

THE FORMATION OF AN ASSOCIATION OF TRAMWAY MUSEUMS OF AUSTRALASIA

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During the opening remarks at the beginning of this conference the question posed was "Why are we here?" Before we consider this question I would like to relate some of the history which has led to this conference.

Since the beginning of tramway preservation history in this country a few people have been outstanding in some particular field of endeavour. The most recent to carry the United Museums banner is the organiser of this conference, Bill Kingsley. He has been able to bring us together to discuss our problems, share our experiences and hopefully set up an association of tramway museums.

But this is not the first time the formation of an association has been mooted. Back in 1955 when the Secretary of the newly formed Australian Electric Transport Association first proposed the formation of a national body of tramway museums, the reasons were all together different than those of today, as at that time only eight trams had been set aside for preservation in Australia. Enthused with the co-operation given by the transport authorities in N.S.W., he proposed that an approach be made to all the operating tramways to set aside representative vehicles of the older classes of tramcars as they were taken out of service to be held for groups, that he was sure would be formed in later years to set up operating museums. With the exception of Adelaide, the proposal did not proceed further.

Four or five years later another move was made, but at that stage it was not considered necessary to form a group as, despite the attitude of some sections of the public and authorities, the museums were progressing satisfactorily, albeit slowly. The last sixteen years, and especially the last ten, has seen a remarkable change in this situation with all but two of the then operating tramways closing. Apart from the additional volunteer tramway museums that have been formed, several light railway and industrial science museums have been formed also, once again by volunteers.

With the number of these volunteer museums constantly growing the time is here to re-consider the formation of an association of museums. As the preservation field is very active in New Zealand it is appropriate that the N.Z. Museums be included in the initial discussions as their membership will add weight to the museum movement generally. Although the combined membership of all the tramway museums totals less than 1500, the range of exhibits is quite extensive and the historical value of the collections immeasurable.

The last twenty five years has seen the volunteer transport and technological preservation movement grow from four enthusiastic young men to well over a thousand enthusiasts actively engaged in the preservation of, and in some cases the operation of a varied range of transport and industrial exhibits.

Out of the public's growing awareness of their national heritage, many commercial folk museums and pioneer villages have evolved also. The differences between the two types of activities lie in their basic motives for their formation, and the enthusiasm and finance each generates.

The commercial groups, generally speaking, are established by business men submitting a viable proposition to encourage entrepreneurs to finance the venture, with the aim of making a profit. The disclosure that a village is to be established in a community generates local enthusiasm which usually provides further assistance, sometimes from volunteer groups, so that the locals become involved. Whether or not the venture is conducted entirely to the letter of historical accuracy does not appear to be of major importance to the promoters, but in all fairness there is an underlying theme of historic presentation throughout most of these attractions: but after that is 'nostalgia'... remembering the good things but not really in any great detail.

The construction phase of these developments involves a large capital outlay and as their operation requires several permanent employees, costs are high. These costs are recouped from a portion of the admission charge. On top of these costs the normal profit margin has to be added, all of which sets a relatively high admission fee that can discourage potential visitors. At some of these villages there are additional attractions inside, for which extra charges are made.

On the other hand, the volunteer groups all started with great enthusiasm but little finance. Our particular society was further handicapped at the beginning by having to promote a hitherto unknown project, where the only source of finance came from the members' pockets. The main disadvantage caused by this lack of finance has been the delays created by having to proceed in a step-by-step manner. In our case it took six years to obtain a site followed by eight years from the turning of the first sod to the operation of the first car under its own power.... 14 years: Completely the reverse of most commercial ventures.

The lack of finance has not been without certain advantages however. The complex we have was built with a minimum of capital expenditure and by using only volunteer labour the initial costs have been kept to a minimum. Another important point is that we are debt free: what we have, we own. An interesting exercise that was carried out last year, put an equivalent dollar value on the work done on the site since 1956. By costing the man-hours put into the project so far at a low two dollars an hour and adding to this figure the estimated cost of the materials if bought new; having regard for price increases over the eighteen year period; the equivalent dollar value of what now exists if done commercially, would be almost \$275,000.....but actually done for approximately \$36,000.

