Mareeba was truly a crossroads in the development of tropical Queensland. Before the railway arrived in the town, it was a ‘half-way’ place on the coach road to the Wild River tin fields. Gold was found, and briefly there was a rush to the place, but it was the railway that made the town’s fortune.

The Wild River tin mining field was opened up in 1880. A local landholder, William Atherton, opened a wayside inn and a store where the coach road from Port Douglas crossed the half-way mark at Granite Creek. The discovery of tin at Herberton was profitable enough to justify a railway line to the coast. Herberton was 882 meters above sea level, and any railway would be difficult to build. There were three rivals to be the ‘railway port’, Mourilyan Harbour, Cairns and Port Douglas.

After two years of surveys, the Government announced on 10 September 1884 that Cairns would be the outlet for the tin fields. The railway between Cairns and Mareeba was constructed in three sections. Section 2, between Redlynch and Myola, was the most difficult and expensive to construct, which now is the famous Barron Gorge railway line. Construction of Section 3 was awarded to Alexander McKenzie and Company for £116,959 in early 1891. Section 3 opened for traffic on 2 January 1893.

**Beyond Mareeba...**

Construction stopped at Mareeba in 1893 when funds where exhausted, a result of the economic depression of the early 1890s. An extension was proposed to Atherton, but this was prevented by the Queensland Legislative Council in 1895. The railway however allowed settlers to exploit the agricultural land and timber resources of the local region, and so it was wood and produce rather than tin that would justify the extension of the railway. By 1897 the mining focus had shifted from the tin fields to the Chillagoe copper fields. The railway line reached Atherton in 1903, and eventually reached Ravenshoe in 1916.

**John Moffat’s Empire...**

The Chillagoe railway was the private railway built in Queensland in the twentieth century. It was politically fraught, being firstly a private railway, and secondly operated by the Labor Party of the early twentieth century, but was quickly pushed through parliament. The line was built to high standards in the belief that Chillagoe would become a major and profitable mining centre. This was not to be the case. The line, opened to Lappa Junction on 1 October 1900, was operated for the company by Queensland Railways, and was extended to Murgon in July 1901. It was then operated by the Chillagoe Railway and Mining Company Limited. The railway was taken over by the Government on 20 June 1919.

**Frank Watson**

Frank Watson who had joined the railways from Bundaberg in 1901 was transferred to Mareeba in 1933, and was to spend the next three years in the northern depot.

Mareeba was a lovely depot. Beautiful climate, much like Bundaberg, but much cooler at night. We had to use blankets right through the summer at night time. You’re up at eleven hundred feet there. The first four days I worked up there, forty hours a week. After that I worked five days and worked fifteen. All B15 converted steam locomotives. They were more reliable than the P18’s.

We worked one way from the Mareeba Depot, through Atherton, Herberton, Tumoulin and on to Ravenshoe. The other way we worked up the Tableland to Toomba and back. A week would go to various stations out there. Twice a week we worked from Mareeba down to Cairns. From the Chillagoe brothers, we also worked in Mount Mulligan for the coal mines, and Mungana. I was transferred there on 7 June 1933, and landed back in Bundaberg on 7 June 1940.

**During construction work on the Chillagoe Company line, around 1907-8, two of the company locomotives 6126 and 633, with the locomotive crew pose for portraits. Five locomotives were purchased by the Chillagoe Mining and Railway Company of the 2-6-0 type, with three being supplied by the West Australian Government Railways.**

- Queensland Rail Historical Collection

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