

NEW ZEALAND SCENE REMINISCENCES

Graham Stewart

Mr Chairman, Visiting Delegates from overseas and southern New Zealand museums, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As someone who was fortunate enough to have been interested in the folklore of Tramways in the majority of New Zealand, Tramway systems were still supreme, moving great masses of people at cheap rates in the days when the motor car was still looked upon as a luxury. It is most heartening, and in some ways, truly unbelievable, to find that twenty years after the running of the last electric tram car in New Zealand there have emerged many societies in this country dedicated to the preservation, restoration and running of street trams in their various forms - whether they be powered by horse, cable or electric. I never envisaged this in the latter days of the street tramways - not in my wildest dream - when I rode on the various systems - the Burmese New Plymouth, Invercargill the Philadelphic Brill, Dunedin or cable cars in Rattray Street, High Street or Mary Hill or riding, say, second trailer back on the Sumner Express which was a real experience. I would say Christchurch's answer was no doubt to California's Big Reds of the Pacific Electric or Adelaide's "H" cars to Geelong.

To think now that the majority of our classic types in New Zealand would one day be reincarnated in their original form, I think you would all agree with me is unbelievable. Now this is mainly due thanks to the original hard core members who founded the museums and whose enthusiasm fired (on the whole) because of their lives having been involved around these vehicles and having ridden on them to school and then to their place of employment.

Now what is heartening and in many ways surprising, is that a large number of these stalwarts who have now become members of these societies and museums in recent years, are now spending much of their leisure time on restoration and construction but are too young to have ever experienced the day when travel by tram was commonplace. The support given by this younger generation is to be applauded. They will ensure that the future of these restored vehicles is now safe and accepted by our New Zealand society as a vital part of our heritage.

When the preservation of one single tram car was first mooted in this country those involved were considered to be rather strange in their interest and in need, possibly, of a psychiatrist although history must record and give full honours to the pioneers who strived against near impossible odds to establish what we now enjoy - the "Ian's" of this world - for example; the Ian Stewart's, the Ian Mison's, the Ian Little's.

It is also very heartening to note (if I may just divert on a personal note) to see Mervyn Stirling present here, who was one of the originators of a lot of the vehicles you now see running in this museum. But today

we must look to the future and be grateful for the continuing interest which has been shown by the younger generation. These people must be encouraged and educated. You must guarantee that your experience in all aspects of museum work is fully recorded and that time and funds are made available to record the history of the tramway systems of yester-year.

A very immense amount of work is still required on restoration of historical vehicles. In years to come there will be a day when museum authorities will have enough examples of vehicles through the agents of exhibits and your future peers will say, "Where are the records, the history, the human interest stories of the dark age of trundling trams back in the first half of the twentieth century?"

I recently sponsored a small exhibition of photographs in Wellington at a gallery to commemorate the twentieth anniversary since the passing of trams in that delightful city. It may interest you to know that the chairman this very evening is a former tram conductor. In Wellington, rumour has it that he was a failed tram motor-man. Now I haven't been in service myself that long. I maybe in need of a body rebuild but I am surprised at the questions I was asked during this exhibition - things most of us here would take for granted - but memories do fade.

A fortnight ago I spent a week on business in one of my favourite tramway centres, Hong Kong, the old double deckers at the turn-of -the-century vintage. At one city junction track work was being replaced. It certainly recharged my batteries in my memory box. It brought back facts and memories of my own travel through New Zealand in the late 1940s and 50s. Fascinating practices of New Zealand tramway law long forgotten. Although your limited funds must be channelled to restoration at present, perhaps more thought should be given to the social and pictorial history of the tramway era before we all join that great web of wires on cloud 248, 247 or 178. I take this quite seriously folks because it's quite surprising the history which is slowly going out the door.

Our guests from North Shore are on the whole within easy reach of tramway systems that survived the trolley bus and diesel invasion which swept the world after the second world war. Even with jet travel, New Zealand is still a rather isolated part of the world and a large percentage of our young New Zealanders will never see a street car in its natural environment. Hence my comments tonight. Look at your archives and your oral history before it is too late.

