

1913.

VICTORIA.

PROGRESS REPORT

FROM

THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE
ON RAILWAYS

ON THE

OMEO AND UPPER TAMBO VALLEY DISTRICTS
CONNECTING RAILWAY ;

TOGETHER WITH

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE AND PLAN.

Ordered by the Legislative Assembly to be printed, 18th November, 1913.

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RAILWAYS STANDING COMMITTEE REPORT No. 3.—[6d.]—15663.

EXTRACTED FROM THE VOTES AND PROCEEDINGS OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY.

THURSDAY, 19TH DECEMBER, 1912.

8. OMEO AND UPPER TAMBO VALLEY DISTRICTS, CONNECTING RAILWAY.—Mr. McBride moved, pursuant to notice, That the question of connecting Omeo and the districts in the Upper Tambo Valley with the existing railway system by means of a railway be referred to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Railways for inquiry and report.

Question—put and resolved in the affirmative.

MEMBERS OF THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON RAILWAYS.

(Tenth Committee.)

The Hon. E. H. CAMERON, M.L.A., Chairman ;

J. W. Billson, Esq., M.L.A.,
The Hon. A. Hicks, M.L.C.,
W. Hutchinson, Esq., M.L.A.,

The Hon. D. Melville, M.L.C.
(Vice-Chairman),
E. C. Warde, Esq., M.L.A.

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PROGRESS REPORT.

THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON RAILWAYS, to which the Legislative Assembly referred the question of connecting Omeo and the districts in the Upper Tambo Valley with the existing railway system by means of a railway, has the honour to report as follows :—

DESCRIPTION OF DISTRICT.

1. The Upper Tambo Valley is on the south side of the Divide, and forms the western boundary of East Gippsland. It comprises the west part of the County of Tambo and the east portion of the County of Dargo. The Tambo River flows southwards from the Divide through this valley and empties into Lake King about midway between Bairnsdale and Lakes Entrance. The broad-gauge railway now under construction from Bairnsdale to Orbost will serve the Lower Tambo Valley by the station at Bruthen. Ascending the Tambo Valley from that township the river runs in a narrow gorge for about 30 miles north of Bruthen through generally inferior land, except a small patch of fair soil at Tambo Crossing, which is 22 miles by road from Bruthen. On approaching Ensay, about 32 miles from Bruthen, the valley of the Tambo River broadens out, there being between the hills an intervening area of about 23,000 acres of undulating country, nearly all of which is considered suitable for the production of wheat, oats, and other cereals. Not more, however, than 1,000 acres are cropped each year. Yields of wheat averaging 22 bushels, and oats 40 bushels, are obtained. Bordering on the river and several creeks which flow into it near Ensay are alluvial flats, but their area in the aggregate is limited to a few hundred acres. Recently a flour-mill was erected at Ensay in the hope that railway facilities would soon be provided to enable it to send flour, bran, and pollard to Bruthen, Orbost, Bairnsdale, and other Gippsland towns. The mill manager, who was formerly employed by the Victorian Agricultural Department, said that the wheat grown at Ensay had a higher gluten content than the Wimmera grain, and that wheat from the Upper Tambo Valley had taken first prize at the Paris Exhibition and at the Royal Show, Melbourne. Nearing Doctor's Flat, which is 8 miles from Ensay, the hills forming the valley of the Tambo River draw in towards that stream, but in a mile or two they widen out again, and the broad rich alluvial lands surrounding the junction of Swift's Creek with the Tambo River are entered upon. These fertile flats—covering an area of 1,500 acres—are well settled, and are highly productive, between 400 and 500 acres growing splendid crops of lucerne, from which six cuttings per annum—each averaging one ton of lucerne hay per acre—are obtained without the aid of irrigation. Heavy crops of maize, pumpkins, potatoes, onions, and oats have been harvested from these lands. Dairying and sheep-raising are the chief industries at Swift's Creek, as, owing to the distance from a railway station and consequent cost of cartage, it does not pay the landholders to grow cereals or root crops for sale in the Melbourne market. It was estimated that there are 15,000 acres of agricultural land in and around Swift's Creek, and about the same acreage of improved grazing land, and 17,000 acres of unimproved grazing land. The agricultural land in the Tambo Valley is more difficult to cultivate than the Mallee country, being more hilly, and the soil heavier. Nevertheless, the higher average yields harvested and the greater certainty of the seasons will, it is considered, compensate for that. Fertilizers are not generally used by the farmers around Ensay, as the cost of carriage thereto from Melbourne—totalling about £4 per ton, including railway freight and cartage—is regarded as prohibitive. The improved grazing land was stated to be capable of carrying one sheep per acre, and the unimproved grazing land could do the

