

Professionalism, Part III

By David Dewey

Previously we talked about standards of care for our collection. This time I want to discuss "public access," how we make our collection available to the public.

The standard definition of a museum includes requiring public access. No matter how wonderful a collection may be, if it is not used to educate the public, (and by this I mean to entertain, illuminate and inspire) it is only a collection. The amount of public access varies from museum to museum. However, the generally accepted minimum public access for developed museums is 120 days a year. This somewhat arbitrary figure was set by the Institute of Museum Services (IMS) as a basic requirement to qualify for their grant programs. This is roughly equivalent to being open every weekend in a year, or every day for four months (a summer season). You can see then that it is not hard for even a small museum to meet this standard. This is apparently how standards evolve: Someone says, "Let's do it this way," and no one objects. Does anyone really know why Roman chariot wheels were four feet, eight and one-half inches apart? Hmm, we're getting "off track" here.

Being open is just one aspect of "public service." To provide an environment that is conducive to educating and entertaining requires us to make the grounds safe, visually appealing, and comfortable. I say "entertaining" because we want these people to enjoy themselves so they will come back bringing others with them and support our museum. This can be tough to do as most of us are so absorbed by the preservation work that we are doing that we will endure what, at the time, seem to be minor inconveniences. Joe Public, however, enters our world without this passion and is accustomed to modern standards of both amenities and services. It is difficult for us to see our museum from his or her eyes. We are not alone in this; that's why outside consultants are often used to help plan a museum's development.

Items for attention in a museum's public service program can be as simple as a clean drinking fountain, or as complex as a planned complete personally guided tour of the entire museum with "hands on" operating artifacts. Professionalism

comes to play not in how much we're doing, but in how much we are aware of the public's needs and how we plan on meeting them. This now includes how we are preparing for the Americans with Disabilities Act, which requires that we (and everyone else who deals with the public) make our museum "user friendly" for everyone, including those with special needs. (I wonder if they include Railfans; it seems to me that "Railroaditis" can be rather debilitating!)

Now to give you greater insight into the museum concept of public access, I'm concluding with some definitions from the IMS MAP III grant application.

Current Audience: the individuals who actually use the museum.

Potential audience: the population that makes up the community surrounding the museum, as well as tourists who frequent the area.

Public experience: what happens physically, intellectually and emotionally to the public when it comes in contact with the museum either by word-of-mouth, through media references, or directly (visiting the museum).

Public involvement: when the public actively participates with and supports the museum financially and/or with physical presence, for example, as corporate sponsors, donors, trustees, advisors, visitors, volunteers, members, friends, or collaborators.

Public perception: the public's impression, knowledge of and feelings about the museum. These create your museum's image and establish the role that your museum has in the community.

Universal Access: the ability of anyone, no matter what his/her special needs may be, to gain entrance to and remain mobile in an institution and to have the opportunity to understand the experience.

Visitor services: facilities or services that provide comfort to visitors, including the checkrooms, dining area, first aid stations, information desk, restrooms, seating, signage, telephone booths, and water fountains.

New Life Members

The FRRS welcomes the following new life members:

Chris Kennedy
from Meadow Valley, CA

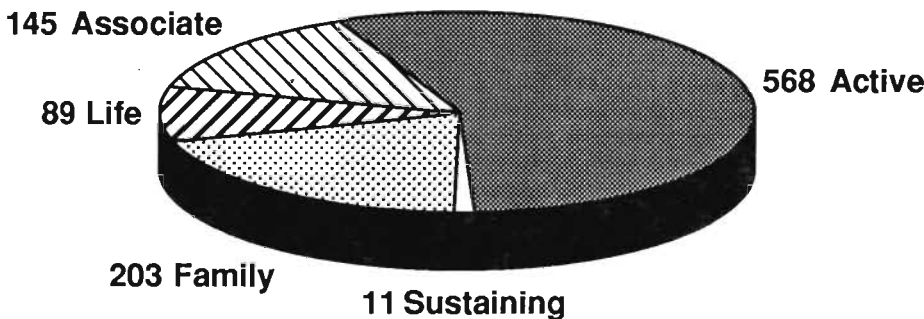
Jim Lekas
from McMinnville, OR

John B. Laumann
from Reseda, CA

Dave Anderson
from Citrus Heights, CA

Membership Report

as of December 21, 1992



Total FRRS membership is 1,016.
Of these, 30 are Charter members.

Donations

The following people have made generous cash donations to the FRRS to help us to continue to operate:

- Alan Aske
- Michael Falzone
- Steve Fauth
- John Flower
- Henry Forri
- Rick Galassi
- Norm Gidney
- James Harper
- Larry Harrison
- Philip Heckman
- Jack & George Ann Honnor
- Roger Leezer Family
- Tom Mounovan
- Ferdinand Rat
- David Richards
- Gregory Zucco