Constructing the Past

Volume 11 | Issue 1 Article 9

2009

Illinois Terminal Railroad: Impact and Demise from the Perspective of the Village of Morton, Illinois

Ramya Kumaran
Illinois Wesleyan University, rkumaran@iwu.edu

Recommended Citation
Kumaran, Ramya (2010) "Illinois Terminal Railroad: Impact and Demise from the Perspective of the Village of Morton, Illinois," *Constructing the Past*: Vol. 11: Iss. 1, Article 9.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/constructing/vol11/iss1/9

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History Department at Digital Commons @ IWU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Constructing the Past by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ IWU. For more information, please contact sdaviska@iwu.edu.
©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Illinois Terminal Railroad: Impact and Demise from the Perspective of the Village of Morton, Illinois

Ramya Kumaran

The Illinois Traction System, the Illinois Terminal Railroad, and the interurban are names for the electric railroad that operated over five hundred miles of electric railway[1] and connected Peoria with Lincoln, Springfield, and St. Louis on its Southern route, and with Bloomington, Decatur, Champaign, and Danville on its Eastern Route.[2] Receiving its power from a third rail or an overhead catenary, the interurban provided two-thirds the speed of railroads, but four to five times the frequency of service at half the fare. George W. Hilton and John F. Due, in *The Electric Interurban Railways in America,* define an interurban as a system which shares most or all of four characteristics: electric power; passenger service as primary emphasis; heavier, faster equipment than urban streetcars; and operation on street trackage in cities but on roadside tracks or private rights-of-way in rural areas.[3] Before the electric lines, muddy, dirt roads linked larger communities with villages like Morton, Illinois. Although steam railroads existed, there were limited passenger trains, hence they had infrequent schedules, high fares, and were not likely to stop at small towns.[4] The interurban succeeded as an alternative to transportation by horse-and-buggy and helped to bridge the gap between two eras, the horse-and-buggy and the automobile.[5] Without many automobiles, good roads, or bus and truck lines, the interurban became the preferred choice of transportation till the rise of the automobile and improved roads. The interurban completely changed transportation in the United States. Although communities are just a small part of a much bigger picture, every town ends up having a different story concerning the phenomenon of the interurban, and the Village of Morton, Illinois, was no exception.

On July 18, 1900, the interurban phenomenon took root in Illinois. William Brown McKinley founded the Illinois Traction System through his purchase of the Danville Street Railway & Light Company and then joined it with the Urbana and Champaign Street Railway Company. These lines

---

[1] Illinois Traction System Photograph, N.d., In Burdall Hall Collection, Burdell Hall.

[2] Burdell Hall, "Illinois Traction (Terminal) System Passenger Coach," April 12, 2000. Presented to Morton Public Library.

[3] George Hilton and John F. Due, *The Electric Interurban Railways in America*. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000) 312.

[4] Dale Jenkins, *Illinois Terminal Railroad: Road to Personalized Services*, (Hart, Missouri: Whitewater Productions Inc., 2005), 9.

[5] Ibid., 10.

developed into the McKinley Lines.[6] More lines were added, and the railroad became officially known as the Illinois Traction System until 1935, when it became the Illinois Terminal Railroad Company. Historian John Keiser said, "Although Illinois ranked fourth among the states in interurban mileage, it boasted the largest and longest-lived company, the Illinois Traction System."[7] This statement was surprising since my research indicated that at one time the Indianapolis Traction Terminal in Indianapolis, Indiana held the title of the world's largest interurban. This is believable because in the height of its popularity, this terminal hosted around seven million passengers a year, and five hundred interurban trains a day. They were from all over the state of Indiana and from as far away as Louisville, Kentucky.[8]

