

A program presented by **Ford Ceasar** and **Alta Reed**  
At a meeting of the Clinton County Historical Society  
Held at the Capital Savings and Loan in St. Johns, Michigan,  
on Feb. 21, 1980.  
Tape #015  
Transcribed by Myrna A. Van Epps    November 2011

## **The Interurban Story**

[Program begins with Shirley Cobb reading a poem about a trolley. It was edited to apply to the local area by Alta Reed.

Where did it go? Now that you reach back half a century in the far, dark caves of mind to find it? Or, does that matter, really, alongside how it went: Briggs, Gunnisonville, county parks, the whole wide world? They had a lion there and a camel that wouldn't need another drink, Father said, until next Tuesday. We climbed on board in one short step and one big one. And with just one push, we went all the way to the other end of the rock-hard maple seat. The bell (ding, ding); the starting tremor; and then the wheels' song: St. Johns, St. Johns, St. Johns, faster and faster as your very own galleon took you over the waves, surging from side to side, mainly trying to escape the imprisonment of tracks. It all rushes back with gushes of breeze on your face: the --- holes in the floor for draining umbrellas; the open-face clock that wasn't a clock but told the fares; the little window eyes that blinked each time the conductor pulled the leather thong. How fine she was, we'd agree, with all her canvas curtains rolled tight shut for the day is fair. It always was. Did you remember George's salt bag, Abby? Mother did. She always did and you can see it there on small white triangle of nick (?) in front through the opening between the top and second pearly buttons of the starched white blouse. The salt bags, remember George? And how long ago and far away that old malaise, "trolley sickness?" All sunshine, it was: this clean, new car, that --- of high buttoned shoes; the softness of taffeta; the warm caress of seat polish serge; and then the terrifying times when the black box over the motorman's head exploded in a clap of thunder; the starry showering of sparks. The world stood still a moment--the way you die a little when you sneeze--until our brave one at the controls, a Mr. Havens or a Macore (?) reached skyward with cotton-gloved hand and pushed the plunger upward and brought life back to the old girl. And then there was that ceremony, grave, rigid, ordered, when you've reached the end of the line: the conductor moving down the foot rail from front to back flipping the seats for the voyage home, the best ones managing it almost at a run. And the motorman trying out his controls: the short handles for the air brake, the narrow and graceful cylinder of brass that was the emergency one (or did he really take them both? I don't quite remember.) in reinstating them with --- equanimity at the other end of the car which now became the pilot's cabin. And the conductor: pockets bulging with coins and transfers, pipe and tobacco, or a half a plug of Red Man; performing the sober ritual of the trolley pole: pull down the rope to free it from the wire; walk around the car from front to back; stand under the wire with your open hand; look up, squinting to fight the wire and let the pole like a free balloon rise toward it. A good man, they say, could hit it every time, but mostly there were one or two experimental passes with the pole hissing blue sparks as it side-scraped the wire; and then success--the union, the elegant copper, and the sound. What was it? The singing, it was sort of a slurp. It was the only sound like it in all of the world. It was, or yes, it was a kiss, a kiss with silver twinkles and sometimes for reasons that must exist, a small puff of smoke. The way we watched, remember George? Then scampered down in front of Father and Mother to the merry-go-round with its racing flood of music and its noble flying horses. Was there ever a bright world or one more fragile?

Then Reed introduces Ford Ceasar.]

I was particularly pleased to be asked to make this presentation tonight for as a small boy I lived in Lansing and I rode that interurban to St. Johns many a time so that I might visit my relatives,

Mr. and Mrs. **Clarence Bishop** and their son, **Frank**, and their daughter **Helen**. They lived out north of St. Johns so I had the opportunity to ride that many, many times.

Well, by way of sort of getting started, I think perhaps I'd like to tell you I think I have the only complete legal law proceedings that was brought into court back in 1908, filed against the interurban company. And I don't know how many people are aware of that, but two people made a complaint and the interurban company of course had to respond to it. I have the complete proceedings there.

I started out, back maybe seven or eight years ago, just browsing and reading and hunting for things that I thought would be of historic nature and I came across some things that rather intrigued me about the early interurban and its getting started. Then I found references to the "Great Northern Ghost." As I make my presentation you will hear me mention the Great Northern several times. That's because of its original background. That came about because of the Lansing, Alma, Mt. Pleasant, and Northern Railroad which preceded the interurban by about 15 years.

I have my notes here. I won't give these to you in their entirety. I'll be rather particular about it, but I've got [interested] all of a sudden here in the last month while working with these. Now I think I'll pick up and write that history of that interurban.

... I think that one of the things that we must keep in mind is that in the very beginning the people who had this in mind of developing an interurban line from Lansing northward, it was to handle trains, not specifically single cars. But it was to handle passenger trains and freight trains, and perhaps combinations of both. Now, these wouldn't reach the magnitude or number of cars that you and I are familiar with today, but it might mean three or four passenger cars. It might mean a half-dozen freight cars as well. So, as we're reading this, please keep this in mind.

