

A HISTORY OF EXPERIENCE - 25 YEARS

A paper on the preservation venture of the South Pacific Electric Railway

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This Paper would not have been possible without reference to "Trolley Wire" Magazine, particularly June 1971 and February 1972 issues, and the personal recollections of Norman Chinn and Ben Parle.

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On Saturday afternoon 9th April 1949, Norm. Chinn and Ken McCarthy rolled a set of steam-tram trailer wheels along a railway siding at Sandown in the western suburbs of Sydney.

On Saturday 3rd September 1949, L/P class tramcar 154 operated the last trip on the isolated Rockdale to Brighton-le-Sands tramway in the Southern suburbs of Sydney.

On 24th July 1950, tramcar No. 154 was assigned to the Australian Electric Traction Association for preservation.

And that's how it all began.

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In the late 1940's the first of the tramway closures, delayed by World War II and the subsequent motor fuel rationing, took place. The idea came to young Norm. Chinn to preserve Sydney steam-tram Motor No. 5A which had been used on the Redbank Wharf tramway of Sydney Ferries Ltd. An approach was made to the firm which had acquired the Motor who were willing to dispose of the remains of the vehicle, as it was, for \$100. That was as far as it went, being far beyond the means of Norm. and Ken., an apprentice on £2/4/3 per week and a schoolboy on 5/- pocket-money. That looked like the end, but not for long.

Joined by Ben Parle and Bob Young and amid staunch opposition they were able to finally win over a majority of the members in the Sydney Branch of the A.E.T.A. to have a request sent to the Department of Road Transport and Tramways that a body of an L/P class tramcar then being scrapped, be made available for preservation in the garden of Norman's father, Mr. A. Chinn. On 24th July 1950, the Commissioner for Road Transport and Tramways, Mr. A.A. Shoebridge, not only agreed to make the request possible at no cost to the Association but advised that he would make available one complete car, not just a body. So the genesis of tramway preservation by enthusiasts occurred, with L/P tramcar No. 154 being chosen as being in the best overall condition.

Where to put the tramcar? Commissioner Shoebridge again came to the rescue by allowing the tramcar to remain temporarily in Newtown Depot - easier than trying to place a complete tramcar in the Chinn's backyard.

Inspired by the success of the first venture in preservation, the historical section of the A.E.T.A., Sydney Branch, were able to obtain the Prison Car 948, Driver Instruction Car 127s (former F-class 393) and N-class 728, all showing their age rather sadly and the worse for wear.

These were the halcyon days of the A.E.T.A. A major contribution had been the "Newcastle Report" in 1950-51, prepared by some of the future founders of S.P.E.R., at the time of the abandonment of the Newcastle tramways.

The growing Sydney Branch of the A.E.T.A. felt that a local digest was needed to advertise current functions, such as meetings, tours, transport protest meetings, etc. to supplement "Tram Tracks", later "Electric Traction". That was the start of "Trolley Wire" in February 1952.

A.E.T.A. activities increased so much that in 1954 meetings were being held twice a month with attendances often of over fifty. With tours, Council Meetings, model evenings and tram-car restoration at Newtown Depot, as well as the two formal meetings each month, there was at least one major activity in which all members could participate each week. However, there was now appearing as a natural development, two distinct groupings, the historical and the modern.

Tramcar and Trolleybus tours in the 1950's became a major outdoor activity, the first having been an "unofficial" tour in Newcastle on 6th December 1947, involving members of the A.E.T.A. and the Australian Railway Historical Society. The co-operation of the Tramways in these tours was very much appreciated.

With the acquisition of L/P-154 in 1950 a search for an eventual storage site was started. No success was achieved and in December 1954, moves were made to possibly lend out some of the tramcars, now stored at Ultimo Depot, for static exhibition, as it appeared that storage there would be for a very limited period. Fortunately, resulting out of these moves, the tramcars were allowed to be stored at Ultimo for a longer period.

By now, it was felt by the Sydney branch of the A.E.T.A. that the time had come to separate the preservation activities from the main activity of the A.E.T.A. - advocating modern electric tramways, and in particular at this time, fighting the tramway abandonment policies of the Transport Department. It had become an ambiguous situation when, with the A.E.T.A. attacking the abandonment policies, the A.E.T.A. was also at the same time obtaining equipment for preservation.

Accordingly, after formation of a working committee comprising the aforementioned young gentlemen, the Australian Electric Transport Museum was established at the inaugural meeting on 1st August 1955, being launched with a capital of £12/-/-.

