

**COTMA Dinner – 16 OCTOBER 2016 – Christchurch, New Zealand.**

**“It all started 60 years ago in New Zealand”**

**Address by New Zealand tramway historian Graham Stewart MNZM.**

Ladies... Gentlemen... of COTMA...

Where would we be without the support of the lovely ladies present this evening ....

It is great to see a good attendance from the great Australian continent ...

I remember well my first visit to Ballarat and Bendigo in 1977 – having ridden and enjoyed riding the then recently introduced Z class trams of Melbourne – experiencing my first ride on an Adelaide interurban to Glenelg.

The highlight of my visit was going to be riding a Birney Safety car again on reaching Bendigo – in the land of drop-centre trams – Yeh Right!

I had experienced riding Birney trams back home in New Plymouth and Invercargill in the early 1950s.

To my dismay – the power workers were in the middle of an industrial stand-off – no trams were running – no power. I found the trams would resume service the day after we left! ...shock, horror!

But our good Australian friends are known for deals! – They suggested if I was that desperate... I could hire a tram... so bang went most of the housekeeping money for the next six months. The last of the big spenders!

The tram I chose was Birney No 30 which had recently carried Prince Charles around Bendigo... The motorman was most obliging – stopping when I requested so I could dash across the road and record all the highlights of Bendigo... as we rode around the city in our private-charter tram.

For New Zealand – it all started 60 years ago... So this year marks an anniversary – a New Zealand anniversary – because in time it led in a roundabout way to the formation of COTMA some years down the track... the Council of Tramway Museums of Australasia.

60 years ago in 1956, I undertook a one-man crusade in Auckland to have a tramcar preserved for posterity.

The City Father's response... a scale model would be adequate. I think I was then looked upon as needing the services of a psychiatrist...

Two years previously, in 1954, I had lead a campaign to save the first tram to be assembled in Auckland, No. 11, which had been decorated for the Golden Jubilee of tramways in 1952. It is now a prized exhibit at MOTAT. I had organised a 'Letters to the Editor' campaign – confession – I actually wrote all the letters myself and had friends mail them into the newspaper.

No. 11 had been used as an exhibit at an Auckland Birthday Carnival at Western Springs, and following the Carnival, was placed in pieces alongside a fence at Western Springs, the body covered with a basic shelter and the bogies left to rust.

The outcome of my 1956 request via the Transport Board to the City Council to preserve a tramcar was all negative and on 17 April 1957... I received a letter from the Auckland Transport Board's Secretary headed 'Request for Tram for Preservation', stating that there had been no interest

expressed in the Metropolitan area, so I duly became the nominal owner of a 17-ton tramcar (No. 253) – which was no surprise....

Fortunately, I had struck gold with my wife's family, her father who had been a motorman in Auckland in the 1930s...had gone back to farming at a place then unknown in North Auckland... on the road to Dargaville... called Matakoho... At that stage, its claim to fame was that it was the birth place of Gordon Coates who was Prime Minister from 1925 to 1928.

I had shown at a post- Christmas family gathering with my wife's cousin, Mervyn Sterling present – some Kodachrome 35mm colour slides I had taken of the running of the last trams in Auckland and spoke about the disgraceful lack of any interest in Auckland to preserve an electric tramcar.

Enter Merv Sterling, who took to the challenge like a fox terrier with a bone, the establishment of the Old Time Transport Preservation League was to follow – and we had technical brain... a man with electrical / engineering knowledge... within the family – my brother Ian Stewart.

So within 37 days of receiving the official letter – we had prepared a site at Matakoho, laid a length of track, and our first exhibit, tram No. 253 had arrived at Matakoho. (24 May 1957).

The rest is now history... trams being lugged north on the back of timber trucks / the selling of scrap metal made available by the Auckland Transport Board to raise funds... the building of a tram barn to house the exhibits.

We then made a cheeky request, for No. 11, now covered with overgrowth with no protection from vandals, to add to the Matakoho exhibits. The thinking in Auckland was starting to slowly change. We were not granted our request. The tram was gifted to the Auckland Zoo where it was to stand stationary for many years under a canopy exposed to the weather. Finally, the establishment of MOTAT and the return of the trams to their original home base...

I want to pay tribute tonight to my brother Ian – who passed away in May this year in his 90th year to that great terminus in the sky. He was a vital part of the jigsaw in the early days at Matakoho on all matters technical... and when MOTAT came to reality... he gave of his life for the establishment of a working electric tramway at Western Springs.

He was a perfectionist.... Ian could never handle 'RSB' people as he called them – 'Rip Shit and Bust' Merchants...

