

# All aboard the Interurban

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Historians looking back at the history of transportation in the early 21st century will likely discuss the use of buses and city cabs and remark on the rise of convenient and cheap rides by companies like Lyft and Uber. A century ago, if communities wanted fast and convenient travel, they would construct interurban rail lines. The first interurban line in the United States was built in 1892 and ran between Anderson and North Anderson, Ind. The name interurban was created by Charles L. Henry, a congressman from Indiana; it was fused together from the Latin phrase "inter urbes," which translated to "between cities." Interurbans were self-propelled electric rail cars that ferried passengers between communities in the days before motorized buses.

Transportation historians George W. Hilton and John F. Due noted interurbans can be distinguished from other types of rail by four factors: their primary source of power had to be electric; passenger service was the primary source of income; cars were faster and heavier than streetcars. Additionally, interurbans utilized both tracks on streets and tracks in rural areas along private rights of way granting access to remote areas. Unlike commuter trains connecting larger cities of the nation a fair distance apart, interurbans were local and meant for travel between cities close to each other, like Cedarburg to Sheboygan, or areas within a county. By 1915, there were 15,500 miles of interurban tracks laid across the United States connecting small communities to nearby larger cities. In 1925, interurban rail was the fifth largest industry in the country.

Farmers were among some of the strongest advocates of interurban lines. In 1906, economist Ernest L. Bogart wrote an article analyzing how an interurban line in Ohio impacted a semi-rural area. He noted that from 5 to 20 percent of riders were farmers coming into town to conduct business or attend community events like church services. Bogart explained the advantages to farmers living in agricultural areas, "(The) farmer and his family can reach the neighboring villages much more quickly, cheaply, and comfortably by trolley than by wagon."

Interurbans would pick up passengers along rural roadways, saving farmers travel time they could otherwise use to conduct business or make social calls. Indeed, one of the advantages of an interurban line was that it allowed people to participate more frequently in social events outside of their own communities. As Bogart reflected, "Many are enabled to attend the theaters, concerts, lectures, and other forms of entertainment. ..." When the Milwaukee Northern line began service from Milwaukee to Cedarburg, many Milwaukee moviegoers would take the interurban to Cedarburg and see films at The Chimes movie-house to escape the congested crowds of the city.

The Milwaukee Electric Railway & Light Company was incorporated in 1896. The company's first project was an interurban route between Milwaukee and Kenosha spanning 23 miles. Soon afterward, lines connecting Watertown, Burlington and East Troy were established. Enthused by this success, in 1905, several investors moved to incorporate the Milwaukee Northern line into Ozaukee County, the aim being to connect the county with urban Milwaukee and Sheboygan. The Ozaukee County section was funded through the sale of \$100,000 in capital stock. One of the founders, John E. Uselding of Port Washington, later went on to become a county judge from 1914 to 1931. The other two founders hailed from Sheboygan.

Construction began a year later in 1906, laying track near the outskirts of Cedarburg. The Cedarburg News reported: "About a dozen teams and 20 men started in to grade on the line just east of the city limits, through the farms of Fred Maronde and Aug Ziemer. ... More help is being added each day and in the course of a few more days a large gang will be employed and the work divided in several divisions."

The first interurban service between Cedarburg and Milwaukee began on Oct. 28, 1907. The press reported that 10,000 people attempted to ride from Milwaukee to Cedarburg and that some resorted to pushing and shoving each other to secure a seat. The Cedarburg News reported that: "Hundreds were knocked down and trampled on. ..." It is not clear whether this story was an editorial exaggeration, but it reveals the excitement generated by the introduction of the interurban.

Early cars were painted a glossy red and had a top speed of 55 miles per hour. The ride



Photo from the Cedarburg Cultural Center-Edward Rappold collection

from Cedarburg to Milwaukee took about an hour and according to newspaper reports, cost 2 cents per mile. Most commonly, passengers bought mileage books, a book containing 100 miles could be bought for \$1.50. Passengers were a mixture of people commuting to work, with others going to Milwaukee for entertainment or to visit family and friends. The Cedarburg News remarked that the flow of visitors went both ways: "The cars are well patronized and many strangers have visited our city during the short time they have been running." Some of the most frequent riders were local students who lived in Mequon and attended Cedarburg High School.

By the late 1940s, roads and automobiles were improving in their durability and the personal automobile was slowly becoming the major means of transport for people. By the late 1940s, bus companies began to buy property used by interurbans, signaling the end of one mass transit system and the birth of another. The last ride of a local interurban took place

in March 1948. Small rockets were launched along the tracks to send Ozaukee County's first successful mass-transit system out with a bang. In the coming decades, buses would take over many of the former routes. The Cedarburg News remarked, "Interurban or street cars as they were commonly called, will be missed by many."

Indeed they were. The memory of the interurban remained in the minds of local historical preservationists. A marker was erected by the Wisconsin State Historical Society near the old interurban trestle bridge in Cedarburg that reads: "In 1907, the Milwaukee Northern Railway Company constructed this riveted-steel Thru Truss Bridge over Cedar Creek. Manufactured by Carnegie Steel and measuring 159 ft. long by 12 ft. wide by 20 ft. high, the bridge was constructed for the company's interurban train line between Milwaukee and Sheboygan. Powered by overhead electrical lines, the interurban carried passengers and freight in and out of Cedarburg. The railway depot and servicing area once stood a few blocks away."

That former interurban depot on N57 W6406 Center St. still serves the community. In the mid-1990s it was purchased by the Ozaukee County Historical Society to serve as the society's Archives Research Center, and the building was lovingly restored to once again resemble a 1907 interurban station. Visitors can take a tour, learn how interurbans functioned and view artifacts like a motorman's pocket watch and lantern. Archivists will also assist visitors with research requests regarding local family history and historic homes and buildings. Center hours are Tuesdays, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., and the second and fourth Mondays of every month from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m.

## References

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- George W. Hilton and John F. Due, "The Electric Interurban Railways in America" (Stanford University Press, 2000)
- Ernest L. Bogart, "Economic and Social Effects of the Interurban Electric Railway in Ohio," *Journal of Political Economy* (December 1906)
- H. Roger Grant, "Electric Interurbans and the American People" (Indiana University Press, 2016)
- "The Old Interurban Line" *News Graphic*, Aug. 15, 1996
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The Historical Society is hosting several events this spring and summer:  
 Blacksmith and Carpentry classes held at OCPV - May 12 and June 9  
 World War II Reenactment School Days - May 18  
 World War II Living History event and USO dance - May 19  
 Pioneer Village opens for season - May 20  
 Flag Day celebration - June 10

OCHS Rummage Sale - June 23-June 24  
 Grafton History Display at Grafton Library throughout July  
 Antique Tractor Show - July 21-July 22  
 OCHS County Fair Booth - Aug. 2-Aug. 5  
 Bluegrass at the Village - Aug. 12  
 Harry Potter at the Village - Sept. 15  
 Autumn at the Village - Oct. 6  
 Women's History Luncheon - Oct. 13  
 Village closes for season - Oct. 14