

Starting a Young Group at the Sydney Tramway Museum – some considerations.

David Critchley – Sydney Tramway Museum

The problem of attracting and retaining young people at the Museum has been a concern of mine for quite a while. Given that memory retention usually starts from the age of around three and the Sydney tramways closed 47 years ago, then any Sydneysiders with any memory of the tramways would need to be at least 50 years of age and this also holds true of most traditional tramways throughout Australia and New Zealand. Thus attracting new Members with a 'sentimental' attachment or memory of Sydney trams is becoming increasingly difficult. While there are young people joining the Museum, the numbers are simply insufficient to continue Museum development at the same pace as is currently achievable. For example, we are only just in a position now to be able to roster one full Traffic Crew of members whose birth year is after 1961, let alone restore aging tramcars and maintain tramway infrastructure into the future.

It must also be remembered that for younger people, the reality of traditional Sydney trams exists only in the Museum. Seeing vintage Sydney trams in the streets occurs only in photos, videos and in the imagination. Therefore attracting and retaining young people as active members relies heavily on feeding their imagination, satisfying their curiosity and making the trams available to them as much as possible. At the same time we need to pass on the skills we have to ensure that the achievements of the Society continue to grow.

The Tramway Museums of today grew out of the imagination of young people:

"The idea of the South Pacific Electric Railway (Sydney Tramway Museum) was born on the afternoon of Saturday, 9th April, 1949, on an AETA hiking outing [along the abandoned Sydney Ferries Ltd Parramatta tramway].... On the return hike to Camellia [two young lads], to the disgust of the rest of the party, rolled a set of steam tram trailer wheels along the adjacent industrial railway siding which ran parallel to the old tramway right-of-way as far as Sandown.... During this act of physical exertion the two [lads] discussed the possibility of purchasing the remains of steam tram motor 5A.... During the following week an approach was made to Messrs Joseph Edwards and this firm was willing to dispose of 5A for 100 pound. [This was] beyond the means of an apprentice on a wage of two pound four shillings and six pence and a schoolboy with a 5 shilling per week pocket money allowance." (Trolleywire Feb 1972)

Those two young lads were Norm Chinn and Ken McCarthy, then aged 18 and 14 respectively. However, within a year and joined by Ben Parle and Bob Young they managed to convince the AETA, despite strong opposition, to send a request to the NSW Commissioner for Road Transport and Tramways for the body of an L/P Class tram to be made available for preservation. Instead one complete tramcar was made available. That tram was 154, the first electric tram to be preserved in Australia. The rest, as they say, is history.



It was the enthusiasm; imagination and probably inexperience, of young people that really kick started the tramway preservation movement. The world has changed greatly in the past 50 years, but what has not changed is the enthusiasm and imagination, and the inexperience, of our young people. Young people today face even greater controls and challenges than faced even by the pioneers. What we need to do is to nurture and guide that enthusiasm and imagination, pass on the knowledge and give our young people the skills to continue to develop our Museums with the same dedication that those have come before had.

Photo; Crowds surround LP Class 154 on the last day of the Brighton-Le-Sands

tramway. 3 September 1949. Prominent in the photo are the young faces of some of the pioneers of tramway preservation. Norm Chinn, Ben Parle, Ken McCarthy and Arthur Perry. Within 12 months of this photo, LP 154 entered preservation, and these lads were instrumental in this achievement.

History, Organization and Structure.

The Sydney Tramway Museum's Youth Group started in 2004 and has averaged between seven to ten members ever since.

The Youth Group is a small informal group of Museum Members and/or Friends between the ages of 12 and 17. This is roughly the same age bracket as a Scout. At the age of 18 the Member is encouraged to join the 'general' members workforce, as it would be difficult and possibly inappropriate to mix under age lads with legal age lads. When meeting as a group the minimum number of 'young' participants is three and the minimum number of adult supervisors is two. This ensures that there is no possible question or accusation of inappropriate behaviour. In the event of attracting female participants, a female supervisor would also be required.

