Clang, Clang, Clang, Went the Trolleys

The progressive nature of Boise in the late 1800s brought the amazing Trolley to the valley.

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December 2004
When you think of the Treasure Valley and Boise, what comes to mind? In the 1990’s, probably an up and coming city attracting hundreds of Californians trying to escape the sprawling landscape of cities like Los Angeles. In the 1980’s, a small city struggling to attract big business, deal with subdivisions, and the connector. The 1960’s and 1970’s, the city that committed suicide and the urban renewal disaster. It seems that Boise has always been struggling to be a metropolitan area, but just can’t quite get there, or becomes afraid when it becomes to close.

Boise, however, has not always been this gun-shy of big city infrastructure and society. On the contrary Boise was a rather sophisticated, urbanite area around the turn of the century, willing to try new fangled inventions and ideas and nearly succeeded in many of them for what seemed would be long term.

The best example of Boise’s progressive nature was the electric trolley system introduced in the late nineteenth century and abandoned in the late 1920’s. Constructed 1891, the Boise Valley Traction Company brought the electric railway system or interurban line, better known as simply the trolley, to the small population, of the Treasure Valley.

The Oregon Short Line, which was built between 1882 and 1883, crossed much of Southern Idaho, and Northern Idaho was connected via the Milwaukee and Great Northern Railroads.¹ “Boise was still miffed at the start of [the last] century because the Oregon Short Line had by-passed her. Her only connection with the railroad was the stub line from Nampa, which… no doubt accounted for Boiseans becoming so trolley-car minded.”²

Electric transit was amazing. May 28, 1890 marked the beginning of the Trolley era, when the Boise Rapid Transit Company (BRTC) received the first charter. The BRTC began service in September 1891, boasting 2.25 miles of track in the city, approximately spanning from the Natatorium to 13ᵗʰ street. The tracks consisted of thirty-five pound per foot rails. By 1911, the BRTC had expanded its track to 7.86 miles, within the city limits, and had adjusted the rails to weigh seventy pounds per foot.³

1906 brought a competitor to BRTC’s door. The Boise Valley Electric Railroad (BVR) had 2.6 miles of track in Boise, but brought real competition in 1907 with the introduction of lines connecting Boise to the Ustick, Morris Hill Cemetery, and fairground areas. 1908 and 1909 brought further extensions to Meridian and Nampa, and by 1911 the BVR owned 31 miles of track and 21 cars.⁴

Yet another competitor appeared around 1907. Receiving their charter in 1905 and beginning operations in 1907, the Boise & Interurban Railroad, run by W.E. Pierce, managed to slightly outdo their competitors in the country lines. In 1911, the Boise & Interurban had thirty-five miles of track connecting much of the intermediary points between Boise and Caldwell, and had 5.10 miles of track within Boise, compared to BRTC’s 7.86 miles and BVR’s 2.6 miles.⁵
One of the foremost advocates of Boise’s trolley system was Walter E. Pierce. Pierce saw the possibilities that the Trolley could provide to Boise and the surrounding valley’s infrastructure. Through his business aspirations, and challenges from competing trolley companies, Pierce would make one of the greatest impacts on the trolley system in its short life.6

Pierce came to the Boise Valley in 1890 and developed very prosperous relationships with two business men, L.H. Cox and J.M. Haines, that would help him to develop several residential areas, most famously the “North End”. The construction of the New York Canal provided hundreds of jobs for workers, and Boise saw a small population boom of around 2,000 residents.7 Although a great deal of the workers were Chinese and Irish ditch diggers who took up residence near Morris Hill, there was a demand for housing in Boise City for those who were not wealthy, but searching for affordable comfort.

