

The Museum of the Goldfields (From Humble Beginnings)

Ron Manners: Address to the Museum of the Goldfields

Meeting April 7 1993

Let us think of this as a competition tonight.

I have been asked to speak.

You have been asked to listen.

It's my sincere hope that I finish first.

As a backdrop to the beginning of the Museum Project I would like to mentally transport us back to Kalgoorlie 1965. This was before the discovery of nickel at Kambalda, when gold mining was falling apart in Kalgoorlie. There was a very low level of economic activity here. Most of the young men of the day, my classmates at the School of Mines, had all gone off to seek more exciting careers in other parts of the world.

It was into a Kalgoorlie in that mode, that the young persons' organisation, the Jaycees, started up a local chapter (or club). A most impressive group of dynamic individuals made several pilgrimages from Perth, to instruct us in the aims, objects and methods whereby their challenge of encouraging self-improvement could have some effect on the young people of this area.

There was no Kalgoorlie College. There was no formal training on project management or presenting oneself, so the seed of Jaycees fell on fertile local soil.

Just a word or two on Jaycees, which can be likened to a service group like Apex Club but with the accent on developing their members.

Whereas with Apex, developing better citizens is a by-product of community development, with Jaycees the accent is reversed and community development was regarded as a tool to develop better citizens.

With that in mind Jaycees had a strict rule that only projects containing a significant element of self-improvement could be adopted by the local chapter. Members who conceived a project had to prepare a detailed business plan for presentation to the full membership. The project would only proceed with voting support from the members.

The first three presidents of the Kalgoorlie-Boulder Jaycees were Gilbert Ralph, from Western Mining Corporation, myself and Vic McCabe, the 6KG Radio Station Manager.

Among the initial projects formulated and executed by the Jaycees was this tourist map of Kalgoorlie, and the tourist itinerary which listed various local points of interest worth visiting. It's hard to believe that no such items existed until we put them together in 1965.

Another item was a distinctive "souvenir of the Golden Mile". This consisted of a sealed can of Kalgoorlie "dirt" with instructions on how to pan-off any contained

gold. This item was quickly declared illegal by the "Gold Stealing Detection Squad" as a possible "tool" for illicit gold transactions.

Tonight we need only speak of one Jaycee project that developed from this nucleus, and that is the Museum Project. I will outline the several phases between the original thought and the eventual reality, and ask if we were successful in the dual challenge of producing a community facility, and at the same time developing our members.

Upon receiving Irene Spottiswood's invitation to speak tonight, I exhumed several old files and it was certainly something of a walk down memory lane, with many old Kalgoorlie Miner cuttings and correspondence relating to the project, and to the various people involved in its initiation.

The Museum Project was an easy one to sell to members as a concept, and with input from many people I put together a proposal that I was sure could not be argued against.

For as long as I can remember, various local people, had been saying that something should be done about starting up a museum. Jaycees was all about actually doing something rather than talking about it.

Kalgoorlie is rich in history and wherever you go in Australia people or their relatives often seem to have originated from Kalgoorlie. This provides them with a good reason for revisiting from time to time. However at that time there was no local rallying point for educating us about our history, for attracting tourists, or for helping newcomers to the district to become more easily assimilated.

The original concept of the museum was that it should be a focal point of the district, so that associated traditions could be on show and easily available as a source of information, a centre of knowledge incorporating both history and modern developments in commerce, industry and other walks of life.

By serving the community in this way the museum could become a centre of culture, and a honey pot for objects of interest, records of the region and in particular, the stories of the people and their involvement in our community.

The Original Museum Proposal

This is how the Museum Project originally kicked off.

During the 1965 Christmas break, the late Frank Green of Westland Autos said to me "Why do most people around here usually talk about things without doing anything about them?"

He was referring to a point raised by Peter Engelbrecht at a recent Jaycees meeting, suggesting the establishment of a Golden Mile Museum.

Peter had said that for as long as he remembered there had been talk of such a museum but no-one seemed to be doing anything about it.

Frank Green's comment lead us to spend the next day cruising Kalgoorlie-Boulder looking for a suitable building.

Of four located, the old British Arms Hotel won (at 3.2 metres wide, said to be the world's narrowest two-story hotel) because it was immediately available, and close to the scene of Paddy Hannan's original gold discovery. The adjacent house was also available for option, giving additional land for further displays.

We located the buildings' owner, a Mr Percy Pilpel, a regular visitor from Perth. The negotiated price was \$2,800 and we secured an option by parting with our own cash deposit, being \$100 from each of us.

