



Digital Delights

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Minnesota Streetcar History

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Minnesota Streetcar Museum

Minneapolis, Minnesota

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As Minnesota's cities developed, they quickly outgrew walking as the all-purpose means of urban transportation. Most people didn't own horses or buggies, so horse-drawn omnibuses appeared (that's where we get the word "bus"). However, most streets were unpaved, which turned to mud when it rained, or cobblestone, causing a jolting ride. The solution was to lay iron railroad tracks in the street. They made for a smoother ride and much lower rolling resistance. The first horsecars, as they were called, appeared in Minneapolis in 1869. By the 1880s, horsecars were also running in St. Paul, Duluth, Anoka, Winona, St. Cloud, Brainerd and Mankato.

<http://reflections.mndigital.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/msn/id/1225/rec/3>

Horses were slow, got sick and left piles of manure in the streets. Victorian inventors were keen to replace them with mechanical power. Steam locomotives were readily available and were used on two lines in the Twin Cities, but their smoke and soot made them unsuitable for urban service.

<http://reflections.mndigital.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/msn/id/184/rec/1>

The first viable alternative was the San Francisco cable car, an unpowered vehicle that engaged a buried continuous steel cable powered by a stationary engine. Expensive to build and maintain, cable cars were faster than horses and could climb any hill.

Numerous cities installed them, including St. Paul and Duluth.

<http://reflections.mndigital.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/msn/id/913/rec/3>

Minneapolis almost did, but at the eleventh hour switched to the recently perfected electric streetcars.

No technology in American history was adopted faster than the electric streetcar. Within five years of its 1887 technological breakthrough, electricity had replaced over 90 percent of the horsecars, cable cars and steam streetcars across the continent. Stillwater opened the first Minnesota electric line in 1889, followed that year by Minneapolis and later by St. Paul, Winona, Mankato, St. Cloud, and Brainerd.

<http://reflections.mndigital.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/msn/id/883/rec/7>

<http://reflections.mndigital.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/msn/id/222/rec/2>

Interstate lines ran in Fargo-Moorhead, Duluth-Superior, Grand Forks-East Grand Forks and Wahpeton-Breckenridge. The latter was the smallest of all, only one mile of track with two streetcars.

<http://reflections.mndigital.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/msn/id/118/rec/1>

The technology was used to create electric “interurban” railways that traveled between cities. The largest was the Mesaba Railway that ran the length of the iron range, connecting Eveleth, Gilbert, Virginia, Buhl, Chisholm and Hibbing. Other lines ran from Minneapolis to Anoka and Lake Minnetonka, and from St. Paul to Stillwater and Hastings.

<http://reflections.mndigital.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/msn/id/171/rec/3>

<http://reflections.mndigital.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/msn/id/1121/rec/4>

During the period 1905-1920, streetcars were unchallenged as the primary means of urban transportation.

<http://reflections.mndigital.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/msn/id/487/rec/6>

This lasted until the 1920s, when competition from paved roads and automobiles began to erode ridership and change the way cities developed. During the ‘20s, buses began to supplement streetcars on lightly patronized shuttles and long suburban routes.

<http://reflections.mndigital.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/irrc/id/1137/rec/40>

Not burdened with the cost of maintaining tracks and overhead wire power systems, buses were much cheaper to operate. As the Great Depression of the 1930s accelerated the loss of riders and fare revenue, all the streetcar systems in Minnesota converted to bus except in the Twin Cities. An interesting exception happened in Duluth, which switched some of its service to electrically powered buses.

<http://reflections.mndigital.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/msn/id/867/rec/8>

During World War II, the rationing of gasoline and tires and greatly increased defense employment created a temporary ridership boom. After the war, ridership again fell precipitously due to pent up demand for automobiles and the growth of the suburbs. Twin City Rapid Transit (TCRT), which operated the transit system, was a for-profit company that was wholly dependent on passenger fares. Government subsidies for transit were still 20 years in the future. It purchased new streamlined streetcars after the war, but the ridership continued to drop.

<http://reflections.mndigital.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/msn/id/738/rec/9>

<http://reflections.mndigital.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/msn/id/549/rec/1>

This was a nationwide trend. Replacing all the streetcars with buses was the only way for TCRT to survive, and by 1954 the last streetcar had turned a wheel.

<http://reflections.mndigital.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/msn/id/426/rec/7>

<http://reflections.mndigital.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/msn/id/272/rec/3>