Perhaps we should start this presentation by looking at the advantages of interurban travel. For several decades persons who desired to travel either journeyed on foot or they depended upon the horse. Oxen were much slower than the horse; hence, they were used chiefly for labor. However, vast numbers of our first pioneers to move into the interior of the state and even into Clinton County followed a yoke of oxen to reach their destination. All these methods were laboriously slow. The advent of the steam train was a great boost for the movement of passengers and freight. However, prior to 1880 the network of lines were restricted to geographical areas such as the very southern tiers of counties, and [there was] the lack of adequate maintenance of the roads and equipment. There are four features of the interurban that brought about its vast acceptance by the riding population. 1) it was a electric operation; 2) its primary dependence upon passenger service; 3) its use of cars heavier and speedier than the city street cars; 4) its extension beyond the limits of a city or metropolitan area.

The first interurban service in Michigan was instituted in 1890 on a line that connected Ann Arbor with Ypsilanti. And I want to stop right here and tell you why. Ann Arbor was the university and here were vast numbers of young men. Over at Ypsilanti was the teachers' training college with vast numbers of young women. Hence, you see the reason. From 1890 to 1896 the cars of the "Ypsi-Ann" were operated by steam. In 1896 the line, of whose length was but 7¼ miles, was converted and equipped for electrical operation. It became the nucleus of a vast network of interurban lines throughout southern Michigan.

The first rumor or hint of an electrical railroad that would affect Clinton County appeared in the *Clinton Independent*, Mar 29, 1900. The article had previously appeared in the *Gratiot County News*. The story pointed out that a group of wealthy men had stopped at the office of the *News*

and had discussed the electrical railroad project from Lansing to St. Louis by way of Ithaca. They spoke eagerly of the sleeping ghost being very much alive. These individuals have been over the line and they assured those present that the finances were available and that the actual undertaking of the project was not far away. Bion J. Arnold, an engineer for the Northwestern Supply Company of Chicago, and John E. Mills, a wealthy individual from Port Huron, were the chief spokesmen for the group. They indicated that the right-of-way had all been secured and the way was clear for pushing the project forward to an early completion.

When we talk about the right-of-way, this was the old route that had been established and that way, as far as the state was concerned, was available to them. The revival of interest in the project would be favored by people all along the line and particularly through the north and south sections of Gratiot County, it was declared by the company men.

It was noted in the *Maple Rapids Dispatch* that a meeting of interested persons had met in Lansing for the purpose of organization, election of officers, and to establish a program. Isaac Hewitt, a prominent businessman from Maple Rapids, had been elected vice president of the board of directors. The new road was named the Lansing, St. Johns, and St. Louis Electric Railway Company with Frederick Thoman of Lansing having been elected president. The Thoman Milling Company of Lansing, engaged in the manufacture of flour, was highly esteemed throughout the middle west. Hewitt reported that he had been well pleased with the Lansing meeting and the prospects which the company offered.

The board of directors voted that \$100,000 was the necessary amount to be raised by subscription along the proposed route of the railroad. Construction of the road was dependant on the acquisition of those farms. It was also the desire of the company to erect their main power house at Maple Rapids and accordingly the village would be asked to raise \$25,000. You have to remember in our day today \$25,000 is not very much and you find this with other figures, but in those days it probably would be three or four times what it would be today.

A meeting of the villagers was quickly called for the purpose of considering the work to be done. It was hoped by Hewitt and others that every wide-awake citizen in Maple Rapids would be present and would manifest a determination to do everything possible to secure the road. At the Maple Rapids meeting the villagers voted to raise the \$25,000 required to secure the location of the power house and to that end a committee of eleven was chosen. It was proposed to raise the required amount in one week. The promoters of the electric railroad project agreed to have the cars running by Sept. 1 if the people along the line would raise the required \$100,000.

A public meeting was held in the afternoon of April 20<sup>th</sup> in the circuit courtroom in St. Johns, in conjunction with the Lansing, St. Johns, and St. Louis Electric Railway. Those persons who spoke for the project were President Thoman, John E. Mills of Port Huron, Judge Sherman Dabol of St. Johns, and others. A committee was chosen at the April 20<sup>th</sup> meeting to solicit subscriptions of stock or donations in aid for the proposed north and south electric road. By the afternoon of April 23<sup>rd</sup>, the committee had secured pledges to the amount of \$4,000. A second public meeting was held at the Clinton courthouse on the afternoon of April 28<sup>th</sup>. Someone said:

“Don’t fail to be present and assist in an enterprise which the people have been praying for and saying, if we only had another railroad here, factories would come here and St. Johns would take on a whole new lease of life. The time is here and the price is not yet in the hands of the trust. A little from everyone will make it easy for all.

