

Homeless Historical Canadian Buses Seeking Help

by Michael Taylor Noonan

Assisted by Dale Laird

Photos courtesy of the Transit Museum Society



The oldest bus in the Transit Museum Society historical fleet is this 1937 Hays-Anderson PCT-37 that operated in intercity service for Pacific Stage Lines. It is now somewhat of a movie star since it was used in the filming of *Christmas Story 2* at the bus and train depot in Vancouver in April of 2012. Other intercity coaches in the TRAMS fleet include a 1948 CCF Brill C-41 currently under restoration and a 1974 MCI MC-8.

Standing on a street corner in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, one can see a wide variety of buses. There are numerous buses to see. There is North America's second largest trolleybus network with its fleet of Flyer standard 40-foot and articulated 60-foot trolleys. Orion, Flyer and Novabus diesels. Hybrids, too. Then, if you are lucky, you may see a bus straight out of a museum. An historic bus from the Transit Museum collection on its way to a "show n' shine" or other community event. However, maybe not for much longer. TransLink, the local transit authority and major sponsor, has recently announced that it will no longer support the Transit Museum Society (TRAMS) after September 2013.

For all the Society's volunteers, people like retired operator Harry Vagg, this is cause for concern. In 1956, he began to drive for the BC Electric from Oakridge Transit Centre in Vancouver. Later, he drove from two suburban depots before retiring in 1991. Often, out on the road, at traffic lights or approaching oncoming buses, he notices the bemused faces of fellow transit drivers. It is not Vagg who is getting the attention; it is his bus, retired, like him. Built in 1957 by General Motors in Pontiac, Michigan, the bus is a TDH4512 wearing the cream color of BC Electric complete with red "BCE" totem pole logo. On other occasions, he might be driving a 1964 GM Fishbowl, painted in blue and green livery. In 1961, the provincial government purchased the BCE operations, repainting the buses in a color

scheme said to represent the ocean and forests of British Columbia. Bus 4612, a 1964 TDH4519, was amongst the first order placed by BC Hydro after its formation. The coach was built at the former GM London, Ontario, locomotive plant opened in 1961.

When he retired, Vagg and his wife travelled extensively in the U.S., but 35 years of driving something bigger than his Toyota Tundra – even with tent trailer – was hard to say goodbye to. "It's just something I've done practically all my life. It's not one of those things that you can just cut off. You still keep an interest in it," he says. So he joined the Transit Museum Society.

The moniker "museum" may be slightly misleading. Members prefer to think of it as a



Bus 2649 is a Flyer E800 originally built as a trolley bus in 1976. Similar buses in the fleet were dieselized in the 1980s but 2649 retained its trolley poles for use as a trolley wire deicer. It was recently restored by the TRAMS volunteers.



Bus 3405 is a 1957 Canadian-built CCF Brill CD52A. It originally operated for BC Electric and is painted in the original livery it had when delivered. The TRAMS collection also includes two Brill trolley buses and a similar diesel bus.

“rolling museum.” The exhibits are taken into the community, rather than the other way around. BC Hydro was succeeded by a variety of transit operators culminating in the current TransLink Authority and its operating subsidiary Coast Mountain Bus Company (CMBC). The work done by Vagg and the other members of the Society has been valued by TransLink which understood the public-relations aspect of preserving and displaying its transit past for future generations. TRAMS accomplished this through attendance at community events, school programs and drove them in many parades. When TransLink needed vintage vehicles for public relations, visiting dignitaries and industry groups, TRAMS obliged.

Both GM buses are part of the 15-vehicle collection cared for by the Transit Museum

Society. The oldest vehicle is a 1937 Hayes-Anderson used for highway services by Pacific Stages Lines, a BCE subsidiary. The newest is a 1991 New Flyer D40 recently retired by CMBC. Other familiar manufacturer names in the collection are Brill and MCI.

When the sponsorship was withdrawn, TRAMS had just begun the restoration of an IC-41 highway coach. Pacific Stage Lines #6228 is an early example of a Canadian built coach. Canadian Car and Foundry licensed designs from American Car and Foundry – the companies were not otherwise related – and unlike later models, was virtually identical to its American cousins. #6228 still has most of its original fittings, but at the moment most are being removed to ascertain the condition of the frame. When completed, it will be the only restored CCF Brill IC-41 in

Canada. The society made the decision to push ahead with the project even though full funding is not yet secured. Members felt that the bus would be in danger of being scrapped if the restoration was not sufficiently advanced by the termination of the warehouse lease. No one wants this unique vehicle to be lost in the shuffle of future events.