The northern contingent who are starting to run through the alphabet again with their classification tram types must excuse our nostalgia. As a matter of interest, if we continued to classify our trams in Auckland by letters of the alphabet we would have made it to the letter "S" - the Streamliners - not Stewart by the way. Now please permit me especially for the Kiwi's present to relive for a few moments, the atmosphere of Auckland and other centres in tramway days.

" R U S H H O U R A U C K L A N D "

In the days when those red and tan monsters called trams dominated all traffic as they rumbled along the main thoroughfares, clapped over rail joints and points, rubbing shoulders with other traffic, motorists treated trams with respects as they (the trams) were bigger and always had right of way. You could stand on a street safety zone ready to board a tram when it pulled up, enjoying the sanctuary from the rush hour traffic of motor cars screaming past. Motorists never really became accustomed to the trams in the city judging by the way motorists would occasionally drive slap bang into a zone.

The struggle for a foothold to board a tram, the rear platform jammed tight with homeward bound workers, the tram gathering speed along the shining rails embedded in the roadway, the saloon lights fading slowly to a yellow glimmer as the power was sapped from the overhead wires. "Move down the car, please", the conductor's cry for fares, "Fares, please", the ring of the conductor's bell, the hiss of the air brakes, the whirl of the electric motors and the throbbing of the compressor under the floor boards . . . Its all great nostalgia for us!

Those mighty dreadnoughts first seemed like a scrum with aspiring five-eights type clinging to the steps and could certainly swallow a crowd in the city. Some trammies even boasted many of our All Blacks received their training in scrummages while boarding a rush hour tram. They were unsurpassed in their ability to stand a day in / day out strain grossly overloaded, but they kept on rolling seemingly gifted, with perpetual life which reminds me of the time a minister of the church from the pulpit once compared a religious man with a tramcar. "The latter," he said, "travels its appointed way doing useful service. It was propelled like as within and it was able to cast light in front of and all about it by the power of the uplifted hand. The Christian man could do likewise".

Speaking of Christian principles; some of the veterans who rode in those years had quaint notices in the saloons like, "Smoking and spitting strictly forbidden; do not expectorate".

Fresh air flowed in and out of the cars at the rate governed by speed. Passengers comfort in Auckland (which is the first consideration in the transportation of passengers) remains firm with the wooden seat along with many other draught chilling refinements.

Speaking of draughts reminds me of the famed double-saloon trams of Wellington. The traditional habit (or bravo or whatever) had decreed upon the poor male the sole right to occupy the centre semi open saloon of these Wellington trams. It would never have been tolerated in these days of women's liberation and equality of the sexes. Women today would have insisted on airing their panty hose at the refreshing, exhilarating speed that these galloping, swaying monsters often achieved while negotiating the quaint streets and lanes of Wellington!

I remember suffering the full blast of a southerly while two ladies sat snugly in the front saloon, the sliding doors between rattled as the tram swung with a jerk upon reaching the summit of Constable Street and we started the descent to the suburbs. The whine of the motors took on a heavier pitch as the motorman braked his way to the bottom of the grade. The canvas blinds on the off-side of the tram flapped in the wind and the eyes of a young lady in an interior advertisement rolled back and forth with the sway of the tram to attract potential clients. The sharp ring of the buzzer telling the motorman no one wanted to alight intruded at regular intervals as the conductor transversed the saloon heavily camouflaged in a navy blue great-coat.

Unkind people used to say the Wellington trams were narrow in keeping with the thinking of the populace of that period. Wellington now boasts the only modern trackless tram system in New Zealand, plus a modern cable car as a bonus.

Now one of the highlights of travelling by tram in those years (especially to a visitor) were the tram zones. They used to pound through these caverns like a thunder storm, sparks flying off the trolley poles. The Haititi tunnel was exclusively a canyon for trams - only a single track inward. The trams seemed to be encased by the curvature of the brick-lined walls so close that the tram hurtled through to reach that spot of light at the other end.

