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SPRINGS LINE SEEKS AID

**"Robert P. Woods, operating head of the Kansas City, Clay County and St. Joseph Railway, is walking the sidewalks of New York this week seeking some Wall Street "angel" to help that line carry on as the sole electric interurban into Kansas City that has not had to reorganize following motorcar, bus and truck competition. It has been general knowledge that the "Springs Line" which serves a territory between Kansas City, St. Joseph and Excelsior Springs, while making operating expenses had not been earning it's rather heavy fixed charges."
- Kansas City Star, August 27, 1930**

September 1, 1930, the Kansas City, Clay County and St. Joseph Railway (KCCC&STJ) defaulted in the payment of its semiannual and fixed charges. The bulk of the shareholders, located in the East, where the securities had been largely marketed, were inclined to liquidate the line, so as much money out of the firm could be possibly salvaged. Abandonment of the line was granted thirty months later and on March 10, 1933, the last scheduled trip left Kansas City for St. Joseph at 6:15 p. m. For that week, nothing is mentioned in the St. Joseph News-Press or competing St. Joseph Gazette about the demise of the electric railroad as President Roosevelt's decision to order a "bank holiday" commanded the headlines.

INTERURBAN ROAD

The Story of Light Rail Transportation in Ole St. Joe

By Ed Gentry

Imagine a contemporary "light-rail electric system" such as Metro-Link in St. Louis, but 90 years ago, leaving the heart of downtown St. Joseph on an hourly schedule from 5:30 a.m. to 11:30 p. m. daily. The fare was \$1.55 for the St. Joseph - Kansas City run, which took two hours, from downtown to downtown. The average speed for the entire line was 37 MPH, but that included the slow pace the electric cars ran when under the lower voltage of the city streetcar systems. In the "flats" from Faucett to Dearborn the cars reached speeds of over 70 MPH and made the distance in nine minutes, which is what traffic does today on Interstate 29.

The February 18, 1913 edition of the St. Joseph News-Press proclaimed that

“Officials of the new St. Joseph-Kansas City Interurban were delighted with their visit here.” PLEASED WITH ST. JOSEPH read the article headline as the out-of-town officers and eastern financiers arrived on one of the “handsome steel coaches” of the new railroad, and afterward “toured the city in motor cars following a luncheon at the Hotel Robidoux.”

The story continued with a description of KCCC&StJ Car 22 that had carried the passengers. “The coach is much larger than the cars used on the St. Joseph-Savannah electric line and its motors are of much greater power. It is a marvel of comfort and convenience and the finishing throughout is beautiful.

Passengers are taken aboard and discharged through doors in the middle of the car and the middle platform divides the car into two sections, one of which will be preserved as a smoking compartment.”

The main ticket office and passenger depot for this electric railroad was in the 200 block of Eighth Street across from the Post Office in downtown St. Joseph. A later generation would remember that as the location of the Trailways Bus Terminal. The heavy electric cars - 58 feet long and 9 feet wide - used the city streetcar line tracks down Eighth Street, then Mitchell, and finally Eleventh Street, south past what was then the Aunt Jemima Mills (later Quaker Oats).

In October 2000 Mr. Sheridan Logan, the dean of St. Joseph historians, reminisced in a video interview, “The cars were large. They were larger than our trolley cars. They were sort of a red maroon color and they had a very distinctive horn on them. It wasn’t exactly a horn and it wasn’t a Claxton. It was sort of a rolling noise. I’ve never heard anything quite like it.” “I remember going to an interchange point in North Kansas City. My mother and I spent a weekend at the Elms Hotel in Excelsior Springs where we drank the bad-tasting water,” Mr. Logan chuckled. “And at that time St. Joseph was really more important than it is today. ”

Banker Charles Enright promoted the railroad in St. Joseph. Mr. Logan explained, “everybody knew him as ‘Cully.’ This was a big step forward to connect Kansas City and St. Joseph.” This interview was made before Mr. Logan’s 100th birthday in December 2000. As a young man, Sheridan Logan was a banker in New York City and when he returned to St. Joseph and published his book *In Ole St. Joe: Gateway to the West*, Mr. Logan, a devotee of public transportation, did not have a driver’s license. To this day, he still doesn’t.

WHAT IS AN INTERURBAN?

Hard roads in Platte, Clay and Buchanan Counties were non-existent in 1911 when 1,500 men began the grading and heavy concrete work for a high-speed electric railway northward from the retail business center of Kansas City, Missouri.

The KCCCC&STJ railway was in the terminology of the day--an Interurban. Charles L. Henry, an Indiana legislator and railroad investor coined the word “interurban” in the late 1890’s. The term described the electric traction systems being developed primarily in the Midwest--particularly Indiana and Ohio--New England, and the West Coast. Cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, Indianapolis,

Philadelphia, and, yes, St. Joseph, had true electric railroads built with millions of investor dollars.

