

Electric Traction Promotion in the South Iowa Coalfields

by

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At the turn of the twentieth century, "interurban fever" struck Iowa. This was the heyday of both the steam railroad and the newly-perfected electric traction railway. As novelist E. L. Doctorow says of the era in his best-seller, *Ragtime*: "Tracks! Tracks! It seemed to the visionaries . . . that the future lay at the end of parallel rails. There were long-distance locomotive railroads and interurban electric railroads . . . all laying their steel stripes on the land, crisscrossing like the texture of an indefatigable civilization."

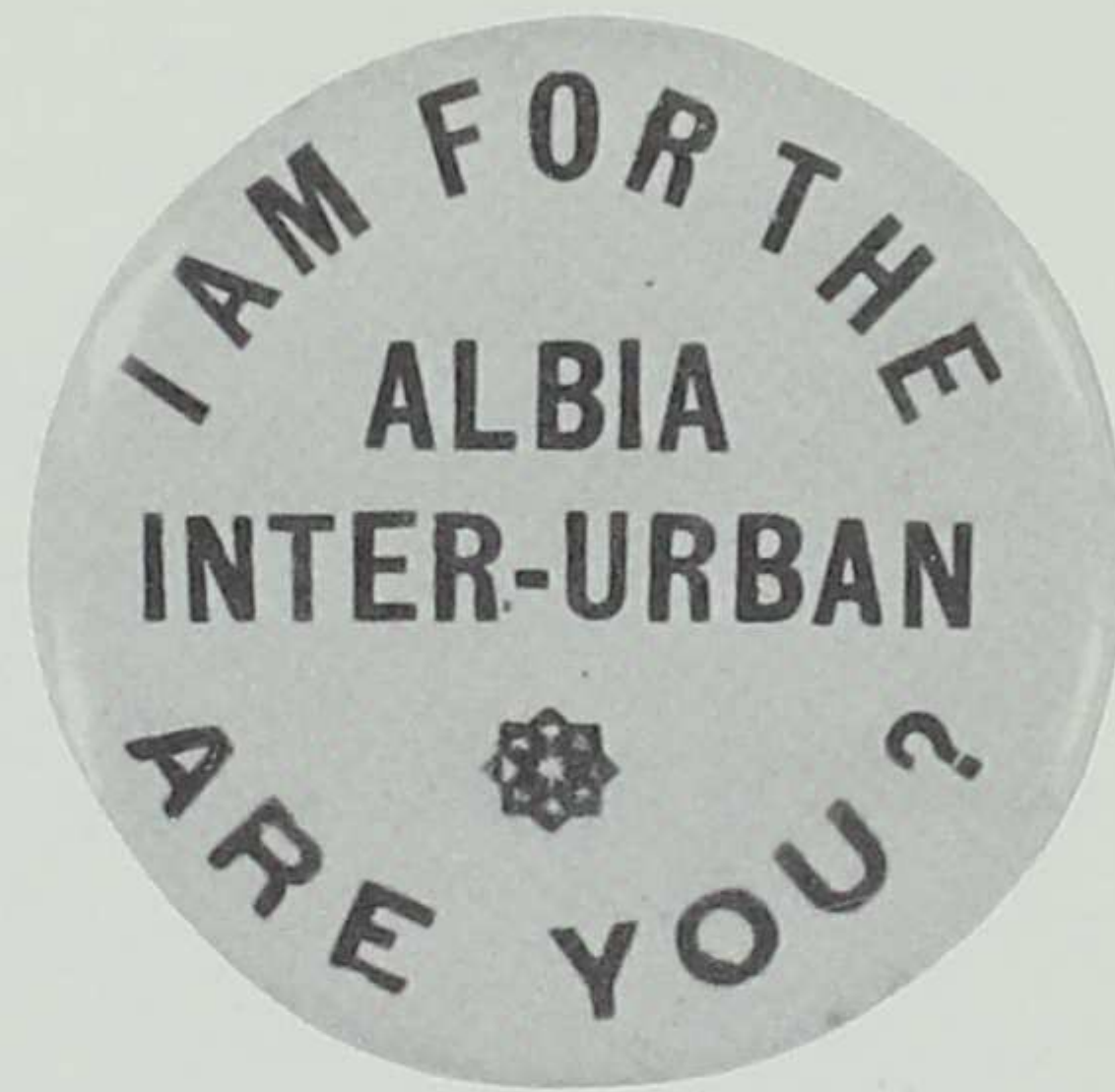
The great boom in electric interurbans nationally came in two bursts, one between 1901 and 1904 and the other between 1905 and 1908. Nearly 1000 miles of track were in operation in 1897; by 1905, there were 8000. In 1915, the nation's interurban network peaked at slightly over 15,000 miles. Although Ohio and Indiana were the heartland of the electric intercity railroads, Iowa constructed 489 miles of interurban lines, the greatest mileage of any state west of the Mississippi River except California and Texas.

