

MUSEUM MOTIVATIONS AND OBJECTIVES

By Dr. John C. Radcliffe

Chairman, Council of Tramway Museums of Australasia
President, Australian Electric Transport Museum (SA) Incorporated

Museums, like any organisation, are made up of three components, the technical component, the administrative component and the social component. Unless we strive to achieve maximum efficiency in each of these areas, it is evident that we will not have an effective museum.

Furthermore, in the operation of our museums, we must have clear organisational objectives. In other words, we must have an answer to the question "What are we really trying to do?" At the same time, we must recognise the social aims and aspirations of museum members. Unless through the method of operation of the museum, members can achieve their own personal aims, the museum will fail. Members' motives can be diverse, and may not always be understood by the members themselves. Some will be involved because they recognise the historical significance of the vehicles they are preserving, others because they enjoy the challenges of tackling difficult creative tasks. Another group seek acceptance by a group of like-minded people, while yet others may derive satisfaction from providing enjoyment to the public. A few appear to derive some satisfaction from an outlet for their aggressions. Needless to say, with a wide variety of motives, there are opportunities for dissention. Occasionally, individuals "take their dolls and go home". However, conflict can also lead to a dissident group setting up a new organisation, resulting in further division of the total resources available for tramway museum development in Australasia. Worse still, it leads to an exacerbation of the administrative difficulties of the public transport authorities on whose goodwill we all depend.

That being said, however, it must be accepted that in a free society where energy and entrepreneurship are recognised, individuals must have the right to set up new enterprises if they wish.

The fact remains, however, that we must have clear objectives. These must be set down before the task is started. It is not satisfactory to do something on the spur of the moment and then later try to incorporate it into one's stated objectives.

The most important area where this applies is in the objectives of the collection. Too often, as has been pointed out by White (1973), museums acquire exhibits on the basis that "it is free: it is available: we ought to have one". The question is not "can we afford not to miss it?", but rather "can we afford to manage it if we get it?". Members' emotions can be harnessed to pay for new acquisitions much more readily than to maintain them. First and foremost, we are "transport preservationists", not "transport acquirers". This must be the primary object of a museum, and how well we do it will be the basis on which we will be judged. This was quite evident to the Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections (Piggott *et al.* 1975) who observed that the weakness of the voluntary railway museums is their inability to preserve the vehicles which it is their proclaimed aim to preserve. Having saved the exhibits from destruction, are we now allowing corrosion, weathering and passenger use to achieve the same result?

Selection of exhibits is important. We must be careful not

to ignore the commonplace, which is in fact more historically significant, in favour of the unusual. Cars of the "W-2" and "O" classes have played a much more significant role in the history of Australia than have Birney cars. Before acquiring an unusual object, its worth should be evaluated and consideration should be given as to whether its acquisition will jeopardise the preservation of cars of greater historical merit.

Too often, the first goal is "how soon can we run it?" There is no shortage of people who live for the moment rather than plan for the future, as witnessed by the success of the tram excursions of the late 1950s and more recently, the success of steam train tours. Immediate operation has short term appeal that may not be in the long term interests of preservation. Preservation must be the first priority.

Once preservation status has been achieved, and this simply means secure housing and adequate maintenance facilities, consideration can be given to restoration and operation. White in his paper makes a plea for care in restoration. Restoration must involve scholarship as well as technical skill. I think it inevitable that a few technical compromises become necessary to successfully operate a museum tramway, but these should not be introduced unnecessarily. In the longer term, it will be the historical responsibility rather than the mechanical ingenuity we have used that will be respected. Most museum groups will have some members whose interests lean towards the pursuit of history. Such individuals may not always be technically skilled in tramcar restoration, but they are invaluable in laying the groundwork for a good restoration job. Museum managers will recognise the need to harness all skills which are at their disposal.

This then brings us to a consideration of what is to be operated. We need to minimise the operation of elderly historic vehicles which are hard to maintain and for which few parts are available. However, if we are a museum rather than a fun park, we must operate vehicles which are seen by the public to appear to be of historical significance. The public, at least in the first generation life of a museum, will expect to ride on vehicles with which it is familiar. At St. Kilda, we get frequent requests for the operation of the Adelaide cars which may not be in traffic on that particular day. Rarely do we get similar requests for the non-Adelaide vehicles. Several museums are considering the acquisition of vehicles whose primary function is to maintain the museum service, thereby reducing the use of truly historic cars. Nevertheless, the public expects to ride in cars which it recognises as its own. For this reason, it may be better for museums to concentrate on providing a service with duplicate cars from their local city, even though they have had major compromises made in their mechanical reconstruction, rather than to use "foreign" cars of no recognisable local significance. At least two Australian museums are already considering this approach.

This then brings us to the conflict between acquisition of complete cars of no direct historical relevance by individual museums compared with the need of other museums for parts, often from the same cars, for correct historical restoration work. In my own mind, despite the fact that none of us wish to see the unnecessary destruction of cars, the parts should go to those museums requiring them rather than to museums which can use any sort of vehicle to run a routine service.

It is therefore important that we rationalise our demands

for parts and equipment and our demands for cars. These are decisions we are better to reach among ourselves, rather than to have them arbitrarily made by a transport authority which cannot be expected to know the historical merits of the individual applications before it. Such rationalisation will of course mean some loss of autonomy by individual museums, but could be well worth considering in the national interest. Maintenance of the support and co-operation of transport authorities is crucial to the long-term future of transport museums.

Ultimately, it will be as much the national outlook of the museums as a whole, rather than the actions of individual museums that will determine our public acceptance and recognition. When we started, we were considered at best an odd band of individuals with the peculiar idea of preserving equipment which everyone knew was best destined to the scrapheap as soon as possible. To-day, the preservation of historical artifacts is recognised as a useful activity in the creation of a better society. However preservation of the work of the transportation engineer is not yet accorded the honour which is given to those who preserve the arts and crafts. We need to take a national approach to achieving our own corporate objectives. We have to harness the individual aspirations of our members to achieve these goals. We cannot afford the luxury of these members being spread over too many projects, for few projects will then be completed. It is only through communication, co-operation and consideration that we will all achieve our aims.

Furthermore, it is essential that we plan for the future. The coming generation must be encouraged to accept and adopt our enthusiasm for tramway museum operations. Provisions for posterity can be started, but certainly not completed within one generation. We must always keep in mind the necessity to pass on our heritage to the future by encouraging our newer younger members to accept more and more responsibility for our operations.

This in turn requires an acknowledgement of the three components required in the operation of a museum - technical skills, administrative skills and social skills. These must be used in welding together a group of individuals to achieve the successful operation of a museum.

REFERENCES

- Figgot, P.H. et al (1975). - "Museums in Australia 1975" - Report of the Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections (Australian Government Publishing Service : Canberra)
- White, J.H., Jr. (1973). - The railway museum : past, present and future. Technology and Culture 14 : 599-613.