

Omaha & Council Bluffs Street Railway Company

Throughout Omaha, then a budding town of 10,000 or 12,000 inhabitants, word was heralded one cool November morning in 1868 that "they have begun to build the horse car line." The day was Friday, November 13, and the Omaha Horse Railway company, pioneer of street car lines in Nebraska, was beginning work on its project. The line was laid on Farnam street between Ninth and Fifteenth streets. Extensions were made rapidly. A line was placed on Fifteenth street to Capitol avenue. Then rails were laid a block west on Capitol avenue. Other lines were put in until the company was stabling twenty-six horses and sheltering four cars.

Until 1883 the development of the Omaha Horse Railway was slow, as it was certain to be. The horses and cars were at the mercy of weather conditions. Service was crude—bound to be with horses and light rails and small cars. Despite the condition of the service the road grew to some extent and new lines were laid.

BONDHOLDERS FORECLOSE IN 1878

In 1878 the bondholders were forced to foreclose under the usual security mortgage. The property of the company was sold at sheriff's auction and was purchased by Captain Marsh, who operated the road until 1883.

In 1883 the company was reorganized and Captain Marsh relieved of the individual responsibility which he had carried for five years. Omaha was starting to grow in earnest and everybody realized the necessity of adding to the street railway facilities.

From 1883 to 1889 between \$700,000 and \$800,000 was spent on the construction of the Omaha Horse Railway. At the end of this period there were about 75 cars in the service, 600 horses owned and worked and 255 persons employed. There were 26 miles of car lines.

But before 1884 the people of Omaha were dissatisfied with the service of the horse railway. They wanted a cable line. So in 1884 The Cable Tramway Company of Omaha was incorporated. A franchise to build and operate cable tramways on the streets of Omaha was granted to the new company on October 7, 1884. Construction of the cable lines was started in 1886. For a long time the competition between the horse line and the cable railway was keen. Neither was willing to concede anything to the other, and people were forced to pay two fares in many instances.

TWO ELECTRIC FRANCHISES GIVEN

In 1887 the people of Omaha granted two franchises to electric railway companies. Only one of these companies, the Omaha Motor Railway company, exercised the rights of its franchise. The Omaha Motor Railway was placed in operation in the fall of 1889. The cars run on this line were not the first electric cars propelled through the streets of Omaha, though, for this honor belongs to the Omaha & 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 the loop tracks, leased from the Omaha Motor company.

The success of the Omaha Motor Railway company was very marked, for the electric lines seemed to be the most satisfactory. The question of the survival of the fittest now occupied the attention of Omaha people, for none believed that all the roads could prosper, or even live as three separate organizations.

At the beginning of 1889 traction conditions in Omaha were about as chaotic as they could be. The Omaha Horse Railway company was operating twenty-five miles of horse railway, the Omaha Cable Tramway company about six miles of double track cable tramway, and the Omaha Motor Railway company was constructing an extensive double track electric road, covering ten miles. There was no friendship among the trio. All were envious.

DIRECTORS FORESAW END

Directors of the roads saw that the business of the city would not support the three companies. In 1889 the Horse and Cable roads were consolidated. The Motor Railway company meanwhile had its troubles. The result was that the Omaha Motor Railway company was purchased by the Omaha Street Railway company, October, 1889. The Omaha Street Railway company was the name which was given to the horse and cable roads after consolidation. Thus the consolidation of the three roads left Omaha in a condition in which it was possible for the new company to go straight ahead and give this city some of the best street railway service in the country. And that is just what happened—the Omaha Street Railway company began a new era of prosperous street car service for the city of Omaha.

The work of building up the service was slow at first because conditions were very poor—money was hard to get and the whole country was experiencing conditions that did not bid well for such a concern as a street railway company.

The eight years preceding the Trans-Mississippi Exposition were, indeed, very severe ones for the company. Those familiar with the conditions over the western country at that time will appreciate what a hard row the railway company had.

