

THE HORSE CAR PERIOD

(Continued)

As stated in last Sunday's article, two horses were needed from the beginning to draw each car of the Omaha Horse Railway. The steep hills on Farnam street and Capitol avenue, and later on other lines, made one-horse operation impossible. In the hope of reducing both investment and operating expenses, repeated experiments were made to determine if horses could not be found capable of single duty, but no such animal was discovered.

The horses had bells suspended from their necks as warning to the public to keep out of the way of their five-mile an hour maximum gait. The cars had no stoves for the first decade. There were but two kerosene lamps in each car. One was placed high up in front and served for semi-illumination of the interior and for a bulls-eye which looked out in front. The other lamp was a little one in the fare box. In winter straw or hay was scattered over the car floors to lessen the rigors of the temperature.

Drivers worked fourteen hours a day, with 28 minutes relief for meals at noon and night. They were paid \$1.50 per day.

In the early days, service usually ceased at 10 o'clock at night. If there was a party at the old Grand Central Hotel [Paxton Hotel site] or a show in the Opera House [United States National Bank corner at Sixteenth and Farnam Streets], sometimes an extra car was run to accommodate the handful which might care to ride.

About thirty horses were required for motive power for the service given by the original four cars. They were worked in three shifts and averaged about 14 miles a day each. A few horses always were out of service, owing to sickness or injuries. From \$75 to \$125 was paid for each animal. The ideal car horse weighed from 1,500 to 1,600 pounds and was from 5 to 6 years old, but condition outranked age in the estimation of the buyer, who for many years, incident to his other duties, was Mr. W. A. Smith, the present Treasurer and General Manager of this Company.

Mr. Smith's connection with Omaha street railways began September 2, 1872, when he was employed as a driver. Within a year he was made Foreman and within another year, Superintendent.

Daily receipts the first few years ran from \$30.00 to \$40.00. The latter figure was considered large. About \$10.00 a day was regarded as the maximum yield of a car.

By the close of 1872, despite the vigorous measures of retrenchment, the Horse Railway Company was still playing a losing game. Stockholders were willing to dispose of their certificates for very little. A. J. Hanscom quietly bought up a controlling interest in the stock, was elected president of the Company, and took charge of affairs about January 1, 1873.

President Hanscom immediately deposed E. B. Chandler as Superintendent and placed Mr. Smith in the position. He also gave the road its first regular bookkeeper and cashier in the person of his son, Wade Hanscom, but the addition to the payroll proved too expensive and was cut off after a few months, fiscal duties falling on the Superintendent.

Mr. Hanscom's regime did not last long. He sold his entire holdings in the property to Captain W. W. Marsh, who became President July 1, 1873. Captain Marsh was a Black Hills stage line proprietor and later operated a ferry on the Missouri River between Omaha and Council Bluffs, prior to the construction of the Union Pacific bridge. He was a prominent stockholder, officer and force in Omaha street railways from the date he became President until he died.

Captain Marsh strove pluckily to make the Horse Railway a success. He succeeded in extending it three times its original length, and almost unaided, carried it through its most precarious period.

In 1874 an extension was built from the terminus at Twenty-first street west on Cumming to Twenty-fourth and north on Twenty-fourth to Hamilton street, a distance of one-half mile. A one and one-half mile line was constructed on Eighteenth street from Cass street north to Ohio.

Then as now the enhanced value traction lines brought to outlying real estate was understood and frequent and insistent demands were made on the Company for extensions. When the Eighteenth street line was built there were no people living north of Ohio street and very few north of Paul. The existence of the old Baumann Brewery and beer garden, however, gave some promise of the financial success to this line. As a matter of fact it barely paid the horse feed and drivers' wages for a number of years.

The cars of the original line had been painted red. The cars of the Eighteenth street line, of which there were only two at first, were painted green. The two lines

were known thereafter as the Red Line and the Green Line, colored glass discs being used in the bullseyes at night for indicators.

The Green Line cars were 12 feet long and had a rear as well as a front platform. About this time a fifth car, also a 12-footer, was added to the Red Line, making the equipment seven cars in all. The trip on the Green Line from the Union Station to the northern terminus required 42 minutes. In 1876 a third Green Line car was put on and the headway shortened to 28 minutes.

Service was greatly at the mercy of the weather. Lack of pavements and hilly streets were sometimes enough to tie up traffic completely, hard rains doing severe damage to the road bed. Car horses had to learn to walk the ties when the brickbat and cinder ballast was washed out.

Omaha grew slowly. By 1878 it had only about 14,000 population. Times were hard. Drouth destroyed the crops. The grasshopper plague descended in the summer of 1876 and devastated all the growing green things except tomato vines. Yet in 1875 the Horse Railway built an extension on Izard street from Eighteenth to Sixteenth and south on Sixteenth to a junction at Capitol avenue. And in the grasshopper year a track was built on Tenth street from the Union Station to Farnam, forming a terminal loop.

To finance the construction and equipment needs of the period 1873-78 it had been necessary to issue \$20,000 bonds. The road was forced to sell these bonds at heavy discount. No dividends had been paid on stock, nor was the Company able to meet the interest on this first bond issue, and it defaulted repeatedly.

In 1878 the bondholders foreclosed under the usual security mortgage. The property was sold at a sheriff's sale and was bid in and purchased by Captain Marsh for less than the face of the bonds and accrued interest. Captain Marsh offered to prorate the purchase price among the stockholders and let them retain their proportionate ownership, but not one of them accepted. Captain Marsh alone appeared to have kept alive his faith in the enterprise and in the town. One stockholder remarked that he did not see why Captain Marsh wanted to pay good money for two streaks of rust down streets where there would be nothing in 100 years.

