

The Interurban Years

by Wayne A. DeJohn

Downtown Clinton in the late '30s. This car had been in use about fifteen years by then. (courtesy Al Wiebers)

t
t
I
t
I
c
n
t
d
C
n
it
w
tr
ra
o
el
3
ta
p
©
Hi

By the early 1890s, the electric streetcar or trolley had proven its worth in hundreds of cities across America. In larger cities it was not only serving the busier central areas, but also linking them to suburban areas a considerable distance from the central city. Why not go one step farther, then, and link regional cities together? In one package, intercity passenger service could help one's own city, other cities, and nearby rural areas. Such was the argument for the interurbans — and a convincing one it was, for interurban systems sprang up like mushrooms all over the country in the early 1900s.

In the years from 1900 to 1920, a dozen interurbans began operation in Iowa. One of the earliest was the Iowa & Illinois Railway, which began operating in 1904. It connected Davenport and Clinton by way of Bettendorf, LeClaire, and Princeton. In 1912, a second line was opened between Davenport and Muscatine when the holding company that controlled Davenport's streetcar system purchased Muscatine's system. The two interurbans — the Iowa & Illinois and the Davenport & Muscatine — were consolidated in 1916. The new company was named the Clinton, Davenport & Muscatine, or CD&M. The CD&M operated electric cars between the three cities from that date until 1940.

Electric rail enthusiasts agree that the CD&M was a top-quality line. An engineer familiar with rail systems of the time remembers it as "a very fine electric line, about on a par with regular steam railroads of its day." The track was laid with oak ties and 70-pound rails, skirted by 22-foot poles that carried the overhead wire powering the trolleys. Four electrical substations were required on the 35-mile Clinton to Davenport section to maintain its 620-volt operating current. The Davenport to Muscatine portion was built later and

had a 1,200-volt capacity over its 30-mile route. Because of the power difference, the two sections required different equipment and so were operated as separate divisions. Passengers on one division had to transfer in Davenport if they wished to travel on the other. Electricity was also sold to residents and towns along the CD&M route, with as many as 1,550 customers by the 1930s. To them, the CD&M meant more than novel transportation — it also meant rural electrification.

In the early years, the CD&M cars were large, double-entry vehicles manned by a motorman and a conductor. The Clinton division used eight Stephenson cars, the majority of which were fifty-six feet long and carried sixty passengers. The Muscatine division was equipped with new Niles cars in 1912. They were fifty feet long and carried fifty-two passengers. In 1923 and 1924, lighter passenger loads caused the line to switch to smaller cars operated by one man. These cars were unique to the CD&M system since they were constructed locally — in the Rock Island Tri-City Railway shops — from earlier car bodies and parts. They were standard streetcars re-equipped with bigger motors and trucks for interurban use. Seating thirty-seven persons, they contained a coach area in the front, a small toilet and a baggage compartment in the center, and a smoker's area in the rear. A telephone with a long wire could be jacked into receptacles on the poles outside for clarification orders or in emergency situations. The cars' normal running speed was forty-five miles per hour, though they could run faster on an open stretch or downgrade. Some of the line's older and larger cars were, with some rebuilding, pressed into service as freight carriers. They amplified a sizable contingent of utility or special-purpose vehicles kept busy on the Clinton-Davenport tracks: two freight locomotives, two dumping cars, and a motorized crane. A sweeper did the routine work of cleaning the tracks.



Commuters board the interurban for the journey to work. This photograph pictures an unidentified interurban of post-World War II vintage. (SHSI)

Scheduling was generous on the CD&M. At its peak during the World War I years, the line provided fifteen runs daily between Clinton and Davenport. Passengers leaving Clinton could depart as early as 5:10 AM and as late as 11:30 PM. Twelve runs, between roughly the same hours, were made from Davenport to Muscatine. In the early years, it took two and a quarter hours to complete either trip, but in the 1920s and the early 1930s this was reduced to an average of seventy-five minutes for the Davenport-Clinton run and seventy-five to eighty minutes for the Davenport-Muscatine trip. In the 1930s, schedules were reduced, but a rider could still leave Clinton at 6:35 AM and arrive in Davenport by 7:50 AM — just in time for commuters to be at 8:00 AM jobs in downtown Davenport. This car then returned to Clinton, and the round-trip circuits repeated until late in the evening. The last trip from Davenport to Muscatine was at 11:30 PM in the earlier years, and 8:05 PM in the 1930s. Addi-