BOOM HURTS AT LAST

Omaha had suffered a financial collapse from the real estate boom. Business slackened, factories closed down and firms went out of business. The

panic of 1893 is historic. Hard times in Omaha began fully three years before the crash of 1893. Capital for any purpose was next to impossible to obtain.

The Omaha Street Railway company at this time was confronted with the problem of installing an electric system over about 30 miles of line and raising money to pay for the power, machinery, new cars, motors, trolley wire, etc. The Omaha public would be satisfied with nothing less than electrification of all lines.

In the face of the great financial troubles the task of doing all this seemed insurmountable, but the company succeeded in changing over all the horse lines to electric lines within three years. The cables were taken out in 1894 and replaced with trolleys, the greater part of the cable investment having been made valueless in less than eight years.

BICYCLE CRAZE NOT HELPFUL

The revenues of the company suffered severely, not alone from hard times, but also from bicycle competition during the fad of 1893-96. The bicycles were used for several years by men, women and children as a common mode of transportation. Demands of the city for paving between and outside the rails increased in volume and added materially to the investment cost.

During this severe period of the company's history there were no profits. The company was not able to establish a depreciation fund to pay for renewals. It was hard to make necessary betterments.

By exertion of determination and heavy expenditure the company placed itself in good condition for transporting the crowds which visited Omaha in 1898. The principal routes used to haul passengers to and from the exposition were by the way of North Twenty-fourth street and through Sherman avenue. These lines were looped in the business district and an excellent service provided. The Dodge line cars were run direct from the railroad stations to the grounds.

It was the general verdict that the company did wonderful work during the exposition and assisted materially in the convenience and comfort of visitors and also in giving them a good impression of the city.

MADE MONEY IN 1898

With the year 1898 came prosperity for the Omaha Street Railway company. The revenue of the company for this year was more than twice as great as that of the preceding year. For the first time in the local street railway business—thirty years—there was a surplus in the treasury greater than the immediate financial demands.

Since 1898 Omaha has grown with strides and has become one of the best cities of the west. In order for the city to grow this way the street car service has had to keep pace with every move of industry, and that the Omaha & Council Bluffs Street Railway company has done this every one will agree, everyone who is conversant with conditions in this expanding city.

It was in 1902 that the name of the street car company was changed, for then the Omaha lines were unified with the Omaha & Council Bluffs Railway and Bridge company.

Under the reorganization a large amount of money was obtained from eastern sources and the Council Bluffs lines and bridge taken over for operation on a 99-year lease.

With the new order of things came a better system of street car service for Omaha and Council Bluffs. The Council Bluffs lines were re-built and re-equipped in all essential respects. In addition many miles of extensions were made to the lines.

NEW HORSE POWER STATION

A modern 6,000-horsepower station was constructed and equipped at the foot of Jackson street, replacing two power stations in Omaha and one in Council Bluffs and causing the scrapping of the machinery formerly used.

At the present time there is under construction an addition to the central power station which, when completed, will cost about \$600,000. This addition is twice the size of the original station and will double its capacity, bringing the total horsepower up to 20,000. When the new addition is completed the station will represent an investment of \$1,000,000.

At Twenty-seventh and Lake streets a new concrete substation was built, equipped with transformers and rotary-converting machines, and conduits for carrying higher tension cables laid to central power station.

All of the light track construction in Omaha was replaced with 73-pound girder rail, laid over rock, cinder and gravel foundation and connected with continuous joints.

A complete replacement and large addition to the rolling stock with new and modern cars took place. The majority of the cars were 40 feet long and upwards, on double trucks, fitted with powerful motors. A large brick car building and general repair shops were constructed at Twenty-sixth and Lake streets.

SERVICE STEADILY IMPROVES

Ever since the consolidation of the Council Bluffs road with the Omaha line the service has steadily been improved until today the Omaha & Council Bluffs Street Railway offers the best service in this part of the country. It is not perfect; the management has never claimed this much for its lines, but it is very good and is being improved every year.

