

# The Interurban Passes

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## Memory of Electric Lines Remain Vivid

  
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By Vernon C. Underwood

**(Columbus Sunday Dispatch, September 25, 1938)**

**IN** the comparatively short space of 40 years, the people of Ohio have witnessed the rise and fall of the extensive interurban system. Even now the abandonment of the last major line, the Cincinnati & Lake Erie railroad, has been sealed by federal court order. With the passing, Columbus, once an interurban center with nine different lines operating from it, will lose its last interurban service.

At first many interurbans were of the old wooden "battleship" type, so-called because of their heavily constructed bodies. Those were eventually replaced by steel-bodied cars, some of which were equipped with parlor car revolving chairs and even observation ends.

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**TODAY** their weather-beaten bodies stripped of their fine brass trimmings and their windows shattered, lay abandoned in farm yards along the highways, forlorn reminders of more prosperous days. Those days are gone, but they will not be forgotten, for railroad fans, the country over, are tracing their histories in a commendable effort to preserve them for posterity in the country which they served so well.

Some of these veterans of the electric rails have met a kinder fate, and are now in use as restaurants, tourist cabins, gasoline stations, et cetera, where they are kept neatly trimmed and painted. Usually, those cars that were not sold were burned and the iron salvaged from them.

At the height of their prosperity, the electric roads featured many of the same services offered on steam roads, such as railway mail service, porter service, parlor and chair car service and through freight service. At one time, funeral cars with somber decorations were built especially for chartering by funeral parties.

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**THE** first interurban line in Ohio of record was the Newark & Granville railway. In 1887, a group of Newark residents raised the money for the construction of the line. It was originally built to haul mail from the B. & O. station in Newark to the T. & O. C. station at Granville.

Later, it carried other kinds of freight as the traffic developed. The bulk of its freight traffic was dairy products and groceries. In 1890, short passenger cars, 25 feet in length, with open platforms and carrying freight trailer cars, were operated every half hour between the two towns.



Photo – 1. Here bus and interurban stand side by side in the old interurban station on Rich Street, a contrast that tells the whole story of the passing of the traction cars. The buses will replace the C. & L. E. cars. From the Donald A. Kaiser Collection

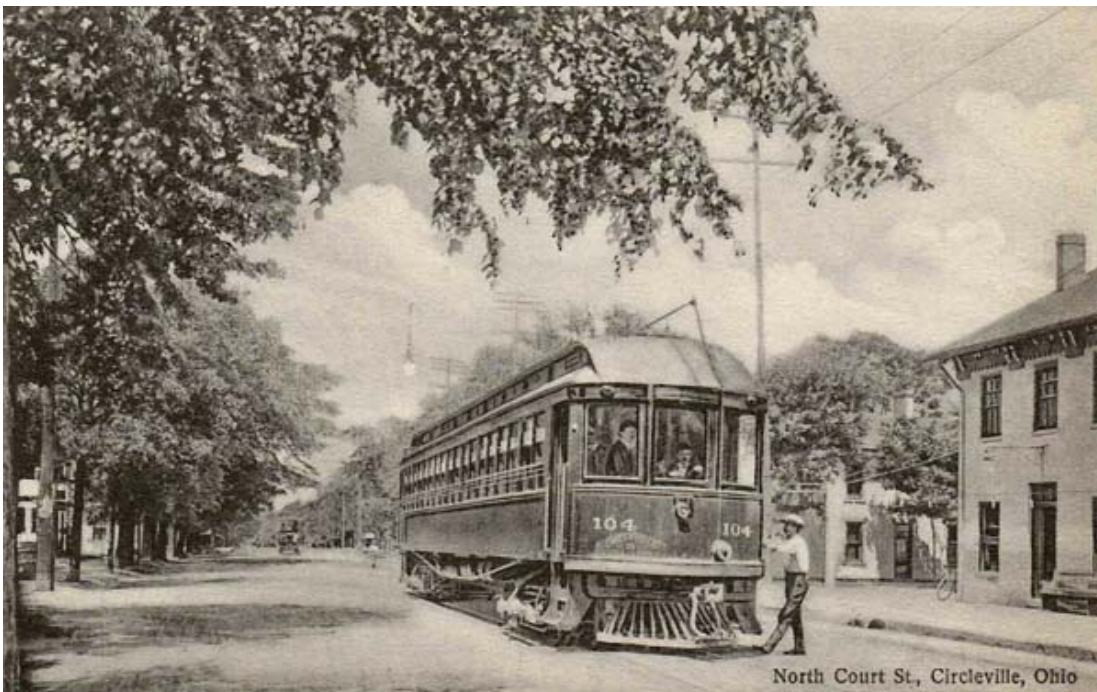


Photo – 2. This view shows the Circleville interurban station (on the right) as it looked circa 1905. From the Alex Campbell Collection

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**THE** most unusual feature of the line was the fact that it carried newspapers to the houses along the line, which required expert marksmanship on the part of the motorman to land the papers safely on the front porches of the subscribers' homes. Its most prominent patron was John Jones, a wealthy coal operator who depended on the line for his daily mail service, which was very heavy.

