A history of Omaha public transportation

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A HISTORY OF OMAHA PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate Division
The University of Omaha

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in History

by
Dennis Thavenet
June 1960
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Appreciation is hereby extended to Professor Frederick Adrian, The University of Omaha, first of all for presenting the challenge to pursue historical studies, and secondly for assisting in the preparation of this study with his encouragement and his advice. Special recognition is also due Miss Sharon Preston who devoted many hours to the final typing of the manuscript. Those institutions that offered their services and their materials were The Omaha Public Library, The Gene Eppley Library, Love Library of the University of Nebraska, and The Nebraska State Historical Library.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Omaha, unlike perhaps any other city in the United States, had as its first public utility a street transportation system. As an Omaha "first", it has had a long continuous history, easily as old as the State of Nebraska and only thirteen years younger than the city itself. As the institution was so closely connected with and was so contingent upon the city in which it was built, much can be learned from it about Omaha and the conditions that surrounded its growth. Because of Omaha's location on the fringe of the Great Plains and because of its location on the frontier for many years, its influence upon institutions like a street transportation system has implications that are trenchant enough to be part of a broader history of the American West.

Linked to a national interest in the locating of the transcontinental railroad, Omaha had been aired by Council Bluffs businessmen who stood to gain the railroad prize if they could select the site of the Nebraska territorial capital. W. D. Brown, A. D. Jones, and their ilk had selected and platted the town. By timely gifts of lots to legisla-

1. The Story of Omaha, (Omaha: Byron Reed Company, 1956), pp. 28-9. The following utilities are listed for Omaha: gas works--1869, telephones--1879, water works--1881, electric lights--1883.
tors they hoped to elicit a favorable vote for the Omaha site. As an important stopping point in the westward trek, the city picked up tradesmen, outfitters, speculators, and the backwash of the great migrations. Population growth was rapid so that after only a decade of existence Omaha was claiming between ten and twenty thousand inhabitants, depending, of course, upon the enthusiasm of the writer.

A psychology which seems to have permeated such sprawling, awkward, frontier-towns affected Omaha. Extremely defensive about its own size and importance, it began to carry on rivalries with its neighbors to the north, south, and east. If Kansas City got paved streets, Omahans demanded paved streets; if Minneapolis got a water works or gas lights installed, Omahans clamored for sewers or gas lights. When Philadelphia and Chicago installed their first street railways, the inevitable result was that Omahans began to think in terms of their own horse railway. It was of little consequence that they had not gotten their paving, water works, or sewers.

Far removed in point of time from territorial Omaha, it is perhaps difficult to see even one good reason for more than a livery service there before paving and a water works. Logic alone, then, does not explain the need for a street railway which entailed great expense for tracks and coaches. The one best clue is a satirical poem which appeared in Han-
Harper's Magazine at that time. Its first stanza ran as follows:

Hast thou ever been in Omaha,
Where rolls the dark Missouri down,
And four strong horses scarce can draw
An empty wagon through the town?2

Satirical though it was, it was not far from correct as Omaha streets were notorious for their bottomless mire. Railroaders had learned to overcome such conditions by running their equipment on tracks which could reduce the resistance and thereby permit carrying of considerably larger loads with the same motive power. If Omaha could meet its critics by using railroading techniques, that was what was needed.

Besides, street railways gave an air of permanence and progress—an important factor in saving face, selling a city to strangers, or keeping up with the neighbors.

Nevertheless, more than demand for a transportation system was needed to build it. Who could be found in a city singularly lacking in men worth ten thousand dollars, that would risk their fortunes? Obviously the answer was either those men who stood to profit by projects that would keep the capital at Omaha after statehood or those men imbued with Omaha’s youthful optimism that a railroad or cattle boom was in the offing.

The actual building of that transportation system was a long and continuous process. Its story (which includes horse, cable, trolley, and bus lines) is most easily grasped in terms of each of the original lines: Omaha Horse Railway Company, Omaha Cable Tramway Company, Omaha Motor Railway Company, and Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Railway Company. Some transit lines had close connections with other important ventures of the period: for example, the Ak-Sar-Ben Bridge, the Lake Manawa Park, and the Trans-Mississippi Exposition were inextricably linked to the trolley lines. There was also a multiplicity of smaller lines operative during the period of great competition. Considered individually they were not too important, but collectively they were important for our understanding of the period of consolidation.

Tremendous civic interest in transportation projects expressed itself most often and most accurately through the Omaha press. A host of early newspapers—the Republican, the Herald, the News, and the Bee—gave almost daily coverage to the building and regulation of horse lines and cables. With some overlapping, naturally, the Bee and the World-Herald covered much of the trolley period, and the latter all of the development of the bus lines. Through the papers it is easy to recognize the day by day transit fluctuations for they are faithfully recorded in a corresponding journalistic
trend. A broader evolutionary pattern which was not so well defined overlay the more immediate changes. One must watch closely for it as horse railways open an era of individualism and competition and move toward the other end of the continuum.
CHAPTER II

HORSES LEAD THE WAY

Only thirteen years after its founding Omaha could claim more than a dozen men, either plainly audacious or imbued with faith in a brilliant future for Omaha, who, through their agent, George Frost, took the first tangible step toward the founding of a street railway. The House Journal of the Territorial Legislature recorded that on February 18, 1867, "An Act to Promote the Building of Horse Railways in the City of Omaha" was passed and signed later that same day.¹ The act was very liberal in providing free access to all present and future Omaha streets and the surrounding country within a radius of five miles, except Fourteenth Street, which had previously been granted as a railroad right of way. The franchise was to be effective for fifty years provided the company could lay and operate a minimum of one mile of railway within a two year period from the granting of the charter and meet a few other simple requirements. Financial limitations required a capitalization of between one-hundred thousand and one million dollars with shares to be sold for one hundred dollars each. To avoid competition from other railroads operating in the Omaha area,

¹House Journal of the Territory of Nebraska, February 18, 1867.
Frost had written the bill to exclude the operation of steam operated lines. It is not clear who was to be satiated by the clause requiring reversion of horse railway properties to the city of Omaha at the expiration of the charter. No one could have guessed that it would ever be a problem.

The incorporators listed in the charter were:

Alfred Burley
Champion S. Chase
J. Frank Coffman
Ezra Millard
George Frost
Joel T. Griffith
J. W. Paddock
William Ruth

George W. Frost, the sponsor of the enabling act in the Territorial Legislature, became the president. John McCormick, J. P. Coffman, and E. B. Chandler became treasurer, secretary, and superintendent, respectively. Offices for the new company were opened in the Caldwell Block at Fourteenth and Farnam Streets above Williams and Baker's Store under the name of the Omaha Horse Railway.³

The charter had stipulated that stock was to be opened for sale on May 1, 1867.⁴ Undoubtedly enthusiasm for the project waned when the stock was not sold on schedule, and in

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²*Laws of Nebraska, 1867*, pp. 76-8.
³*The Omaha Sunday Bee*, January 31, 1909.
⁴*Laws of Nebraska, 1867*, loc. cit.
fact the charter lay fallow for a year and a half while Omahans were left to speculate on whether anyone really intended to build a street railway. The reasons for the delay were not all clear. Certainly money was a problem. Then, too, perhaps the incorporators were waiting for the Omaha City Council to approve an ordinance restating the charter agreement which it did in late October 1868. They may have received assurances of the passage of the ordinance, or perhaps it was the imminent expiration of the charter that spurred them into action. At any rate on October 2, 1868, ninety-nine thousand dollars worth of stock was sold. All of the original incorporators except Bird, Burley, Millard, Kountze, and Ruth purchased ninety shares each. With funds actually available materials could be ordered and construction could be started.

The Omaha Weekly Herald was ecstatic when it could report in November that construction had actually begun:

...In Farnam Street yesterday...passers by gathered in knots at seeing the graders marching rapidly in the rear of the engineers, and scores of stalwart men engaged in making the bed and planting ties upon the Omaha Street Railway.

No doubt they expressed the awe of the entire community when

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5The Omaha Sunday Bee. January 17, 1909.
6City of Omaha, Ordinance No. 166, October 28, 1868.
7The Omaha Sunday Bee. January 17, 1909.
they added: "What sane man...ever dreamed, in the wildest flights of imagination, that the results we now witness would be realized in fourteen years?"  

Construction was in charge of Thomas P. Mulloy, the Union Pacific engineer who had established a reputation for having graded ten miles of track in eight days. Needless to say, the track was laid rapidly. Construction costs ran about six thousand dollars per mile for the iron "T" rail (twenty-five pounds per yard) laid on six-foot light-hewn, white-oak ties three feet apart. In a short time the line was laid on Farnam Street from Ninth to Fifteen Street. Then progress stopped while the board of directors tried to decide which direction they wanted the line to go next. Such periods of indecision usually exasperated Omaha newspaper editors who had ready answers to offer. In this case they were placated by a decision to extend the line north on Fifteenth Street to Capitol Avenue and then west to Sixteenth Street. Enough track had been constructed by late December to warrant a trial run on the line. President Frost pur-

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8 The Omaha Weekly Herald, November 16, 1868, says work began "yesterday". It could actually have been any day during the previous week as articles were written continuously for weekly papers. The Omaha Sunday Bee, January 31, 1909, says work began November 13, 1868.

9 The Omaha Weekly Herald, November 18, 1868.

10 The Omaha Daily News, March 26, 1909, and The Omaha Sunday Bee, January 31, 1909.
obaaefl the first car in Chicago—a second-hand model costing seven-hundred dollars. Upon delivery a showing was held. The editor of the Weekly Republican, who was granted a seat on the initial run, described the excursion in detail:

The elegant car of the street railroad was got on to the track yesterday, and put in operation for purposes of trial. We took a ride in it down Farmham [sic] Street, and were pleased with the smoothness of the track and ease with which the car rode. There was a peculiarity about it we had not before observed. We had noticed it had but one entrance, the same as an ordinary omnibus. We next discovered that it is its own turntable, the body being attached by a pivot to the truck, so that when it is required to move in an opposite direction, the horse is reined around, just as you would rein him on an ordinary vehicle, he turns the body with him, and then the car is ready to go back. This saves all the trouble of unhitching and rehitching the horse, as is done in the ordinary street car and economizes considerable time. It is a handy improvement.

Public interest in the new horse car was general, and when it began regular trips a couple of days later, many thrill seekers were on hand to put it to similar test.12

Unfortunately, the first car, described variously as "handsome" and "elegant", was only a wooden barrel-shaped car with five drafty windows per side and hard wooden seats covered with rugs. The operator sat on a high perch to do the driving, while the fare collection was done from the in-

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12 The Omaha Weekly Republican, December 30, 1868.
side by a conductor. The worst feature of the car was the rigid design of the wheel system which gave rise to much track-jumping and friction-locking on curves. Since no adjustment was possible, the car had to be discarded and replaced.  

Meanwhile track laying continued west in 1869 to Eighteenth Street. Heavy snow stopped work occasionally, but the mile limit was reached when the line was pushed north on Eighteenth Street to Cass Street. Block by block the line continued west on Cass Street to Twentieth Street, then north on Twentieth Street to Cuming Street, and finally one block west on Cuming Street to the new terminal built to house twenty-six horses and four cars. With the addition of turntables at each end of the line to accommodate cars which did not serve as their own turntables and turn-out switches at different points so cars could pass on the single track, the line remained for the next five years very nearly as it was completed in 1869.  

The first really active units on the completed line were four standard, sixteen-foot horse cars with open platforms which ran every four minutes. A ride on one of these

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13 The Omaha Bee-News, May 9, 1920; The Omaha Sunday Bee, January 31, 1909; and Morning World-Herald, August 27, 1956. The original car is now on display at Frontier Village in Minden, Nebraska.