What was the electric interurban railway and why did it become so popular? Unlike the electric street railway, which provided solely local service within a community and possibly a short extension into the nearby countryside to serve a "trolley" amusement park, lake, or cemetery, the interurban was designed to connect two or more communities with services similar to those provided by a conventional steam railroad — hauling passengers, express, and often carload freight. According to one enthusiastic observer, the electric intercity railroad would "perform a service for mankind as notable and perhaps ultimately as great as that rendered by its steam-operated precursor."

The popularity of electric traction — whether in Iowa or elsewhere — is easily explained. If a community or region lacked adequate steam service, an electric road could solve the problem. Interurban service would give farmers, miners, and others convenient access to the cultural and economic opportunities in the larger cities and towns; these communities could thus profitably tap a

larger trading area. When in operation, electric lines usually offered hourly or semi-hourly service, rather than the two or three runs a day of the steam roads. Moreover, interurbans, unlike steam-cars, would stop at farmsteads, village crossings, or virtually anywhere. And the electric railways were clean; there were "no cinders, no dirt, no dust, no smoke." The traveling public also liked the less expensive rates. This was particularly appreciated after years of discontent with high and arbitrary steam railroad and express company charges. Of course, this new mode of transportation, with all of its advantages, extended the range of travel. Despite the coming of the automobile, highways were primitive. In Iowa, the state's "vicious and viscous and generally impassable brand of mud" gained a national reputation. It would be years before the good-roads movement succeeded in lifting the state out of the "gumbo."

The idea of the electric interurban became important in the coal fields of southern Iowa that grew rapidly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While coal had been mined commercially since the 1870s, the increased demand for locomotive fuel set off a boom, and prompted coal-mining firms, often subsidiaries of the rail carriers themselves, to invest heavily in the region. Monroe County was a good example. The development of large, deep-shaft mines in the 1890s and early 1900s by the



A lapel button, worn by promoters of the Albia Interurban (courtesy of the author).

Wapello Coal Company and the Consolidated Coal Company — the former a corporate affiliate of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad and the latter a satellite firm of the Chicago & North Western Railway — explains why the county, which produced only 100,000 tons of coal in 1883, reached an output of two and one-half million tons by 1907.

Understandably, the population of southern Iowa's five leading coal-producing counties grew steadily, even spectacularly, between 1890 and 1910. The total population of these counties — Appanoose, Mahaska, Marion, Monroe, and Wapello — increased 25.9 per cent during these 20 years. The greatest expansion was in Monroe and Appanoose counties, 86.1 per cent in the former and 51.4 per cent in the latter. Individual communities reflected the increase, as the larger towns served as supply points for the coal industry. For instance, Cen-



Payday at Buxton, July 4, 1907 (courtesy of Mrs. T. H. Dearing, Albia).

terville, the seat of Appanoose County, had 3,668 residents in 1890 and 6,936 in 1910. Mystic, also in Appanoose County, grew from 875 in 1890 to 2,663 by 1910. The population of Ottumwa, Wapello's seat, increased from 14,001 in 1890 to 22,012 in 1910. Oskaloosa, seat of Mahaska County, moved from 6,558 to 9,466 between the 1890 and 1910 censuses, while Albia, the Monroe County seat, more than doubled its size from 2,359 to 4,969 during this same period. Two other Monroe County communities boomed even more. Hiteman, nonexistent in 1890, had approximately 3,000 residents in 1910 and Buxton, established in 1900, had at least 6,000 inhabitants by 1907.

This population growth, which coincided with the national mania for electric railways, created a fertile environment for interurban promotion. The new

mining camps, with their many potential patrons, their close proximity to one another and to older communities, their general lack of adequate steam railroad service, and their poor local highways, were attractive to would-be traction builders. The South Iowa coalfields could not be ignored.

The first talk of interurban construction in the coal fields came in 1895 when Oskaloosa merchants proposed a small inter-city system, but this and dozens of similar efforts seldom got past the planning stages. The story of traction promotion in South Iowa is most graphically seen in the case histories of the three electric roads actually constructed: the Oskaloosa-Buxton Electric Railway; the Albia Interurban; and the Centerville, Albia & Southern.