The Newark-Granville line was absorbed into the Ohio Electric system in 1910 and enjoyed its greatest prosperity from 1910 to 1921. Its principal passenger business was derived from the student body at Denison university in Granville. In 1923, the line suffering from heavy operating expenses was abandoned.

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**ONE** of the most interesting lines in Ohio was the Ohio Southern, commonly known as the "Hartman Farm Line." S. B. Hartman, now deceased, conceived the idea of bringing people to his extensive farm on High street, just south of Columbus to spend their weekends and vacations. His huge country estate with numerous cattle barns, tenant houses, a large dairy, a power plant and hotel, became and still is one of the show places of central Ohio. A means of transportation was also required to send the tremendous bulk of farm products to Columbus, the nearest distributing center.

On Oct. 1, 1906, the line was incorporated and built from South Columbus through the Hartman farm to St. Joseph's cemetery station, a distance of 6.85 miles. Earl S. Davis was named as president of the line, which was financed by Mr. Harman.

In addition to the farm and tourist business, it carried mourners to funeral services at St. Joseph's cemetery. With these three different kinds of traffic, it flourished until about 1925, when automobiles began to cut into its passenger business. Finally on May 20 1929, it ceased operations.

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**THE** interurbans most familiar to central Ohio residents were those of the Scioto Valley and Columbus, Delaware & Marion railways. The C., D. & M. cars were nicknamed the "red bird" cars because of their crimson-painted bodies. Built by the [American car & Foundry Co.], they featured revolving chairs, a glass-enclosed observation room and screens in the windows. Their high speed and Pullman [like] comfort made them the favorites of the traveling public, even though an extra fare was charged to ride them.

Similar to these were the deluxe chair car limiteds of the Scioto Valley, which were named "Mount Logan", the "Mount Pleasant" and the "Lord Dunmore." At night the lights gleaming from their windows and third rail shoes trailing a shower of sparks behind, they flashed through the country side like a meteor.

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**MANY** of the first interurbans in operation were equipped with wooden seats while others were covered with interwoven cane seats. Later, these types of seats gave way to green plush and still latter to the leather-covered bucket type seats, the latter being used widely today on the lines still operating.





Photo – 3. When interurbans began to feel the competition of automobiles, they painted huge signs on their sides like this one and another reading “Are the highways paid for by those who use them?”. From the Don Narris Collection



Photo – 4. An excursion train on the Scioto Valley Traction is shown here at Chase, Ohio, in 1906. From the Donald A. Kaiser Collection.

Practically all cars were equipped with smoking compartments, which were the favorite rendezvous for traveling salesmen, who always seemed to have a stock trade of the latest stories for the willing ears they found there.

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**THE** longest interurban line ever to operate in Ohio, as one corporate entity, was the Ohio Electric, with a total of 665.2 miles of line. This company was organized in 1910, and was made up of 13 companies merged into one system, the lines radiating to Lima, Toledo, Columbus, Zanesville, Newark, Springfield, Dayton, Cincinnati, Bellefontaine, and Union City with hourly service to all these points. It enjoyed its greatest prosperity in the years from 1910-1920.

In 1921 it went into receivership and B. J. Jones, formerly general manager of the line, was named as receiver.

Five huge power houses, situated at Zanesville, Hebron, Lima, Lindenwold and Medway were required to furnish power for the system.

The shortest interurban line operated in Ohio was Fort Loramie Railway, with a total of 3.04 miles of track. Incorporated in September, 1919, it ran from Minster to Loramie, the latter situated on a small lake of the same name. From its beginning to the time it was taken over by the Western Ohio railway on Feb. 15, 1927, it encountered financial setbacks. In spite of public subscription to prolong its life, the line suffering from a lack of business, was abandoned shortly after the merger.

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**FOLLOWING** the organization of the Ohio Electric Railway Co., construction was started on the present interurban station at Rich and Third streets in Columbus. The terminal association was organized by the various lines entering the station and bonds were sold to finance the construction. In 1912 the new terminal was opened to the public and the first ticket was sold to B. J. Jones, now a civil engineer of Columbus.