Despite the fact that the initial moves to create an operational technical museum were made by volunteers in a period when 'nostalgia' was unheard of, the commercial ventures are more widely known and accepted than those operated by volunteers. Publicity has a great deal to do with this obviously, and whilst items on volunteers can be seen in the newspapers or on television on odd occasions, it is a drop in the bucket compared with the commercial ventures' ability, through finance, to publicise their attractions regularly. Our museums are not looking for the gaudy attractions generally associated with commercialism, but we do have strong desires to display and operate our exhibits for the benefit of the public. Our exhibits are, after all, the originals and not just replicas.

This comparison between our activities and the commercial ventures is

not intended to deride the villages and folk museums, but to illustrate that by promotion they are known, we are not.

The peculiar thing about being a volunteer is that the stigma of 'amateur' is always levelled at your efforts....if you are a volunteer, it follows that you must be an amateur and you are treated accordingly. It took the volunteer bush fire brigades many, many years to overcome this hurdle, but by promotion and action they did.

Commercial ventures however, are always considered 'professionals' and are treated with respect. The dictionary defines an amateur as 'one who cultivates a particular study or art for the love of it and not professionally'; often with the suggestion that he is superficial or inexperienced.

On the other hand professionals are classed as those who make their living by an art, or make it their career and show the skill, artistry and demeanour of conduct appropriate of a member of a profession. Anyone here who has been to the operating volunteer museums will agree, I feel sure, that these museums conduct themselves 'with the skill and demeanour of conduct that one would expect from a professional'.

The main visible difference between the two types of activity is the elaborateness of presentation. The adequate finance, that provides the commercial ventures with their 'trappings', is missing from our volunteer efforts.

So we have the situation where non-profit volunteers acting professionally are regarded as amateurs, whilst profit making private enterprises are regarded as professionals due to the misconceived belief that to be paid makes them professionals.

The only true professionals in the museum field are the Government run museums, as their staff are fully trained in museology and qualified by educational institutions after many years of study. Even though we may be prepared to undertake a course, there are none available to which our members can go for formal training, because part time volunteers are not catered for. Although the Museums Association of Australia has carried out some investigations, the situation is unlikely to change in the short term.

The Public Transport enthusiasts, especially those associated with tramways, have been elevated over the last few years from the classification of 'ratbags' and 'unusual' to that of 'buffs' and 'imaginative' a far cry from the nineteen fifties. But, for all this greater acceptance, we are not considered a body with any major influence.

Where then do we stand?????

Not true professionals yet more than amateurs: not paid for our work yet are able to keep costs down: not able to display our exhibits as we would like, yet possess a greater feeling for historical preservation than commercial attractions.

Can we do anything to correct this situation?????

The Australian Government has shown its interest in the national heritage by forming two committees of inquiry last year, to investigate the national estate on one hand and the museums and national collections on the other. As a result of these inquiries, the Government is aware that our organisations exist and that we are in need of assistance. The Government also knows that our museums are singular in approach and are non-committed to each other. If we continue to remain separate entities, and this is easy to do in a country where the vast distances tend to insulate one community from another, we could be easy prey to

nationalism. This may be considered a bit far fetched, but recently SPER was involved in state political manoeuvres which, had they been successful, would have ultimately lead to the eventual takeover of the society. This was despite the 80,000 man-hours that has been put into the project by volunteers who had also financed the whole enterprise themselves. Our many years of successful self-supporting operations were not even considered.

Despite some assistance, the volunteer non-profit organisations are not fully accepted. Governments and museums all have a part to play: but why should they: and why should they co-operate unless all fully understand the concepts and can work out the benefits that can be shared.