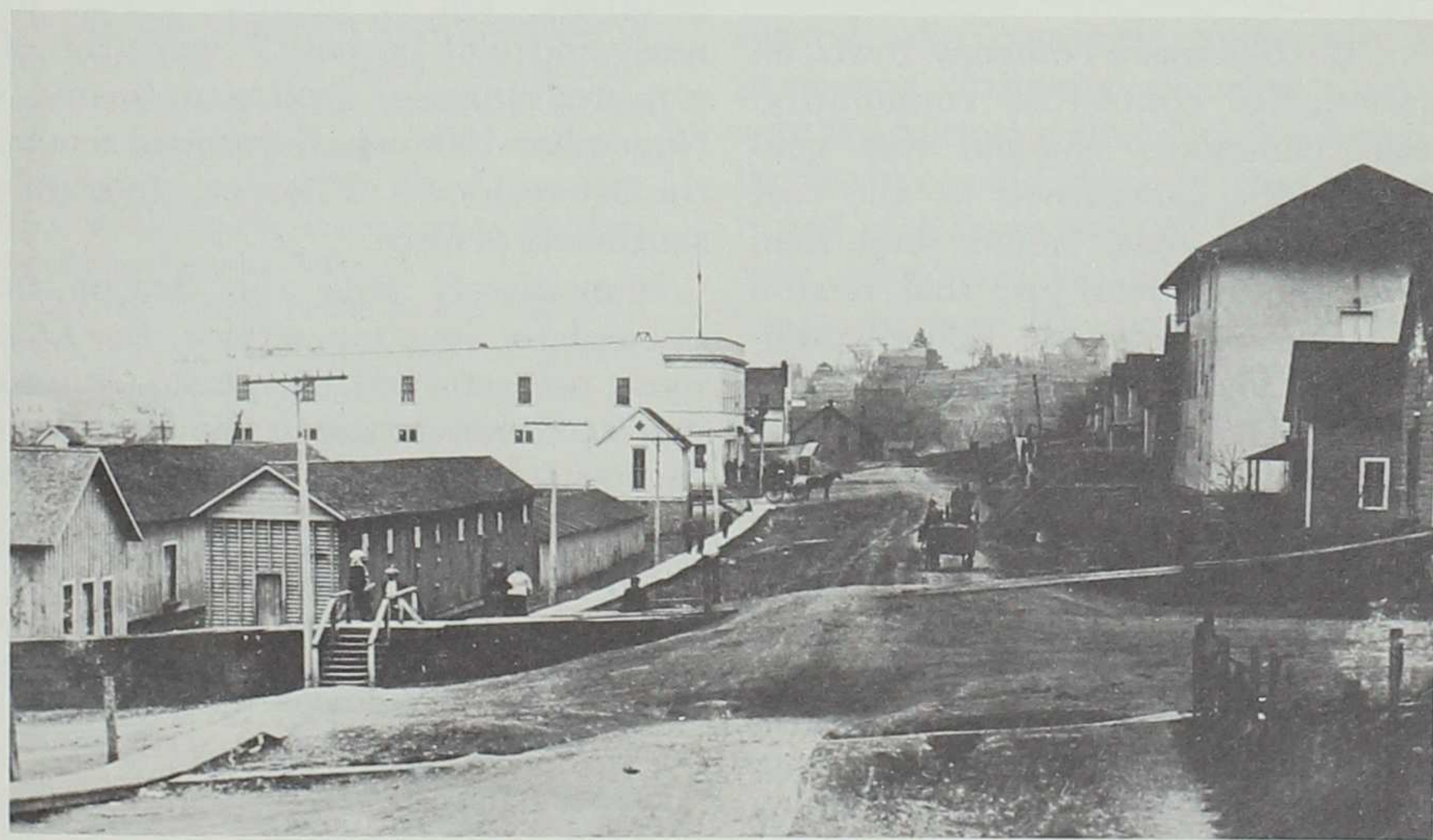
In 1902, two traction promoters,

Henry E. O'Neil of Omaha, Nebraska and J. F. Springfield of Ottumwa, opened a highly-profitable electric light, heating, and street railway business in Oskaloosa. These men at first expressed no interest in interurbans. However, local merchants in the Spring of 1904 enlisted the services of O'Neil and Springfield as "field managers" to explore the possibility of building a high-speed electric railway of approximately 20 miles from Oskaloosa southwest to the mining camps of Beacon, White City, and Buxton. After more than a year of study — on June 19, 1905 — the interurban proposal was officially incorporated as the Oskaloosa-Buxton Electric Railway Company. Fourteen months later, Mahaska County voters by a three to one margin approved a special bond issue which, along with a stock subscription drive, ultimately raised

more than \$100,000.

The road's objective, Buxton, was not the typical South Iowa coal camp. It was large, populated by blacks, and totally company owned. In 1900, the Chicago & North Western Railway, through its Consolidated Coal Company, purchased 8,600 acres of coal property in Bluff Creek Township in northeastern Monroe County and bought another 1,600 acres in adjoining Mahaska County. The railroad leased mineral rights under additional land. It then moved a portion of its old Muchakinock camp in southern Mahaska County to the new townsite during the summer of 1900, and within a few years the population there totalled 3,500, eventually reaching 6,000 (one source says 9,000). Local legend claimed that Buxton was "the largest unincorporated city in the United States."

The labor force in Buxton was pre-



A view of Buxton, circa 1906 (courtesy of the author).

dominantly black. "Nine-tenths of [Buxton residents]," noted the *Monroe County News* in 1907, "are of the negro descent." Although black miners already lived in Muchakinock, the C&NW recruited more for Buxton, largely from Alabama. The railroad preferred blacks since they worked cheaply, did not form militant unions, and relieved the area's labor shortage.

