

Cable Railways in Omaha

The cable tramway was a Western invention. It originated in San Francisco, was tried in Kansas City and then introduced in Omaha. The cable was intended to solve the problem of hauling cars up steep hills and to replace horse car transit.

Power was transmitted to the cars by means of an endless wire cable, running in concrete conduits underneath the center of the track. An apparatus called a "grip" extended from the car through open metal slots and gripped or released the cable at the will of the operator. The cable was passed around a large drum at the power house to secure the necessary motion.

Cable trams were constructed in a number of large cities but gave way rapidly before the development of electric power. The cable roads were expensive to build, expensive to maintain and operate and not nearly as satisfactory as the electric railway, being far less reliable, and the motion of the cars not nearly as smooth and even as that of the trolley cars.

As will be shown, the people of Omaha were very anxious to have cable tramways built, even though experiments at Richmond, Va., Cleveland, O., and other places were being made with electric motive power.

The Cable Tramway Company of Omaha was incorporated June 26, 1884, by Samuel R. Johnson, C. B. Rustin, Isaac S. Hascall, Casper E. Yost and Fred Drexel. Mr. Johnson was the president of this and the succeeding cable company.

A franchise to build and operate cable tramways on certain streets was granted by the City Council October 7, 1884, and confirmed by the people at a general election November 4, 1884. There were 2,261 votes cast on the tramway proposition, 1,797 favoring it and 464 opposing. The majority for the tramway franchise was greater than the majority at the same election in favor of issuing \$500,000 intersection paving bonds.

No limit was placed on the duration of the franchise; no rate of fare was specified and nothing was said about transfers.

The officers of the Tramway Company had difficulty in financing their project and money was not secured nor construction begun until 1886. The interests of Isaac S. Hascall, Casper E. Yost and Fred Drexel were taken over by W. V. Morse, L. B. Williams and Dr. Samuel R. Mercer. Later A. S. Paddock and Chas. F. Manderson interested themselves in the venture. Funds were finally secured from stockholders, directors and eastern sources, and a thoroughly modern, double-track cable tramway built and placed in operation.

Two separate lines were put in. The first began at the Union Passenger Station and ran up Tenth Street to Dodge; West on Dodge to Twentieth and North on Twentieth to Cass. This line was soon extended on Twentieth Street to Lake Street. The other line ran up Harney Street from Tenth to Twentieth; North on Twentieth to Dodge and West on Dodge to Twenty-fifth.

A large brick power house was constructed at Twentieth and Harney Streets and a Wright engine of about 400 horsepower and other expensive machinery installed. Each line was operated as a unit and each required a heavy, continuous cable approximately five miles long and lasting only about 90 days. The cables were made at Trenton, N. J., weighed 45 tons each and were a source of heavy expense.

So desirous were the business men and others to have the tramway in operation, that they subscribed collectively about \$40,000 as a bonus to be paid if operation was started within a certain time.

The cost of construction at best was heavy owing to the heavy concrete conduits for the cables and the steel yokes supporting the rails, the open slot in the center of the track making the usual cross-ties impossible. The rail used weighed 56 pounds to the yard and was what was known as a "center-bearing" rail, there being a flange on both sides. The cost per mile, as remembered by those connected with the road, was considerably in excess of \$100,000.

The public wish to have the road built quickly caused the company to pay extraordinary wages to the contractors and workmen to hurry completion. Mechanics drew as high as \$10 and \$12 a day. Construction was finished in time to claim the bonus, but the directors concluded not to seek payment and burned the notes or agreements in the office stove.

Sufficient cars of the best obtainable type were purchased to operate the tramways with an adequate service. Operation from the start was in the hands of F. A. Tucker, General Manager, who received his early tramway experience in San Francisco and Kansas City. A few gripmen were obtained from these cities to teach new men how to run the cars.

The cars were sent out in trains of two each—a grip car and a trailer. The service was popular, but the company never made money or declared a dividend. The heavy investment and peculiar problems of operation prevented profits. The volume of traffic did not justify the expense involved.

There was constant competition from and friction with the old Horse Railway Company and its vastly more extensive system of horse car lines. The conditions made the payment of double fares by no means uncommon, as the roads, naturally did not exchange passengers. A bitter fight was carried on between the two companies both in and out of court. The Horse Railway objected to the Cable Company running a track on each side of its own lines on Tenth and part of Twentieth streets. The courts finally permitted the Cable Company to do so, but required the payment of heavy cash damages.

Existing conditions and certain doubts as to the validity of franchise rights caused the organization of a new Cable Company to be advisable. This proceeding was carried out and on May 1, 1888, articles of The Omaha Cable Tramway Company were filed, with Samuel R. Johnson, L. B. Williams, Charles B. Rustin, Samuel D. Mercer, William V. Morse and Benjamin F. Smith as incorporators. The cable property was transferred to this new Company under a contract dated November 1, 1888.

A franchise ordinance, conferring rights for a period of 40 years, and authorizing the Company to occupy and use practically any and all the streets in the city, mentioned specifically, was submitted to the people at a special election May 22, 1888, and was approved by a majority of votes. For power this franchise permitted "endless cables, electricity, compressed air, steam motor [under certain conditions] or by such other motor as may now or hereafter prove to be practicable."

This is the principal franchise under which the present Company is operating. The validity of the first cable franchise, however, was sustained by the State Supreme Court. When the second franchise described was granted there were three separate railway organizations operating or building in Omaha.

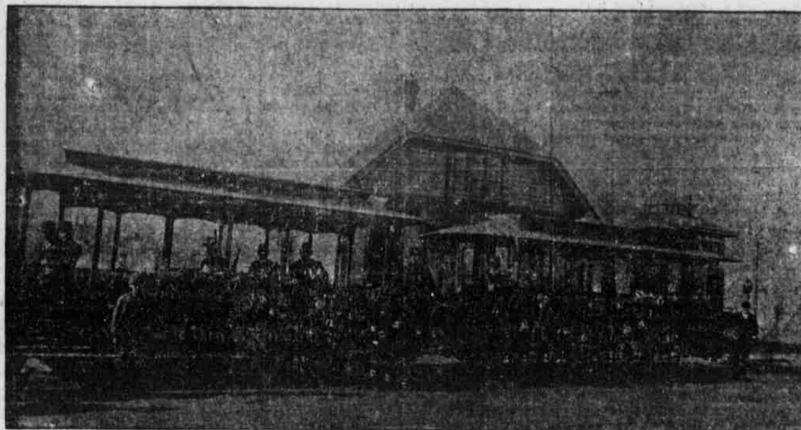
The Cable Company made preparations to build new lines. A change to the new electric motive power was contemplated, Mr. Morse and other directors having observed experimental roads in operation and become impressed with the innovation.

The Horse Railway Company, also, prepared to make a strong fight to survive.

Both organizations were menaced by the new electric lines already being built in Omaha and Council Bluffs. Under the circumstances money to finance improvements and extensions was not forthcoming. The logical result was consolidation and this was what took place in 1889.

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

("The First Electric Railways" will be the Subject presented Next Sunday.)



Cable Train as Operated in Omaha in 1888.