

Engineering Heritage Australia
National Engineering Oral History Program
Biographical Notes

Keith Archibald Smith (1915 –)
AM, OBE, BE (Hons), MIE Aust, FCIT

**Chief Mechanical Engineer and Commissioner of the Commonwealth Railways
and Chairman of the Australian National Railways Commission**

Birth & Family: Born on 4 May 1915, at Orange in New South Wales. He was the second of five children to Archibald Rogers Smith (c1890–1976), a clerk in the New South Wales Railways, and Lillian (nee Davis) (1890–1980).

Keith was the second of five sons, Louis (1913), Bruce (1918), Doug (1922) and Geoff (1930). Married (Norma) in 1939.

Education: Attended primary schools at Lithgow and Bathurst; and Bathurst High School until 1930. Studied music at the Pixie Ladies' College, Bathurst.

Intermediate Certificate at Neutral Bay High School after the family moved to Sydney.

Night school, and University of Sydney.

Qualifications: Qualified Fitter and Turner, Bachelor of Engineering with Honours

Memberships: The Institution of Engineers, Australia
Australian and New Zealand Railway Commissioners' Conference

Rail Policy Group of the Australian Transport Advisory Council

Foundation director of Australian Railway Research and Development Organisation

Awards: Member of the Order of the British Empire (OBE), 1970

Member of the Order of Australia (AM), 1980

Publications: *Tales from a Railway Odyssey: An Historical Autobiography*, Vol. 1, Railmac Publications, Elizabeth, 2001

Numerous articles in railway magazines

Work History: Keith became an apprentice fitter and turner at the New South Wales Railways' Eveleigh locomotive workshops in 1932 and was named apprentice of the Year in 1934. He completed his matriculation at night school in Sydney.

He gained two scholarships in 1936, the Eddy Memorial and Peter Nicol Russell scholarships, that enabled him to study Engineering at Sydney University. He graduated as a Bachelor of Engineering with Honours in 1940 and was awarded the Garnsey Prize for Metallurgy.

After his graduation Keith returned to the New South Wales Railways in 1940 where he worked for a time in the drawing office.

Subsequently during World War 2, he transferred to the Locomotive Testing Section before being seconded to the Beaufort Bomber project, where he spent two years as Supply and Equipment Engineer in the Cruiser Tank Assembly Shop at Chullora, New South Wales.

He returned to the Locomotive Testing Section and served four years as Assistant Engineer for Locomotive Running, when he became familiar with the extent and operations of the state's railway system.

Keith was appointed Production Engineer in the Tasmanian Government Railways in July 1948 and moved with his family to Launceston. During this period he broadened his workshop experience and became responsible for updating breakdown procedures and introducing modern equipment to the workshops. He also represented his Commissioner on various boards that gave him an appreciation of transport issues, rather than only railway ones. i. He attended the Australian and New Zealand Railway Commissioners' Conference.

Keith became Chief Mechanical Engineer of the Commonwealth Railways, on 30 November 1950 and moved to Port Augusta, South Australia. He was responsible for consolidating new initiatives such as the introduction of diesel locomotives, a new passenger train for the Trancontinental line and the new standard gauge line to Leigh Creek and Marree. He supported the introduction of concrete sleepers and long welded rails. His responsibilities included the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory and, at times he assumed additional duties and responsibilities of the Chief Civil Engineer and Chief Construction Engineer.

Keith became Acting Commonwealth Railways Commissioner, succeeding Pat Hannaberry on 9 April 1960 and was confirmed in the position six months later. In his role as Commissioner he became responsible for assessing, reporting on, and establishing the standards for all rail standardisation projects in order to protect Commonwealth interests. In addition to his general oversight of the Commonwealth Railways, he initiated various consultancy programs in Christmas Island, Indonesia and Sudan. He was largely responsible for promoting construction of the standard gauge line between Tarcoola and Alice Springs.

Keith became the inaugural Chairman of the Australian National Railways Commission after the Passage of the Australian National Railways Act in 1975, in accordance with Labor policy announced prior to its return to government in 1972. The assets of the Tasmanian Government Railways and the non-metropolitan railways in South Australia were vested in the Australian National Railways Commission from 1 July 1975, with the Commission taking operational responsibility on 1 March 1978. Keith was responsible for overseeing this and doing much to facilitate the amalgamation.

Keith retired as Chairman of the Australian National Railways Commission on 5 March 1981. He engaged in horse-breeding at Strathalbyn for a time, before moving to West Lakes. He and his wife Norma decided to travel Australia but settled in Orange in 1986, where Keith was elected an alderman to the City Council, and became chairman of the Finance Committee. He returned to South Australia for family reasons in 1990 and settled at Victor Harbor, where he wrote articles and books.