Until recently the vehicles were housed in a former bus depot in Surrey. As the revenue fleet expanded, TransLink needed additional space, so a warehouse was leased to temporarily store the historic buses. Plans were underway for a new transit center complete with storage space for the vintage buses, but the recent downturn in the economy changed those plans. As with many other government agencies, TransLink came under intense scrutiny to make sure it offered value-for-money to the taxpayers of British Columbia. Despite a cordial relationship that stretched back many years, TransLink felt it could no longer justify the cost of the Society’s sponsorship, especially the cost of the warehouse lease. Whether by design or accident, the announcement was a complete surprise to TRAMS members. The decision presented some tough challenges for the Society at very short notice.

Not all vehicles were stored in the warehouse: some trolley buses were kept in out-of-the-way areas at Oakridge Transit Centre. TransLink offered to pay the warehouse lease for another year, on condition the Society removed all buses from all transit property within 30 days. However, the warehouse was full and could not accommodate any more vehicles. A temporary solution was found by taking three diesel buses to a secure storage location in the Fraser Valley, some 50 miles outside Vancouver. This parking was donated by a sympathetic supporter. Their space in the warehouse was then taken by three trolley buses from Oakridge. However the Society incurred more than \$5,000 in unexpected costs in arranging towing, in

Harry Vagg poses with the museum’s 1957 TDH4512 GM “Old Look.” Harry drove for BC Electric from 1956 until his retirement in 1991. Bus 730 operated for BC Electric and still has the BCE cream color and the red company logo.



addition to having spent \$17,000 for a vehicle tent just a few months previously.

Also temporarily stored at Oakridge was a rare Fageol 34-S, restorable but in rough shape. There was no other space where it could be parked. Just when it looked like the bus would have to be sent for scrap, Yakima Valley Trolleys, which operates an electric interurban in Yakima, Washington, stepped forward and offered it a home. Additionally, a BC Electric 1953 REO tow-truck being restored at the warehouse was sold to a local truck museum for a nominal sum to create one more bus parking space.

One by one, all the conditions were met within the 30-day deadline, allowing the Society to remain in the warehouse until October. Now that the holiday season has passed, members are thinking about their Society's future and how to retain the collection.

It is said that every cloud has a silver lining. This may be true for TRAMS. Some of the vehicles it cared for were still owned by TransLink. Other conditions for the continuation of the warehouse lease was that the Society accept ownership of all the vintage vehicles and never again approach TransLink or its subsidiaries for any kind of help. TRAMS is now solely responsible for the historic fleet and can make its own deci-

sions. It presents a tremendous opportunity for the Society, but right now the priority is finding new sponsors and sources of funding – both large and small.

One popular annual fundraiser is a "Christmas Lights Tour" of illuminated homes and gardens in the Vancouver area. The Society decided that the event planned for 2012 would go ahead, but any other community involvement would be severely curtailed. Events that in previous years would see TRAMS buses at little or no cost to the organizers could no longer be accommodated.

That is not good news for Vagg. He enjoys taking vehicles to these events, including his favorite, the 1957 GM TDH4512, numbered 730. Back in 1990, BC Transit converted it into a travelling transit artifact exhibit and movie theater to help publicize the celebration of 100 years of transit in Vancouver. It is perhaps the TRAMS vehicle that draws the most attention at events.

Vagg explains that once people realize "it's a museum and not just a regular city bus, they jump on. They start looking at the photos and then they start looking at the advertising boards, and then the older generation starts to remember. They start to laugh, and say 'I remember that!' When they come on with

their children they say that this is the bus that mommy went to school on."

Many times though, it is transit operators who board the bus. "When they come on out of curiosity to see what it is all about, I always tell them there are no computers in it, and it doesn't have power steering. Once you're moving, you can turn the wheel, but you can't turn them stationary. There's too much weight on the front end, got to make sure you're rolling first. As you pull into a stop, you have to have planned an exit."

Vagg just hopes that it will not be the Transit Museum planning an exit. That would be a tremendous blow to its members and bus enthusiasts throughout North America. Most importantly, he feels, it would be a disservice to the current and future residents of British Columbia, depriving them of a glimpse of their history.

You can view the collection at www.trams.ca. Donations would be very welcome. E-mail contacts are on the Web site if you would like to make a donation or offer some help. You can also phone Dale Laird at (604) 325-9990. Donations can be claimed as tax credits in Canada. If any readers find themselves in the Vancouver area, arrangements would gladly be made for them to view the vehicles. □

The buses in the Transit Museum Society fleet are often used in parades, put on display at public events and even used in movies. This display included 730, the 1957 GM TDH4512 "Old Look" and 4612, a 1964 GM TDH4519 "New Look."



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