At one time a total of 164 passenger and 95 freight cars were operated into the Columbus terminal. Now only eight passenger runs are operated on the C. & L. E. line to Columbus, while freight service has been discontinued.

The traction cars will be replaced entirely by buses operated by the C. & L. E. bus line.

When the C. & L. E. railroad was organized, this line operated approximately 300 freight and passenger interurbans and employed 1000 men. Now, only five men are employed in the operation of the remaining 16 cars.

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**IN** 1908, 210 passenger and 320 freight cars were operated by the Ohio Electric. Its largest passenger cars, numbers 57 and 58, each had a carrying capacity of [108] passengers and were the largest in operation in Ohio. They were equipped with baggage and smoking compartments and were used to handle the heavy commuter traffic between Columbus and Grove City.

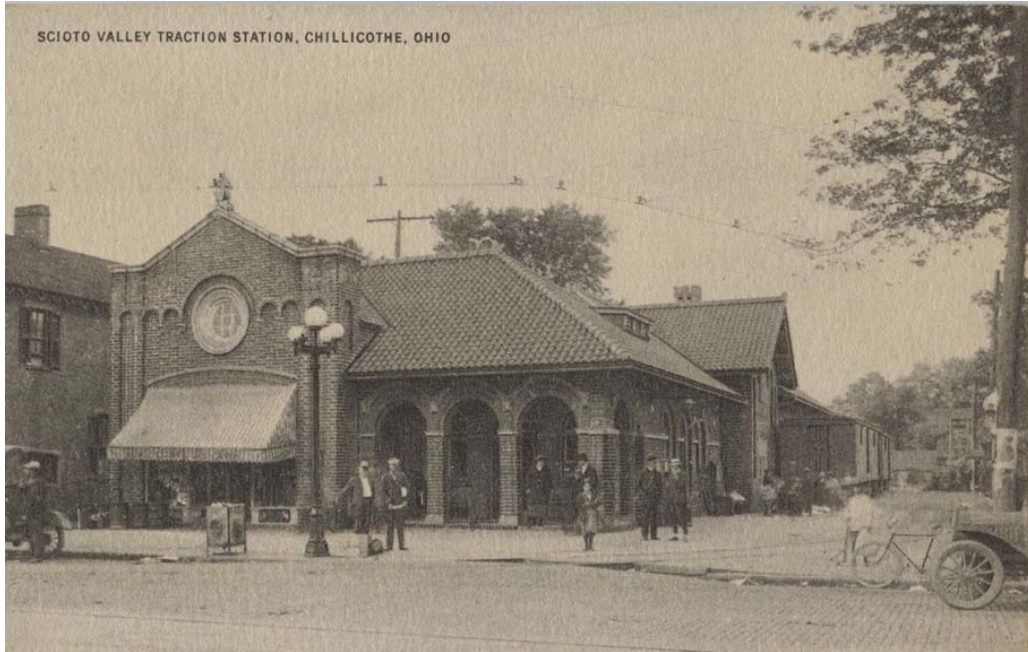


Photo – 5. This is how the Chillicothe terminal of the Scioto Valley line looked circa 1910. From the Alex Campbell Collection

