

Mhow to Mt. Abu by Train(1943)



Ken Staynor

Kenneth Hugh Staynor was born at Madhupur on 16 September 1927. In 1929, his family went to the United Kingdom, and returned to India in 1931 to Kurseong, where his father was a teacher, and later Headmaster, at Victoria School. Kenneth was educated at St. Josephs College, Darjeeling, and St Mary's High School, Mount Abu. He left India in August 1951 for permanent residence in the UK to get into research and development in engineering, which was not available in India, and because his ancestral roots were in the UK. He lives in South Wales after retirement. His wife passed away in January 2010; he has three sons, five grandsons, five granddaughters and one great granddaughter.

Editor's note: This is part of a chapter from Mr. Staynor's forthcoming book. A shorter version this article first appeared at http://irfca.org/apps/trip_reports/show/410.

1943 saw a significant change in my life. Before that I had got used to life in relative civilisation in places like Calcutta, Darjeeling, Delhi and Simla and several towns on the East Indian Railway where there was mains electricity, running water on tap and proper up to date sanitary arrangements such as flush toilets, et cetera!

In 1943 things took a change for the worse! My father was selected to set up the GHQ Communications Security School for South East Asia Command (SEAC for short), and this was to be located at a place called Mhow, in the Holkar State, in Central India and where the main Signal Training Centre (British) was based. I had heard of Mhow from a boy in Simla, but he never spoke much about the place except that if you were not in the military you were nobody in Mhow, so the journey was looked forward to with some excitement.

My excitement was soon dampened by my first impression of Mhow when we I arrived there at about seven thirty in the night. I was filled with shock and surprise! Gone were the multi-platform brightly electrically illuminated stations I was used to in Northern India. Here was a single platform station lit by one gas lamp by the entrance. The rest of the station was in semi-darkness, illuminated by oil lamps which cast sinister shadows, making it difficult to sort out our heavy luggage being unloaded from the luggage van at the end of the train, and between two oil lamps!



Mhow Station in the early 1900's showing a Rajputana Malwa Railway train headed by a Class 'O' Locomotive. Mhow station looked exactly the same in the 1940's. Picture provided by Denzil Lobo, currently living in Mhow and author of a book titled 'A Town Called Mhow'.

I was soon to learn that this was the norm for these places in the 'Gut' of India. The further one got away from what one referred to as British India, and penetrated into the Princely states of Malwa and Rajputana, the more primitive and backward things got. For the first time I began to realise that India certainly was a country of diversities; people dressed differently and although they all understood 'Kitchen Hindi' (The sort of Hindi we spoke to our household servants) they spoke differently. I was in for a number of shocks and surprises in the next month by a life style that took a great deal of getting used to, and summoned up every bit of moral fibre and strength of character I had!

My first days at Mhow were spent in what was known as the 'Hutments.' They were a series of hastily built two and three bedroom military Officers' quarters on One Tree Hill, and on the outskirts of the Infantry School Mortar Training Ground, which meant from time to time pieces of shrapnel went whistling passed the house! These were the quarters allocated to newly posted officers awaiting permanent military housing when it became available.

As Commandant of the Communications Security Training Establishment, my father was entitled to a house on what was referred to by the locals as 'Generals Road' because the Area Commander and other Brigadiers, Colonels and the rest of the 'Red Tape' lived there (although in fact, it was named something else, One Tree Hill Road I think), or one of the large bungalows on Ordinance Road. As these were still occupied by officers who were due to be posted to some other cantonment town, we had to make do with a hutment till they became available. That was military life for you!

In the next hutment lived a Major D'Silva of the Royal Army Medical Corps., and his family. He was posted to the British Military Hospital, and like dad was awaiting permanent quarters. They had a son who was in school at a place called Mount Abu in the Aravalli Hills in Rajputana. On the D'Silva family's advice, it was decided, since I had been withdrawn from school at Darjeeling, some two

thousand miles from Mhow by train, but only a few hundred from an anticipated invasion of India by the Japanese, that admittance to St. Mary's High School in that hill station should be tried for.

During the second half of April 1943, I made my first solo train journey. My bags and baggage were all packed. With fifty Rupees (about 1,000 Rupees in today's money) on me, I was put on the train for Ajmer. At Ajmer, where I had to change trains to the Delhi and Sind Mail for Abu Road, which was a through train between Delhi and Ahmadabad, the whole journey being made on the metre gauge section of the Bombay Baroda & Central India Railway and just over 500 miles. At the time, because of the restrictions on non-military traffic, there was only one through train between Khandwah and Ajmer. This train departed at about eight in the morning from Mhow stopping at every station on the way arriving at Ajmer at about 6am the next morning. I already had an experience of metre gauge travel when travelling to Mhow from Ratlam which took the train four hours to do 84 miles!

