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Biography

Elizabeth Fielding has been working in state and public libraries for more than twenty years. For the past four years she has been with the State Library of Queensland in the capacity of project manager and reference librarian.

Unlocking the garage: A web portal for car enthusiasts

Abstract

In sheds, under houses and in back paddocks across Australia, elderly automobile bodies sit dejectedly waiting for dedicated car enthusiasts to restore them to their former glory. And to judge by the number of car clubs around the nation, classic car owners are out there in their thousands - needing wiring diagrams, needing brake specifications - and needing help from librarians. Intending classic car restorers come to the library fired by hope and optimism, only to meet with disappointment when a standard repair manual cannot be located. Over many years the State Library of Queensland has built up a substantial collection of potentially useful works relating to vehicles manufactured between 1900 and 1970. Until recently, however, this much sought after information, secreted away in bland looking compendium manuals with unrevealing titles, was a secret known only to the initiated few. Last year the State Library took the opportunity to bring together the ten year indexing effort of two remarkable volunteers, a fascinating collection of historically significant photographs and a little technical innovation to develop the popular Garage web portal. This paper considers the opportunities inherent in opening up high demand areas in library collections, the philosophy of sharing expertise in the community with the library's wider public and the technical challenges involved in converting a set of unrealised assets into a useful, integrated online resource.

**The library and the car enthusiast:
An enduring relationship**

If you have ever spent time at a state or public library reference desk the chances are you've brushed up against something akin to a wiring diagram, tuning specification or torque wrench setting. For some decades now the motor vehicle has assumed a dominant profile among questions submitted to many reference services around Australia. The sustained demand for this category of information is reflective both of an unmet need on the part of information consumers and of a popular faith in the capacity of librarians to deliver when a workshop manual is needed.

The people who ask us for vehicle repair information do not, in many instances, conform to our conventional image of the library user, in that they are not necessarily the sort of bookish people who enjoy prowling around library shelves. Yet car enthusiasts, if we were to cultivate them as a user group, could represent a significant sector of our client base. Quite apart from the incalculable number of home mechanics around the nation, there are, at an educated guess, around 2,000 classic car clubs in Australia and thousands more people directly or peripherally involved in restoring vehicles.

In fact car enthusiasts qualify eminently as an example of the non traditional client group libraries aspire to reach out to and there is no doubt potential to build on the existing relationships we have established with them. Whether the request comes from someone who wants to resuscitate an ailing farm

vehicle or in conjunction with a handsome restoration project, the enquirers have in common a practical, DIY related information need which is representative of a sustained demand over many years. Last year, in an evidence based response to the significant volume of vehicle repair and restoration enquiries received by the Reference Services unit from both country libraries and walk-in clients, the State Library undertook to build a resource which targeted the very particular needs of the car enthusiast. The project which developed this initiative - and the set of resources associated with it became known as The Garage.

The Garage's digital home is under the *Services for ... Car enthusiasts* tab on the State Library's website. Essentially it is an online portal to the automotive information resources available from the State Library's collections. Its key assets are several thousand index records sourced from motor repair compendia by two longstanding volunteers and a digital image gallery which reflects the history of Queensland motoring and the Australian passion for cars. The project was inspired by a realisation that a significant, and potentially very useful, part of the collection was invisible to anyone searching on the catalogue for repair information. The achievement of The Garage was to make these resources available to the State Library's wider constituency via a searchable interface and in so doing, to profile and add value to, a popular aspect of the collection. Most importantly, the project demonstrates the value of volunteer effort and the potential libraries have to

facilitate the sharing of specialised knowledge in the community with an interested public.

An offer too good to refuse

The project had its origins in a chance conversation which took place at the enquiry desk of the State Library's cultural heritage research centre, the John Oxley Library, one morning in late 1990. Waiting at the counter to offer a donation of books was retired mechanical engineer Ken Sandercoe, sharp eyed, quick witted and extraordinarily knowledgeable about all things automotive. Ken volunteered some critical information about an old photograph lying on the counter. 'You'd probably be aware' he commented 'that the car in that photograph is a 1927 Chev.'

