

# Abandoned Bush Tram Becomes a Cycle Trail

By Paul Mahoney and Graeme Carter

*At the end of July, work began on developing a 21 km hiking and cycling trail between Turoa Skifield, on Mount Ruapehu, and Ohakune. Half of the trail will be along the bush tramway once owned by Bennett and Punch.*

It is planned that the first 4 km section of the Te Ara Mangawhero, the trail connecting Turoa and Ohakune will be open in December this year. It is expected that 41,000 people will use the trail each year. The trail is the initiative of local iwi Ngati Rangī, with assistance from the Department of Conservation and Ruapehu District Council. Te Ara Mangawhero is one of eight sections of the Mountains to the Sea Great Trail, a cycle trail from Mount Ruapehu to Castlecliff. Te Ara Mangawhero has a range of important environmental and ecological features such as podocarp forests, trout spawning and rare plant species.

On Tuesday 18 July, the first sod was turned on the project. This was done by 98-year-old local, Laurie Weller, who worked for Bennett and Punch from 1945 until the sawmill closed down in 1960. One of his last jobs was to uplift the tramway.

The 9 km tram route will be cleared of windfalls and slips, with drains and culverts reactivated. There are two substantial bridges to rebuild. One will use the Bennett and Punch concrete piers still in place. One section is in a scenic gorge, and another section, 2 km in length, runs through unlogged forest with huge rimu trees.

## BENNETT AND PUNCH

In 1893 Alec Bennett and John Punch established a sawmill at Raetihi. It was a very successful partnership and the two men remained friends all their lives. In 1908 they shifted their mill to Rangataua and operated until the bush was cut out. In 1933 they opened a new mill at Dreadnought Road, between Rangataua and Ohakune. From here they put in a tramline up the lower slopes of Mount Ruapehu. They cut and milled timber up to the edge of the present Ohakune Mountain Road.

In the late 1950s, the mill was starting to run out of logs and Bennett and Punch considered obtaining cutting rights from N Z Forest Service over a radiata block at Karioi. However, the mill would need to be modified to process pine. In 1960 the mill was purchased by Carter Consolidated, who had recently secured cutting rights over a large block of radiata pine and built a new mill on the site. The mill closed down in 1987.

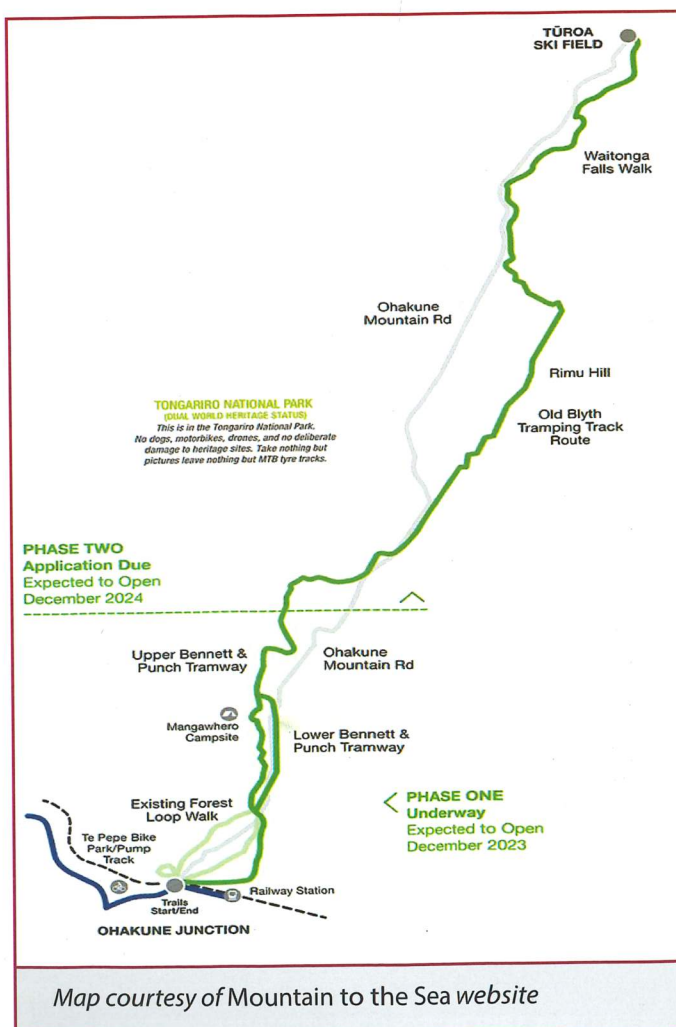
## THE TRAM

When the bush tramway closed in 1959 it was the last tram on the Main Trunk. Over the years they used four Union Foundry