14 The Omaha Sunday Bee, January 31, 1909.
FIGURE 1

OMAHA HORSE RAILWAY
1868 - 1873

(From data in The Omaha Sunday Bee)
January 21, 1900
cars over the two miles of track took twenty-eight minutes and cost ten cents (eight fares for fifty cents). The trip from the train depot to the former capitol was well patronized and should have been a profitable run, but it was ruined by nonpaying stockholders and friends of the conductors. 15

The sagging income for the first year was bolstered by additional stock issues. On June 16, 1869 two hundred shares were issued, in August fifty more shares were sold, but when the fourth issue was attempted in October the risk seemed so great that only 197 shares found takers even though they sold for fifty cents and were offered over a nine-month period. 16 A great appeal was made in the Weekly Herald to make the promoters: "...feel in their pockets and otherwise, that the public appreciate [sic] and are willing to reward their enterprise." 17 One would hope that it was true, as the same paper said, that none of the stockholders had invested with the idea of profit, for it would save much disappointment. 18


16 The Omaha Sunday Bee, January 17, 1909.

17 The Omaha Weekly Herald, February 17 and 24, 1869.

18 Ibid., February 24, 1869.
Several attempts were made to diminish company expenses and to encourage more riders. The sixteen-foot cars at one time were replaced by four ten-foot cars which it was thought could be pulled by one horse. Such was not the case up the Omaha hills and in some Omaha streets, where it even became necessary to lay planking to keep the horses out of the heavy mud for which the thoroughfares were distinguished.  

To get maximum service from the horses they were worked in three shifts, each horse averaging about fourteen miles of duty per day. Horses were selected especially for the job; presumably the best type was five or six year olds weighing about fourteen to sixteen hundred pounds. Such horses were an important expense item for they cost seventy-five to one hundred twenty-five dollars per horse, and losses were undoubtedly common. Sometimes they broke their legs in the muddy tracks and had to be destroyed, while others just expired on the hills. One was even reported to have fallen, turned around in its traces, and then jumped up, 

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thrusting its head through the front window of the car and attempting to bite a lady sitting on the front seat. The lady's condition was not reported, but the horse was left cut and bleeding.\(^{21}\)

Greater economies probably came from the personnel section than from any other department. Street car operators worked fourteen-hour days (with twenty-eight minutes for lunch) and were paid a dollar and a half per day. Their work load was increased without any pay adjustment when the conductors were removed from the cars and the single operator handled all of the duties.

To lure more passengers, fares were cut to five cents on May 1, 1872, but the doldrums persisted. Ten dollars continued to be an excellent day's receipts for a car, which meant that the company had a daily income of from thirty to forty dollars.\(^{22}\) On holidays like the Fourth of July "specials" were offered to increase the revenue, and as a one-time thing they worked exceptionally well, but generally promotional schemes were not consistently effective.\(^{23}\)

As if to finally defeat the horse railway, an epidemic

\(^{21}\)Phillips, op. cit., pp. 29-30; and The Omaha Daily Herald, July 23, 1881

\(^{22}\)The Omaha Sunday Bee, January 31 and February 7, 1909.

\(^{23}\)The Omaha Daily Republican, June 16, 1881.
of "epizootic lymphazitis" hit Omaha in the late fall of 1872. The Weekly Herald was painfully prophetic when it said "the railroad coffers will not be so full since their horses have become coughers." The same paper encouraged the railway to convert to steam dummies to defeat the epidemic, but the company chose another way out.24

The board of directors chose to try a new management. A. J. Hanscom took over the presidency of the Omaha Horse Railway on January 1, 1873, but his lack of success is indicated by only a six-month tenure. He was replaced by Captain W. W. Marsh, a former proprietor of a Black Hills stage-line and a ferry-boat operator on the Missouri River. Captain Marsh developed the idea in Omaha street transportation systems that an expanded system would be the only way to make it pay for itself, so during his presidency the line was expanded to three times its original size. Extensions on the original "red line" were made up Cuming Street to Twenty-fourth and then north to Hamilton Street. At the eastern end of the line a track was run from the Union Pacific depot along Tenth Street to Farnam Street. In 1874 the

24 The Omaha Weekly Herald, November 20, 1872. "Epizootic lymphazitis" was an inflamation of the lymph glands.

25 Sorenson, op. cit., pp. 631-2; Leading Industries of the West: Omaha, (n.p.: n.n.), 1884), pp. 34-5; and The Omaha Sunday Bee, February 7, 1909. "Red line" was taken from the color of the cars run on the original line.
State Fair stimulated the growth of one and a half miles of roadway on Eighteenth Street from Cass to Ohio that became the "green line". Situated on this line was the Baumann Brewery and Beer Garden whose patrons were numerous enough to make that extension profitable even when the fair was not operating. Droughts and grasshopper plagues added to the Panic of 1873 made times generally difficult, but still Marsh pushed for new lines. In 1875 a line connected Capitol Avenue and Izard Street along Sixteenth and then went west to join Sixteenth and Eighteenth Streets.\(^26\)

Financing the operations had continued to be difficult. To add the burden of expansion costs had required the floating of twenty thousand dollars worth of bonds at a heavy discount. In 1878 when the bondholders demanded a return on their investment and none was available, they foreclosed and the property of the Omaha Horse Railway was sold at a sheriff's auction. Captain Marsh bid-in the property and for about twenty-five thousand dollars became the virtual owner of the entire company from 1878 to 1883.\(^27\)

On his own in 1880 Marsh built a line from Fifteenth and Farnam Streets to Hanscom Park. Future home-building

\(^{26}\)Phillips, op. cit., p. 19; and The Omaha Sunday Bee, February 7, 1909.

\(^{27}\)Sorenson, loc. cit.; and The Omaha Sunday Bee, February 7, 1909.
FIGURE 2
OMAHA HORSE RAILWAY

EXTRACTION
1873-1889

Original line
1880-1873

Built during presidency of W.W. Marsh
1873-1883

Final Extensions
1883-1889

(From data in The Omaha Sunday Bee, February 7, 1909
and Sunday World-Herald, February 14, 1909)
in that area promised a good return, but present returns came mainly from picnickers who traveled to the park in the summer time. This "yellow line" required a relief barn at Park Avenue and Woolworth Street and the use of a "hill horse" on Saint Marys Avenue. A boy would be stationed at the bottom of the avenue ready to hitch his horse alongside the regular team to aid in the heavy pull up the very steep incline. On the return trip often the passengers unloaded and walked down while the horses were led to keep the car from running over them. At the bottom the driver would call: "All outs in free," and the journey downtown would continue. Some old cars were used on the "park line" and six new twelve-footers were added in 1882.28

When the expanded company became too large an opera-
tion for one man, Captain Marsh effected a reorganization that retained the original name but made Guy Barton of the Smelting Works, Frank Murphy of the Merchant's National Bank, S. H. H. Clark of the Union Pacific Railroad, and W. A. Smith partners with him in the company. Marsh received a considerable amount of stock and bonds when he turned over the nearly thirty-five cars, two hundred horses, several barns, and ten

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miles of track in 1893. The nearly eighty employees of the old company were retained.29

Daily receipts of the old company had been boosted under Marsh to nearly three-hundred dollars per day.30 Expansion seemed to have been the catalyst for increased profits for the last five year period; there were indications that it would continue to be used as a stimulant in the future. An ambitious program of building was begun. Three new barns with sizeable capacities were built at Sixteenth and Vinton Streets, at Twenty-sixth and Lake Streets, and at the Union Station. The arteries of travel which the horse railways had helped to establish were paved during this period with the Horse Railway Company bearing the burden of paving between their tracks. "T"-rails were no longer satisfactory because they projected too high out of the macadamized roads so they were relaid using strips of wrought iron one and one-half inches thick fastened over four by six-inch cypress stringers. The paved streets at least eliminated the necessity of laying planks to keep horses out of the mud.31

29 Sorenson, loc. cit.; Leading Industries of the West; Omaha, loc. cit.; and Sunday World-Herald, February 14, 1909.
31 Ibid., and The Omaha Daily Republican, May 27, 1885.
Along with expansion supervision of the street railway became more important during the eighties. Both the state and the City Council passed ordinances to regulate operating conditions on the lines. Conductors who had formerly been exposed to the elements, particularly the cold, were benefited when the state legislature passed an act requiring enclosed platforms for drivers from November to April. The state also forbade any company offers to allow elected city officials, except policemen and firemen, to ride free of charge.

The City Council very often dealt with railway schedules and speeds. By ordinance cars were required in 1884 to run every ten minutes from six o'clock in the morning until eight o'clock in the evening. Between eight o'clock and midnight cars were to run at twenty minute intervals. Attached to the schedule ordinance was a clause which said that a fine of from ten to one hundred dollars per day would be charged on each line on which cars were not run. A maximum speed of five miles per hour was imposed, and horses were required to wear bells to warn pedestrians to get out of the way.

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32 Brown and Wheeler's Compiled Statutes for 1892, Nebraska, Art. VII, 4644a, Sec. 13.
33 Ibid., Sec. 119.
34 City of Omaha, Ordinance No. 516, October 7, 1884.
35 The Omaha Sunday Bee, February 7, 1909.
Attempts were made by the City Council to require heating units in the cars, but such ordinances were impossible to pass. The patrons had their own method of protesting the inconvenience. One winter The Omaha Republican reported that:

Several of the street cars have had their bottoms kicked off by the patrons in the vain endeavor to keep warm. If the horse railway company had put stoves into their cars the patrons would have wished them a Happy New Year.36

As housing areas grew up along the line, warm days usually precipitated the filing of a rash of complaints with the City Council demanding the removal of horse bams as smelly nuisances. A committee of the City Council usually did its best to have the objectionable features cleaned up but felt constrained to allow the stables to remain or risk losing a transportation system.37

The horse railway fraternity had its own way of dealing with complainers or patrons who made themselves obnoxious.

It is not uncommon for a man to shout himself hoarse, or a lady to shake her hands nearly off in vainly trying to attract a driver's attention.38

Those patrons who tried to slip by without paying were greet-

36The Omaha Daily Republican, January 3, 1888; and City of Omaha, Record of City Council, (1885) at, seq.
37City of Omaha, Record of City Council, May 22, 1888.
38The Omaha Daily Herald, June 12, 1884.
ed with a violent ringing of the conductor's bell until they came forward and deposited their fares. If one may believe the report, no doubt it was political spleen being vented when an Omaha driver whipped a path through a Republican street parade and even went so far as to knock the mayor over when His Honor tried to grab the car horses.

Young lads, who hitched rides, pelted the passengers with snowballs, or taunted the drivers, learned to keep their distance or feel the sting of a horse whip. A rash of attempted robberies during 1885 and 1886 was settled equally as vigorously by drivers who defended themselves and their car fares.

The 1880's were also a period of innovation. When tests with all types of horses failed to demonstrate an especially suitable animal, experiments were attempted using mules. Their pulling ability proved desirable, particularly on the hilly routes where occasionally a horse would drop dead. Mules were adopted for use on several lines, but even they were never able to conquer the steep grade on Dodge

41 *Ibid.*, *The Omaha Daily Bee*, January 9, 1885; and *The Omaha Daily Republican*, July 14, 1885.
Street. The colorful cars, which often carried passengers far from their destinations when a car from one line did substitute duty on another line, were eventually all painted canary yellow. The route designation was thereafter shown by a colored board with the name of the line printed on it. At night a colored glass bullseye with an oil lamp behind it told the prospective passenger which car to board.

When the various lines began to converge on the business district and the railroad depots, the demand arose for the right to transfer from one line to another without payment of additional fare. After the Hancock Park line was added in 1885 the company acquiesced in this demand and built a transfer station at Fifteenth and Farmer Streets. There a traffic manager directed traffic with his whistle, threw the switches for the drivers, and personally transferred the passengers from one car to another.

