

The History of the West Australian Road Transport Industry



By Russell McKinnon

THE ROARING 20s



1925

From The West Australian of February 25:

"North West Transport. A more liberal or a special grant for the making of roads and crossings in the North- West was asked for by the Pastoralists' Association, members of which were introduced by Senator Lynch. It was stated that the combined Federal and State grants amounted to £10,350 last year and that £4000 of that amount had been expended. The difficulties of transport in the great spaces of the North-West were stressed including those of crossing rivers in flood. The country was producing wool and meat and deserved consideration it was urged. Mr Hall, in reply, said that while for many years to come neither the State nor Federal Governments, could give the North-West a decent metalled

road for a thousand miles, he was prepared to see that the North-West had a reasonable amount allocated to make its roads passable through sand hills and river crossings, and even assist in connection with bridges. He would try to secure an amendment of the Act that would allow a differential treatment as between States and also between different portions of the State. If a special grant were made to the northern portion of Western Australia, every other State would ask for special grants. He would endeavour to give the North-West a decent amount of the present grant."

By 1925, the Model T Ford played a vital role in expanding commercial motor transport in WA. About 2000 vans, trucks and buses were registered in the State.

Of those, 80 were buses, not

only Fords, Chevrolets and Reos, but almost-forgotten makers like Ruggles, Brockwell, Mason and Gray. Services were going to comparatively close destinations like Scarborough, Wembley, Redcliffe and Cannington, then further afield to Kalamunda, Jarrahdale and the Peel Estate. There were suggestions that a Perth-Bunbury service could be mustered. However, this seemed nigh on impossible when a service to Middle Swan resulted in five broken springs and two snapped axles in one weekend's operations. The bus companies had liveries as varied as their destinations — Blue and cream for South Suburban; tan and cream for Beam; silver for United; vivid yellow for Daffodil; one company even specialised in candy stripes.

The company operators were as colourful as their buses. They included a surprisingly large number of women — among them the redoubtable Mrs Caisley of Redcliffe and Mrs Marion Bell. The Toodyay-Northam service was operated by a Ukrainian migrant, Josef Hoffman, who went on record as saying that his career in WA had included "manufacturer, bag merchant and maker of suspenders etc," but that buses were the most troublesome career of all.

Such was the explosive situation of brawling drivers fighting for custom that the Government instituted a Routes Advisory Board to distribute routes and destinations more evenly. Speed limits of 20mph for solid tyres and 25mph for pneumatics were imposed to try and end competitive driving to pick up passengers first. Bluebird and Reo eventually combined their operations into one company.

From The West Australian of July 1: "MOTOR CARRIERS' ASSOCIATION. The annual meeting of the Metropolitan Motor Transport Carriers' Association (Ed: not to be confused with the Fremantle Association) was held on Monday. A review of the twelve months showed that the association had done useful work in the general regulation and control of motor transport. Amongst other business, the question of the new licence fees was discussed. It was agreed that a deputation should wait on the Minister to lay before him the extreme hardships which the new licence fees imposed upon those engaged in motor transport and to point out that the sudden increase of fees amounting to approximately 325 percent was a big blow to an industry which was a large and essential factor in the State's progress.

From The Daily News of July 7: "VEHICLE LICENSES (sic). IS THE INCREASE EXORBITANT? Strong comment was made at a meeting of the Fremantle Council last night regarding the action of the Government in increasing the licensing fees of vehicles. Cr Daly brought the matter before the council and stated that the fees had been increased nearly 400 percent. The fees inflicted a hardship on business people, particularly struggling carriers with horse-drawn vehicles. He moved that the council enter an emphatic protest against the exorbitant fees that were being made. Cr Stevens seconded the motion. Cr Carter said that an increase of 400 percent was too drastic. He would not object to a 100 percent increase on horse-drawn vehicles and 200 percent on motors, but 400 percent was not a fair proposition. Cr Sumpton (president of the Transport Association) said that his association intended to approach the Government protesting against the increase. The licences were not fair to the small owner-drivers of lorries. The big companies would be in a position to pay the high fees, but the small owners would be squeezed out. Cr Shepherd considered that the council should write to the Government asking that the charges be reconsidered with a view to a reduction. They all knew why the high increase in the fees had been made. The railways were suffering from the motor competition, and the Government was just doing what ordinary businessmen would do

to save their business. If the council appealed to the Government to reconsider the increase he thought they would get some satisfaction. The motion was then altered to read that the Minister be appealed to reconsider his decision in connection with the licences and was carried."

From the West Australian of August 5: "Protest Against Increased Charges. Over eighty persons, the majority of whom were connected with the carrying industry, attended a public meeting in the Fremantle Town Hall last night for the purpose of protesting against the new changes which are being made for the licensing of horse-drawn vehicles. The meeting, which was convened by the Mayor of Fremantle (Mr J Cooke) in response to a petition from a number of ratepayers, was presided over by Mr Cooke, and among those present were Messrs G Potter and B H Gray,

that the drivers' licences should have to go with the vehicle. This meant that firms, which possessed many vehicles, some of which were not in use, were taxed whether the vehicle was on the road or not. There was no doubt that the changes as they affected the horse-drawn vehicles were unfair and far too high. When the scale was announced a deputation waited on the Acting Minister for Works, (Mr. Cunningham), and were practically told that it was realised by the Government that the fees were too high, and that the matter would be re-considered. A subsequent letter received through Mr J B Sleeman, MLA from the Minister for Works (Mr A McCallum) intimated that the charges would be reconsidered. Nothing had been done, however, and it was time that some definite protest was made against the charges. He moved that this meeting of Fremantle citizens registers its emphatic protest against

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MLC, the president of the Fremantle Chamber of Commerce (Mr J F Allen), the president of Metropolitan Master Carriers' Association (Lieutenant Colonel C H E Manning), members of the Fremantle Business Men's Association and members of the Fremantle Municipal Council. Lieutenant-Colonel C H E Manning said that the licensing fees on horse-drawn vehicles had been raised by 1,275 percent, and, although carriers' did not mind paying their just dues, they did not like people taking from them more than was reasonably justified. There was no State in Australia where the fees were nearly so high. One firm, which last year paid £14 for the licensing of its horse-drawn vehicles, was now asked to pay over £70. Another firm's tax had risen from £31 to £105 and the same firm which last year paid £53 for drivers' licences, now had to pay £393. It was unfair

the oppressive taxation imposed on the horse transport section of the community by the amended Traffic Act and respectfully requests that the schedule of fees be urgently reconsidered; also that the limitation of the time for payment of the same be extended until the decision of the Government is made known.

From the West Australian of September 1: "A flag was flown at half-mast on the Fremantle Town Hall yesterday in a mark of respect for the late Mr J H Lester, a prominent Fremantle citizen, who died yesterday morning. The late Mr Lester was well known in the business circles of the port, and for three years (1914 to 1917) he was a member, of the Fremantle Municipal Council." He was also a member of the Association, serving as a Trustee since the inception in 1912. ■