There were several other passengers in my compartment, including a Colonel who knew my father and was travelling as far as Ratlam for Delhi. At Ratlam, there was a mass exodus of military personnel including everyone from my compartment and I found myself the sole occupant! The guard, seeing me still on the train, enquired if I was going all the way to Ajmer; I confirmed that I was. He then asked if I would like dinner at Neemuch. I had already studied the route in my Bradshaw, which was my favourite bedtime reading, and was aware that the train stopped at Neemuch for twenty minutes, but did not know that a meal could be had there. Since I was already wondering what I was going to do for something to eat and considering buying something from a *Paan-Wallah's* trolley, I said I would. I and asked what food was available. He produced a menu of limited items, and I decided on soup, lamb and potato cutlets with vegetables, but the menu did not say what soup and vegetables!

I was beginning to feel a bit homesick by now yet proud of being semi-adult, and decided that this was all part of my learning curve and at the end of the journey I would be more adult than when I started out!

The train made regular stops at mainly deserted stations, while the scenery, though green and shrubby in most places, was nevertheless rugged and looked very foreboding. From time to time, we crossed small streams or rivers, which mainly were dry but had cut steep, almost vertical banks into the hard rocky land that, except for a scattering of stunted trees, was quite barren with no sign of agriculture.

While I looked out of a window I noticed there was some 'High Jinx' and hilarity going on in a compartment in the coach behind the coach I was in. This continued when the train stopped at a place called Mandsaur, which seemed to be the only place with signs of life beyond the station since we left Ratlam. When the train pulled out of the station, the laughter and revelry continued, and suddenly a fellow fell out of this compartment and went rolling down the embankment. It was all good natured stuff that had gone wrong! Fortunately, someone pulled the communication cord and brought the train to a stop. The unfortunate chap was helped back onto the train amidst laughter but not before he got a clip on the ear from the train armed guard, who happened to be travelling on the same coach as the revellers! I must admit I joined in the laughter.

If Mhow station was a shock, Neemuch was something out of this world! Mhow at least, had a bright gas lamp at the entrance, but Neemuch was in almost total darkness. It was 'illuminated' only by oil lamps which were about forty feet apart, and if my compartment had not stopped right opposite the 'Refreshment Room' I would have had trouble locating it in the gloom! The dining room was about fifteen feet square with a large table in the middle of it, which had an oil lamp on the centre of it that was the only source of illumination in the room. There were four of us for dinner, an army captain travelling to Nasirabad, a small military station near Ajmer, while the other two seemed to be travelling together and on their way to Udaipur. We sat ourselves down and made light conversation including jovial comments about the poor fellow who had fallen out of the train! Obviously, I was not the only spectator!

The soup arrived from an adjoining room, which I assumed was the kitchen, and with it came a rather pleasant and gentle breeze which caused the solitary lamp to flicker and cast weird ghost like shadows. At

