

CANADIAN COUNCIL FOR RAILWAY HERITAGE ("CCRH" or the "Council")

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Abstract

The Canadian Council for Railway Heritage was formed in June of 1992 at a Calgary, Alberta meeting of interested railway history groups from the four western provinces. The Council's principal objective is to increase the professional credibility and further the collective objectives of organized railway heritage and preservation groups in Canada. Operating to date as the "Western Region Committee", the CCRH has been effective in serving as a medium of communication and cooperation among the stakeholders and participants within Western Canada's railway museum and historical societies community. It is hoped there will eventually be affiliated "Central Region" and "Atlantic Region" Committee counterparts which will, in turn, catalytically work together among the members of the three Regions.

Rationale of Organization and Objectives

The first of two reasons for forming the Council was to **improve communication** among diverse Canadian railway preservation interests. The Western Canadian railway heritage "movement" was fractionated - and fractious! - but contained great potential for mutually-reinforced achievement if its various factions and interests could be unified. (For whatever irrational reasons, members of certain groups did not like - and would not even talk to - members of other groups!) Inspired by David W. Monaghan's "Reflections on the Canadian Railway Preservation Movement"* in *Branchline's* February 1990 issue, Founding Chairman Jim Lanigan believed that if the various factions could meet and talk together, they would find that they not only shared many common interests but also experienced common problems. If they could just get talking together, they might find that they actually liked each other. Once they realized that they shared much in common, liked each other and could be friends, they would start to work together to achieve common objectives and/or assist each other in the achievement of their respective objectives. The net result was that member institutions started to meet twice each year at rotating venues. They are no longer adversely competitive against, but are now cooperative with and both complementary - and complimentary - to each other.

* In this pivotal article Mr. Monaghan discussed the history of preservation of railway artifacts and equipment in Canada which dates, with few exceptions, only from the late-1950s. Public transit's transition from street railways to rubber-tired vehicles and the railways' changeover from steam to diesel-electric motive power provided the impetus for a literal "rescue mission" of historic equipment. Mr. Monaghan wrote: "Convinced of the worthiness of 'the cause' and fuelled by a belief that resources would eventually become available, collections were amassed and stored under far from ideal conditions." Unfortunately, the resources' failure to materialize resulted in many collections deteriorating to the point of becoming major liabilities. Mr. Monaghan further lamented that had the failed Canadian Council on Railway Heritage's member societies in 1979 been "more willing to work constructively", perhaps some of the conflicts and shortcomings of the preservation movement could have been overcome and managed. However, this original lobby group "failed due to lack of coordination, a failure to pool resources and because of distrust".

Mr. Monaghan concluded with "The primary approach to present and future concerns should be through more concerted and collective actions between societies and institutions. Every attempt should be made to resuscitate the Canadian Council for Railway Heritage to provide a forum for expressing the concerns and obtain the required resources for its members. . . . Societies, particularly those with collections, should review their policies and produce clear terms of reference with which they may review existing and future holdings. In doing so, they must gauge their aspirations to their resources with a view toward excelling in their particular field of endeavour. . . . In short, railway historical societies must take a realistic approach to their activities and missions. . . . By expanding horizons, by seeking partnerships with other societies . . . , the preservation movement may obtain the resources upon which its survival depends."

The **second reason** for formation of the Council was to **increase cooperation** among Canadian railway heritage interests because too much retired equipment had been preserved, much of which should never have been preserved to begin with. As a result, collections tended to be too large for the resources available to manage them and, in some cases, they had fallen into a state of disrepair or physical deterioration. (Some of this surplus of equipment had survived simply because it was available, there seemed to be an inability to say “no” when it was offered, so it tended to be accepted without consideration for either its historical significance, technological merit or heritage value.) Much of the equipment had been preserved “in isolation” in certain collections; whereas, in certain other collections it would have provided a synergistic relationship with equipment already present and contributed to an overall theme and “story line”.

The Council believed that it was necessary - indeed, compellingly imperative - to rationalize and upgrade the small “n” “national” collection (defined as “everything that has been preserved across Canada to date”, because Canada does not have an official “National Collection” of heritage railway equipment). It was important that the individual collections made sense within the overall Canadian heritage preservation movement, and didn’t just reflect the personal interests and agendas of certain individual organization members. This belief arose because of concern about the continued relevance of railway heritage, not only to today’s generation (which hasn’t been nurtured in a railway-dominated and dependent society) but particularly to future generations. Very clearly, only collections of high calibre, and with adequate resources for their management, will survive and continue to be relevant to posterity.

As a result of the foregoing, member institutions’ collections have begun to be rationalized. This has involved trades or exchanges of equipment between institutions (sometimes on the basis of “future consideration” only); outright deaccessioning of equipment to other institutions and; in some cases, scrapping of equipment when the latter was either in an advanced state of deterioration, did not fit into either its existing collection or that of another institution, or which really had insufficient merit to warrant continued preservation.

Philosophy for Preservation of Historic Railway Equipment

As stated above, an important impetus leading to formation of the Council was a desire - if not a compelling imperative - to “upgrade and rationalize Canada’s small ‘n’ national collection”. The concern arose because, in the freight-only era of most regions of the Country where passenger and express service is no longer a necessity and has faded into memory, people are no longer dependent upon and tend to overlook the presence of railway operations. In an era when the average little boy no longer dreams of becoming a locomotive engineer and people no longer identify closely with railways, there just is not widespread public interest in railways, or their history and heritage. The challenge becomes one of making railway heritage relevant to a broad public in the “space age”. In so doing, given a chronic lack of resources in the volunteer and hobby sector, again it is likely that only the highest-calibre museums and collections will survive.

