A house call

In New Zealand colonial times the doctors went from one patient to another on horseback. A country doctor had to be able to ride a horse, and ride it well, and when a shipment of horses arrived from Australia, the doctor was to be seen down on the waterfront, selecting one of the best of them for his own personal use.

Some years later, an alternative method for getting around was the railway network. In his book “Doctor in the Sticks,” (1972), the late Dr D. A. Bathgate describes a night call done by electric locomotives and railway flat trucks in the early 1920s.

Dr Bathgate, employed on an annual salary of £500, took the job of Medical Officer at Otira, in the Southern Alps. Work on the amazing Otira tunnel, which is over 8.5km long, was still in progress. Construction had begun simultaneously at each end, and years later the workers met somewhere in the middle. The course of the tunnel had been plotted with remarkable accuracy. By the 1920s, one could traverse the tunnel, but it was not fully lined. The mouth of the tunnel at the Arthur’s Pass end is 250 metres higher than at the Otira end, giving a downhill gradient of 1:33 over its entire length.

Patients lived in the settlements at each end of the tunnel, and Dr Bathgate was responsible for all of them. A winding and dangerous road through the steep mountains connected Otira, where a small hospital was situated, and Arthur’s Pass. The tunnel, when completed, would make for a faster and safer journey from one side of the mountain range to the other.

One night Dr Bathgate was asked to attend urgently a female patient at Arthur’s Pass, which is at the eastern and more elevated end of this enormously long tunnel. He phoned the tunnel mouth at Otira, and asked for an electric locomotive to take him to the “top heading,” the point at which the two parts of the tunnel joined up, but which was not yet completed. There was a door to stop the spread of fumes and gases.

He set out on this long journey with a colleague, a Dr Arthur. When the locomotive dropped him off he could expect to walk some distance in very wet conditions, before being picked up by another locomotive, that would start towards the “top heading” from the Arthur’s Pass end of the tunnel.

During the first part of the transit, west to east, in total darkness, the driver of the locomotive sensed that something was coming towards him. He threw the locomotive into reverse, and travelled at speed back down the way he had come. Arriving at a set of points, he ordered Dr Bathgate to throw the switch, and he got the locomotive off the main track into a siding where it was safe.

Hardly had he done so than a rake of trucks, on which were perched two men blowing whistles, flew past, going downhill with a thundering roar, sparks streaming from the brakes on the wheels. It seems that they had no business to be travelling at that hour.

The doctors resumed their journey, and the driver, in the middle of the tunnel, (at the end of the western section of the line), left a flat truck for the two doctors to use when
they returned. Having splashed through a lot of water, they were picked up by another locomotive that had come in from the Arthur’s Pass end.

Arriving at the settlement in the middle of the night with his friend, Dr Bathgate attended the patient, whose husband rewarded him with a couple of hares. He then placed his gift of the two hares, his acetylene lamp, and his medical bag on the “flattie” at the eastern end of the tunnel, and took off again at speed towards the door placed in the middle of the tunnel, regulating his downhill progress by means of a footbrake on the truck.

Going too fast, and, as he himself says, “carelessly missing the landmarks in the tunnel walls,” Dr Bathgate slammed into another rake of loaded trucks that had been left in the blackness for the next shift to clear.

Dr Bathgate was hurled the full length of the truck, and Dr Arthur vanished into the void, holding on to the hares. By the light of his acetylene lamp, Dr Bathgate could see Dr Arthur sitting between the rails. Neither was badly hurt.

Abandoning the blocked truck, the two men walked in a westerly direction along the tunnel until they found, somewhere near the middle of it, the other “flattie” that had been left there for their use. “At a more reasonable pace,” Dr Bathgate writes, “we proceeded down to the Otira portal, [a distance of almost five kilometres] and walked back to the hospital…Dr Arthur had no desire to repeat the experience. Next day we had hare soup for dinner.”

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