The meeting was warmly addressed by Judge Dabol, the Honorable Frank L. Dodge; President Thoman; John Mills; Judge Stone; Isaac Hewitt; F. T. Waldron; O. P. DeWitt; Richard Moore;

John H. Fedewa; Thomas Bromley, Jr.; Galusha Pennell; D. S. French; H. J. Patterson; and others. Now, these were people who were just speaking for the railroad.

The soliciting committee consisted of the following gentlemen: David S. French; Sherman B. Dabol; H. H. Fitzgerald; Galusha Pennell; Richard Moore; Coleman C. Vaughn; O. P. Dewitt; John C. Hicks; Charles Fowler; and Henry J. Patterson.

Frank Dodge, President Thoman and John Mills were very complimentary in their remarks concerning St. Johns and that part of Clinton through which the proposed road would traverse. Mills, the capitalist, said that he was willing to invest his money in the project providing the people would raise the \$100,000. He said that if the road was built, it would be one of the best constructed roads in Michigan—first class in every respect; standard gauge and sufficient heft to transfer and haul full loaded cars from the steam roads without breaking bulk and to haul three or four large passenger coaches filled with people at the rate of speed of about 40 minutes between St. Johns and Lansing, a distance of about twenty-one miles at a cost to the passenger of about fifty cents for the round trip.

The stock was to be non-assessable and that issued to the poor man was to be as good as that issued to the rich. Mills concluded his remarks by stating that if the \$100,000 were subscribed by May 15<sup>th</sup>, work would be commenced by early fall and perhaps in time for the county fair.

A public meeting on April 19<sup>th</sup> at Maple Rapids illustrates the enthusiasm of the townspeople towards the project. The village was gayly decorated with flags floating from nearly every building, public and private. The stores were all closed and every attention was paid to the railroad. The band was out and the cannons saluted the leaders of the project. So great was the enthusiasm that the hall in which the meeting was held was not half large enough to hold the eager throng. Speeches were made by the citizens and the railway officials. Although no attempt was made to secure subscriptions to the stock, assurance for \$5,000 was received. The following statement appeared at the same time in the *North Lansing Record*: "The proposed streetcar line from Lansing to St. Louis promises to be a sure go. Subscriptions for stock are easily secured and the general interest is intense. It will certainly be a great saving of time and money to travelers."

A St. Louis correspondent to the *Detroit Free Press*, writing under the date of April 24<sup>th</sup> concerning a public meeting at that place said, "The directors of the Lansing, St. Johns, & St. Louis Electric Railway with their contractor, John E. Mills, addressed a mass meeting of the citizens of this city for the purpose of raising a bonus to secure the immediate construction of the electric road to this city. The citizens of the city are at least alive to the interest of their town and all at the meeting feeling that St. Louis is bound to be in the front ranks with the northern cities of the state."

\$15,000 had been pledged by the village of Maple Rapids as of April 26<sup>th</sup>. It appeared that everyone was very much interested in the proposed railroad.

The *Lansing [State] Journal*, in an effort to stimulate more enthusiasm to secure aid for the road, said, "The operational line would no doubt increase to a great extent the business activity of the city. It appears that this is one of greatest opportunities ever reported to Lansing citizens to increase the prosperity of the city. It is proposed to become incorporated under the Tramway Act which permits the condemnation of property for a right-of-way."

Mills had indicated at an earlier meeting of the Lansing citizens that the total cost of the project would be somewhere in the neighborhood of \$1,500,000, and he himself would stand ready to put \$300,000 or more into the enterprise. The line would be extremely expensive to build due to

the great cost of steel and copper, the chief articles entering into the building of an electric road. The grades would be built the same as if they were on a steam road. The rails were to be of steel, 70-pound stock, so that all trains could run a maximum speed of 45 miles per hour.

President Thoman addressed a group of Lansing businessmen on April 9<sup>th</sup> which was very well attended and the spirit of enthusiasm prevailed. Thoman promised that if the \$100,000 could be secured before May 15<sup>th</sup>, the work on the road would be commenced by May 26<sup>th</sup>, and the line from Lansing to St. Johns would be completed and cars running by Sept. 1<sup>st</sup>. He pointed out that the stocks need not be paid for until the rails were laid.

The organizational meeting referred to earlier was held on April 10<sup>th</sup> at Lansing. It had been called a "Board of Directors Meeting of Northern Electric Railway." The name of the road was changed to "Lansing, St. Johns, and St. Louis Electric Railway" and the following officers were duly elected: Fred Thoman, president; Isaac Hewitt, Maple Rapids, vice president; Frank L. Dodge, Lansing, secretary; Jacob Stahl, Lansing, treasurer. Frank Dodge was an attorney. Jacob Stahl was a hardware man. The Board of Directors consisted of the officers and the Honorable A. B. Darragh, Dr. Stiles Kennedy of St. Louis, and George E. Fisher of Detroit. The company was capitalized at \$500,000 with 25% actually paid in. To raise the \$100,000 required, the towns along the line and the county tributary to each were apportioned as follows:

- Lansing, \$35,000
- St. Johns \$10,000
- Maple Rapids, inconsideration of the location of the power house, \$25,000
- Alma, \$10,000
- Ithaca, \$10,000
- St. Louis, \$10,000.

