REFLECTIONS ON THE INTERURBAN ERA

William D. Middleton

Most of us look back at—and some of us remember—the interurban era fondly. But as almost everyone does in looking at the past, there is a tendency to look at the electric interurban railways through a lens of nostalgia and perhaps with a little wishful thinking.

I have been as guilty as any on that score. I call this the "Disneyfication" of history. We romanticize life in that era. It was a time when family values were strong, the American work ethic was firmly in place, and everyone dressed nicely. Interurbans provided convenient, friendly service that brought people together, and all was right with the world.

Well, that's well and good. But I want to try to look at the interurbans in a very different way.

- What did the interurbans really represent to the people of their time?
- How did they affect and improve people's lives?
- What lasting effect—if any—did they have on how our country grew and developed?

As much as I can, I've set out to do this through the words and thoughts of people of that time.

The Interurban in Transportation Development

If I can simplify greatly, I think that the development of transportation infrastructure can be looked at in two ways:

First, it is a shaper of new growth and development. The transcontinental railroad is a good example; its construction provided the transportation framework that made the development of the West possible.

Second, it is a response to existing needs that are unmet, or that are met in a better way. By doing so, of course, it also becomes a shaper of growth and development. An example might be the completion of the Shore Line railroad route along the Rhode Island and Connecticut coast between New York and Boston in an area that was already well developed. In this case the railroad provided a faster and more economical transportation service than the coastal steamers it replaced. This improved transportation service, in addition to displacing the steamships, stimulated further growth and development.

The interurbans, in almost every case, fall into the second category. They usually competed with—and supplemented—the steam railroads. But quite often they also provided service where none had been available before.

The interurbans competed with the steam railroads most effectively for local and short-haul traffic, typically offering lower fares and providing more frequent and regular service. Let's look at a few examples from pre–World War I timetables for two Indiana interurbans.

For travel between Indianapolis and Louisville the principal steam railroad—the Pennsylvania Railroad—offered five daily round-trips, while an interurban—the Indianapolis & Louisville Traction Company—operated eleven daily round-trips, with the further convenience that the interurbans operated on very regular schedules.

The interurban service was most advantageous for the small towns along the route. Sellersburg had a choice of only two daily round-trips on the Pennsylvania

Railroad, while Scottsburg had four and Seymour had five. Travelers to or from all three cities, however, could choose from among eleven daily interurban round-trips.

Between Indianapolis and Terre Haute the principal steam railroad—the Vandalia Line—operated eight daily round-trips, while the interurban—the Terre Haute, Indianapolis & Eastern Traction Company—operated twelve daily round-trips, with a local train scheduled almost every hour during the day. The interurban offered an even greater advantage for travelers to and from the small towns along the route. Brazil and Greencastle each had seven daily Vandalia Line round-trips, while the interurban offered twelve. For residents of Cartersburg and Reelsville the greater convenience of the interurban schedules was even more pronounced. The two towns each had only one daily train on the Vandalia Line, while the interurban offered no less than seven daily round-trips.

In a wonderful article for *McClure's Magazine* in 1903, Samuel E. Moffett wrote of this convenience: "Go, for instance, to Indianapolis, and take a spin of fifty-three miles to Muncie over the lines of the Union Traction Company. You do not have to calculate your train time by a nautical almanac. You can go at any hour of the day."[1]

The interurbans typically offered, too, cleaner and more comfortable trains than the steam lines. In a 1907 series about the success of the new interurban railways, *Chicago Tribune* writer Raymond commented: "When the habit of traveling by trolley is once firmly established one wonders that the nuisances of the steam roads were ever submitted to. The electric line is the perfection of traveling—at least for short distances. There is a freedom from dirt and cinders and one feels nearer the country through which he travels than on the steam road."[2]

Moffett also said this of the comforts of modern interurban cars: "Travel on a line so equipped is pleasanter than on a steam road, for the breezes can be allowed to blow through without fear of smoke or cinders, and the surrounding scenery is infinitely more attractive. A trolley road can penetrate the most exquisite retreats without spoiling their charm—a steam road has the faculty of making everything it touches hopelessly vulgar and hideous."[3]

