

Fastest Milk Cart in the West – Mike Pensini

Slide 1 - Good afternoon

The title of the talk today is a slight reworking of a 1980 song by Benny Hill, Ernie (The fastest milkman in the West)

Slide 2 - All of us at one time or another had an Esky to keep our food cool; while we went to the beach or camping.

The railways had the same problem – how do we move fresh meat from country abattoirs on their long journey to the cities?

Slide 3 - In the 1930s the Main Southern, North lines and other lines were re-laid with heavier rail allowing the speed limits to be raised to 70mph.

The existing ice chilled refrigerator cars (BRC) were not suitable for these new speed limits. These vehicles featured “arch bar” bogies which had short comings of unstable riding at speed. Many accidents happened.

A new design of bogie refrigerator cars was required.

Slide 4 - The new Meat Refrigerated Car, MRC, design was of similar construction style to the earlier BRC cars with timber sheathed bodywork on an iron frame with insulated interiors. The cars had a carrying capacity of 20 tons plus 2 tons of ice.

Slide 5 - In 1932 the Railway workshops built seven MRC cars to the new design. These cars were the first to use the 2AE type high speed bogies.

This design was a success. These new bogies allowed for the attachment to express mail and passenger trains.

A further 57 cars were built between 1933 and 1938 by Ritchie Bros.

Between 1941 to 1943, Waddingtons built 50 cars across two contracts. All were built with two ice hatches, one at each end of the car roof.

Slide 6 - Between 1944 and 1950, 125 cars were built with 6 ice hatches.

These vehicles are significant as an important link in the transport of perishable meat between country abattoirs and city markets, thus facilitating the spread of country abattoirs.

Slide 7 - Our MRC 25706 has heritage significance as a rare and intact example of a Refrigerator Van of a total of 250 manufactured during the first half of the 20th century.

It represents the first type of refrigerator car to use a substantial steel truss body and framing that supports both outside and inside panelling, which was revolutionary.

Slide 8 - The Nepean Dairy and Refrigeration Co-Op Society Limited had its milk treatment plant head office at Penrith which had a rail siding at the north western end of Penrith yard.

The society was incorporated in the late 1920s to pasteurise milk produced on the local dairy farms and forwarded the surplus whole milk products to either Dairy Farmers or Fresh Food and Ice Co bottling plants in Sydney.

Slide 9 - In the late 1940s, because of increased population in the western region, the Society set up its own bottling plant and established distribution depots throughout the Penrith and Blue Mountains area.

Two of these depots were set up at Katoomba and Lithgow.

Slide 10 - In 1954 a lease was obtained of adjoining railway land at Katoomba and Lithgow for 25 years and the use of departmental refrigerator wagons. They transported bottled milk in crates and bulk milk in cans from the Penrith factory to the depots at Katoomba and Lithgow.

The company fitted their signs to the wagons and there were four in use at any one time.

Two being used on the forward journey and two empties for the return journey.

There must have been spares for emergency and routine repairs.

Slide 11 - Although there are no records available to verify 25706 in use as a milk carrier, it is possible.

Every day, a train made up of general goods with two MRCs at the head departed Penrith for Katoomba and Lithgow. They were steam hauled for a short time until electrification was completed in 1957.

MRC 25706 has signs attached to represent the wagons as they would have been observed travelling through the mountains.

Slide 12 - MRC 25706 arrived at Valley Heights from Thirlmere in September 2008. It was suffering roof and body deterioration. After many years of being exposed to the weather elements both while in service and at Thirlmere the general condition of the van had deteriorated.

It was firstly used to house many of the 5711 locomotive parts.

The car was stored in the Departure Road at Valley Heights.

Slide 13 - Several rainy periods soon revealed that the roof was leaking and arrangements were made.

The members at Valley Heights decided to go ahead and recover the roof.

The vehicle was moved under cover and three working bees were held over several weeks.

The old malthoid roofing was removed, and the roof was cleaned and made ready to receive new malthoid.

Slide 14 - In 2008, Valley Heights was chosen to participate in a Pilot Scheme for a joint venture between RailCorp's Office of Rail Heritage (ORH) and Conservation Volunteers Australia. (CVA).

Volunteers were supplied by CVA consisting of a supervisor and backpacker tourists looking to do voluntary work in exchange for board and meals.

It was thought that the MRC could do with a general tidy up and this would be a suitable CVA project.

Slide 15 - Conservation Volunteers scheme was being advertised in 2010 for 2011 start.

Approval was given and a time frame of 24 weeks for 5 people at two days per week was allowed to remove the old paint, putty up nail holes etc. and repaint.

Next task was to recruit volunteers. It resulted in 8 people initially but very rapidly declined to 2 or three per week. A very capable volunteer joined, and he helped to progress the job, unfortunately he left before the timber repair work began.

Slide 16 - Max employment from Springwood was also used in an attempt to obtain volunteers. This resulted in a very unstable supply of volunteers which required constant supervision.

As cleaning progressed, it was found that the match boards and letter boards were seriously deteriorated and needed replacement.

Slide 17 - The plug doors were also rotted at the base due to water entrapment.

In all, over two thirds of the matchboards needed replacement as well as the door coverings and frames.

A review of the scope of works with ORH was executed and money allowed in the next round of projects for timber to be purchased.

Meanwhile, the clean-up continued, and some matchboards were removed.

This revealed that the timber noggins between the steel truss frames were also rotted, and some had termite infestation.

Slide 18 - The 24 week program was destroyed with lack of volunteers and the size of the task.

The small group continued slowly and about 6 months in, another volunteer, joined the group, she was a TAFE accredited Carpenter and soon put her skills to work.

Not all the matchboards' sides were beyond recovery, and each was carefully examined and where possible, the bad sections were cut away and the remaining section joined to a similar good section thus forming a full-length board from two or three old pieces.

Slide 19 - Special shaped noggins were made and slowly the skeleton frame took shape.

The plug doors were removed, and the special shaped timbers were carefully renewed.

Three years on the project finally reached completion.

Slide 20 - If any other group should decide to refurbish a MRC, here is some helpful information:

Cost of material required: \$9,000.

Man hours: 6,000.

Note: These costs depend on the overall condition of the vehicle.

In the case of MRC 25706, the vehicle looked in reasonable condition until damaged pieces were removed only to reveal further damage underneath.
The underframe, chassis and bogies were in good order.

Slide 21 - On Australia Day 2014, the Museum unveiled the restored van MRC 25706 which had been the subject of a complete restoration over a period of four years.
The van was restored to represent a Nepean Milk Van that regularly conveyed milk from the Nepean Milk Factory at Penrith to Katoomba and Lithgow.

Slide 22 - This meat refrigeration car is on display at our museum every second and fourth Sunday. There are also special days advertised on our website and social media forums.
Truly the fastest milk cart in the west.