Pierce and his partners had begun working with the idea of electricity in the homes and on the streets of these new neighborhoods. Electricity made it possible to create a comfortable living space for a relatively inexpensive price. Pierce, however, saw the possibilities that would interconnect and change the way the average family lived. By extending the electric trolley system into the North End and eventually the rest of the valley, residents would be provided a cheap and quick source of transportation. However, there were many more benefits than simply transportation for residents and developers. The trolleys helped to trigger a real estate boom in the North End. The trolleys also had the ability to carry electricity to the countryside, helping farmers to quicken the pace of work, have an outlet to city life, and provide more leisure time. Pierce capitalized on all of these benefits. He became one of the most profitable realtors in Idaho’s history, he was able to attract large investments from the east coast to finance a campaign to consolidate the competing trolley lines, and he created leisure and entertainment spots, most notably Pierce Park and the Natatorium, for residents across the valley to enjoy.8

Pierce’s line, the Boise & Interurban fought bitterly with the BVR. Much of the rivalry centered around a fight over who would be able to extend their line to Caldwell first. Caldwell had been buzzing with a rumor that the trolleys would come their way, but many investors and engineers wrote it off as a pipedream. The tenacious fight went on for years as both lines worked their way to Caldwell, Nampa, and back to Boise.9 In 1912, things finally began to settle as the complete loop was completed.10 There is a great deal of contradicting information as to when all of the lines were combined, how many lines there were, and if they were ever truly combined at all. Although there is a great deal of speculation as to when and if these things occurred, 1912 marks the approximate consolidation of the three rail lines.

At the peak of the electric transit system in the Boise valley, trolleys ran a 60-mile loop called the “Boise Valley Loop”. The loop stretched from Warm Springs Avenue to as far west as Caldwell. The trolleys connected several tiny communities and villages, such as Yost, Ustick, Star, and several others. Over four dozen cars served the valley.
Several of the cars had names like, “Red Wing” and “Yellow Hammer.” A few cars were open air for summer use only; that were said to provide a “refreshing way to take a joyride.” Car types varied depending on whether they were to carry passengers, freight, or both. The tracks for all the lines were standard gage, so that freight cars could be the regular size and weight.

On a good day, an entire trip around “The Loop” would take about two hours. The trolley usually made about fifty to seventy stops on its way around for passengers and freight. As Boise’s population grew, from about 2,300 in 1890 to around 22,000 in 1920, the trolleys did their best time provide timely and safe service to the valley.

Small shelter stations, similar to bus stops dotted the valley. Heavy-duty bridges were constructed for the trolleys to cross the Boise River. Trolleys buzzed between stops at a quick twenty-mile per hour pace, speed varied of course, between town and country. In the beginning, each trip cost a mere nickel. After the trolleys had been up and running for a few years, fares began to vary by the length of the trip. A short trip would probably still cost a nickel most of the time. For a long trip, like the Sunday excursions many families took that went completely around “The Loop”, it might cost upwards of $1.50. “Cars on the Ustick line ran every hour from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m., with fares of 25 cents to Boise, ten cents to Meridian or Ustick.”

The tiny towns that made up those fifty to seventy stops were scattered along “The Loop” were often referred to as “Toonervilles”. The name came from the sound of an arriving trolley, signified by a clang or “toon”. However, the name also became associated with the belittling knocks of city dwellers toward country-folk, or hayseeds. Slowly, but surely, these “Toonervilles”, typically consisting of no more than a crossroad and a grocery store, were swallowed by the greater Boise, Meridian, and Nampa areas. As clear city and village lines dissolved, so did the superior attitude of the valley’s urbanites.

“Boise now sees the beginning of her electric railways system, which is destined to unite business centers with suburban districts and the entire city with as much of the valley as is within hearing distance of her church bells. Perhaps we shall see Boise wedded to Caldwell by electric bands.” The Idaho Statesman proclaimed this brief editorial on August 23, 1891, when residents of the valley were introduced to the “newfangled street cars.” As Boise caught its first glimpse of the electric trolley car, it began to hope for expansion, economic growth, and a sign that Boise was growing up. One of the streetcars, Trolley No. 2 was being tested around six in the evening on that first day. Once word of the trolley preview hit the streets, it was only a few minutes until Main Street was crowded with curious residents. At the beginning of September rider-ship was at around 1,500 people per day. Throughout the month estimates dropped to about 800 people per day. With just a few miles of track in town and a population of only around 2,500, the figures were impressive.

