

2001 GENERAL TOOLS AWARD - Robert Merriam

President Miller then invited David Simmons, chair of the General Tools Award committee to make this year's presentation. Mr Simmons opened his remarks by asking the membership if they had forgotten the General Tools Award, because the committee received no new nominations this year. The General Tools Award is not a popularity contest, but fortunately this year's committee could rely on earlier strong nominations for its decision. He announced that Vance Packard will be the chair of next year's committee, and invited the membership to help him out by submitting more nominations. (The text below is from Mr Simmon's prepared address as transmitted to the secretary.)

“For nearly a decade, the Society has awarded the General Tools Award for Distinguished Service to Industrial Archeology to individuals who have given “noteworthy, beyond-the-call-of-duty service, over an extended period of time.” Provided through the generosity of the Abraham and Lillian Rosenberg Foundation, the type of service is unspecified in the criteria for selection, except that it must be in an area other than academic publication.

“The call for nominations was published in the *Newsletter*, and continues through the year until next spring. All the eight individuals who have previously been awarded the monetary gift of \$1,000 and the General Tools brass plumb bob presentation piece have all been exemplary practitioners of the field. This provides an opportunity to ask all those previous winners present today to stand and be recognized. But I need to take this opportunity to ask the membership if they have forgotten about the award? Despite each previous recipient having strong and forceful personalities, they also were blessed with colleagues who thought enough of their work and their accomplishments in industrial archeology to prepare remarkably well-written and persuasively argued nominations. This year the General Tools Award committee, consisting of myself as chair, Vance Packard, and John Light, received no new nominations. The award depends on the membership for nominations. The award is not meant to be a popularity contest but a genuine recognition of the extraordinary efforts that are often involved in preserving and appreciating industrial buildings and artifacts. Fortunately the committee was able to draw on a strong group of earlier nominations to identify an outstanding candidate. But should that pattern continue, an opportunity to draw attention to a selfless devotion to the cause will be lost and the field of industrial archeology accordingly diminished. Next year's chairman is Vance Packard, and he needs your help.

“This year's recipient of the Society for Industrial Archeology's General Tools Award combines an impressive academic background, wide-ranging and varied world of experience, a ready willingness to get his hands (and the rest of him) dirty in order to preserve industrial history, and a refreshing perspective and enduring Yankee sense of humor. It is **Robert Merriam**, founder of the New England Museum of Wireless and Steam in East Greenwich, Rhode Island.

“Like every good practitioner of IA, Bob Merriam brings a strong technical background to the field. He has been fiddling around with radios since a boy, but his formal education in engineering began when he entered Harvard in 1941. During the war, he received an electrical

engineer's certificate through the Army Specialized Training Program at the University of New York. After a stint with the Signal Corps and service in the European Theatre, he returned to Harvard to obtain a degree in engineering sciences and applied physics and finished work on his master's degree in electrical engineering, also from Harvard. During one summer, he attended the University of Oslo where he became the first non-Norwegian to get an amateur radio license in Norway.

“Bob's lifetime commitment to education began shortly thereafter when he joined the faculty of Swarthmore College as an instructor in electrical engineering. He has also been an associate professor in electrical engineering at the University of Rhode Island. Bob edits the periodical *Wireless Communication in the U.S* and has authored more than 130 articles on marine electronics.

“Bob's major contribution to the field of industrial archeology has been through his work at the New England Museum of Wireless and Steam. Founded in 1964, under Bob's leadership the museum has become a world-class archival, preservation and educational facility for the history of wireless and steam technology. Bob provided the initial collection of artifacts, the land where the museum stands, now composed of five buildings, and much support from his personal finances, including serving as the director without compensation. The Wireless Building houses rare equipment spanning electronic communication from telegraph to TV and ranges from early commercial receivers to wireless transmitters and test instruments. The unaltered 1907 wireless station built by Walter W. Massie (a contemporary of Guglielmo Marconi) to serve off-shore steamboat traffic was moved to the museum grounds from Point Judith, Rhode Island. It is the oldest surviving originally equipped wireless station in the world. The stationary steam engine collection, encompassing engines manufactured between 1868 and 1911, was designated by the American Society of Mechanical Engineers in 1992 as an “International Heritage Collection.” But preservation is only part of the museum's mission. To quote Bob, “We want these pieces of history to run the way their builders meant them to run.” That requires careful research into things like how to create the right foundation for a machine that weighs as much as 28 tons and how to get the proper valve setting and alignment on an engine that may have been sitting idle for half a century. Because of Bob's leadership, the museum now incorporates the only working example of a George H. Corliss steam engine. In addition to these industrial-sized artifacts, the museum has a library building for its body of steam engine drawings (which is also very highly rated by the ASME) and mechanical engineering books and archives. This building also houses the museum's large collection of steam engine models. Most importantly for SIA, Bob has made sure that the museum has, since the very beginning, been that rarest of birds, an institutional member.

“Making the museum “a place for study and enlightenment” is a major goal of Bob Merriam's. The annual Yankee Steam-Up, where Bob's license as a stationary steam engineer comes into play, and the annual Yankee Radio Tune-Up make important strides in fulfilling it. Quoting Bob Lindquist who prepared the nomination materials, “the museum is a magnificent, noisy, smoky, steamy time machine.” Seeing the universal delight and amazement on the faces of visitors of all ages during a Yankee Steam-Up is a true thrill for everyone, not the least of which is the director.

“Again like all passionate industrial archeologists, Bob does not shrink from the hard physical labor, and dirt and grime necessary to salvage industrial artifacts. More importantly, he has not done it just because that was the only way of saving these artifacts. His real sense of joy and pleasure in the work is a recurring theme in Bob’s work. “Rigging steam engines is hard work, but fun.” “It requires skill, muscle and scholarship.” “The history of science and technology is fun. Studying the parade of discoveries which shed light on nature’s mysteries is one of the best of entertainments.” Those are direct quotes, evidence of Bob’s strong commitment and enthusiasm for the field.

“Bob Merriam’s list of previous awards from organizations and personal accomplishments is remarkable. He is a registered professional engineer, registered land surveyor, and the recipient of US patents in the field of radio electronics. He was a founder of the National Marine Electronics Association, a founder and past president of the East Greenwich Preservation Society, the 1979 recipient of Ralph Batcher Memorial Award from the Radio Club of America for achievement in the preservation of the history of radio and electronic communication, and a recipient of the Marconi Gold Medal of Achievement from the Veteran Wireless Operators Association. He has been made an honorary lifetime trustee by the Rhode Island Heritage Trust, received the Downing Volunteer Service Award by the Rhode Island Preservation and Heritage Commission, has been named a life member of the Institute for Electrical and Electronics Engineers (the famous “eye-triple-E”), made a life member of the American Radio Relay League, named an honorary member of the National Association of Power Engineers, named an honorary member of the National Marine Electronic Association, and named Engineer of the Year in 1999 by the Providence Engineering Society. While receiving this recognition, he found time, along with his wife Nancy, to establish his own marine instrument firm, Merriam Instruments, and to design and install elaborate electronics on world-traveling yachts.

“It gives me great pleasure to add to that long list the 2001 General Tools Award for Distinguished Service to Industrial Archeology. Congratulations Bob!