It is about time -- for the sake of the volunteer museums at least -- that the benefits of our type of activity be seen in their true perspective, be given their rightful attention, and their improvements actively persued.

In short, we have to gain government recognition at a national level.

But Government recognition is only part of the story. We must sell ourselves to the public also, as it is they who can reap the greatest benefits from co-operation between ourselves and governments. Our aims are greater than just to 'play trams', but unfortunately the vast majority of outsiders do not realise this. We have set our aims high, but to gain the public's confidence and support we will have to detail the resulting benefits of education, research, tourism and entertainment in terms that all will understand.

We must divest ourselves of the 'amateur' status by publicising our past achievements and future plans to convince the public that although we are volunteers, we think and act professionally. Then, and only then, will we be on an even footing with the commercial ventures.

Another advantage of the formation of a national body will be that it will create the opportunity to share our experiences, share our knowledge and share our resources. Experience is a good teacher as we have already discovered during the workshop sessions. We realise now that our problems are similar and that in some cases the same problem has been attacked in several ways. Whilst local conditions can have an effect on methods of approach, checking with other museums on their experiences could lead to an even better, and hopefully an easier, way to do the job.

Our pastime covers not only the preservation of the vehicles themselves but also the preservation of dying skills. Many of the skills used in the construction and maintenance of the trams will be redundant in future years as modern designs and techniques employ far different methods than those used at the early part of this century. It is part of our responsibility as preservationists to keep these skills alive for future generations. The greater the pool of knowledge the easier this task will be.

As well as these skills there is a great deal of specialised machinery and tools associated with tramways, some of which has been lost in the early years as our collective aims on formation were to erect buildings, renovate some of the trams and commence operations. Due to lack of facilities, and more importantly finance, many items went to scrap metal dealers. In recent years machinery and tools have been saved and between the groups there is quite a collection. Although our workshops have not been established to the extent of, say, "Seashore" in the U.S.A. In future years it is quite conceivable that we will not need to go outside the association for even major work such as tyre replacement and wheel turning.

Similarly, a large quantity of spare parts has been amassed and in future years will prove invaluable as our already ageing fleets undergo maintenance and overhaul work. It is envisaged that in emergencies such items as complete bogies could be loaned to get a sister museum out of trouble: or for that matter into service. By either borrowing or exchanging tools, equipment and spare parts, we will be able to assist each other by mutual co-operation, within the framework of the association.

The formation of a national body will be a task of some magnitude as the scope of membership will require a great deal of thought. The range of groups to consider is difficult to determine. Ballarat, and SPER are the only museums whose collections are comprised solely of electric tramcars. Brisbane, Adelaide and the TMSV are basically all electric also, although Brisbane's collection does include trolley buses and the TMSV has cable cars in addition to their electric fleet. Adelaide covers the trolley bus field as well as the trams but also has a motor bus. New Zealand further complicates the issue as Wellington's collection includes trams and buses, Christchurch presents the general transport theme whilst Auckland goes further in so far as it forms part of a multi-facet technological complex. Dunedin, on the other hand, has only trams at the moment but could well enter a more complex field. Although not an electric tramway museum the ST&RPS is a tramway museum and whilst it is basically a steam tram preservation group it does tend towards being representative of the light railway cum side of the road rural tramway and at present includes light and industrial railway vehicles in its exhibits. The Hobart based group is an integrated road/rail preservation body with the railway interests predominating but does have the only complete tram and trolley buses in Tasmania. The preservation group centered on Launceston concentrates on trams but could expand their activities. WATM is mainly a bus group but does include trams and trolley buses within its scope. For our own part it is probable that buses will be included in our collection before long.

From the foregoing it will be seen that tramway interest merges into buses on the one hand and into light railways on the other. Another criterion to consider is the organisation and the aims of the groups preserving and/or operating trams and associated items. This allows a general division into preservation and operation by genuine, non-profit groups i.e. enthusiasts, as against profit oriented and/or straight tourist attraction groups.