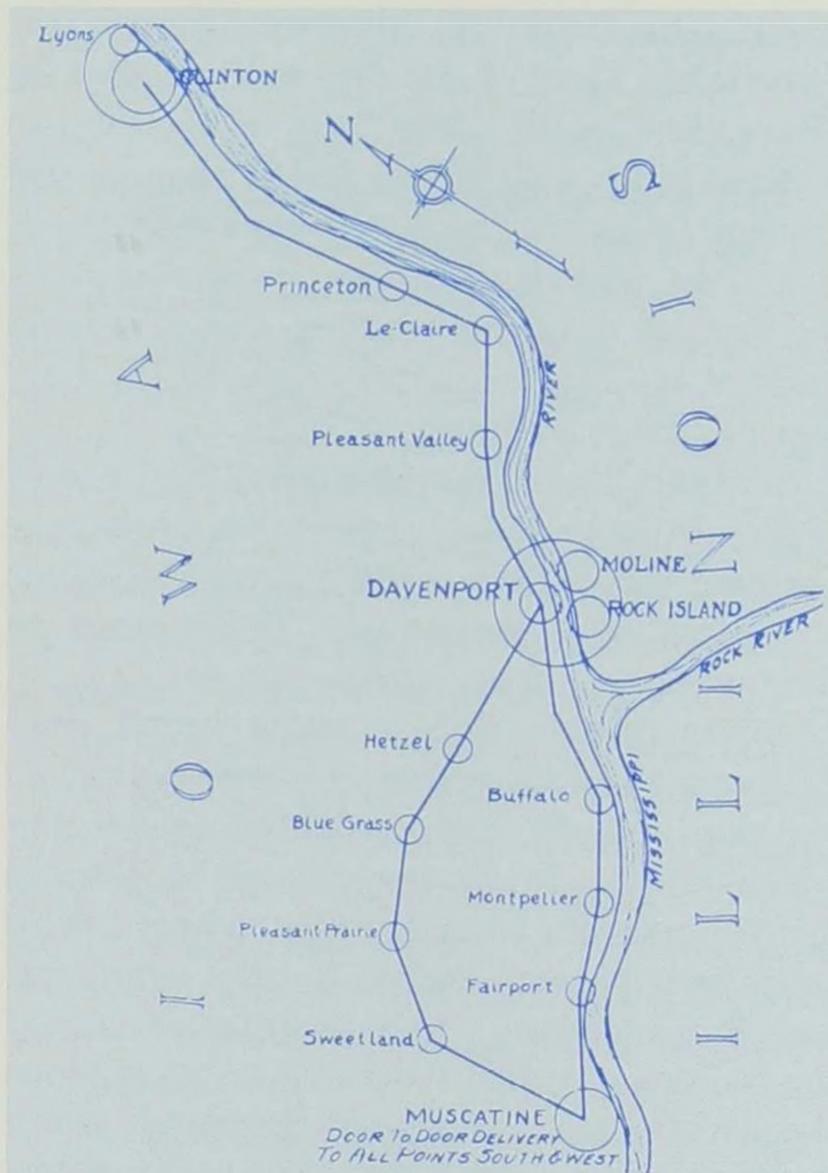
tional commuter trains ran between Pleasant Valley and Davenport in the peak morning and evening hours. Also, a special trip was made each weekday from Blue Grass to Davenport at 8:01 AM and back again at 4:00 PM. Express trains, stopping only at the larger towns, operated for a number of years on the Clinton-Davenport run. These were discontinued as passenger ridership declined.

Fares were reasonable, about two and a half cents per mile. Regular riders could take advantage of ticket books, which reduced the charge to about one and a half cents per mile. In the 1930s, the standard fare for the trip from Davenport to Muscatine was \$.60, or \$1.10 round trip; the Davenport to Clinton fare was \$.80, or \$1.45 round trip. Many of the riders, originating from points closer to the cities, paid much smaller fares — usually 25 cents or less.

Transfers could be obtained for the trolley systems in the three cities served.

The Clinton to Davenport route closely followed the Mississippi River. Depots and agents were located at Pleasant Valley, LeClaire, and Princeton, but there were forty stops listed in the CD&M schedule. From Clinton to LeClaire, the passengers enjoyed the scenic view of wooded areas, where sharp cuts in the landscape, quarries, good fishing streams, and glimpses of the nearby river were steady fare. Between LeClaire and Bettendorf the terrain opened up. The land was green and prosperous, a river plain with neatly kept onion fields around Pleasant Valley. In the greenhouses of the Davis Gardens, flowers and vegetables grew in the middle of the winter. Sumptuous homes on the bluffs above, including one which was later converted into a country club, indicated the presence of affluent city people seeking the good country life. In Bettendorf, the mammoth factories of the Bettendorf brothers signaled the approach of the big industry and larger population of the Tri-Cities. Passing the busy switching area at East Davenport, the cars entered Davenport street rails and mingled with automobile and pedestrian traffic on downtown streets. The cars pulled up to the depot on Perry Street, which was conveniently located for business, shopping, recreation, and other downtown activities.