At first glance, life in Buxton seemed good. The huge company store, which at its zenith employed 135 clerks, offered merchandise that ran the gamut from "caskets to safety pins." The town's newspaper, *The Gazette*, reported in 1906 that "Our school attendance has grown from 300 children to 650. The church buildings have increased from three to five. . . . The YMCA has outgrown its commodious building and a separate building for the boy's department has been secured. . . . the new telephone system has taken the place of the old."

Yet, Buxton was a company town, an economically controlled community. Miners commonly charged that consumer prices, established by the coal company, were much higher there than in surrounding towns and that Buxton lacked certain services. These conditions were made worse by the inability of Buxtonites to shop conveniently elsewhere. Local roads were awful — some of the state's worst — and the steam railroad situation was not much better. The C&NW operated just a single passenger train through town. This line, an 80-mile branch from the carrier's mainline at Belle Plaine, served only sleepy farming villages and small mining towns — stations like Guernsey, Deep River, What Cheer, Tioga, White City,

Cricket, and Miami. Therefore, Buxtonites eagerly backed a direct traction line into Oskaloosa or some other large community.

Understandably, Oskaloosans viewed the Buxton terminus as a potential El Dorado. Observed a local newspaper: "The interurban idea presented itself to the business sense of Oskaloosa merchants when the Muchakinock coal camp . . . dwindled and passed and when the new town of Buxton in Monroe County took the miners and their dollars from Oskaloosa. Business interests demanded easy access with the growing camp of Buxton and the interurban was the thing to bring about the desired conditions." Oskaloosa businessmen believed firmly that "miners spent, farmers saved." If only they could tap the miners — never mind if they were black!

For nearly a decade Oskaloosans sought to reach Buxton with their interurban. "On to Buxton!" "This line must and will be built!" were the oft-repeated slogans. Optimism soared in November 1906 when the road reached the 300 residents of Beacon, three miles southwest of town.

Immediately after the Beacon line opened for revenue service, the Oskaloosa press turned to special "interurban" columns to argue the benefits of the road, hoping, of course, to achieve completion of the project. A typical story, aimed at farmers, read:

Joe Shaw, a representative farmer living southwest of Beacon, is an interurban enthusiast. While in town yesterday he told one of the directors of the interurban company that he would not only give the right-of-way as surveyed through the farm but he would contribute \$200



Ceremonies in the Spring of 1907 on the west side of the public square in Albia to mark the construction of the Albia to Hocking line of the Albia Interurban (courtesy of Mrs. W. A. Magie, Albia).

toward the building of the extension from Beacon to Buxton. Since the Beacon line was put into operation the advantages of the interurban have been emphatically impressed on Mr. Shaw's mind. If all the farmers along the proposed extension would do as well as Mr. Shaw has promised, work on the extension of the line would not long be delayed.

The interurban is the farmer's best asset in getting his stuff to market. Beacon people are of the opinion that the new interurban line is a big advertisement for them. Already Oskaloosa people have been hunting butter and eggs in the place and are buying meats at the local shops.

But wishful thinking could not complete the interurban from Beacon to Buxton. Several factors destroyed promotion efforts. The Panic of 1907 temporarily ruined the "foreign" money market; the road's initial cost of more than \$35,000 per mile (compared to the

average cost per mile of \$15,000) consumed virtually all of the available local capital; the company continually experienced difficulty securing right-of-way at a fair price from "money-hungry" landowners; and there existed the real threat of Albia promoters building their own interurban to Buxton. The Oskaloosa-Buxton Electric Railway was stalled. Its Lilliputian size earned it the distinction of being one of the nation's strangest interurbans.

Albia's interurban story was more successful. After the turn of the century, this bustling seat of Monroe County delighted in being called Iowa's "Capital City of Coal." Initially, local traction promoters — Levi Tiltson Richmond of Albia, Calvin Manning of Ottumwa, and W. E. Gant of Holton, Kansas — had their eyes set on construc-

tion of two lines — one three miles south from Albia to Hocking, a mining community of 800 operated by the Iowa Central Railroad, and the other, seven miles long, to the northwest to serve the prosperous, progressive town of Hite-man, home of the Wapello Coal Company.

Early in 1907 Richmond, an officer in Albia's Farmers & Miners Savings Bank, began raising locally the \$30,000 for the Hocking project. By June, the Albia Interurban Railway proudly opened its new line, although the Hiteman extension proved to be a greater challenge, simply because its longer length raised construction costs (estimated between \$60,000 and \$75,000). But early opera-

tions of the Hocking division encouraged promoters. "This line during the first sixty days of operation," beamed a company official, "brought in- to Albia from Hocking and Rizerville [a small coal camp between Albia and Hocking] 215 passengers per day, or 6450 per month, the majority of which it is safe to assume have expended some money in this city." During this same period the firm took in a daily average of \$35, while operating expenses amounted to only \$19 per day.

