

IS YOUR MUSEUM DYING?

Presented by Richard Gilbert, Ballarat Tramway Preservation Society

This talk is about the membership of museums or more particular, as I see it, the ageing membership and lack of new entrants to membership.

Let's look at the formation of our museums. They were formed during 1950's, '60's and '70's. Those formed in the 1950-60's were formed at times of great change.

The war had been over for some years and a whole new boom of development and changes were taking place in communities. The old shackles and values were out.

Transport, of course, was in this field of change.

In the railways, the overgrown tramways, the steam locomotive was being displaced by the diesel locomotives. In street transport, the tram and the trolley bus were being replaced by the diesel bus.

There was a clamour among the few who were interested, to record them on film, and there were those who took the unprecedented steps to purchase vehicles with the intention of operating them.

The museums formed in the '70's were an ongoing pursuit of the same ideals of the museums set up earlier. To those who formed the museums of the '70's it seemed that anything formed 10 to 20 years before was something that happened in the dark ages. Now it has snuck up on those who formed these museums of the '70's. Our museums have been going for virtually 20 years.

We should look back and take stock of ourselves.

Are we going well? Does the enthusiasm and the drive of those formative years still exist or have we slowed down, had a loss of some members and not much of a gain of new members?

A lot of people who started these museums are still running them.

Puffing Billy - the popular 2'6" gauge railway operating near Melbourne, which was at the height of its membership in the 1960's, had a schools section. A lot of schools around Melbourne had railway clubs and as such, groups from these

schools lent a hand at restoring the railway, along with the many volunteers directly working for the Society and I was one of those workers. I think it is fair to say that most of us joined at a time when this type of recreation was fashionable. In the days past, there weren't many other recreational interests other than using your abilities to perform physical tasks.

We must look around and say, do we have a problem of gaining new members and do we have an ageing membership? **Is your museum dying?**

Today there is so much to do on a Sunday, things that you just couldn't do in the times our museums were set up. You couldn't buy butter, petrol or beer. There were no markets, shopping or picture theatres operating. Some councils even chained up playground equipment.

And so - we joined and helped create a tramway museum, or else we stayed home and mowed the lawns.

But for the younger generation there are a lot of activities. Electronic games, computers, sporting competitions and changes in perceived ideas of recreation. **Is it still acceptable to young people as a recreation today?**

We should say, was our museum set up for a cause, or a certain euphoria which existed at the time, or has it created its own dynamics and laid some foundations that will see it go on to up and coming generations?

We must keep gaining new members. We can't hog our museum - we can't have too many members. We heard at the workshop yesterday, the discussion about welcoming and involving new members.

How do we get new members? In the pursuit of our pastime and the pressure of running it, are we overlooking our ageing situation and should we take time to collectively think about and plan a strategy?

Do members here feel they have the same situation that I have spoken about here? Do any feel they don't have a problem?

Young people like to experience new things. They may not stay with a tramway interest but they must be fostered and for those who do stay, or at least come back some years later, the museum has gained. The museum gains even if they stay for only a short time. Young people don't want to be involved in rule stricken societies. Where an age requirement to achieve a particular position is some time away, it seems like centuries to some people. We all have to have these minimum age rules in the Traffic areas, but our tramway has gotten around it in one way - assistants on single trucks. we have to have rules - let's be as welcoming as we can.

We have to relate to what young people see of our tramway when they join it. Unlike many of us, who by being involved in our museum, have rekindled the memories we have of trams running around the system we know, the new member develops his interest because of what he sees now in front of him as it exists.

Do we have a plan of welcome, in the form of productive tasks for a new member? Do museums continually get new member applications, say monthly? Do we see those new members or are they armchair ones?

Getting the new members: You can't create them. They usually have a basic interest in the tramway/railway world and from that point you foster it. There are new generations of young people around us, and although we know of our museum and its membership facility we tend to forget these new generations have to be informed of what we offer. Advertising our society to them in the tramway/railway publications may make them aware of our membership that is offered. When they join us we can then follow through the steps of welcoming them and fostering their particular interest in the museum, in the ways that were discussed in the workshop yesterday.

Do you feel that the point exists that we have to put our societies before the potential younger members who have a basic railway interest?

Look at the reasons members may join:

Not necessarily historical
Technical, Educational, sense of achievement purely pastime.

Achieve something they wouldn't otherwise do - drive and work trams.

Applies to older - new members.

We have all put so much into our respective museums, both for the pursuit of our personal interest and for the betterment of the heritage of the nation, so much so that we must put an effort into tempting the community, the new generations about us, to joining up and thereby ensuring a continuity of the preservation and operation of our dearly loved collections.

General Discussion

Bruce Gamble (MOTAT) said we have to develop an aggressive marketing approach. Railways are possibly getting interest at the expense of tramway

museums. The profile of trams in the public eye is not high and may be we have to get families involved in addition to individuals.

John Radcliffe (Australian Electric Transport Museum) quoted extracts from a UK Museum publication regarding population trends in society and its effect on the number of volunteers available, i.e. falling birth rates and older populations with its consequent effect on people who normally make themselves available. The problem is how to address the change in society.

Dick Jones (South Pacific Electric Railway) felt that we must encourage those who wish to join a museum to actively participate such as driving trams, which have the advantage over trains as they are much easier to actually drive.

Martin Grant (Perth Electric Tramway Society) questioned whether anybody had thought about canvassing schools

Richard Gray (Wellington Tramway Museum) noted that they had written to all the schools in our area but apart from one or two applications to join, results have been disappointing although there could be long term results.

Martin Grant (Perth Electric Tramway Society) suggested that maybe we should be looking for teenagers who are taking woodwork and metal work at school.

Lewis Nyman (Maitland Tramway Park and Museum) noted that sporting groups are competing with us and in some instances parents are reluctant to let their children join museums as they will be unattended. We must encourage parents and their families to come to museums and participate in its activities. We must try and identify those people who simply want to get away from home as distinct from those with a genuine interest in tramways.

Richard Gilbert (Ballarat Tramway Preservation Society) asked whether it is because people want an alternative to their normal work and join a museum to further this interest? Armchair members still play an important role in keeping membership numbers up. The Western Australian Railway Society at Hoffen Valley has a large number of junior members who are very active. The railway has a high profile and people join and stay.

Bruce Gamble (MOTAT) said we should invest in younger children by making ourselves available by talking to them, running special trips etc.

John Phillips (Ballarat Tramway Preservation Society) posed the question - if we join up younger members will they keep their interest up? We have to ensure we don't develop into a child minding organisation and we also need to have a balance of compatible ages. The average age of many members is between 40 and 50 and very few younger members. What we really need is a plan of welcome to induct new and potential members. Interpersonal relationships can

either help or hinder co-operation amongst members. We need to:

1. advertise in Rail magazines.
2. Develop a welcoming/admission policy.
3. Parent members to encourage their children if they show an interest.
4. Invite participation/membership.

Kevin Parker (Perth Electric Tramway Society) noted that Sunday papers in Perth have a tourist feature and suggested that use could be made of such a facility to advertise and promote patronage and membership.

John Radcliffe (Australian Electric Transport Museum) concluded the session stating that we need to raise our social status to a higher level to avoid the image that we are a bunch of nuts. We must encourage newspapers and TV to take more interest in our activities. We need to make more use of special occasions and maximise our publicity before the general public including some gimmicky things if this can be done. We have to get away from the image that we are a bunch of hobbyists - we are in the tourist industry and must project ourselves.