Travel on the Muscatine division was on a different set of cars, normally with different motormen. Leaving the Perry Street depot, cars went west on Telegraph Road, past the attractive farms and market gardens west of Davenport. The first major stop was at Blue Grass, the center of a prosperous farming district and a town of several hundred people. The CD&M track roughly paralleled the Rock Island trunk line tracks until this point, but when it entered Muscatine County, it veered southwestward to within about four or five miles of the Mississippi River before



CD&M operations extended seventy miles. The Buffalo-Montpelier-Fairport connection was not a rail line but an express service route. (courtesy Davenport Chamber of Commerce)

Note on Sources

Important sources on the CD&M can be found at the Iowa-Illinois Gas and Electric Company in Davenport. The company's central files contain in-house transportation reports, newspaper clippings, photo albums, and other material. The assistance of company archivist John Killion was invaluable. Interviews with Max Roller and with former CD&M motormen Al Wiebers, Clyde (Ike) Nelson, and Tom Kilpatrick provided important information.

For the technical dimension of the history of the interurbans, see the bulletins of the Central Electric Railfans Association, especially John F. Humiston, "Clinton, Davenport, and Muscatine Railway Company," Bulletin #36, C.E.R.A. (Chicago, 1942), and Norman Carlson, ed., "Iowa Trolleys," Bulletin #114, C.E.R.A. (Chicago, 1975).

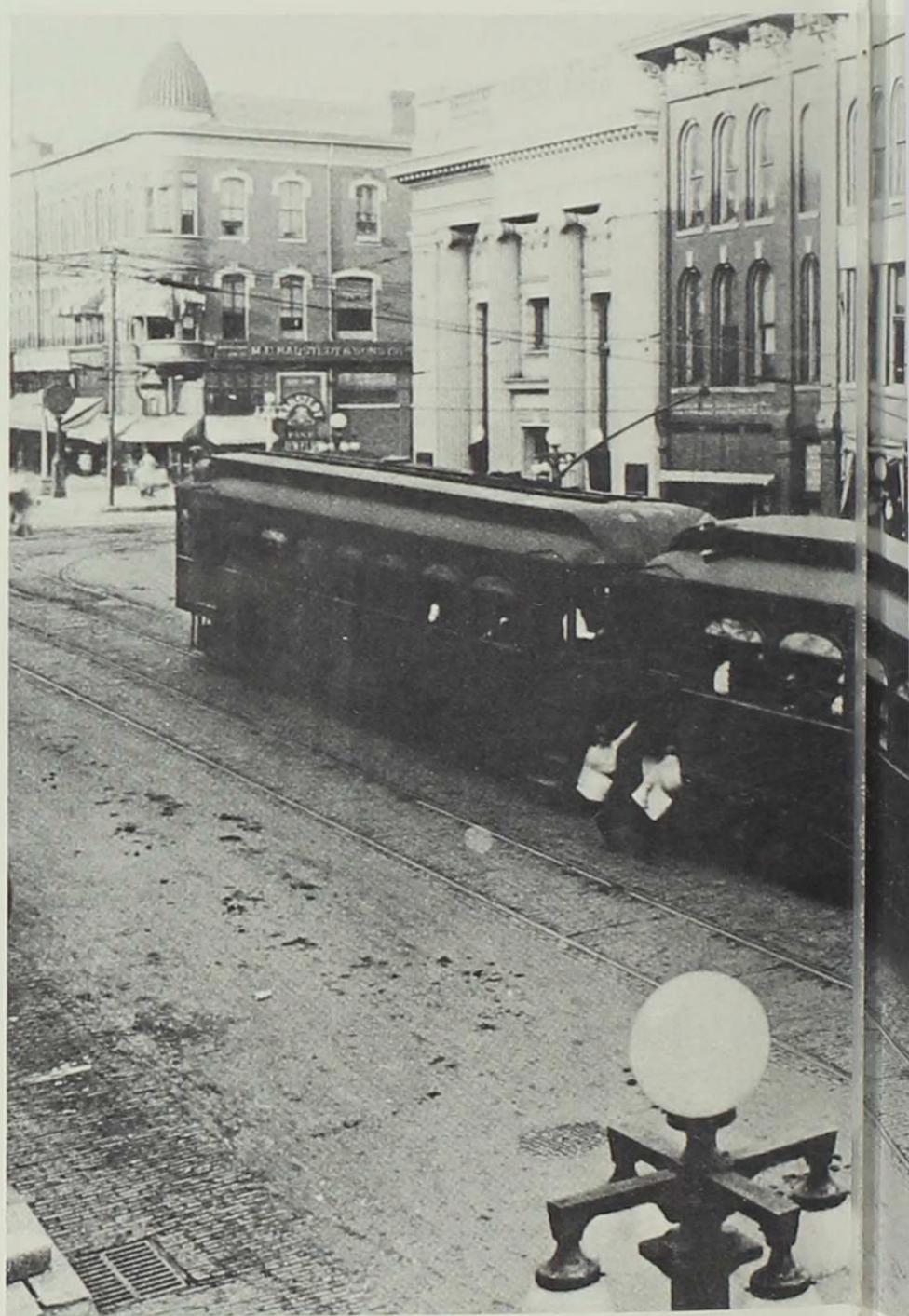
Other secondary sources included *Quad-City Times* articles by Jim Arpy and Rema Graham, and an article titled "Davenport's Own Railway," published in the *Davenport Chamber of Commerce News*, April 1934.