In the first decade of the Twentieth Century the electrified railway systems were seen as the “last word” in travel. American saw electricity as a symbol of the modern age.

At the peak of the interurban craze in 1916, these lines had built over 18,000 miles of track and operated over 10,000 cars. Actually most were extensions of existing city streetcar lines with light-weight track and should be termed “country trolleys.” Regardless they all offered clean (“sootless” “cinderless”), frequent and economical service to compete with existing steam locomotive lines and, of course, horses and horse-drawn vehicles.

In St. Joseph, six steam lines radiating in all directions had competed for business in the years following the Civil War. A look at a map of Buchanan County one hundred years ago shows railroad lines blanketing the county, connecting every rural community, such as Agency, DeKalb, Willowbrook, and Faucett. The Chicago, Burlington and Quincy RR tracks followed the Missouri River valley and was (and still is) the primary rail route between St. Joseph and Kansas City. The distance between the two terminals was however 62 miles and at that time required approximately three hours to cover the route. In the Kansas City area, the first electric railroad to build to a neighboring city was completed in January 1900, up the west side of the Missouri River to Leavenworth, Kansas, 26 miles. Electric railroad development followed to other points in Kansas such as the Missouri and Kansas RR, known as the “Strang Line.” In 1907 it completed its line 20 miles southwestward from Kansas City to Olathe, Kansas, along a right-of-way that paralleled much of the existing Santa Fe RR. Its purpose was not necessarily competition to the Santa Fe as much as promotion of W.B. Strang’s suburban real estate developments—among them Overland Park, Kansas.

The St. Joseph Railway, Light, Heat and Power Company, which operated the city trolley system, began, on July 5, 1910, construction of a 13-mile interurban roadway to Andrew County to compete with the existing steam Chicago Great Western RR. Opened in 1911, this line was called the St. Joseph-Savannah Interurban. The route consisted of three wooden cars and headed north on the streetcar line down St. Joseph Avenue and terminated four blocks west of the square in Savannah. Strangely, the little line outlived the St. Joseph streetcar lines---and most of the big Kansas City interurbans—its last run was July 22, 1939.

In this day, the highway drive between the two county seats is on four-lane Route 71, and the southbound lanes of the highway dip up and down over the slightly hilly terrain. In a very obvious contrast the northbound lanes to Savannah are built on the historic right-of-way of the St. Joseph-Savannah Interurban, and give the smooth, graded ride characteristic of a railroad right-of-way.

The best single source for information regarding the Interurban Industry is Hilton and Due’s book *The Electric Interurban Railways in America*. An excellent history of the Kansas interurban railways is found in a book by Alison Chandler, *Trolley Through the Countryside*.

HUGH J. MCGOWAN and CHARLES ENRIGHT

Hugh J. McGowan, born in Clay County, Missouri in 1860, began his career in public transportation as a driver of a horse-drawn streetcar on the muddy streets of nineteenth century Kansas City. From that beginning he rose to the rank of manager of the United Gas Improvement Company of Kansas City when in 1899 he was called east to manage the Indianapolis Street Railway Company owned by the same utility. For the remaining twelve years of his life Hugh McGowan was literally the right man at the right place as his shrewd and competent leadership, in partnership with William Schoepf of Cincinnati, Ohio, created a traction syndicate which grew to be the dominate force in Midwest interurban circles.

“The money that these two managers required came from Philadelphia financiers with resources far beyond those of many other electric traction promoters,” writes George K. Bradley in his 1991 book, *Indiana Railroad—the Magic Interurban*. “One of the hallmarks of the Schoepf-McGowan syndicate’s methods was the careful use of ‘front’ men as promoters and builders. They knew shrewd landowners would demand higher prices if they knew the real source of the capital.”

As McGowan enjoyed success in Indiana, such was not the case of traction promoters in his home state. St. Joseph had in 1900 the (inflated) census population of 100,000. The city had been promoted “back east” by St. Joseph jobbers and warehousemen as the point of departure for the 1849 California Gold Rush--and that publicity and the 1860 Pony Express gave a national exposure to Missouri’s third largest city. Kansas City had its own glowing reputation as a booming western metropolis. Traction promoters dreamed of constructing an electric interurban connection between these two leading western Missouri cities, but the cities were separated by a major obstacle that the steam railroad already conquered -- the Missouri River.

Charles Fredrick Enright, born in 1866, had an established career in banking when in 1908 he left the Missouri Valley Trust Bank to promote an electric Interurban connection to Kansas City. He secured franchises and the necessary right-of-way. The event precipitating construction of the long-sought electric road -- ten previous projects had been planned, but abandoned-- occurred in 1909 when the Armour-Swift-Burlington syndicate began construction of a double-deck, two-million dollar bridge to link its new townsite “North Kansas City” over the river to Kansas City proper. A major engineering feat of the day, the A-S-B Bridge carried steam railroad service on the lower deck, and the upper deck was for street and interurban cars, vehicles, and pedestrians.