The Youth Group meets formally every 6 – 8 weeks. Young members are made welcome to participate in most other Museum activities at any time, however to hold formal meeting anything less than 6 – 8 weeks may interfere with homework, study and family and social life. As with the Scouts, the Museum is a voluntary organization and the importance of home, work and study as the first priority must be emphasised to all youth.

Meetings can take place on either a Saturday or Sunday and generally take up the entire day. The Program is normally devised and run by the supervisors, but our young lads increasingly suggest what they would like to see and do. Activity ideas are set out below, but a variety of activities should be undertaken, both meeting to meeting and also during the day, rather than concentrating on one goal or activity.

Recruiting

The obvious place to start a youth group within your Museum is with the children and grandchildren of your own Membership. An article in SPERNews helped kick start Sydney's youth group, with interest coming from young lads who were already Museum Members. Regular news items about youth group activities in the newsletter, and in Trolleywire, has kept up the profile of the group. Thereafter the most effective recruitment tool is word of mouth, and this comes from having a interesting and fun programme, a variety of activities and dedicated leadership.

Leadership

Any activity involving young people must have some form of responsible adult supervision or leadership. These Members should have an outgoing and approachable personality, the ability to organise activities and have a commitment to, and understanding of the needs of young people. They may need to take on the role of mentor, trainer, historian, careers advisor and even counsellor. A Leader or Mentor needs to be able to look after the interests of the young people and the Museum and there be prepared to defend the interest of the you people, accept criticism from others and even discipline individuals were necessary. Three Museum Members are responsible for the youth group at Sydney; they are Hayden Holmes, John McFadden and myself. We have had to tackle a number of issues over time, from emotional crisis', family issues and even a potential suicide. At all times, discretion, compassion and professionalism is important in successfully dealing with these issues. There are resources in the community to assist you with the more serious issues, so don't think you need to deal with a young persons problems alone. Be prepared to ask questions and find help if and when it is required.

Before starting a youth group in your Museum, please check any State or National statutory requirements for the nominated supervisors, such a Police background checks, Child Protection legislation, Public Liability and other Insurance and Parent Permission. Qualifications in Learning or working with youth may be an advantage but not necessary to successfully run a youth group.

A Name

Giving the club a name is also important; a name gives the sense of belonging and permanency.

Avoid the word 'junior' or any 'us and them' connotation. Perhaps it would be better to leave the name up to the participants, but suggestions such as 'Jumping Jacks', 'Birney Club' and 'Dreadnoughts' could be useful. Our young group had a number of suggestions including 'Trammies in Training' (or TiTs for short) but settled on the name 'Jumping Jacks', which not only has connections with the small trams, but also the lively motion and energy of young people.

Program and Activities.

Presenting a variety of activities is the best way to retain enthusiasm and interest. Therefore the program should contain a range of activities that explore different aspects of the Museum and the Tramways. From tramway history to restoration to operating a Museum, there is an almost endless mix of ideas and resources to cater for the varied interests of the participants.

Activities may include:

- ❖ Induction / Introduction to the Museum
- ❖ Safety
- ❖ Tramcar and Infrastructure Restoration
- ❖ Tramcar maintenance
- ❖ Heritage Conservation
- ❖ The Small Objects collection
- ❖ Museum Grounds (Gardening etc)
- ❖ Tramcar History
- ❖ Models
- ❖ Tramcar Painting
- ❖ Research
- ❖ Photography
- ❖ Tramways in other cities and countries.
- ❖ Tramways in the modern world.
- ❖ Tramways on the internet – eg YouTube or Yahoo groups.
- ❖ Collecting ephemera
- ❖ Shop Talk/Gossip Forum
- ❖ Books and Magazines
- ❖ Video's and DVD's
- ❖ Learn the Bookshop
- ❖ Learn how to be a Museum Guide
- ❖ Special Event roles
- ❖ Tours – eg other Museums (Powerhouse, MoS etc), former Sydney tramlines and relics, the Sydney Light Railway

Thus a typical Meeting day may contain one or two activities/workshops as well as Lunch and a tram ride. Museum members with 'expert' knowledge can also be invited to run an activity or workshop with the supervisors present. For example, John Matts or Ian Hanson could be invited to run an activity on Tramcar Painting, Vic Solomons could workshop Small Objects, Bill Parkinson or Mark Newton may wish to run an activity of maintenance etc. Thus not only are the participant introduced to a wider cross section of the membership but the 'onus' of running activities is not left solely to the supervisors. The young lads also get experience at the different facets that make up the museum and they can then pursue their particular interest.