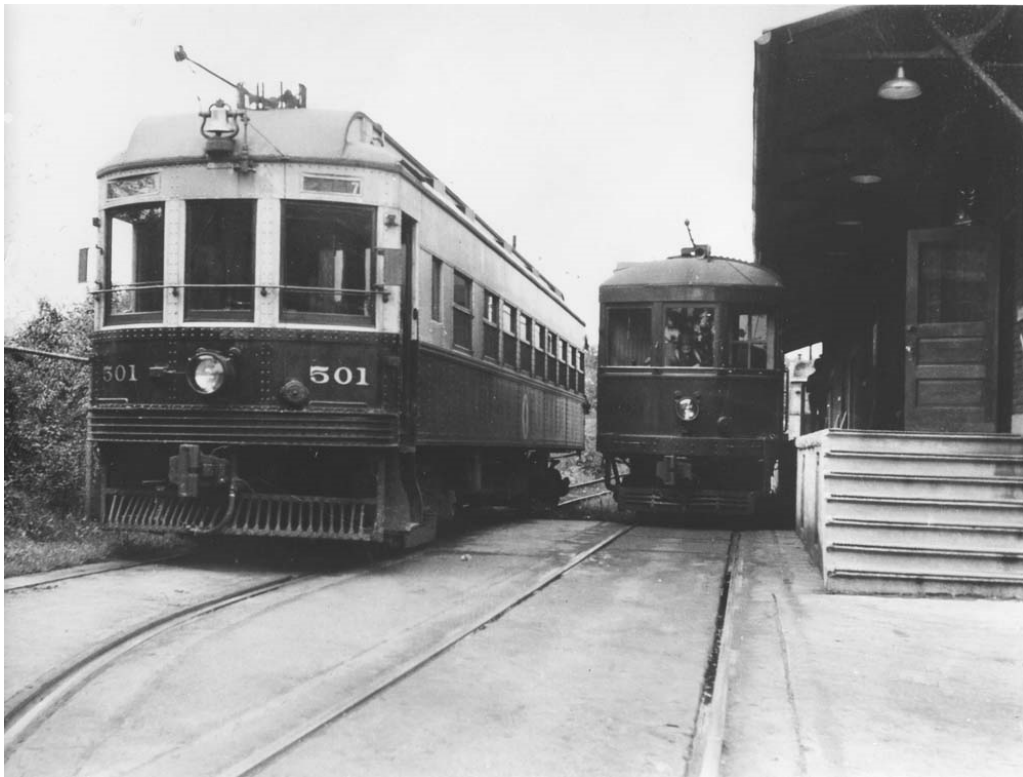


Photo – 6. At the station is the C., D. & M. No. 501 ready for the last run out of Marion, in June, 1933. From the Alex Campbell Collection.



In 1915, the peak year, this state was served by a system of 68 electric lines with a total of 2809.9 miles of track. Now the total scarcely exceeds 500 miles, and the contemplated abandonment of the C. & L. E. will reduce that total to approximately 400 miles.

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**THE** interurban was the only means of transportation to and from Buckeye Lake Park, besides the private automobiles which were comparatively few in the earlier years. The passenger traffic was so enormous that an elaborate station had to be build at the park with ticket office, waiting rooms, train gates and other features found in the large steam road terminals.

It was not uncommon to see trains of from three to five passenger cars running to Indian and Buckeye Lakes on Saturday afternoons when people, pleasure-bound for the weekend, would fill the cars to capacity.

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**THE** two largest passenger movements on the Ohio Electric were those operated to Buckeye Lake Park, one for the Hilltop association and the other for colored residents of Columbus and Central Ohio.

Forty passenger cars were required to handle the 2500 colored people in July, 1921, the return movement to Columbus not being completed until the morning of the day following their picnic at the park.

Columbus West side residents will recall the Hilltop association picnic, drawing 1500 people and requiring 20 passenger cars for the movement, in August, 1918. Four trains were operated to the park, the first two carrying seven and nine cars and the last two carrying two cars each. The first two were the longest interurban passenger trains in the history of the Ohio Electric and had to be pulled by freight motor cars to negotiate the grades on the line.

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**TWO** of the worst wrecks on the Ohio Electric line occurred at London on the Springfield subdivision and at Elk Run on the Cincinnati division. In December, 1918, a passenger car approached a sharp curve at London at excessive speed, and went over on its side. Eight people were killed and five injured.

A head-on collision between a freight and passenger train at Elk Creek in July, 1931, resulted in the death of nine persons and the injury of five. Approaching each other at high speed, the freight car telescoped the passenger.

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**INTERURBAN** fares have averaged about 2 ½ cents per mile during the last 40 years in comparison with steam road fares of 3 cents per mile up until Aug. 26, 1920, when the minimum was advanced to 3.6 cents. On June 1, 1936, steam road fares were reduced to two cents per mile, where they remained until July 25, when they were increased to 2 ½ cents.