It was the beginning of a relationship which has endured for the best part of two decades. What transpired was an extraordinarily generous offer on Ken's part - he would identify the cars - the makes, models, their date of manufacture, the odd point of technical or historical interest - in John Oxley Library's vast collection of donated historical photographs. The Garage, at this point, was far from being even a gleam in anyone's eye. There was no project in prospect, no precedent for such an undertaking and in an era which predated the Web, no possibility of sharing the results of such an effort with the wider Queensland public. The rationalisation for Ken's work, oddly enough, hinged on dates. The identification of car elements in historically significant Queensland photographs would assist in assigning dates to them - it would establish the earliest limit for the photograph's age,

based on the first year of manufacture for the vehicle. The information would place undated photographs somewhere within a ten to fifteen year period in Queensland history, it would lend them significance and context and would ultimately add to the value of the entire photographic collection.

The photographs

The singular profile which cars and motoring have had in popular history is wonderfully reflected in John Oxley's photographic collection. There are literally thousands of donated photographs depicting the automobiles of our past. Pioneer motorists are proudly posing in front of them, draught-horses are dragging them out of churning mud, bush mechanics stiffly attired in driving gear are bent under bonnets and crouched beside punctured tyres, dignitaries are stepping regally from gleaming limousines, women are declaring their early independence behind the wheel, family outings in the hired tourer are frozen in time as a camera clicks. Vehicles are featured in honeymoons, holidays, stunt and endurance shows, spectacular accidents, fledgling car rallies, war efforts, landmark trade missions and intrepid ventures into the untrammelled outback. When you focus on the car, pursue it as a theme and track it through its history there is a compelling case for seeing that the social, political, commercial and historical life of the nation is inextricably linked with the romance and adventure of motoring.

Ken enlisted the help of longstanding friend and fellow car enthusiast Ron Douglas, who like Ken, had accumulated a lifetime of automotive experience and expertise. During

weekly visits spread over three years Ken and Ron identified vehicles - and the term was understood to include not only cars, but also buses, vans and trucks - in around 3,500 images from the John Oxley Library's collection. To authenticate the information they transcribed onto the backing slips which accompanied each photograph, the volunteers scoured State Library's print collections for evidence, brought in books from their private collections and consulted encyclopaedic works from the reference shelves.

A fundamental difficulty in establishing the identity of individual makes and models was that for much of this nation's earlier automotive history, cars were built in Australia from imported mechanical components. It was common practice between the two World Wars for Australian manufacturers to import a chassis and engine and subsequently build the body according to local specifications. In fact the bodywork design was frequently copied from that of other locally built makes. This meant that an Australian built model could look altogether different from its counterpart in the country of origin. While it was necessary to consult American, British or European publications to discover the make, it was often not possible to make a simple match from an overseas sourced illustration of the original vehicle. For this reason the photographic detail of the only visible parts belonging to the imported chassis – the radiator, cowl, headlamps and mudguard – assumed a particular significance in the identification process - as did Ken's fifty year old pocket magnifying glass.

Extended debate over the curvature of a mudguard or shape of a radiator was associated with the mysterious provenance of many of the older photographs. Donated by residents from both metropolitan Brisbane and distant areas in country Queensland over many years, most had little or no accompanying information. The photographs date from around 1900 and are part of the John Oxley's Library's extensive collection of more than 900,000 donated and purchased images with a Queensland connection, comprising of copy prints, original photographs, glass plate and celluloid negatives and albums. While many of the images depicting vehicles were taken by or for individuals and families, the collection also includes a substantial number of publicity photographs created for advertising and newspaper copy. Approximately half were acquired from commercial sources such as dealerships and companies and in the case of donations from media sources such as Queensland newspapers, the John Oxley Library received copyright clearance.