curving back toward Pleasant Prairie and Sweetland. Most of the dozen or so stops in Muscatine County were farm or road intersections indicating lighter traffic than on the Clinton division. The latter was busier, both in freight and in passenger volume, but in the first ten to fifteen years of operation both parts of the line frequently enjoyed full cars and plenty of business.

Neither Clinton nor Muscatine had a true depot. In both cities, downtown businesses assumed the CD&M operations as a sideline, and passengers boarded cars in the street as they would a normal trolley. In some of the towns there were depots, ticket agents, and even small waiting rooms. At some of the lesser stops, small sheds provided shelter for waiting riders. Rural riders, however, usually had to signal the train in order to board. The procedure recommended by the company was to extend one's arm horizontally above the tracks and wait for the motorman to blow the whistle twice in acknowledgment. After nightfall this was not effective, and waiting riders were then urged to "light a match or a piece of paper and wave it until the motorman answers the signal."

Accidents on the CD&M were rare compared to interurbans in other places. Not one of the ex-motormen interviewed for this article can remember an accident fatal to riders. The cars occasionally struck automobiles and livestock along the route, but the resounding and deadly crashes and derailments that occurred on some lines never stained the CD&M record. This was due in part to the quality of the CD&M trackbed and equipment, but it was also due to the care and concern of CD&M personnel. One motorman, Al Wiebers of Camanche, recalls clutching the controls with his orders in his palm for fear of forgetting them.

The motormen had to be hard-working and versatile, for their job required much



Downtown Davenport: the car on the left pulls the one on the right. The depot is on the other side of the cars. (courtesy Iowa-Illinois)

more than controlling the speed of the car. After 1923 or 1924, they had to be both motormen and conductors — operating the car, collecting fares, and handling baggage or loading freight. And, of course, if rowdies caused trouble on the cars, the motormen had to be bouncers too. One evening, when a gang of Clinton-bound toughs started a brawl in the rear of one of the cars, they were forcibly ejected at LeClaire by a determined motorman and a lineman wielding a large monkey wrench. On one-man cars, the motorman had to handle most situations by



one on the right for a peak load run. The
 (Iowa-Illinois Gas and Electric Company)

himself. Equipment problems, such as a malfunctioning trolley, were dreaded occurrences. Summer heat would cause the overhead copper wire to expand and sag, creating the danger of the trolley pole jumping the line. There were cases of loose trolley poles knocking out brackets, and even careening wildly and smashing through car windows. In winter, ice and sleet on the wire could cause the cars to lose power or crack the trolley wheels. In either season, the motorman then had to clamber atop the car to fix, reposition, or replace the trolley assem-

bly. At night or in severe weather, this was an arduous task.

Most work, though, was more mundane. On freight runs, the time-consuming switching of cars was a major job. At times, the CD&M men also had to assume the laborious task of loading and unloading the freight cars. Even baggage on the passenger cars frequently involved heavy work — since passengers were allowed 150 pounds of baggage. The CD&M also carried mail and commercial shipments, so packages often filled the baggage area and overflowed into nearby seats and aisles. Smokers heading for the rear of the car sometimes found the way impassable. For the motormen, the various duties sometimes stretched into fourteen or fifteen-hour days, for a top hourly wage of 65 cents in the 1930s. No holiday or overtime rates were paid. Nevertheless, motormen liked the varied work and the congeniality of passenger service.