His contribution to what the MOTAT tramway is today is beyond belief. I understand there is to be a building associated with the trams named after him at MOTAT, a right and proper permanent tribute for the important role he played over many decades.

Now let us turn the pages back to the late 1950s again... as a small group of young enthusiasts having formed the OTTPL ... we decided Matakoho would be where a national transport museum could become a reality covering all forms of our transportation past. We had big ideas and no money.

I, having the tramway knowledge, the historical facts, and following much correspondence with the WCCT... had secured the last remaining double-decker in Wellington, No. 47, the freight tram No 301, and the right to a double-saloon...

It was then that Mervyn, Ian and I drove south to Wellington in June 1958. We chose double-saloon No. 135 which had recently been out-shopped.

When the Wellington tramway closed in 1964 – we added to our trophy cabinet Fiducia's 244, 252, and 257. I had requested 260 (the last tramcar to be built in New Zealand), but the GM declined that request wanting this tram to remain in Wellington... so 252 was chosen – the last first generation tram to run through the streets of NZ – which is awaiting restoration at MOTAT. Henry Brittain has finally forgiven us for this raid on his home territory...

On the way home we called in at Ohau and secured a staircase from one of the Big Ben double decker's that was now privately owned... as one staircase was missing off No. 47. The collection was starting to grow!

We drove home via Wanganui to inspect the Baldwin steam Tram, No. 100. Let me tell you the Wanganui Story... a real Ripley's Believe it or – while shopping at a local dairy milk-bar in Auckland I found my purchases had been wrapped in a Sydney newspaper and therein was a story about a Sydney tram group who owned a Baldwin steam tram at Wanganui, but did not have the funds to ship it to Australia, it appeared there was no alternative to scrapping. Enter Peter Mellor who has lived in Australia for many years, who was a vital stalwart of the OTTPL in the early days. We posted a letter to the Sydney Group and they replied saying they would sell the locomotive to us at a reasonable price as long as we guaranteed its preservation. Both of us had recently married, had cash flow problems, but managed to find the funds between us without being faced with divorce proceedings. The price from memory was about 100 Pounds, quite a sum of money in those days.

I am of course talking about the beautifully restored Baldwin steam tram at MOTAT today.

Shortly afterwards, I did a trip to Christchurch – I had, it seems, become a vintage tram Corporate raider!

I should qualify that statement – no other preservation society had been formed at that stage in New Zealand, we were earnestly endeavouring to save vehicles before it was too late.

I had written to John Fardell, the General Manager of the Christchurch Transport Board, who I had previously met, about the fate of the Kitson steam tram and the former horse tram which were in temporary storage in town, exposed mostly to the elements.

I had hopefully played my cards right in the past, sending Fardell prints of my photographs when the trams were still running as sweeteners. Sitting in what seemed to me at that age, a very large and plush office... I broached carefully the subject I had come to discuss. – that the OTTPL of Matakoho, would look after the Kitson and the former horse tram with loving care in the proposed National Museum of New Zealand Transport. We had about ten and half members at that stage...

He was firm in his reply – he would never allow these two historic vehicles leave Canterbury. End of discussion.

At the conclusion of our meeting, Fardell kindly drove me around in his car to inspect the Kitson steam tram and No. 43, the former horse tram, then under temporary storage at Bill Clapham's yard.

Fardell was loyal to Canterbury and rightly so – It was a meeting that if he had conceded to the Matakoho request I proposed, it could have changed the course of transport preservation in Christchurch. Who knows?

In later years, I had a feeling that John Shanks must have been lurking in the shadows.

But later, we did a raid way south to Dunedin and secured the only remaining original Mornington cable car trailer, No. 107, now at MOTAT. Don McAra would not have approved!

Within a few short years Christchurch (1961) and then Wellington (1964), had soon established their own transport museums with great success – and the same pioneer stories can be told of both these Museums.

So my story is not a unique story, the frustrations and knock-backs would have been the same throughout Australasia in the early days of our endeavours to save a tram or two or three for the future.

Since these humble beginnings; there have been an unbelievable number of tramway vehicles saved throughout New Zealand – from the horse, steam, cable and electric eras.

All remarkable achievements and all done by dedicated volunteers over the decades – with much blood, sweat and tears (to quote Churchill).

These happenings were all vital links in the wheel of progression in the saving of these historical vehicles – and the reason we are gathered here this evening.

In Auckland it all started 60 years ago this year – this month – as the trams were ending 54 years of service.

So let us raise our glasses to 60 years ago... when it all started in God's Own... and I thank you all for inviting me to address this August gathering tonight.

Graham Stewart MNZM

– COTMA Dinner, Gondola Restaurant, Christchurch,

Sunday, 16 October 2016