Transfers enhanced traveling opportunities and with a few extensions into intermediate housing developments the

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42. The Omaha Daily Herald, March 13, 1884.
43. Phillips, loc. cit.
44. Ibid., and The Omaha Daily Herald, October 6, 1881.
45. The Omaha Daily Herald, June 7, 1885; Sunday World-Herald, January 21, 1932; and The Omaha Sunday Bee, February 7, 1909.
horse railway finally found its daily income slightly larger than its maintenance and operation costs, so that expansion was carried on without selling new bonds. The original line was extended from Twenty-fourth to Thirty-second Street on Cuming, a crosstown line was run from Sixteenth and Vinton Streets through the downtown to Twentieth and Cuming Streets, and a line was developed north on Twenty-fourth from Hamilton to Seward, west to Twenty-sixth, and then north to Lake Street where a short line connected it with the Eighteenth and Lake Streets. The fair grounds got a second line north on Twentieth to Lake Street. The Farnam line was run west to Thirtieth and then south to Leavenworth Street to connect with the "park line". (See Figure 2)

Just when the period of boom had caused Omaha's area to increase from twelve square miles in 1882 to twenty-two square miles in 1889, and the population to swell to nearly eighty thousand in the same period, other conditions developed that punctuated the rosy glow of street railway prosperity. The horse disease, epizootic lymphazitis, swept the country again taking heavy tolls. Furthermore the city fathers of Omaha decided that the best path to cheap and efficient transportation was a highly competitive one, so they


granted numerous franchises to cable roads and almost immedi-
ately to electric lines. By contrast with the exciti-
ing new mediums of transportation the horse car suddenly be-
came outdated, smelly, and too slow. The horse railway de-
termined that if they could no longer compete on a favorable
basis with other modes of transportation, the best plan would
be to join the competition. Thus the story of the Omaha Horse
Railway was nearly ended in 1889.

By that time Omaha had sewers, electric lights, paved
streets, and a water system, but it would be recalled that
her first utility was a street railway. Its importance as
a step in aligning Omaha with the great metropolitan centers
was well documented. Furthermore, it was these cars, an
editor had once said, that made each Omaha...feel at home
and sure of his own identity.49


49 *The Omaha Weekly Republican*, May 19, 1869.
CHAPTER III

THE CABLE COMPETITION

Just about the time the Omaha Horse Railway really was well established, Omahans began talking about a new medium of transportation that was being tried in the Far West. The hills of San Francisco had proved to be too steep for horse cars so the cable car had been developed for use there. As word of this development moved east, the Omaha newspapers picked up the stories and stumped for cable lines for Omaha. The Omaha Daily Herald, as early as 1881, encouraged Captain Harsh of the Omaha Horse Railway to use cables on his Hanscom Park line in order to conquer the Saint Marys Avenue incline.1 Evidently the Republican considered the Herald much too aggressive in its campaign for cable railways for one of its editions carried the sarcastic comment that the Republican assumed that the editor of the Herald would be willing to underwrite a half a mile or so of cable line (at only two-hundred thousand dollars a mile) since he was so anxious for them.2

Undaunted by a little sarcasm, The Omaha Herald con-

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1The Omaha Daily Herald, March 26, 1881.
2The Omaha Daily Republican, February 2, 1882.
continued its campaign for keeping Omaha abreast of the times.

"The present demands," the paper said, "...transit by the cable line system." The virtues of the cable system was extolled:

It overcomes the most precipitous grades, glides along the level like a gull on a calm day at sea, and there is seldom or no balking. Planned and plotted for a city of half a million, which a few years will realize, Omaha is just the place for the introduction of the cable system to annihilate the magnificent distances that make it a beautiful and most pretentious city. 3

The cause for the delay in building a cable line in Omaha could not be attributed to franchise difficulties as the City Council early in October, 1884, had called for a special election to determine the popular support for a new cable line. 4 The vote on the franchise was light compared with the concurrent political vote, but it was great enough to carry the issue. 5 As in the case of the horse railway there were men brave enough to attempt a corporation, but there were few who could really afford the undertaking. The first list of incorporators included Samuel R. Johnson, president, Charles B. Rustin, Caspar E. Yost, Isaac S. Hascall, and Fred Drexel. As the expiration of the franchise neared

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3 The Omaha Daily Herald, November 18, 1886.
4 City of Omaha, Ordinance No. 315, October 7, 1884.
5 The Omaha Daily Herald, November 5, 1884, and City of Omaha, Record of City Council, November 6, 1884.
for want of any construction, Hascall, Yost, and Drexel sold their part in the company to William V. Morse, L. B. Williams, and Dr. Samuel Mercer. The change in ownership seemed to stimulate the organization for members began investigating cable lines in other cities and finally some contracts for building materials were let. At last the line's most enthusiastic supporter, The Omaha Daily Herald, could report that:

Yesterday the contract was closed for $60,000 worth of material for Omaha's new cable railway. This act will certainly remove all doubts in the minds of the public as to the actual inauguration of the enterprise. The only essential point yet undetermined is the location of the line, which the Herald states confidently will be settled very soon and either Dodge Street or Farnam Street fixed upon. Before the snow flies next November at least two miles of the road will be in operation....More power and speed to the cable road.

Still other contracts were let, and yet no location of the road was forthcoming. The Herald began to feel a little cheated perhaps because it complained:

...The location of the line has not been determined yet, although large interests are being held back to the general damage because of the delay and indecision. The public, which has so much at stake, is beginning to feel that it is very illly used.

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6 The Omaha Daily News, February 21, 1909.
7 The Omaha Daily Republican, January 1, 1886.
8 The Omaha Daily Herald, June 15, 1886.
9 The Omaha Weekly Herald, July 22, 1886.
One of the big delays in building, which the original horse railway had not encountered, was the resistance by the existant line to building along the same streets. At first the Horse Railway announced its intention to convert its Farnam line to a cable road in order to discourage competition there. When that approach did not work, the Omaha Horse Railway took the case to court and asked for an injunction against the cable company. The result was that the cable line was not built on Farnam Street, but wherever cables did parallel the horse lines, the Horse Railway was to be indemnified.10

When the litigation was settled, building began vigorously. Twelve blocks of cable line were laid in the remaining months of 1886. Progress on the cable line was much slower because cable-laying was a much more technical process than laying horse tracks. First of all a trench seven feet wide and one foot deep was dug. In the center of this trench a sub-trench three feet deep was dug. The sub-trench was three feet wide at the top and narrowed to two feet at the bottom. Into the trenches were set "Y"-shaped yokes at four foot intervals on whose outer edges the tracks were laid. No ties could be used because continuous access was needed to the cable which was laid in a concrete tube between the

10 The Omaha Daily Herald, August 12, 1886, and The Omaha Daily News, February 21, 1909.
(From data in The Omaha Daily Republican)

January 1, 1888

CABLE TRENCH
(CROSS SECTION)
FIGURE 3
rails. Carrying-pulleys a foot in diameter and weighing seventy-five pounds were placed at thirty-six inch intervals to support the cable.\textsuperscript{11}

The local business men grew anxious to see the cable line completed so they subscribed forty-thousand dollars as a bonus if the line were completed by a certain date. The rush to win the bonus had disastrous effects, for it forced the wages of employees up so that mechanics could ask for ten to twelve dollars per day.\textsuperscript{12} The second year of building saw about three miles of track completed.\textsuperscript{13} Work on Harney Street had only begun in June and later the same month the first large spool of cable, five miles in length and weighing about forty-four tons, was received from the manufacturers in Trenton, New Jersey, and was laid on Twentieth Street.\textsuperscript{14} By December the Harney Street line was laid from the train depots north on Tenth Street to Harney, west on Harney to Twentieth Street, north on Twentieth Street to

\textsuperscript{11}The Omaha Daily Republican, January 1, 1888.

\textsuperscript{12}The Omaha Daily News, February 21, 1909. Rather ironical for the company never accepted the bonus even though the line was completed on time.

\textsuperscript{13}The Omaha Daily Republican, January 1, 1888.

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., June 23, 1887; The Omaha Daily Herald, June 27, 1887; and The Omaha Daily News, February 21, 1909.
FIGURE 4
OMAHA CABLE LINES
1887-1888

(From data in The Omaha Daily News, February 26, 1888)
Dodge and then west again to Twenty-sixth Street. This line was double track and the cable returned by the same route. The completed cost of the line was between one hundred and two hundred-thousand dollars per mile.

While the line was being laid an equally important installation was being made at Twentieth and Harney Streets. A large, two-story, brick building was placed there to house the power units for the cable line. Six large steam boilers were installed to power the four-hundred horsepower Wright Engine which in turn propelled the forty-five thousand pound flywheel which was twenty feet in diameter. The cylinders in this giant engine were thirty inches in diameter. The drums around which the cables were wound to be powered were twelve feet in diameter.

Not only the construction, but also the operation of the cable line was a more technical job than that of the horse lines had been. E. A. Tucker, who had had cable experience in San Francisco and Kansas City, was brought to Omaha as the line operator. To train car-men he brought in experienced operators from Kansas City and San Francisco for

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15 *The Omaha Daily Republican*, January 1, 1888.


on-the-job training.\textsuperscript{18} The first car seems to have been run for public use about the last day of 1887. It was then that \textit{The Omaha Daily Herald} announced that "Omaha has at last got cable cars." The Herald felt they were smoother running than the bobtails, and what's more they were heated.\textsuperscript{19}

The company began operations with fifteen grip cars and twenty passenger cars built by the Stephenson Company of New York. The operators, known as the "grip men" worked the lead cars, engaging and disengaging the cable, while the conductor was stationed in the trail car which nearly sixty passengers—about twice as many as the grip car.\textsuperscript{20} Service was popular on the line but income did not keep pace with expenses. A reorganization on May 1, 1888, put the company under the new name of the Omaha Cable Tramway Company,\textsuperscript{21} and a new forty-year franchise with unlimited building rights was granted on May 22, 1888, which seemed to pave the way for completion of the Dodge line.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{18}\textit{The Omaha Daily News}, February 21, 1909.


\textsuperscript{20}\textit{The Omaha Daily Republican}, January 1, 1888.

\textsuperscript{21}\textit{The Omaha Daily News}, February 21, 1909.

\textsuperscript{22}City of Omaha, \textit{Record of City Council}, May 29, 1888.
The Dodge line ran from Tenth and Harney Streets to Dodge, then west on Dodge Street to Twentieth, north to Cass Street, back south along Twentieth Street to the power house, back north to Dodge Street, and then retraced its route to Tenth and Harney Streets.23 When the line was opened on June 28, 1888, it was heartily welcomed by crowds of people lining the sidewalks, by dozens of small boys hitching rides, and by waving hats and lighted firecrackers. The Herald more predicted that this would be the most popular of the two cable lines even though the Harney line had done well until that time.24

The cable company was a tough competitor for the horse railway. After a ball game, where both modes of transportation were available for the trip home, the spectators refused to ride home in the horse cars even though they had to wait a long time before cable cars were available to handle the entire crowd. This was a thorough demonstration commented the Herald:

that people living in the suburbs will not use a horse car when, even by walking a block or two, they can reach a cable car. This shows that the horse car is doomed, except as a feeder.25

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23 The Omaha Daily Republican, January 1, 1888.
24 The Omaha Daily Herald, June 29, 1888.
25 Ibid., July 1, 1888.
No doubt, though, the citizens of Omaha were happy to have the old horse car on those occasions when the cable broke or had to be replaced (cables lasted about ninety days). Breaks took as long as a day or two to repair, and when an extension was made, several days sometimes elapsed before the cable could be joined in a continuous loop.26

From the standpoint of delays it was just as well that few extensions were made. The Dodge line eventually ran to Lake Street, and summer trail cars were added in 1889, but otherwise before the cables really had an epoch of their own in Omaha, electric trams were on the move.27 Cables, it was discovered, were useful on the hills and avoided objectionable overhead wires, but they were rough riders, made dangerous gaps in the streets, and would pay out only where cars could find enough passengers to run one minute apart.28

In Omaha they served as a curiosity which even the Duke of Marlborough planned to examine to see if they might be feasible for London:29 they bridged the gap between horse

26 The Omaha Daily Bee, August 2, 1889, and The Omaha Daily Herald, June 26, 1888.

27 The Omaha Daily Bee, July 26, 1889, and The Omaha Daily News, February 21, 1909.

28 The Omaha Daily Republican, October 18, 1889.

29 The Omaha Daily Bee, October 21, 1888.
cars and trolleys; and they broke the legs of horses that unwittingly stepped into the cable slots.\textsuperscript{30} There had been no real need for them in the beginning and none ever developed. They had been (as one newspaper all but admitted) simply an attempt to keep up with the neighbors.\textsuperscript{31} In order to save the investment, cables were headed toward consolidation.