In the beginning, the Trolley was the place to be as well as be seen. The first two residents of the valley to ride by paid fare were recognized in the August 23, 1891 issue
of the *Idaho Statesman*, E.B. Tage and Mrs. J.W. Cunningham. “Both were citizens of note in the community.” However, the wealthy also viewed this example of progress as an excuse for parties. During the first month of operation, trolley cars were host to three upscale parties deemed, rapid transit parties. The *Idaho Statesman* made it a point to cover the events as a matter of social news.

Trolleys became a resource for all sorts of things, transportation for commuters, freight shipping, day trips, etc. However, social events became the mainstay of the Boise & Interurban up until the late teens. Most notably Pierce Park and the Natatorium, attracted more visitors than any other leisure spot in the valley. Pierce Park, now the site of Plantation Golf Course, became the place for company picnics, Labor Day celebrations, romantic evenings, and general merriment. W.E. Pierce approached the investors who had provided financial support to consolidate; to provide $100,000 for a park, which would be modeled after famous parks around the country. Pierce received his funding and proceeded to create a park with every state of the art convenience possible. Electric lighting for every walkway, concession stands, swings, lunch tables, and a stage were all installed. It became a public favorite for years to come.

Pierce also had the pleasure of owning the Natatorium, situated on the very edge of Warm Springs Avenue, and the last stop on the east end of the trolley line. The “Nat” served a purpose, similar to that of a YMCA. There was an enormous pool, filled with thermal waters derived from the geothermal hot springs that still heat much of Warm Springs Avenue and the state buildings downtown. There were private dressing rooms, baths, a squash court, ballroom, gymnasium, and numerous other facilities. Dance classes and swimming lessons were held, and the Nat stayed open the entire year around. It too became a hot spot for leisure.

The trolley also tended to not only sponsor, but also orchestrate other social affairs. In 1914 the Boise & Interurban sponsored a baseball team to compete in a late summer league. Sometimes the games would attract crowds as large as five or six hundred people. In 1907, when the Boise & Interurban began running to Caldwell, special low fares were given to Canyon County Fair goers. In 1913, a special car was provided for the Meridian Mothers’ Club so that women from around the valley could attend their annual meeting and stay overnight.

The atmosphere of the trolley cars was a mixture of grandeur and commonality. The cars looked at felt stylish, while they smelled dirty and clanked and clunked noisily. “The cars were luxurious, complete with oak and brass and the first upholstered seats many [people] had ever seen.” The cars featured seatbacks which flipped over because the streetcars merely reversed direction for a return trip rather than turn around. . . . switchable seats let passengers always face to the front. The cars carried a multitude of patrons, everything from wealthy Warm Springs residents to farm families and school children from the far end of the valley near small communities like Yote and Ustick. College students from the College of Idaho in Caldwell used the trolleys too. In the evening hours residents from the Warm Springs area could be seen in their finest attire, looking as if they were going to the theatre in New York. On hot summer days,
as people crowded into trolley cars, the smell of sweaty bodies, creosote from the
engine, and burning wires mixed to create unpleasant odors. Sparks and loud cracks
came from above the cars were the cables and arms conducting electricity to power the
trolleys. In addition to the noise and smell, the ride could become rough because
much of the track was not level. Despite the unpleasant environment, riders were
more than happy to scoot speedily down the tracks in a very modern and progressive
fashion for such an affordable price.

Another advantage of welcoming the trolley system was the increase in property values.
Land value along the line increased dramatically. Occasionally land value doubled if it
was situated directly against the tracks. Land in the Ustick area could sell for as much
as two hundred dollars an acre. The trolley line also brought city-dwellers to the
country. Around 1910 it became popular to take hunting excursions via the trolley. A
hunter could ride to Nampa, shoot pheasant or duck for an afternoon, dine in Nampa or
Meridian, and return to Boise before nightfall.

