

# EARLY HORSE CAR PERIOD

The first officers of the Omaha Horse Railway Company were as follows:

President—G. W. Frost.

Treasurer—John McCormick.

Secretary—J. F. Coffman.

Board of Directors—John McCormick, G. W. Frost, J. W. Paddock, J. F. Coffman, E. B. Chandler.

Besides being a director, Mr. Chandler was the first superintendent, a position which he held until 1873.

According to the **Omaha Daily Herald** of November 15, 1868, "The gentlemen mentioned as the officers and directors will be sufficient assurance that the enterprise will be conducted in the regular way of Western enterprise."

The Omaha Horse Railway Company was not superstitious.

Construction was started Friday, November 13, 1868. The first shovelful of earth was dug in Farnam Street near Ninth Street. Crowds stood and watched the laborers all day. Material had been purchased or arranged for to complete  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles of single track road, but most of the route was undecided when construction began.

"The road," said the **Herald**, "is located on Farnam Street between Ninth and Fifteenth. Beyond this point the location is postponed until a future meeting of the Board. The road will be started with first-class cars and horses and trips will be made every 15 minutes."

Offices for the transaction of the company's business were established in what was known as the Caldwell Block, at Fourteenth and Farnam. They were on the second floor above "Williams & Baker's Store," and looked out on Fourteenth Street. These offices were occupied by the company until the spring of '73, when A. J. Hanscom, who was at that time in control of the property, built a small frame office at the horse car barn on 21st St., between Cuming and Izard.

It was more than twenty months from the time the charter rights were conferred by the Territorial Legislature before a beginning was made on building the road. Many other enterprises promised quicker and larger returns to capital. The franchise, however, required that at least one mile of single-track be down within two years and by the winter of 1868 the time had grown short—to less than four months, in fact.

Therefore, when work was once under way it was pushed diligently through the stormy days of the Winter. At times 100 or more men were busy on the job. There was no general contractor to take responsibility from the officers of the company, nor to take a profit from the company's treasury. The construction was handled by the road itself by day labor, a practice which has prevailed down to the present day through successive physical transformations and reorganizations.

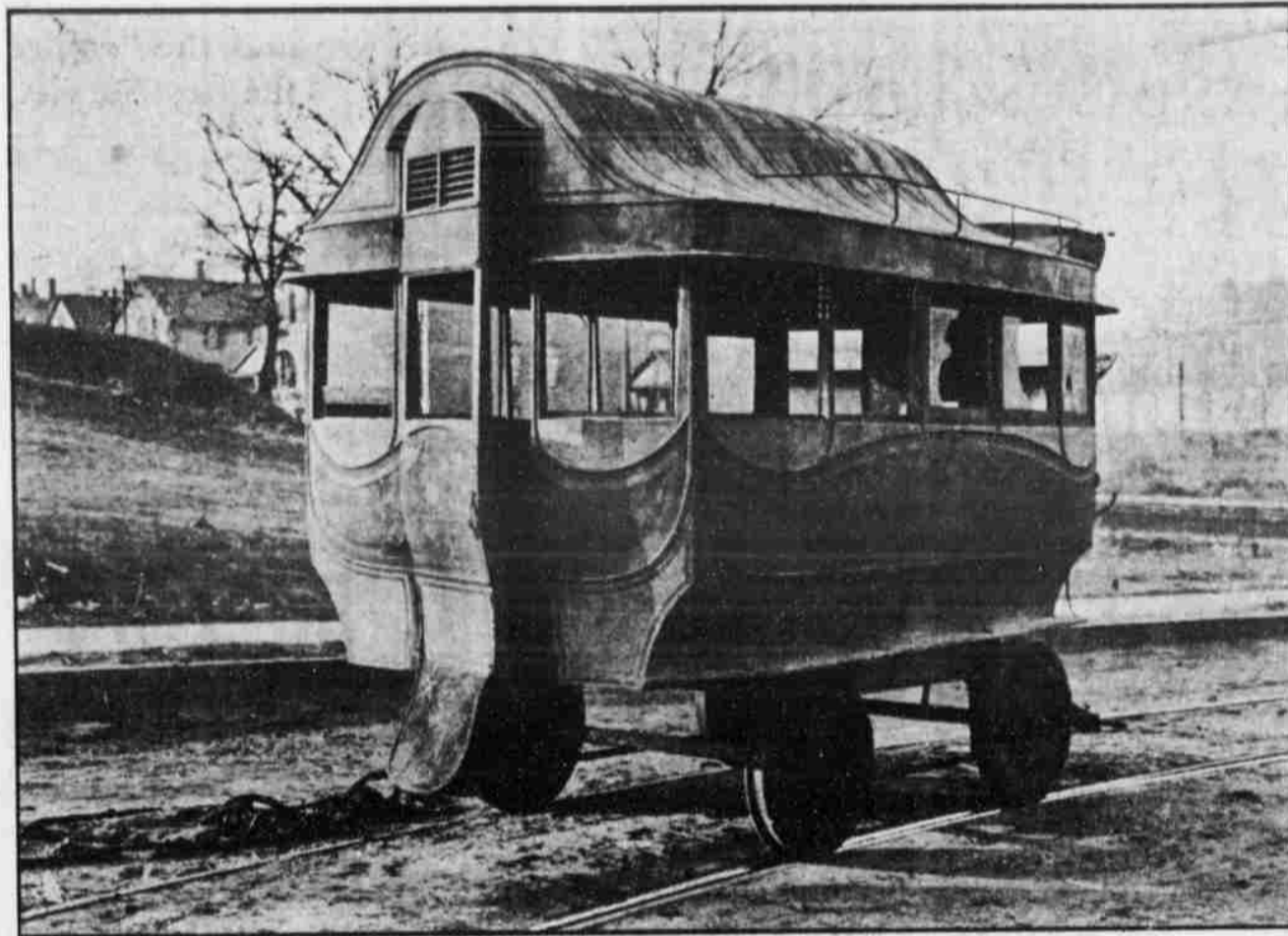
Progress was recorded in the public prints in a somewhat desultory way. December 6th most of the gang was engaged in cleaning away snow and "planking" between the rails on Farnam Street. Rails, ties and other material were on the ground. By December 30th track had been laid on Farnam Street from Ninth to Fifteenth, north on Fifteenth to Capitol Avenue, and up the Avenue to Sixteenth. By January 3d another block had been put in on Capitol Avenue, but the track on Farnam Street was "completely covered with snow."

