HOW THE MUSEUM GOT STARTED

By Joe Wood

In the President's message in the September, 1985 edition of the Panama Canal Society's Canal Record, Society 2nd Vice President, Adrian "Kibby" Bouche, was listed as chair of the Museum Committee, which was established for the purpose of exploring the feasibility of creating a museum to be operated under the auspices of the Society. On page 7 of that same issue, it was announced that Kibby had resigned as 2nd Vice President because he wanted to devote all his time to the Museum Committee's work. This was the beginning of the Panama Canal Society's effort to create a museum to preserve Panama Canal and Canal Zone history. While there was some initial interest, the effort never got off the ground.

In the June, 1986 Canal Record, the President's message contained this note: "Mr. Adrian "Kibby" Bouche completed a very comprehensive investigation on the needs and requirements involved in the establishment of a Panama Canal Museum. He visited the administrators of several museums in Washington, D. C. to gather information and support. Kibby spent many hours on this project to cover every minute detail, concluding with the finding that, even with reducing the scope, it is an overwhelming project for a Society relying on volunteers, in addition to requiring a considerable outlay of funds. As a result, the Panama Canal Society's Panama Canal Museum project has been terminated. Contributing to this decision was membership lack of interest in the project. We received a total of 11 Museum questionnaires returned by our members. There were 9 in support of the museum and 2 against the museum. This is not enough interest to justify an operation of this magnitude. Anyone still interested in a museum should contact Mr. Bouche as this is something dear to his heart and he'll probably try to continue with it in another direction."

Over a several year period, Bouche continued to try to find a "home" for his extensive collection of Panama Canal memorabilia and historical objects. At one point, he interested a small Cattle museum in Dallas, Texas, to allow his collection to be displayed in one part of the museum. Adding to that collection, the Panama Canal Commission donated a complete set of dinner ware and other objects from the Canal Zone Governor's house. Those items, and the rest of the collection, were later returned to Bouche because the museum did not devote much time or space to displaying the collection. Bouche continued his quest for an established institution to take over his collection and to allow the formation of a Panama Canal Museum within their facilities. He felt strongly that a stand-alone museum would not make it on its own.

In May, 1997, Chuck Hummer called me and asked if I would like to help form a museum to preserve the history of the United States in Panama before the US turned over the Canal at the end of the century. Chuck and Davis Stevenson had been concerned that the history of the US presence in the Canal Zone and the institutional memory of the many people who had lived there and worked for the Panama Canal would be lost once the US transferred the Canal.

Chuck, at the time, was an officer of the Panama Canal Society and wanted the support of the Society in the creation of the museum. Recognizing the past efforts of Kibby Bouche to enlist the support of the Society, Chuck asked me if I could prepare a comprehensive prospectus and feasibility study that would assess the viability of starting and successfully operating a museum and present a business plan and recommendation to the Society for their endorsement of a museum. Having been involved in numerous civic activities while working for the Panama Canal, and not really wanting to re-engage, I begged off. Chuck was very persuasive, however, making the case that no one else is going to preserve our history if we don't do it ourselves. I reluctantly agreed to conduct a feasibility study which we could present to the Society to garner their support.

My first step was to visit the Knott House Museum in Tallahassee and talk to the curator about the pitfalls, obstacles and challenges of operating a small museum. She referred me to a book entitled, "So You Think You Want to Start a Museum?" written by a retired army general who was asked one time to start a military history

museum in his hometown. The book was very revealing and offered a step-by-step guideline for getting a museum up and running, including a very strong warning to take it slowly, not expect much support from the public and make sure the governing board and volunteers were totally committed and dedicated to the project.

I spent the better part of 1997 and the early part of 1998 preparing the study and concluded that, while it would be a major undertaking to start and operate a museum, it appeared that there could be a strong underpinning of support from the more than 4,000 Society members and others who had an interest in preserving their unique history, and that membership could form the foundation for our endeavor.

Chuck presented the prospectus to the Panama Canal Society Board, with a favorable recommendation to move forward. The board felt that, while it would be wonderful to have a museum, it could not financially support such an undertaking and felt that the museum should be established as a completely separate organization so as not to obligate the Society to an outlay of funds that could drain its reserves. At the same time, Betty LeDoux, an officer of the Society Board, felt that the museum could be established even without financial support from the Society, and she arranged with an attorney to draft a constitution and by-laws for the museum.

On March 15, 1998, the museum organization, named the Panama Canal Society Foundation (although not connected in any way to the Society), was formally established and registered as a Florida Non Profit Corporation. In July of that year, the first organizational meeting was held in Orlando in conjunction with the Panama Canal Society Reunion. A small group of about 25 people attended the meeting and all vowed to support the effort. Most in the audience immediately pledged donations (several of $1,000 or more).The founding officers were: President, Joe Wood; Vice President, Betty LeDoux; Executive Vice President, Chuck Hummer; Treasurer; Nancy Van Siclen; Secretary, Marie Wright Gibson.

Our first formal meeting took place on September 25 and 26, 1998, over a weekend at the Saddlebrook Resort in Tampa, and allowed us to spend time organizing and mapping out our goals and objectives. Later, we held a three day retreat at the Killearn Golf and Country Club in Tallahassee and furthered our intense focus on goals and aspirations, fundraising initiatives and governance.

On March 18, 1999, we received our formal approval from the IRS to operate as a 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization, which allowed museum purchases to be tax-exempt and contributions to be tax deductible – an important milestone triggering increased contributions.

For several years we held our meetings in the conference room of the Panama Canal Society until we had raised enough money to lease a small office in the same building. At the time, that move was risky because we weren't sure we could sustain the flow of donations to cover our rent.

For most of the year leading up to establishment of the museum, Chuck and I were in constant communication with Kibby Bouche to let him know what we were doing and to ask for his support. He rejected our efforts, stating that there is no way that we could be successful in operating a museum and he refused to be a part of the organizing group; nor did he want to donate his collection to us because he felt that we would fail. Despite our early success, and continuing discussions on how we were doing, he decided to donate parts of his collection to the Los Angeles Maritime Museum, and the University of California, Riverside.