\textsuperscript{30}The Omaha Daily Herald, June 22, 1888.

\textsuperscript{31}Ibid., June 12, 1888.
CHAPTER IV

OMAHA TRIES TOOKERVILLES

Before the tramway had been completed, and certainly before trolleys had proved themselves as a reliable form of transportation, the City Council granted two franchises for motor railways in Omaha. The Northwestern Street Railway Company, which was incorporated in 1886, got one franchise, while the Omaha Motor Railway Company got the other one. A caution, lacking in the issuance of earlier horse and cable franchises, was noticeable since the trolley lines were restricted to building only on those streets unoccupied by horse or cable lines.¹

The Northwestern Street Railway Company never materialized into an operating line, but the Omaha Motor Railway incorporated on March 1, 1887, with the following directors:

Samuel D. Mercer
Clifton E. Mayne
Charles B. Brown

Herbert J. Davis
Samuel S. Curtis
Emerson L. Stone²

Dr. Mercer, the guiding spirit in the trolley enterprise,

¹Omaha Daily Bee, September 20, 1886; The Omaha Daily Republican, April 13, 1887; and The Omaha Sunday Bee, February 28, 1909.

²Omaha Motor Railway Company, Articles of Incorporation, March 1, 1887.
had taken his inspiration from an experimental line that he had seen in New Orleans. Like previous transportation companies the Motor Railway found money to be a problem. Nevertheless, they were able to make an early beginning in April of their first year on the construction of their basic line. The construction was an easy beginning compared with holding the board of directors together to see the company through to completion. Almost immediately after the construction began, all of the incorporators except Samuel Curtis and Herbert Davis deserted Dr. Mercer and the Motor Railway. Only Mercer's zealous missionary efforts brought Joseph Millard, E. W. Nash, J. J. Brown, and N. W. Wells into the company.3

The board's original plans for the line called for interurban traffic in Douglas, Cass, Dodge, Sarpy, and Otoe counties.4 Contrasted with such grandiose plans, the construction proceedings were most timid. The Daily Republican reported in the summer of 1887 that their reporter had investigated a construction project being carried on under cover of darkness on Cass Street near Sixteenth. Bonfires were blazing and lanterns were hung to light the work. The reporter inquired for what purpose the tracks were being

3 The Omaha Daily Republican, April 6, 1887, and The Omaha Sunday Bee, February 28, 1909.

4 The Omaha Sunday Bee, February 28, 1909.
laid. One of the workmen replied evasively that a cable line was being constructed, but then upon further questioning he was unable to explain why the ties were being used. In rapid fire the reporter asked where Dr. Mercer could be found, and before the workman realized that he had betrayed the ownership of the line, he stated that Dr. Mercer was inspecting the other end of the line. The workers, it turned out, were cable employees hired to work nights on the motor line.\footnote{The Omaha Daily Republican, July 26, 1887. Dr. Mercer held interests in both the cable and motor lines.}

Secrecy was characteristic of the building of the motor line even from its beginning because the company had begun before the franchise had been approved by a special election. Then, too, it was advantageous to avoid asking plans for a new line public because rival horse and cable lines might attempt to run in a track to keep out the competition.\footnote{The Omaha Daily Bee, June 1, 9, 15, 1887.} As an indication of just how severe the competition and other problems became, there was the contrast between Dr. Mercer's optimistic view that the line would be completed considerably before the end of 1887 and the reality that its first cars were run in 1889.\footnote{The Omaha Daily Republican, July 26, 1887.}

The opposition was divided among those who were still
enamored with cable lines, those who feared overhead trolley wires, and, of course, the other transportation companies. In the courts rival companies sought injunctions against the Mercer Line to prevent building on routes which they claimed by prior appropriation. Labor problems were sometimes precipitated to hold up construction when litigation failed. Those who liked the cable lines, and there were many at that time, on occasion expressed their opposition very vociferously. For instance at a mass meeting in Hanscom Park in 1888, over three hundred and fifty people attended to offer a vote of confidence to the cable lines and to discourage the trolley people. The cables, it was said at the meeting, increased real estate values from twenty-five to thirty per cent. That trolleys might do equally as much for real estate values was not given consideration. Dr. Mercer was denounced as a dangerous opportunist. One speaker said he could guess what kind of power Dr. Mercer would use on his line: "It would not be electricity, but unadulterated wind." The same speaker wanted the Doctor to know that citizens, too, had rights on which even he had better not trample. Another

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2Hewitt, op. cit., p. 44; The Omaha Daily Republican, April 12 and October 16, 1889; The Omaha Daily Herald, July 8, 1889; The Omaha Daily Bee, April 17, 1889; and "Opinion of Judge Doane in District Court", Douglas County, Nebraska, (1889).
warned "...that in a combat with the devil you had to fight him with fire." The upshot of the meeting was a subscription of two hundred and fifty dollars with which to wage some nebulous kind of battle.9

The other main source of resistance to trolley lines came from Gashans who seemed to be genuinely concerned over the danger of falling overhead power wires, and from individuals who objected to the addition of poles to the maze of electric, telephone, and telegraph poles already lining the streets. Mayor Broatch led the opposition to the overhead trolley wires, which were said to remain above ground while their victims went underground.10 When a serious inquiry was made into the safety (or lack of safety) of span-wire construction, The Omaha Republican replied tongue-in-cheek, "The electric wires are safe as they are; it is the people that are in danger."11 The trolley line began covertly to install poles, but a sharp-eyed Bee reporter printed

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9The Omaha Daily Herald, July 11, 1886.

10Sorenson, op. cit., p. 532; The Omaha Daily Bee, December 18, 1886; and The Omaha Daily Republican, October 19, 1889.

11The Omaha Daily Republican, October 19, 1889. The electrocutations never materialized, but the Direct Current induced an electrolytic process that prematurely dissolved the water pipes in the downtown area.
the fact in the paper, and another court action resulted.12

The delays, the secrecy, and the unfulfilled promises left some Omahans dissatisfied and others embittered.13 Through all of the hassle the one person who never wavered was Dr. Mercer. He was certain that if his line were completed, it could operate for fifty per cent less money. In addition to economy trolleys, according to Dr. Mercer, were smoother, quicker, and had no offensive odor.14 Dr. Mercer was not without support. A meeting of a group of his followers was reported to have strongly endorsed electric propelling power. According to the Republican:

The doctor would probably have blushed had he heard the enthusiastic praise tendered his pet motor, and witnessed the intensely earnest gyration of the speakers in expressing their admiration of the rapid and mysterious carry-all.15

Ultimately most trolley-building problems found their solutions, and tracks and span-wire construction proceeded. Seventy-three pound girder-rails were laid on seven-foot ties (six inches by eight inches) in a bed of crushed rock.

12 The Omaha Daily Bee, December 12, 1888, and January 16, August 11, 1889.
13 The Omaha Daily Herald, July 11, August 5 and 14, 1888.
14 Ibid., July 8, 1888, and The Omaha Daily Republican, August 14, 1887.
15 The Omaha Daily Republican, April 2, 1889.
Most poles for the overhead wires were wooden and were spread about fifty-two to the mile. The first line constructed was double tracked and was four miles in length. It stretched between Bancroft and Howard Streets along Eleventh Street, up Howard to Fourteenth Street, north to Cass Street, west to Seventeenth Street, north again to Burt Street, and west again to Thirty-sixth. A court decision had made possible the use of viaducts upon payment of bonds to the city, and where lines overlapped, track rental at a fair price was required of rival companies. The line had major preoperational extensions from Thirty-sixth and Burt Streets to Cuming Street and then west to Fortieth Street; it had another extension from Nicholas to Charles Street along Twenty-second, west to Twenty-fifth Street and north to Lake Street; finally it had what was really a separate line from Twenty-second and Ames Streets east to Sherman (formerly north Sixteenth Street), south to Clark Street, west to Seventeenth, south to Burt, along the basic line to Howard and then south along Fifteenth, Sixteenth, and Twenty-fourth Streets and west along Leaven-

OMAHA MOTOR RAILWAY

(Figure 5)

1889

(From entry in the Omaha Sunday Bee, February 28, 1909)

146
worth and Vinton Streets until it reached the stockyards at "N" Street.\textsuperscript{17}

The trolley system first went into operation in mid-
summer of 1889. Cars from the Council Bluffs Bridge Company had been on trial runs over the lines during the early summer, but the first Omaha Motor Railway cars ran about the last week of July. The Bee waxed poetic: "There is an unusual hum in the streets of Omaha nowadays. It is the song of the electric motors."\textsuperscript{18} The first major run was made by car number fifteen without a trail car. Superintendent Todhunter, Dr. Mercer, and a few other passengers made the trip. "The short journey was made without mishap," wrote the Bee reporter who was along, "although the car at times attained a speed of 10 miles an hour." When the crowds cheered, Dr. Mercer's face fairly beamed. Trolley excursions began that very evening.\textsuperscript{19}

About twenty closed, Pullman-type cars constituted the first regular equipment. Each four-wheel car was twenty-four feet long and propelled by two fifteen-horsepower Thompson-Houston motors. The five-hundred volt direct current to operate the motors came from the power house at Twenty-second

\textsuperscript{17}The Omaha Daily Bee, April 24 and June 6, 1889; The Omaha Sunday Bee, February 28, 1909; and Hewitt, op. cit., who said the original line had a jog on Webster Street between Seventeenth and Twenty-second Streets.

\textsuperscript{18}The Omaha Daily Bee, July 24, 1889, and The Omaha Sunday Bee, February 28, 1909.

\textsuperscript{19}The Omaha Daily Bee, July 23, 1889.
and Nicholas Streets where two giant Corliss engines operated the Thompson-Houston generators.20

A trolley innovation, the cowcatcher, created a great new sport for youngsters who would hitch rides. Besides, the horse whip was no longer available to correct the situation. The Central High School boys soon discovered to their delight that by standing on the rear platform of the trolleys they could cause the cars to rear off the tracks. The age-old problem of cold cars became evident on the trolleys, too, as winter approached.21 The Omaha Republican castigated the Motor Line:

Omaha's Street Railway company continues to fly in the face of fashion. Motor cars shouldn't be attired decollete while there is snow on the ground.22

When trolleys were added to the streets of Omaha, three separate but intertwined mediums were operating in some cases over the same trucks. In the confusion accidents were bound to happen. Some blame was due to the brakes on the trolleys where a large friction wheel had to be wound-up to stop the car. If the driver was not alert, the winding was sometimes too slow. Rivalry and its handmaiden, antipathy,

20 The Omaha Sunday Bee, February 28, 1909, and The Omaha Daily News, March 28, 1909. The trolley company sold excess power in the downtown area for a number of years.