Philosophically, the Council began from the premise that the last thing Canada needs is another railway museum, as far too much railway equipment has already been preserved and much of that has fallen into disrepair and sometimes disgraceful appearance. More cabooses have been preserved than anything else (several hundred, according to the *Canadian Trackside Guide*), followed by numerous business cars and a reasonable number of locomotives. Preservation efforts to date have generally concentrated on the “head end” and the “tail end” of the train, but relatively little equipment has been retained from in between. (It is important to remember, however, that the regular daycoach, workaday express car, mundane boxcar, and lowly stock car, which actually performed the service and generated railway revenue, were what railroading was really all about.) The foregoing problem has been compounded by railway enthusiasts’ tendency to preserve that which was novel or unusual (because it was neat!), as opposed to what was typical or representative, and to never say “no” to an offer of a piece of equipment, simply because it was available and offered. A common argument has been that “if we don’t save it, no one else will”. Well, perhaps no one should, because you can’t save everything and certain things just do not possess sufficient intrinsic heritage merit or value to warrant preservation.

It is critical to assess the motives of a preservation group's individual members and why they want to get involved in railway preservation, and it's always important to ask for whom they're saving these relics of times passed. All too often the justification (or rationalization) is that amateur groups are preserving for posterity when, in reality, they're preserving for themselves. Such acts serve to remind them of past (and perhaps happier) times or sometimes their activities are for certain ego gratification motives. Too seldom in the past has there been careful consideration of what's important and necessary to, or worthy of preservation for, well-considered and stated objectives. For that reason, throughout North America a number of ill-considered collections or derelict individual displays exist to haunt serious preservationists - and there is something to be learned therefrom. It is necessary to consider an artifact or collection's value not only in terms of what is important today, but also what will continue to be of importance in the future - and the objectivity to assess such matters is a rare talent relative to what is often a very subjective and emotional process.

Obviously the Council isn't actually opposed to more railway museums, but unless they are carefully planned and justified in the public interest, they will probably fail. (Remember the adage "If you fail to plan, you plan to fail".) The planning process has to start by deciding upon the **primary theme** (perhaps with **secondary themes**) to be depicted - and such themes should be of fairly **broad public interest and appeal** and ideally compressed into a **succinct mission statement**. The next step is to formulate a general **collection(s) policy** through which the theme(s) will be represented, followed by a specific **collection plan** through which the collection policy will be implemented and achieved. Adherence to the latter steps will greatly assist in achieving a meaningful and cohesive "collection of worthy artifacts" as opposed to a disjointed *ad hoc* "accumulation of (sometimes) peculiar *albeit* interesting objects".

The time has long-passed when a museum collection could be formed simply upon an eclectic, technological orientation because, on a continuing multi-visit basis, such institutions narrowly appeal at best only to the seriously interested or, at worst, the dreaded "rivet counters"! As such, it may be useful to consider the importance of a socio-cultural, politico-economic or perhaps a "lifestyle" emphasis to proposed themes (e.g., as at Cranbrook's Canadian Museum of Rail Travel), as they tend to have both broader public appeal and will probably achieve greater institutional longevity. Once the Collections(s) Policy and Collection Plan has been completed, it is important to prepare a comprehensive **business plan** to which all of the foregoing will form an integral part. A business plan structured on as long a time horizon as possible is critical (with "budget quality" financial projections for the first three years), as a museum may be taking on unrealistic risks if it aspires to - or acquires - a collection for which it cannot realistically expect to have the resources to manage.

Regardless, although **preservation is important**, once a decision has been made to preserve an artifact, it has to be recognized that **presentation and interpretation** of the object are **equally important**. Ultimately - particularly within the mandate of a public museum - you really can't have one without the others. Once an artifact has been preserved, it is desirable that it be presented in an appropriate environmental context to have visual appeal, and crucial that it be interpreted within an appropriate historical context to have meaning. The latter is particularly critical, because the visiting public has to be told what an object is, what it did or was for, and ultimately you have to publicly-justify why it was believed to be of sufficient interest and importance to be preserved, especially for future generations. Such reasons might include that it was very representative of an era, it was technologically precedent-setting or, for example, it may have been associated with an important historic event or social milestone in the history of the nation. If such objective justification is lacking, however, an artifact may not be worthy of preservation within the public domain. (Certain private preservation efforts reflecting the personal interest(s) of - and with the costs borne by - individual hobbyists is a very different matter, of course, and some of the foregoing comments obviously should not apply thereto.)

Conclusion

The Canadian Council for Railway Heritage believes that the preservation of railway heritage in the public domain can be viable. However, the Council's founders perceived that, as a catalytic first step toward the increased professionalism and assured longevity of serious railway heritage preservation in Canada, certain well-planned and executed preconditions were necessary to achieve high-calibre collections. Regardless, effectively addressing the "ideals" of its stated objectives remains a daunting challenge, and will ultimately be achieved only through a national commitment by Canada's principal railway heritage stakeholders.