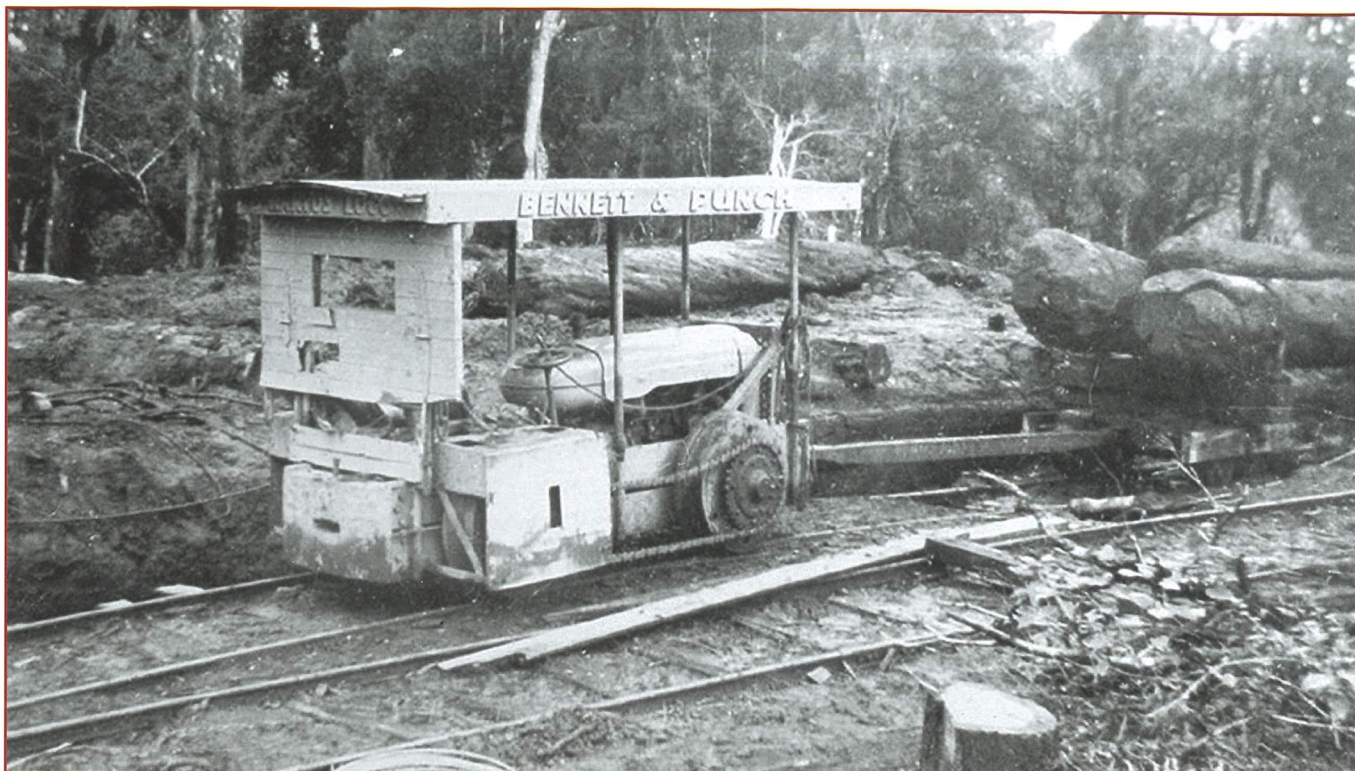
tractors; three of these still exist. One remains upside down in the Mangawhero River after it ran away. The driver jumped clear. There were also two big Judd steam haulers used in the bush.

A feature of the tram is a large cutting and a substantial bridge. At the bridge a log train derailed and four men riding home on the logs fell onto those rocks. The Department of Labour made Bennett and Punch pay compensation and invest in a men's jigger. In another incident, two men died in the bush. Bennett and Punch liked using dynamite to clean up bark and mud off the log loading skids, and both blew themselves up using dynamite. The Department of Labour insisted that workers use shovels instead.

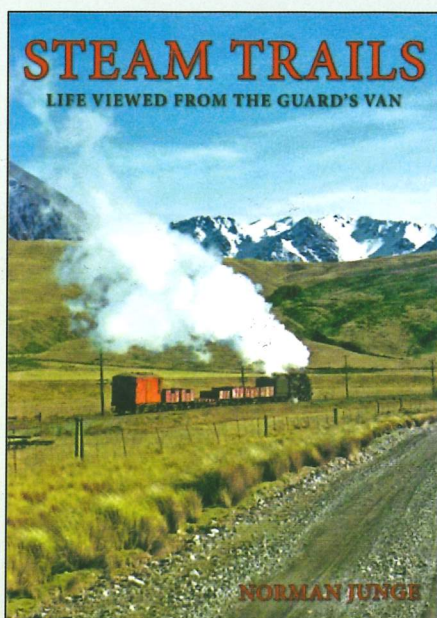
In January 1951 Peter Hodge inspected many private railways and bush tramways in the central North Island. Notes of his visits were published in *Observer* 53 – August-September 1952. Peter's report on Bennett and Punch follows.