Keiser's statement becomes largely presumptuous and possibly doubtful, so it is necessary to see whether other historians express the same sentiments. Illinois Terminal Railroad historian Dale Jenkins stated that the railroad once held the title of "North America's most far-flung electric interurban."[9] There is still confusion as to what exactly this pertains to, but local historians Fred W. Soady, Jr. and A. Gill Siepert, bring us closer to the truth by stating that the "Traction had the distinction of being the largest (in mileage) and the longest (in mainline) interurban to operate under one management in the State of Illinois."[10] Rather than being the longest and largest interurban operation in the United States, the Illinois Traction System was considered the longest and largest interurban operating in Illinois. Since the Illinois Terminal Railroad is not a much contested or explored topic, one can see how the truth can become misconstrued. Since the historians in this field are all from Illinois, they are all local historians. Although Dale Jenkins is also from Illinois, he might be the exception since he is a respected scholar in the field of Illinois Railroad history. Since the historians are all from Illinois, they also may have a vested personal interest to promote the Illinois interurban and, like Kaiser, skew the truth a little.

The Village of Morton was one of the smaller communities that greatly benefited from the railroad through gaining a connection to the rest of the world. The railroad helped stabilize and expand Morton by drawing more business to the community. According to Grant Conibear, the first agent for the

---

[6] Donald F. Roth and Ruth C. Roth, "The Morton Interurban," *Morton: A Pictorial History*, (Morton, IL: G. Bradley Publishing Inc., 1988), 98.

[7] John H. Keiser, "The Electric Interurban in Illinois,"*Illinois Vignettes* (Springfield, IL: Sangamon State University, 1977) 52.

[8] Jerry Marlette, *Indianapolis Traction Terminal*, (Indianapolis: Council for Local History, 1959), 811-12.

[9] Jenkins, *Illinois Terminal*, 6.

[10] Fred W. Soady, Jr. and A. Gill Siepert, "Railroads…," *Morton Centennial Part XII*, December 1977, 10.

Illinois Terminal Railroad, the interurban "lifted Morton right out of the mud."[11] The passenger railroad came to Morton as a part of the McKinley Lines, and the railroad depot and traction were constructed from 1905 to 1907. The Morton Interurban Depot, or "Station 581,"[12] was constructed by Edward Mathis, operator of a lumber yard, on the corner of Jefferson and First Street.[13] The structure had a ticket office, waiting room, and a baggage room in the back.[14] Today, this is the location of the First National Bank.

The first Morton man to ride the first interurban train was Leonard C. Russell. He rode the train on a trial run to Peoria and then to East Peoria. Until June of 1907, a regular route was not established. The passenger service which came through Morton was part of the route between East Peoria and St. Louis.[15] According to Burdell Hall, who has been on the entire route from Peoria, it took a whole day to go around the route. The train departed at six in the morning, made stops at Morton, Springfield, St. Louis, Champaign, and Danville. He only returned to Peoria at around midnight.[16] The dark green[17] interurban came to Morton when there was a great need for short-distance intercity travel, so it was able to thrive.[18] Rebuilding around 1928 led to the front trucks of the now tangerine[19] traction cars to be replaced by powered cars in order to gain higher speed.[20]

Although the interurban helped Morton grow as a community, it also brought unexpected problems to the town, such as deadly train-automobile accidents and an increased concern about electric current as the cause of fatality or injury among interurban employees. Electricity was provided to the railroad in two ways. One option was to use overhead catenary live wires, which would come in contact with pantographs, or cage-like structures, fitted

---

[11] Roth and Roth, "The Morton Interurban," 98.

[12] Soady and Siepert, "Railroads," 7.

[13] Roth and Roth, "Morton Interurban," 98.

[14] Soady and Siepert, "Railroads," 7.

[15] "Morton Man Who Rode First Train Takes Last Interurban Ride Also," *Tazewell County News*, June 16, 1955.

[16] Burdell Hall, Written History, March 2, 2009.

[17] Fred W. Soady, Jr, "Longest electric railway through this area," *Tazewell Publications*, January 16, 1975.

[18] Soady and Siepert, "Railroads," 5.