same when cleaned up and wire-netted. But if present conditions continue the latter land will most likely be abandoned to the rabbits. That pest is largely on the increase in the Upper Tambo Valley and Omeo district, and it is feared that, unless railway facilities are provided so as to encourage subdivision and settlement of the larger holdings and the improvement of the present inferior grazing land by ring-barking the timber and burning off the *débris* encumbering the land, the rabbits will in the next few years make considerable headway.

2. To the west of Swift's Creek, at a distance of 5 and 8 miles respectively, are the mining townships of Tongio West and Cassilis. About 7 miles north of Swift's Creek township the hills forming the boundaries of the Tambo Valley again draw in, but in a short distance they widen out, leaving at their feet an area of about 10,000 acres of flat and undulating country in the Parish of Bindi. The annual average rainfall in the Upper Tambo Valley is from 21 to 25 inches. The climate is mild and invigorating, and all classes of live stock do well on the flat and lower lands forming the valley, which has an altitude of from 500 to 1,200 feet above sea-level. It is believed that in time the sheltered hill slopes will be dotted with orchards bearing export varieties of apples and pears. Between Swift's Creek and Bindi is the hamlet of Tongiomunjie. Here the road to Omeo branches off in a north-westerly direction ascending the Tongio gap. The summit of the Divide is reached in about 6 miles at an altitude of 2,500 feet. From there the road gradually descends for 6 miles into the township of Omeo, which is situated on Livingstone Creek, a stream flowing northwards into the Mitta Mitta River, which empties into the Murray River near Albury.

MINING INDUSTRY.

3. For upwards of 30 years Omeo was a thriving township, having banks, stores, flour-mill, butter factory, shire hall, court house, &c. During that period gold to the value of over £2,000,000 was won from the adjacent alluvial workings and reefs. As, however, the gold reefs were followed down they became heavily mineralized at the lower levels, and expensive plants had to be erected to deal with the stone. The concentrates had to be sent by road to Mossiface, a shallow port below Bruthen, or to Bairnsdale for shipment to New South Wales for treatment. In consequence of the cost of cartage—about £3 a ton from Omeo to the sea-board—stone to the value of 2 ozs. to the ton ceased to pay a profit to the miner. Latterly mining operations have largely decreased, only a few dredges and fossickers now being at work in the valley of Livingstone Creek, where formerly there were hundreds of miners seeking gold on the slopes and in the bed of that stream. Thirty miles north-west of Omeo is the mining field of Glen Wills, at the foot of Mount Wills. A good graded road has recently been made from Omeo to Glen Wills. Both gold and tin have been found at that field, which has had a somewhat chequered career. About 20 years ago some of the tin-bearing dykes and lodes were worked with encouraging results, but the cost of recovering the tin made operations unprofitable. At a later date rich gold-bearing quartz reefs were found, and have since received considerable attention from a number of companies with varying success. Much of the ore, however, is refractory and requires special treatment. It was said that the present cost of cartage and boat freight on the material sent to Cockle Creek, New South Wales, for treatment prohibited the low-grade stone being put to any use. The total yield of gold in the Omeo district, comprising Cassilis, Stirling, Brookville, Omeo, and Glen Wills, in 1910 was 17,781 ozs., and in the following year 16,809 ozs. The average number of miners employed in 1910 was 339, and in the next year 368. At Limestone Creek about 30 miles north-east of Omeo excellent massive marble, with various colouring from streaked pink to compact grey and dove grey, has been found covering an extensive area. Mr. H. Herman, Director of Geological Survey, informed the Committee that—"Both the Painter's Creek and Stoney Creek deposits contain immense quantities of massive marble free from joints and of excellent texture and colour. Admirable sites for economic quarrying occur, but the great drawback is the expensive carriage to Melbourne *via* Omeo and Tambo Valley. At Bindi, towards the head of the Tambo Valley, some marble and much limestone also occur over a large area." He concluded his report by stating—"At the same time, I do not know that at present there is, apart from the limestone and marble, any mineral industry in the Omeo district in which development is being retarded by want of railway communication."