*In 1956 Mike Coghlan and Peter Hodge enjoyed a ride up the tram and Mike took this photograph of a Union Foundry tractor at the bush skids. It was a wet day and a scary ride back to the mill.*



## STEAM TRAILS

### LIFE VIEWED FROM THE GUARD'S VAN

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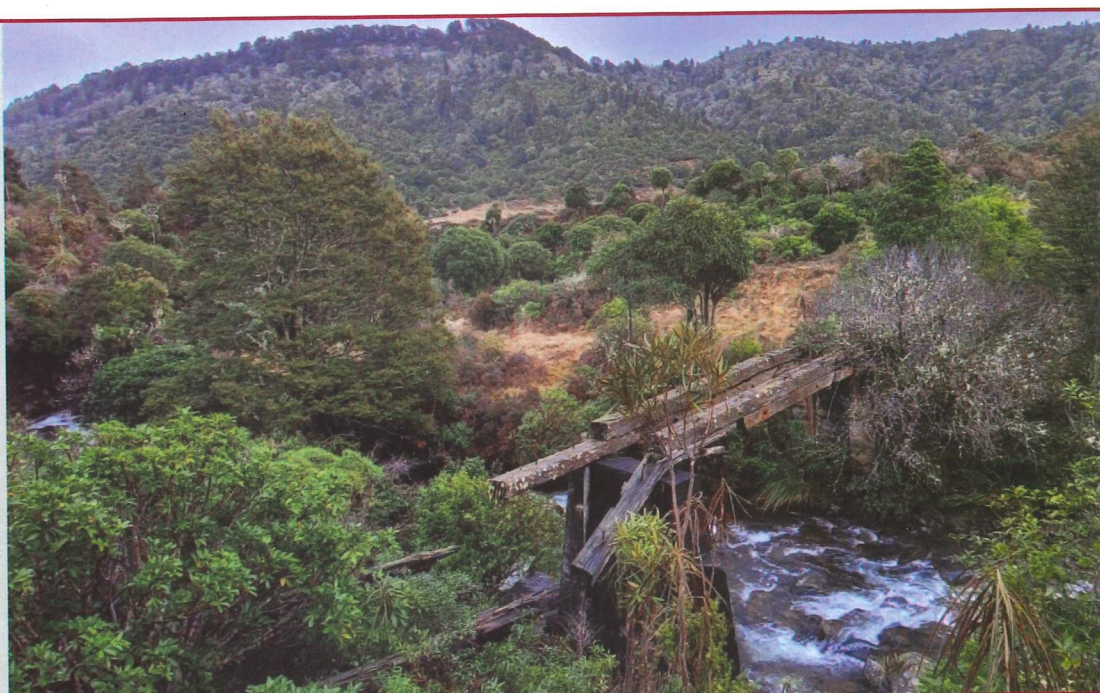
The first line I observed in the area was that of Bennett and Punch, near Ohakune. This was an extremely primitive affair, worked by a Union Foundry 0-4-0 petrol tractor and two log bogies. It was some five miles in length and extended from the sawmill for a mile across paddocks, and thence up a valley into the foothills below Mount Ruapehu. The layout of the sawmill consisted of a single track serving the unloading skids, tractor shed and petrol pump. There was also a siding into the mill building.

The track was exceptionally rough – thirty-pound rail on unseasoned sleepers, laid with little or no regard to

alignment or accuracy. At the time of my visit, many of the spikes were loose and shifting sleepers were not uncommon. One of the beams on a small culvert was lying at an angle of 45 degrees to the rail it was intended to support. The road-bed consisted of longitudinal beams under the sleepers.

The tractor was built by the Union Foundry of Stratford. It consisted of a McCormack-Deering farm-tractor engine mounted on a solid steel girder frame, carried on large steel wheels. Four stanchions supported a wooden roof, which differed from the usual in being set further to the rear and not covering the entire frame.

*The remains of bridge number 1 on the Bennett and Punch tramway. The cycleway will cross over the restored bridge.*



*The large cutting that leads to the bridge. Standing in the undergrowth are Karen Grimwade and Murray Wilson, both have been very involved in restoring bush tramways to cycle trails in the Waimarino.*

*Both photographs were taken by Paul Mahoney on 19 July 2023*