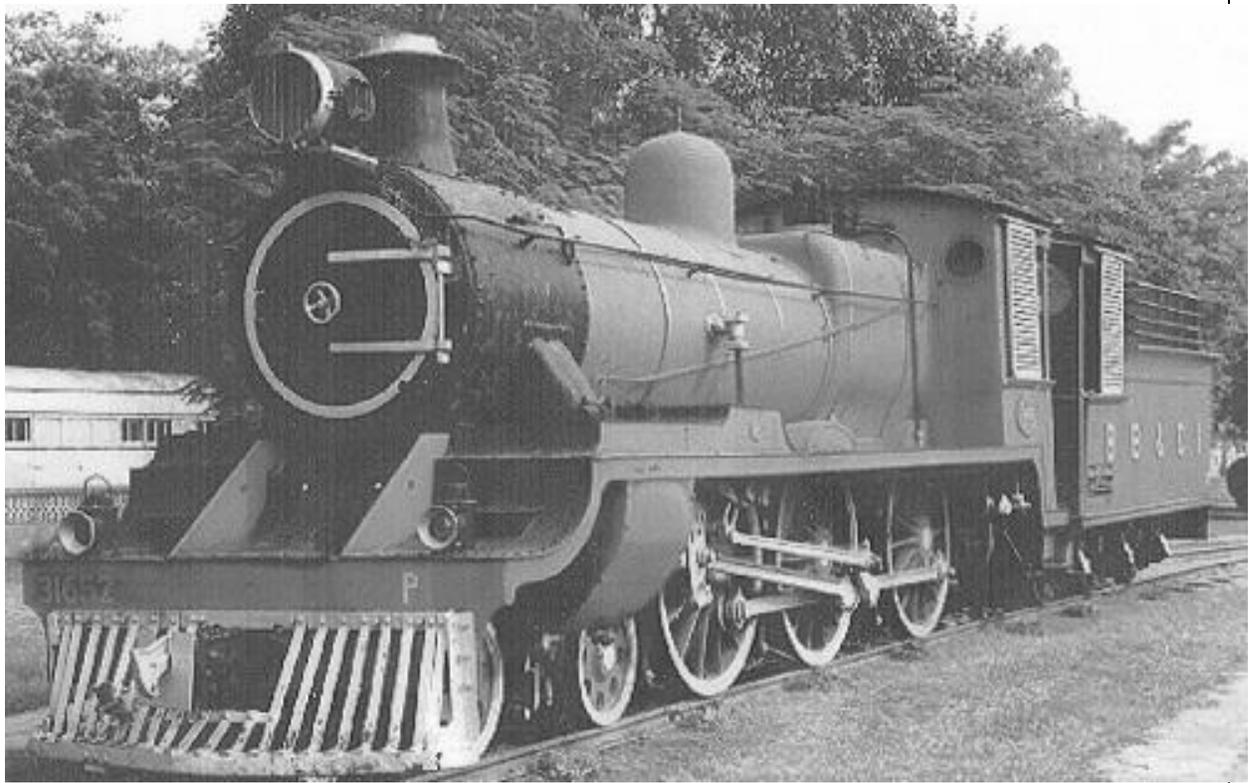
first I was puzzled by this sudden cooling draught, till I realised it was the *Punkha*, which was a large carpet looking thing on a horizontal pole suspended from the ceiling which, when pulled by some hidden person swung to and fro above the table creating the gentle breeze. I had heard about these contraptions but had never actually seen one till now for the first time in my life. Things were getting more and more like something out of a book by Rudyard Kipling! I thought back to Mhow station, concluded that it also must have had a similar refreshment room, and there were probably at this very moment passengers having dinner from this train's counter-part which would be stopped at Mhow at the same time as we were at Neemuch. After about twenty minutes we were all back on the train and on our way again.

Since I still had the compartment to myself, I decided to open out my bedding roll and after a good wash which freshened me up no end I decided to turn in for the night, while the train trundled and rocked its way along. I do not think it ever exceeded twenty five miles per hour!

But old habits die hard and I found myself sitting up and curiously looking out of the window every time the train stopped. Why I did this was pure habit as at all the stations there was nothing to see, not even a flicker of light away from the station, which usually had just one oil lamp flickering in the middle of a deserted platform. So it was a case of 'Cat-nap' and 'Nosy-parker' till eventually sleep got the better of me.

I do not how long I had been asleep, when I was awakened again, this time by a great deal of railway activity, of rolling stock being fly-shunted and a clanking and whistle blowing by a shunting engine. I looked out of a window onto a quiet and deserted platform, not even the familiar call of *Chai Gurum* (hot tea), which is synonymous with all stations in India! I leant out of the window to get a glimpse of the station name but the lighting was so poor I could not make the name out so I asked a solitary passing coolie what the name of the station was.

It was Chittorgarh, which, I knew from my Bradshaw (*Ed. Note: Bradshaw was a company that published railway timetables*) studies, was a junction with the Udaipur State Railway. The yards were very poorly illuminated, so I was unable to tell whether the shunter (*Ed. Note: shunting engine*) was a Bombay, Baroda & Central India Railway (BB&CIR) engine or not because it was just a shadowy image with no lighting among the silhouettes of goods trucks and wagons. Whichever railway it belonged to, the driver certainly loved the sound of its whistle! We stopped at Chittorgarh for quite a while and no sooner had we got moving when I succumbed to sleep again.



A BB&CIR Class P locomotive

I have a kind of built-in alarm clock which allows me to set an alarm in my mind that awakens me more or less at any given time I want. This was working well, as my eyes suddenly opened and I was aware that the train was slowing down. I looked out of the window and in the semi-daylight made out the name of the station which was Nasirabad, which, from my Bradshaw reading, I knew to be forty minutes from Ajmer. I decided to roll up my bedding have a good wash, and spruce myself up for my change of trains at Ajmer.