But where do we draw the line?? Obviously, if membership is restricted to electric tramways only it will be a very small association indeed. Even if membership is to be restricted to those museums where the major interest is electric trams, several groups who have some particular interesting items, would not be a part of the national body.

Should membership be restricted to street transport items only; or should it be widened to include all tramways, including narrow gauge railways as well??? However, three state government railways are by definition narrow gauge, but being main line operations are possibly well outside the scope which we are considering.

Do we form the association to assist preservation of tramways, street transport or light railways and should it include groups outside the sphere of volunteers???

Do we want to further the volunteer movement only or is our main aim that of transport preservation in general with tramways perhaps predominating???

Do we include any organisation that preserves tramcars as full members, with the possibility of having other groups as associate members, or should a body be formed to cover all transport and industrial technology preservation and be operated as separate strands such as tramways, light railways, main line railways, steam traction, etc. etc.

We must be careful that the organisation does not become top heavy by having too many groups, but on the other hand many preservation groups could be after the same equipment range that we are, eg Zig Zag and Colo Vale, (in N.S.W.).

Having decided membership qualifications, the next main point to consider is the administration of the association. Whether it be called a council or some other title, it is basically a committee consisting of delegates from each of the participating groups. The number of delegates from each group is an important issue. The number can be specific, say two, from each society or can be based on a ratio of the membership in each society, say one for each hundred members: alternatively a ratio of the number of exhibits in each group can be used as the determining factor. Membership could also be on a state basis based on the number of groups in that state. It should be remembered that with a large membership the committee becomes a crowd and is too top heavy for efficient working. However the number is arrived at, the individual groups should appoint members who will be able to act on behalf of their society.

The Council's terms of reference should be defined and specific as to the task to be carried out. In our case should the council act primarily as an advisory body or should it have the council would meet at irregular intervals at times and places as determined by circumstances with the host group nominating the chairman.

Sub-Committees could play an important part in the association being able to concentrate on specific matters. These sub-committees will create positions for the involvement of more of our 'specialists', who will be able to talk to each other in the same language. These sub-committees would be set up to deal with specific matters and would be responsible for making recommendations to council meetings and for carrying out decisions therefrom. It is envisaged that most dealings of the sub-committees would be carried out by correspondence and the group leaders nominated at association conferences.

These conferences should be a regular part of the activities but due to the geographical location of our museums the timing of the conferences could range between one and three years.

As part of the role co-operation will play in the association, a specific group would be nominated to deal with a specific authority on behalf of all member groups e.g. the AETM would be the contact with the M.T.T.

Co-ordination of the council and sub-committee activities and general day-to-day running would be by a secretariat. Only a small number of personnel would be required and all should be from the same city or area, but not necessarily from the same group. The secretariat could rotate among the larger groups at least.

Management expenses are expected to be low and could be met by a levy on each participating group determined by size or income.

What should be the objects of the association????

The basic aim of the association is to secure a better deal for all groups and to be recognised as a major and important part of Australian and New Zealand transport history. As stressed earlier the initial aim

is to be recognised and appreciated by both government and the public alike. By combining our efforts in promotion we will be able to present a united front to government and semi-government bodies and instrumentalities.

Until now the operating museums in Australia and New Zealand have had no direct bearing on each other but as distance is less of a barrier than it was a few years ago, travel is increasing and our approach to the public must be reviewed. This is not a reflection on anyone, but our public relations can no longer be a secondary consideration; we must put on our best face at all times. Public facilities such as picnic areas and toilets are just as important to the public as the right colour scheme on a certain tram is to us. We must set a standard and it is imperative therefore, that we present a uniform approach to the public.

Even with only two tramway systems still in operation, more trams, spare parts and equipment will become available as older cars are replaced. Despite isolated cases, our relationship with the various authorities have always been good; in fact if it had not been like this, tramcar preservation would not be as active as it is. This relationship will be even more important in future years as experience has shown that, with our limited operations, wear and tear is still prevalent and an adequate supply of spare parts is essential.