The road proceeded to Eighteenth, north on Eighteenth to Cass, where the one-mile requirement was met; then west on Cass to Twentieth, north on Twentieth to Cuming and up that

street to Twenty-first, where the terminal was established and a car barn built, stabling 26 horses and sheltering four cars in a "lean-to." On the other end of the line the track was extended from Farnam down Ninth to the old Union Pacific Passenger Station, or to about Jones Street.

This was Omaha's first street railway. It covered a distance of two miles, traversed the business district, was able to take delegates to and from the Capitol and the depot, and experienced no expansion for five years.

The first track construction consisted of iron "T" rail weighing 25 pounds to the yard, laid on six-foot, light, hewn white-oak ties, three feet apart. The specifications were high-class at the time. Construction cost probably \$6,000.00 a mile at the time. At first the road was planked between the rails to Capitol Avenue, but when the original planking wore out it was not replaced, partly because the Company could not afford it and partly because Farnam Street was macadamized in the early '70s. There were turntables at each end of the line to reverse the cars, and turn-out switches at different points so that cars might meet and pass on the single track.



THE FIRST STREET CAR RUN IN OMAHA

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The first car operated is still preserved in about as good condition as it ever was. President Frost bought it second-hand in Chicago for \$700, and innocently acquired a gold-brick thereby. Sometime prior to January 22, 1869, the car, which is merely an omnibus mounted on flanged iron wheels, was brought to Omaha and

attempts made to start operation with it. The car refused to stay on the rails when going around curves, and its active career was short.

This car is today the single piece of property of the horse railways of Omaha that remains intact and in existence.

The first real street cars were four "standard horse cars," 16 feet long, with open platforms. They were put on early in 1869 and ran every fourteen minutes. The trip one way over the two-mile route was made in 28 minutes. These cars were manned by a driver and a conductor.

The rate of cash fare was 10 cents. Commutation books were sold for 50 cents good for eight rides. History says that during the first few years the stockholders composed the majority of passengers.

Money was lost so rapidly that the directors were driven to measures which would at the same time cut down the payroll and stimulate patronage. The 16-foot cars were disposed of and replaced by four 10-foot cars with a single step at the rear in place of a platform, and intended to be propelled by a single horse. Owing, however, to the heavy grades of Omaha's streets it was found necessary to use two horses after all. The conductors were dismissed and fare-boxes placed in the front ends of the cars, the driver being made responsible for the collection of fares and making change.

The rate of fare was cut to 5 cents, it being concluded that the abolition of conductors would overcome the difference in the rate of fare. It was also thought that the reduced rate might increase traffic to a point where revenue, also, would be increased. These innovations were put into effect May 1, 1872. Conductors were never again used on the Omaha horse cars.

Horse railways in other Western cities were content to get along without conductors from the start, but in Omaha every effort was made to keep on the conductors and the larger cars as long as possible.

G. W. WATTLES, President,  
Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Railway Co.

(The Story of the Early Horse Car Period Will Be Continued Next Sunday.)