor since the turn of the century is overcome. In other words light rail would replace the existing unsustainable practice of carrying almost 200,000 tourists annually around Fraser Island in tour buses which have been shown to have a greater impact on island roads than any other passenger vehicles used.
2. The widening of roads to accommodate larger 4WDs, particularly buses, means that the experience of a physical close encounter with nature has been lost. This can be reinstated because less clearance is required for a train.
3. Because more people can be carried simultaneously it justifies a higher standard of interpretation and commentary and should provide visitors with better more accurate information about all aspects of Fraser Island.
4. Commercial Tour Operators are constantly demanding improvement of existing sand tracks on Fraser Island to provide a more comfortable ride for their passengers. Light rail would be certain to provide a more comfortable ride and make Fraser Island accessible for people with bad backs.
5. Light rail is easier to manage and would limit the extent of impact into fewer areas which needed "hardening".



From Railways Historical Society Queensland Division's newsletter, "Sunshine Express".

NOTE: Some other tramlines, including a line through Pile Valley, do not appear on this map.

How to get Light Rail on Fraser Island

FIDO has used its funds to commission two independent studies on light rail for Fraser Island. These show that light rail is a potentially viable commercial venture on Fraser Island but if it is to proceed the Queensland Government needs to make some clear decisions.

1. A preferred route should be nominated. It is FIDO's view that for economy and to reduce the environmental impacts this should be based on one of the historical tramline routes which are either the Bogimbah, the McKenzie or the Central Station routes.
2. The Queensland Government should establish a set of conditions upon which any commercial operator would be required to operate a light rail service and what concession it would be given such as rights to establish terminals and jetties and exclusive use of the route.
3. The Government needs to identify what if any restrictions would be placed on the use of Fraser Island by other forms of transport once the light rail is operational.
4. The Queensland Government would then call for Expressions of Interest from the Commercial Sector to submit a proposal to construct and operate a light rail in accordance with the above three pre-requisites.

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