22 The Omaha Daily Republican, November 3, 1889.
may also have contributed to accidents. On occasion competing cars refused to yield the right of way, and the results were often injurious or at best, ludicrous.23 Once a horse car was traveling up a hill on Sixteenth Street between two motor cars. The first car began to roll backwards, so the horse car passengers, upon seeing the impending crash, jumped out "with more alacrity than grace." The car, itself, was quite badly crushed between the two trolleys, but what happened to the horse is not recorded.24 Another time a cable car and a trolley collided at the intersection of Sixteenth and Dodge Streets disabling the trolley but leaving the cable car undamaged.25 Once when a Dubuque, Iowa, delegation was inspecting the street railway system, as luck would have it, a couple of trolleys crashed. Completely exasperated, the Republican sarcastically explained:

The distinguished visitors might have regarded the collision as accidental, but it was nothing of the kind. As one of the cicerones explained, the cars were wrecked merely to convince the strangers that such accidents could happen, and to show how they could be averted. And having learned that the best way to avoid railway collisions is to keep the cars from attempting to ride over each other, the party resumed its tour, much refreshed by the information.26

24 *The Omaha Daily Republican*, November 1, 1889.
The story of the Omaha Motor Railway would not be complete without mentioning a few important asides. Financing became a serious problem for the trolley company. Building expenses ate into the gross income to the extent of entirely consuming it. At first simple attempts were made to stimulate the volume of business. For example, a donation of five-hundred dollars by the Motor Company was made to the Omaha Baseball Club to keep it active as it provided an attraction for trolley business to and from the ball park, but small projects usually resulted in only temporary relief.27

A major undertaking, which was in later years to keep the successors of the Motor Railway Company solvent when their transit lines were losing money, was the construction of a Missouri River Bridge ultimately controlled by the trolley lines. Agitation for a bridge had begun around 1882, but Council Bluffs opposed it at the time for fear that a bridge would mean the loss of their rail terminal. In the end, however, the voters of Council Bluffs approved a special levy in order that a bonus of seventy-five thousand dollars could be paid to the bridge builders.28 Finally Congress

27Ibid., April 2, 1887.
28The Omaha Daily Bee, October 30, 1888.
and President Cleveland, in April, 1886, approved a bill
authorising the bridge across the Missouri River, and short-
ly thereafter the Omaha and Council Bluffs Railway and Bridge
Company filed articles of incorporation.\(^{29}\) Contractors from
all over the country visited the area to check the specifica-
tions and location for the bridge. \(^{29}\) On May 21, 1887, bids
from thirteen contractors were opened which ranged from
$402,000 to $485,000.\(^{30}\) The Edgemoor Iron Company of Wilm-
ington, Delaware, was awarded the contract and work was
scheduled to begin within ten days.\(^{31}\) The contractor's good
intentions, however, were thwarted, and they were left to
cool their heels while the Omaha City Council decided where
the bridge ought to connect on the Omaha side of the river.
In October the Council decided to build on Douglas Street.\(^{32}\)

Construction at times was hampered by ice, heavy rains,
and faulty surveys, but as the year 1888 moved along, the
four-hundred foot span neared completion.\(^{33}\) With approaches,
the distance across the bridge was seven-eighths of a mile;
while the span rose to sixty feet above the water with a

\(^{29}\) *Ibid.*, October 21, 1886; and *The Omaha Daily Herald*,
April 28, 1886.

\(^{30}\) *The Omaha Daily Bee*, April 26 and May 21, 1887.


\(^{32}\) *Ibid.*, October 6, 1887.

\(^{33}\) *Ibid.*, January 22 and May 15, 1888; and *The Omaha
Daily Herald*, July 17, 1888.
roadway of thirty-three feet of which twenty-five feet were set aside for the motor line and vehicles. Costs had exceeded estimates, so on opening day the owners possessed an eight-hundred thousand dollar property. By completion time those owners included among their numbers two Omaha Motor Railway officers—a hint of the marriage to come. 34

A magnificent celebration was planned in which Governors Larrabee of Iowa and Thayer of Nebraska, Mayors Boher and Broatch, General Brookes, the judges and city councils, bishops and clergy, the boards of education, and the police and fire commissioners all appeared in newly painted carriages driven by liveried coachmen. Thousands watched and cheered as a bottle of wine was smashed to christen the bridge. Many speeches preceded the long parade of soldiers and commercial floats. 35 The Bridge Company's electric trolley, which had been rushed to completion for the opening day, did not operate properly. Successful runs were not made until November 11, when Charles L. Pullman came to town to oversee the employment of the equipment built by his company. 36 Regular operation began in early 1889. 37

34 'The Omaha Daily Bee, October 30, 1888.
35 Ibid., October 29, 1888.
36 Ibid., November 11, 1888.
37 Ibid., November 25, 1888.
While the Bridge Company had both the bridge and trolley line as sources of income, it preferred to be a less active corporation and to lease the bridge and part of its line. For a flat rental rate the trolley lines of Omaha eventually got control of the bridge and its revenues. Tolls were charged at the following schedule:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vehicle</th>
<th>Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Footman</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horse and rider</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horse and buggy</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horse and wagon</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two horses and buggy</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two horses and wagon</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three horses and wagon</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four horses and wagon</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Each extra horse</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Each extra person</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horses, mules, cows</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheep and hogs</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In some later years the cumulative tolls amounted to half a million dollars, a fact that made the bridge a life-saver for the trolley lines.

With the bridge completed, a companion project was undertaken. Lake Manawa, created when the Missouri River changed its course, was developed into an amusement park to which a trolley line was operated. No admission to the park was charged except the twenty-five cents for the round-trip trolley fare. Swimming, yachting, dancing, rides on the roller coaster and steamer, as well as refreshments could be enjoyed for a nominal fee.

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Thus, because of all its involvements the Omaha Motor Railway had a very short independent history. Short though it was, it made one thing eminently clear: Too much had been invested in trolleys to turn back to older forms of transportation. A means had best be found to improve the system.
CHAPTER V

THE SUBURBS KEEP PACE

Omaha's public transportation system in the early days were centered largely around the Omaha Horse Railway, the Omaha Cable Tramway, and the Omaha Motor Railway, but there were numerous smaller lines which contributed at one time or another to the growth and development of the city. In the mid-1880's the development of several real-estate subdivisions encouraged promoters to apply for franchises for short connecting transit lines. Real-estate dealers recognized the value of rapid transit as a talking point in selling lots; hence, many large advertisements carried a money-back guarantee that a transit line would be extended to the subdivision within a specified time.1

The City Council of Omaha did its part to encourage short line building by making it easy to get a franchise—so easy in fact that the Daily Republican took issue with the Council. The newspaper claimed that all one had to do to get a franchise was to be able to afford twenty-five dollars for a month's office rent and the cost of printing a stock book.2

1Phillips, op. cit., p. 17; The Omaha Daily Republican, May 27, 1885; and The Omaha Daily Herald, November 24, 1883.

2The Omaha Daily Republican, March 6, 1887.
Aside from a need for transportation from subdivisions to jobs in the city, there were other reasons for highly stimulated building in the 1880's. For one thing, Omaha stock yards needed a large labor supply, which in turn needed transportation from the city to the yards. Furthermore, where whole communities earlier had vied with each other to get public utilities established, now Omaha subdivisions vied with each other to get lines going. Residents along proposed lines sometimes subscribed construction costs without themselves becoming stockholders.3

The earliest of the suburban lines was the one which was inspired by the development of Benson Place. E. A. Benson, C. E. Mayne, and W. L. McCague, who were associated in that real-estate venture, in the winter of 1886-7 decided to connect their property with the city transit lines by building a steam line from Benson to Forty-fifth and Grant Streets. Because the steamer frightened horses and cattle in the pastures along the route, farmers organized to have it discontinued. A transition to horse power assuaged the protestors and brought the line into compliance with the law. This Benson Motor Company eventually became the Benson and Halcyon Heights Railroad, an unprofitable venture subsidized

3 Phillips, loc. cit.; and The Omaha Sunday Bee, March 14, 1909.
by the owners until they were able to unload it in the general consolidation. 4

Another real estate-linked venture was tried on west Leavenworth Street in 1887. The three and one-half miles of line were a part of the Omaha and Southwestern Street Railway Company owned by S. J. Howell, Cyrus Morton, J. T. Paulse, Henry Ambler, and C. F. Harrison. Connections on this line were made between Burdon Place, Howell Place, Ambler Place, Eckerman Place, Shriver Place, and West Side. This line was joined to the city line at the northwest corner of Hanscom Park. Like the Benson line it was unprofitable from the very first. 5

The Dundie residents had great hopes of getting a tram line when the Metropolitan Cable Railway Company was organized by Kansas City financiers who owned property in western Omaha. When the construction got underway, however, in November of 1887, it was a horse line that was built. Extending approximately from the present Brownell Hall to Forty-first and Farnam Streets, the completed line did not begin operations until 1891. 6

4 Sorenson, loc. cit.; Hewitt, loc. cit.; The Omaha Sunday Bee, March 14, 1909; The Omaha Daily Bee, February 28, 1917; and James W. Savage and John T. Bell, History of the City of Omaha, (New York: Munsell and Company, 1894), p. 414.

5 The Omaha Sunday Bee, March 14, 1909.

6 Ibid.; The Omaha Daily Republican, January 1, 1888; Hewitt, loc. cit.; and Sorenson, loc. cit. Hewitt and Sorenson confuse the Metropolitan Cable and Metropolitan Street Railway Companies.
Not to be confused with the Metropolitan Cable Railway Company was a similar enterprise called the Metropolitan Street Railway Company. The latter was incorporated in January of 1891, by J. A. Creighton, John A. McShane, W. A. Paxton, E. S. Bood, W. C. Albright, E. A. Cudahy, and T. S. Mahoney. Designed to capture the stock yards travel, it connected South Omaha with Omaha proper. During the morning and evening it was busy, but otherwise it was little used, and like its related lines it became a losing proposition. A financial statement from the company covering the period from November 28, 1891, to September 30, 1892, showed an operational loss of $658.

Sorenson and Savage record that a line was constructed in 1891 connecting East Omaha with the city. They called the builder the Interstate Bridge and Street Railway Company, but this was most likely an extension of the Omaha and Council Bluffs Bridge and Street Railway Company which was mentioned earlier. While the type of line was not indicated, it is reasonable to assume that the Bridge Company used trolleys.

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7The Metropolitan Street Railway Company, Articles of Incorporation, January 5, 1891; and City of South Omaha, Ordinance No. 247, c. 1891.

8The Omaha Sunday Bee, March 14, 1909.

9Sorenson, loc. cit.; and Savage, op. cit., p. 415.
While the enabling act of the Territorial Legislature had prevented the steam-operated railroads from competing directly with the street railway, they were able to circumvent the law and in some cases offer a little competition or at least complementary service. The railroads never attempted to build in the streets of Omaha. Rather they solicited the business of suburbs along their regular routes, and then ran engines with only three or four passenger cars attached. This resulted in a limited but economical service for trips were made only during the rush hours and a single line served a multiple purpose.

*The Omaha Daily Herald* noted that a "dummy" train was being run to South Omaha in 1886, but it was not until 1888 that both the Union Pacific and Missouri Pacific Railroads made concerted efforts to establish local transit systems. The former tapped the commuter business between Omaha and Council Bluffs. The round trip on this run cost fifty cents plus street car fare at each end since no transfer agreements existed. From an operational standpoint the

10 *The Omaha Daily Herald*, November 30, 1886. "Dummy" train was the term applied to the suburban trains that carried only three or four passenger-cars.

Missouri Pacific attempted a much more extensive program in the opposite direction of the Union Pacific.

What had begun as a Union Pacific project in 1883 and 1884, became the Belt Line Railroad, a system that encircled Omaha with a view toward providing complementary local service for the Missouri Pacific Railroad. The Union Pacific had begun condemnation proceedings to secure a right of way, and then suddenly dropped the project. Jay Gould got S. H. Clark, the general manager of Union Pacific, to leave his job to become president of the Belt Line, which Gould proposed to make a Missouri Pacific affiliate in order to give that railroad direct access to Omaha. After the Union Pacific withdrew its objection to the line for the sum of seventy-five thousand dollars, Gould went ahead with the project. The result was a spur to Papillion that gave the Missouri Pacific a toll free line into Omaha, plus the advantage of a line that encircled the city. This line cost seven hundred thousand dollars to build, but its advantageous position gave it a value many times the original cost.12

When the Belt Line began operations, its rate card was printed in the Daily Herald—an interesting contrast with the street railway offerings:

12Savage, op. cit., p. 409. Evidence of the Belt Line can still be seen in the Missouri Pacific Railroad bridge and station on Dodge Street at about Forty-sixth Street.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination:</th>
<th>Oak Chatham</th>
<th>Walnut Hill</th>
<th>West Side</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual 10 trip--30 day limit</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>1.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family 30 trip--90 day limit</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual 50 trip--60 day limit</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>5.30</td>
<td>6.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual 100 trip--90 day limit</td>
<td>5.75</td>
<td>9.30</td>
<td>11.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Regular trips on the line began July 15, with trains departing from Fifteenth and Webster Streets at 7:10 and 11:00 A.M. and 4:25 and 6:20 P.M.\(^{13}\)

Complex and diverse were the words to describe the suburban transit lines. Almost all of them had found their justification in improving the salability of suburban real estate developments. Whether they could have paid their way under good management is doubtful--suffice it to say that they did not under the management they got.