OMEIO PLAINS.

4. Some 15 or 20 miles beyond Omeo, bordering on the Mitta Mitta River and surrounding Lake Omeo, is the Hinnomunjie and Benambra country, which was formerly known as the Omeo Plains. This country has an altitude of 2,500 feet. The cleared lands there, containing about 20,000 acres, are very productive, and most of the wheat and oats required to feed the inhabitants and live stock of Omeo were grown on those plains. From some of the best chocolate-coloured land 70 bushels of oats and 35 bushels of wheat per acre have been thrashed. The average yield, however, is about 45 bushels of oats and 30 bushels of wheat. Oaten hay averages $2\frac{1}{2}$ tons per acre, and potatoes 8 tons. All these yields were obtained without the aid of irrigation or artificial fertilizers on land which had been cropped for several years in succession. Lucerne has also been successfully grown on this productive plateau, five cuttings per year having given a total estimated yield of 8 tons of lucerne hay per acre. There is a cheese factory at Benambra. The average annual rainfall in this district is 30 inches. In the high-lying Cobungra country to the west of Omeo are some good grazing lands growing English grasses and clovers, and fattening cattle and sheep in the spring and summer months. The carrying capacity of these lands was stated by witnesses to be from $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 sheep to the acre. Rape has been successfully grown in the Cobungra country, and sheep and lambs readily fatten on that crop.

5. The farmers at Benambra and Cobungra having, through the falling off of the mining industry, been deprived of their local market at Omeo, are now obliged to find other outlets for their production, and, having no railway nearer than 60 or 70 miles, it is out of the question to send their grain or root crops to Melbourne under existing circumstances, as the cartage charges would more than absorb the whole of the money obtained from the sale of the crop. Sheep and lambs and also pigs are fattened in the Omeo district, but when they are driven such a long distance by road to Bruthen or Bairnsdale, and have to traverse the belt of poor grazing country between Tambo Crossing and Bruthen, they lose so much of their condition that they are only "stores" by the time they reach those railway towns. The spread of rabbits in the Upper Tambo Valley also calls for increased farming activity, so as to rid the land of fallen timber, bracken, and other harbour for the vermin. It is useless, however, expecting any increase in the agricultural production of the country in the absence of cheap transport facilities.

CROWN LANDS.

6. Nearly 300,000 acres of alienated land and selected land would be served by a railway to Omeo. Mr. J. M. Reed, Surveyor-General, informed the Committee that of the unoccupied Crown lands in the Upper Tambo Valley and Omeo district there are none which could, in the absence of railway facilities, be regarded as either first or second class. There are, however, about 170,000 acres of third class Crown lands, and upwards of 500,000 acres held under pastoral leases or grazing licences, while some 400,000 acres are reserved for State forests and timber purposes, and about 25,000 acres for mining.

TIMBER.

