

LOCAL VOICES

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Horse power,
electricity kept
Ashland's street
cars running

From 1887-1933 two urban transportation systems served the City of Ashland, horse-drawn cars and then electric-powered cars.

The track ran on Second Street, Ashland's main street, from 21st Avenue West to the ore docks, or for about 2½ miles.

On April 29, 1887, the Ashland City Council gave a franchise to the Ashland Street Railway Company to construct a horse-drawn street railway. The company stockholders included Edwin Ellis, O.M. Tomkins, Thomas Bardon and other local notables.

Track laying began on Aug. 10, 1887, and on Nov. 2, 1887, the first horse-drawn car passed over the line with only minor track problems, creating great excitement along the way.

The Ashland Daily Press reported that "a very short time only will elapse before the horse cars will be flying back and forth along Second Street thence down Stuntz Avenue (Third Avenue East) to St. Clair Street to the Lake Shore docks."

On Nov. 2, 1887, the Ashland street railway began regular operation, carrying city dignitaries and old settlers, and a mob of small boys. The fare was 5 cents, although no money was collected for this trial run.

The Press reported that large crowds gathered to "see the circus" and cheer the speeding car, and to help put it back on the track "when it would become contrary and insist on traveling in the gutter."



Lars Larson

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"Saloon keepers rushed to the door with their mugs of foaming lager at one place, drinking health and success to the line," while "men, women and children rushed to the doors" of their houses, sometimes following the car "to get a good fair, square long look at the outfit."

The Press reported that the trial run was a success with only minor problems, "a red-letter day for the old as well as for the young."

The Press described the cars as "the very latest and improved make with two platforms, iron steps, elegantly painted, and provided with a heater in the center. Each car is drawn by two horses. The horses were handsome boys and wore more harness than they will when things get in running order. They seemed to realize that there was something unusual going on, and appeared to be proud of the honor of driving the first street car through the liveliest city of the state."

On June 14, 1892, the city council granted a franchise to the Ashland Lighting and Street Railway Company to operate electrically powered street cars, drawing electricity from an overhead cable.

The horse cars continued to operate until the first electric car went over the line on a trial trip on Sunday, Jan. 22, 1893, while "hundreds of people lined the sidewalks and watched the cars go by."

On the following Monday afternoon, cars were sent over the line several times, carrying officials of the company and reporters, from the blast furnace on Sanborn Avenue to the eastern terminal, about 1¼ mile east of Stuntz Avenue.

The Ashland Press noted that the cars ran "very smoothly ... without a hitch and were enjoyed by all on board."

The car speed averaged from eight to 10 miles an hour. The Press described the cars as "very handsome ones. ... The seats are covered with fine tapestry and are very comfortable. For light, each is provided with five incandescent lamps, and ample heat is furnished by a coal stove in the center of the car."

A motorman and a conductor operated each car. Some people believed that they would be electrocuted if they stepped on the rails, and that riding in the electric cars would damage their watches.

The final trip on the line was made by an electric car at 10:30 p.m. on Monday Sept. 25, 1933. A farewell party consisting of Mayor J.M. Dodd and other Ashland notables were passengers.

After 46 years of service the street railway was replaced by a bus system.

Information for this column was taken from an article by Guy M. Burnham, appearing in the Ashland Daily Press on Sept. 27, 1933.