Frank and I knew that if we couldn't get the project off the ground we would either lose our deposit or end up having to buy an unlicensed abandoned hotel.

At the January 1966 Jaycees meeting the museum project was presented and adopted as being a suitable Jaycee activity, as members would gain experience in negotiating with Local Government, State Government and local service organisations.

When I now look at my January 1966 proposal put to the Jaycees, I can only smile at our youthful enthusiasm and our estimate for completion of the project within three months.

The experience in discovering why a relatively simple, worthwhile project, in reality took two-and-a-half years to complete, has no doubt prepared us for the red tape we would face in later life.

Of all the various proposals for any Goldfields facility of those times, this was one that I felt would receive 100% support; even with my vivid imagination, I could not conceive that there could be a single soul who could oppose our idea

I was wrong.

The type of negativism that we were confronted with is shown in this *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 22/7/66 press clip, (Not suitable as a museum. Cr Bennetts objected etc.)

Another example was the Chamber of Commerce report that the building presents too many problems *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 21/7/66).

We countered this criticism by slowly and surely shaping public opinion of the merits of the project.

We staged a series of events, one of which we titled The Blood and Jazz Project. (Relieving the public of cash and blood to the music of a visiting jazz band - see photos).

From this sort of activity flowed tremendous support, we had 400 visitors to the British Arms building during a Rotary conference, and a flood of enthusiastic letters was subsequently received from these visitors, supporting our project. This was followed by an increased momentum in donations from the Chamber of Mines and the Chamber of Commerce. The project was moving at last.

The long, hard haul was then ably piloted by two Museum Committee chairmen, Gavin Bunning and Tim Hobson, the Committee secretary Gilbert Ralph and the various Committee members made up from the Historical Society, Local Government and the Chamber of Mines and Chamber of Commerce. To them

goes full credit for keeping this project on the rails by hard work and unending patience.

Looking through the project file it is fascinating to see the tremendous enthusiasm generated by the Museum Committee over this formation period. Enthusiasm brought the Premier, David Brand, to Kalgoorlie for a special visit, when he briefed Jaycee members on the best tactics to be used in gaining assistance from the Tourist Development Authority and the W.A. Museum Board. He told us to keep reminding them that they were the W.A. Museum Board, not the Perth Museum Board. He also explained how best these bodies could work together with the local authorities (three at that time).

If I can digress for a moment and just expand on Premier Brand's first visit on this project.

We decided to contact the Premier who enthusiastically accepted the invitation to visit Kalgoorlie and suggested that he meet us in the bar at the Palace Hotel on a specific date.

Gilbert Ralph, Frank Green and I expected him to arrive with an entourage, but he arrived on his own, and over an orange juice explained how happy he was to have this opportunity to visit Kalgoorlie and that his early working life was spent underground on one of the local mines.

We then visited the British Arms and he clambered all over the broken floorboards and rickety stairways with us, sharing our vision of what could be, rather than what it was at that moment.

He briefed us on tactics and then Gilbert Ralph, whose car we were using (he was the only one of us who possessed a car with four doors and a rear seat) asked where the Premier would like to be taken. The Premier said that he had nothing particular to do until the train left at 9.30pm that night so Gilbert took him home for dinner and then delivered him to the railway station.

The informality of David Brand's initial and further contact with us has left a lasting impression.

The Premier's enthusiasm also brought him back to Kalgoorlie to address a public meeting, and he later sent senior members of the W.A. Museum Board to Kalgoorlie to address a public meeting. Later, he sent senior members of the WA Museum Board to Kalgoorlie to address a joint Local Government-service club meeting, to explain how a local museum should be an interesting focal point where students and visitors could quickly assimilate our colorful history, rather than be a dusty archives repository.

Enthusiasm brought offers of items from display from as far away as London and Malaysia and offers of financial help came from many unexpected sources. These included \$600 from the family of the late Claude de Bernales (plus to our delight) \$400 from Mr Pilpel himself, thereby effectively reducing his sale price of the British Arms to \$2,400.

Surprisingly, the main obstacles in the committee's path were firstly spreading the enthusiasm to our three Local Government bodies. While none were actually against the project it was necessary to gain mutual support during a period when the relationship between the Councils was not always cordial. The project was

almost torpedoed when the Malcolm Uren Report recommended that the focal point of this whole Goldfields Project be shifted to Coolgardie. It was later decided by tourist authorities to develop Coolgardie separately.