[19] Illinois Terminal Railroad toy passenger coach replica. In Burdell Hall Collection. Burdell Hall. Mr. Hall's father was a lineman for the ITS from 1924 to 1938. He purchased the toy passenger coach for Burdell Hall at Woolworth's Five and Dime Store in Peoria, Illinois in December 1926. The shop had the caps, uniforms, gloves, etc that the train workers would need as well as toys which represented the Interurban.

[20] A. E. Barker, "T parlor-observation interurban," *Model Railroader Magazine*.

on top of the train. A lesser version of this apparatus, called the "Direct Suspension," was a single overhead wire that was connected by a cable on a pole with a pulley. The second option involved a third electrified rail located alongside the train track. A flat plate, called a shoe, would extend from the train to skim the top of the third rail. Morton used the option of catenary wires to provide power for its interurban trains.[21]

This increased use of electricity by the railroads led to public concern, such as an article published in the *Morton News* called "What Would You Do: If Live Wire Was Lying Across a Man's Body?" The article strove to expose the community to the dangers of electricity and educate readers about possible solutions to accidents. The article also noted the lack of awareness people had about electricity, which led railroad companies to instruct employees who were in close proximity to the "bolt of death."[22] It is very interesting to read about the reaction to electricity in the early twentieth century. According to the article, if someone is "Given a sound heart and a good constitution, it does not follow that contact with the rail always kills," but "It will kill a weak individual…at first shock."[23] In order for the "weak individual" to survive, the rescue needs to be very quick and at the right time. Rather than the amount of voltage or the length of contact with the live wire, people thought that if someone was healthy, that electricity would spare them more than a weaker person. Rescuing a person who had received an electric shock was compared to saving someone from drowning. I believe that this is a really good description of how quick a fatality from electrocution would have been. The main highlight of the article was the descriptions of removing the live wire from a victim. One possibility was to take hold of the man by the back of his coat and pull him quickly away from the wire. Another rescue possibility entailed the men removing their coats and carefully placing them beneath the body of the man lying on the electric rail. The man would then be raised from contact with the current. A third possibility involved the use of a wooden lever to lift the victim's body from the electric rail and to think quickly in order to utilize other articles lying around the area. Although very dangerous, removing the live wire itself was also essential in the rescue of victims. Men were taught to use at least two coats to make a rope. They would then stand on each side of the live wire, while keeping the coat in between them, and catch the wire in the coat and save the unconscious victim from death.[24] I believe this article would have

---

[21] Soady and Siepert, "Railroads," 9.
In appendix iii, the photograph of Illinois Terminal Railroad Car does a good job of showing the overwire apparatus.

[22] "What Would You Do: If Live Wire Was Lying Across a Man's Body?" *Morton News*. Feb. 9, 1909.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

more validity and truth to it if I had been able to find other primary sources which expressed the same ideas. Although this is the only description of railroad first-aid I found, I believe that the article clearly shows the fear of electricity and being electrocuted with the stress on the necessary rescue measures.

Another possible cause of fatality by railroad came with the arrival of train-automobile accidents. Morton first experienced the tragedy of train-automobile collisions on Sunday, August 29, 1909. The *Morton Times* reported the accident occurred a little more than a mile west of town when a P.B. & C. train travelling forty to fifty miles per hour struck an automobile traveling at twenty-three to thirty miles per hour. The automobile was attempting to cross the P.B. & C. tracks before the train arrived. Although the interurban motorman, Elijah Neeley, attempted to stop the streetcar, the train still struck the automobile. Samuel Mosiman was killed upon impact, while Joseph E. Mosiman and John E. Gerber were injured. To the people of Morton, this accident was a shock. Not only was this the town's first tragedy from the interurban, but the first citizen killed was a prominent, beloved member of the town. Samuel Mosiman also was a great supporter of the P.B. & C. Traction Co., and he even rode the interurban on the first day of operation from Morton.[25] In 1909, a collision like this was rare, but this incident was an indication of what was to come. As the number of automobiles increased, incidents of train-automobile collisions would also proportionally increase.[26] The increase in accidents over the years could be taken as an indicator of the fate of the Illinois Terminal and the interurban in general, because it shows a direct effect of the growing and dominating automobile industry.