7. On the ranges forming the eastern and western boundaries of the watershed of the Tambo River are belts of hardwood timbers, including woollybutt. The latter is likely to be in demand for furniture making and railway carriage fittings when cheaper transport facilities are provided so that it can be placed on the Melbourne and other markets at a reasonable price. To the east of Tambo Crossing, at a distance of about 7 or 8 miles, is Mount Elizabeth, on the northern slopes of which, and also on those leading down towards the Timbarra River, is some good milling timber, consisting of blackbutt or mountain ash, messmate, stringybark, and blackwood. Some ironbark and red box is also growing on this area. Northwards from there, on the east side of the Little River, a tributary of the Tambo River, is a woollybutt forest, extending on to Nunnion, towards the head of the Tambo River. These trees are straight, large, and sound, and it was estimated by the local residents that there were from 40 to 50 trees to the acre. Woollybutt seldom grows at a lower altitude than 3,000 feet. On the lower slopes yellow stringybark and yellow box are growing. To the west of Tambo Valley is an extensive

woollybutt forest, running from Mount Baldhead, near the sources of the Nicholson and Wentworth rivers, northwards towards Omeo. The timber from this forest could be taken down hill by way of Riley's and Swift's creeks to the proposed railway by a tramway about 12 or 15 miles in length. In the Tambo Valley itself the timber from Ensay northwards and also around Omeo is, generally speaking, of inferior quality, though sufficient piles and beams for railway construction could be obtained within easy access of the line. About 25 miles east of Berambra, on the northern fall of the Divide, and at about the same distance north-west of Omeo, are other large forests of woollybutt. In the Tambo Valley a large tonnage of wattle bark could be obtained.

POPULATION.

8. According to the Government Statist the population of the Omeo Shire, which includes practically all the Tambo Valley and the mining townships of Omeo and Glen Wills, was 3,747 when the census was taken in April, 1911. In 1901, when the previous census was collected, the population was 4,262.

TOURISTS' TRAFFIC.

9. It was pointed out by the members of the Omeo Railway League that if a railway were made up the Tambo Valley to that town there would be a large tourist traffic over the proposed line. Excursionists after visiting the Gippsland Lakes and Buchan Caves could proceed to the high lands at Omeo, and obtain good trout fishing in the numerous clear swift-running streams flowing into the Mitta Mitta River, within 20 miles of Omeo. It was probable that if a railway came to Omeo efforts would be made to make available for inspection the limestone caves 40 miles to the north-east of that town. Tourists could view the magnificent mountain scenery from the Bogong High Plains, 5,800 feet above sea-level, and then proceed from Omeo to Bright and Mount Buffalo, passing close to Mount Hotham and the other high, snow-clad mountains on the road to the Ovens Valley.

ROUTE OF RAILWAY.

10. Omeo is 67 miles by road from Bruthen, 75 miles from Bright, and 100 miles from Tallangatta, which is reached by following down the valley of the Mitta Mitta River. All the witnesses examined by the Committee favoured the Tambo Valley route for a railway, starting either at Bruthen or a few miles east of that town. This was considered the shortest and cheapest route available for railway construction. About 20 years ago there was an agitation to construct a railway from Bairnsdale northwards, *via* Mount Baldhead, to Omeo, the total through distance being $70\frac{1}{2}$ miles, compared with 84 miles by way of Bruthen and the Tambo Valley. Mr. J. Hugh Davies, who was then an engineer of the Construction Branch of the Railway Department, reported that the Mount Baldhead route would involve heavy and very costly works. Along the course of this proposed line the country was very broken, consisting for the most part of more or less precipitous ranges, spurs, and gullies, with some exceptions of easier slopes. The summit of the line would reach 3,800 feet above the sea, and it was estimated that the line would have 1 in 30 grades for a total of 40 miles of its length. On the higher altitudes of this route snow accumulated during severe seasons to a depth of between 3 and 4 feet, and remained on the ground for about three months of the year. The country traversed by the Mount Baldhead route was described by Mr. Davies as ranging from interior to good grazing land only. The number of residents along this route is exceedingly small, the country being practically unpopulated until approaching Omeo.

