

THREE AMBITIONS ACHIEVED by Erica Downard 6/2/23

Three small ambitions of mine were achieved in the 1980s during a period of intentional motivation: Visiting Egypt, working on Melbourne's trams and appearing on the "Sale of the Century".

After coming to the end of years of self-employment as a badge-maker, I had saved enough money for an overseas trip. This included a marvellous archaeology-based 14 day tour of the major sites of Egypt.

On returning home, I became employed by the Public Transport Corporation as tram conductress No. 1089, with the obligatory bottle green uniform. The training took place in the PTC offices above the old Hawthorn tram depot near Leonda's Receptions. There, former trammies taught everything from understanding running schedules and how to manage the general public, to staying warm in the winter months.

At the South Melbourne depot in Kingsway, where I was stationed, my friends were Magenta, Squish and Dave - all new employees just like me. In commencing as a conductress, the natural progression was to become a "Marmalade" (that is, a connie/driver), then on to becoming a full-time driver. We conductors worked in pairs with drivers on the famous W-class trams and many vintage vehicles. The newer A- and B-class trams, including the articulated versions, were coming into service in the late 80s and we were trained for those as well. The well-known routes out of my depot included No. 15 St. Kilda Beach, No. 109 Port Melbourne and No. 1 South Melbourne Beach.

The South Melbourne Depot was commonly known as the "gay depot" due to the number of openly homosexual and trans-gender employees. The depot was also multi-cultural with Chinese and Greek personnel and people of Middle Eastern descent - of all ages and genders. We were a social bunch, meeting off-duty for pub dinners and picnics. My first experience of a truly blue collar unionised workplace was at this particular depot.

It was during this time that I achieved another ambition before graduating to driving: I was a contestant on Tony Barber's quiz show - earning myself the legendary Bruce and Walsh diamond stick pin.

There were happy times on-the-job: the relief of reaching a terminus on a long, busy run, gulping down a hot take-away coffee and chatting to the driver. Or being handed the working-class Sun newspaper that needed to be read and returned before the end-of-shift. Or searching out all my passengers while squeezing through a packed tram car calling out "Fares, please!". Certainly, the now obsolete job of conductor with their brown leather bags, ticket punch and sturdy shoes was a uniquely Melbourne experience.

Though only for three years, this was a memorable time indeed. And I'm honoured to have once been able to call myself a Melbourne connie.