The passengers themselves were a diverse lot. Since outlying secondary schools were nonexistent then, many rural youths rode each weekday to attend high school in one of the three Iowa cities. The special commuter run from Blue Grass to Davenport carried students who attended Davenport High School. People working in downtown businesses and offices — store clerks, businessmen, and professionals, for example — were regular commuters on the CD&M. They often filled the cars to standing room capacity during the morning and evening rush hours. Travelling salesmen typically did just the reverse, riding out of the cities in the morning and returning in the evening. In the early days, before the full emergence of the automobile, the interurban was a vital link between these salesmen and the smaller communities in townships along the Mississippi. Workers were not a large category of CD&M riders since most of them were served by city trolleys, but a few rode the morning trains



A CD&M freight train arrives in Davenport in the 1930s. (courtesy Davenport Chamber of Commerce)

from Davenport to the factories and fields of the Bettendorf and Pleasant Valley area. During the slack hours, many women from small towns and farms rode to the cities to shop.

Farmers also found the system convenient for bringing eggs or small-lot produce to a nearby town for marketing. Their cans of cream were tagged and left at CD&M stops, whisked into the car's baggage compartment, and delivered to the creamery in Davenport. One elderly farmer from northern Scott County relied on the CD&M in a special way. A regular weekend tippler at Davenport nightspots, he sometimes drank too much and needed to be dutifully assisted off the last evening run by accommodating CD&M motormen.

Regular riders became accustomed to sitting in a particular seat on the cars and became acquainted with one another and the motormen too, so the atmosphere was friendly. "Everybody knew my name," recalls a former motorman who often piloted the Blue Grass to Davenport commuter runs, "and we motormen knew the riders."

Recreation provided another source of ridership. People from the rural areas were at-

tracted to recreation spots in the Tri-Cities, which were served by trolley connections to the interurbans. Like many interurbans seeking to increase their traffic, the CD&M for some years maintained its own park. Opened in 1906, it was just north of LeClaire. Dances were held and steamboats landed there, adding to the number of picnickers and excursionists. The Oakes Park stop, near Camanche, was another pretty wooded site that was the scene of many recreational gatherings. Especially on the Clinton to LeClaire stretch, there were good fishing and camping places, which the CD&M pointed to in its promotional literature. Fishermen from Clinton and Camanche rode to their favorite haunts downstream in the Wapsie River bottoms or along Rock Creek.

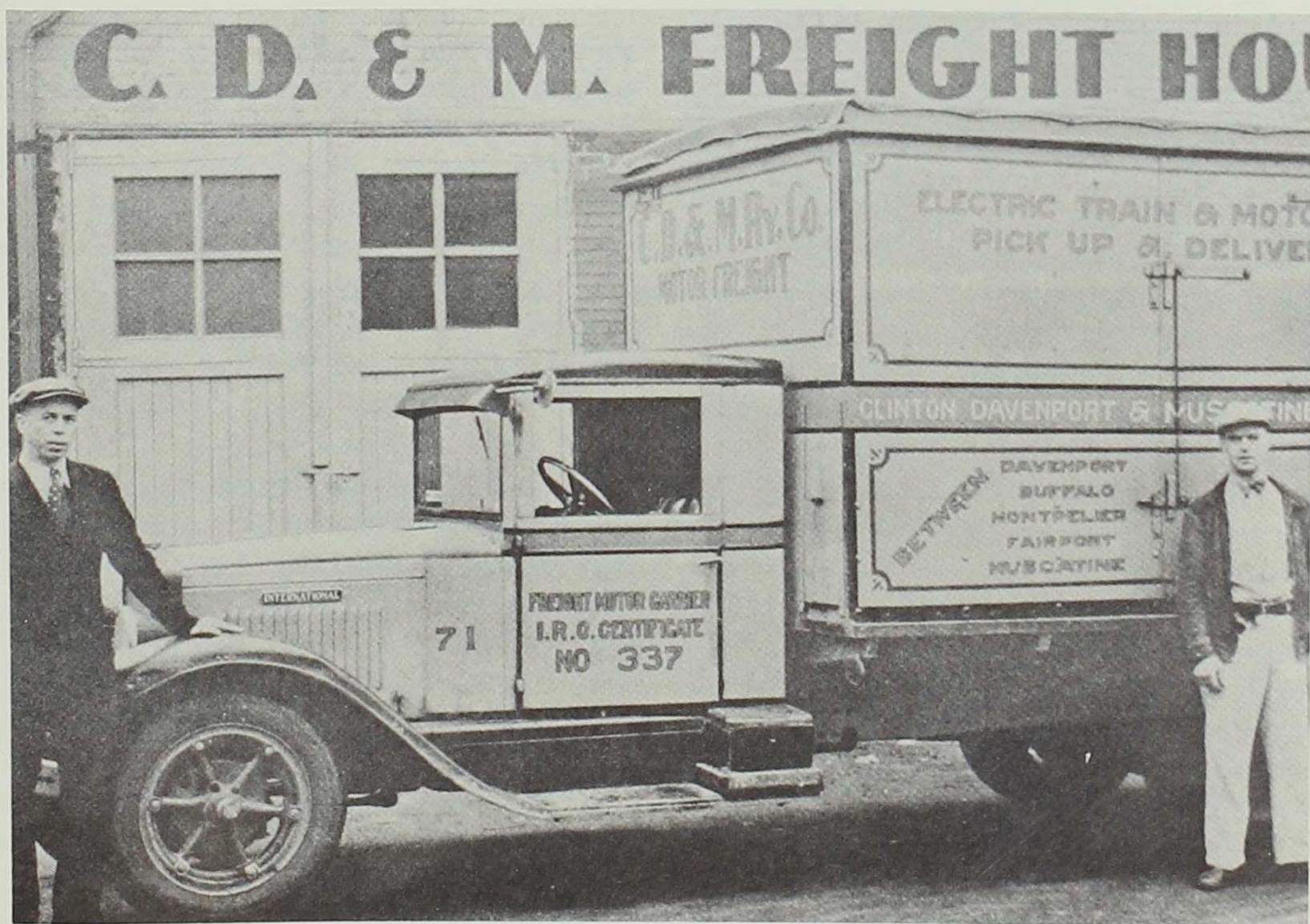
We think of the interurbans as passenger lines, but many of them carried substantial amounts of freight as well. The CD&M was one of these. In fact, its freight service was more important and more profitable than its passenger service by the 1920s. The carrying of express items, mail, daily