The railroad project created something of a three-cornered scrap in Gratiot County. Citizens of Ithaca and St. Louis did not want Alma, a rival, included in the route. Alma, however, was an important center, and besides its college and the sanitarium, had one of the largest beet sugar factories in the state. Almey W. Wright, a capitalist of Alma who was the principal owner of the sugar factory, was very favorably disposed towards the road particularly for the reason that the line would furnish an outlet for a great quantity of sugar beets.

As of April 28, 1900, it was reported that only a little more than \$20,000 had been subscribed at Lansing. The soliciting committee was nearly discouraged at the apathy evinced by many of the city's citizens over the great project. The ladies aid societies of the two churches at Maple Rapids pledged \$100 each towards the new railroad. At a well attended meeting held at Merle Beach on May 4<sup>th</sup>, the Olive Town[ship] board was present and the franchise was granted to the railway by them. That's the first time in any of the research that I explored where I found that a political group had granted a franchise. None had been granted in the City of Lansing or St. Johns, or even in DeWitt. But here was this little township board granting it. \$500 was subscribed at that meeting. Owing to the fact that the necessary aid had not been subscribed by May 15<sup>th</sup> for the Lansing, St. Johns, and St. Louis Electric Railway, an extension of a few days had been granted; that is, until Monday, May 21, to allow the soliciting committees a last chance to meet their goals.

When the railroad committee met in the parlor at the St. Johns National Bank on the evening of May 16<sup>th</sup>, they felt assured that the money required from St. Johns and vicinity--\$15,000. (I don't know where that change came about. If you listened well, there is a difference of \$5,000, but somewhere, they must have called upon St. Johns for an additional \$5000) should all be raised by the 15<sup>th</sup> or by the 19<sup>th</sup> at the latest. Chairman O. P. DeWitt stated that up to the 15<sup>th</sup>, including the Olive subscription of about \$2,000, nearly \$11,000 had been subscribed, some of it conditioned or payable in work. So there would be some shrinkage. Overtures had been made by Miner Frink and others to the fact that if the route could be changed to run west from St.

Johns, then north to Maple Rapids, a large amount of money could be raised in his neighborhood. Miner Frink lived out west of St. Johns perhaps three or four miles. A part of the committee had investigated the route, and while the meeting was in session, M. T. Streeter and M. L. Kenyon, who had been hustling for subscriptions on the route, came in with \$2,900 in pledges raised the day before. From the statements of Merrett Frink, Barney Kneeland, and Joel Wilcox, it seemed probable that more was forthcoming. If the route was to be changed it was most probable that there would be a loss of subscriptions on the north or the French route.

Another change that seemed to be under consideration by the company was to go straight north from DeWitt to Orin Rice's corner, one mile west of the fair grounds and then turn east. Rice and others on that route proposed some very liberal offers, providing that they could get the road. Richard Moore thought that the subscribers on the original route ought to be notified and given an even chance. It was left to him and anyone that he might select to again go over the original route.

*The Clinton Independent*, dated May 24, 1900, stated that the \$100,000 had been secured. The work of the surveying and the establishing of the line commenced at Lansing on the 21<sup>st</sup>. The work of construction was scheduled to begin about June <sup>t</sup> on both ends of the route, Lansing and St. Johns, and on the powerhouse at Maple Rapids.

The committee along the proposed road were notified to meet in Lansing with their pledges. The matter would be finalized and the contract let between the company and John Mills. The company was asking the various committees to guarantee the subscriptions. The St. Johns Committee met at the National Bank and, by resolution, declined to personally or as a committee to become responsible. The company representative made known his plan at that time to run the freight cars west of St. Johns and get under the Detroit and Milwaukee Railroad somewhere near Henderson's Mill and to run a loop to Clinton Avenue for passengers, plus sidings to the gas works, table factory, and spring works.

On June 7<sup>th</sup> the railroad company guaranteed to pull \$100,000 to the contractor, John E. Mills of Port Huron. Subscribers were urged to stand by the contractors by paying in their pledges promptly or as they became due. Jacob Stahl, Fred Thoman, and Frank Dodge entered into a personal bond guaranteeing any shortage in the entire bonus.

The engineering corps or surveyors of the Lansing, St. Johns, and St. Louis Electric Railway arrived in Lansing on June 12<sup>th</sup>. It was proposed to erect at once a shed about 200 feet long on land at the north end of Center Street, Lansing, next to the Lake Shore tracks in which to hold supplies and also furnish an office for the engineers. One of the annoying questions was whether the company would follow the old road of the Lansing, Alma, Mt. Pleasant, and Northern Railroad or would they establish a new one.