\(^{13}\) *The Omaha Daily Herald*, July 15, 1888.
CHAPTER VI

HORSES, CABLES, AND TROLLEYS JOIN FORCES

A recapitulation of the public transportation situation at the time soon after trolleys had first appeared as the third medium of transportation in Omaha, indicates that about ten street and "dummy" lines were in operation. Within the inner city, alone, there were twenty-five miles of horse lines, five miles of double-track cables, and about ten miles of double-track electric road. The number of companies and the diverse mediums made the transportation conditions viciously competitive and chaotic to say the least. A common practice employed by most companies in an attempt to anticipate the plans of rivals was the use of spies and agents to shadow the officers and employees of rival organizations. In retrospect those conditions evoke the standard commentary that the pendulum had swung to one extreme; it was due to return.

The transit patron, who suffered as much as anyone from the state of affairs, was well disposed to any change that might deliver him from obnoxious double and triple fares on single trips. Similarly, owners of small lines would probably have appreciated an opportunity to dispose of their

1 Sunday World-Herald, March 7, 1909.
unprofitable properties if some of their investment could be salvaged. The great obstacle to any solution of the problems seemed to be lodged with the directors of the three major lines. Vehement denunciations of each other became their specialty, and they announced for all kinds of additions and conversions. That extravagant vituperation belied ulterior motives was assumed by the Bee which editorialized: "When corporations vigorously denounce each other, it is an unfailing indication of an early union."2

It became evident that there was a great deal of truth in the Bee's conjecture. There had been speculation in 1888 about the joining of street railways; it gained credence when one of the first bills in the 1889 legislative session turned out to be a measure to permit consolidation of street railways that adjoined and connected;3 it became reality when a consolidation of the Omaha Horse Railway Company and the Omaha Cable Tramway Company was announced. The agreement had been made in January before the enabling act was passed, and only the terms remained to be delineated. The combination involved about five miles of cable and thirty-six miles of horse line capitalized at four million dollars.

2 The Omaha Daily Bee, May 23, 1889.

3 Ibid., May 9, 1888 and January 18, 1889; and Laws of Nebraska 1889, Senate File No. 16, February 12, 1889.
The first board of directors was a composite of men from both of the former companies. Frank Murphy, S. R. Johnson, and D. H. Goodrich became president, vice-president, and secretary-treasurer, respectively. Other board members were Guy C. Barton, W. W. Marsh, W. E. Smith, C. B. Bustin, A. S. Paddock, and B. F. Smith. (The transfer of property was finalized on April 6, 1889.) The new company, the Omaha Street Railway Company, was able to satiate the public to a degree with transfer facilities. In a long-range move to improve service the board began an investigation of the costs and problems involved in a transition to electric power.

Consolidation of cable and horse lines reduced the number of Omaha transit competitors, but the stronger team which resulted was able to wage a better battle with obstructionism as its chief weapon. The Bee said that most of the track-laying in 1889 by the rival street car companies was done in the courts. In fact as the year moved on, the Bee berated the consolidated companies for failing to improve

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4 *Articles of Union and Consolidation between the Omaha Cable Tramway Company and the Omaha Horse Railway forming the Omaha Street Railway Company, and extracts from Records of Board Meetings of the Omaha Cable Tramway Company, February 14, 1889 and Records of Directors' Meetings of the Omaha Horse Railway Company, March 4, 1889.*


6 *The Omaha Daily Bee*, April 24, 1889.
their service, as they had promised, and gloomily warned that any future consolidation might create a virtual transportation monopoly that would certainly feel no great compulsion to extend its services.7

The Bee's fear that a transportation monopoly might be created was justified when the stronger Street Railway Company was able to use the financial dilemma of the Motor Company as a lever to bring about a sale. The big three began a unified operation on November 1, 1889. Essentially, the merger repaid the investments of the stockholders of the Motor Company with interest, gave them one-fifth of the common stock of the new company, and gave Dr. Mercer and J. J. Brown seats on the board of directors.8

With competition virtually at an end, attention was diverted to making the system an efficient and profitable one. Competitive wages and the duplication of services and equipment could be eliminated to save money, while transfer facilities could be used to encourage more riders which in turn would boost income. To have retreated from the conversion to trolleys that had been begun by the Street Railway

7Ibid., October 16, 1889.

8Deed of Conveyance from the Omaha Motor Railway Company to the Omaha Street Railway Company, November 1, 1889; Sunday World-Herald, March 7, 1909, and The Omaha Republican, October 16, 1889.
before the last consolidation, would have meant a return to lines that in some cases paid out eight cents for every five cents collected.⁹

The electrification of the street railways in Omaha can be listed as a major feat for two reasons. First of all the conversion was accomplished in just a little more than three years; secondly, it was accomplished in a period of extreme economic distress. The decade from 1889 to 1898 was the most difficult period in Omaha transit history as it was for most businesses. Local agricultural failures in 1890, 1891, and 1892 restricted income severely, and when the problem became a national one in the depression of 1893, it was given additional intensity. Then, as if to add insult to injury, the velocipede struck Omaha, and it precipitated a fad of such proportions that transit business was cut to the bone. To explain where the company got the money to add the suburban lines to its system and to electrify them during the decade is difficult, except to suppose that personal fortunes and trusting local banks did the job, for it was well known that the company's discounted mortgage bonds found no takers.¹⁰

⁹The Omaha Sunday Bee, March 14, 1909.

¹⁰Ibid. Horse cars that were not converted sold for about ten dollars so that equipment disposal did little to sustain conversion costs.
Electrification in turn took its toll. The one big unhappy family of cable, horse, and trolley lines saw the demise of the former two and the triumph of the latter.11

The lack of success attendant upon street railways in Omaha had created a lugubrious decade, but there were to be more cheerful and more profitable times. The end of the decade found Omaha sponsoring the Trans-Mississippi Exposition with a local banker, Gurdon W. Wattles, elected president of the fair. If any favors were to accrue from a position of influence, then the Omaha Street Railway stood to benefit for Wattles had invested in that utility in the decade of trouble. A ten-thousand dollar donation to the Exposition did nothing to harm the trolley company's chances either.12 For the thousands of visitors who were expected to attend, special trolley services were planned to the Exposition site from the railroad stations and from downtown Omaha. Such a profusion of visitors thronged to the exhibits in the plaster palaces that within the year Omaha's street transportation vaulted from a poorly patronized and losing business organization to a much used and profitable enterprise. Up until

11Mrs. Fred Larkin, personal interview, November 4, 1959. Mrs. Larkin recalls that the last horse car ran to Laurel Hill Cemetery in South Omaha.

this time, no mention had been made of dividends for there had been none, but in 1898 dividends of two per cent were declared and these subsequently rose to four per cent. While the stockholders undoubtedly welcomed the return on their investments, hindsight makes it clear that the dividends should have been held as renewal monies for the propitious changes due to follow.¹⁴

Gurdon Wattles, who had helped place the trolley company on a paying basis, by 1902 had collected five thousand shares of street railway stock. With control of the voting stock assured, he set out to make big money. Through purchase and lease he pulled together into the Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Railway Company all the twin-city transit systems including the bridge and Lake Manawa interests. The Council Bluffs Railway and Bridge Company which controlled the Suburban Railway Company and Lake Manawa and Manhattan Beach Railway. The bridge was leased for a flat annual rate


of sixty thousand dollars plus bond interest which cost an additional ninety-thousand dollars each year. Frank Murphy, who was another driving force in this last combination, became the president with Omahans Guy C. Barton as vice-president, W. A. Smith as treasurer, R. A. Leussler as secretary and Gurdon Wattles and W. B. Morse as board members. Several other board members were conspicuous because of their absence from the community—Albert Strauss of New York, Randall Morgan of Philadelphia, and Hugh J. McGowan of Indianapolis. C. R. Tyler was the only Council Bluffs member of the board.15

With the exception of the bridge and the Council Bluffs lines and equipment, the lines and equipment of the combination were in a poor state of repair. Much original construction had been carelessly done, and surpluses had been used to pay dividends rather than for upkeep and repair. But eternal optimism dictated tremendous expansion. A gigantic power station to replace the three older ones were built at the foot of Jackson Street with a substation at Twenty-seventh and Lake Streets. All of the old-style track was relaid with seventy-three pound girder rails. The wooden poles for the span-wire construction were replaced with metal ones.

Twenty-one line extensions were made, and new cars were added while the old ones were replaced. After 1906 the company built its own rolling stock—forty-two foot cars equipped with two forty horsepower motors, hot water heating systems, air brakes, and sanders. At least once a year each car received a complete overhaul.16

Through all of the increased activity presidents came and went rapidly. Frank Murphy lasted through two years of building and then was replaced by Guy Barton, his vice-president. Barton lasted for four years and then was replaced in 1908 by Gurdon Wattles. As the building had slowed down so did the turnover in leadership. Gurdon Wattles, whose name came to be associated with twentieth century Omaha street railways as Captain March's had been with nineteenth century ones, held the reins of the Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Railway for fifteen years.17

Wattles' fifteen years of leadership were a period characterized by financial problems, franchise controversies, and labor unrest. Strikes hit soon after Wattles took office. In September of 1909 the street railway employees sought

16 The Omaha Daily News, March 21 and April 4, 1909.

17 Ibid., March 21, 1909. It should be recorded that in 1903, before he took over the actual leadership of the transit company, Wattles had been instrumental in the formation of the Business Men's Association designed to resist unionizing.
higher wages with some agitation for union recognition. In retaliation for the strike Wattles threatened:

Now, I am not a timid man...I say to the union men, If they quit the employ of this company, there will never be another union man employed by this company...this company will go right along and operate its cars; if necessary under protection of government itself.

The protection that Wattles ultimately secured could hardly have been classified government protection. The company contracted for Waddell and Mahan strikebreakers to keep the cars running. In September the situation was explosive when James Waddell arrived in Omaha from New York commanding five hundred men of doubtful character. Local hoodlums found the conflict an excuse to disrupt service by greasing the rails, clogging tracks with rocks, breaking windows, and even shootings. One car conductor, who staunchly refused to move the trolley until fares were paid, was forced off the car while the passengers operated it to the end of the line and then abandoned it. Later Wattles described the situation as follows:

In all ordinary conflicts they effectively used the iron switch rods or the trolley controllers on the cars...Very little of the money collected by the strikebreakers reached the treasury of the company...They did not know the sensation of fear and were always ready for a fight...It was said that the conductors divided their collections with the motormen, and again with the lieutenants at the barns, who, were all corrupt as the operating men...but it is difficult to record a word of criticism against these strikebreakers...so, whatever their faults might have been, they were forgotten by the officials of the company and by the public generally.
The public, as Wattles said, may have forgotten, but with such a relationship between employer and employee it is little wonder that the animosity built up during the strike hung on for years. Street car men had only to look at the "scabs", who were given tenure while strikers lost their seniority rights and had to begin at the bottom of the ladder once more, to be reminded of their intense dissatisfaction.\(^{18}\)

Nine years later President Wattles faced a better organization of labor and a firmer demand for union recognition, a nine-hour day, closed shop, and overtime. Because a state of war with Germany still existed the War Labor Board claimed jurisdiction and ended the strike until a study of grievances could be made. Former-president Taft, the chief arbitrator in the case, came to Omaha in January of 1919 and conducted an investigation which resulted in little change in the status quo.\(^{19}\)

The lack of success on the part of the railway employees to achieve any of their demands had them striking again in mid-summer of 1919. What began as a demand for restoration of seniority lost in the 1909 strike, improved working


\(^{19}\) *Morning World-Herald*, December 13, 1918; *The Omaha Daily Bee*, December 3, 1918, at... seq.; and *The Omaha Daily News*, January 3, 1919.
conditions, closed shop, and wage boosts, ended with only the last item as a point of contention for the other rights were waived when the company remained adamant. The employees got mixed public support because the wage hike was linked to a fare increase to seven cents. A writer to the Bee, who used the pseudonym of "Pro Bono Publico", derisively pointed out that the seven-cent fare was a real blessing because he now was able to save seven cents by walking to work instead of only five. Another view was that with the price of shoe leather spiraling upwards, perhaps it was worth a two-cent increase to ride.  