11. In 1902 Mr. John Darbyshire, an engineer of the Construction Branch, made a flying survey of the country between Bairnsdale and Omeo by way of Bruthen and the Tambo Valley. He found that a narrow-gauge line, having a ruling grade of 1 in 30, could be obtained, the cost from Bruthen to Omeo, *via* Tambo Crossing, being at that time set down at £247,900, excluding land and rolling-stock, and using serviceable second-hand rails. Mr. Darbyshire stated that for a few miles north of Bruthen the construction works would not be heavy, but for 3 miles on the south side of St. Patrick's Creek, where the line would descend into the valley of the Tambo River, the earthworks would be very heavy, and several bridges of short length, but from 30 to 50 feet high, would have to be built. From St. Patrick's Creek to within 2 miles of Ensay the

railway would keep close to the western bank of the river. On this section of about 15 miles the works would be heavy, owing to the hills sloping rapidly into the river. Cuttings and banks would be numerous, and a large number of short but high bridges would be required. Nearly all the cuttings on this portion of the line would be in rock consisting of decomposed granite, granite boulders, solid granite, and slate. From Ensay to Doctor's Flat the works would be easier, and from there to about 3 miles north of Swift's Creek the railway could be cheaply constructed, the works being light, consisting chiefly of small culverts and surface forming. From the hamlet of Tongiomunjie, leading up to Tongio Gap, where the Divide is crossed, the works would be heavy and rock would be met with in the cuttings. From the Gap into Omeo cuttings and banks would be necessary, but this section would not be so expensive as that on the south side of the Divide, between Tongiomunjie and the Gap.

12. Mr. Kernot, Chief Engineer for Railway Construction, recently informed the Committee that a 2ft. 6in. gauge railway from Bruthen to Omeo, *via* Tambo Crossing, based on a wage rate of 9s. per day for labourers and on the results of the flying survey made by Mr. Darbyshire in 1902, would cost as under :—

Route.	Approximate Length in Miles.	uling Gradient.	Sharpest Curve in Chains Radius.	Approximate Cost per Mile.	Rough Approximate Total Cost.
		feet.		£	£
Bruthen to Tambo Crossing	23·65	1 in 30	3	6,211	147,000
Tambo Crossing to Swift's Creek	26·22	1 in 30	3	5,377	141,000
Swift's Creek to Omeo	18·90	1 in 30	3	5,661	107,000
Total length	68·77			Total Cost	£395,000

These costs are exclusive of land and rolling-stock, and also fencing, except around the stations. He hoped a permanent survey would make some reduction in the cost.

13. When the Committee was at Ensay in March last the local railway league suggested that a suitable route for a broad-gauge line might be found by leaving the Orbost railway at a point 5 miles or so east of Bruthen and following up the watershed of Boggy Creek on the west side, and crossing the Timbarra River about 8 miles from Buchan and 6 miles east of Mount Elizabeth. This alternative route would then proceed in a north-westerly direction to Ensay and on across Ramrod Flat to Doctor's Flat. From there it would follow the course of the surveyed route through Swift's Creek to Omeo. On passing through Bairnsdale the Committee questioned Mr. G. S. Pinniger, District Surveyor, who has an intimate knowledge of the East Gippsland country, as to the practicability of this alternative proposal. He expressed the opinion that a workable route would probably be found along the course suggested by the Ensay Railway League. The Committee, on returning to Melbourne, asked Mr. Kernot to have the Timbarra route inspected. This was done, and a few weeks ago Mr. G. Beauchamp, Inspecting Engineer, of the Construction Branch, reported that the Timbarra route was much more favorable for railway construction than the Tambo Valley one between Bruthen and Ensay, and that the former would command much more timber and would pass within 6 miles of Buchan South, which was the outlet from the Gelantipy country, besides serving the Ensay district better. The Timbarra route would increase the length to Melbourne by 12 miles compared with the Tambo Valley survey, *via* Tambo Crossing, but, in consequence of the operation of the tapering rates on all goods carried over 150 miles on the railways, the difference in freight rates would be but small.

