

NOTES ON VIDEO PRODUCTIONS OF THE SYDNEY TRAMWAY MUSEUM

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The overall history of the Museum's video productions is one of progressive development, using confidence gained from early productions to commit greater resources to achieving higher quality, and therefore increased sales on later tapes.

The story began when Roger Piper made his film available to the Museum. No editing of the film was permitted - and no editing was feasible on the video. Richard Youl did the transfer, shooting "off the wall" with a domestic video camera, and added some of his own film. There was no commentary, and the sound track consisted of the sound of Sydney suburban trains.

Titled "Trams", this pioneering production, done at minimal cost, demonstrated that there was a market for tram videos. About 160 copies were sold. It was then decided to use Jim Powe's film as the basis of further productions. Approximately 2 1/2 hours of film taken by Jim was transferred to tape professionally, but the transfer proved to be of poor quality, with flicker and other problems. Accordingly the material for Sydney Tramway Memories reel 1 was again transferred by Richard Youl, shooting "off the wall", with an off-the-cuff commentary by Don Campbell. The cover or slick was a colour photocopy, and sales amounted to a couple of hundred.

For reel two we paid for professional transfer using a competent and sympathetic production house, Systems Electronics. Very limited video editing was done, to save cost of the video editing suite. There was also a policy decision to "leave everything in", and not eliminate shots which were duplications.

The commentary was researched and written, and was pre-recorded by Don Campbell, for later dubbing onto the video. This was a technique which was not very satisfactory and was not repeated (although it is commonly used in professional productions). The commentary works better if the person speaking can see the scene on video which is being referred to - and also it enables any timing problems to be corrected on the spot through re-recording of the audio.

For reel two we paid for music for about half the production, leaving the old silent film without any accompanying music or commentary. This was done partly to save money, and partly because it seemed an appropriate technique - but it is not one which would be repeated. Again the slick was produced by colour photocopying.

Continuing strong sales led to a decision to further improve the production standard for reel three. We added a professional commentator and the cover or slick was produced by full colour printing. The production cost of reel three was around \$2000. The aim of the increased production standard, including the cover, was to get the video into the ABC retailing network, and this was successful. The ABC has continued to be a major outlet, currently selling around 100 copies per month of '*Shooting Through!*'.

Reels one, two and three exhausted the film taken by Jim Powe, together with a contribution from Ben Parle and some historic footage from the State Transit Authority. It was concluded that there was not enough other film available, showing different lines, to justify a fourth tape in the Sydney Tramway Memories series. The easiest step forward was to re-issue reels one and two, bringing each of them up to the same standard as reel three and thus getting them into a wider retail market, principally through the ABC. This was done, with considerable success. The historic black-and-white sequences in reel two, which included extraneous material such as football matches and displays at Sydney Showground, were shortened slightly, and background music was added to all of reel two.

Sales of these three tapes generated substantial funds for the Museum, running into several thousand dollars. The quantity sold of reel three is around 600, with the others not far behind.

In considering what to do next, the key request was for a video which would cover the whole system on one tape. There appeared to be two main options. One would have been to produce a short tape of about half an hour, with highlights from all available film. Such a production would have needed a clear story line, perhaps on the history of the Tramway and its contribution to Sydney. It would have probably needed extensive new material such as interviews with individuals. In brief it would have been a much more complex production

than the previous productions or the eventual alternative. It would have required considerable scripting and a fully professional film maker's approach.

The alternative - which eventually led to *'Shooting Through!'* was chosen not just because it was easier, but because it was believed that most people who buy tram videos get them because they want to see the trams in locations within which they are familiar - perhaps where they lived as a child, or where their parents lived. So it seemed sensible for the combined film to show every possible line.

By this time we had expanded our retail outlets slightly, to include some rail/tram enthusiast industry outlets, but notably also Grace Brothers. We learned from sales through the ABC shops and Grace Brothers that the tapes were of interest to people other than hard-core tram enthusiasts.

We received some helpful advice from Grace Brothers in planning *'Shooting Through!'*. They alleviated any concerns that the finished production would be unattractive because of being too long. In fact they said that length is a virtue: tapes shorter than an hour do not sell well, even if price is matched to length.

We were told that video prices were coming down. Whereas a price of \$39.95 might have been acceptable a couple of years ago, many tapes are now available at much lower prices. Grace Brothers and the distributor emphasised the importance of putting all the material on one tape, rather than selling a pair of tapes, because some retailers will not take tapes packaged as pairs; and they also encouraged us not to worry about the reduced quality of images made from 8mm film: purchasers do not mind lower image quality on historic material. Our Grace Brothers adviser also indicated that, contrary to our initial thoughts, trams had equal or greater appeal than steam train videos - because trams run along streets, and past buildings, with which people are familiar.

The decision to use a distributor was difficult and complex. Instead of having copies run off the master tape and distributing them ourselves - with a very handsome profit margin - we would be handing over the master tape to the distributor, who pays for the production of the copies and then distributes them, paying us a royalty on each tape sold. This royalty is much less than the wholesale or retail mark-up - but the distributor places the tapes into a very much wider market. In effect we were trading off a larger profit on a small number of tapes against the advantages of much wider distribution. Of course we would make the normal retailer's profit on tapes sold at the Museum or through our mail order list, which currently runs to some 250 names. Sales of *'Shooting Through!'* are currently around the 2,000 mark, of which retail sales by the Museum account for about 450, so the benefits of the wider market achieved by use of a distributor are obvious.