The Illinois Terminal only transported passengers at first, but as the years passed, more freight was slowly added to its cargo. Development of freight services enabled the Traction to survive longer than other railroads. Even as passenger revenues declined with the emergence of the automobile and paved highways, the railroad was still able to remain solvent.[27] The passenger service ran through Morton from April 13, 1907,[28] until June 12, 1955,[29] which marked the end of Morton's interurban era of forty-eight years of passenger services. Leonard C. Russell, the first passenger, was bestowed with the honor to be the last to take a ride on the interurban. In *The Morton*

In appendix i, included are pictures from the article which describe these situations.

[25] "Death at a Road Crossing," *The Morton Times*, Sept. 2, 1909.

[26] Soady and Siepert, "Railroads," 11.

[27] Soady and Siepert, "Railroads," 5.

[28] Photograph, In Robert C. Conibear Collection. Morton Public Library.

[29] Soady and Siepert, "Railroads," 19.

Times, Russell reported there were around thirty passengers for the last run between Morton and East Peoria. Since Morton was a part of the discontinued route between East Peoria and St. Louis, only the passenger route from Springfield to St. Louis still continued.[30]

According to local historians Fred W. Soady, Jr. and A. Gill Siepert, a national financial panic in late 1907 caused a drastic increase in construction costs and helped to end the "interurban building boom."[31] Interurban passenger services slowly started to decline in the 1920s until the influence of buses and private automobiles led to the end of passenger services in April 1956.[32] Reasons for the end of the passenger railroad raise another question concerning historical truth as to whether there were other explanations than a natural demise with the increase in automobiles, buses, and highways in the United States.

By 1955, around twenty-two percent of Morton's land was taken up by streets, while only a little over two percent consisted of railroads.[33] In the February 1955 "A Comprehensive Plan for the City of Morton Illinois," there is an implication that Morton was glad to get rid of the interurban railroad. The plan showcased Morton's desire for prosperity, growth, and progress. The demise of the Illinois Terminal passenger services gave Morton the chance to revamp its image. The town's aim was to progress towards what Morton would eventually be known as, the "Town of Beautiful Homes." The city would not be very beautiful with train tracks right through the middle of the town and in the downtown area.[34] Since the passenger services were completely ceasing in a few months, there were even detailed plans for taking the railroad tracks out and emphasis on repaving and widening the streets.[35] Also, the highway construction of what is now I-74 is mentioned in the plan. This highway has been able to replace the function of the Illinois Terminal Railroad, and even today this highway is important in linking Morton to other communities. Another interesting inclusion in the plan was the town's hope of possibly building a heliport. Although they acknowledged that future helicopter passenger transportation would be too expensive and far-fetched, it did not end the hope of being a part of a possible helicopter transportation system

---

[30] "Morton Man Who Rode."

[31] Soady and Siepert, "Railroads," 10.

[32] Thomas William Scott, "Geography of the Illinois Terminal Railroad," (PhD diss., University of Illinois, 1951), 2.

[33] Scruggs and Hammond Planning Consultants, *A Comprehensive Plan for the City of Morton Illinois: City Planning & Zoning Commission*, Feb. 10, 1955. 11.

[34] Ibid. 42.

[35] Ibid. 55-56.

with Chicago.[36] I believe that this showcases the town's inclination towards progress, and that they were not interested in a relic, like a railroad system from the early twentieth century, to stop them from being as advanced as Peoria or even Chicago. The ambitions expressed by the plan really show that there is a very good possibility that Morton was pleased with the removal of the interurban and shows a deeper story than what is seen on the surface.