RECOMMENDATION.

14. The Committee recommends that a developmental railway be made from near Bruthen, *via* Ensay and Swift's Creek, terminating at the foot of the Tongio Gap near Tongiomunjie, as such a line will reasonably meet the requirements of the residents of Omeo and the landholders on the Omeo Plains as well as those in the Cobungra country. The Committee, however, recommends that a survey be forthwith made of the Timbarra route for both a broad and narrow gauge line. Owners of live stock favour a broad-gauge railway to save the trouble and expense of transferring cattle, sheep, and pigs from the narrow-gauge trucks to the wider ones. The Committee also believes in building a broad-gauge railway where the expense of doing so is not prohibitive. Once Ensay is passed there are no further engineering difficulties to be encountered so far as either gauge is concerned until Tongiomunjie is reached.

15. As soon as the survey by way of Timbarra River is finished, and the quantities and cost of the earthworks have been taken out, the Committee will determine the route and gauge of the railway, thus enabling the various official reports required by the *Developmental Railways Act 1912* to be prepared for the information of Parliament. The length of the railway, however, by either route will be upwards of 50 miles, and will probably cost about £300,000 or £400,000, according to the gauge and gradient adopted.

REASONS FOR A DEVELOPMENTAL RAILWAY.

16. In accordance with the requirements of section 3 of the *Developmental Railways Act 1912*, the Committee gives the following reasons for recommending that the railway to the Upper Tambo Valley should be constructed under the provisions of that Act:—

There is no other settled district in Victoria so remote from railway facilities as Omeo and the Upper Tambo Valley.

Owing to that isolation it is impossible to develop the agricultural resources of the Upper Tambo Valley and Omeo Plains, and to secure the settlement of the remaining Crown lands.

It is useless growing cereals and root crops beyond what are required for local consumption while there is an absence of cheap means of transport to outside markets.

Sheep, lambs, and pigs can be fattened in the district, but in consequence of the distance they have to travel on foot to an existing railway and the poor grazing character of the country between Eusay and Bruthen, with the exception of a patch of fair land near Tambo Crossing, they reach market in a "store" condition.

Unless the land-owners are provided with railway facilities, so as to enable them to put their sheep and lambs on the market in good condition, it will not pay them to cope with the rabbit pest infesting the hill slopes, and such lands must remain unproductive.

On the hills on both sides of the Tambo Valley are supplies of hardwood timbers, and also woollybutt—a timber suitable for furniture-making and other superior work.

In consequence of the distance from Melbourne it is improbable that there will be much demand for these hardwood timbers until the supplies at Warburton and other forests nearer Melbourne become diminished 10 or 15 years hence.

Although the woollybutt timber is suitable for furniture-making and railway carriage fittings, the demand for it when supplies are available by rail will have to be created in this and the neighbouring States, and this will necessarily take a few years to accomplish.

Any new settlement in the district will be gradual, and so also will the increased production necessary to make the railway a profitable one, as it will take several years to clear the hill slopes of timber and bring the land under cultivation. In the meantime dairying and sheep raising and fattening will be the principal pursuits.

The Committee doubts if at the outset the railway will earn sufficient to pay the working and maintenance expenses, and it is certain that the railway will not for many years obtain revenue enough to meet the full interest charges in addition to the operating expenses.