It is obvious that if each organisation makes individual approaches to the authorities, trouble could be encountered by duplication and competition as happened to SPER in Brisbane. 39E bogies were set aside for SPER by the Transport Department. A N.Z. museum spotted same and applied to council who OK's. Bogies to N.Z.

There could well be a surge of acquisitions as Melbourne's replacement trams are put in service, and from outside the groups represented here, also. The time is imminent for the tramway museums to pause and reflect on what will be best for the tramway preservation movement. Maybe sacrifices will have to be made by individual groups, but the national cause should be considered first. Therefore it is in our own interest to co-ordinate the purchase or acquisition of exhibits, equipment and spare parts.

Until now each group has acted individually and until recent years this was generally acceptable, but by co-operation we will be able to eliminate direct competition and duplication of effort between groups.

To supplement traffic income, transport oriented publications are sold by our groups also. Many of the books are published by others outside the groups represented here but in recent years this trend has changed. With publishing, the greater the quantity the lower the unit cost. Unlike other organisations, printers are usually keen to receive payment.

Commercial activities, including general tourist items, could provide another source of income. To date our organisations have tended to shy away from this type of activity as it does not really fit in with the image of true museums. Additionally, kiosk type operations need staff to operate them: staff we do not have.

As can be witnessed from Puffing Billy, incomes can be increased by operating a kiosk and should catch on and become widespread in our field, the principles of bulk buying apply, just as they do for publishing. The national body therefore, could be instrumental in co-ordinating activities in these fields to rationalise publishing and other commercial activities.

One of the most difficult parts in the formation of this association

is the method of implementation and it will require considerable thought also, but to a degree depends upon the objects finally agreed upon. Once the membership and administration framework is decided, initial sub-committees could be set up. There are six basic topics which cover our activities.

1. Technical.
2. Exhibits.
3. Procurement.
4. Publicity.
5. Publishing and Commercial.
6. Operation.

These committees could initially determine their own scope of operation and make recommendations for their permanent function to the council. It could well be that other meetings will be required for initial council and sub-committee meetings, but in view of distance and consequent costs this may not be considered possible.

On the other hand it may not be necessary to set up formal committees for inter-museum problems; this conference has given us 'faces' to contact by correspondence.

Before concluding I would like to summarise the main points of this complex issue.

1. The reasons for the formation of an association of museums are:
(i) To gain proper recognition, (ii) To share our experiences and
(iii) To assist each other by mutual co-operation.
2. Membership and the administrative framework must give adequate representation for all groups concerned yet not be top heavy.
3. The basic objects should aim to satisfy all reasons for the association and the major ones are - (i) To present a united front to governments and semi-government bodies and instrumentalities.
(ii) To present a uniform approach to the public, (iii) To co-ordinate the purchase or acquisition of exhibits, equipment and spare parts,
(iv) To eliminate direct competition and duplication of effort between groups, and (v) Rationalise publishing and other commercial activities.
4. The workings of the association have to be implemented to give the greatest benefits to all.

CONCLUSION

With several museums operating and the possibility of others doing so in the near future, there are many ways in which the tramway preservation movement will benefit from closer co-operation and co-ordination between groups.

The reasons for the formation of an association are varied. The basis for membership complex and the structure and operation of the association requires considerable thought. It is a wide ranging subject with many issues to side-track clear thinking.

The volunteer transport and technology museums need an image. This national body will be a forum for opinions, a means for improvement and a catalyst for action. Just as our concepts are complex and wide ranging so is the action needed to stimulate acceptance and large

scale assistance. The national body will unite us and promote increased mutual understanding and co-operation.

Remembering that there is strength in unity, I leave you with many unanswered questions, a great deal of material for thought and trust that through discussion concrete proposals will be forthcoming.

After all..... That's Why We Are Here.