A Group Project or Goal also has merit, although I would not use the goal/project as the basis of an entire day's program. Instead a longer term Goal or Project could be set whereby the participants work on Project for a few hours before moving on to another activity.

Ideas for projects could include:

- ❖ Small restoration projects.
- ❖ Cataloguing and Recording archives, including transferring records onto Computer.
- ❖ Cleaning and maintenance of small objects.
- ❖ Upkeep of the Display Hall displays.
- ❖ Tramcar or infrastructure painting.

Passing on the Lore

As memories fade so the traditions and knowledge of the how the tramways operated is being lost. This includes often-unofficial procedures and idiosyncrasies that made the tramways of each city unique. The number of Museum Members who were former employees of the Tramways is rapidly diminishing and thus the knowledge is also being lost. A Youth Group may be one important way of ensuring that tramway lore isn't lost. Museums and interest groups can have structured meeting and interviews to record or write down the reminiscences of retired trammies, but more often than not details are forgotten or glazed over. Instead, when retired employees are invited to participate with young people in an operational environment, then memories and anecdotes are more forthcoming. Encourage your young people to keep up the traditions and lore of the tramways so that they are not lost to future generations.



Pitfalls and Problems.

No organization or club is exempt from problems, and the youth group is no exception. There has been tension and criticism from within the general Museum membership towards the youth group and some of its activities and also issues raised by the young people themselves about the Museum in general. It is important that the youth group leadership listen to both sides and diplomatically solve each issue as it arises. Often it is just a case of misunderstanding or misinformation and most problems can be solved with a few quiet words.

Young people often boil over with enthusiasm; they want to do everything and have everything right now! They have little fear and will attempt almost anything; but their eagerness to learn is often tempered by their inexperience. This requires patience and training to overcome, not derision and a barking disapproval.

Young people seem to be unwilling to get their hands dirty. It has been said that they run a mile when asked to do mundane or dirty duties. No one likes doing the dirty jobs and this is particularly so of young people. They didn't join a Museum to clean toilets or sweep paths, they joined to ride trams and have fun. They will do these mundane jobs, eventually, but it will come with time, experience and familiarity with the Museum. Believe it or not they have probably less experience in cleaning toilets than they have at driving trams!

Most importantly, we don't need impatient 'grumpy old men' who in one breath reminisce about the fun times they had as young enthusiasts and the often foolish antic that they got up to and then in the next breath turn around and chastise young members for much milder actions or misdemeanours. Far too many times have I seen young people make an innocent error and have his whole world shattered by some older person barking their disapproval at them. It is often the last time we see that young person, they walk away disillusioned embarrassed and angry.

Instead we need people who will take a friendly approach to young people; people who realise that young people are the very future of the Museum, people who have the patience to work with young people, guide them, teach them and train them to do things the right ways and pass on the skills and traditions of over a century of tramways. Only then will the Museum achieve true success.

Summary

With thought and a willingness to succeed, a Youth Group could prove a real winner in attracting and retaining young people at your Museum. It not only aims to capture the imagination of young people but also uses variety to satisfy their curiosity and at the same time introduces them to the many facets of a working Museum in which, hopefully, they will eventually take an active role.

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Sydney Tramway Museum 2008



Youth Group members, Kaine and Sam await departure of the next tram.
25 February 2008.



Sam gets into the spirit of the 1950's Event day, 2007.

Both photos – David Critchley