Completion of the A-S-B Bridge was noticed on a national level. In Indiana Hugh McGowan, who had been raised on a farm near Liberty, must have seen the progress in his native state. Was he the link between Charles Enright and experienced Interurban developers from Indiana? This is definitely possible, but not recorded. Hugh McGowan, only 51 years old, died December 19, 1911, as construction was underway on the new line.

Enright found associates in the project--or they found him--from the hotbed of Interurban know-how-- Indiana. The Indiana railroaders George Townsend, Walter Kirkpatrick, and Ward Arnold had previously in the “interurban boom” era

built the first electric line out of Ft. Wayne, Indiana. Enright and his Indiana railroad associates incorporated the KCCC&StJ March 22, 1911. It was to have one division linking Kansas City to St. Joseph, a distance of 52 miles, and another smaller line, 27.7 miles, to the spa community of Excelsior Springs. The desirability of the Clay County route was the fact the steam Wabash RR was carrying 250,000 passengers annually to the Springs.

In Clay County, the line did run through the Hugh McGowan homestead, and most of that property today is part of the Martha-Lafite Nature Sanctuary east of Liberty. In that preserve still stands a 50-foot large, semicircular bridge which took the line over Rush Creek. Of all the remaining “concrete work” of the KCCC&StJ, this structure alone has a name imprinted in the bridge keystone, and that name is – MC GOWAN.

IT’S A RAILROAD

The Indiana promoters and Enright secured \$5,000,000 from New York and Boston bankers, who sold the bonds even in Europe. Robert P. Woods of Indianapolis, was the consulting engineer, responsible for the route details, bridge design, station and equipment design. At that time this eminent engineer had over 21 years experience in RR construction. After the project was built he remained in Missouri, became the railroad’s general manager in 1919, and after its demise, lived till 1955, a respected member of the Kansas City public transportation community.

The KCCCC&STJ was designed to steam railroad specifications that included heavy rail, and crushed rock ballast. The company purchased the best available equipment. From the Cincinnati Car Company the road received five motor-freight units, five express cars and sixteen passenger cars. Due to increases in both freight and passenger business, the road by 1917 had acquired an additional four motor freight units and four passenger cars.

The electric railroad had a variety of nicknames such as the “Excelsior Springs Line” or the “Clay County” because that was the first section open for operation in 1913. Another nickname was the “Red Line” after the steel coach’s maroon color.

Published years after his final run on the Interurban RR, Motorman Ray Hilner related in 1962 to the Topeka Chapter of the National Railroad Historical Society these following comments:

“The KCCC&StJ was quite fastidious in their terminology, they operated ‘trains’ and never referred to them as ‘cars’ or ‘interurbans.’ This was truly a railroad in every sense of the word except for the length of the line, and it was operated like a railroad by railroad men. Like the Santa Fe, there was no shoddiness anywhere.

“The August 1926 issue of the Electric Railway Journal stated the KCCC&StJ was the nation’s 6th fastest electric line competing with such wonderful electric interurbans as the Lake Shore Electric, Cincinnati & Lake Erie, Pacific Electric, Illinois Traction, Sacramento Northern, and all the glorious interurbans of Indiana and Ohio to name a few.

“The KCCC&StJ could easily hit a stride of 70 to 75 miles per hour and the well-ballasted track was excellent enough to stand the speed with safety.

“These cars were massive, especially the ponderous two-car trains when they were being operated downtown over city car lines. The interurban trains always moved slowly mainly because they were operating thru the change-over from 1200 volts to 600 volts on city car lines, and then too, because they were trains and not street cars.

“The air-operated foot gongs gave them an air of dignity that commanded respect from the disinterested and were not ignored by the indifferent.”

The established steam railroads saw no reason to cooperate or aid any electric competitor to their passenger and freight business and resisted the Interurbans with lawsuits citing safety concerns at proposed crossings. The KCCCC&STJ responded with bridges of six steel structures and 108 reinforced concrete arches whose purpose was not just to bridge waterways or farm roadways, but also to carry the line over the steam railroads. From the commencement of operation in 1913, the line increased steadily in profitability until 1923 when passenger receipts topped the \$1,000,000 mark and net profits were \$455,000.

THE END OF THE LINE

In 1923 Clay County paved the country roadway from Liberty all the way to Excelsior Springs, in a route that curved and weaved, as country roads do, but roughly paralleled the "Springs Line." Ridership and profitability fell.