Edward White of Lansing, a member of the survey gang, while working in the area of DeWitt, gave his leg an ugly gash on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of June. He was taken to the home of E. Hewitt, an uncle of his, Dr. R. Simmons, was called and it was found necessary to take several stitches in the cut. This was the first recorded accident to occur in connection of the railroad project. There were several others.

An ordinance authorizing the Lansing, St. Johns, and St. Louis Electric Railway to construct and maintain a street railway in the village of St. Johns and containing certain agreements and restrictions was presented and adopted by the village council on June 11<sup>th</sup>. The managers of the project were not fully pleased with the wording of the franchise. This was but just the beginning of a long series of arbitration between the village and the company.

The surveyors of the railroad company were in St. Johns on July 31 and after surveying the line on the east side of the village with the object of crossing the D & M line at the deep cut just east of the bridge and to enter Clinton Avenue by a direct course from the main line down State Street, down Clinton Avenue, and back to the main line by way of Railroad Street. The residents along State Street put up a strong opposition to that plan.

The grading was commenced two miles north of DeWitt on June 25. Dr. Bliss of Maple Rapids boarded the men in tents. John Norris, secretary to John Mills, wrote to John C. Hicks that the company had purchased \$70,000 worth of railroad ties.

An item in the Lansing papers stated that the Great Northern had entered into contract with Pulfrey & Pouch at St. Johns for 85,000 brick to construct the Maple Rapids power house. Pulfrey said it would take 100,000 brick for the job and that the firm had no contract to furnish any brick. Maple Rapids decided to postpone any further celebrations until the completion of the project to that village.

The hot weather of July and the absence of equipment such as scrapers, long on order, slowed the work on the line. A reporter for *The Clinton Republican* found fifty men and eighteen teams at work on the railroad at a point about a mile and a half northeast of DeWitt on the town line. They had commenced to grade a piece about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile long, the grade in that place being the largest on the road. One part of the place to be filled in was about 8 feet deep and a quarter of a mile long. And in another place a stretch of about 200 yards long had to be filled to a depth of 18 feet. The work progressed very slowly as after each rain the roads must be all made over again. And in one place where the road went through a swampy track, the men had to work in water up to their knees part of the week. The great heat also hindered some as a few men quit on the count of it. There were men going and coming all the while, and anyone could secure plenty of work.

During the middle of July a rumor spread that the railroad was planning to convert from electricity to steam and that the Lakeshore Line had gobbled up the trolley line. Secretary Frank Dodge was very emphatic in his denial and branded the entire matter as a hoax instituted by enemies of the line.

During the latter part of July, the question of crossing the Detroit, Grand Haven, and Milwaukee Railroad again came to the surface. Would he go under the tracks which would involve considerable trenching or would he go over the top of Emmons' Hill necessitating a very heavy grade?

It was learned that on Aug. 4<sup>th</sup>, 1900, articles of incorporation of the Lansing and Northern Railway Company with a capital stock of \$60,000 were filed with the Secretary of State. Secretary Frank Dodge said that he deemed the act advisable to incorporate under the Tramway Act so the company could condemn property for the right-of-way. It seemed that five or six men on the line had got their heads together to hold up the company on the right-of-way on account of price fixing. That was done right into this area here.

A sink hole had been encountered by the contractors of the railroad company and considerable difficulty had been experienced during a period in the middle of August in an attempt to fill it up. It was in the neighborhood of Alward Lake. When asked how much trouble it had occasioned, one of the men at work on the road facetiously remarked that they had already dumped in three or four 40-acre farms on the place and it was not known how many more would be required.

From early October to December of 1900, some work of grading was done. The construction of the trestle at DeWitt over the Looking Glass River was also begun. Two locomotives had been purchased by the company and were stored in the shed at north Lansing.

A considerable amount of excitement and enthusiasm surfaced during that time with the formation of the Crystal Lake Electric Railway with meetings in St. Johns, Maple Rapids, Hubbardston, Carson City, and Crystal. The number of St. Johns people who bought stock in that enterprise were inspiring.

Rails enough to lay several miles of track on the new railroad arrived in Lansing on May 14, 1901, and there were also carloads of ties making about 40 cars in all. The first ½ mile of track was laid about the middle of May. Tents and improved shanties were seen at the north end of the road where the workmen who were engaged in laying the tracks were making temporary residences. Those tents were carried along as the work progressed. I'm thinking that would be actually within the city limits of Lansing as it exists today.

