

The First Electric Railways

Unwilling to wait until electric traction had been proved a practical success elsewhere, the people of Omaha granted two franchises July 13, 1887, to encourage the construction of trolley lines. The cable tramway was not then completed.

The franchises were identical in their terms, conferring operating rights on practically any and all streets not already used by a street railway. They ran for a period of thirty years, said nothing whatever about the rate of fare or transfers, and, curiously enough, did not bind the grantees to electric power.

The uncertainty generally felt over the new means of locomotion is characterized in that part of the franchise which permits operation by the following methods: Electricity, Compressed Air, Horse Power, Cable or "By such other motor (except steam locomotives) as may be practicable for the operation of a street railway."

One franchise was granted to the Omaha Motor Railway Company and the other to the Northwestern Street Railway Company. **The question was submitted at a special election, at which 1,029 votes were cast favoring the grants and 95 against them.**

The first electric railways of Omaha were built by the Omaha Motor Railway Company, of which the late Dr. Samuel D. Mercer was the chief organizer. The rights of the Northwestern franchise were never exercised. The men chiefly interested in that company, according to the records, were Henry St. John, Elmer E. Finney, Charles F. Goodman, Henry Creighton, James A. Brown, George Dorsey, Oscar P. Goodman, Hiram G. Bell, Henry J. Penfold and Joseph Bell. Evidently the problem of financing the road proved too difficult.

The Omaha Motor Railway Company was incorporated April 11, 1887, by Dr. Mercer, Clifton E. Mayne, Herbert J. Davis, Charles B. Brown, of New York, Samuel S. Curtis and Emerson S. Stone. The original intention seems to have been chiefly towards building interurban lines in Douglas, Cass, Dodge, Sarpy and Otoe Counties.

Obtaining the necessary funds and constructing an electric street railway in 1887-89 was a task too onerous and entailing too many risks to tempt the conservative business man. Only an extraordinary personality, like Dr. Mercer, possessed of both imagination and will power, was fitted for the undertaking. Other local men—some of them living—were important factors in the Motor Railway, but the majority of such credit as is due for making the enterprise an actuality belongs to Dr. Mercer. From the time he saw an experimental electric line at a New Orleans exposition he never rested until there was one in Omaha.

The struggles of the Motor Company were crucial. After construction was started all of the original incorporators and bankers retired, except President Mercer, Samuel S. Curtis and Herbert J. Davis, the latter two remaining as directors at the request of Dr. Mercer. The president, laboring against great disadvantages, secured the co-operation and participation of Joseph H. Millard, E. W. Nash, J. J. Brown and N. W. Wells, and with their help the road was built.

The Omaha Motor Railway was put into operation in the fall of 1889. The cars run were not the first electric cars propelled through the streets of Omaha, however. That honor belongs to the Omaha and Council Bluffs Railway and Bridge Company, which brought electric cars across the river on its new bridge, in the summer of 1889, and ran them around loop tracks, leased from the Omaha Motor Company.

Nevertheless the Motor Railway was among the first electric lines constructed and operated. Coming into existence about the time of the erection of the New York Life, Bee and City Hall buildings, the railway was one of the "show" achievements of the city.

The electric line first constructed and operated started at Thirty-sixth and Burt Streets, ran east on Burt to Seventeenth; south on Seventeenth to Cass; east on Cass to Fourteenth; south on Fourteenth to Howard; east on Howard to Eleventh and south on Eleventh to Bancroft Street, a distance of 4 miles. Later an extension was built on Thirty-sixth from Burt to Cuming Street and out to Fortieth Street.

The Motor Railway, having received a franchise by vote of the people there, July 25, 1887, built the first street railway to South Omaha, where the stock yards and packing houses were already well established. This line was 7½ miles long and covered the following route:

Starting from Twenty-second Street and Ames Avenue, where a car house was built, east on Ames to Sherman Ave.; south to Clark St.; west to Seventeenth; south to Burt, where it connected with the original line and used the tracks to Howard St.; west to Fifteenth; south to Leavenworth; west to Sixteenth; south

to Vinton; west to Twenty-fourth; south to N Street, South Omaha.

A fourth line was built north on Twenty-second St. from Nicholas to Charles; west on Charles to Twenty-fifth and north on Twenty-fifth to Lake Street.

All of the Motor Railway construction was double track. The rail used was a steel girder rail, weighing 45 pounds to the yard. The trolley wires were suspended from wooden poles set along the curb.

A substantial brick power house, still in existence, was built at Twenty-second and Nicholas streets and fitted with two Corliss engines, one of 450 horsepower and the other 250 horsepower, belt connected to Thomson-Houston generators.

The first equipment consisted of about twenty closed cars with Pullman bodies mounted on single trucks. They were fitted with two, 15 horsepower Thomson-Houston motors each. Direct current was supplied at 500 volts.

