

Collections Are We Losing Them

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My presentation is on a subject that I feel needs addressing. It needs to be discussed, thought out and hopefully a result can be achieved. In talking about collections I am talking primarily about film and slide collections.

I wish to put forward my views of the danger of losing collections and the importance that collections be accessible.

A lot of us in this tramway following now have our own film collections going back some 30 years, and in some cases further. What do we currently do with it? Why did we take it? How do we store it? Is it something absolutely personal to us in our private life? How often do we resource it?

Interesting questions to ponder on.

When I say some of us have collections going back 30 years, I also point out and we all know that a number of people who have these ageing collections are themselves ageing, and sadly in some cases have of recent times passed on. **WHAT HAPPENED TO THEIR COLLECTION?**

If we are to have a view of going forward with ideas on preservation of the collection, we have to be able to jump the biggest hurdle by asking ourselves the biggest question — Do I want to pass on my collection?

If we can address that in the positive, and I hope for the onward preservation of the nation's history, we can, I then pose the suggestion of how do we do it.

There are the formal museums that willingly take collections. These collections are safe, so safe it is almost impossible to resource them in any easy manner.

At this point I want to relay an experience I had in the PTC that can be paralleled in the overall intention of this paper.

I was a member of the working party set up by government direction when the Public Transport Corporation was looking at the future of the railway and tramway film and negative collection. The PTC management had taken the easy way out, in cost cutting, by deciding the collection was too costly to maintain and in their quick fix mentality of the time saw the State Library of Victoria contacted to take the lot.

There was an uproar from the unions, these people who most times seem to get bad press, but on the other hand these dedicated people who really work on the job and save much of our national estate such as the Regent Theatre or the Rialto buildings to the eventual accolades of the Press, and in this case the unions had to show their hand. From being on this working party I gained a good insight into the security, maintenance and access of film collections in the State Library hands. Some years ago the Victorian Railways publicity branch negatives ended up in the collection of the State Library. Whilst not for one minute doubting the integrity and good intention of the library in making copies of photographs available, there is a bureaucracy and formality involved in gaining access to the collection.

One has only to compare access and viewing of the collection, still at the PTC to that at the State Library to see the advantage of keeping a collection formal, but local. Obviously the combined transport unions working party submission was accepted by the Minister, the collection saved and

re-vitalised by people who understood it and of course the career-seeking manager moved on to another government department and project.

What are the alternatives for our personal collections? We can keep the collection at home. Well that's fine, while we are alive, but lets look further ahead than that. I feel a responsible alternative is the setting up of a group in the form of a Trust or Management Body to collect, administer, maintain and provide access to donated film collections.

As a starting point we have, in Victoria, the archival collection of the Australian Railway Historical Society. Some of this material has been collected directly by the society and a sizeable amount has been donated from private collections, both by persons still alive, who wished to see it preserved and accessible to researchers, and of course some was presented by the estate of deceased persons. The collection is housed at rooms rented at Windsor Station.

I recently spent an evening there on the Tuesday archives night, and was interested to see a few members of the Society come along to do research but more interestingly two people from the wider community had booked in to come along to research for projects they were undertaking.

The Ballarat Tramway Museum has two resource areas that we can look at in this paper.

We have had for some 20 years a 'library' at our member's house at Bungaree which has developed into a collection of railway timetables and related publications. This collection has been a valuable resource for tour notes for a number of railway tours and particularly for the production of the quarterly magazine the *Australian Railway Enthusiast*. The comparison here is that the collection is known about and easily researched by the Association of Railway Enthusiasts.

At the tram depot we have of more recent times established our formal archives collection and, for example, the Wal Jack slides have been easily accessed for our post conference slide show. Most importantly, the collection has been placed by the estate of Wal Jack into our archive and is, as a result, available to us all.