Charles Enright did not live to see the decline of the railroad he promoted. He once said, “I’m a farmer. I own a farm that’s 60 feet wide and 79 miles long right here in Missouri.” After the completion of the railroad, “Cully” returned to banking, was a Boy Scout promoter, and was the State of Missouri Bank Commissioner, when he died March 30, 1921. He was 55 years old. The St. Joseph News-Press reported later about the pending Enright funeral: “At eleven o’clock this morning at St. Joseph’s Cathedral services will be held for Charles F. Enright, with burial in the Mt. Olivet cemetery. All cars on the Kansas City, Clay County, and St. Joseph interurban will stop at 11 o’clock for five minutes this morning in respect to Mr. Enright’s memory.”

The Interurban ran for 12 year’s after Cully’s death, till March 10, 1933, and the morning after the cars stopped forever the electric lines still hummed one more day as someone did not “shut down the power.”

In St. Joseph a sturdy, boxy red brick building at the south-west corner of 8th Street and Angelic Street now houses an enterprise called The Motor Shop. That structure at 510 South 8th Street was the Interurban freight depot in St. Joseph from 1913 to 1933. The heavy Interurban cars went down 8th Street and 11th Street. South of New Life Mills (formerly Quaker Oats), 11th street turns leftward, but in 1913 the railroad veered right, and a house is now built on the right-of-way. Behind that property the route has been paved over by Interstate 229, for the mile distance to 22nd Street (Route 371).

Where the interchange of 22nd Street and I-229 is today in St. Joseph, a photograph was taken in 1913 of Car 31 and a “Luten-designed” concrete bridge, 70-feet in length over “Sparta Road.” This photo is from the collection of James L. Cooper of Greencastle, Indiana. Dr. Cooper’s book *Artistry and Ingenuity in Artificial Stone* details the rise and fall of the National Bridge Company of Indianapolis, and its founder Daniel Luten. This is the firm Robert Woods turned to for the design of the railroad’s distinctive concrete structures, many of which can be still found today.

After crossing Sparta Road (22nd Street) the route turned south in Buchanan County diagonally eastward from St. Joseph to Dearborn, Missouri. A rare 1913 Atlas of Buchanan County at your St. Joseph Public Library reference department shows the route through these townships.

In Willowbrook, Missouri, there are 2 brick structures on the main road Route H. One is a “Community Center,” obviously a former school, and the other is Sub-Station “B” of the KCCC&StJ, a former power transmission station and passenger depot. Now used simply as a garage, this brick building like the freight depot on 8th Street, is another Interurban structure to be found in the Northland.

John Wolfe owns the house and farm across the highway from the Willowbrook power transformer building/depot. I first meet John at a Pony Express event at the Patee House Museum, and last spring with John my wife and I toured Buchanan County Interurban sites. Unlike Clay County, where a power transmission line is built on the historic R.O.W. from Liberty to the Springs, in Buchanan County the route is hidden all summer by scrub brush and trees. In the winter and early spring you can feel your way along and imagine the long gone Kyle, Maxie, Richie, and Pinkston stops on the way to Willowbrook.

We traveled in John’s pickup to the farm of his 95-year-old Aunt, who lives near the historic townsite of the Sparta. On her farm was something completely amazing--a lengthy section of the right-of-way, completely cleared, with the Interurban wire fences placed there ninety years ago.

John explained, his Aunt and her husband had moved to their farm in 1950. Their farmhouse was heated solely by a wood-burning stove. Guess where the scrub brush, trees, and wood were harvested for their stove?

The history of the railroad ends, March 10, 1933, but its story continues, as the children who rode the railroad are now Senior Citizens with memories to share. The principal growth of the Kansas City metropolitan area has historically been to the south. Some areas of Clay, Platte and Buchanan Counties in the Northland are slower in development and St. Joseph has fallen to sixth in rank of Missouri cities. This means, the right-of-way itself, some cars, and the Luten-design concrete archways, like the children who rode the rails, still remain of the two decade existence of one of the nation's finest "light-rail" systems, the Kansas City, Clay County and St. Joseph Railway.

The word Interurban was first put in usage in America around 1900 as a term to define this enterprise as different from municipal trolley lines. As the last generation who remembers the KCCC&StJ fades away, one wonders when some

opportunists will make an effort to rename our **Interurban Road** to “Trout Lakes Parkway” or some other developer-friendly nomenclature.

This has actually happened in the past decade in St. Joseph. A subdivision off Highway 371 on the south side was built in the 1970’s and this developer was fond of railroad names. The streets there were called “Rock Island,” “Wabash” and the street off the state highway was named “Interurban.” The abandoned right-of-way of the electric railway did go through the subdivision many years before in a north-south direction. This “Interurban Road” was an east-west drive, which simply honored the memory of the electric railway. Out of the blue, in 1998, it was renamed by city officials in response to the request by a 1990’s developer who felt his new “Maple Grove” development next door to the 70’s subdivision deserved an entrance way with the more pastoral, “Maple Grove Drive.”

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