In forty years the street railway system of this city has grown from two miles of single track, operated with four horse cars, to a modern electric street railway, equipped with the best centralized power that money can buy, maintaining service over more than 150 miles of track, having at its disposal more than 400 modern cars, and requiring the services of several hundred men.

A feature of the street railway system which has attracted great comment is the new car building and general repair shops at Twenty-sixth and Lake streets. The shops of the company are entitled to consideration by themselves as an industrial and wage-paying factory. Permanent employment is possible for about 100 men, comprising the highest and best paid kind of artisans. As the work done at the shops is constantly growing with the expansion of the company the payroll shows a steady increase.

LARGE STORAGE YARDS

The shops and large storage yards are located on a tract of ground two blocks square, giving ample room both for present and future needs. The main building is 245 feet long by 120 feet wide. The offices and draughting room are housed in a separate building, 25 by 50 feet in size. This is fitted with a fire-proof vault for the storage of maps, plans and records.

The shops are separated by heavy brick firewalls into six departments, as follows: Machine shops, forge shops, truck room, armature rooms, mill or wood working shop and paint shop.

All of the many expensive machines, apparatus and devices used are thoroughly modern and capable of performing far more work than is required of them at present. All mechanical power used is electric, and so far as practicable, the various machines have their individual motors, ready for the most economical operation at all times. The natural lighting facilities are excellent and the entire building is fitted with incandescent lamps.

Compressed air is used for operating hoists and certain tools. The hoists are portable and are employed when it is desired to lift anything which is a tax to man's strength, upwards to 20-ton cars.

BUILDING ITS OWN CARS

The Omaha & Council Bluffs Street Railway company has built some of its own cars since 1906. In deciding to build these cars the company was influenced by a number of reasons, one being the wish to add to the industrial growth and welfare of the city. The company found that it could build its own cars about as cheaply as it could buy them from manufacturers. By building the cars stronger and better and carefully supervising each bit of construction, it is believed that superior service could be offered, and maintenance costs reduced at the same time. Repair parts could be always obtainable and local needs could be studied and specially met as they arose.

The cars turned out at the company's shops can be compared favorably with any regular urban service in the United States. They are 42 feet long, built on heavy double tracks and operated by four 40-horse power motors. They are heated by hot-water systems, with the stove in the motorman's compartments. The seats, affording room for forty-two passengers, are covered with cane, the larger proportion being cross-seats with an aisle in the center. Electric push-buttons to signal the conductor are placed between the windows.

WELL EQUIPPED CARS

All of the large cars are equipped with air-brakes and air controlled sanders. The rear platform is large and roomy, steps are wide and easy to mount and the passage-way into the car is protected by a railing. Careful attention is given to ventilation and every effort is made to offer a passenger the safest and most comfortable ride that money and invention can procure.

The company not only attempts to give its patrons the highest class of car-equipment, but makes special efforts to keep the cars clean, hygienic and slightly.

At least once a year every car on the system goes through the repair shops for a thorough overhauling and revarnishing. Once a week remains in the car house long enough for a thorough daylight inspection and for any minor repairs that may be needed. Every night all cars and trucks are inspected, oiled and cleaned, and if anything is found materially wrong the car is taken out of service.

The cars are cleaned thoroughly every day with soap and water and disinfected twice a week with formaldehyde.

The investment of the Omaha & Council Bluffs Street Railway company in its central power station, rotary reverting sub-stations and high voltage cables runs into the millions.

FOUR DIVISIONS MAINTAINED

The Omaha & Council Bluffs Street Railway system is operated in four divisions, as follows: Ames avenue division, with its car-house at Twenty-fourth and Ames avenue; Vinton division, with its car-house at Twenty-fourth and Vinton streets; Mason division, with its car-house at Tenth and Mason streets, and the Council Bluffs division, with its car-house at Twenty-eighth street and Avenue A. The car-house at Tenth and Mason streets is the newest and largest. It is modernly constructed, with every facility for the convenient housing of a large number of cars. It

has been opened within the last year. Each car-house is under the supervision of a day and night foreman, who have the immediate direction of the car-men. The latter rank in order of their seniority, according to the divisions to which they are attached. The older men have the preference of runs, etc.

