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Some Detroiters saw no need for the new-fangled electric trolley since horse-drawn cars like this one from the Chene Street line had served the city well since Civil War days.

Clang, clang, clang went the trolley

By Kay Houston / *The Detroit News*

January 17, 2000

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At the beginning of the Gay '90's, the horse-car riding public included just about everybody in town. Even the most enthusiastic cyclists used the cars in bad weather. The acceptance by the Detroit Electrical Works of a contract to electrify the Jefferson Avenue line of the Citizens Railway drew widespread interest -- but not everyone approved. Some considered the idea of stringing naked, lightning-bearing copper wires above the middle of the street to be outlandish and dangerous. And was it necessary? After all, the horse-cars had served the city well since Civil War days.

Poles and lines for the great experiment went in place without incident, but the two companies involved were cautious about testing their work in public. If anything went wrong, they didn't want a crowd on hand.



Passengers hang on to the crowded Baker line trolley in 1910.

But when traction officials gathered at the electrical powerhouse on St. Antoine at 7:30 a.m. on Monday,

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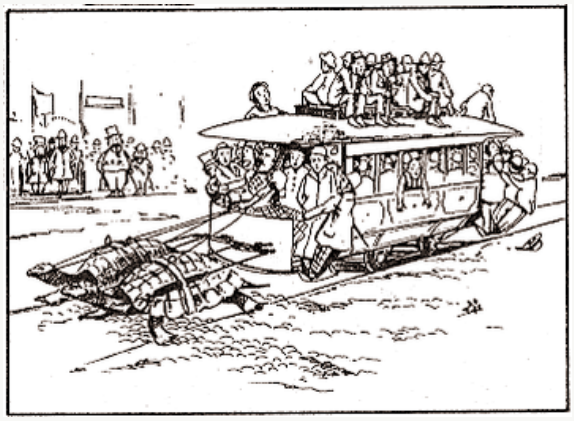
Aug. 22, 1892, it was clear to anyone in the area that something was up. Word spread rapidly through the neighborhood, and more than 40 people had gathered outside the works when, at 7:42 a.m., company foreman F. M. Zimmerman pulled a lever to feed electrical current into the system.

John Cochrane, the Jefferson line's best driver, gingerly maneuvered the trolley arm on Car 295 to the overhead wire and, amid a shower of sparks, he quickly climbed aboard to watch Zimmerman operate the controls. With a whir and a crunch, the car glided out of the powerhouse. Lewis Warfield, vice president and general manager of the Electrical Works, told an Evening News reporter:

"Our contract specified that we should have the cars running today, and here you are." Car No. 295 headed out onto Jefferson and Detroiters heard for the first time a sound that was to become celebrated in song and legend -- the clang, clang, clang of the speeding trolley.

The News reporter wrote:

"The occupants of the car caught their breath, and The News' reporter got in the draft with his coat unbuttoned and began to sneeze. Crews and passengers in the down bound horse-cars twisted their necks and gazed after the car.



Fred I. Leipsiger, The News' first editorial cartoonist, used his acid wit to comment on the old Detroit United Railways.

"At Joseph Campau the stalwart horses attached to a sprinkler cart took umbrage at the general appearance and rapid motion of the trolley and gave their driver a hard tussle to prevent their running a race with it."

Car No. 295 reached the end of the line at Baldwin just l8 minutes after the start.

One mishap marred the return trip. At the Detroit Grand Haven & Milwaukee Railroad viaduct, the cowcatcher struck a paving stone and splintered. But it was removed and No. 295 was back on Woodward at 8:58 and arrived at the depot 90 seconds later. In every way, the trip had been a success.

Two days later, after more test runs, the trolleys took over the line, reducing the former 50-minute round trip by 10 minutes.

Detroiters climbed aboard the electric trolleys in droves. They waved and called to occupants of cars passing on the other track. They thoroughly enjoyed the new marvel of the age. The clang, clang, clang of the trolleys remained a part of the city symphony for more than half a century.

Kenard Lawrence wrote this about his boyhood memories of the trolley: "You got on in front and if you were quick and lucky you could get a seat right behind and to one side of the motorman. So much activity! Flip the knob to close the door. What magic as the doors would open and close, like an accordion, with the flip of a switch.

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A commuter reads the newspaper in his way to work on the Harper line.

"Clang the bell. Pull the big lever with the big wooden knob on top to the first notch and the car would jerk to a start. The next notch and we'd get rolling. Stamp the button on the floor and the bell would clang.

"Pull the big lever again and we'd really get rolling, and the rocking would start. Bang bang bang, side to side. Clang clang clang, banged the bell as he stamped his foot. Sitting in that polished wicker seat, which ran from front to rear along the car, I rode sideways, facing the other side of the car so I'd get stiff twisting round to watch out front and watch the motorman. But I never minded.

"And what a scare when another streetcar came at you on the other track! There was a rush of wind that pushed your car off to one side. Later I'd walk through the streetcar to the very rear. I didn't pay much mind to the conductor. He sat there bored in his cage, collecting the money and operating the back door to let you out. I paid more attention to the glass box you dropped the coins in, watching them bounce back and forth down the staggered chute.

"Put it all together, the clanging, rattling, banging back and forth, the oncoming cars, the motorman doing a ballet to maintain his balance on one foot while the other clanged the bell, and you had an experience to remember. And you could have it any time of any day, anywhere in the city, for 6 cents a throw. I can't imagine what cruel city planner decided to do away with such a marvel...."