In addition to the strikes, the Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Railway felt much harrassed by the Omaha City Council. In 1908 the Council began to check the terms of the Railway's franchises. The resultant haggling over a period of years culminated in a suit in 1917 by the city to get control of part of the street railway property under the reversion clause of the territorial organization act of 1867. The courts decided in favor of the Street Railway. The company had countered with the claim that their franchises were held "in perpetuity". No major franchise settlement was made during the presidency of Wattles, who was preoccupied his last year fighting "reds" and red-ink accounts. The

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20 The Omaha Daily Bee, July 31, 1919, st. sec.
years from 1920 to 1924 resulted in losses for the organization in excess of two million dollars.21

Wattles's administration was, nevertheless, a high-water mark of street railway transit. It had been his leadership that created a completely unified transit system for both Omaha and Council Bluffs and brought it to a high state of repair. Beyond that time of vigorous building, replacement, and expansion, a plateau began to appear—the stage was set for a challenging new medium of transport.

21Ibid., December 22, 1917; March 17, 1925; Morning World-Herald, June 24, 1926; and E. Bryant Phillips, A History of Street Railways in Nebraska, (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, University of Nebraska, 1944), p. 486.
CHAPTER VII

BUSES TAKE OVER

The two World Wars mark important steps in the use of buses as a means of street transportation in the city of Omaha. The first war, which had speeded the development of the gasoline engine into a practical means of powering transportation vehicles, catapulted buses onto the transportation scene, while the second war marked the triumph of buses over trolleys. The period intervening between the world wars, then, was a period of coexistence filled with solutions to the franchise and bridge problems, more labor problems, and a host of other regulatory complications.

Once the trolley became established, the Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Railway became the great resister of change. Hence, the motor bus had to find its sponsor elsewhere. A company called The Boulevard Transit Lines began short runs in May of 1923 with fares set at ten cents. Though it had a permit from the City Council to operate, the Douglas County Court accepted a plea of the Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Railway Company for an injunction to stop its competitors runs. (The plea was eventually granted.) The trolley com-
pany claimed exclusive and perpetual rights all based on former franchises to the use of Omaha streets for trolleys or buses.\(^2\) Even if the trolley company did get help on legislating its bus competition out of business for a time, it could not ignore the writing on the wall. Buses were coming no matter who operated them—it would be unwise to disregard them.

The way was paved for bus operation when Mayor Dahlman, who found the struggle for street rights intolerable, carried a bill to Lincoln which granted buses the right of operation. The Legislature passed the bill, and the trolley company began its operation in 1925 with five or six buses that provided extensions from the ends of trolley lines to housing areas beyond.\(^3\) The addition of bus lines came gradually over the years, the buses all the while having to share the problems that faced the trolley company.

The first problem encountered after coexistence began was a move in the City Council to raise the valuation of the street car company. The World-Herald did not indicate whether it considered the proposed increase in evaluation fair or not, but it did feel that the company was being singled out

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\(^2\)Morning World-Herald, June 24, 1928.

\(^3\)Ibid., January 15 and June 21, 1925, and June 24, 1928.
and that other companies were being overlooked. Newspaper sentiment, notwithstanding, the tax valuation was increased by one and three-tenths million dollars.  

The following year the question of a new forty-year franchise for the street car line was submitted to the voters. The move, begun as far back as 1917, had gotten a solid boost when the company and the City Council had agreed on the details in 1926. A special propaganda campaign waged in behalf of the franchise was the one indication that passage of the proposed franchise might not be so easy. After spending fifty-five thousand dollars (the company bore the expense of the election which was usually about twenty thousand dollars), it must have been a severe blow when the citizens rejected the franchise. It seems that the franchise issue had become confused with a drive for a free bridge over the Missouri River.

By the time a second vote was to be taken in 1928, a new president, J. N. Shanahan, was at the helm of the street car company. A master of public relations, Shanahan was responsible for running the campaign. This time the issues were clarified—the ballot carried the franchise with a separate line.

\[4\text{Morning World-Herald, June 30 and July 3, 1925.}\

\[5\text{The Omaha Daily Bee, January 3, 1917, January 16, 1925, and May 21, 1926; The Omaha Sunday Bee, March 7, 1926; and Ibid., June 24, 1928 and August 17, 1938.}\]
rate bond issue for buying or building a new bridge. On November 6, the franchise proposal won by a big majority while the bond issue went down to defeat. The thirty-year franchise with its bus and interurban rights was as much a product of the good will generated by Shanahan's "courteous trolley conductors" campaign, as it was a stern after-thought that Omaha would be without a comprehensive transit program if the present company did not get a franchise.6

Shanahan had a profusion of promotional schemes to offer. In 1929 he got banner headlines when he hired Ross W. Harris, a traffic expert, to come to Omaha to study population patterns and then to recommend new routes for the trolley lines and bus connections in order to economize on operating expenses and to improve service. The City Council objected to the changes and subjected the plans to their own whims without giving Harris' recommendations a fair trial even though Shanahan had promised to please ninety-five percent of the riders. The program was adopted in only a modified form—a situation which never really determined its effectiveness.7

Another project for 1929 was a "choose the color of

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6City of Omaha, Ordinance No. 13526, August 14, 1928; The Omaha Evening Bee-News, January 12, 13, 28, July 26, and November 27, 1928; and Morning World-Herald, August 17, 1928.

7The Omaha Evening Bee-News, May 9, 1929; and Morning World-Herald, June 29, 1929.
your trolley" scheme. Riders got to cast one vote for their favorite colors with each fare. Some wanted red, white, and blue; others wanted Ak-Sar-Ben's red, green, and yellow; but the overwhelming majority wanted brown and cream.8 The color selection was fun, but the crowning promotional scheme of Shanahan during 1929 was the dedication of the Missouri River bridge to the twin-city public in not more than six and one-half years from October 31, 1929, or sooner if the $4,155,246 price were collected in tolls. The fact that a tax-free bridge would hasten the payment was mention as an aside, while requirement: that the bridge would neither be condemned nor a new one built during the term of the escrow agreement was written into the offer. The offer was left to the City Councils of Omaha and Council Bluffs to accept or reject.9

Not only the public, but also the employees of his company were the beneficiaries of Jack Shanahan's programs. His office was always open to all employees, and grievances were usually assuaged there on a first-name basis.10 A very important virtue that had developed partly under Shanahan's

8*Omaha's Own Magazine* (June 1929), p. 8; and Sunday World-Herald, February 20, 1955.

guidance that could have been touted in 1929 in good conscience—the trolley company reported a dearth of accidents for the previous decade.\textsuperscript{11}

When Gordon Wattles paid a visit to Omaha in late 1929,\textsuperscript{12} a running battle between him and Shanahan erupted. Shanahan claimed that all the money problems he had been facing were due to the poor management of Wattles. Wattles countered with the argument that the increasing number of automobiles were creating the problems and that even during his tenure the bridge had been the money-maker that kept things going. "First Citizen" Shanahan did not see the conclusion of his problems by the time he left Omaha in 1933.\textsuperscript{13}

Shanahan's escrow proposal which had been tendered to the cities of Omaha and Council Bluffs was spurned by the Omaha City Council so nothing came of it. Unwilling to accept the bridge as a gift, they were by the same token unwilling, as the 1930's proved, to vote bonds to buy the old one or build the new one which had been authorized and sup-

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Omaha's Own Magazine}, (May 1929), p. 5.
\textsuperscript{12} The implication is that Wattles left Omaha to avoid the reaction that set in to the red-hunt in which he participated. \textit{Phillips, A History of Street Railways in Nebraska}, loc. cit.
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{The Omaha Bee-Herald}, November 8, 1929; and \textit{Morning World-Herald}, August 17, 1928. Shanahan was elected "First Citizen" of Omaha after only four years in the city.
\end{quote}
ported by some firms. By 1938 the problem was becoming intolerable to many residents. "The Rosary", which was parodied in the World-Herald, gave an idea of the sentiment at that point:

THE ROSARY

Oh memories of bridge toll paid!
Oh barren gain and bitter tax.
I kiss each two-bit piece goodbye—and yearn
To get the axe, H. K.
To get--the--axe!15

To businessmen like George Brandeis the eternal toll meant a loss of business from the Iowa side of the Missouri River. It was leadership like his that finally resolved the problem. The directors of Ak-Sar-Ben were persuaded to purchase the bridge for $2,350,000 and to turn it over free to Omaha when the tolls had paid off the purchase price. By no means a popular act in all quarters it was the one ultimately accepted.16

Where John Shanahan had excelled in the ability to smooth the relationships between his company and the employees, his immediate successors were less adept. The later 1930's

14Morning World-Herald, January 25, 1930, and November 1, 1937.

15Ibid., January 15, 1938. The "H. K." was most likely Henry Kearns, the bridge toll-collector.

16Ibid., June 21 and 22, 1938; Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Railway Company, "Bridge Chronology", (1938); and Leighton, op. cit., (July 1938), p. 115. George Brandeis was a director in both Ak-Sar-Ben and the transit company.
were marred by strikes or threats of strikes almost every year. Even a cursory glance shows two short strikes in April and July of 1934. The following year the situation was so turbulent that riots developed almost daily. When Omaha police seemed unable to quell the rioting, Lieutenant Governor Jurgensen instituted martial law, and when Governor Cochran returned to Nebraska, the loss of life, injuries to over a hundred people, and property damage was so great that he ordered the National Guard into the area to preserve the peace. The intervention of the National Labor Relations Board was such an interminable process that their decision was not rendered until three years after the strike—a long period for grievances to brew. The report was a castigation of the Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Railway. Right down the line it found the company guilty of unfair practices and ordered reinstatement of strikers, cessation of dealings with any organization but the union, bonuses for all employees, and new uniforms for returning strikers.

The intervention of World War II produced a variety of effects. Labor problems were no longer concerned with strikes—rather they were concerned with where to get enough

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personnel to keep the lines operating. Some curtailment was required, but happily it was discovered that women could operate trolleys, so motorettes filled the gap—and successfully. Gas and tire rationing, while deprecated by most, worked to the advantage of the street railways. From 1940 to 1944 traffic was boosted almost one hundred per cent, and the price of transit stocks jumped from a dollar and a quarter a ride in 1940 to thirteen dollars in 1943.19

If war provided a period of prosperity, it also provided its share of problems. For equipment, which took harder than normal use over the five war-years, there had been few repairs, and the result was a fleet of tired and worn trolleys; inflated operating costs were not covered by the seven-cent fare; and former employees were returning from military service to claim their jobs. Solutions were sought in fare increases, more strikes, and a complete transition to buses.

A news clipping from the Benson Sun recites the post-war climb of fares. The long standing seven-cent fare first went from three for a quarter to a straight ten cents in 1948. The following year the company tried to get a fifteen-cent fare, but had to settle for thirteen cents or two fares for

19Ibid., April 6, 1941; March 30, 1943; March 8, 1944; June 8 and September 6, 1945.
a quarter. In another three years they moved to eighteen cents or two for thirty-five cents, and finally in 1956 the fare became twenty cents plus two cents for a transfer.20

Like the thirties the early 1950's were filled with strikes or threats of strikes over wages and hours. The city offered some relief to the company by removing a sixty-four thousand dollar occupation tax levy in order that the company might be able to support a forty-five hour week at $2.12 an hour in 1956 with another two-cent increase in two years. The union, itself, sued for a transit authority in 1958. Under a guise of protecting the public and the industry, they sought this means of protecting their jobs for the company had given indications of curtailing services.21

Before the war, even, a city planning commission had recommended the discontinuation of trolleys in Omaha. The commission's report said: "Street cars are an outmoded form of conveyance, no longer desired by a vast proportion of the local riding public."22 When the equipment became available after the war, the company carried out the recommendation.

20 The Benson Sun, [n.d., c. 1958].

21 Morning World-Herald, November 4, 1953; June 27, 1955, September 18 and 28, October 4, and December 12, 1956; February 20, 1957; and September 13, 1958.