Not long after six o'clock we trundled into Ajmer. I was pleasantly surprised to find that here at last was a brightly electrically illuminated three platform station, with a nice station building, A.H Wheeler's book-stall, tea stalls, and every amenity one should expect at a station for a large city that Ajmer was. I knew that a dining car was attached to the Delhi and Sind Mail at Ajmer so I decided to treat myself to a cup of tea only on the platform, having in mind to get myself a good breakfast on the train.

The Sind and Delhi Mail steamed in on time headed by a magnificent YB-class Pacific locomotive; when it came to a stop half the train seemed empty itself onto the wide platform. There was a great deal of shunting activity as some coaches were taken off and others including the restaurant car were connected. The dining car shared a coach with a first class compartment with a sliding connecting door between them and into which the coolie who had taken charge of my luggage expertly installed me.

I had a fellow traveller who was a Major in the army and was on his way for a short break at Mount Abu. He was excellent company and had joined the Ajmer train at Neemuch, but somehow we had not seen each other. He suggested that we should wait for the train to get going before entering the dining car for breakfast. He had been stationed at Neemuch for three years and long enough to accustom himself to 'The joys of the Thunder-Box' as he put it.

When he found out who my father was, he made sure he had nothing derisory to say about the army and being posted to a place like Neemuch. Little did he know that my father had been derisory about the army on several occasions, especially when he learnt that the Training Establishment was to be located at Mhow, but as Mhow was one the chief Royal Signals Training Centres in India, had accepted it as a *Fait Accompli*!

The service in the dining car was faultless; the bearer asked us very politely what we would like for breakfast. The Major and I obviously had similar tastes when it came to breakfast, because we both ordered orange juice followed by cornflakes and then three-quarter boiled eggs and toast with coffee. Few breakfasts ever went down better! After breakfast and before the train had made its first stop at Bewar, we were back in our compartment, the Major locking the sliding door so that no one could come in from the dining car.

The difference between this train and the one from Mhow was remarkable! This one was making headway and for a metre gauge train was quite fast.

By now I was beginning to feel Rajputana heat; it was not yet 9.30 in the morning and already the ceiling fans were having no effect. The Major complained that he had not slept well so was going to have a sleep saying that if no one had got into the compartment at Ajmer it was unlikely that any one would before Marwar Junction or Abu Road. I decided to follow suit and stretched out on my bunk not noticing that



A YB-Class Pacific locomotive

one of my windows was not fully shut. When the Major awakened me at about noon suggesting that we should go for lunch, I got off my bunk and could see where I had been lying; it was the only spot not covered by desert dust which had made its way into the compartment through the open gap.

There were not very many passengers for lunch. The Major and I were two of the only five ‘Whites’; the other half dozen or so all seemed to be well to do Indian business people all sitting at separate tables. I cannot fault BB&CIR catering; if breakfast was superb, the travelling chef excelled with lunch! There was a large jug of fresh iced lemon juice on the table, and I promptly helped myself to a glass before the same bearer, who had served us at breakfast, came to take our order.

We decided on consommé to start with, followed by lamb curry and boiled rice. The lamb was succulent and very tasty; the Major said he had taken a while to acquire the taste for curry and that was as good as any he had ever tasted! I agreed.

While we were lunching the train stopped at Marwar Junction and as we had left the connecting door open we were able to see that no one had entered our compartment. Hundreds were milling around the station some making their ways to the Jodhpur Railway station for trains to Hyderabad in Sind or for Jodhpur and other Rajput Desert townships, while others were searching out accommodation on our train.

Later, while looking out of the window at the Jodhpur Railway platform I was able to see the longest metre gauge locomotive I had ever seen. It was heading a Jodhpur Railway train and had an enormous twelve wheeled tender which was as long as the engine and gave it a disproportionate appearance. I later learned that it was a class ‘M’ Pacific, which had this outsized tender to carry extra water and specifically built for the Jodhpur Railway by the Baldwin Locomotive Company for the crossing of the 350 mile barrenness of the Rajputana and Thar Deserts to Hyderabad in Sind.



A Jodhpur Railway Class 'M' Pacific Pacific locomotive

Let me digress a bit from the main story line about this journey. The Jodhpur Railway line from Hyderabad Sind through Marwar Junction was the shortest rail route between Karachi, Delhi and Bombay though not necessarily the fastest. Jodhpur trains were not noted for speed; Kipling wrote that “There is no slower train than a Jodhpur train!” There was no direct ‘Coastal’ rail link between Karachi and Bombay, and as far as I can tell the British had no plans to build one as the link had no strategic or commercial importance a factor which was the prime purpose for constructing the railways in the first place. Following the partition of the Sub-Continent, the very idea of such a rail link was out of the question. This journey was probably quickest by ship between Karachi and Bombay! And as far as Delhi was concerned, owing to the slowness of the Jodhpur Railway’s metre gauge it was much faster to Delhi via the North Western Railway Karachi – Bhatinda route which was all broad gauge.