I remember the kornie joke of the period:- "Did you hear I was involved in a tramway accident last week?" "Really". "Yes, I kissed the wrong girl in the Haititi tunnel".

As a matter of record the Haititi tramway tunnel was responsible for the preservation of the sole surviving double decker electric tram in this country - No 47. It was actually retained for the express purpose of being used as a travelling platform whenever overhead maintenance was carried out in the tunnel. I know our Wellington colleagues will be forever grateful that we managed to save this lovely old tram when we first formed a preservation group in the North (which, incidentally, for our visitors from North Shore, pre-dates this museum, MOTAT, in Auckland.)

I have been fortunate in recent years to have had the opportunity to view many tramway museums throughout the world, now I do not want to sound parochial, but the best real live museum I have ever viewed and ridden was Christchurch. On an Addington Trotting Day in January 1950, what a collection of real live relics. I will never again see such a variety of museum pieces trundling through city streets unheralded!

Each electric tram had two trailers attached of questionable age, including about fourteen of the original horse and steam tram double deck trailers dating from the 1880's. It was the halfway mark of the century and these old deckers loaded with punters swayed and squealed on their way as if from time was unheard. My form of transport in those years was the bicycle. I left my bike in the bicycle garage - something rather exclusive to Christchurch in those years - and travelled on the upper deck to Addington.

The only major modification ever given to these trailers arrived on the top deck. It looked to me to be totally out of place on such a dignified vehicle belonging to grand-dad's day - a woman conductress!

In all seriousness, I would rate Christchurch as my favourite main centre system in those years -the variety of trams and trailers, the interesting track layouts (for someone who had lived in Auckland where all the fleet were mainly double truck, single saloons and ninety percent of the track double). Christchurch was a mecca of interest, surprise and delight.

We now travel south to Dunedin, the city that pioneered the electric tram and the cable tram in New Zealand. They had a fleet of genuine American cars built by the Brill Company of Philadelphia to a selection of styles. How passengers in this southern city endured winter travel on these breezy electrics was a matter of wonder. Their long overhang made them prance along the tracks when running at any speed and nicknames like "Jumping Jacks", "Bob Tailers" and "Gallopings Gerties" became local quotations.

These Brills of early twentieth century design remained in service with no major alterations up until the final years of tramways in Dunedin and they would be worth a packet today if they had been kept.

I was fortunate also to be able to ride the cable lines of Dunedin from their twilight years. I found it a very interesting and fascinating experience to actually live in Dunedin for a little while and ride as a regular on a cable line. Perhaps just a few quotes from cable cars here (which I wrote about in the book and I just quote briefly from my own experience).

"Travel by cable car was different. No queues waited to enter the quaint Victorian cars as they reached the terminus. The waiting crowds surged around them in a circular movement. By habit, women and youngsters made for the tiny glassed in saloons fore and aft while men took the open-air seats on the outsides and late-comers selected whatever footholds they could find. A strap or a toe-hold on the footboard was enough for any energetic male as the car bobbed off and took the grade. A passenger hanging by a thin leather strap (which soon cut into his fingers - and I write from personal experience) experienced an element of danger which gave him the feeling that the world was still for the brave.

The conductor, an agile acrobat, would swing monkey-like along the side of the crowded car with punch and tickets in his hands to collect fares. He worked from strap to strap, climbing through caverns and around toe-holds on the luggage racks. The grip-man, an expert at this specialised task, was treated with respect by the regulars. In the centre of it all he heaved on his big levers to stop and start the car - a constant source of fascination. There was a friendly intimacy about the ride because one couldn't be snobbish when sharing a foothold with a dozen others. Tunes were played on the cable car bells by the gripman who had a code all of their own. Two distinct gongs chimed after an up car passed the down car, the chimes telling the other crew that an Inspector was close by.

A symphony of steel was played as the pulley slapped and rattled and the hum and skip of the rope buried deep beneath the road slot fluctuated in crescendo. To those who lived near a cable line this was music to their ears - part of the familiar sounds of their locality. The wire rope could be heard humming mysteriously in a deserted street with not a cable car in sight. The cable itself never stopped during the hours of service."