The long-looked-for day in the annals of DeWitt had at last dawned and the first train of cars passed through the village on July 22. A delegation of ladies and gentlemen decked the engine with brooms, flags, bunting, and flowers. The iron for the north part of the road could then be hauled by the construction train. The directors of the railroad made the trip from Lansing to within 4 miles of St. Johns over the new road in just an hour and three minutes on Aug 6, 1901. The work train was utilized, the directors getting an early start before the workmen were in need of the engine.

A delegation of 110 farmers and businessmen were given a complimentary trip to Lansing and return on Nov. 25 by the officers of the railroad. The company had no coaches at that date so had to use a box car and two flats covered with canvas. They were a little airy and the heating appliances were not at all what could have been hoped for and the ventilation was first-class.

The officials of the road met in Lansing on Dec. 23 and reorganized under the General Railroad Laws to permit them to condemn right-of-way on their way north from St. Johns and to obtain permission to use steam until July 1, 1902, giving more time.

A special dispatch to the Sunday *[Detroit] Free Press* from Lansing on January 11, 1902, said that the Michigan Suburban Railroad had been organized with \$200,000 capital to operate a steam road from Lansing to St. Johns. The Michigan Suburban was the first real train to go from Lansing to St. Johns on Saturday Feb. 1, 1902, having on board over 60 prominent men of Lansing, including many of the city officials who were guests of John E. Mills of Port Huron. I might tell you that the newspapers here in St. Johns really played that up because they had a huge big noonday dinner and celebration, dancing, and they really went to town. Rumors to the effect that the Michigan Suburban road would be eventually absorbed by the --- system were afloat in late May.

The first train to go over the Pier Marquette tracks in north Lansing by way of the new trestle took place on Monday, December 8, 1902. The Michigan Suburban sold 6,000 fares between St. Johns and the fair grounds during the fair held in September of 1902. The first electric car to run over the new road made the trip on Nov. 19, 1903. Fire destroyed the car shops of the Michigan Suburban on the north end of Lansing early on the morning of Dec. 18<sup>th</sup>. Two of the company's new cars and the Arnold alternating-current motor, which the inventor had just completed, were lost.

The Michigan United Railways stepped into the picture in 1907 as a result of a reorganization of the old Michigan Suburban Traction Company.



Early in 1929 the interurban bowed out even in advance of the great depression of that year. The last run from Lansing to St. Johns was made on May 29<sup>th</sup>; the last run from Owosso to Jackson, by way of Lansing, the following day.

That ends my talk from the very beginning of the building of the interurban line from St. Johns to Lansing.

**AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION**  
(speakers mostly unidentified)

[Reed] We have with us Mr. --- Hamilton whose father was a conductor or a motorman.

[Hamilton] He worked in the power house.

[Reed] He was an amateur photographer also and he took these pictures. These pictures are taken off a glass negative that Mr. Hamilton has kept. ...the prints over here and equipment that was used on the interurban and also the bell.

This one picture is very interesting because it shows the dynamiting of the tracks. ...

[Reed] We have someone else that used to work for the interurban, Tom Sine.  
What did you do Tom?

[Sine] I was ticket agent in Lansing in 1921.

[Reed] Janet Snyder's grandfather, Mr. ---. She has his watch back here, his gold watch.

[Reed] We also have Alan Campbell here this evening. Alan's father bought the old cars in '33 and Alan lived in one of them one winter. Would you like to tell us about living in the old cars?

[Campbell] It was the winter of [19]37 and '38 that I remember staying there and I remember Ma too. It was real cold I remember that. I'd wake up in the morning and I'd get in a blanket and rolled up in it. That was one way of keeping warm and not only that but my mom was always going around putting plugs. You talk about air conditioning, that was the one we were in. It was a cold place to sleep, I'll tell you that. I can remember Mom and Dad saying, "We will not spend another winter in this place." That's when my dad went and started to build up the garage. We lived in the garage the following winter, but I do know it was cold. You talked about the bells: It had ropes along both sides and Mom took one of those ropes, cut it, and partitioned it off in there like a bedroom, drew the curtains across it. I know she didn't like mice. Really, I thought it was alright. It didn't bother me that bad. I can remember my brother. He was always getting a job chasing after these mice for Mom. I can see him on his knees underneath the round dining room table we had there. ... Mom & Dad sitting at the table there, and Dad says to Mom, "We will not spend another winter in this place."

[Reed] He also told me when coming over here that it was his job to bring water in for his mother to do the dishes and he told me what happened when he forgot to bring the water in.

[Campell] My dad was old-fashioned too and he -- one way to do it.

[Reed] The car that Alan lived in was taken into DeWitt city and it was turned into a greenhouse. Then it burned over there. The other car is still on State Road. ...

George, was the power plant ever built at Maple Rapids?

No, it never was.

[Wasn't] there a power plant later built at Loomis and Jason Roads?