Although the trolley was innovative, safe, and modern, there were still glitches, almost
everyday. Some of these operational difficulties were minor, for example the arms
connecting the cars and the electric cables would often slip causing the trolley to grind
to a halt. The cars would either do this themselves or be triggered by children throwing
stones to knock the arms loose. Sometimes the power would simply fail. In the early
days of service when power was coming from Swan Falls, a storm might come through
and knock out power, leaving commuters to walk the rest of the way home. Occasionally, larger problems would occur. In 1915 the rear of a trolley car missed the
switch while the front had already headed down a separate track. The trolley car wound
up precariously turned with the front section sitting perpendicular to the Main St. tracks,
while the rear of the car was perched across the tracks for 13th St. A line crew was
called in to pull the car back onto one set of tracks.

The trolleys did not suffer only from operational and mechanical difficulties. The city of
Boise was often at odds with the trolley companies. During the 1890’s the city asked
that the bridge at 15th and State streets be widened to accommodate traffic growth.
The BRTC did nothing to improve the bridge, which drew attention to a far greater
dispute between the city and the company. BRTC had been required to pay a portion of
the fare collected from riders after the operation had passed its fifth year anniversary.
BRTC, however, had not owned up to this commitment, insistent that a financial crisis
made them unable to begin payments to the city. Nonetheless, the city extended the
five-year grace period from the original charter, outraging the Idaho Statesman.

Patrons had many of their own difficulties with the trolleys. At the Natatorium stop on
the far end of the loop, riders would often have to wait for trolley cars to be entirely full
before the (driver) would leave. The Idaho Statesman speculated that, “. . . such
service that is daily causing the people to cease patronizing the Rapid Transit
[Company].” In 1913 the Idaho Statesman introduced a column called “Trolley Kicks”
where patrons could voice their opinions and difficulties with BRTC. The theory behind
the critical column was that by criticizing the current state of transportation, the BRTC
would be kick started into giving good service consistently. Complaints covered a wide range, anything from small irritation with scheduling foul-ups and less than punctual service, to more serious charges of misconduct. Many of the editorials submitted were more of suggestions than complaints. Such an editorial was submitted on February 10, 1913. “I suggest an extra car each way on the belt line to accommodate the 6 o’clock supper crowd.” Longer submissions, however, were just as frequent. A submission on February 9, 1913 talked of one specific incident.

A conductor the other day called out in an ugly way when a man on a crowded on car on the back platform pulled the bell to stop the car, which was about to pass his street. He was going to “punch the head” of the next fellow who did it. As the conductor had not gotten to him for his fare so the passenger could tell him where he wanted to get off, would the conductor have been justified in punching his head? Why not fix the signal buttons so they can be used? It would save the conductor a load of responsibility and protect passengers from the necessity of mussing him up any time he started his punching process.

The column provided a much-needed public forum that provided two things, a monitoring system of the BRTC and a bond of mutual concern between neighboring villages and Boise.

Aside from minor glitches and stoppages, the trolleys did incur some serious problems. Injuries could be numerous on a bad day, for employees and passengers. There were cases in which the electricity function of the cars would malfunction shocking the conductor, occasionally knocking him off his feet. Sometimes the trolley wire would break loose and crash through a window hurting a passenger. Brakes would fail, cars would split and derail, and sometimes cars could completely jump the track. Much of the time, accidents were not exclusive to the trolley. Several incidents and collisions occurred between horse drawn carriages, wagons, horses, and automobiles. On more horrific occasions, pedestrians were hit, run over, and in a few cases, killed by trolleys. Although in most cases the pedestrian or motorist was at fault, it still made people weary of the dangers of trolleys.