newspapers, and the like on its passenger cars constituted only a small portion of this side of the business.

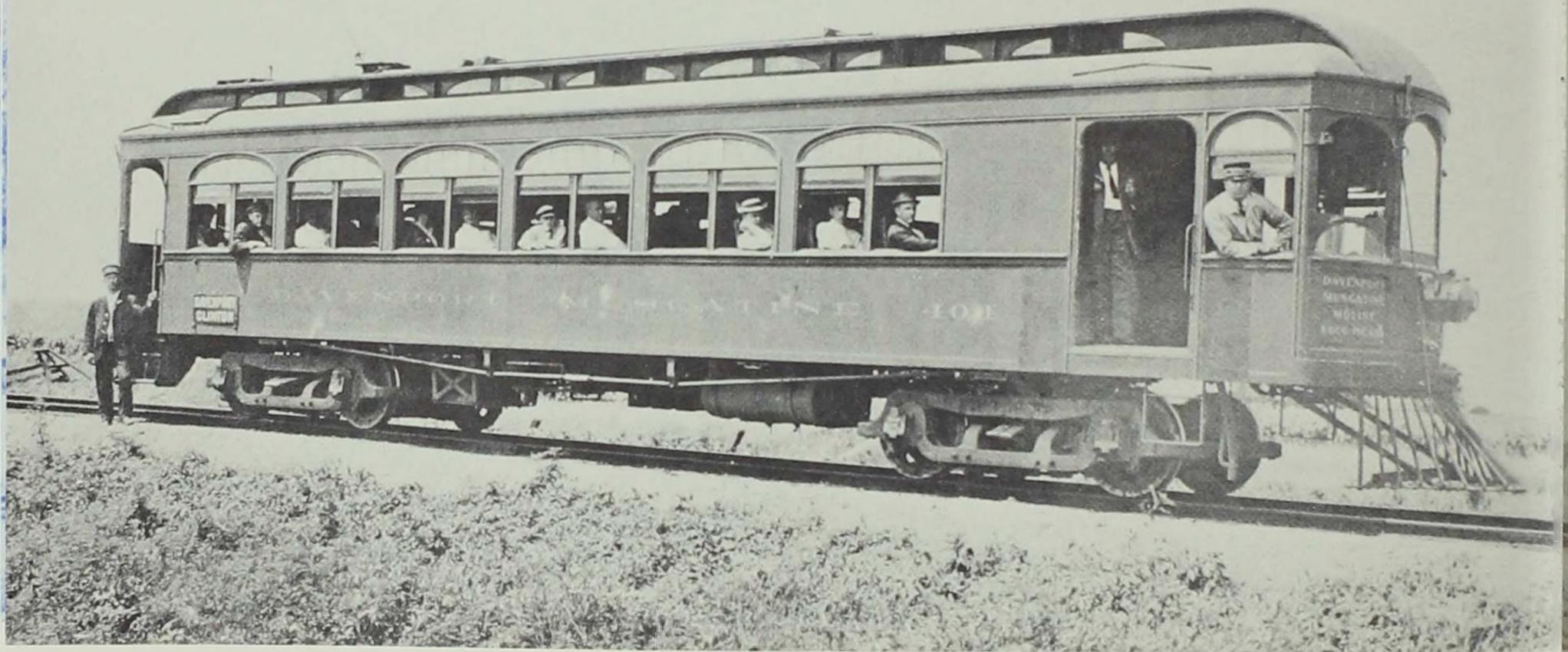
Carload freight was handled by husky steplecab locomotives and refitted express cars, and the trains they pulled looked like any freight train. In the 1930s, two scheduled freight trains ran on the system and carried about 500,000 tons of freight a year. Many carloads were transferred between the Chicago & Northwestern line at Clinton and the Rock Island line at Davenport, the CD&M linking the two larger lines. Other cars had a local origin or destination. Perishable goods leaving Davenport at 1:30 PM could be unloaded in Clinton and *enroute* to grocery stores and restaurants by 3:30. Bread baked in Davenport arrived in Clinton

