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The WAGR/Westrail Workshops at Midland, 1904-1994

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Introduction

The contents of this issue of *Papers in Labour History* are products of a year's research for the Westrail Workshops (Midland) History Project. The Project began in 1998 when some members of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History (Perth branch) formed a sub-committee to investigate ways of preserving the history of the Railway Workshops that were closed in 1994 after operating at Midland for 90 years and, prior to that, in Fremantle. The group consisted of academic historians and students from Murdoch, Curtin and Notre Dame Universities, members of the major unions that operated in the Midland Workshops and past employees.

In 2000, Dr Pat Bertola and I received an Australia Research Council grant of \$80,000, with matching cash and in-kind support from six industry partners over two years. These funds, together with a further grant of \$5,000 from the City of Swan, enabled the project to employ a Project Manager, Ric McCracken, on a .8 basis, and purchase or lease appropriate audio visual equipment. A project office was established at Unions WA, who to date, have given the Project considerable in kind support although they were not among the original six industry partners. These comprised the four unions whose members were employed at the Workshops prior to their closure – the Communications, Electrical, Engineering and Plumbing Union (CEPU), the Australian Services Union (ASU), the Public Transport Union (PTU), and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) – the J.S. Battye Library of Western Australian History, and the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History (ASSLH).

Collecting protocols and documentation were developed, with assistance of the Battye Library. In a series of workshops, which represented an important advance in terms of academic and community cooperation and skills development, volunteers were trained in interview techniques, the collection and preservation of archival material, and the use of a digital camera. To date over 60 hours of audio taped interviews and about 20 hours of digital video have been recorded and partially transcribed. Training community members in the use of high technology equipment for recording and editing digitally recorded material has been central to the success of the project. These aspects of the project involved much of the 'in kind' assistance offered by our industry partners.

Over 200 people have contacted the project through newspaper advertisements and articles and by word of mouth, as well as through Open days at the Workshops. Two exhibitions of photographic and ephemeral materials have been mounted. In February 2001, the project hosted a visit by Dr Lucy Taksa, who is directing a similar project at the Eveleigh Workshops. Dr Taksa addressed a public gathering of almost 100 people at the Midland Town Hall on 12 February as well as meeting with project volunteers, members of the MRA, and speaking at an academic staff and student seminar at Curtin University. The public lecture is produced in this issue.

The project has also served as a useful teaching tool for the Research Institute for Cultural Heritage (RICH) at Curtin University, and for other campuses. In

semester 2, 2000, the first student work practicum was completed successfully, with the student gaining skills and experience in accessioning and cataloguing parts of the collection and interviewing for the oral history project. In semester 1, 2001, four Graduate diploma students researched and wrote major essays on aspects of the Workshops. These essays appear in this issue. Students from Murdoch University's School of Media, Communication and Culture recorded interviews as one of their assignments in a unit on Radio Feature Reporting. These interviews have been edited and placed on CD as a research outcome of the project. In addition to taped interviews, a substantial collection of photographs, documents and ephemera is being gathered and lodged with the Batty Library, the State Archives, of Western Australia and the WA Museum. Some examples of this material are included as illustrations in this issue.

In preparing the issue, I have been pleased to see how the materials (selected largely on the basis of interest, merit and information), have complemented one another. The four Curtin students – Robyn Peel, Jane Archer, Dawn Palm and Julia Wallis – have drawn on the written material provided by past workers such as Alan Wahl, Jack Emery, Rod Quinn and John Hagarty, while incorporating a wide range of primary and secondary sources to examine particular aspects of Workshops life. The workers all speak of their apprenticeship experiences. Many of those are in common: riding to work on the 'Rattler' and having to establish one's one seat in a particular carriage; the variety of the work; the skills taught; painful injuries; lack of safety equipment; the actual or legendary memory of characters such as Nurse Ashton – known by many as 'Iodine Annie'. Several have written of the kindness and patience of the tradesmen in training apprentices; but also of the cruel 'initiations' and other humiliations heaped upon junior workers and apprentices.

The Workshops experience varied greatly. John Hagarty regarded his years there as 'hell', whereas Jack Emery thought that working his own machine meant he had 'finally come of age and was the boss of my own machine and future'. Both Jack Emery and Alan Wahl, however, were glad when they were assigned to duties in, respectively, the Drawing Office and the Chief Mechanical Engineer's Office. This meant arriving at work later, remaining clean all day, and getting to know the 'girls' who worked on the clerical staff.

The issue is organised in sections to reflect the content of the material. It concludes with Dr Taksa's lecture, which gives a timely wake-up call to heritage practitioners. Industrial heritage, especially on the scale of the Midland Workshops, is a precious asset that is fast disappearing from Australian cities. What remains needs to be preserved and interpreted in a relevant and interesting way for future generations.

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