Promoters Richmond, Manning, and Gant bombarded the citizenry with the commonly-argued advantages of interurban service. They emphasized, for example, the poor and expensive quality



Car Number 9 of the Albia Interurban Railway (on the Hocking run) nears the southwest corner of Albia's public square, circa 1910 (courtesy of Mrs. John H. Bickert, Albia).



The Hiteman Supply Company in Hiteman, Iowa, circa 1910. This was the "company" store, owned by the Wapello Coal Company (courtesy of Mrs. T. H. Dearing, Albia).

of existing transportation between Albia and the coal towns. One story ran: "It now costs from 40 cents [one way] to come from Hiteman via the steam railway, and then you have to go to Tower 307 [a junction west of Albia where the CB&Q Hiteman branch met the mainline] and many times wait for a belated train." (It would later cost only 15 cents to ride the interurban cars that ran hourly.) Of course, the economic advantages were never ignored. "There are 800 miners at Hiteman," observed the promoters, "and they are the best buyers on earth. They must be brought to Albia and they must have the proper facilities to reach the city." And they argued, "[Hiteman] ladies . . . can come to Albia and make their purchases the same as the Hocking ladies now do and be at home in time to prepare their morning purchases for dinner." (When the line opened, special cars ran on payday to bring miners to town.)

There were additional arguments in favor of the Hiteman extension. Merchants were told by promoters that direct access to much of the \$200,000

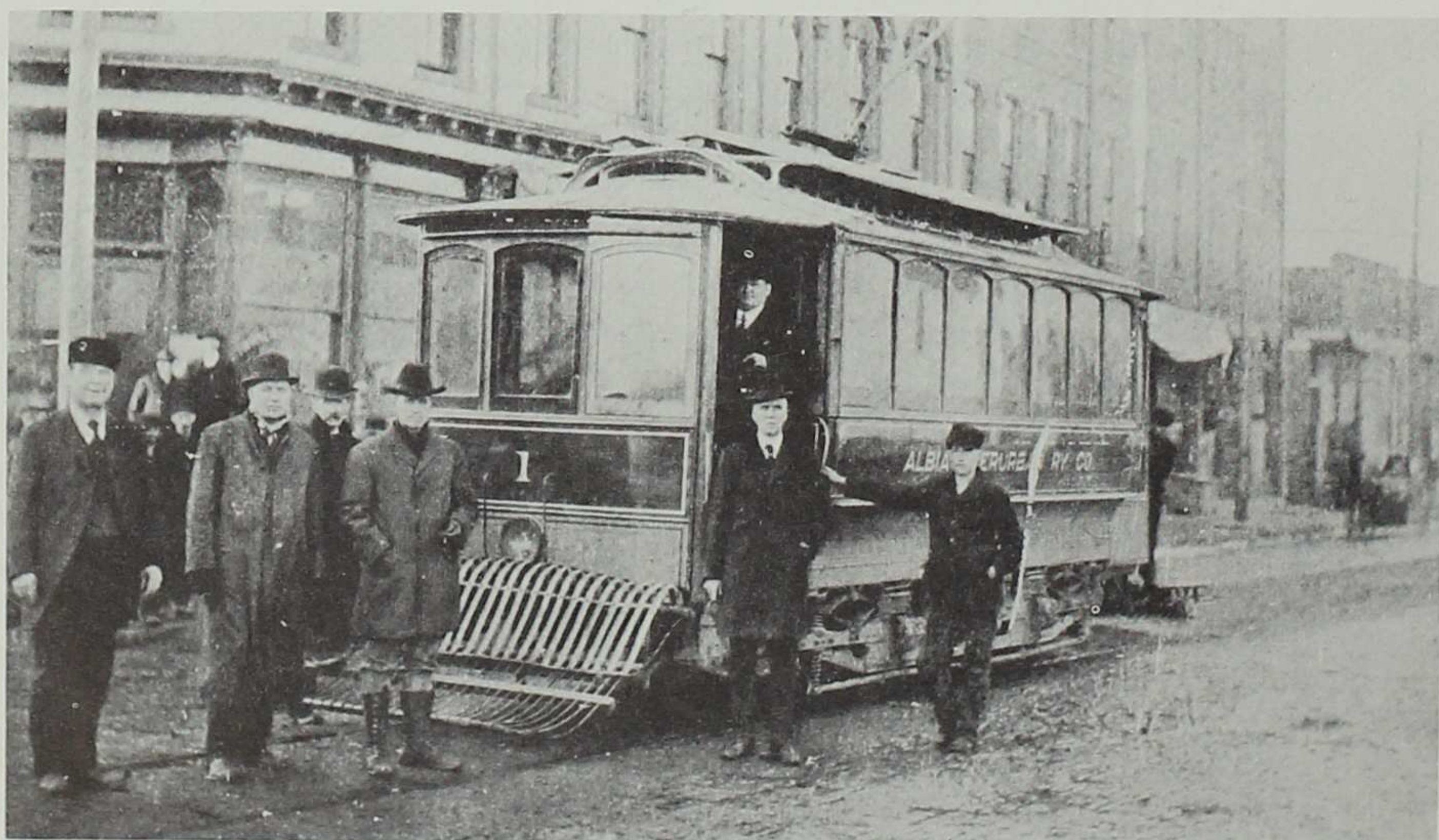
monthly mining payroll could "in a short time . . . stamp out the business now done through mail-order houses." It was pointed out to residents along the projected line that land prices would rise dramatically. Farmers would find, for instance, that they could profitably sell small parcels of real estate because miners would undoubtedly want to buy an acre or two near the interurban (thus convenient to work) "to do a little farming besides working in the mines." Perhaps appealing to local pride and to well-known examples of "corporate arrogance" during this time, promoters suggested that "it may be five or ten years before some big capitalist would come along and build it [Hiteman line] and run it for his own interest, *as he pleases*, and make all the profits *regardless of the people concerned*." They therefore concluded that "it would be a thousand times better for everyone to have it built now." And these same Albia traction boosters realized that mining camps were ephemeral: "[In time] Hocking and Hiteman will be worked out and the people will not be in those

