

# Change--It's Inevitable

By David Dewey

The last decade has seen many changes in how we communicate, and what we do for relaxation and entertainment. These changes affect the society in both membership needs and museum visitation. Our Society's biggest economic element is the Museum. Not only is it our largest financial drain, it is also our largest income producing activity, mostly via the "Run a Locomotive" program. While many of our members are "hard core" railfans, most of the visitors to the museum are "general public," people to whom railroads are primarily a curiosity.

What draws people here, or to any museum facility, may be different for each visitor, but the overwhelming element is curiosity. How a museum keeps people coming, staying, and supporting the museum has been subject to much debate lately. On the Internet, there has been a discussion of "movement as the essence of railroading." The majority opinion there is that railroads fascinate because they are large, noisy things that move, and that stationary displays of "dead" equipment cannot convey that. Portola is even mentioned as one of the few places where "stuff" moves.

I am willing to theorize that this desire to see "Action" is one of the signs of the basic changes in society's approach to leisure activities. We are now bombarded with quick, fast images; our games are no longer flat boards with figures moved by a manual roll of the dice, now they are interactive video, or virtual reality. Stuff moves; we are intimately involved in the action we create. No longer do we consider a visit to a bunch of static displays of stuff a satisfying experience.

What we are asking for, in Museum Speak, is "Smoke & Mirrors." It's greatly debated by those who think the artifacts (OK, "stuff") should be left alone, in an arrested state (of course, if the "stuff" is subjected to the elements, it's not arrested, it becomes the "rust garden"), and those who think that only active, operating interpretations (i.e., running trains) can communicate the message.

What it boils down to is saving the stuff, and getting the general public excited enough about the stuff so they support the museum. Getting the public excited is becoming more and more difficult as they have become used to that fast paced, active entertainment mentioned earlier. This major shift in what the public looks for in recreation has happened just within the last ten years. It has caught most of us by surprise. It will take some time for the "established" management people to adapt and react to the change. Meanwhile we will see a crisis in preservation support and funding while the evolution of museum presentation and develop-

ment occurs. This is something like the metamorphosis stage of the butterfly's life, in a cocoon. We can't visually see what's happening, but the end result is either a plain moth, or a beautiful butterfly. Hopefully the existing museums can weather the financial "storm" this evolution will cause and emerge as butterflies.

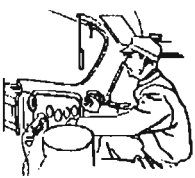
It will be an interesting (diplomatic way of saying "difficult, gut wrenching") next few years while we try to work out how we are going to attract more visitors and preserve the large significant collection that we already have. Not that we will be alone in this endeavor. All museums will be doing this, we just have bigger "stuff" than most places.

Some of this is actually simple: make the visitor (guest) feel welcome and comfortable. People today expect a clean site, with a well-marked entrance. They expect rest rooms that are up to present day standards, or are so "Historic" and old-fashioned that they are considered, "part of the experience." Today most visitors expect rest rooms with tile floors and walls, baby changing tables, etc. -- check your local fast food place, or shopping center, for a good example. This wasn't the norm ten years ago when we opened, but it is now (I hadn't even heard of changing tables two years ago!). The volunteers at a museum now expect similar facilities, too. I'm happy to say we're working on that with the remodeling of the shower car!

People have also become somewhat passive in their exploration of new things; they expect to be guided in their museum visit. There are many ways of doing this; electronic hand held speakers that pick up recorded messages at view stations), personal guides, guide books, "tours" at selected times. Now before everyone jumps up and tells me, "This isn't Sacramento!" I'm not suggesting that we are, or even try to be. We are different; the experience one receives here is different than almost any other railroad museum. I would venture to say its "better," but this is relative; for some it's better, for others it's not, but for all it's different. I am just saying that we need to look at and change how we treat our visitors so we can keep up with their changing expectations and needs. This is the only way we will be able to "keep the doors open" and live up to our motto, "the WP *Lives* at Portola."

You can help too; next time you're visiting, look around and see if you have any ideas, or see something you think should be changed (you could even do this at other museums, see if there are any ideas we could "appropriate" --if caught, I will disavow any knowledge of your actions).

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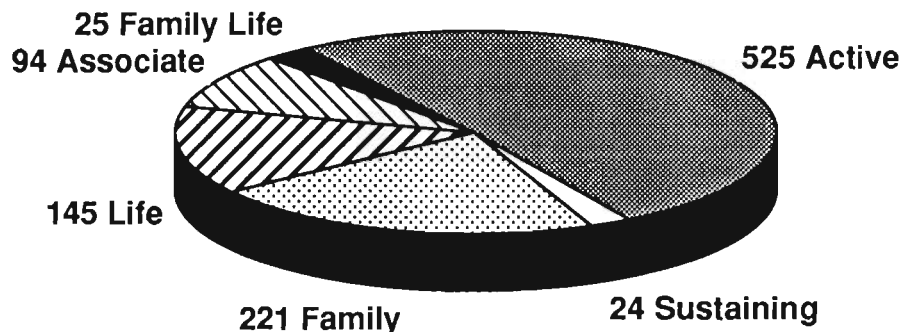
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