The search for a museum site now began in earnest and by early 1956, ten sites had been or were being considered. Among them were:

- The Spit - north of the City on Middle Harbour,
- Lambton - near Newcastle,
- Toongabbie - outer western suburb of Sydney,
- Picton - south of Sydney,
- and the Royal National Park.

By now there were eight tramcars and things were becoming frantic for a museum site. I remember very well, at the time, the publicity about the A.E.T.M. with its trams looking for a home. The Committee, after much consideration, decided on the Royal National Park site as offering the best possibility. Representatives of the A.E.T.M. met with an Official of the Lands Department of N.S.W., who was heard to say when told they had arrived to meet him... "I'll soon get rid of them!" Agreement was reached and the National Park Trust approved the lease of an area near the Railway Crossing on the Princes Highway at Loftus in August 1956.

The first sod was turned at the site in the same month, right where an underground fibro water main was laid. As a result, the next sod was turned approximately 30 yards away. Meanwhile, the trams had to move from Ultimo Depot and once again Commissioner Shoebridge came to our rescue offering storage of the cars at Rozelle Depot, pending transfer to Loftus.

Meanwhile, things were happening outside of New South Wales. In Adelaide, the Metropolitan Tramways Trust offered a number of Tramcars for preservation in October 1956. During the 1956 A.E.T.A. Easter Convention in Adelaide, John Radcliffe and Mac. Alexander discussed tramcar preservation possibilities with some of the A.E.T.M. members from Sydney. As a consequence, a preservation group was established in 1957 becoming the South Australian branch of the A.E.T.M., and began looking for a site, eventually locating at St. Kilda, north of Adelaide.

In Sydney, at Loftus, a compound had been constructed by March 1957, using second-hand iron and telegraph poles, becoming later the walls of the Depot building. The fleet was moved to there on 18th, 19th and 20th March. The South Pacific Electric Railway was established. A major goal had been attained and a new era began.

With the growth of the A.E.T.M.'s activities, it was felt that "some form of incorporation was needed whereby the liability of the members of AETM could be limited and the financial situation of the undertaking subjected to compulsory audit." Registration as a Co-operative Society was the most convenient and least expensive. On 2nd April 1959, the South Pacific Electric Railway Co-operative Society Limited replaced the Australian Electric Transport Museum. The South Australian Branch of the A.E.T.M. subsequently became incorporated in 1960 as the Australian Electric Transport Museum (South Australia) Incorporated.

Now preservation of tramcars was gaining momentum and in Melbourne the Tramway Museum Society of Victoria was formed, becoming incorporated on 9th April, 1963.

As the tramways in Sydney finished in February 1961, general interest turned to railways and interstate tramways. SPER, as it had become popularly known, began running train and interstate tram tours. On a rail trip to the Illawarra area south of Sydney on 25th July 1962, the idea of establishing an operating railway museum on the Camden line was put forward. Subsequent to this, thoughts for a railway museum were formulated and out of these arose the New South Wales Rail Transport Museum.

Meanwhile, at Loftus, the Museum was developing. A roof was placed over the trams, which had received preventative maintenance work on them. Additional cars were delivered to Loftus in 1959 as the Sydney tramways continued to contract. A start was made on track-laying of the Depot fan which was the second for the Museum, the first having been removed by unauthorised persons for scrap.

Restoration work on the tramcars continued together with some limited track-laying of the Depot yard area. Then on Saturday 23rd December 1961, The Tramway Museum was officially opened by Mr. A.A. Shoebridge, now retired; indeed a fitting tribute to the man who recognised the dedication and enthusiasm of the founders of SPER and supported them as far as circumstances would permit.

Tramcar and track work continued apace and by late 1963, with the arrival of the 1923 model Cadillac Rail Motor from a colliery railway near Newcastle, almost a quarter of a mile of track had been laid. Of course, there was no D.C. electricity available to move the trams

under power, but this state of affairs was not to remain for long. In the meantime, however, the tramcars were moved by manpower, sometimes assisted by our resident motor truck.

On Sunday 2nd November, the Cadillac Rail Motor became the first self-propelled vehicle to operate over the line. Regular operation commenced on New Years Day, 1964 and continued on the first Sunday of the Month thereafter (when the Museum was open for inspection). Meanwhile, work began in earnest to lead up to electrification and on 27th June, 1964, a very limited power supply was fed into tramcar 134s (D class 102) permitting the operation of the compressor and the car lights. At this stage it is pertinent to remember that SPER was not receiving any outside financial assistance whatsoever, other than from members and supplemented by small public donations. As a result, we had to be as sparing as possible in our expenditure.