Other main obstacles were several local citizens who, for reasons of their own, were not in favor of the Museum. I have a very selective memory and can only remember the names of the people who supported us, but I can remember on one occasion at a meeting in Kalgoorlie on March 16, 1967, at which senior personnel of the Tourist Development Authority announced that the Museum would be given official recognition as part of the overall Kalgoorlie-Boulder-Coolgardie tourist planning for the future. One of the local knockers leapt to his feet and moved that the funds earmarked for the museum could be better spent in sign-posting the district.

For a few moments the project looked like going on the rocks but fortunately his motion was lost.

First Official Opening

This took place in 1968, and as you can imagine was a joyous event for all concerned.

In 1978 there was another significant celebration to mark the 10th anniversary, where those with an involvement over this period were brought together to witness the progress made. The Museum Board Chairman at that time, Mr Doug Daws stated the museum was unique in a number of ways;

"Its formation was unique because of the way it started with very little cost to the community. It has never needed subsidy from Local Authorities or Government, but has paid its way by income obtained from a modest admittance fee".

This brings me to the present situation, where as a Government Department, the Museum does not charge an admittance fee, because if it did, the funds would simply go into consolidated revenue rather than remain with the museum. This is a strange situation when people, 50% of whom are visitors to the area, walk in with money in their hand expecting to pay but are told that it's "free". However, they are also referred to the donation box, on this basis they pay an average of only 14 cents per head.

I am aware of the old socialist cliché - that says "The public has already paid for the museums and galleries, with their tax money, so why should they pay a second time to see them?" The answer to this is that taxes already paid may have contributed to the original buildings, but the maintenance and expansion of these services are being paid for with borrowed money. If the users don't pay, the burden falls entirely on the non-users, and that is hardly fair.

If we are to keep pace with the expansion and modernisation of our museums and galleries, we had better look at a better way of financing them, and how better by charging an admittance fee for other than school groups?

A major argument against entry fees is that attendance will drop, but why should they? Competing private attractions charge three or four times what would be regarded as a normal entry fee, and still they are well attended. This illustrates that people are prepared to pay if the value is there.

The good news is that the New South Wales State Government has already instructed their museums in 1991 that they are at liberty to charge reasonable fees for admission, and to raise other revenues from user charges.

Another good model for our State Government is Britain in the early 1980's. The British started five-year plans with small annual reductions in budgets, while allowing institutions to keep and spend any other monies raised. Suddenly, there was an incentive to be entrepreneurial.

Free admission to our museums and galleries may have been a wonderful tradition. It may be "nice" if that could continue, but unfortunately, to do so in the face of rising costs and increasing demands, combined with bankrupt Government coffers, that alternative is no longer available for us.

The Ultimate Opening

So much has happened since the original building opened in 1968 that the finished product was again opened in June 1989, at which time I burst into print with a Letter to the Local Editor (*Kalgoorlie Miner* June 21, 1989), as follows :-

"Taxpayers may get some value for their money...

Sir, May I congratulate those dedicated individuals who have brought the Museum project to such a successful conclusion.

Predictably, at the official opening, we heard the politicians congratulating themselves for spending other people's money.

The vote of thanks to the taxpayers (whose compulsory donations matched the many other voluntary contributors) was not heard.

However, one positive aspect is that this time the taxpayers may get some value for their money, as the museum has the potential to be self sustaining – unlike the majority of projects where taxpayers see their money being spent against their wishes."

Over the many years Jill Moffat and Pam Moore, together with their dedicated staff, have by careful selection of material, presented us with an ever changing and vital presentation. In looking back if I were asked if the whole project has been worthwhile, they have given us the complete answer, that with an annual attendance of 130,000 the project is most certainly worthwhile for the region and the visitors who represent 50% of that total. It has certainly matched one of the original objectives of the Jaycees in establishing a worthwhile community facility.

What of the other question, whether it fulfilled the role of training our Jaycee members in the procedure of conceiving an idea and putting it into action? I can only speak on behalf of one of those Jaycee members who, upon reflection must certainly fall into the "slow learner" class.

I find that over the ensuing 25 years I have continually made the same mistake of letting my enthusiasm convince me that a project can be completed in an unrealistically short time. It then becomes bogged down in the sticky web of bureaucracy. It then needs all sorts of emergency rescue missions to salvage the project. During this process I manage to make myself thoroughly unpopular in some quarters, but usually manage to get the show on the road - eventually.

Perhaps it has taught me never to accept "no", for an answer, or in the words of local philosopher George Compton "null bastardo carborundum" (don't let the bastards grind you down).

So from a personal point of view I am very thankful to have had a part to play in this Museum Project as without it, I may never have learned something of the art of *performance through persistence*.