



The Express

A Peek at the Past

Electric Dreams: Tales of the Lock Haven trolley system

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In this era of exorbitant petrol prices, wouldn't it be a pleasure to travel from downtown Lock Haven to Mill Hall in an environmentally-friendly electric-powered conveyance, all for the price of a dime, round-trip?

From 1895 to 1930, the Susquehanna Traction Company's street railway system operated just such a public transportation miracle, allowing thousands of locals a cheap method of getting back and forth to dozens of destinations in Lock Haven, Flemington and Mill Hall for errands, school, work, amusement or just a chance to get out of the house and enjoy the passing scenery.

The era of the American trolley was fairly brief — in communities large and small it lasted for just a few decades in the late 19th and early 20th centuries — and it was soon squeezed out by the passenger bus and automobile.

Today, however, the era is remembered with great fondness and affection, even if it never really proved to be economically viable.

The trolley system in Clinton County barely broke even in its best years, and lost money almost from the start.

Perhaps it was simply too far ahead of its time.

Established at a time when gasoline cost just pennies a gallon, the streetcar didn't make a lot of sense after the Ford Model T became the dominant transportation option for the masses. In hindsight, the idea of a low-cost, electric mass transit system sounds like a hell of an idea — especially today when it can cost fifty bucks to fill a typical gas tank.

For many in Clinton County, it seemed like a hell of an idea as early as 1891, too. That was the first year a streetcar from Lock Haven to Mill Hall was proposed. It wasn't until ex-Senator and longtime rail transportation advocate Samuel Richard Peale got behind the concept, however, that it began to be taken seriously.

Ground was finally broken on Clinton County's street railway system at 1 p.m. on July 23, 1894 at Sixth and Main Streets, and the following day the laying of rail on the streets of Lock Haven began, according to 1978's "West Branch Trolleys: Street Railways of Lycoming & Clinton Counties," by Paul Schieck and Harold Cox.

Trolley service began in mid-December 1894, and nearly 800 souls traveled the rails on the first day of operation, according to Schieck and Cox.

Six conductors and six motormen kept the picturesque cars moving from the old Lock Haven train station, formerly on Henderson Street, to the Pennsylvania Central Railroad station in Mill Hall (currently the site of an Agway distributorship).

Along the way, the trolley passed down Lock Haven's Main Street business district, to Fairview Street and the Normal School (now Lock Haven University) on to Bellefonte Ave., through Flemington, across the Bald Eagle Creek bridge and down Hogan Blvd. in Mill Hall.

Seeing old photographs of the trolleys passing through the city's downtown, over the steel rail bridge in Flemington and the almost shockingly rural section of Hogan Blvd. of the 1910s and '20s brings a sepia-toned sense of nostalgia and perhaps an old song to mind ("Clang, clang, clang went the trolleyÖ."), but there was little good will or warm feelings exhibited by the stockholders who financed the Susquehanna Traction Company.

These investors never collected a penny of dividends, and by the late 1890s it looked like the street railway system was probably doomed.

At that time, a recession was sweeping the U.S., the lumber industry was going into decline and population and

economic growth in Clinton County was starting to flatten.

Then in 1903 Henry Ford incorporated the Ford Motor Company declaring, "I will build a car for the great multitude," a task he accomplished about five years later, when he introduced the Model T for \$950.

Eventually 15.5 million Model T's would be sold in the U.S. alone. Who wanted to squeeze onto a crowded electric trolley when you could tool around in a spiffy, new 20-mile-per-gallon Tin Lizzie? At the time, the price of gasoline was just – gulp! – seven cents a gallon!

Still, the trolleys continued to run (mostly in the red) through the roaring 1920s, when Lock Haven was filled with bootleggers and speakeasies. Sometimes the charming electric cars carried as many as 10,000 people back and forth on spring and summer days, when picnicking at Agar's Park, near Mill Hall, or Hecla Park, near Bellefonte, was at its height.

During all this time, there was only one reported serious streetcar accident, when, on a foggy night at around 10 p.m., two trolleys crashed while racing to the car barn and powerhouse on Pearl and Spruce Streets in Lock Haven.

Both of the motormen in the trolleys were injured, and one had to have his leg amputated below the knee. The only passenger on the trolley line at that time of night was spared injury. There were no reported deaths resulting from the accident.

As the trolleys were gradually upgraded and the older cars moved out of service, new uses were found for some of the older, discarded trolley cars.