Along the way, the people looked very colourful, the men wearing larger than usual brightly coloured turbans, and the women were dressed in gorgeously coloured saris, which gave a typical Rajput scene. Marwar was also another junction station with the Udaipur State Railway. Here I was able to see a Jodhpur Railway train its green coaches contrasting with the drab desert surroundings, but I saw no Udaipur State rolling stock.

After lunch we dozed and chatted alternately. The temperature had by now risen to well over a hundred degrees Fahrenheit which, with the amount of desert dust that had got under my collar due to the open window, mixed with heavy perspiration made things distinctly uncomfortable!

This was a journey through contrasting scenery. Between Mhow and Ajmer, the land was reasonably green though uncultivated, and now we were travelling through a barren wilderness. This was like travelling through a different country, as the contrast between what the countryside between Mhow and Ajmer, and Ajmer and Abu Road was remarkably different.

I began to realise how vast and diversified a country India was. There were a series of 'Road' stations like Sojat Road, Erinpura Road and Sajjan Road. There was one station named Rani (queen) and another named Nana (prince), which were in keeping with the name of the Rajah Maharaja Railway (the actual name was Rajputana Malwa Railway)! But they were all deserted places and seemed to be no more than passing places on the single track line as there appeared to be nothing out there beyond the small station but desert! This line certainly ran through a wilderness!

At about 3.30 in the afternoon there was a knock on the dividing door and a call 'Sahib'; I opened the door to find a bearer standing there with a broad Rajput smile, his pearly white teeth contrasting with his brown skin;

"Would sahibs like some tea?" he asked

"Yes," replied the Major, still reclining on his bunk.

Five minutes later, the bearer arrived carrying a tray with a pot of tea, two cups and saucers with milk and sugar and a plate of assorted biscuits.

"That will be two Rupees, Sahib," said the bearer.

"I'll get that," the Major said giving the bearer a Five Rupee Note and telling him to keep the change.

The train travelled through some of the most barren country I have seen, occasionally stopping at stations which seemed to be nothing more than passing places, because as far as I could see there were no townships associated with them, just desert. At some of these stations, there were goods trains headed by YD 2-8-2 locomotives going the other way, and obviously waiting to allow the Mail through before proceeding.



A YD-Class locomotive

As we progressed through this scrub-land flatness I could see the distant Aravalli hills on both sides. With Abu Road approaching, the Major asked me what arrangements I had made for getting from Abu Road up to the Mount. I told him that I had telegraphed the operators of the Bus Company who I think was Ganesh & Company, for a reservation as suggested in the Bradshaw.

“You will be lucky,” he said “They take no notice of telegrams around here; they want money up front. I have arranged a taxi, the same fellow every time I go to the Mount; I would offer you a lift but there is no way all your luggage and mine will fit in the car.”

By this time we were almost at Abu Road and I was getting one of those sinking feelings one gets when all seems a lost cause!

We arrived at Abu Road station, which once again was a single platform affair. There was a reasonably extensive yard and a clear view of the loco shed; I was able to see several YB and YD locomotives on shed. There was a goods train this time headed by a P Class locomotive waiting for the Mail to overtake. Across the lines I could see the houses of the railway colony; clearly Abu Road was a railway town!

A coolie obligingly handled my luggage and showed me the way to the Bus Operator’s Office. I introduced myself, and told a rather harassed man that I had telegraphed from Mhow for a reservation.

“No telegram come,” he said “You paid for reservation? If you no send money, we no make reservation.”

“I must get to Mount Abu,” I said.

“So must more than hundred people. How I make room for you?” he ranted

“Have these people made and paid for reservation?” I asked.

“No, but they come before you. Where you go in Mount Abu?”

“I must get to St. Mary’s School,” I pleaded

“OK you go in this bus, tell driver you get out at Toll Gate,” he said having softened his tone of voice by now.

“No, I want St. Mary’s school,” I said in my ignorance of anything to do with Mount Abu.

“Yes, yes I know you want High School, that is stop at Toll Gate,” he said.

By this time I began to think that Mount Abu was some big metropolis. Little did I know!

However, I was on my way to Mount Abu after one of the more interesting train journeys I made on the Sub-Continent. ❖

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