

## Short Line Interurbans

### *The Mason City & Clear Lake Railroad*

Shortest of all Iowa interurbans is the 10-mile Mason City & Clear Lake Railroad, yet mile for mile, it has been among the most profitable. During the Depression, when all five steam roads serving Mason City were in receivership, the MC&CL alone remained solvent. It vies with the Waterloo, Cedar Falls & Northern for the distinction of being the oldest *electric interurban railway* in Iowa, both roads having begun intercity service in 1897. The MC&CL is said to have been the first electric railway in the United States to have joint freight tariffs with steam railroads.

In 1896 W. E. Brice, Lew H. Ong, and others formed the Mason City & Clear Lake Traction Company. C. T. Dike, a young engineering graduate from Cornell who lived in Mason City, and who later became vice-president of the Chicago & North Western, was selected as the road's engineer. Brice was president and general manager of the new firm and Ong served as vice-president, secretary, and superintendent. The road commenced operation with an excursion on July 4, 1897, in which Mr. and Mrs. Brice, with their dog Sanko, occupied the front seat of an open car. At

Emery, Sanko took out after birds and delayed the train.

Brice continued as head of the Mason City & Clear Lake Railroad until it was taken over by the United Light and Railways Company in 1913. Besides constructing the interurban he built the Chicago & North Western's branch from Belle Plaine through Mason City to Blue Earth, Minnesota. This road was originally called the Iowa, Minnesota & Northwestern Railway and was sold to the C&NW in December, 1900.

The equipment of the old MC&CL was unusual. A large combination passenger and baggage car, equipped with four 75-h.p. motors, pulled double-truck open trailers, each seating fifty-six people. The road was busiest during the summer hauling excursionists to Clear Lake. In winter ice harvested from Clear Lake proved an important source of revenue. Before the days of mechanical refrigeration hundreds of boxcars of natural ice were shipped to many points in Iowa and neighboring states.

In the early days, through coaches from connecting steam roads often went direct to Clear Lake, making it unnecessary to change cars at Mason City. Many prominent railroad executives had their business cars hauled to the lake to enjoy the sensation of being drawn by electric power on this pioneer line.

Around the turn of the century the road

dropped the name "Traction" in favor of the more interurban-sounding "Railway." In 1910 the company was reorganized under its present title — the Mason City & Clear Lake Railroad. The road also operated local streetcars in Mason City until they were superseded by buses in 1936. During that decade company-owned buses supplanted electric cars on the interurban, although freight service continued by rail.

The MC&CL is now owned by a local group headed by Charles E. Strickland. While red wooden interurban passenger cars no longer shuttle between Mason City and Clear Lake, the road's four electric locomotives do a brisk business in freight. Hauling ice is a thing of the past, but there are still elevators, coal and lumber yards, tank farms, and cement plants which furnish the road with lucrative traffic.

#### *The Charles City Western Railway*

The Charles City Western Railway is a grass roots interurban with headquarters in Charles City, about thirty miles east of Mason City. This 21-mile road started life as a steam and gasoline-operated carrier. It was chartered on February 3, 1910, and the following year began operating between Charles City and Marble Rock, a distance of thirteen miles. Passengers rode a 55-foot long, pointed-front, gasoline-operated McKeen car that had porthole-type windows, a center entrance, and

a large pilot or "cow catcher." Steam locomotives handled the freight traffic. C. W. Hart of Charles City headed the road; and he and C. H. Parr, E. M. Sherman, C. D. Ellis, A. E. Ellis, N. Frudden, and F. W. Fisher, all of Charles City, served on the directorate.

In 1915 the CCW was electrified and an extension was built to Colwell, eight miles northeast of Charles City. The road also operated the Charles City street railway. The interurban sported a fascinating variety of rolling stock: new steel cars; an odd off-center-door car from the defunct Shore Line Electric Railway in Connecticut; a sturdy deck-roof car from the Twin City Rapid Transit; and other quaint but serviceable equipment. In more recent years diesels have been added along with a heavy-duty electric freight engine hailing from the abandoned Texas Electric Railway. Because of its variegated equipment and rural setting the CCW has long been regarded as a paradise for traction historians and railroad fans.

Now and then, when the power failed on the eastern end of the line, the motorman would coast down to the bridge crossing Little Cedar River, reach for his bamboo pole, and get in some fishing. The crews were paid by the month; like the Skipper of the famous Toonerville Trolley, they could afford to indulge in this pleasant pastime.

The Charles City Western serves important industries in its home community, including the

large Oliver Plow Works, and smaller firms along the way. It interchanges with the Milwaukee and the Illinois Central railroads at Charles City and with the Rock Island at Marble Rock. Some idea of its importance to the agricultural populace is suggested by the sign "Interurban View Farm" located about midway between Charles City and Marble Rock. Indeed, the road has been something of a family affair, locally operated and controlled, with the Ellis' and Frudden's invariably appearing on the directorate, as presidents or as other officials. M. W. Ellis was formerly president, and at this writing (1954) H. O. Frudden heads the carrier.

During World War I the Charles City Western received considerable publicity as the first electric railway in Iowa to have a "motorwoman" — Miss Marjorie Dodd, a college girl, and the daughter of the mayor of Charles City. During 1918 all the "one-man" streetcars in Charles City were operated by women. For a brief period, too, the interurban had an all-women section crew. Due to high cost of operation and automobile competition in the postwar era city service was discontinued in 1921.

In spite of extremely light patronage the interurban routes continued to feature two round trips, daily except Sunday, over the entire road. In the summer of 1952, however, this luxury was dropped; and the interurban, like an ever increas-

ing number of its fellows, is operated for "Freight Service Only."

This completes the story of all Iowa interurbans now operating. With the exception of the defunct Clinton, Davenport & Muscatine Railway, it includes every interurban line run in the state. The CD&M started as the Iowa & Illinois Railway in 1904, connecting Clinton with Davenport. In 1912 the Davenport & Muscatine Railway linked these two towns in its name. Four years later the two lines consolidated, forming the Clinton, Davenport & Muscatine. Unlike the interurbans still running, the CD&M never had a freight business sufficiently lucrative to enable it to continue operating as a tonnage carrier. This proved a major factor in its demise in 1940.

From the foregoing trend it is safe to make two predictions. One is that the so-called interurbans will all go out of the passenger business, at least by rail. The other is that dieselization will replace electric operation on most if not all Iowa interurbans in the near future. Indeed, the very name interurban will become archaic; and, except in a historical sense, it will have little meaning. Most of the Iowa "interurbans" will continue to be more or less economically important as dieselized, short-line railroads handling freight exclusively. But as passenger-carrying, high-speed, electric, intercity roads one regretfully concludes their day is over.

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