

## When the rails were a thrilling ride

Bygone era's romance still humming along in vintage cars, buses at Milton museum  
Aug 06, 2008 04:30 AM

Tess Kalinowski  
TRANSPORTATION REPORTER

It was built for children. But on a sunny summer afternoon, it's mostly white-haired visitors enjoying the ride down the Milton streetcar museum's 3-kilometre track.

There is at least one boy, though.

He is hidden behind the eyes of 73-year-old Bob Johnson.

All the romance of the Halton Radial Railway Museum's vintage streetcar and bus collection – some 150 vehicles in all – lives on in his memory.

His first love, he admits, was steam locomotives. In their youth, he and his brother John would hang about the railyards, chatting up train crews and cadging rides.

"You can't imagine what it was like riding a locomotive. Everything moved. Everything made noise. They were wonderful," he says, his voice breaking with emotion.

"I come from the time when all this was around. Oh, God, I loved it. (When) I was 20 we got on a train in Orangeville going to Port McNichol. We got off in Orangeville and they said the Royal York was going to stop for us – a double-headed steam engine. We get off in Galt and there was a three-car electric train sitting waiting to take us down. You can't imagine it. We're going down along the Grand River, Galt, Paris, Brantford, Port Dover – 120 kilometres. The cars were dancing, they were dancing," says Johnson.

The brothers Johnson have been pouring that passion for trains into the Ontario Electric Railway Historical Association for half a century. Founded in 1953, the group is dedicated to preserving a nearly forgotten piece of regional history – a time when streetcar lines and electric railroads ran in and between Guelph, Kitchener, London, Oshawa, Windsor and the Niagara Region.

Though most had died out by 1972, when the museum was founded, streetcars are now enjoying a revival around the world.



JIM ROSS PHOTO FOR THE TORONTO STAR  
Rail buff Bob Johnson stands in a vintage Suburban streetcar currently under restoration at the Halton Radial Railway Museum in Milton. (July 30, 2008)

But the basic technology behind mass transit on rails has hardly changed in the 100 years since its last renaissance.

In the 1920s, Sunday picnickers could travel by streetcar all the way from the Toronto lakefront to the shores of Lake Simcoe. (GO trains only recently achieved that feat with a new Barrie run.)

"You could take a city streetcar to the corner of Weston Rd. and St. Clair. On the northeast corner was a station (where) you got on an inter-urban streetcar to go to Guelph," Johnson remembers. Inter-urban cars, unlike city cars, had to have toilets.

The electric rail association was born when eight young rail buffs rallied against the TTC's plan to scrap the last of its wooden streetcars. They bought their first vehicle, a 1910 Toronto Railway Car, for \$100.

The next problem was finding a place to store it. They found a kilometre of the old Toronto Suburban Railway right-of-way in Nassawasaya Township, and bought it by paying off about \$300 in back taxes. Since then, they've purchased more property.

The 36-year-old museum now attracts about 15,000 visitors a year. Run on about \$150,000 a year in admission and gift shop sales, it survives mainly on donations, says Caroline Rose, the volunteer marketing manager.

The pride of the museum is the last working interurban steel streetcar from London. Built in 1915 but destroyed by fire 10 years later, it was sent to Montreal to have its wood interior rebuilt. Then Johnson and a team of volunteers spent 11 years lovingly replacing the fittings and fixtures, down to the brass plates used to strike matches in the men's smoking compartment.

(Ladies didn't smoke in public.)

Also among its vehicles, about 40 of which are operational, are three rare TTC Peter Witt cars – the heavy, noisy trolleys that served the city for 42 years until 1963.

In one of the museum sheds, a yellow snowplow hangs from the side of an old TTC sweeper. Johnson remembers bringing lunch to his father, a TTC operator, and begging to stay aboard to watch the work car clear snow off the track in front of it and plow the lane beside it.

The TTC, he says, has been good to the museum, at one point allowing it to raid the basement of the Hillcrest complex for old parts that can be used to restore the cars.

There are about 300 members of the electric rail association now, about 50 of them "relatively active," according to Rose.

But two of the original eight founders have died and Johnson worries about who will take the place of the old-timers.

"Nobody young's joining," he says. "We have three or four guys in their 30s. Nobody's younger than that. We're losing people that have skills."

"Things have changed," agrees Rose, although she's optimistic about the museum and the association's future.

"It started out as more as a club. (Now) more people are involved that are not interested in only trains, like myself, they're interested in history, education. Things have evolved."

## **EVOLUTION OF THE TTC STREETCAR**

### **Three incarnations of TTC streetcars:**

1. The TTC's Peter Witt cars that ran 1921-1963 were a new design for Canada. Named for the street railway commissioner of Cleveland, who designed them, they were the first large-capacity steel cars in Canada with front and centre entrances.
2. The Presidents' Conference Committee cars ran 1938-1996. A more streamlined design that offered smoother braking and acceleration, they were designed, as their name suggests, by a committee formed in 1929 of electric railway representatives in the U.S.
3. The TTC's current fleet of CLRVs (Canadian Light Rail Vehicles), now approaching the end of its life, was introduced in 1977. They were made by the Swiss Urban Transportation Development Corp., which has since become part of Bombardier. The longer, articulated ALRVs launched in 1983.

### **Halton Radial Railway and Museum**

**Where:** 13629 Guelph Line, about 15 kilometres north of Highway 401 on the east side.

**Admission:** \$9.75 for adults; \$8.50 for seniors and \$7.50 for children 4 to 17. Family rate is \$29 and evening events cost \$8 per person.

**Open:** seven days a week until the end of August from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

**Until Aug. 9:** The museum is advertising its Ice-cream and Starlight event in which visitors are romanced under the stars and lights as they ride the rails and enjoy hand-scooped ice cream.