Interurban Effects on the Railroads

Moffett attributed a decline of twelve million railroad passengers in seven years to the competition of electric railways. "Inch by inch the field is contested," he wrote, "and slowly, sullenly, the locomotive is giving way before the insistent trolley. A dozen years ago it was only the car horse and the cable in the towns that were threatened by electric traction. Then the trolley poked an inquiring tentacle over the city limits into the suburbs. The results were satisfactory, and swiftly the electric lines flung their spider filaments from town to town, until now great sections of the country are cobwebbed with them. . . . Certainly the locomotive is doomed on local lines; . . . and the question whether it can hold its own anywhere is the most hotly debated problem now agitating the transportation world."[4]

It was also argued that much of the traffic attracted by the interurbans was new business, resulting from the low cost and frequency of interurban service, its greater accessibility in small towns and rural areas, and the greater convenience of interurban lines that entered the heart of town over streetcar tracks.

It probably was both.

Interurban Effects on Small Towns

The evidence suggests that—wherever they operated—the interurbans had an appreciable effect on the nature and quality of small-town life. Offering lower fares and more frequent and convenient service, they provided an improved mobility to small-town residents and businesses.

The interurban made it much easier to travel to larger cities, where better selections of goods and services were available. "The proprietors of the big department stores in Indianapolis and Cincinnati say that they have almost doubled their trade since the introduction of the interurban system of travel," commented a *Chicago Tribune* writer in a 1907 series.[5]

At the same time, interurban express services made it easier for small-town merchants to stock a wider variety of goods and perishables. "Curiously enough the local stores of the small villages have not lost any custom as the result of the traveling habit induced by the interurban cars," reported the *Chicago Tribune*. "These village stores have found it simple to increase their stocks, and have slowly but surely met the competition of the city stores by increasing the variety of their own supply. . . . Villages where perishable goods simply could not be had ten years ago are now supplied with fruit and vegetables as a matter of course, and the express compartments on the electric cars radiating from such a market point as Indianapolis are frequently loaded with cantaloupes from Colorado and watermelons from Georgia."[6]

The new mobility afforded by the interurbans broadened cultural and entertainment opportunities. The electric railways developed resorts and amusement parks as a means of generating new traffic. Sightseeing by trolley became a popular pastime, and many lines published guides to the sights in their area.

Typical of interurban railway promotional service were the "Theater Specials" that were operated into Toledo and Cleveland by Ohio's Lake Shore Electric Railway, which featured meals and entertainment on the car. Chicago's North Shore Line ran "Grand Opera Specials" during the Chicago opera season. The Michigan United Railway offered cut-rate vaudeville tickets with a round-trip ticket. The Cleveland & Southwestern Railway organized a baseball trolley league among six on-line towns. All of this helped to enrich small-town life.

Interurban Effects on the Farm

Perhaps the interurban's greatest impact was on the rural farming community.

The interurbans were particularly well suited to agricultural traffic. The electric cars made frequent stops at conveniently located loading sheds and platforms; the use of city streetcar tracks provided a good distribution system in urban areas; and the fast, frequent service made trolley freight attractive for milk, fruit, and produce, which required prompt shipment to market. All of this greatly improved the farmer's access to markets.

There were social benefits as well. The interurbans gave farm families and farmworkers new mobility. Previously limited by the radius of a horse and wagon, they could board an interurban at the nearest country crossing and be off to town and city. It was a welcome release, for despite all of the nostalgia about the sterling values of life on the family farm, it was a hard, confining life.