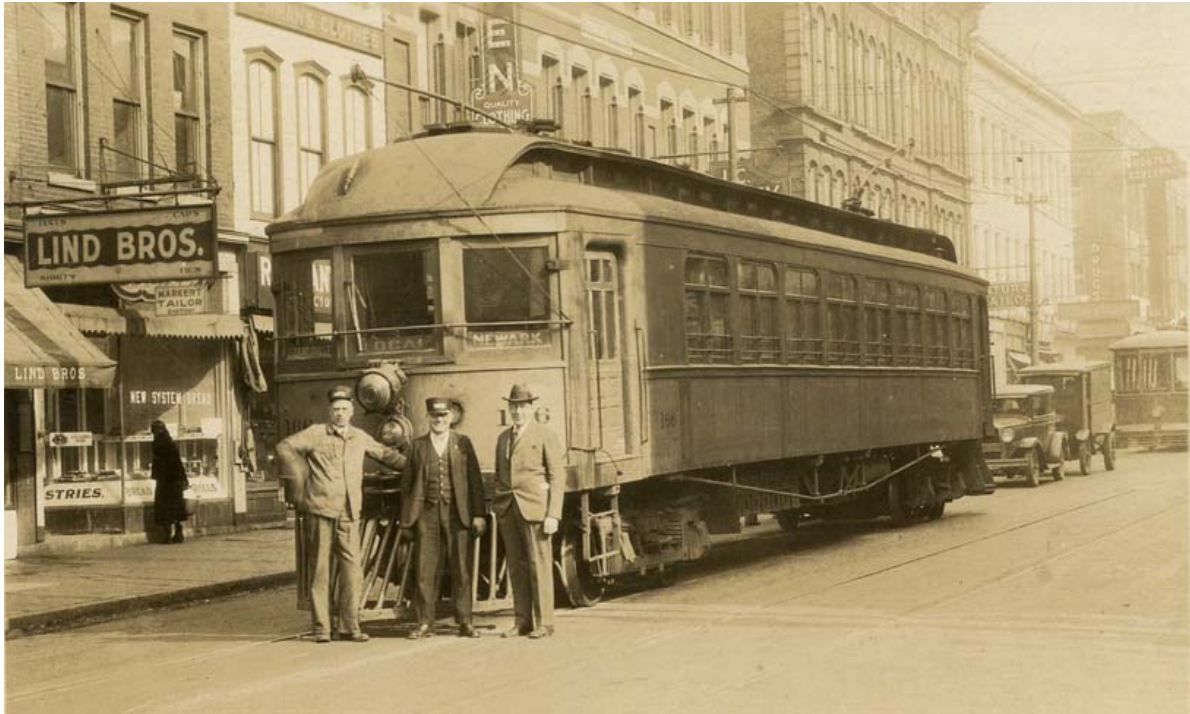


Photo – 7. The last car out of Zanesville is shown ready to leave, Feb. 15, 1929. From the Alex Campbell Collection.

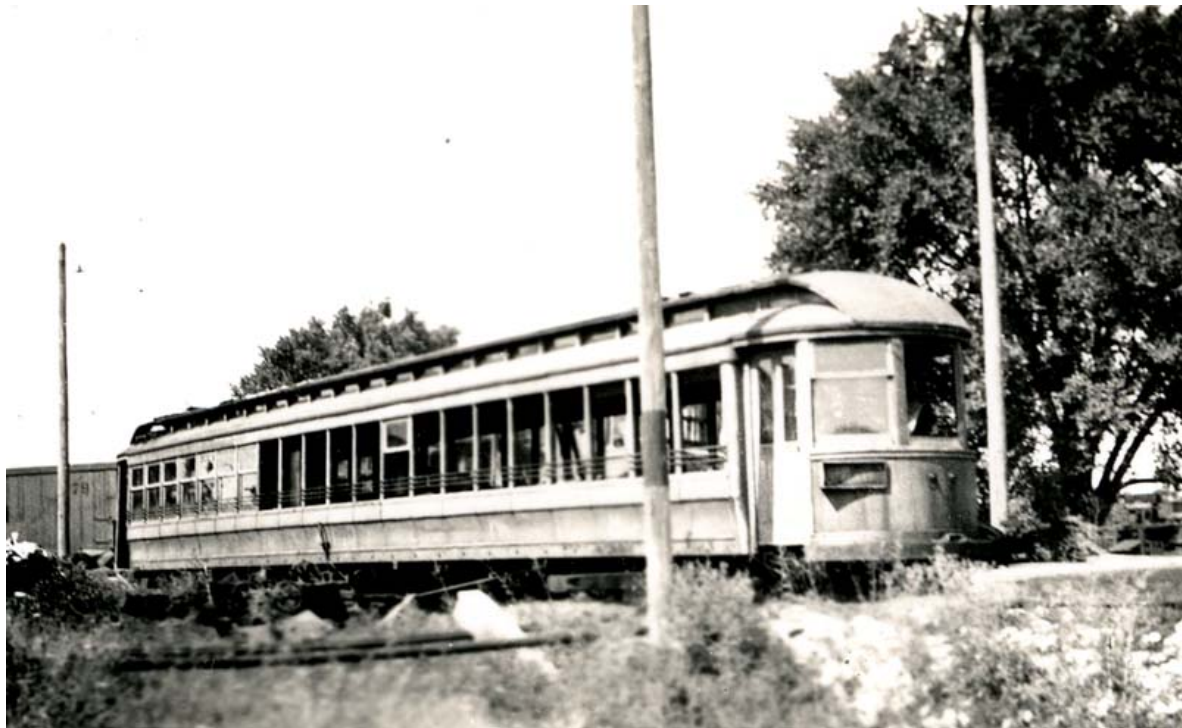


Photo – 8. This car, used often to carry university students and thousands of others to picnics at Olentangy park, north of Columbus, found its last resting place in a field at Stratford, Ohio, a forlorn reminder of more prosperous days. From the Alex Campbell Collection



These low fares, coupled with higher speeds and modernization of the steam roads, took much of the long-haul passenger traffic away from the interurbans. At first the interurbans took the local passenger business away from the steam railroads on account of their more frequent schedules and low fares, but they eventually lost this in turn to the private automobile and bus.