The Illinois Terminal Railroad and the rest of the country's electric passenger railroads had less personal and specific reasons for closing. The Illinois Terminal Railroad itself did not cease completely until 1982, and this was because the railroad company diversified the services with freight. Transforming from a high-speed interurban to a diesel-powered freight-hauler, it adapted to the many changes in the railroad industry.[37] But, the Terminal made an ill-advised million-dollar investment in 1946. The investment was in new interurban passenger equipment, and this could have been a possible effect of World War II, a time of prosperity for the still-existing interurban lines. The interurban was able to briefly regain the popularity of the early 1900s, and the Illinois Terminal hoped that the new equipment would help maintain the high passenger counts of the war years. Unfortunately, the new equipment only arrived in the fall of 1948. By this time it was too late because there was once again a great availability of new automobiles and gasoline, which led people to be independent of public transportation. The decision to buy new equipment and the resulting effect really show that there was no competition between the interurban railroad and the automobile, with the latter being the obvious winner.[38]

The country experienced decline in the interurban railroad industry starting with the 1920s rise of the automobile and state construction of concrete highways. The highways would often be put alongside the interurban lines, and in some cases the state even pressured the struggling lines to abandon service so that the tracks could be removed in order for the highway to be expanded. The Great Depression also did not help by driving many lines to bankruptcy. The depression of the 1930s wiped out most of the remaining firms. Those that survived through World War II gradually abandoned or discontinued passenger service in the postwar years, until by July 1959, only three companies continued passenger operations, and two of these were not expected to last out the year. The firms would continue to operate the passenger service too long. Before the firms closed, they would incur several years of out-of-pocket losses. This version of the interurban demise is what happened to the Illinois Terminal Railroad. In the other version, powerful companies conspired to bring the interurban era to an end in favor of diesel

---

[36] Ibid, 25.
[37] Jenkins, *Illinois Terminal*, 120.
[38] Ibid, 218.

buses, diesel trains, and the automobile. In 1974, attorney Bradford Snell testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Antitrust and Monopoly in favor of breaking up the Big Three automakers. Snell testified that General Motors led the American auto industry to engage in monopolistic practices for decades that were not good for the nation. Among these practices was the strategy of purchasing electric transit systems and either closing them or placing financial strains on them. Snell called this "dieselization,"[39] and he focused the majority of his testimony on the Los Angeles area. He states that "what happened there was not unique"[40] and says that General Motors was involved in the ruin of more than one hundred electric rail and bus systems in fifty-six cities, including New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, St. Louis, Oakland, Salt Lake City, and Los Angeles."[41] But nowhere in this case was there any mention of a conspiracy to replace streetcars with buses. The counterargument to Snell displays that the replacement of streetcars with buses had actually been under way for several years. It basically said streetcar companies were converting to buses anyway, and GM just wanted to make sure they bought General Motor buses. At the time, buses were seen to be more modern than streetcars. They were also thought to be cheaper to run, quieter, and safer. Also, buses do not run on fixed tracks. This meant that routes could be adjusted at will, and be easily extended into new developments, which was a major concern in a growing city like Los Angeles.[42]

I believe the true motives for the interurban's demise are still in question today, and it will be interesting to see if the truth can ever be found. In my opinion, there is no common straightforward reason that describes the end of each separate line, but I do believe that automobiles, buses, and concrete highways did greatly contribute to the termination. Although Morton, Illinois, was only a small segment of the Illinois Terminal Railroad and an even smaller segment of the interurban system in the United States, the town definitely had its own story. It is remarkable that the railroad changed Morton and was a great part in its future. Although the passenger services of the interurban are no longer present, there is still a movement to bring back public transportation. With increasing gas prices, the situation is almost the opposite of the 1950s. The public is starting to demand better public transportation. Even more ironically, the once prominent General Motors and other automobile companies are in the same position as the railroads they took over; they are going bankrupt. Although it only lasted a short time, the interurban

---

[39] Chris Slater, "General Motors and the Demise of Streetcars," *Transportation Quarterly*. Vol. 51. No. 3 Summer 1997, 46.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid, 47.

[42] Ibid, 50-51.

succeeded in making not only an impact on a national level, but also changed small communities like Morton, Illinois.