New men are required to spend at least twelve days on the cars under the tutelage of old employees, who are paid an additional compensation for the instruction so rendered. They are then further instructed and examined by road officers, given some practical experience by themselves and finally examined by the superintendent of transportation before they are considered regularly employed. It is necessary to maintain an extra list of 150 men, who hold themselves in readiness to take the places of absentees from day to day and who are rated in priority.

There is no doubt that during the past fifteen years the cost of living has greatly increased. The company experiences the same effect as an individual in its expenses, due to the advanced prices of necessities.

GREAT GAINS SINCE 1902

Since 1902 the Omaha & Council Bluffs Street Railway company has been practically rebuilt and equipped with a new central power station, a new general repair and car shops, new car-houses, new and larger cars, new and heavier rails and roadway, and new electric distributing systems. The first electric lines in the early nineties have disappeared. Besides this many miles of new lines and extensions have been constructed.

All the work has been with first-class materials, purchased at the high prices of the period and with labor constantly and justly demanding higher wages and receiving them.

It is apparent to everyone, undoubtedly, that it costs more to maintain the track and roadway of today than it did to maintain the early type of track and roadway, and also that it costs more to maintain the heavy modern cars in operation today, with their air-brakes, hot water heating plants and other accessories, than it did to maintain the small single-truck in use when electric operation was commenced.

BUYING POWER OF NICKLE

Since 1898 the power of a five-cent piece in buying transportation throughout Omaha and its suburbs has increased 50 per cent. In 1898 the longest street railway ride that could be purchased for five cents was eight miles. Now the same sum will buy any one of several rides, each about twelve miles long. In 1898 the five-cent ride was good for a maximum of eight miles, in small electric cars, run on 45-pound rails, the service being excellent for the period. In 1911 a nickel buys a ride of twelve miles in smooth-running, 42-foot, hot-water-heated, air-brake cars, traveling over heavy rails on a firmly-constructed roadbed and driven from energy distributed from a 10,000-horse power central power station.

In serving the community the company ignored the artificial lines of corporate limits and regards Omaha, South Omaha, East Omaha, Florence, Benson, Dundee and intermediate territory as a single district to be served impartially and without discrimination. A nickel is good for a ride to any point in this territory or any other point on the lines of the system. A universal transfer system, which permits travel in the same general direction at any junction, enables this accomplishment.

MANY FACTORS IN UPBUILDING

Many factors enter into the upbuilding of a city. A street railway is one of these factors and by no means is the least important. No mill or out-lying real estate is worth much unless it is easily accessible by the electric cars. No visitor comes to the city without forming an impression and using it in passing judgment upon the town. No small-salaried worker can enjoy the pleasures of home-owning, of lower rents and healthier surroundings unless he can go to and from his work quickly at a small cost.

The street railway company that makes no profit is not a good institution for a city. The street railway that is prosperous and is always looking out for the improvement of its service is the company that makes good in the hearts of its patrons. Quick service in airy, sanitary cars, makes the Omaha & Council Bluffs Railway company a most desirable corporation for this city. It makes it the company that stands at the head of things.

RECOGNIZED AS ONE OF BEST

The street railway system of Omaha is recognized in all parts of the country as one of the best. It is much better than many systems in cities the size of Omaha. It is enabled to maintain a high grade of service at all times and continues to make improvements. Its officers and directors are continually engaged in endeavoring to make all improvements that will aid the progress of the city and the convenience of its patrons.

Omaha must, in a degree, be known by the street railway system. It is the aim of the local street railway management to make Omaha known as the city of the ideal street car lines. Every year has seen many improvements. Every year of the immediate future will witness improvements.

The Omaha & Council Bluffs Street Railway company desires to give Omaha a square deal, to make its patrons boost for the service. To this end the company is always trying to improve conditions, and that it is succeeding is questioned by none.