towns to be reached." They saw the interurban as a means of permanently building up the Albia economy. "We must make good and develop the town so it will not need the mines."

In the Spring of 1908 only \$9,000 remained to be raised to guarantee the Hiteman project. Mass meetings, smokers, and continued solicitation of residents, particularly professionals, finally produced the needed capital. One technique used was having young men take stock and work it out on construction of the line, one half of their labor to be paid in cash and the balance in stock. The railway was speedily built; the first car ran from Albia to Hiteman on

December 16, 1908. In a great moment of self-congratulation the *Albia Union* announced: "WITH HITEMAN FINISHED, OTHER LINES WILL INEVITABLY FOLLOW."

Backers of the Albia Interurban also had a Buxton line in mind. Albians saw Buxton as the great interurban prize, just as Oskaloosans did. Unquestionably, a strong sense of urban rivalry developed between the two county-seat communities. Albia newspapers repeatedly mocked Oskaloosa's failure to build from Beacon to Buxton. The *Albia Republican* of December 24, 1908, for one, said: "They [Oskaloosans] built a line not quite as long as the Hocking line, and



After the opening of the Albia to Hiteman line, the promoters of the Albia Interurban posed in front of one of their cars. Left to right are: L. T. Richman, W. E. Gant, Charles Ross, and Calvin Manning. The man in the car is probably A. J. Beckett (courtesy of Mrs. John H. Bickert, Albia).

then they quit. Since that time, they have been doing nothing along a line of building interurbans. Albia, however, has finished the Hocking line, built to Hiteman, and it is dollars to donuts we will have a line running into Buxton before Oskaloosa advances another foot." Concluded the *Republican*, "Over at this end of the line we do things, and we have a right to feel our oats!" The Oskaloosa press was extremely sensitive to these barbs, but it usually responded with platitudes that warned Albians that the Beacon to Buxton project was far from dead.

The momentum seemed to be with the Albia Interurban. Soon after service

began to Hiteman, the company announced that it would build the ten miles from Albia to Buxton. There was every reason for optimism: the two lines already operating were money-makers; the project faced no difficult terrain (Oskaloosa promoters, on the other hand, would have to bridge the treacherous Des Moines River); the country between Albia and Buxton was "thickly settled" with farms and scattered mines; and Buxton continued to thrive.

Yet the project sputtered. Local promoters knew that they would have to have outside capital if steel rails and trolley overhead were ever to be installed. The Hocking and Hiteman lines



An Albia Interurban Railway car on the Cedar Creek bridge, one half mile east of Hiteman in February 1911 (courtesy of the author).



The Hiteman terminal of the Albia Interurban, circa December 1908. The building also contained a small restaurant (courtesy of the author).

had consumed their own capital and most of the Monroe County investment dollars. Then, in June 1910, the *Electric Railway Journal* (the traction industry's trade organ) reported that the Albia Interurban had authorized a \$300,000 bond issue for the Buxton extension and that New York financiers would sell these construction obligations. Even before this report, local papers said that an Albia-Buxton interurban was "definite." Such a disclosure prompted the *Bussey Press* to exclaim: "History tells us that in the days of the Roman Empire, 'All roads led to Rome.' Truly this is today [the case] of Albia."

Despite such optimism, Albians never saw their Buxton line. The New York

banking house of Reynolds, Davis & Company, after selling approximately \$10,000 of construction bonds, abandoned the project. The reasons are unknown, but likely the opening of new mines by Consolidated Coal in western Monroe County, which started to syphon off Buxton's population, frightened the eastern business community. By the end of 1911 the Albia press no longer discussed a solely local line to Buxton, but spoke rather of having some stronger system finish the job.