It is interesting to record that when we showed the partially completed tape to a number of distributors, we found that they were competing with their offers to handle the tape for us. It was not a case of persuading someone to do it, it was a case of picking the best offer.

We recognised that use of a distributor would have other benefits. The effort they put into promoting the tape would provide publicity for the Museum, increasing visitor numbers. So far our distributor, VDI, has spent in excess of \$10,000 on promotion of *'Shooting Through!'*: it has been used as a prize in competitions run by newspapers, it has been prominently featured in catalogues and it was endorsed as a merchandise item for the City of Sydney sesquicentenary. None of this would have been achieved without the use of a distributor: the Museum simply does not have the resources to make these things happen. Further, the distributor is selling the program overseas - not just to tramway enthusiasts but to a wider market. Again, the Museum could not have undertaken this activity.

Turning to the production of *'Shooting Through!'*, a number of key decisions were made. First we would gather all available material from both amateur and professional sources - the latter including the newsreel collection and other film from the National Film and Sound Archive. We obtained Roger Piper's film again, and had it transferred to video professionally. Second, we would do a full editing job - a time-consuming and therefore costly task. The editing of *'Shooting Through!'* on video took seven full days, at a cost of about \$1,000 per day. The result of a full day of editing is about 20 minutes of finished tape. The beginning and end of every shot has to be identified, and every shot has to be assessed for brightness, colour and sharpness, with appropriate adjustments being made.

Another important decision for *'Shooting Through!'* was to vary the style of music, especially having regard to the overall length of the tape. We chose piano music by Scott Joplin, which is out of copyright, and paid for professional recording by a professional pianist. The decision was made to issue a map sheet with the tape. It was decided that the closing sequence should provide a strong promotional message for the Museum, and the

shots at the Museum were professionally filmed. The total production cost for 'Shooting Through!' is in excess of \$12,000. The return on this will come partly from sales and royalties and partly, as already mentioned, through stimulating visits to the Museum.

There is also a potential for the tape to earn royalties from its inclusion in the library of Film World Research: organisations seeking to show street scenes of Sydney in bygone days will be able to use extracts from 'Shooting Through!' for which the Museum will receive fees.

What would we do differently if we were starting again?

The answer is: not much. I am sure that our approach, of learning to walk before we ran, i.e. by starting off on a shoestring and building up, was the sensible course.

Advice for other museums? Don't be perturbed if all you have is 8mm film. If it is of good quality, i.e. correctly exposed and steady, then it can be satisfactorily used as the basis of a video promotion. Conversely there is no need to waste money on editing such material on one inch video tape. This is expensive overkill for the image you can get off the film. 3/4 inch equipment is entirely satisfactory, and comes at a much cheaper price in terms of editing time.

It is essential in preparing the commentary to have a detailed knowledge of the scenes being shown. Especially when you are working from film which is unedited, or with a variety of film from different sources, it is essential for editing to be able to recognise locations and put them into a logical sequence.

How to get started? An essential requirement is adequate source material: you should be thinking of a finished length of not less than one hour. Production of videos requires someone interested in and knowledgeable about films and film making (or video and video making). Such knowledge is essential to turn enthusiast material into something acceptable for a wider public - which is necessary if satisfactory sales are to be achieved. This person must develop the concept for the production. As mentioned earlier, there also needs to be someone with a detailed knowledge of the locations to be shown. Incidentally and importantly, scenes should not be chosen or edited so that they show only trams. In editing 'Shooting Through!' we deliberately included scenes showing people, cars and other motor vehicles - because they add to the interest of the tape for many viewers. It is important to identify a competent and friendly production facility with 3/4 inch editing equipment. Finally, you need lots of spare time to commit to the job.

What you do not need is a lot of money. Production of tapes to the standard of the *Sydney Tramway Memories* series, which is very acceptable for widespread retail distribution, is not necessarily an expensive proposition.

In conclusion, it is appropriate to acknowledge all those who have contributed to the development of the Sydney Tramway Museum's video tapes. Richard Youl's experimental production of Roger Piper's material was a pioneering effort without which the later and more ambitious productions would never have been attempted. Jim Powe, apart from contributing the film which provided the basis for the *Sydney Tramway Memories* series, also provided helpful advice on the standard requirement for retail sales, both in the technical aspects of video production and in the presentational aspects, such as the use of a full colour printed cover. Alan Phillips of Grace Brothers and Geoff Wylie of VDI, our distributor, also provided guidance which as already mentioned was extremely helpful. And finally it is important to thank all those who contributed to the film from which the videos have been made. Without their generosity in making their film available, none of our videos would have seen the light of day.

Questions

Barry King: Enquired as to how SPER coped with copyright.

Don explained that SPER sought initial material that was original or out of copyright (eg Scott Joplin 'rags' in 'Shooting Through!') though copyright of about \$700 was paid through the National Film and Sound Archive for material reproduced from Cinescope Newsreels.

Les Stewart: Asked was there a critical cost analysis done on the videos.

Don answered that the early videos, Trams and Sydney Tramway Memories 1-2-3, had been produced and distributed by ourselves. Early dubbing had been done cheaply through a Religious communication outfit and relatively large profits were made per individual tape. However, as we had a limited distribution network the overall result was not as spectacular.

COTMA CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS, BENDIGO, 1994.

To use a distributor meant lower profit margins with royalties and sales mark-up from SPER's own sales being the main income. However, this is compensated for by the much wider distribution network including major retailers, hobby shops, tourist outlets and interstate, and more recently international, distribution.