on the last interurban in the evening, ready for early morning distribution. Stone, sand, and gravel were carried from LeClaire, Princeton, and Camanche areas; coal was brought to the Riverside power plant near Pleasant Valley and to the Davis Gardens outside Bettendorf. The Davis Gardens also received carloads of manure for its planting beds. Onions and livestock were shipped from the same area. Special CD&M cars and crews worked around the clock when the Pleasant Valley onion crop was ready to ship each summer. Twenty carloads at a time were often dispatched, sometimes totalling 250 carloads a season. The CD&M carried them to larger lines, which took them to Chicago and points farther east.

In the 1920s, the CD&M began to pur-



Part of the CD&M's expanding truck fleet in the 1930s. (courtesy Davenport Chamber of Commerce)



An early Niles two-man car carries a full load on the Muscatine division. (courtesy Iowa-Illinois Gas and Electric Company)

chase its own motor trucks and initiated express service. It advertised free pickup and delivery of goods anywhere in the Tri-Cities. A separate freight depot at 101 Brady Street in Davenport was the hub of this expanding business. Soon the trucking line was operating in areas remote from the CD&M tracks, making regular express runs to Buffalo, Montpelier, and other places. "Local express service at freight rates" was the company's claim in 1936. The motor truck, although a growing competitor for CD&M rail business, was used by the company to parallel and supplement its own rail operations.

The CD&M and its predecessors served eastern Iowa for over thirty-six years, from 1904 to 1940. During the latter half of that period, the company suffered growing competition from the automobile and the truck. As noted above, declining ridership dictated the transition to lighter cars and less frequent scheduling in the mid-1920s. To the evident virtues of motor transportation — its flexibility and the fact that it did not require large private investment in equipment or rights-of-way — one must add the psychological