I now look forward to my next visit to Christchurch to view the completion of the restoration by the Tramway Historical Society of the Roslyn cable car, 1905. I rode this car in those years and it will be a nice experience to see it again in reality.

The first provincial centre to establish an electric tramway in New Zealand was at Wanganui in 1908. I was fortunate to ride these trams in their dying years. Even then, the quaint old iron verandah posts and horse troughs in Victoria Ave - the main thoroughfare - toned well with the tramway street furniture.

By the time you reached the end of the line at Aramoho opposite the cemetery you thought you had reached the moon. The track had slowly become more overgrown with grass and weeds and the electric power gave the impression of just being strong enough for the motorman to read his newspaper by, while he was waiting for the return trip along the riverbank. You were certainly out in the country.

The highlight of the trip back into town was the underpass at the Aramoho township. To avoid complications to the railway, the tram line took a dive under the railway bridge and emerged in an equally steep gradient to appear again and shudder to a stop by the antique waiting shelter.

I loved the Wanganui system - like the track to Castlecliff over a trestle bridge through the sand dunes with often not a home in sight. Shades of Queen Elizabeth Park today. During the closing ceremony in September 1950, I was privileged to ride on the footplate of old "Puffing Billy" up and down the main street in grand procession. This is the Baldwin that has been beautifully restored by this Museum (MOTAT).

The final farewell of trams from Castlecliff in Wanganui was a gala occasion with bonfires on the beach and thousands present to witness the last convoy. Three "Takapunas" - old faithfuls - they were farewelled by highland pipe bands, exploding fireworks and detonators on the tracks. For the purists present, No. 28 was the very last tram and two little girls placed a wreath on the tram that night which bore the inscription:- "You have rattled our bones, you have rattled our doors and after tonight, you'll rattle no more".

New Plymouth by comparison was a model tramway system with a fleet of ten respectably kept tramcars. I was also fortunate to ride on the last ceremonial tram through the streets and I shudder a little bit to think that it will be thirty years ago next month. I remember well two amusing incidents that night. The official speeches were made from the balcony of the Criterion Hotel. It was in the days of 6pm closing of bars in New Zealand and very strict licencing laws. The manager of the tramways, on hearing I was staying at the hotel, requested my blessing for the mayor and Corporation to quote their names as my guests to the bar steward so they could enjoy a few drinks legally while waiting for the official ceremony to begin. I think it was the first time that someone interested in the subject such as tramways in New Zealand was accepted by society.

Later in the evening I was standing with the manager when he gave the instruction for the ceremony of the last tram, reserved for civic dignitaries only, to be shunted on to the mainline so that the guests could board in style as he was under the impression (as was his chief inspector) that the last public tram from the port had passed on its merry way!

I had gone to the trouble of hiring a taxi to cover the last tram to the port of New Plymouth, then asked the cab driver to drive me pronto at speed back to town, when I pointed out politely, that there was still a tram inward bound from the port. I was coldly believed when single trucker No.3 did appear packed to the gunwales. The chief inspector did have the courtesy to walk across to me and say a big thank you. I have often wondered since if I had kept my mouth shut the local papers would have had a good story that the ceremonial last tram had not been the last tram after all. I have actually never told that story, but that is true. If I hadn't spoken up, it would have upset their whole ceremonial occasion that night. It was a very moving event.

For a small country situated way south on the globe, we seem to have kept pace with transport trends in the early years of this century. Gisborne introduced Edison battery cars from New Jersey in 1913 propelled, as it was termed then, by "invisible power". Napier chose Blue and cream as the livery for their electrics in the same year. They survived for eighteen years until a major earthquake brought the system to a sudden halt forever.

I lived in Napier for a number of years and slowly researched the placement of their fleet at the actual moment the earthquake struck. It took a lot of time and patience like solving a murder. I interviewed old motormen and depot hands, learnt that three trams had been toppled into the pits at the depot by force of the earthquake. One motorman driving one of the original British built cars in from the port when it happened, told me the tram was shaking like a fox terrier playing a rat. Although the inner city was totally destroyed by fire that followed the quake, the trams were not even scorched.