These were times, let it be remembered, when the future of the West was disputed and every town and city had a host of rivals snapping at its heels. The announcement that the street railway had been abandoned would have done untold injury to the community.

From 1878 to 1883 Captain Marsh operated the road as an individual owner, but the corporate entity was kept up, Frank Murphy and W. A. Smith serving as nominal directors with Captain Marsh. This period was the prelude to the great "boom" of 1882-89. Horse Railway stock was worth from 5 to 10 cents on the dollar and couldn't be sold for that.

Captain Marsh secured money on his own responsibility and built a two-mile extension to Hanscom Park via St. Mary's avenue. This line was put through in 1880. It began at Farnam street, ran south on Fifteenth to Howard, west to Sixteenth and St. Mary's Avenue, up the avenue to Twenty-seventh street, south on Twenty-seventh to Leavenworth, west on Leavenworth to Park avenue and south on Park avenue to Woolworth, where the second car barn, sheltering 30 horses, was built.

The greater part of the Hanscom Park Line was built through a corn field. It was hoped that summer traffic to Hanscom Park would keep down losses while the district was being settled up. The steep grades on St. Mary's avenue necessitated the use of a "hill horse" an interesting accelerator in charge of a boy, the horse pulling from a hook on a forward corner of the car.

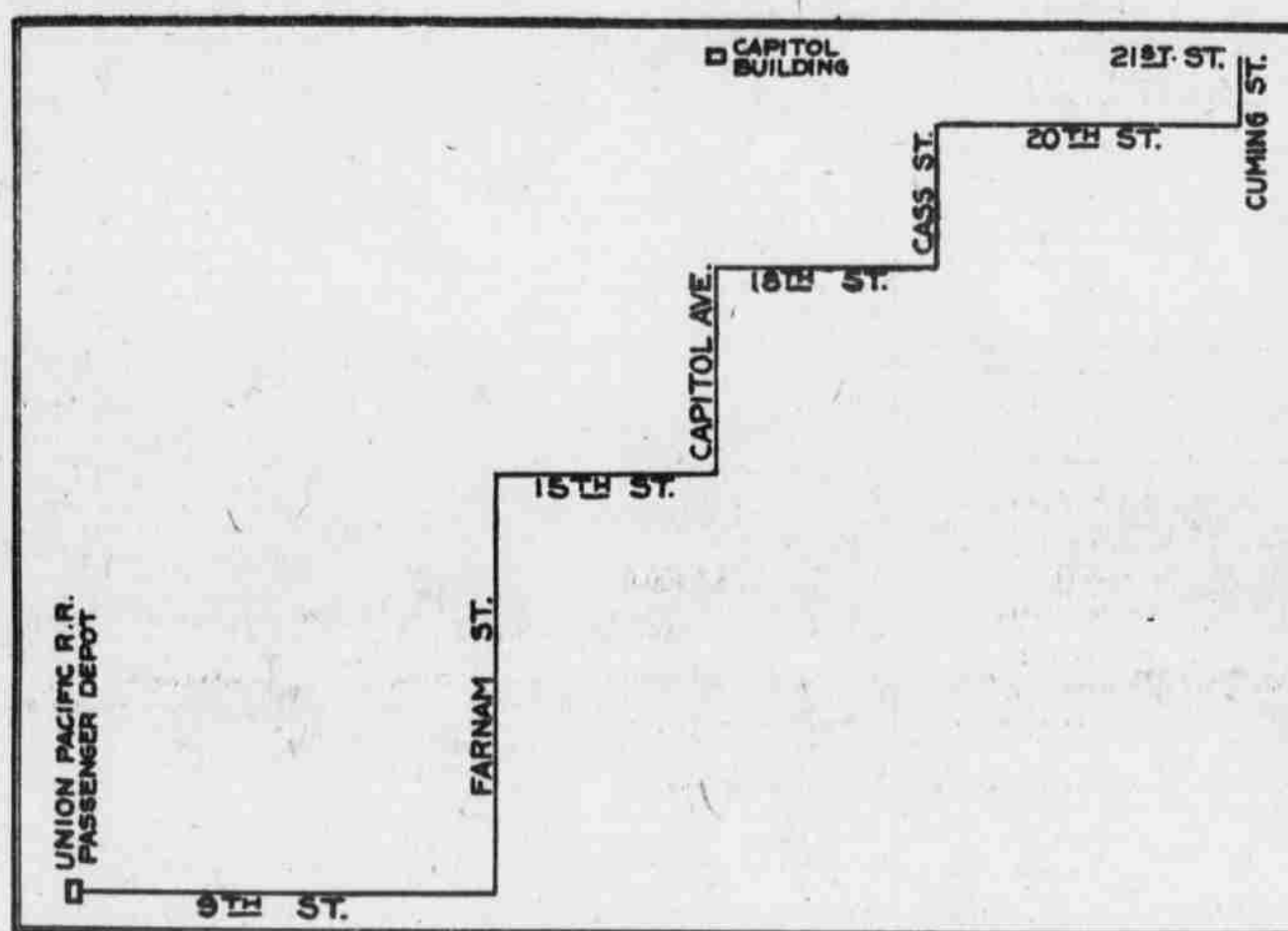
The equipment of the new Park Line consisted of the four old 10-foot cars from the original Red Line, six new 12-foot cars, with the latest improvements of the times, having been purchased and put on the latter. About this time canary was adopted as the color for all cars, and the designations reduced to colored signs. The color of the Park Line was yellow.

The Park Line brought about the first transfer station in Omaha—at Fifteenth and Farnam. Here a man was stationed to personally transfer passengers between the cars running to the Union Station and the Park cars, and turn switches as well. There were no transfer slips, these conveniences not having come into general use on street railways.

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Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Railway Co.

(Next Sunday the story of the Horse Car Period will be completed.)



LINES PRIOR TO 1874