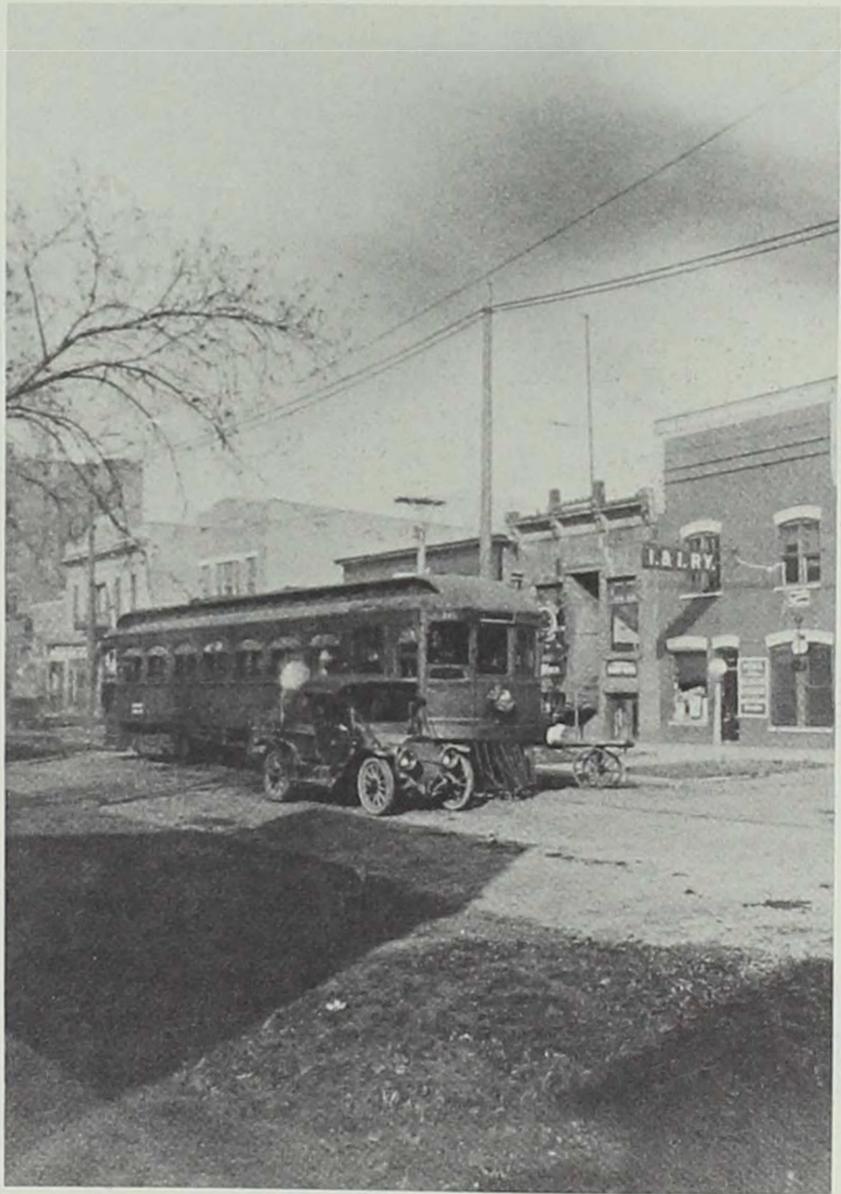
aspects of an America that was quickly adopting the values of consumerism and privatism. The assumption that progress entailed constant technological or material change and that "new is better" were becoming dogma. To many people, the electric streetcar began to appear outdated and cumbersome, even boring, in comparison to the lively and novel auto.

In the 1920s, the breakthrough to "automobility," to use one historian's apt term, was beginning to cast a shadow over street rail and interurban alike. The CD&M foresaw the direction of change and began to supplement its rail service with buses. In 1928, shortly after the completion of the paved highway between Davenport and Clinton, it introduced buses on its schedules between the two cities. In 1929, buses appeared on the Davenport to Muscatine trip. The company also tried to interest the public in the novelty and comfort of a new set of "parlor coaches" purchased in the early 1930s, but by 1930 over a third of its passen-

gers travelled by bus (59,874 of the total 157,902 riders). The six daily trips from Davenport to Clinton were now supplemented by three bus trips each way on the highway. Rail ridership slipped. The packed cars so common to the early 1920s grew more and more infrequent. The company began to rely on its freight service as income from passenger service declined. The CD&M's argument that riding the interurban was safer and cost a third to half of what it cost to drive an automobile the same distance did not persuade commuters who were becoming irretrievably hooked on the auto.

By the mid-1930s, the switch from trolleys to motor buses within the Tri-Cities had gone even further than on the interurban. In 1936, buses replaced almost all of the Davenport and Tri-City trolleys. A nationwide campaign to scrap streetcars — spearheaded by General Motors and other auto-related industries — claimed success after success, and decisions by CD&M officials indicated that the trolley's end was near. The perennially weaker Davenport-Muscatine portion of the system discontinued electric rail service in 1938, and in 1940 Clinton-Davenport service ceased. A few of the cars and utility vehicles were sold to other rail systems, where they remained in use for a few more years. Most, however, went to a local dealer who resold them as diners, homes, and scrap metal. The track, except for a 13-mile section between East Davenport and LeClaire, was dismantled and scrapped. Eventually, the People's Power and Light Company — a sibling company and predecessor of the present Iowa-Illinois Gas and Electric Company — took over CD&M's electrical service to rural areas.

Thus, despite its efficiency, its safety, its dependability in all kinds of weather, and its excellent service to eastern Iowa, the CD&M passed into history in the space of little more than one generation. The opportunity for a



An I&I car at the Clinton depot, before the depot relocated and began operating out of a downtown business. In time, smaller cars replaced the full-sized car pictured here. Already the railroad and the automobile jockey for position. (courtesy Iowa-Illinois Gas and Electric Company)

balanced transportation system, capable of moving large numbers of people safely and cheaply, passed with it. Only recently, with the advent of our current energy crisis, have we in Iowa — and in the United States — begun to appreciate the significance of the interurban's decline. It would appear that the costs involved in shifting to a unidimensional, heavily energy-consuming mode of transportation have yet to be fully reckoned. □