The new hope for an electric road to Buxton from Albia centered on what became southern Iowa's largest

and most successful electric traction project, the Centerville, Albia & Southern Railway. Unlike the previous two systems, most of the CA&S had been built earlier as a steam railroad. Dating from 1879 and known as the Centerville, Moravia & Albia Railway, this road linked the three communities in its corporate title. Owned by prominent Centerville attorney, businessman, and politician Francis M. Drake and New York financier Russell Sage, this 24.5 mile line had an exciting history. It was leased in the early 1880s to the Wabash, then it was operated as an independent steam shortline, and in 1890, it was reorganized as the Albia & Centerville Railway and subsequently leased to the Iowa Central.

The property, never in good physical condition, had deteriorated badly by the early years of the century. Reported the *Albia Republican* in 1909: "We were away from the city the other day and a gentleman remarked he knew where Albia was all right, that it was on the line of the Albia-Centerville Railway. The A & C is the butt for about all the jokes and gibes that can come to the railway or about a railway. The train service is as poor as it possibly could be. . . ."

Patrons and all those desiring good service between Albia and Centerville took heart in 1910 when a group of largely out-of-state investors, led by William A. Bollin of New York City, acquired the Drake-Sage property, ended the lease with the Iowa Central, and then set about to rebuild the line as an interurban. In March 1910, they formed the Southern Iowa Traction Company, but unfortunately "found it difficult to float bonds on the property that had been losing money each year under the past inef-

ficient management while operated by the Iowa Central."

After several unsuccessful tries at financing the electrification and the line's extension (the promoters surveyed their own Albia to Buxton route), the Southern Iowa Traction Company in early 1914 sold out to the Centerville, Light & Traction Company, a firm headed by two local financial wizards, Frank S. Payne and D. C. Bradley. These men, who already owned a lucrative electric power business in the area and the Centerville streetcar system, had opened in 1909 a seven-mile interurban from Centerville northwest to Mystic, a booming mining town on the Milwaukee Railroad which lacked direct access to Centerville. The Mystic line by 1914 enjoyed the third highest net earnings per mile for any Iowa railroad, and both Payne and Bradley believed that they could earn handsome profits with the Southern Iowa Traction property.

