

A FEW MEMORIES OF 'W' CLASS TRAMS by Marilyn Fahey

"They are taking them out of service this weekend." The man sitting opposite me on the North Richmond Tram said.

"I have been wondering why they have been left to get so dirty" I replied "Now I understand."

We were total strangers but soon involved in a conversation about something that we both had an interest in. Although he appeared to have a deeper interest than I had, he told me that he had travelled over from a Northern suburb to take a last ride on the No.78 W class tram along Chapel Street.

"I guess they will use newer style tram" I said as we clattered along the tracks "These are very noisy and the number of people living along Chapel Street is increasing all the time."

"They are too slow and they have always had a problem with their brakes" he told me.

I smiled as I remembered my father showing me an old W class tram dropping a load of sand onto the tracks to assist with stopping at the corner of Montague and Park Street, South Melbourne. The tram was crowded with passengers and coming down the modest incline of Park Street, it was probably at its weakest braking capacity.

Come to think of it the tram was probably was not so old then which was the 1940's. Memories started to flow as I recalled my long association with W class Trams.

This wasn't the first time they had been scheduled to be taken from service but somehow they had always had a last minute reprieve. I expect the W class trams that run around the city for tourists would stay in service as they seem to be so popular.

I don't think I ever got over my surprise when the people of Melbourne made a gift of a refurbished W Class tram to the Danish Royal couple as a wedding present and several other W class trams have gone to overseas destinations, so they definitely appeal to some. I remember being thrilled to see a W class tram operating in San Francisco where it was a great tourist attraction

These trams were a home grown feat of engineering being built in the West Preston Tramways workshops since early in the century, that is the 20th Century. They were heavy because we had a plentiful supply of steel, no need to skimp and our tastes then ran to sturdy rather than sleek.

The original interiors were polished wooden benches along both sides of the interior cabins called saloons and the middle section had slatted wooden seats with duckboard flooring to allow the mud and rainwater to drain. This space was also the 'smoking' area because believe it or not you could and many did smoke on public transport, another useful feature of the duck board flooring was its availability as an ashtray.

Men sitting in the saloon section were often guilty, even then, of 'man spread' but almost without exception men would surrender their wider seat space to a lady so their presence in the saloon was tolerated.

The middle section of the 40's W class tram had the entrance and exit through an interchangeable doorway, the doors were made of striped canvas and were pulled down and locked with a nifty leather bound half circle foot hold. Very occasionally the 'Connie' would allow a small child to release the canvas and let it fly back up to the top at the end of the line. This side swapping happened at each end of the tram route and the canvas provided the only shelter for passengers in the middle section, one side down and the other side up for the entire trip, no sliding doors then but on the upside access to trams was rapid with people jumping on and off whilst the tram was slowing to a halt.

The 'Connie' or Conductor was the male or female ticket seller travelling with the passengers. They carried large leather bags with tickets to sell and a hefty weight of coin from collecting fares and making change. Over time the 'Connies' became increasingly female, this was good for kids because quite often they would give a child the ticket stubs, believe it or not this was considered to be a treat.

Another duty of a 'Connie' was to replace the pole carrying electricity to the tram motors. These poles had a small wheel to connect the tram to wires above the tram line. These wheels often jumped the wires and the tram would grind to a halt, the 'Connie' jumped off when this occurred, caught the dangling rope and manoeuvred the pole and wheel back onto the electricity wires.

At the previously mentioned corner of Park and Montague streets the tram had to turn the corner and the pole would often come unstuck, the following replacement and sparks flying from the wheel was a great treat to watch.

There were times when the tram was so crowded that the 'Connies' were not able to make their way down the tram to sell tickets so everyone got a free ride. Although small paper boys managed to make their way through the passengers selling the "Herald" and then hop off at the next stop with the 'donated' change in their pockets.

But like all things they had to be improved and finally we were treated to sliding doors, leather covered seats, the poles and wheels were changed to wide electricity connectors, better brakes were installed but they never licked the noise of the heavy W class trams rattling over the multiple joins in the track along Chapel St.

And Clang! Clang! Clang! We are jerked back to the present as an ever vigilant driver slams on the brakes to avoid a mobile phone using jay walker. The W class tram enthusiast and I agree that technology is on the improve but regrettably, there is always a percentage of the population who are less than competent users of new technologies.