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In Quest of a Museum

During the 1950's one after another of Iowa's once-proud electric interurban lines was discontinuing passenger service and dieselizing its freight service. For a half century they had linked farm and town in many sections of the state; now a way of life was rapidly passing from the Iowa scene. Big inter-city trolleys had whistled through the countryside, had helped "drummers" cover their territory, had taken shoppers to market, and boys and girls to picnics, movies, or just for the ride. Electric locomotives had shunted cars of coal, grain, livestock, and natural ice. "Trolley freight" cars had hauled milk set out in ten-gallon cans on raised platforms at village crossroads or picked up express from the town depot.

The "interurban" was going, indeed was all but gone, when a group of historically-minded Iowans determined to act. They wanted to obtain a typical high-speed car which would in years to come be reminiscent of the electric railway in all its glory. This trolley must be a car that would

run, with a right-of-way on which to run it, and the track, trolley wire, and "overhead" to facilitate operation. How the interested parties met these needs is the story of the Iowa Railway Historical Museum.

The initiative for an operating railway museum came from the Iowa Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society. The NRHS had been organizing train and trolley trips, circulating a news sheet, and holding periodic meetings to stimulate interest in railroads. It had been particularly successful in sponsoring excursions on the 16-mile Southern Iowa Railway, operating between Centerville and Moravia. This electric line had a small passenger car on its roster, although the road had been operating for freight service only since 1933. The NRHS had been chartering its passenger car for "fan" trips at a nominal fee with considerable success. Furthermore, the road was not planning to dieselize, and it would still remain a trolley line in the foreseeable future. If a large old-fashioned interurban car could be procured there was no better place in Iowa on which to operate it.

Getting a car, however, proved to be the hardest task. Several de-electrifying interurban roads were contacted but a satisfactory price could not be agreed upon. Finally, the Waterloo Railroad, successor to the Waterloo, Cedar Falls & Northern, donated a large interurban car.

Membership in the Iowa Chapter of the NRHS is thinly scattered throughout the state and in adjacent states. Very few reside in any one community. Fortunately, several members in the vicinity of where the car was then located and where it was to go, did much of the work in preserving the vehicle. James S. Levis in Waterloo, with the help of Elmer R. Carr, of Ottumwa, took care of getting the trolley. Carr, in addition, made the necessary arrangements for the delivery of the vehicle to the Southern Iowa Railway, whose headquarters are in Centerville. A temporary "Governing Body" for the Chapter's interurban car was set up with Levis as chairman and Carr as secretary-treasurer. A. P. Wheelock, formerly president of the Fort Dodge, Des Moines & Southern Railway, and Robert Levis also served as members of the body.

It was felt a separate organization should be formed to have custody of No. 100 and other equipment in what would be a permanent operating museum. To fulfill this need, the Iowa Railway Historical Museum was chartered in the state on March 22, 1958. Wilson B. Lemberger of Wever was appointed president, James S. Levis, vice-president, and Elmer R. Carr, secretary-treasurer. Late in 1958 Lemberger turned over the presidency to Levis and Richard M. Billings of Cedar Rapids became vice-president.

The Iowa Railway Historical Museum, Inc.,

is a non-profit organization which has its annual meeting in June, usually in the Continental Hotel in Centerville. As of 1959 it had seventy-six members scattered in fifteen states. Thanks to the friendly relationship with the Southern Iowa Railway, the Museum has in effect a 16-mile operating line on which to run its equipment. This happy situation came about through the interest of Edward L. Shutts, president of the railway, in the museum project. No less enthusiastic was Traffic Manager C. J. Poffenberger, General Superintendent L. W. Breeze, and all the personnel of the road.

The principal business of the Southern Iowa Railway is to transport coal mined in the territory it serves and to act as an intermediate carrier of freight received from or billed to other lines. It interchanges with the Burlington Lines at Centerville, the Milwaukee Road at Trask, and the Wabash Railroad at Moravia. The freight operation is such that the Museum can operate its car so that it is sandwiched between the running of the daily freight trains. There is no freight service on Sunday, thereby leaving the entire railway virtually to the pleasure of the railroad fans.

The No. 100 is currently stored on a spur track running through the car barn to the south side of the building. It is quite a feat to operate the trolley so it will clear the barn door and not overrun the spur, as the latter is just about the

length of the car. But qualified club members who usually maneuver the vehicle (always under the supervision of company personnel) have become as adept as the railway's veteran motormen. Ultimately it is anticipated the Museum will build its own car barn or use part of the present building which temporarily houses equipment of the Iowa Southern Utilities Company.

Since the railroad fans and historians have started informally sharing in the electric railway operation, the line has taken on a new look. Several times a year the Museum runs what may be called a "work extra," which is filled with hatchet-and-axe-carrying volunteers wearing old clothes. They chop down brush along the right-of-way, making the road look trim and well kept. This is not done so much for aesthetic reasons as to keep the brush and brambles from scraping the sides of the repainted No. 100. Museum members have erected signs at road crossings and repainted switch stands and depot names.

The Museum's big interurban car is now its sole equipment. But the organization plans to include other rolling stock from steam and electric lines. It is in the market for a standard, double-end street car to handle the overflow on the popular "rail fan" trips over the line. The Museum is also hunting for a caboose.

Luckily the Southern Iowa has kept No. 9, one of its suburban cars, in good condition. When a

large crowd shows up for summer trips the railway has graciously permitted the Museum to handle the overflow in its "standby" vehicle for a modest fee. The rail historians in turn have a standing rule that the Southern Iowa can use No. 100 whenever it desires, with the compliments of the Museum. This option was exercised in 1958, when the directors of the Iowa Southern Utilities Company made a trip over their line in it. Coffee and doughnuts were served on the inspection trip, reminiscent of the trolley a quarter century ago.

Not only has No. 100 been saved, but the sounds associated with its operation on the Waterloo, Cedar Falls & Northern have been preserved. Thanks to William A. Steventon, five recordings were made of its last run over the "Cedar Valley Road." As the disc revolves one hears the trolley's door slam, the traction motors whine, the quickening cadence of the wheels clicking over the rail-joints, and, finally, the hauntingly beautiful sound of the air horn. On the same phonograph record is the whistle and other sounds of Southern Iowa's No. 9, recorded by the Railroad Record Club of Hawkins, Wisconsin.

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