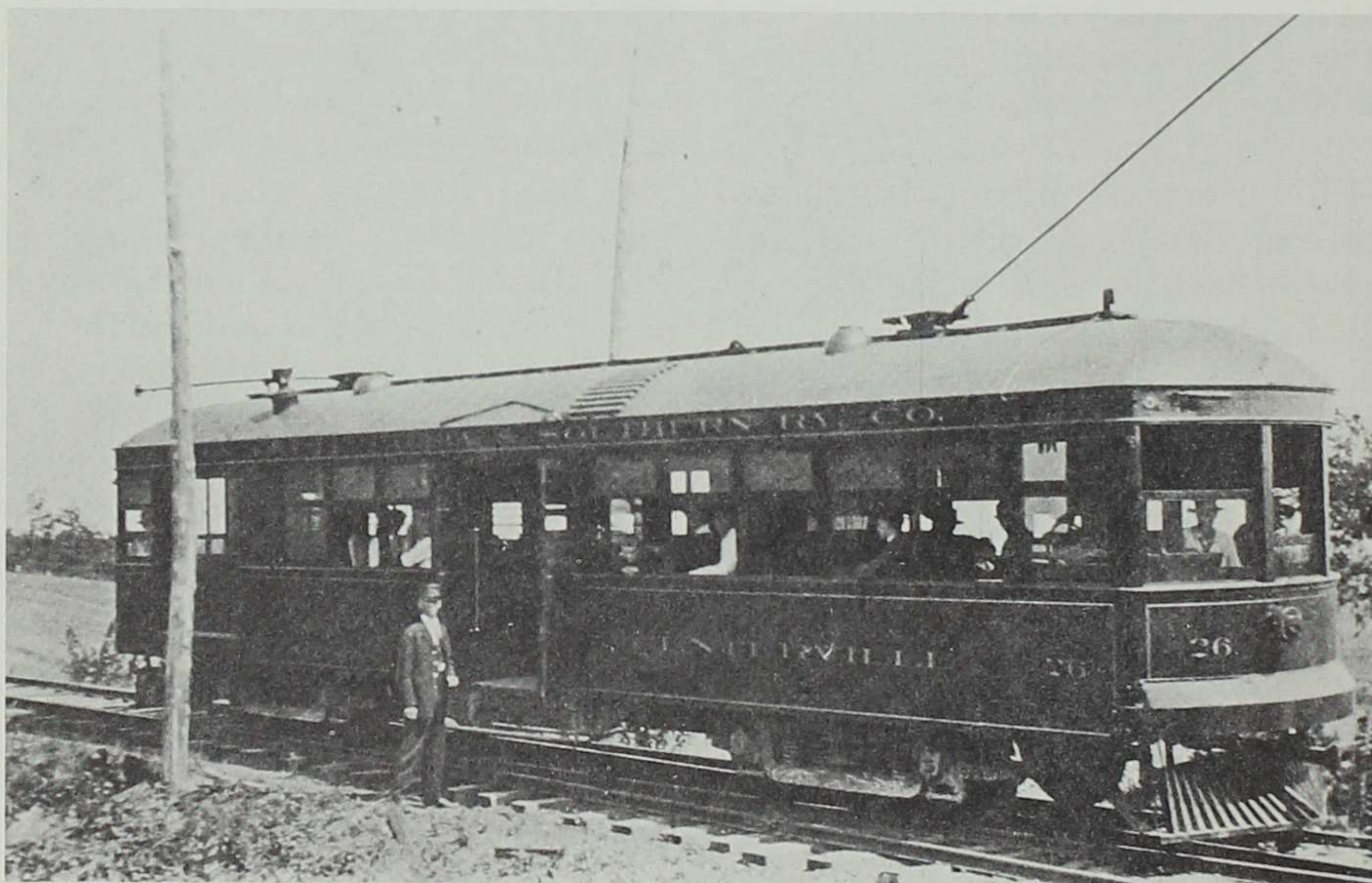
NOTE ON SOURCES

Key source material used for this article came from the interurban trade publications, *The Street Railway Journal* and *The Electric Railway Journal*, and local newspapers, especially *The Oskaloosa Herald*, *The Albia Republican*, *The Monroe County News* (Albia), *The Albia Union*, and *The Semi-Weekly Iowegian* (Centerville), for the pertinent years.

Also helpful was the "standard" history of the electric traction industry, George W. Hilton and John F. Due, *The Electric Interurban Railways in America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1960).

A version of this article was presented at the Eleventh Annual Northern Great Plains History Conference held at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse on October 22, 1976. A copy of the complete documentation for both the conference paper and this article is available in the files of the Division of the State Historical Society, Iowa City.

My special thanks for photographic assistance to my mother, Mrs. Thomas H. Dearing of Albia, and to Mrs. John H. Bickert, Mrs. W. A. Magie, and Robert W. Larson, all of Albia.



Car Number 26 of the Centerville, Albia & Southern in 1919, near Hilton, Iowa, four and one half miles south of Albia (courtesy of the author).

News of the Centerville, Light & Traction take-over of the old steam line was warmly received in both Centerville and Albia. Centerville's *Semi-Weekly Iowegian* felt that "now there will be an opportunity for the people from the north part of the county to get to their county seat town where they naturally want to come to trade." And added the paper: "Not only the people directly along the line and at Moravia will be benefited, but the whole wide territory each side of the track as a long drive can be saved by driving to the interurban just as many in the northwest county now do in driving

to Mystic and then taking the cars." Unlike the rivalry that developed between Albia and Oskaloosa over the Buxton line, Albians greeted electrification as a great step forward for them, too. They did not view the road as potentially hurting business. "The merchants of Albia have places of business that are larger and better than Centerville. They carry a more diversified stock and are in every way more fully up with the items and ready to meet the demands of all shoppers."

The first electric cars rolled over a completely refurbished Centerville,

Albia & Southern — the wholly owned affiliate of the parent CL&T — on July 27, 1914. Rather than plan a line north to Buxton, now a dying community, owners of the CA&S focused their efforts instead at improving the carload freight and package express business, opening new mines along the line, and making the property “the profitable passenger short line via Albia.” They succeeded in all efforts.

By World War I enthusiasm for electric traction in South Iowa and throughout the nation had flagged. Viable alternatives to the interurban now existed. Rubber tires, not flanged wheels, symbolized popular interest in intercity transportation. Noted the owner of one of the Midwest’s most unprofitable traction firms, the Mexico, Missouri Investment and Construction Company, in 1917, “When this enterprise was started ten years ago, [electric] railroads were prosperous and railroad securities were regarded as good

investments. Now they are not wanted at any price.”

The 1920s were a time of retrenchments and abandonments for electric traction. In southern Iowa the owners of the Oskaloosa-Buxton Electric Railway junked their road in 1920; by 1925 all interurban operations of the Albia Interurban Railway (reorganized in 1916 as the Albia Light & Railway Company) had been abandoned; and the same decade saw service trimmed on the CA&S. What had once been thought “the latest harbingers of a higher state of civilization” had totally passed. Perhaps South Iowans were fortunate that they did not construct more miles of electric railway, for as the nation’s leading historians of the interurban have concluded, “Few industries have arisen so rapidly or declined so quickly, and no important industry of its size had a worse financial record.” Yet, the earlier excitement for traction in the South Iowa coalfields reveals the age-old quest for profits and a more glorious future. □