The *Chicago Tribune* noted: "There has been an extraordinary impetus given to the social life of the farmer class of the country. A boy can remain at home, do his work on the farm during the day, and yet take his girl to the theater, or to a lecture, or a dance

that night, and get home in time to do the chores in the morning at least. The farmers are coming oftener to the city. They find they can get city types of clothes as cheaply as they formerly could the antiquated garments which once distinguished the agriculturalist. The gawky country boy and girl is disappearing so rapidly that there will soon be little material in that line left for the comic weeklies, because the type is being wiped out by the interurban railroad."[7]

Adele Marie Shaw wrote about the improvement to farm life brought about by electricity: "Much of the talk about farm life is drivelling sentimentality," she wrote. "To the hard manual labor and the dearth of outside interests of many country places to-day a desert island would offer a pleasing contrast."[8]

Shaw spoke of the interurban as the "liberating trolley." Shaw wrote, "Everything that puts the farm into direct communication with people and things outside its own boundaries breaks the stagnation whose labor is unproductive and ill paid. . . . Closer contact with the town gives to the farm home a better table, better decoration, wider interests, and the trolley-lines provide this contact."[9]

John R. Graham, an electric railway president at Bangor, Maine, saw the new mobility as a good thing, saying that "Social conditions on the farm have been greatly improved as a result of the electric railway."[10] Since the advantages of the city were easily available, Graham maintained, the problem of keeping young people down on the farm was solved.

Indiana State Statistician Johnson saw it the other way. In 1904 Johnson said that a dearth of farm hands in the state was “due to the rapid development of the electric interurban railways, which offer easier hours and more remunerative employment. The problem,” he said, was “a serious one in some sections of the state.”[11]

Shaw saw benefits from the interurban for farm children. "I know a country boy who in the summer earns $1 30 a day picking berries that he conveys to town by the early morning trolley. His fare for the round trip is twenty cents. Before the electric line was established he had no way of getting his wares into connection with a market. Every country place near an electric-railway line shows such instances; the trolley increases the earning power of the child of the small farmer as well as of his more prosperous neighbor, and enables him to spend what he earns to better advantage."[12]

According to Shaw there were educational advantages, too. "As an aid to cheap transportation the 'electrics' give the country children better education;" and "high schools in small cities show a striking increase in country patronage since the electric roads were built, and good education is good business."[13]

Shaw saw the interurban as a boon for the country wife, as well. [Amusement parks] “draw a large proportion of their visitors from the country. . . . Vaudeville on a rustic stage above bay or lake or river bank, electric fountains filling the night with color, out-of-doors as a pastime—these are good prescriptions for the woman who spends too many hours 'over a hot stove' in a farmhouse kitchen. . . . The 'out-of-doors' and the social opportunity are the great gifts of the country trolley to women."[14]

The *Chicago Tribune* even saw mental health benefits in the interurbans. “It is fair to presume that the loneliness of the farmer's wife is at an end, and if that be so the unfortunate percentage of suicides in the agricultural districts will surely decrease when a farmer can take his wife and children and in a few minutes be dropped at the nearest cross roads, or even at the village, or interior city which was visited only once in a season

when the roads were good, and when the general farm team was not otherwise occupied."[15]

The contemporary accounts noted above clearly indicate that interurbans were seen as—and were—a new technology that brought a significant improvement in mobility and quality of life wherever they were developed.

The Lasting Effects of the Interurbans

Just what were the lasting effects of the interurbans?

Their physical traces can still be found—old stations, substations, freight houses—long since converted to other uses. Sometimes interurban routes can be traced by the presence of old bridge abutments, the remains of an embankment, or the alignment of a power transmission line. These are interesting, but in what lasting way were American growth and development changed by the interurbans? Sadly, in a general way at least, I would have to conclude, not many.

The interurbans did indeed follow in the path of the railroads in bringing major change and improvement to the nation's mobility, but the period of their effect was almost tragically brief. Just how brief is perhaps best illustrated by the history of Maine's Portland-Lewiston Interurban. The maiden run over the line was made on 29 June 1914, with the car *Arbutus*, with motorman Charles H. Mitchell and conductor Joseph L'Heureux as its crew. When the line made its last run on 28 June 1933 it was with the same car, *Arbutus*, and with the same crew of Mitchell and L'Heureux.