Returning to electrification, the goal was fully achieved when at 4.27 p.m. on Sunday 19th July 1964, L/P-154, was driven along the track in the Depot yard under its own power. How fortunate we were that so many of our early members, who had seen L/P-154 as the last tram on the Rockdale to Brighton-le-Sands line on 3rd September, 1949, were there at Loftus 15 years later to see and ride the same tram, on our own tramline.

With this inspiration, we pressed on with stringing the overhead wire along the length of track and organising the electric conversion equipment, using motor-generator sets in the Sub-station. This was the lead-up to the final achievement of the Museum - electric operation.

At 2.37 p.m. on Saturday 13th March 1965, after an absence of a little over four years, trams returned to public service in Sydney, when the Deputy Premier of N.S.W. drove tramcar L/P-154 through a ribbon stretched across the track and down the quarter-mile of line. The Museum tramway of S.P.E.R. was now officially open.

The years of toil and frustrations by the members were finally justified. We now looked forward to rewarding ourselves for our efforts, as we settled down to the running of an operating museum. Thus, the ultimate aim had been realised.

We now had a regular routine - operating trams on Sundays and most public holidays, with major work being undertaken on Saturdays. The next step was to extend the track length approximately one and a quarter miles, running from the Depot to a scenic lookout over the Hacking River. However, in 1965, there was a change of State Government and, subsequent to this, a change of the administration of the Royal National Park. As a result, in 1967, SPER was prevented from extending the track beyond the southern terminus. As a consolation, SPER could extend northwards to a vaguely defined area near the Highway. This gave a total track length of approximately one third of a mile.

A major activity not previously mentioned, was the periodic involvement in offsite work since establishment at Loftus. This has generally involved removal of track, for storage and eventual use, from such places as Randwick Workshops Yard and Repair Shop, Water Board Railway at Potts Hill (western suburbs), Ascot Racecourse (Mascot Airport), Rozelle Depot (pointwork). Other items obtained have included waiting-sheds from the City and suburbs, railway-type tramway signal from near Newcastle, steel tramway poles and even steel building framework. Generally, wherever we went, we had items of passing interest nearby, such as steam trains, jet aircraft and even animals in Taronga Zoo Park. And it wasn't only hard work either, but enjoyable; what with playing trams with our ubiquitous trolley or

riding the mini-gauge trolley with a jet-plane taking off over our heads.

Back at Loftus, we joined in the Captain Cook Bi-Centenary celebrations in April 1970, when we operated the tramcars for two weeks every day from 9.00 a.m. to 9.00 p.m. This proved very beneficial to SPER and was a good public relations exercise.

Over the last five years, tramway operations have settled down to a fairly organised routine. The original power conversion equipment is now on standby use only, having been superseded by a sophisticated rectifier. A large variety of tramcars have become available for traffic, including cars from interstate. Although established to preserve Sydney trams, the intention has been to preserve a limited range of tramcars from interstate, so as to obtain a broad cross-section of the development of the Australian tramcar, and the distinctions between Sydney tramcars and those of other Australian cities.

Studies of alternate sites for an operating museum tramway in lieu of the present restricted site at Loftus, possibly supplemented by static museum displays, have been undertaken. Investigations have also been made into the possibility of having a comprehensive transport and technological museum in which the tramway would form a link with other activities physically as well as historically and using other modes of transport, such as buses and other vintage vehicles, to re-create a typical suburban street scene of, say, the early 1930's. An Outline Plan has been compiled which gives a comprehensive view of our ultimate requirements for an ideal museum tramway.

And so to 1975 - Trams have been operating at Loftus for ten years, having just recently carried their quarter-millionth passenger in 14,000 tramcar trips. Trams are running at St. Kilda, South Australia, at Museums in Wellington, Auckland and Christchurch in New Zealand, now at Ballarat and soon at Bylands near Melbourne and Ferny Grove near Brisbane.

When we look around us, we know that we really started something, those twenty-five years ago. Now, not only are there tramway preservation ventures but railway, bus and ferry preservation schemes. SPER's ultimate aim always was live preservation. This was achieved through supreme dedication and sacrifices by the early members who were game enough to have a go and inspired others to join them. That independence of spirit - that special quality, to get on with the job. But that was not all. We have succeeded as well in the support of the general public by maintaining essential public relations. We have also succeeded because officials and organisations in various spheres supported us or let us "make a go" of it. We have responded with a professional approach to our hobby.

Perhaps we could use a little biblical influence to illustrate the establishment and development stages of SPER and, we believe, tramway preservation in Australia and New Zealand:

- Stage 1 - 1950 - GENESIS - the creation - the initial collection;
- Stage 2 - 1956 - EXODUS - the promised land - Loftus
- Stage 3 - 1965 - The ultimate, the climax - running a tramway.

Simply, we attained the impossible.