The construction, equipment and service of the Omaha Motor Railway was the very best that could be offered at that time. Moreover it was tremendously costly, and **electric traction was still an experiment.** The money that went into this road went in on FAITH.

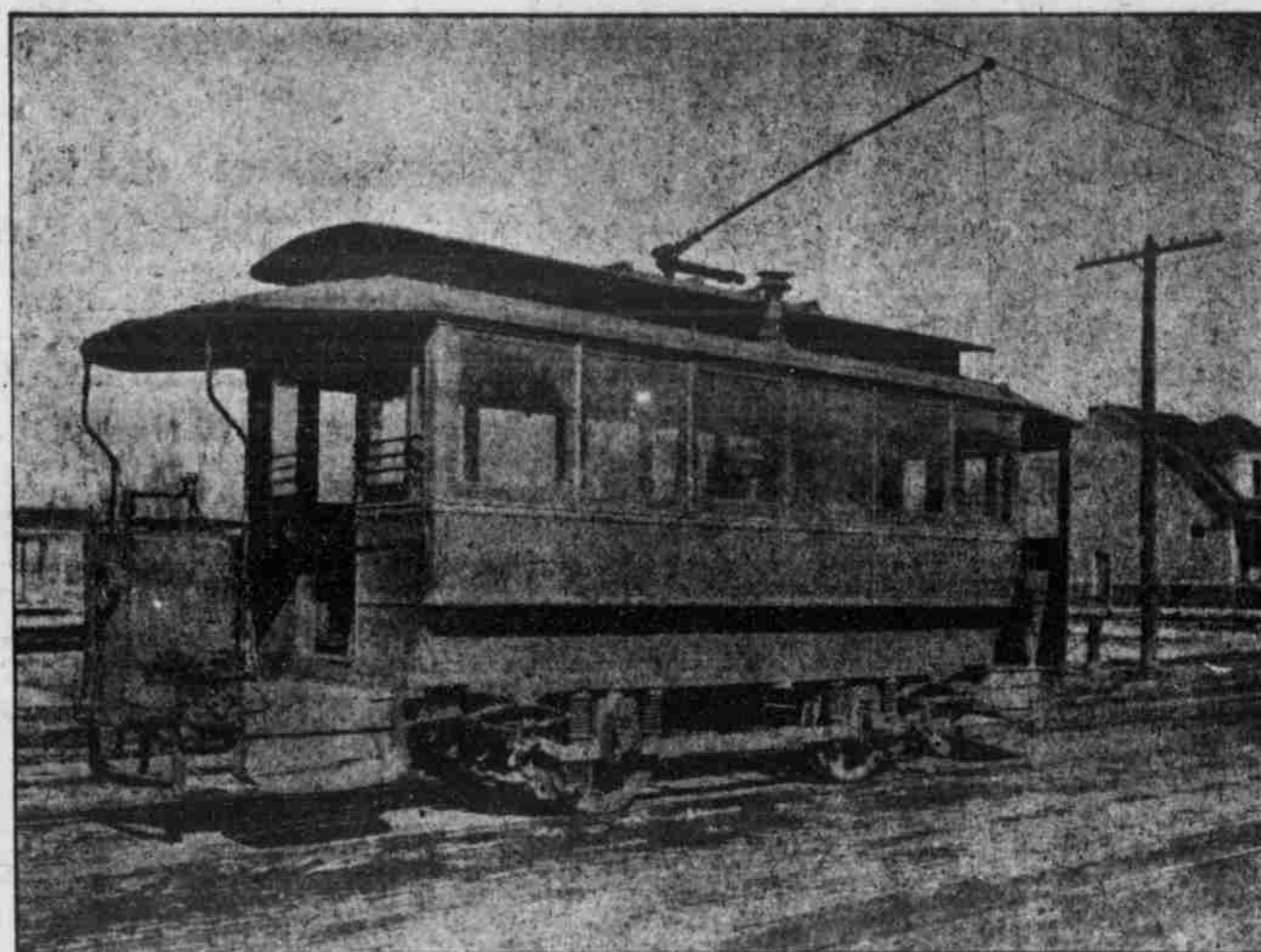
The steep grades, in particular, worried the early electric traction engineers. A contract made in November, 1889, whereby the Omaha Street Railway Company took over a little horse-car line which had been built in Dundee, specified that operation should be by electric power, but made a proviso for horsepower "should electricity prove undesirable for winter service on grades."

But electric traction in Omaha proved to be an unqualified success.

Six months before the Motor Railway began to haul passengers the Omaha Street Railway Company [the consolidated Horse and Cable Railways] had adopted electricity, decided to electrify important lines and had made contracts for cars, engines, generators and supplies. The struggles between the two companies for priority on the streets and viaducts, the difficulty of both to obtain funds for construction and the collapse of the "boom" all contributed to the inevitable merger.

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

("Consolidation and Electrification" will be the Subject discussed Next Sunday.)



One of the First Electric Cars Operated in Omaha.