The interurban was displaced by a newer automotive technology that did a far better and more complete job of bringing mobility to America. In summary, the interurban can at the most be regarded as a transitional technology that occupied a brief period between a time when local travel was severely proscribed by the limitations of country roads, horse-drawn conveyance, and steam railroads and the arrival of the almost universal mobility afforded by the automobile and improved roads.

Important as they were in their brief history, it would be hard to say that anything in Seymour, Terre Haute, Scottsburg, Muncie, or Fort Wayne is much different today than it would have been if the interurbans had never existed. But having said that, I think that within this rather discouraging general conclusion there are some important exceptions, and I would like to close with a mention of two examples.

Interurbans and the Growth of Los Angeles

The greatest interurban railway system in America was the Pacific Electric Railway founded by Henry E. Huntington, which grew to a system of nearly twelve hundred miles reaching over 125 cities in a four-county area of Southern California. Far more so than almost any other interurban, Pacific Electric was built to shape growth and development.

Huntington had a boundless optimism about the future of Southern California. "I am a foresighted man," he once said, "and I believe Los Angeles is destined to become the most important city in the country if not in the world. It can extend in any direction as far as you like."[16]

With this vision Huntington was active in property development, and the advance of the electric cars into new territory was carefully coordinated with his real estate interests. Thus Pacific Electric became the transportation framework upon which Southern California developed. When Huntington began the formation of his electric railway empire at the start of the twentieth century, the entire four counties of Southern

California had a total population of less than 250,000, a figure that would double or more every decade for the next thirty years. Far more than most people realize, this great metropolitan area, which today is home to an estimated sixteen million people, was largely built along the lines of the Pacific Electric.

By the mid–twentieth century Southern California had discarded its great interurban network in favor of the world's greatest freeway system. Today, as the region struggles to relieve its traffic congestion with a rail transit system, it is interesting to observe how closely the routes of these new rail lines parallel those of the old Pacific Electric.

Interurbans and the Growth of Indianapolis

I suggest that a second major urban area affected in a more lasting way by the interurbans was in Indianapolis. Indiana, together with Ohio, had what was virtually a statewide system of interurban lines. Focusing on Indianapolis at the center of the state, with no less than a dozen important routes radiating from the downtown Traction Terminal, this interurban system made the city one of the greatest interurban centers in America and gave Indianapolis unparalleled advantages as a regional center.

The interurbans brought people to Indianapolis to shop and to enjoy the advantages of a big city. The fast, frequent express and freight services operated from the interurban freight terminal on Kentucky Avenue were at the center of a network of twenty-five interurban lines that provided fast freight service to points throughout most of Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio as well as northern Kentucky and points in western New York and Pennsylvania. This freight network helped Indianapolis become a major regional wholesale and distribution center.

Between the census of 1900 and that of 1910 Indianapolis grew by 38 percent, while St. Louis grew by only 19 percent. Commenting on this, the *St. Louis Republic* had this to say:

> A number of railroad systems are managed from St. Louis—not one road of any size from Indianapolis. St. Louis lies just across the Mississippi from the greatest deposit of good steam coal adjacent to any American city; Indianapolis gets its coal from a considerable distance. St. Louis has a river channel connecting it with the sea; Indianapolis has no navigable water. St. Louis is located on rolling hills of great scenic beauty and giving ideal drainage; Indianapolis is as flat as a top of a dinner table. St. Louis is far from any competing large city; Indianapolis achieved its remarkable growth within 183 miles of Chicago. St. Louis has two important universities; Indianapolis has none. St. Louis is a wealthy city; Indianapolis has almost no large fortunes. St. Louis is the world's center in a number of lines of manufacture; Indianapolis has many small, prosperous shops, but few large ones.
>
> But fast interurban trolley lines have made it easy for the people within a circle of 250 miles in diameter to visit Indianapolis. In the streets of this capital, the man from Fort Wayne rubs elbows with the man from Terre Haute; the shopper from Columbus meets her old school friend from Logansport. A trolley map of Indiana looks like the spokes of a wheel whose hub is the city of Indianapolis. A city without great wealth, without large industries, without a university, without navigable water, without coal, without natural beauty of site, has grown because it made it easy for its neighbors for a hundred miles around to

drop in before dinner by trolley car, and leaving after an early supper, to get home by bed time.[17]

Although the interurbans are gone, Indianapolis continues to enjoy these commercial advantages, served today by a radial system of interstate and other major highways that closely parallel the routes of the old interurbans.