But the honeymoon between Detroiters and those early trolleys did not last long. Soon all the lines had been gathered up into a single-traction combine, the Detroit United Railways (DUR), owned largely by Montreal stockholders and New York banking interests. Complaints about inadequate service and monopoly exploitation swelled into a rising tide of dissatisfaction. It became a common sight to see hardy passengers, eager to get home through a winter storm, and tired of waiting while fully loaded cars passed them by, clinging to the outside of a streetcar for miles.

On Feb. 10, 1910, The News assigned a reporter to study what it was like going home on the Baker line. He boarded a westbound car at Michigan and Griswold at 6:15 p.m.

"On every corner along the route were little groups of worker-weary citizens anxious to get home to their meals," he wrote.

"They were too tired and too hungry to care just how they got home as long as they got there as quickly as possible. When the car stopped, they piled on, fighting and twisting to get a foothold.

"With the inside of the car full, soon every inch on the front and rear steps were occupied by men clinging to the car. Other would-be passengers, unable to find footing on the step, piled on the fender and rested against the front of the car.

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Passengers often had to battle for space on the crowded trolley cars during rush hour.

"A winter blast howled down Michigan and, as the car started, it beat into their faces, but they knew that those at home were waiting for them and they were too cold to bother about a little thing like pneumonia," the reporter added.

"They stuck to the fender and cursed the DUR when the motorman pleaded with them to get off."

Such conditions had everybody up in arms, and on Feb. 11 Mayor Philip Breitmeyer and Alderman James Vernor came out in favor of the city's purchasing the car lines. But even that suggestion wasn't enough for some.

Irate citizens took DUR motormen to court under a city ordinance making it a misdemeanor to fail to stop a car with space for more passengers when patrons were waiting at a legal boarding point.

When one defendant, motorman George Brown, denied in court that he and his colleagues ever did such a thing, Judge William F. Connolly adjourned the case and went out in rush hour to see for himself. What he saw made him so angry he disqualified himself from the case and announced he would be a witness against the motorman.

The DUR era had its lighter side, however, on the "owl cars," as those running after midnight were called. There the atmosphere could be distinctly clubby.

"Look over the cargo. -- 40 passengers aboard, and every one of them asleep," a conductor remarked to a reporter who boarded an owl car running out Woodward.



A Royal Oak car is decked out with bunting in celebration of something in this undated photo on the Woodward line.

"We're operating a Pullman service after 12 o'clock. Everybody rolls over against the next fellow and starts snoring, and expects me to know where they get off."

The conductor said he would go through the car when it reached Grand Boulevard and waken anyone he did not recognize. His regular customers were allowed to doze until their stops were reached.

A novelty one winter was a side-seater car installed on the Michigan line. Another newsman compared it to a three-ring circus. The car had just two seats, one running the full length of the car. The opposite bench was bisected by a hard-coal stove. Between the long seats was "an uninterrupted speedway from the

motorman's vestibule clear back to the rear railing." Half a dozen times, the reporter saw unwary passengers caught off balance as the car lurched forward. They "did acrobatics the full length of the car, all the way to the back platform." Passengers quickly learned to grab a strap as soon as they boarded the new-type car.

Those seated were also in peril, the reporter noted. "When the car started quickly the seated passengers, beginning with the people nearest the motorman, rolled into their neighbors -- and so on down the car like a row of dominoes."

A unique trolley car was the DUR's funeral car, introduced in 1901. Detroit was one of a few cities to have such a car, and it was booked solid. It hauled anybody who had been anybody to the cemetery. The funeral car was black, with no name or number, and had an opening near the front to receive the casket. It stayed in service from 1901 to 1917. Each of the large cemeteries of the time maintained a loop of track to accommodate the car. The mourners rode right along with the corpse, coffin and family in front, guests in the rear.

Detroiters eventually voted to buy out the DUR in a pair of elections in 1920 and 1921. After constructing 61 miles of track (holding the DUR superintendant in jail while they laid tracks over his line), the city then purchased the DUR track and cars for $19,850,000. Detroit finally established its own municipal transit system, the Detroit Street Railway, in May of 1922. Labor disputes quickly arose. One issue was the one-man car. In 1938, the Detroit Street Railwaymen's Association blasted the commission plan for a one-man car operation "on the basis it would result in increased unemployment."



DUR line foreman P.H. Buttermore took this photo in 1917 of Valhalla Curve, the first curve north of Bloomfield Center on the Pontiac Division. Woodward Ave. is a dirt road alongside the tracks.

Greene Wilson, a union officer, wrote: "It strikes me as very peculiar that the DSR commission should take this stand on one-man car operation, claiming the recession as the cause when we just went through four years of depression without such a drastic step.

"It appears that the DSR commission desires to take all the benefits of good business without any of the detriments which goes with the transportation business, and finally to take it out on our men."

The issue remained unsettled until August of 1947, when the DSR and union agreed to one-man cars. A News article of Aug. 23, 1947 said: "Sullivan (DSR General Manager) said the agreement provides job security and other guarantees to employees who work on the line's two-man cars. He said the line had a (huge loss) in the last five months under two-man operation and that this loss could have been cut more than $50,000 under the one-man system. He said the line will still lose money until it can be supplanted by buses."

However, more than staffing and budget problems brought on the demise of the colorful and noisy streetcars. The new quieter, more comfortable buses gained popularity in a motor city now used to better auto models every year. The last streetcar was replaced by a bus on April 7, 1956, mourned only by a few die-hard streetcar buffs.



A new Peter Witt trolley circa 1928.

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