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Archival Chronicle

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[Gallery: Inside the Interurbans](#) | [Archival Chronicle Index](#) | [CAC Homepage](#)**The Interurban: Mass Transit in the Early 20th Century**

◀ *Trainmen pose with an interurban railcar in about 1910. Many interurban lines served the northwest Ohio region. This car was probably part of the Maumee Valley Railway and Light system. CAC General Photograph Collection. Gift of Julius Witzler*

As the price of oil passes the \$100 per barrel mark, Americans are looking for ways to conserve energy and to lessen our dependence on petroleum. Since transportation is one of the principle ways we burn energy, public transit systems like those used in Europe and Japan may become more common. Americans are so accustomed travelling on a whim that the personal automobile seems like the only "natural" choice. But this is not the first time we have experimented with mass transit.

During the nineteenth century, city-dwellers especially found it expensive and inconvenient to own and care for their own horse and carriage, so delivery services were common and horse-drawn cabs and trolleys took people where they needed to go in town. For longer distances, the locomotive was the very symbol of high technology, industry, and rapid transportation, linking cities from coast to coast.

As the twentieth century dawned, public transportation relied on three power sources: steam from coal- or wood-burning boilers, electricity, and the gasoline- or diesel-fueled internal combustion engine. The advantages over the horse were plain: an engine out of service does not need to be fueled, and when in service, it never needs a rest.

Electric-powered streetcars replaced horse-drawn trolleys in cities large and small. Links between cities and towns were soon added, creating a **network** of intersecting lines serving the entire region. In fact, the first interurban line in the United States connected Newark and Granville, Ohio, while the most profitable and heavily utilized line in the state was the Akron, Bedford, and Cleveland Line, completed in 1895. By World War I, Ohio had almost 2,800 miles of track. Interurban cars were light weight and efficient, allowing them to make stops at rural sidings on an as-needed basis, as well as providing scheduled passenger and freight service. During the early years of Bowling Green Normal College, many students took advantage of this convenient transportation, living in Toledo or outlying communities and commuting in to Bowling Green to attend class daily.

Local trains served those traveling to and from the country, stopping any time they were signaled. The "limited" trains made city and town stops only. Special cars could be chartered for service between any two points, for a guaranteed number of fares. A 1 1/2 hour trip from Fostoria to Toledo cost \$.65 (or \$1.20 round trip), with eighteen scheduled departures daily. Businesses, too, used the interurbans to carry freight between cities and farmers used the freight service to haul crops to market.

Was it simply the advent of the automobile that doomed the American interurban? Probably not. The construction and maintenance of a rail line required a huge investment in right-of-way, power generation and transmission, and rolling stock, to say nothing of employees for service and maintenance. Most companies existed less than ten years in their original form, and probably did not last long enough to recover their start-up costs and return a profit; many companies merged and sold off parts of lines in order to keep going. Meanwhile, automakers began manufacturing buses and short-haul trucks to compete directly with interurban services. But it was the Great Depression which finally put an end to almost all interurban companies.

—Lee N. McLaird

For Further Reading

Cincinnati Streetcars, Interurbans, and Railroads. An extensive site focusing on interurban service in Cincinnati, with photographs of right-of-way and remnants of the physical facilities.

Interurban. Wikipedia article.

Interurban: The Technology of Economical Local Transport in the United States. An extensive and detailed description of interurban service, including technical information on car operation.

Interurban Railroads. Ohio History Central: An Online Encyclopedia of Ohio History.

Interurban Railroads through Columbus, Ohio. Includes more photographs of interurban stations and cars in use in Columbus during the first half of the twentieth century.

The Trolley Stop. Part of a series of pages on transportation.

1914 Ohio Interurban Map. Information on railroads and interurban lines.