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**THE** chief factors contributing to the downfall of the interurban were: First and most important, the ever-increasing number of private automobiles; second, the establishment of faster steam railroad service between the principal cities; third bus competition; and last, the debt-laden capital structure of the interurban companies.

Bus lines took their toll in luring business away from the traction companies. Many will remember the old "Star" lines which used buses which were merely elongated sedans with trunks behind and luggage racks on the roof. As the automobile developed, the bus did likewise and large bus manufacturing concerns began to install individual bucket type seats and equip the wheels with balloon tires, thus affording easier riding

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**THEN** began a race in modernization between the interurban and bus companies, each trying to build faster and more comfortable equipment than the other.

Many interurban companies began to realize the value of highway transportation for supplemental feeder lines and replacement of non-profitable interurban schedules, and thus formed subsidiary lines to perform these services. In later years, many traction lines have built fast, light-weight cars, many of them streamlined, to compete with streamlined buses which were rapidly coming into and still are in use. However, the high cost of track maintenance and taxes thereon, have forced many lines to resort to highway transportation.

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**IN THE** present age of speed, the traction lines found a handicap in the time lost through traffic in the towns, while their competitors, the steam roads, through grade crossing elimination, and the construction of more efficient signal systems, quickened their schedules considerably.

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**BUT** quite a different picture is presented in the metropolitan centers, such as Chicago, Milwaukee, San Francisco, St. Louis and others. Here in the densely populated, commuting districts, people flock to the electric lines for their daily transportation to and from work and play. Through the medium of electric transportation, people find relief from the heavily congested highways and in these large cities, interurban lines still flourish. Their revenues approximate those of the major steam railroads of the country, and no decline is indicated at present.

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Photo – 9. As late as July 3, 1938, this car was operated as a special for railroad fans. It's of the old wooden construction. From the B J Kern Collection.