The service station manual: an undervalued resource

At the end of three years the photographic subject category, *Motor vehicles*, subdivided by the decades between 1900 and 1970, was represented in several boxes packed full of annotated photographs in the John Oxley Library. Here the collection might have stayed as a useful, fascinating but isolated resource had not Ken and Ron in their liaison trips to the print collections downstairs not encountered in the person of reference librarian Brian Gilbert, someone who shared their interest in motor vehicles.

As established volunteers Ken and Ron were interested in a new project and showed some enthusiasm when two years later, they were introduced to an embryonic card index which had been designed for in house use by reference staff. The index consisted of very basic analytical entries from a section of an annual British publication entitled *Technical Services Data* whose coverage stretches between 1947 and 1991. The index is representative of a number of extremely useful compendium works called service station manuals.

Service station manuals are – at least potentially – of considerable value to home mechanics because they contain service and repair information on every make and model manufactured in a given year and detail year by year changes in individual models. Their particular value as a reference tool is that their comprehensive coverage includes the more unusual, exotic car models which may not have a corresponding workshop manual in the collection – either because the small number of cars produced may not have justified the purchase of one or because the workshop manual in question was never published for the open market. Certainly in the case of cars manufactured prior to World War II, coverage of makes and models in compendium service station manuals is manifestly superior to what can be found in the way of standard workshop or repair manuals.

The collection

The card index was born out of the frustration, on the part of reference staff, of trying to satisfy repair enquiries for older vehicles in the

absence of a relevant workshop manual. This should be seen in the context that expectations about the State Library's ability to assist people with this sort of information need were elevated precisely because the automotive collection is so extensive. Like its counterparts in other states, the State Library of Queensland's particular virtue in relationship to resources in this area is that every manual ever purchased has been retained as a permanent part of the collection. The collection includes some fascinating, old and now wonderfully quaint works dating back to the 1890s from a time when you consulted a single work to acquaint yourself with every known aspect of the motor-car, some examples being:

- Horseless vehicles, automobiles, motor cycles operated by steam, hydro-carbon, electric and pneumatic motors: a practical treatise for automobilists, manufacturers, capitalists, investors and everyone interested in the development, use and care of the automobile: including a special chapter on how to build an electric cab, with detail drawings by Gardner D. Hiscox (written around 1900)
- The book of the motor car: a practical volume devoted to the history, construction, use and care of motor-cars (1905)
- The complete motorist: being an account of the evolution and construction of the modern motor-car: with notes on the selection, use and maintenance of the same: and on the pleasures of travel upon the public roads. (1905)

In terms of its practical value the automotive collection is particularly

strong from the late 1930s when it benefited substantially from the stimulus provided by the scathing Munn-Pitt report in 1935 which described the collections generally as showing 'every evidence of financial starvation' (Munn and Pitt, 1935). It was after this point that the State Library began to acquire compendium service station manuals and to invest substantially in standing order arrangements for repair manuals. Several decades later the collection represents the status of Australian motoring very ably, its particular strengths being, in addition to its substantial coverage of British, American and Australian vehicles, its range of European and early Japanese manuals.

A problem and a solution

Despite the State Library's best efforts to equip itself to respond to the numerous enquiries pouring in from public libraries and local classic car enthusiasts, there remained the persistent problem that many older vehicles are not represented in the collection by a dedicated car manual. The difficulty was such that reference librarians were heavily dependent on the technical expertise of one or two staff who knew that, obscurely tucked away in some multi-volume compendium service station manual with an inscrutable title such as *Glenn's New Auto Repair Manual* or *Motors Auto Repair Manual* was a section which included service specifications and/or repair information for the vehicle in question. Given that the catalogue entry for such titles revealed nothing about their extremely useful content, the value of these substantial works - and there are about fifty of them in the

collection - was unknown to the State Library's clients.

While the early work done on the card index to *Technical Services Data* was a gesture in the right direction, the file was designed for in house use and was limited to title information (the name of the make and model) for individual sections. When Ken and Ron took on the indexing work in 1995 the project assumed a new dimension which was influenced by the opportunities and altered philosophical outlook associated with web based technologies. The scope of the existing card index would be significantly increased to include the majority of pre 1970 service station manuals and subject terms would be added to indicate the existence of detailed information about brakes, transmission, and other repair aspects.