22 City of Omaha, Street Traffic Research and Planning (1938-9); City of Omaha, Ordinance No. 14361, April 2, 1936, Ordinance Nos. 14542, 14548, 14549, December 14, 1937, and Ordinance No. 14627, July 26, 1938.
Each major transition in the transit industry has had its own special leader. The president who became the "bus man" was L. G. Barnes, a long-time Omaha trolley man who had come west with John Shanahan. In March of 1955 Mr. Barnes engineered the final change to buses—247 in all. The street cars were sold off at $3.25 a piece, about thirty of them going to a boys' camp northeast of Omaha to be used for dormitories.23

The very long buses on some of the runs caused drivers a good many headaches and sad experiences. The swinging tails whacked hydrants and curbed cars, so for a while they seemed doomed to extinction, but the current trend has been toward fewer but larger fifty-one passenger models. Presently the company owns 172 buses; operates 146 of them on a regular schedule with the others used for a parallel charter service which has proved to be a paying proposition. By the same token the company personnel has been reduced from nine-hundred in 1952 to three hundred thirty-five in 1960.24

That old question of a franchise was due to come up again in 1958 when the one granted in 1928 would expire. Experience, however, had taught transit people to start early to work for a new charter. With only one company seeking a

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charter for public transportation, the vote could go only one way. The present franchise was granted in 1954 to run for twenty-five years. A special clause in the 1954 franchise provided for the first time three public directors chosen from a list of candidates offered by the mayor. The public directors were granted voting rights in order to represent the best interest of the Omaha public. That the public directors, with only one exception, have found no occasion to report to the public would indicate their satisfaction with the general operations of the company. Both the franchise and a 1957 state law provided for the creation of a Metropolitan Transit Authority should the city ever decide to purchase and operate the transportation lines.25

Speculation over whether Omaha would buy its transit lines has recurred from time to time. There was a time not too many years ago when the price would have been a veritable bargain, but that is no longer true for the past few years under Mr. Barnes have shown a tremendous increase in stock value of the company. Cities that have purchased their transit lines have discovered that the initial expense was by no means the only burden and that subsidies were required to keep

25Morning World-Herald, August 30, 1957; City of Omaha, Ordinance No. 18119, August 31, 1954; and State of Nebraska, Legislative Bill No. 432, January 28, 1957.
their lines operating. Omahans have not shown a disposition to add to their tax burden for services which private corporations can provide so it seems that municipal ownership is unlikely in the near future.

There are, however, two things for which to watch concerning bus lines. The first one is the relationship of the buses to the number of automobiles owned by Omaha residents. As the number of automobiles has increased each year, conversely the number of bus passengers has decreased. If the time comes when even the "necessity riders" (those who either do not own or are not able to drive) begin to decrease because of the universality of automobiles, the bus company will no longer be able to afford to maintain a system except perhaps in the downtown area. If on the other hand the congestion in downtown Omaha is not mitigated, the automobiles may strangle themselves and work to the advantage of the bus company. Another thing for which to watch is the negotiation in the very near future of a new wage contract. The ramifications of a new contract, which almost always means a wage increase, are fare increases and, consequently, fewer riders—a vicious cycle. The outcome deserves the attention of the entire city.
To provide good transportation service for Omaha citizens, buses travel more than 8 million miles each year. Approximately 80 skilled mechanics work around-the-clock shifts to keep the buses safe, clean, and efficient. The company's bus garage at 25th and Cuming Streets and the general service of buses and bus maintenance are considered to be the most modern repair and maintenance shops in the country. Student and convent groups are invited to visit them. If you will call Atlantic 8800, we will be glad to have a guide escort your group through our use charter buses for sight-seeing tours in and about Omaha.

For information on bus service, call Omaha Transit Company at 8800.

Ask for schedule information department.
...and John, this Deed is a pretty important piece of paper...better keep it in a Safe Deposit Box!

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Protect your deeds, savings bonds, insurance policies and other valuable papers from loss by fire, theft, or being mislaid or destroyed by keeping them in a Safe Deposit Box in our all-steel vaults.

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CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

The culmination of the nearly one hundred years of public transportation in Omaha is the well-established Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Railway Company. Behind that company are many years of service to the public that have created a panorama of speculation, of "boom and bust", of vigorous transportation pioneers, and of innovation, invention, and experimentation. Much of what happens to Omaha public transportation in the future will be a direct continuation of that long history.

Had Frederick Jackson Turner sought additional evidence for his "frontier thesis" he could have found it in the first three decades of Omaha transit. The frontier American (in contrast with his cousins from the Atlantic Coast who knew that you could not save time anyway) was eternally rushing in the optimistic notion that progress and movement were identical. Transit company investors exploited the urge to get places in a hurry—certain all the while that they themselves were rushing to great fortunes in the new ventures. Not for a long time did the investors learn that their haste really made waste instead of great fortunes.

Of the Omaha transit entrepreneurs—the rugged individualists who gambled their fortunes to make bigger fortunes—
there were three who stood out especially to confirm the frontier description. The first was Captain Marsh who in a decade tripled the size of his company and increased the income one thousand per cent, and another was Dr. Samuel Mercer whose vision established the trolley venture before it had been proved elsewhere. Without the same kind of personal investment involved, the current president, Lynn G. Barnes, is something of an anachronism who possesses those same Marsh and Mercer qualities of ruggedness, individualism and vision that have made the Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Railway Company a healthy member of a generally sick industry.

From an economic standpoint the transportation business in Omaha has been only moderately successful over the years. A graph of the income shows a hilly pattern not unlike that of the national economy. The really desperate financial crises developed in the early eighties, again in the early nineties, and once again in the nineteen thirties. The most prosperous times occurred around the turn of the century and during the two World Wars, but at no time have investors had an unusually high return on their stocks.

In seeking reasons for the long periods of negligible success, other than national and sectional hard times, certain conclusions have crystallized. Of singular importance among those reasons was the excessive expansion of mass transit facilities into areas that had little demand for them and
never developed much. A corollary was the development of systems like the cable lines for which, again, the times provided little demand.

Somewhat more difficult to assess was the damage done by excessive competition. With as many as five or six lines tapping the same fields at certain times, the fares which had to remain competitive could not cover even the operational costs. Without access to complete company records, it would be unfair to attach a high degree of blame to any of the company leaders for their poor management. The implications are, nevertheless, that men like A. J. Hanscom had little to offer the company and that Gurdon Wattles had more interest in preserving a conservative philosophy than he had in keeping his company solvent. At any rate they appeared as marked contrasts to men like Marsh, Barnes, and Shanahan whose techniques were imaginative and profitable.

On the other side of the ledger was the consumer economics. The original cost to the rider had been ten cents, but that was the fare for only a short duration. It was replaced by the five-cent fare which was to become as sacrosanct as the "nickel beer" or the "five-cent cigar". In the beginning the rider got about a mile of passage for his five cents, twenty years later he got three miles for the same money, and by 1910 the rider got twelve miles of transportation for his nickel. Assuming that the present inflated fare
can be equated at about the same value as the 1910-nickel, the rider can get about fifteen miles worth of transit for it.

When reviewing the impact that the transit lines had on Omaha as a whole rather than on individual patrons, several considerations again must be made. As an overall effect, one reason Omaha could become as decentralized as it did was the willingness of the transit business to follow (in some cases precede) industries and to associate itself with suburban real-estate ventures. Another important effect was the relationship of the street railway routes to traffic routes and then later paving. The grading done for track laying pointed up better wagon and carriage routes so that when paving was begun it followed the same pattern. A heavy share of that paving expense, it should be remembered, was borne by the street railways which paid for surfacing between the double tracks and for a short distance on either side. In addition to paving costs the street railways have long paid a considerable property and street-use tax and more recently vehicle taxes. In quite another way they contributed to the economy of Omaha by providing employment at times for over a thousand residents.

Employees of the transit companies have gone through the usual pattern established by the American Labor movement. The long search for union recognition and improved working conditions resulted in innumerable strikes over the years.
The most significant outgrowth of the labor struggle was the forty-five hour week with an hourly wage of two dollars and fourteen cents. The contrast between the spiral of wages and fares has been interesting. While salaries over the more than nine decades have increased from eleven cents to two dollars and fourteen cents an hour (an increase of over nineteen hundred per cent) the fares have increased from five to twenty cents (a four hundred per cent increase).

The fares give evidence of considerably more regulation than do the wages. Other forms of regulation have increased in the same degree. Where the original franchise covered about two pages of printed materials, the 1954-franchise contained twenty pages. Likewise, it would be a safe estimate that during the period when the City Council was doing most of the supervision and regulation of the transportation industry, the ordinances that were passed bore titles that included the names of street railways more often than those of any other industry. Much of the supervision once provided by the City Council has been assumed by the Nebraska State Railway Commission.

Thus far the past and the present have monopolized our attention, but what of the future? What prospects does it hold for mass transportation in Omaha? A very few aspects of a prognosis are relatively clear, but beyond those speculation must be resorted to. Those aspects are: 1. Auto-
Mobiles will become more and more universally used. 2. The transportation company stands to suffer financially from the vicious cycle of fewer riders and curtailed services. 3. Not all people in a community will ever benefit equally from mass transportation, and 4. A dynamic approach to transportation problems is badly needed.

It is true that with the automobile’s increased use, even though its cost is much greater and not always more convenient, the transit business will suffer financially, and yet let one bad blizzard paralyze the city and mass transportation becomes indispensable. One fifty passenger bus that rarely stalls makes a favorable contrast with thirty or so private automobiles under the same conditions. A standby service of this nature is the most inefficient and expensive to operate. Certainly a private business could not continue to operate on that basis.

Nor under the present conditions can the transit company continue to operate its regular service for “necessity riders” without prospect of loss. Higher fares, higher taxes, and wage increases will not be met with more riders. Even though there will always be the “necessity riders” in the community—the youths, the aged, the disabled, and the non-carowners—it has been suggested that mass transit be allowed to die from its own weight because if it were really needed it would pay its own way. It is sheer ignorance to say that
the transit company ought to be allowed to ride until it
kills itself just because a majority of the citizens do not
use it. To extend that thinking to its logical conclusion
would be to eliminate airports, police protection, sewage,
and water systems because all do not benefit equally from
them. Not only that but a marked effect would be felt in
the economy of the city if one-fourth of the population were
left without transportation.

Since Omahans are not well disposed to public owner­
ship of the transit lines, suggestions for its improvement
will be made on the basis of continued private ownership.
The special bus lanes, which the bus company has sought, would
cost the city about twelve thousand dollars. Such lanes have
in other cities increased the carrying power of streets from
ten to twenty per cent, so such an investment seems sounder
than subways in the downtown area which would cost millions
of dollars.

Another reasonable investment might well be made in
offering the transit company some relief in terms of reduced
tax levies. The pyramid of property taxes, vehicle taxes,
license fees, street-use fees, gas taxes, and corporation
taxes was designed to restrict transit monopolies. While the
removal of any of these levies would meet with storms of
protest, the relief might ultimately prove to be less expen­sive
than public ownership.
With parking in the downtown areas becoming more difficult each day, suburban patrons of the bus company might be induced to drive to the end of a bus line and take the bus if good parking facilities were made available. Two important benefits would ensue. Automobiles would be kept out of the downtown, while the bus company could concentrate on major runs, and the buses would be full from the beginning so that express runs could be made. A variation would be the use of feeder lines in outlying suburbs to bring passengers to a transfer point where express buses would be waiting. Most passengers would be willing to transfer if there were no standing in rain or snow, and if they could be assured of riding the entire distance without making stops at almost every block.

If these and other forward looking experiments were tried, workers and shoppers would make immediate gains. Only slightly less immediate would be the awareness of employers and merchants that business was on the move. In a far-reaching way real estate would feel the demand for property which had easy access, and if property were valuable and business healthy, government would find its income greater.

The most binding conclusion after prognoses and suggestions have been made is that if solutions to problems of mass transportation are to be found, they must be solutions rooted in an integration of all facets of travel—the vehi-
cles, the travelers, the corporate interests, and regulatory agencies; and where haste was once anathema, it now becomes the route by which problems must be solved before they grow too large to manage.
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