Our interest in photographing the tramway scene for some 30 years has not only recorded the tramway scenes of the past but has added greatly to the recording, on film, the social history of the nation. The National Film and Sound archive have lately been very keen to receive collections of amateur 8mm film stock because it records directly the social lifestyles of the families in the subject of the film and as importantly, the surrounding scenery in the shot. But above all, we have recorded our scenes for our direct interest and we need easy, affordable and informal access to these collections.

There are many Trusts, or other bodies that directly administer the estates of persons for an infinite number of reasons. Some give grants, some take into care real estate properties whilst others take into care significant items such as musical instruments, art collections, motor car collections. Those having actual physical items in their care usually allow inspection of them and the use of them for research.

In theory, a Trust could be set up with the election of a Board representing the tramway/railway fraternity and it could gain some funding by grants from government arts areas and private Trusts because of the significance of the visual history in the collection. There could be a secure area obtained reasonably easily, for instance a tramway museum may allow an area to be constructed on site or, in the Melbourne area, a railway station building can be rented. With the development of automatic ticketing there will be some quite secure brick station buildings available for rent.

The Trust could earn funds from access fees to the collection and the promotion of the availability of its use would have an upward spiralling effect. The promotion of the Trust would bring awareness to families disposing of estates and this would see collections saved. We have all been aware of photographic collections being disposed of through ignorance of the surviving family in locating any suitable repository.

The success of setting up and building on the collection would be dependant on the professionalism of the management team and the ability of potential donors to realise the asset they have, and their wider interest in the importance of the collection and their understanding of the reason they took it all, that now turning out to be the recording and dissemination of a rich historical resource.

One important thing to remember about film collections, or any other museum collection, is where possible keep it as a living collection. That is there should be no cut off point in the timeline. The collection should be continually added to as history goes on and this creates an active interest in it and adds to its importance for research in trying to market it. Some researchers may want a photograph of a tram taken quite recently and the more the collection can be used the more business it generates. A way to gain potential donors to the Trust would be to promote secure storage of the donors collection and convince him of the ease of access to the point that with the burgeoning film collections most of us have, it may be palatable to store in the archives the non directly used portion of our personal collection. The donor would have the rights of access and even the rights of removal from the collection, similarly to a public library, for some use outside the archive area. The Trust repository could be considered an offline holding store for his collection and as such may tempt people to donate and even further use the Trust. Similarly with the example of the production of the magazine the *Australian Railway Enthusiast* it would provide an excellent resource for *Trolley Wire* magazine.

The spirit of the intention is to see some arrangement set up to securely store, and offer for research, publication and general benefit to the community requiring it, the asset of our personal film collections. These collections in total represent an extremely valuable record of the tramway/railway history along with an equally important visual and social record of the nation.

I feel the time is right to push ahead with a project of this style.

Question/Comments

Film/slide collections – danger of losing – storage, accessible, preserve.

Reason for taking film/slide – are we prepared to pass on collection.

How/where?

Archive/record trust – overcome bureaucracy/cost – state, federal institution.

Committee to administer – guidelines (compliance, maintenance).

Greater integration with kindred societies.

Les Stewart: excellent idea. Archives/management of records (NZRLS).

John Radcliffe: Reservations. Two tiers – archival repository v working collection.

Photos – copyright – taxation incentive for the arts – digitisation (expensive).

Temperature control, security (fire, theft).

What are you preserving eg Windsor station/Bungaree.

Ascertain demand – location – may suggest centralised aggregation.

Curator – avoid extensive inquiries, continuity.

Personal domestic storage may not be anymore secure than say Windsor station.

John Phillips: No 2 Goods shed, Melbourne – National Rail Museum?

Ancient glass slides not appreciated by non-enthusiast.

Ron White: Personal collections – persuasion to ensure they end up in the ‘right’ hands – no bullying?

Peter Hyde: Scanners (digitisation) expensive. Ever changing technology – out dates current data storage methods/procedures – compatibility.

Richard’s summary: Localising collection. Catalogue kits. Arts grants. Acid free envelopes. Archive/storage boxes. Professional advice.

John Shaw: Call to ensure that the concept is followed up and developed before the next conference.