

# Maintenance Master Karl Johnson Retires

Muni historic streetcar maintenance Superintendent Karl Johnson retired in May, closing out a notable 37-year career encompassing the entire current era of vintage streetcars in San Francisco.

Karl started with Muni in October 1977. His previous experience as a volunteer at the Seashore Trolley Museum in Maine made him a natural choice to help maintain the disparate fleet of streetcars gathered from around the world for the five years of the Historic Trolley Festivals from 1983 to 1987.

Later, when the F-line opened in 1995, Karl took on the maintenance of the PCCs, and soon, the ten vintage 1928 Milan trams added to meet growing rider demand. He mastered maintenance of this diverse fleet despite periodic reduction in staffing over the decades. Ultimately, Karl became superintendent of maintenance for the historic streetcar fleet.

Through it all, Karl found time to pay attention to the one-of-a-kind historic streetcars that represent an irreplaceable part of San Francisco—and global—transit history. He oversaw the restoration of Car No. 162, returned to Muni in 2003 after being purchased by Market Street Railway from the Orange Empire Railway Museum in Riverside County. No. 162's restoration was a great achievement, and although the car has been sidelined with accident damage since early 2014, it will run again and be an ongoing tribute to Karl and his team.

More recently, he oversaw the renovation of Muni's latest gift from Market Street Railway, its second 1934 'boat tram' from Blackpool,

England, acquired in 2013 thanks to a generous gift from the Thoresen Foundation and shipping subsidized by FedEx Trade Networks.

Karl's combination of knowledge and experience gained him strong recognition as one of the nation's top experts on historic streetcars. After a pair of serious fires on vintage streetcars operated by the Memphis Area Transit Authority (MATA), he was a key member of a team sent by the American Public Transportation Association (APTA) sent to Memphis to determine the causes of the fires and recommend remedial action. He also provided counsel to the City of El Paso in evaluating its stored PCC bodies for possible renovation on a new line in that Texas city, a project now under way.

Friends and work colleagues held a retirement party for Karl on June 27 at the Western Railway Museum in Solano County, where Karl is now railway manager, continuing his transit preservation work.

"Karl Johnson is a master of maintenance for streetcars, and Muni is fortunate to have had his services in a career that spanned five decades," said MSR President Rick Laubscher. "He has brought expertise, experience, and passion to his work. He has truly cared about the cars, and it shows. We'll see his legacy on the streets of San Francisco for decades to come. All of us at Market Street Railway wish Karl and his wife Carmen decades of happiness ahead, and we hope he'll continue to share his knowledge with us in support of San Francisco's historic streetcar fleet. They're still his babies." ■



Karl Johnson on the steps of St. Louis Public Service PCC No. 1704 (restored to its original appearance from Muni No. 1128) in early 1984. The occasion was a test of Sacramento Northern Birney Car No. 62 from the Western Railway Museum in Solano County, where Karl is now railway manager. (The Birney's railroad-profile wheels couldn't negotiate Muni tracks effectively and it was never used in service here.) 1914 Muni Car No. 130, at the time newly restored to passenger service after 25 years as a work car, looks on at the now vanished East Bay Terminal. *Rick Laubscher photo.*



Karl in the cab of 1916 Muni work car C-1, which he piloted many times on its trips to check alignment of newly laid track and switches. *SFMTA photo.*