Now there is a power plant and it think it's still standing. That's the only one I know of. They planned to build one in Maple Rapids which would be a booster really. The power was provided by Pilot Electrical Company in Lansing which is right back of where the present Knapps store is

now. And they were to provide the power for the street electrical railways and the interurban line out here to St. Johns and did for quite some time. I think this was a relay station, but they did have generators as you can see here in these pictures.

What were the generators powered by out there?

I don't know. Does anybody know?

I think it was gasoline engines. There was a man by the name of Devereaux used to operate that and he had a power plant fueled by... His boy Mahlon was in school with me in St. Johns.

[Caesar] Well, that was about the time that gasoline engines were coming into their forte' too, so it would seem reasonable that they would use those. I suppose you could hear that old thump, thump, thump going away at all hours of the night and day. Yes, the automobile spelled the demise of the interurban. I read where they made round trips sometimes all day long with hardly anyone on them—three or four people.

How often did they run?

[Caesar] We have a schedule here on the table. It took them about an hour to make the trip from Lansing to St. Johns and they'd spend about fifteen minutes and then back they'd go again.

They went about every two hours.

The local went one hour and the limited went the next and they went to Detroit. The local went to Owosso and St. Johns.

There was a work area somewhere between here and DeWitt. Do you know where it was? There was cars on the siding, a freight car, gondola, ... [discussion about where it was. mentioned: south end of town, Monroe's, blinking light, sugar beet fields, Marshall's, fair grounds, etc.]

Ford [Caesar] is going to read the names of the stations. There are some people here whose family the stations were named after. Stand up when your name is mentioned.

[Reed]

We'll start at **Lansing**:

First stop was at **Sheridan Road**

Second was **Briggs**, but it's State Road now.

**Brattons** was at Stoll Road ...

The **Gunnisonville** stop was at Clark Road.

**Dunhams** was at Herbison Road;

**DeWitt** Station

**Town Line** which was Cutler Rd

**Claytons** which was at Chadwick Rd.

**Lochers** at Locher Road

**Schwabs** at Olive Lake

**Merle Beach** is now Jason Rd

**Drakes** at Price Road;

**Nortons** at Centerline

[unidentified speaker] They used to still live there. Four of the Norris family were killed there on that corner. They came home from church in 1926. That was four of my family. That family still lives there--the Davis's and they are descendants of the Norris's.

Yallup Rd. at Taft  
County Farm  
Beagles  
Spring  
Fair Grounds  
St. Johns

One was called Bums [Corner].

I think it was called Alward Lake crossing. It was before my day, but I do remember hearing it was called "Bum's." I don't know why.

Before the interurban, or maybe after it was established, our neighbor, Mr. Idley went around to the neighbors and asked for \$2 from each one of them and he built a little shanty there for people to get in.

I think there was a shanty on Lehman Road also so people could wait. The shanties were made by the people. They were about 12x10 or 12x16, and the neighbors built them and then the railroad, I can remember, put in the lights. They finally damaged the lights. There was a station [shanty] along the road pretty near everyone. And the mail came at Schwab's Crossing every day.

Did they not drop off newspapers at some of those? They picked up cans of milk to take into Lansing for restaurants and the milk factory there too. Mail? Yes, they had a contract with the government to haul mail.

A lot of livestock was shipped on that little road through DeWitt... We had a siding where livestock was in and out. We shipped a lot of hay out of there. It went right between the two houses.

At the Merle Beach Crossing they used to have a siding there and would haul sugar beets into Lansing.

[Caesar] I read where they had a contract with the road to haul ice from Alward Lake into St. Johns, but I never found that that materialized.

... Sometimes they would have at night a special car. It would be lit up with colored lights ... and music in special cars..

Glen Barnhart told me several years ago when we were talking [about the] interurban-- Where was the St. Johns ice pond?

North of St. Johns... on Walker Road... behind Travis's now... filled in now.

--where they used to cut in the wintertime, they'd bring the ice in on a sled drawn by a horse to the interurban and it got shipped in.

[Reed] The last story I have was told to me on the way over here by Minnie. She and her husband are going to celebrate their 60<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary this month. She said she just had received the diamond ring. She was traveling on the interurban. She was so proud of this

diamond, she said. She put her hand up like this on the window because everybody had to see it. The window came down and pretty near crushed the diamond into her finger.

I've heard so many stories about riding on the interurban. Things like being stuck in snow storms, spending the night in Lansing on the cars; a Mrs. Newman that lived in ... that would take people in that were stranded when the interurban got stalled in snow; another gentlemen ... spent the night playing cards. I guess when he got into north Lansing he had to have a wagon take him to the sugar beet factory.

They switched them over there. There was a siding.... We had stories like that.

[Caesar] Alta, we might close this by saying that most of the people did not say they were going to take the interurban over to St. Johns. They were going to "take the cars." That was the common expression—to take the cars over or the car.