The Australian delegates present will be interested to learn that in Invercargill it was quite acceptable in the best of company to say that you had to hurry to catch the b----- tram. Their route designations were by letters of the alphabet - not numerals. Invercargill boasted of having the southern-most tramway system in the world and, of course, out of six thousand odd Bernie safety cars built in the States the southern-most fleet were painted chocolate and orange.

Talking of Americans, I once knew a Jim Walker associated with trams. He is what you would call in the States, a real "juice man". He was a depot foreman at the old Epsom Depot here in Auckland. Jim had a small dog called Empire who used to go with his master every day to Epsom Depot and really earned his tucker. Jim would check through the running reports. Any of the cars that had been booked in with electrical leakage faults by passengers, generally from a cast iron seat frame. Jim would then carefully go through the car and place a piece of meat at the foot of each seat and then place the pole on the wire and send his hungry dog through the tram, watching carefully until suddenly, Empire would leap back from the seat! The trouble spot had been found.

The most unlucky person ever to travel by tram in Auckland would have undoubtedly been a Mr Henry Williamson of Mt Eden who, in 1911, gave up his seat for a lady and stood on the back platform only to be killed when another tram ploughed into the rear - (What men did for the fairer sex in those days!) And speaking of women reminds me of a rather large lady who wedged her way onto a crowded Queen Street tram and started fumbling in her coat pocket for her fare. She fumbled and struggled and fumbled when, at last the man standing beside her was heard to say "Permit me, madam, to pay your fare. You have been working on the last button of my braces and I can't help being nervous as to what's going to happen!"

"A C C I D E N T S"

A motorman called Charlie Haley went on duty at 6 o'clock in the morning. His p.m. motorman didn't turn up for duty and Charlie was asked to carry on. Late at night Charlie was driving his tram down Khyber Pass Road and went to sleep. This, of course, didn't worry the tram which continued gayly on down Khyber Pass, jumped the rails on reaching the curve into Broadway,

Newmarket, and careered across the footpath with only inches to spare on each side as it ran into the alleyway by the Royal George Hotel without sustaining a scratch! With the hotel still intact, the relieved publican opened all bars and provided drinks on the house for the shaken passengers. Old No 111, always known as Lord Nelson, was given a new nickname that night - "Halley's Comet".

Perhaps one of the most amusing accidents occurred when a truck, loaded with ripe tomatoes, ran down Wakefield Street in Auckland and collided outside the Town Hall with a tram coming down Queen Street. The truck hit the tram, midships, and burst tomatoes were everywhere. The motorman had one look at the mess and jumped to the conclusion someone had been killed and promptly fainted.

Then, by co-incidence, there was the lady who was knocked down by a tram in Queen Street. She was taken to hospital and sent home to her house near Wallace Street on the Herne Bay route. She was sitting in her front room a few weeks later when she saw a tram come through her front fence and finish up almost touching her house - and the motorman driving the tram was the one who had knocked her down in Queen Street! Now that was quite an odd reunion.

"T R A M W A Y U N I O N"

Talking of odd reunions brings me to a few interesting stories about the tramway union. We had an unusual strike here just after the First World War when the Tramways Union backed the Jockey's Association over protesting over the way they were being treated by racing clubs throughout the country. As a result, race trams were declared "black" and crews refused to run any race specials to Ellerslie (although they did run if the sign showed Remuera - not races - as refusals to run specials meant suspension). By late afternoon all men had stopped work. The next day a notice was posted giving them a week's notice, but by Tuesday the issue had been resolved. Now the interesting aspect of this story for all New Zealanders is the union secretary at the time was a gentleman called Mr Peter Fraser who later became Prime Minister of New Zealand from 1940 to 1949.