In 1920, for example, it was announced that five outdated trolleys were to become dwelling places for small families or bachelors in order to meet the increasingly tight housing demand in the area.

A few months earlier, Lock Haven police officer George Hale had purchased one of the first trolley cars operated by the Susquehanna Traction Company (later renamed Susquehanna Transit) and turned it into a restaurant. Those with a superstitious bent might speculate that his endeavor was cursed from the start, since bad luck seemed to follow the trolley restaurant enterprise almost from the beginning.

Hale parked the freshly-painted trolley on the corner of Main and Jay Streets, just steps away from the old Irvin Hotel, according to a short article that appeared in the Clinton County Times on Dec. 5, 1919.

Sadly, he was only able to enjoy his new restaurant endeavor for a few years. In September, 1926 he was one of three men and a horse who were electrocuted by a PPL high power line in a freak accident while doing some road work in Castanea.

"Becoming entangled in some manner which may never be known with a high tension line of the Pennsylvania Power and Light company, three Castanea township residents, Harry Engles, George Hale and a man known as Fisher McClain, whose real name is said to be Adam Renninger, were found dead about a mile and a half east of Castanea this morning shortly after 9 o'clock," the Express reported in its Sept. 14, 1926 edition.

Hale was about 60 years old at the time of his death. The cause of the accident remains a mystery to this day. PPL officials questioned by police claimed that the loose wire that killed the three men and the horse had been inspected just days earlier and was found to be in perfectly good working order.

But Hale's idea of a trolley restaurant apparently caught on with other locals. Around 1929, Lock Haven residents Raymond and Larry Osborne brought a trolley car to the city, attached it to an existing trolley diner (likely the former George Hale restaurant) and opened an eatery called "The Twin Trolley Diner" at 214 East Main Street.

According to Robert Schadt's history of the Twin Trolley Diner on file at the Ross Library, the Twin Trolley remained in operation by the Osborne brothers through 1936, when it was nearly destroyed in the massive flood that swept through town that year.

After the Osbornes divested themselves of the now-dilapidated diner, Leonard Boone decided to give the Twin Trolley a try. He operated the business until World War II, when he went into service in the Army. He committed suicide in 1974, about thirty years after the diner was likely turned to scrap metal.

Sale for scrap metal was also the fate of the trolley lines themselves. Soon after the last trolley carried its last passengers through Lock Haven, Flemington and Mill Hall on May 23, 1930, junk dealer Ben Hoberman bought up the overhead wires and equipment and the rails themselves began to be torn up, a task that remained incomplete as late as 1942.

But though extinct, the Clinton County trolley system remained alive in popular memory for decades to come, as personified by W. Horace Emery, the last full-time streetcar conductor.

Emery continued to live and work in Lock Haven for nearly forty years after guiding the last trolley down the rails in 1930. He and his wife Caroline raised four children in the city, one of whom grew up to become principal of McGhee Elementary School.

"He had driven almost the equivalent of here to the moon – all in route from Lock Haven to Mill Hall – as a trolley car and bus operator during 21 years prior to 1942," wrote an un-named Express reporter in Emery's 1969 obituary. "The two World Wars had been the terminal points of his career, in which he became well known to hundreds of people who rode as his passengers."

In 1980, Horace's son Robert was interviewed by the Express about the old trolley days. In that article, Robert admitted to having occasionally taken the controls while sitting on his father's lap during the final streetcar excursions of 1929 and '30. That gave the McGhee Elementary principal the distinction of being the last man alive known to have operated a trolley in the city. He died in 1994.

The last intact structural manifestation of the trolley days went the way of the wrecking ball only very recently. Last year the old trolley car barn and powerhouse at Pearl and Spruce Streets was finally torn down by First Quality as part of an expansion of their factory at the old Hammermill Paper Company site.

And, sad to say, few individuals today can recount first hand, what the old trolley days were like.

One is 101-year-old Roxie Strump. Asked recently if she ever took the trolley, Strump said, "Oh heavens yes. I loved them. We had relatives that would come in on the train from Clearfield and then take the trolley...Every time I see a picture of San Francisco, where they still have their trolleys, I always think of those days."

A charming, intelligent woman, blessed with a clear mind even as her 102nd birthday approaches on July 1, Roxie jokes that "When you get to be my age, you don't have much of a future, so you tend to live in the past."

But what a past it is.

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Copies of two of the original "Peek at the Past" books are available for purchase at the Ross Library for \$4. Matt Connor can be reached at mbconnor4265@gmail.com.