Mrs. Beckwith on Ballard/Weiland Road over in Valley Farms talked about getting up in the dark and seeing on frosty mornings when there would be ice on the electric wire and sparks flying from the electric lines, she said it was a beautiful sight. They knew the cars wouldn't run for awhile because they couldn't make contact with the electricity and they would have to wait for that frost to melt before the cars began.

I was just going to say that the station in St. Johns is where Richard Wells has his law office now, and another lawyer in there with him.


Yes, John Weber and Richard Wells have their offices at the corner of Clinton Avenue and State Street at the east side corner and that is where the station was and the cars came down the little short block its called -- Linden Avenue it was called-- between the Methodist Church and the Courthouse, as George Osgood said, on Cass Street, and then went down Wight Street, and then when they got to the edge of the town they went across the field and then over near the fair grounds and out what is Lansing Street or Loomis Road now and when that came to an end it went right on through the field where Parks ends.

Yes, they went down to the north end of Clinton Ave., just this side of the railroad tracks. They called it the "Y" or kind of a "T," then went around there and then started back up Clinton Avenue.

[Mrs. Dick Whittier speaks:] I served in the Army over in Europe. I was telling this the same thing they did in Paris in order to turn our train around. When they were threatening us with a bomb, we moved real fast because we had the GI's with us and not the Frenchmen.

### Description of the device



 Modern trolley poles as installed on Vancouver's low floor electric trolley buses.

A trolley pole is *not* "attached" to the overhead wire. The pole sits atop a sprung base on the roof of the vehicle, with springs providing the pressure to keep the trolley wheel or shoe in contact with the wire. If the pole is made of wood, a cable brings the electrical current down to the vehicle. A metal pole may use such a cable, or may itself be electrically "live", requiring the base to be insulated from the vehicle body.

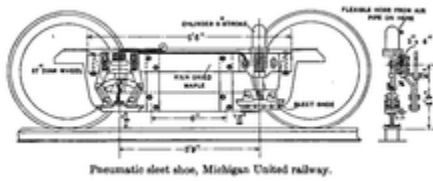
On systems with double-ended railway cars capable of running in both directions, the trolley pole must always be pulled behind the car and not pushed, or dewiring is very likely, which can cause damage to the overhead wires. At terminus points, the conductor must turn the trolley pole around to face the correct direction, pulling it off the wire either with a rope or a pole and walking it around to the other end. In some cases, two trolley poles are provided, one for each direction: in this case it is a matter of raising one and lowering the other. Since the operator could raise the pole at one end whilst the conductor lowered the other, this saved time and was much easier for the conductor. Care must be taken to raise the downed pole first, to eliminate the damage caused by arcing between the pole and wire. In the US, the dual-pole system was the most common arrangement on double-ended vehicles. However, pushing of the pole (called "back-poling" in the US or "spear-poling" in Australia), was quite common where the trams were moving at slow speeds, such as at wye terminals (also known as reversers) and whilst backing into the sheds.

Trolley poles are usually raised and lowered manually by a rope from the back of the vehicle. The rope feeds into a spring reel mechanism, called a *trolley catcher* or "trolley retriever". The trolley catcher contains a detent, like that in an automotive shoulder safety belt, which "catches" the rope to prevent the trolley pole from flying upward if the pole is *dewired*. The similar looking retriever (see photo) adds a spring mechanism that yanks the pole downward if it should leave the wire, pulling it away from all overhead wire fittings. Catchers are commonly used on trams operating at lower speeds, as in a city, whilst retrievers are used on suburban and interurban lines to limit damage to the overhead at speed.

On some older systems, the poles were raised and lowered using a long pole with a metal hook. Where available, these may have been made of bamboo due to its length, natural straightness and strength, combined with its relative light weight and the fact that it is an insulator. Trolleybuses usually carried one with the vehicle, for use in the event of dewirement, but tram systems usually had them placed along the route at locations where the trolley pole would need reversing.

The poles used on trolleybuses are typically longer than those used on trams, to allow the bus to take fuller advantage of its not being restricted to a fixed path in the street (the rails), by giving a degree of lateral steerability, enabling the trolleybus to board passengers at curbside.

## Interurban technology



In general, interurbans operated with technology somewhere between that of a streetcar line and a full-scale railroad. The vast majority of interurbans were electrified, utilizing simply strung overhead wire, or, on heavily trafficked high speed lines, the more complicated wiring system known as catenary. In either case, power was transferred from the wire to the locomotive (in the case of an interurban freight line) or interurban passenger car by way of a trolley pole or pantograph. Some interurbans transferred electricity to the trains by way of a third rail running parallel to, and outside of, the rails when running on private right-of-way while overhead supply was used elsewhere, notably in built up areas (i.e. Sacramento Northern Railway, and Chicago Aurora and Elgin Railroad). Power was transferred to the train using a "shoe" attached to the locomotive or car. Engineers working for Michigan United Railways devised a shoe with steel cutters which could remove ice from the tracks.<sup>[6]</sup>