Two goal related prospects drove what was planned to be a substantial, long term and methodically organised effort covering vehicles manufactured between 1920 and the 1970s. Firstly it was realised that this was an opportunity to extend exponentially the range of vehicles for which repair information could be made available. And secondly it was envisaged that at some point the card index (known affectionately as MORRIE or Motor Repair and Restoration Index) would be converted to digital format and made available to the State Library's extended client base. Over a ten year period punctuated by fortnightly visits to the Reference Services unit, the two volunteers created several thousand hand printed index records, bringing to bear their specialised knowledge and expertise in describing the contents of a range of compendium manuals.

The garage: A project proposal

In iterative planning for the move to an electronic interface which would provide remote access, via a catalogue search, to the index records, the desirability of featuring them in association with other collection resources was given consideration. The State Library needed a means to profile Ken and Ron's achievement that was not dependent on an appreciation of the librarian rooted concepts of indexing and hierarchically linked catalogue records. Indeed we wanted the message that we had significantly enhanced access to the State Library's holdings on vehicle repair to be invested with an element of excitement, a notion which inspired the logic of linking catalogue records and photographs. By virtue of its ability to allow simultaneous searching across disparate databases, the ENCompass product, used as the search interface for the John Oxley Library's digitised photographic collection, Picture Queensland, offered a ready made solution.

While the ENCompass option would allow us to make a connection between two sets of discrete resources very effectively, we also wanted to seize on the further potential to profile related aspects of the collection. The 2004 project proposal which encapsulated this thinking requested funding both to transfer the MORRIE card index to the State Library's Voyager catalogue and to build a dedicated web portal which would consolidate access to images and catalogue records and showcase existing resources in the automotive area. When Queensland Government OPAL (Online Public Access in Libraries) project funding became available for the project to proceed in

2005, it was granted on the basis that the project's goals were consistent with the State Library's *Future Directions* policy (2001) of making content web accessible.

Anticipating the garage visitor

In planning for the project a key point of reference was the identity of our target audience. In a very practical sense we saw The Garage as a resource for people who are looking for vehicle repair information, a particular strength being its potential to help with enquiries related to older cars. Because we wanted to facilitate access to the collection we thought in terms of a user friendly search interface supported by help information and a customised enquiry form which would allow its users to copy, paste and submit catalogue search results or to ask a vehicle related question. The broader principle involved here was about self empowerment – we were very conscious that the home mechanic is likely to know considerably more about his or her subject than the average reference librarian. We saw, as well, that there was potential to streamline the process of responding to vehicle related enquiries by allowing clients to identify specific records which appeared to match their information needs. This was a departure from the status quo in that historically, in the absence of catalogue information which reflected the true extent of the State Library's resources, many enquirers had submitted subject requests. We also needed to establish expectations realistically and to be clear that in keeping with longstanding policy, assistance would be delivered in the form of a photocopy rather than a loan.

Our broader target group included the car enthusiast, and by association anyone who is curious about Queensland's motoring history. In this respect we imagined the photographs as both an album of motoring history and a statement about the extent to which a way of life has been dictated by our changing relationship with the motor car. We also anticipated - and were proven correct in this assumption - that the photographic content would be of interest to car restorers who were wanting to authenticate details for restoration projects.

Calculating that project funding would allow for the digitisation of approximately five hundred of the photographs identified by Ken and Ron, we decided to offer The Garage visitors some options for exploring an image gallery: a search box, a browsable list of topics and, to make the most of interrelated photographs, a thematic approach. The featured themes section would allow us to add to the impact and socio-historical or technical interest of particular images by grouping them and supporting them with background information. We would then take advantage of the opportunity to highlight items in the wider collection by acknowledging the sources used for the associated research.