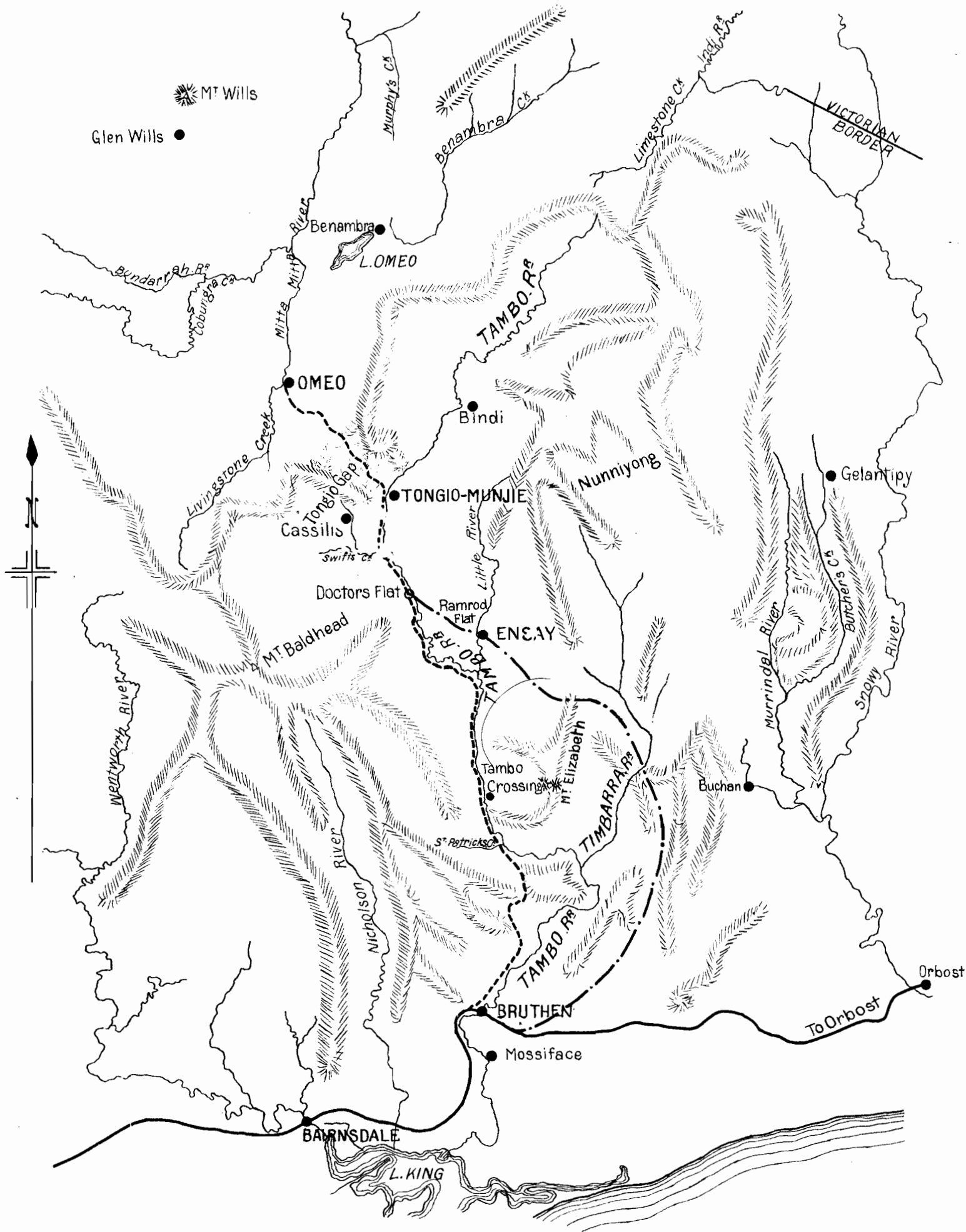
It is also of opinion that unless a railway is constructed into the Upper Tambo Valley that district and the surrounding country will lose population and will further recede unless there is an unexpected revival in the mining industry.

The building of the railway should save the Government portion of the large annual monetary assistance it has to give the Omeo Shire Council towards maintaining the Tambo Valley main road.

E. H. CAMERON,
Chairman.

Railways Standing Committee Room,
State Parliament House,
Melbourne, 14th November, 1913.

[*Minutes of Evidence are not printed.*]



— Sketch Map —
 — of —

— OMEO RAILWAY —

— Surveied Route —

— Alternative Route —

— Scale: 8 Miles to an Inch. —