Diesel Power!

The Port Elizabeth to Avontuur 2 ft narrow gauge railway was very much a viable proposition in the late 60's and early 70's for Spoornet (now Transnet Freight Rail [TFR]). With heavy limestone traffic from Loerie to the EPCC cement factory in New Brighton and fruit traffic from the Langkloof, it was decided to dieselise the line and sent aside the ageing NGG13 and 16 Garratts and the NG15 locos.
Twenty locomotives of the General Electric Type UM6B were ordered, this being a variation of their standard narrow gauge U6B. Design for the 2ft gauge caused difficulties and the bogies had to be specially designed with the traction motors between the axles. The Class 91 was to become the largest 2ft gauge diesel electric locomotive in the world. Fitted with a Caterpillar D375 turbo charged V8 engine they were rated at 600hp and had a maximum speed of 50kmh.



91-007 and an unidentified sister near Patensie with fruit vans for loading in June 1996.
Picture by Dave Richardson

By the end of the 80's the Langkloof fruit traffic was now on road transport although the Patensie Branch still carried seasonal citrus. The major traffic from Loerie was lost when the limestone quarry closed in 2004 and this signified the beginning of the end for this iconic railway. By 2009 TFR had decided that the line was not viable and all revenue traffic ceased. Although the Apple Express operated a final train on the line in 2011, the line remains out of use but not officially closed.
The fate of the remaining 19 class 91 diesels, 91-014 having been written off in an accident, was hanging in the balance. However in 1992 TFR had hired some 91 Class diesels to the Alfred County Railway in Port Shepstone and by fitting bogies from the 36 Class Cape Gauge locos had enabled them to travel under their own power to Kwa Zulu Natal. This transport solution proved to be a lifesaver for the 91's and a number were sold off to industry and regauged for a new life on a mine. A number were retained at Humewood Road depot in Port Elizabeth but the sea air has seen them deteriorate badly. 91-010 was also regauged to 3'6" and was used for shunting in the Port Elizabeth area, particularly Swartkops Electric Depot. This loco has now been acquired by Sandstone Heritage Trust and a set of 2ft gauge bogies obtained. The loco will shortly be transported to Sandstone for recommissioning and is a worthy locomotive for 2 ft narrow gauge preservation as an example of the final piece of the timeline of 2ft narrow gauge in South Africa.



91-010 at Swartkops electric depot.