One of the major threats to women being employed on public transport in New Zealand as conductors at that time occurred in 1947. Strangely enough it came from the Tramways Union in the form of a letter saying that the employment of women was a wartime measure and was never intended to be continued after cessation of hostilities. The union had therefore resolved that the future engagement of women to do the work normally performed by men had been declared closed and no further applications from such persons would be accepted by the Union. The transport authorities at the time challenged this ruling and obtained legal backing that women could not be refused membership of the union. The union retaliated by posting a notice that motormen and conductors were not permitted to train female conductors. As staff shortages continued to climb, the Emergency Disputes Committee ruled that the employment of women was to be continued. The conductresses certainly did a grand job, particularly throughout the war years.

When I first took a serious interest in tramways - in their technology and social history - I was one of the few rare breed, possibly an oddity. Fortunately, it is now the trams that are the oddities.

One of my first memories as a small boy was when my mother took me to town and an Inspector came through the tram. When he got to our seat my mother looked up with a smile and said, "I'm sorry, Inspector, but I'm afraid my little boy has eaten his ticket." "That's alright," said the Inspector, "I suggest you buy him a second helping." So it seems I had an appetite from tramways at a very early age.

Talking of youngsters travelling by tram reminds me of some of the Victorian Music Hall style humour of that period associated with the tramcar. There was a story about the conductor who said, "Madam, I will have to have a fare for that child - he's over 4 years of age." The lady replied, "He can't be, I've only been married 3 years." Conductor, "Never mind the confessions lady, just give me the money!"

And then there was the difficulty created by basketball girls in the days when they all dressed in gym dresses. On boarding a city bound tram they all asked for half fares. The conductor was a little suspicious of one but she assured him she was a half fare. On alighting in the city two girls of eleven or twelve and a small boy rushed up to this girl and said, "How did you get on, mummy?"

I was going to speak tonight on the human side of trams entitled, "Sex on a Street-car", but your chairman pointed out that I would be addressing a very serious gathering, so to talk about "grand unions", having a "lay over", "putting on the bag" would not be suitable! For a conference of delegates who are, what you would term "nuts and bolts" people, are possibly more interested in the finer points of the "screw".

On a serious note, gentlemen and ladies present, our lives are truly only a flick of the fingers compared with eternal time. It will be the generation still unborn that will appreciate the work each and everyone of you have undertaken to record in some form. So much has been saved thanks to foresight and dedication that now we still have in New Zealand, the remains of the very first electric tram and the very first trackless tram. The tram, I understand, has now been transferred to Seacliffe outside Dunedin and I hope is under cover. The trackless tram is near a golf course on the outskirts of Wellington. The whereabouts of these two vehicles, I know, is no secret to most of New Zealanders attending this conference.

Ferrymead has No 3 tram earmarked for preservation which is great. I would sincerely like to make a special plea tonight for a central, non-parochial sub-committee to be formed to investigate the saving of these two important relics. Brushing aside all local possessiveness, make it, say, a national project with the ultimate aim to have these two vehicles exhibited, hopefully, side by side in a central locality - not left to rot. Possibly somewhere suitable which could act as an advertisement for all the operating museums in New Zealand, plus wetting the public's appetite to visit your locality. I strongly ask you all to give this consideration much thought. Do not place it in the pending basket because in a few short years even the bones of these vehicles will no longer exist.

Finally, on the lighter side -

"WHY WERE TRAMS SO POPULAR?"

Well they were generally Hobson's choice. Most of us couldn't afford to borrow father's car in those days or didn't have enough pounds, shillings or pence to buy ourselves a set of personal wheels. The services were frequent and motor cars were in short supply for many years after the war and there's one joke which I wrote in my book, at the time well known, regarding faith people had for the electric tram.

They used to say, "Never run after a tram, my boy. You want to remember what they say in America; Never run after a tram or a woman. There will always be another along in a minute".

Or perhaps an item published in a newspaper of a conversation in broken English, overheard on a Wellington tram when trams were still trumps, sums it all up.

"Trams is better than buses".

"No, why you say so?"

"On bus, you pay everytime when you get in, sure.
On tram, big crowd, no pay".

Finally, folks, I would like to thank the Organising Committee for giving me the opportunity to address all the delegates tonight. I wish you all a most successful conference and I trust that our overseas visitors will enjoy some genuine New Zealand hospitality while they are with us.

Thank You.