

Diplomacy and the Disparaging Remark

By guest columnist John S. Walker

It's not uncommon for members of a group to occasionally hear disparaging remarks made about their organization. Sometimes the remark is harmless, even humorous; "How many locomotives have the museum added to the collection this week?" But misinformation and spiteful remarks need to be challenged. Letting these remarks go unchallenged may give them some appearance of credibility and might discourage people from joining our organization, visiting or supporting the museum. Before we can respond to these remarks, we have to examine why the remark was made in the first place and by whom.

Strangely enough, the people who seem to complain the most about railroad museums and the railroad preservation movement in general seem to be railfans! They are not members of our, or any other railroad museum. Yet, they seem to feel some type of righteous indignation if we don't perform to their level of satisfaction! Their remarks may be due to some hidden resentment. Perhaps an offer to help was rejected, a suggestion was scoffed at, perhaps a donation was not appreciated to their satisfaction. Poor attitudes towards an organization can easily be developed through ignorance, rumors or false innuendo.

As members of the FRRS it is important for us to double as museum diplomats. We have to defend our museum by stopping wild rumors, taking the time to explain why the museum has taken a particular action or the process involved in running a particular part of the museum's operation. Sometimes you may not have an answer, but you can always offer to find out or refer the question to the proper authority (your director's phone numbers are listed in the front of The Train Sheet). A simple yet careful explanation will usually go a long way towards defusing a disparaging remark or correcting false information.

Sometimes the person making the remark needs to be challenged. If the person is one of those people who thinks they know everything (but does nothing but complain-you know the type) you may have to deflate them a little to put their remarks into perspective. Ask the person how they would have handled the situation? When was the last time they visited the museum? How many hours did they volunteer last year? What committee's do they serve on? What projects have they been working on at the museum? Ask the person if they are even a member of our organization (If they're not, you might even point out that it's really none of their business then-is it?).

Always remember to be polite. More often than not, an organization is judged by the conduct and quality of its members. Who knows, maybe they do have a better idea (please pass it along to your museum). Maybe after you explain the situation, their impressions will be reversed and you can persuade the person to join the museum or volunteer on a project. Suggest that if they are so interested in the museum, they should join and quit getting their information out of left field.

I don't know of any organization that doesn't have setbacks or occasionally fails to meet its own expectations. Volunteer organizations are composed of hard working, good intentioned people who agree that something should be done-but may not agree on how it should be done.

Even if and when we get frustrated, we must be careful about where and to whom we express these feelings. Just because we may feel that something isn't going right, without a full understanding of the situation, an outsider may get the impression that the whole organization is screwed up!

This editorial was prompted by a remark I recently overheard about the speed of our restorations. I was attending a slide show with some local railfans when a slide of the new California Northern Railroad was shown with a train of old wood sugar beet racks in tow. No sooner had one person expressed relief that we are preserving three of these historic freight cars than another person remarked that the cars were "just going to sit up there and rot away with the rest of their junk"!

OUCH! That really stings (especially when I'm the manager of the Freight Car Restoration Department)! A museum whose collection just rots away... I really can't think of a worse thing to say about a preservation organization! After spending hundreds of hours working on restoring two wooden cabooses last year, I did not let this remark go unchallenged!

I pointed out that the restoration of old railroad equipment is not the same as assembling an HO model kit. Our locomotives and freight cars are definitely not new (There is a phrase commonly heard around the museum that goes "If it was any good to begin with, they wouldn't have given it to us in the first place"). Restoration work, while rather simple when broken down to simple tasks, can be slowed down considerably by an effort to maintain historical accuracy. Good pieces are often salvaged to be reused. Broken and rotted pieces are used as templates to construct new pieces or find replacements. Over 1,000 hours has been spent restoring two cabooses in the last year and we still need more volunteers to pitch in and help! I asked this person to come up to the museum and help me restore the three sugar beet cars. As you might expect, my invitation went unanswered (But a couple of others did volunteer to help work on WP caboose 614).

I don't think I'll ever hear that remark again from any of the people who were in the room that night. Hopefully, if my friends hear this remark someplace else, they will pass along my comments and help spread the word that restoration work is progressing rapidly up at the museum.

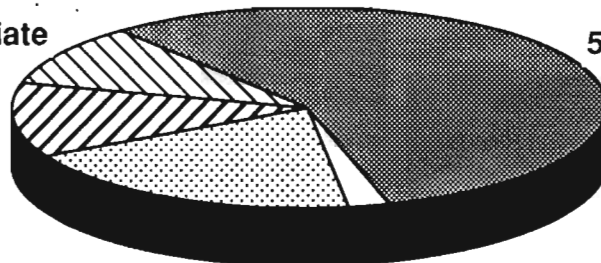
Membership Report

as of May 4, 1994

107 Associate

597 Active

126 Life



204 Family

23 Sustaining

Total FRRS membership is 1,057.
Of these, 28 are Charter members.