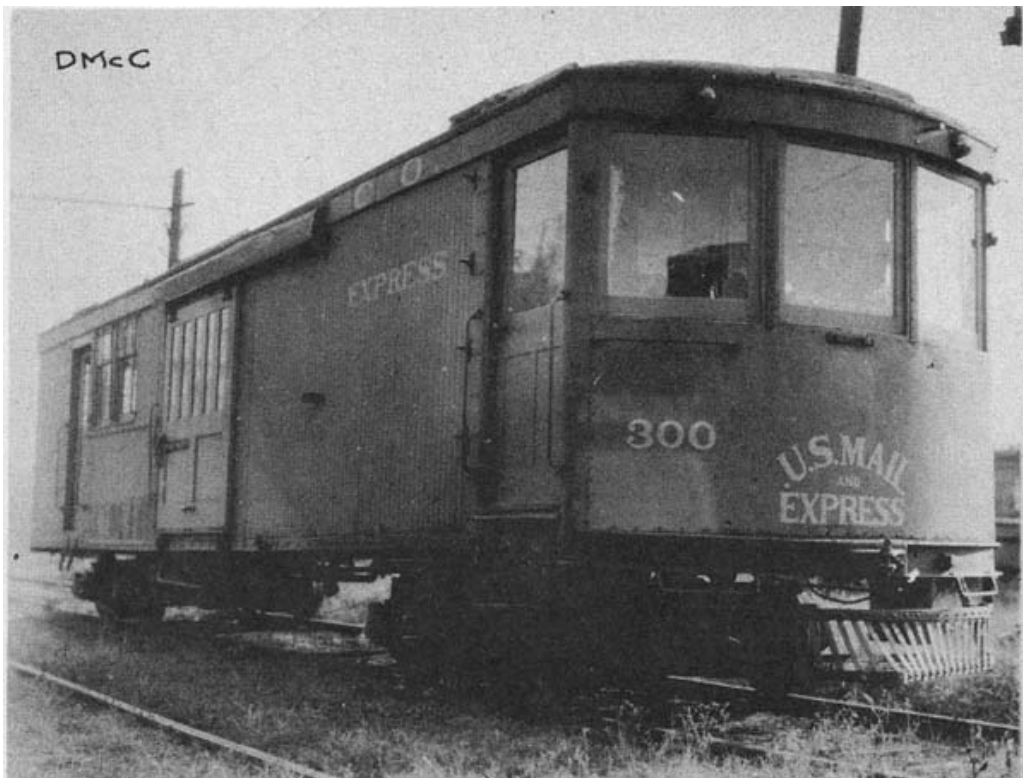


Photo – 10. One of the few Ohio interurban lines operating railway postal cars was the Cincinnati, Georgetown & Portsmouth. This post office car was taken off the line in November, 1935. From the CERA Bulletin No. 96

**THE** remaining electric lines still in operation in Ohio are: Cleveland Interurban from Cleveland to Shaker Heights, 11 miles; Co-operative Transit from Bellaire to Bridgeport and Wheeling, 47 miles; Inter-City Rapid Transit, from Canton to Massillon, 10 miles; Monongahela, West Penn Public Service, operating a line from Marietta to Parkersburg, W VA, with approximately a half mile of line in Ohio; Ohio Midland Light & Power from Groveport to Picway power plant on the Scioto river, 13 miles; Ohio & Morenci from Birkey, Ohio to Morenci, Mich., 18 miles; Ohio Public Service, from Toledo to Marblehead, 64 miles; Stark Electric from Canton to Salem, 32 miles; Steubenville, East Liverpool & Beaver Valley, 43 miles; Steubenville, Wellsburg & Weirton, 12 miles; Steubenville & Wheeling, seven miles; Toledo & Indiana from Vulcan, Ohio, to Bryan Ohio, 51 miles.

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**THE** Co-operative Transit Co. has an interesting history. This line was offered at public sale several years ago, its revenues having been depleted and its resources drained. Then a determined group of citizens and employes of the line purchased the entire properties and set out to prove to the transportation world and the public that the line could prosper.

Originally named the Wheeling Traction Co., they reorganized as the Co-operative Transit. With frequent service and a 5-cent fare, the line soon triumphed over bus competition and established itself on a paying basis. With marked success, it stands today as a living monument to the efforts of its management.

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**THE** future of the other lines remains in doubt, and even the steam roads are facing their troubles.

In the history of the United States, transportation has undergone a constant evolution. From wagon trains, progress was made to canal boats; from canal boats to railroads. Then came the electric railroad and the automobile and buses. Latest on the scene is the airplane. But even that has its limitations.

Who can predict which will triumph?

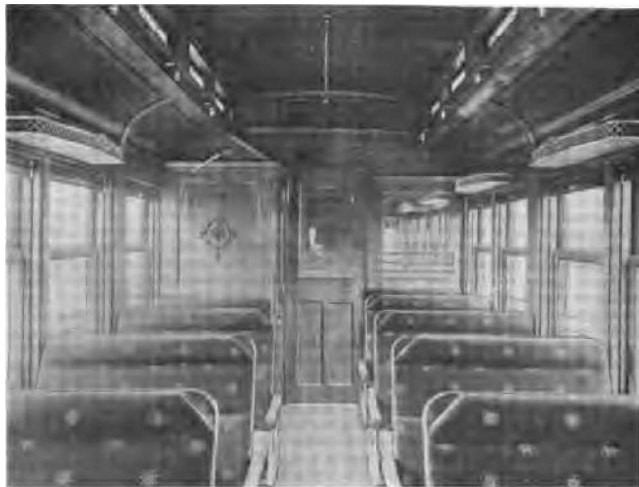


Photo- 11. View showing the interior of a Scioto Valley car which took first prize at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1905. From the 1906 Street Railway Journal.