Inside The Garage: The web pages

As is frequently the case with web portals, the construction phase was both a learning experience and an exercise in sizing our ambitions to accommodate the project constraints of timeline and budgetary resourcing. Although we were, at least initially, overly ambitious about what could be achieved technically in terms of web page design,

we eventually arrived at compromise solutions which worked well in terms of what we were trying to achieve. What we ended up with, after some experiment and revision, were a set of elements which defined The Garage. Essentially these included:

- a search interface which provides access to The Garage index records and other car repair information in the State Library's collections via the public catalogue
- a search facility which retrieves both catalogue records and corresponding images by searching The Garage photographs and the catalogue simultaneously using ENCompass
- a dedicated search facility for The Garage image gallery
- a browse list which includes a hundred and eleven topics as a basis for exploring the image gallery
- a themed approach to the image gallery which includes thirteen short feature articles on various aspects of motoring history. The themes represent topics of technical interest such as *The Jeep, Willys-Overland* and *Building a Car Down Under* and more general themes such as *Women and Cars, Early Road Conditions* and *Queensland's First Cars*.
- a list of references identifying sources used in building The Garage
- an interactive element which offers visitors the opportunity to contribute historic or technical information in relation to the images
- search tips and help information
- a customised enquiry form which invites site visitors to submit an enquiry or photocopy request

- a Hot Topics section which links to a range of canned State Library catalogue searches on topical aspects of cars and motoring and to relevant websites in the State Library's online subject directory, Netlinks
- an annotated list of selected motoring magazines in the State Library's collection
- an e-Card facility which allows online visitors to select an electronic postcard from a range of fifteen historic photographs
- links to external websites with information of interest to car enthusiasts – for example, car clubs, additional car repair information, classic car profiles, motoring history

Building the garage: Project logistics

As some kind of orientation for what was to follow, initial project effort was invested in selecting the five hundred photographs to be digitised for inclusion in The Garage image gallery. The criteria employed for inclusion related to both the quality of individual photographs and their relevance to the collection as a whole. Consideration was given, for example, to the resolution of the image, the extent of certainty about the vehicle's identity, its value in representing a particular period or car model, its wider socio-historical significance and the degree to which it contributed to the balance of the collection. The final selections were a mix of highly significant photographs, an example being James Trackson's 1902 Locomobile which has been a catalyst for robust debate about who owned the first car in Queensland, and images which capture little known snippets of automotive history through their depiction of exotic or obscure car

makes, such as the 1925 Gray tourer, which had only a fleeting existence in Australia.

Following their digitisation within the State Library's photographic unit, the images were stored as a subset of the Picture Queensland digital collection. Australian Pictorial Thesaurus terms in combination with Library of Congress subject headings (for makes and models) were assigned according to the conventions of the parent collection. Supplementary descriptive information, based on research within the State Library's collections, was added to key images which had been included in the featured themes and topical browse list. Canned searches were subsequently constructed for all one hundred and eleven topics in the latter section.

A fundamental influence governing decisions about what was the optimal content and display format of the Voyager catalogue records created from the MORRIE card index was the goal of achieving a maximum retrieval outcome for The Garage's clients. We had therefore, to anticipate and accommodate logical client search strategy and to avoid confusion about how an index record related to its parent title. We used scope notes, for example, as a means of including searchable keyword terminology such as 'cars', 'service specifications' and 'repair' and the holdings note to clarify the requirement to click on the compendium manual title to send a retrieval request. The objectives, in essence, were to:

- allow clients to search for information on specific vehicle model/makes within compendium works

- ensure that searches executed from The Garage web portal are able to simultaneously retrieve content from Garage (index) records, other relevant material in the print collections (particularly car repair manuals) and photographs from The Garage image gallery
- achieve a consistency between subject headings allocated for image and print items to provide for effective combined searches
- allow for date range searches (for example the search 'Holden 1967' would retrieve a title such as *Holden 1948-1968*)

The challenges, revealed both in the translation of data from printed card to catalogue record and in the course of testing a series of batch records, were numerous, complicated and frequently time consuming. There were for instance, no established headings in the State Library catalogue for many vehicle makes and in the case of more obscure vehicles, no Library of Congress headings either. As well, there were a range of problems associated with the need to achieve a balance between the usefulness of records from a client perspective and preservation of the integrity and consistency of the catalogue database. Cataloging rules for example, require a vehicle definition as automobile, truck or van - terms which are understood variously and inconsistently by the general public.