Notes

1. Samuel E. Moffett, "The War on the Locomotive: The Marvelous Development of the Trolley Car System," *McClure's Magazine* 20 (Mar. 1903): 453.

2. *Chicago Tribune,* 11 Sept. 1907. A series on interurbans ran in the *Tribune* from 3–11 Sept. 1907.

3. Moffett, "War on the Locomotive," 460.

4. Ibid., 452, 462.

5. *Chicago Tribune,* 11 Sept. 1907.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 3 Sept. 1907.

8. Adele Marie Shaw, "Electricity in Farm-Life: The Story of an Agricultural Revolution," *Harper's Weekly* 51 (19 Jan. 1907): 104.

9. Ibid.

10. John R. Graham, address to the 1914 convention of the American Electric Railway Association.

11. Quoted in *Transit Journal* 78 (Sept. 1934): 328.

12. Shaw, "Electricity in Farm-Life," 104.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. *Chicago Tribune,* 3 Sept. 1907.

16. Quoted in Spencer Crump, *Ride the Big Red Cars: How Trolleys Helped Build Southern California* (: Crest Publications, 1962), 52.

17. *St. Louis Republic,* 1915 (month and day unknown).

(Captions and Credits)

A Southern Michigan Railway train passing through Niles, Michigan, in 1906, soon after the line opened between South Bend, Indiana, and St. Joseph, Michigan.

Krambles-Peterson Archive

A train of the Indianapolis & Louisville Traction Company.

General Electric Company

A train of the Terre Haute, Indianapolis & Eastern Traction Company leaving the Indianapolis Traction Terminal at Market and Capitol. The car is No. 29, "Hendricks."

Collection of Jeffrey K. Winslow

A train of the Indiana Union Traction Company on the Anderson Division, operating to Fort Wayne via Muncie.

General Railway Signal Company

A pleasant outing by interurban trolley on the Chautauqua Traction Company at Jamestown, New York.

Chautauqua Traction Company

An interurban in the rural countryside of southern New York passing an Otsego County dairy farm en route to Oneonta over the Otsego & Herkimer Railroad.

Otsego & Herkimer Railroad

The Chicago, Aurora & Elgin successfully competed with the steam railroads for Chicago suburban traffic by offering fast, frequent service. This was an express train en route from Elgin to Chicago.

Chicago, Aurora & Elgin

A train of the Sandusky, Norwalk & Mansfield Electric Railway in the public square at Plymouth, Ohio.

O. F. Lee Collection

A typical excursion train on an interurban railway. This was an employee's excursion of the Rocky Mountain Packing Corporation on the Salt Lake & Utah Railroad.

William D. Middleton Collection

The Balloon Route Trolley Trip was a popular Southern California excursion on the Pacific Electric Railway and the predecessor Los Angeles Pacific.

Al Haij Collection

The excursion by interurban and incline railway to Mt. Lowe was another popular Southern California outing.

William D. Middleton Collection

The Cleveland, Elyria & Western transported milk, as well as passengers, to Cleveland.

Max E. Wilcox Collection

An interurban railway milk car loading milk cans near Cleveland.

William D. Middleton Collection

The Saltair Resort on Great Salt Lake, Utah, was the principal destination for passengers on the Salt Lake, Garfield & Western, an interurban that extended west to the lake from Salt Lake City.

William D. Middleton Collection

A Pacific Electric Railway train at Sierra Madre, California. The Southern California region around Los Angeles developed largely along the lines of the Papcific Electric.

Craig Rasmussen Collection

A limited train at Covina on the Pacific Electric Railway's main line to San Bernardino, California. The Southern California region around Los Angeles developed largely along the lines of the Pacific Electric.

Duke-Middleton Collection