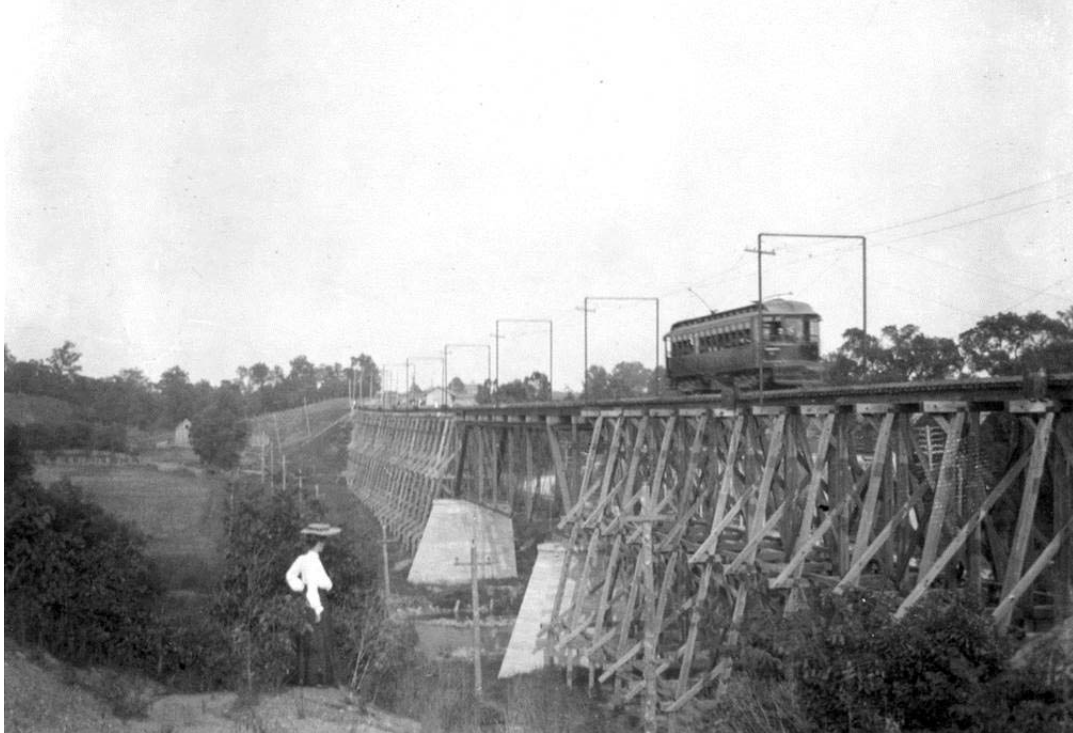


Photo – 12. Famous was the West Jefferson wooden trestle here occupied by a Columbus, London & Springfield interurban. From the Donald A. Kaiser Collection.

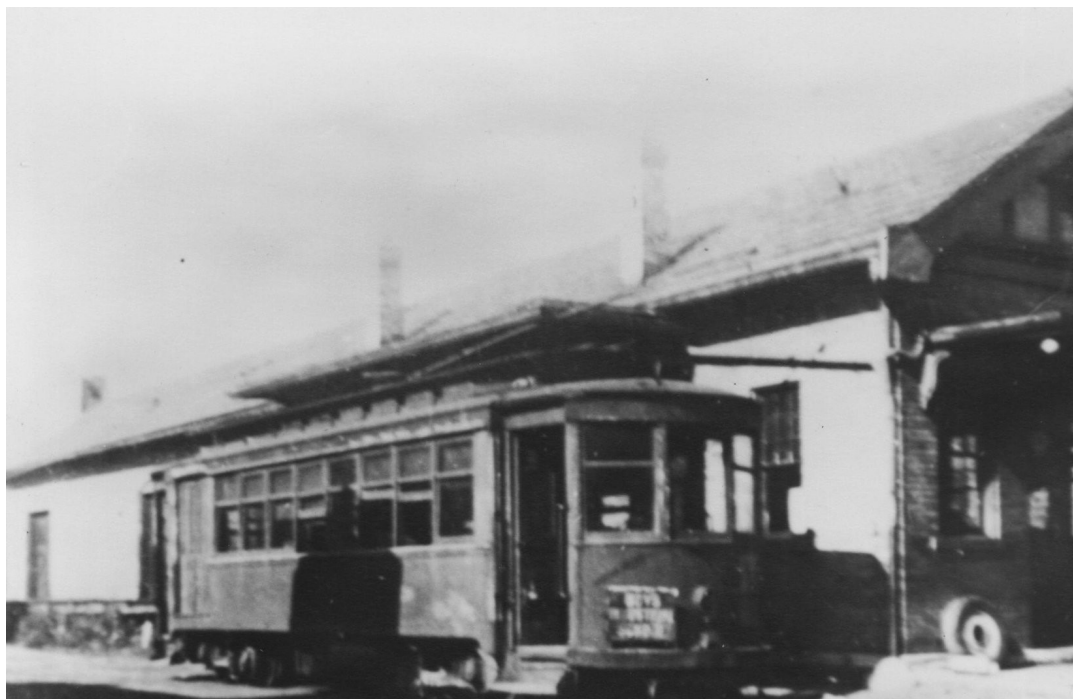


Photo – 13. Lancaster Traction & Power interurban at Lancaster station, ready to depart for the boys' Industrial School. From the Gilbert Butch McManaway Collection.