Library of Congress subject headings were inherently problematic given that Australian and United States conventions for naming cars vary considerably (as in terms such as 'Ford', 'Jeep' and 'Mini'). There were further differences between British and United

States naming conventions and some confusion about what constituted a model and a make. There was also a Library of Congress rule change affecting the singular and plural use of the term 'automobile'(s) and a consequent choice to be made, in cataloguing terms, between achieving backwards or forwards compatibility. And finally there was a pre-existing problem (happily resolved as a result of project priorities) with the functionality of linking parent and index records in the Voyager catalogue.

Celebrating the garage: The launch and its aftermath

The Garage launch, set down for late October last year, offered a valuable opportunity to promote the web portal, to reach a new group of prospective clients and to celebrate an exceptional volunteer achievement. Invitations were accordingly dispatched to over one hundred car clubs in the greater Brisbane area to attend a classic car display and associated Garage festivities. Inspired by Ken (who also drew up the list of club invitees), the car display concept proved to be a spectacular event and an outstanding success, both in terms of its visual appeal - fifty gleaming classic cars parked to best advantage in the South Bank cultural forecourt overlooking the Brisbane River - and the excitement, goodwill and interest it generated.

Despite stiff competition from busy car club social calendars, interest outstripped standing capacity as approximately a hundred and sixty guests squeezed into the Brisbane Playhouse venue to help us celebrate. They came not only for slideshows and speeches but to hear keynote speaker

Bev Kidby who both organised and took part in the Paris to Peking trip profiled by the ABC television series and book. The connection here was with the Itala, the car driven by Lang Kidby which is featured rather handsomely in The Garage image gallery.

The Garage launch experience demonstrated very clearly the promotional value and appeal of distinctive, stylish branding. The Marketing and Communications unit at State Library excelled itself in carrying through the project's compelling signature image (young woman beside a 1947 Standard Vanguard) on the website banner, invitations, badges produced for the launch week and other promotional materials. Following the launch there was good evidence that we had tapped into a surprisingly large reservoir of interest. We were invited to tell The Garage story in eight different radio interviews, the project was given space in Queensland's RACQ magazine, in the print media and in classic car club newsletters, we were inundated with feedback about the images, our web statistics domain report recorded online visits from sixty-three different countries, we had numerous offers of car manual donations, and perhaps most tellingly, our vehicle repair enquiries for the first three month period increased by 525% over the previous two years.

In the final analysis

The Garage project captured the imagination of both staff and public in an altogether unexpected way. While it capitalised on an impressive achievement on the part of State Library's volunteers, the project's

realisation was also critically dependent on the contribution of skills, effort, creativity and generous support from across the organisation. In terms of project goals it was demonstrably successful in broadening the State Library's client base by aligning its activities with the interests and information needs of a significant number of people. A particularly satisfying aspect of the project has been its success in using available technology to enhance access to the collection and to illuminate isolated and under-utilised resources. In building on the fundamental concept of sharing high demand resources with the State Library's virtual clients, The Garage has also taken advantage of its visual elements to add interest and enjoyment to the user experience.

There are undoubtedly other Garages locked away in library collections. The process of making sought after resources visible to public audiences on a scale such as this one is inherently both demanding and rewarding. There is a need for a coincidence of several factors, among them a fit with the library's philosophical orientation and strategic planning goals, adequate project resourcing, the evidence of client driven demand, technological opportunity and the availability of specialist knowledge. The critical element, however, is passion. The State Library of Queensland was fortunate in having dedicated volunteers and librarians who, over a number of years, were willing to sustain their enthusiasm and contribute their considerable expertise for the benefit of the wider community.

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