The trolley system presented some interesting alternatives to difficult circumstances especially during winter months. Morris Hill Cemetery, which was established around 1891 as an alternative to previous burial grounds for Boise City, had the capability of being incredibly difficult to reach between October and March. The most direct road leading to Morris Hill was often muddy and difficult to traverse. The only other routes were long and presented challenges of their own. When the BVR expanded operations between Orchard Avenue and Morris Hill this offered an opportunity to families of the deceased. Previously the deceased had to be stored in the city over the winter, as transporting them by wagon was complicated. With the new extension the funeral car was introduced. The funeral car was equipped with a platform for the casket and
several seats for the mourners. This service was provided year round for about 35 cents.

Although rare, there were a few times when the trolley cars could not operate. In 1902 a snowstorm swept the Boise valley and buried the tracks under several inches of snow. An enterprising resident offered up a sleigh that ran from Hyde Park to the Overland Hotel following the usual route of the trolley. The sleigh ran every twenty minutes from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. Passengers were charged twenty cents per roundtrip. Until the snow melted enough to clear the tracks, the sleigh transport brought in about ten dollars a day.

Whether in winter or summer, trolleys connected people. As the trolley lines expanded further west, farmers and ranchers gained access to Boise. “(It) was our main transportation. Of course there was the faithful horse and our own two legs. There were very, very few, if any, cars owned by farmers. Trucks? There just weren’t any.” However, farming communities and families gained access to each other as well. Farm families would still have to make the trek to get from the farm to one of the trolley stops. Many farmers would bring produce to the shelter stations and several would take their wares to town. Freight was commonly shipped along the trolley line. The fruit packing industry shipped produce between the farm and plant quite frequently. Farmers also transported milk and vegetable produce to the market daily. Homes along the line would often become “informal depots” for horses, wagons, and passengers coming and going on the trolley.

Trolley service behaved a little differently in the countryside than in town. Although people generally caught the trolleys at designated stations, conductors would stop almost anywhere along the line to pick up riders. Children on the way to school would hail trolleys for a ride especially on cold winter mornings.

As trolley service continued for almost forty years, it began to fall into a slow decline fairly early on. The first signs of decline came in the form of “wheelmen”, or people who rode bicycles. Toward the close of the nineteenth century, bicycles became a popular form of entertainment and mode of transportation. When bicycles first arrived in Boise, restrictions on speed and location were placed on cyclists during the winter when they were forced to use sidewalks instead of roads, which turned to slush and mud. However, with pedestrians continually fearing reckless cyclists, an ordinance banned riding and even walking bicycles down sidewalks. Despite the occasional frustration with limitations, bicycles became a popular and handy alternative for commuters to waiting in lines for the trolleys. Although it seems that any impact on the industry would be relatively small, it still marked the downturn of trolley patronage. “. . . a nickel [was lost] every time someone peddled.”

Bicycles, however, were no match for the damage that motor vehicles would bring. “Devil wagons” was one of many negative catch phrases given to reckless and noisy machines, yet, it did not take long for the automobile to gain popularity with the wealthy and middle class soon after. As popularity grew, people would rent cars for evening
drives or make day trips to Idaho City that usually took around four hours. Car purchases and licensing increased rapidly between 1910 and 1920. “A Statesman headline in January 1919 declared, ‘Auto Licenses are Going Like Hot Cakes’ as an average of twenty people per day applied for driver’s licenses in Ada County. The state issued approximately 32,000 licenses the previous year, ten percent in Ada County alone.”

With planes descending on the ever-growing transportation scene, trolleys simply could no longer compete with progress. Companies like Ford convinced cities that they no longer needed old, out of date technology, like trolleys. Boise trolleys faced a grim prospect. The cost of maintenance on tracks, cars, and facilities became unreasonable. Fares rose steadily to compensate the loss, but toward the end of 1927, the Boise & Interurban was forced to end operation.

May 17, 1928 marked the official end of the trolley era. At 6:00pm the trolleys were taken to the storage barn, the few remaining patrons were given bus schedules, as they had now replaced the trolley line. Sadly, little sorrow from the public accompanied the close of the trolleys. People had long been complaining about poor service, bumpy rides, and unsightly cracked pavement around the tracks. However, for the few that faithfully rode the trolleys, the engineers and conductors who maintained and ran them, it was the end of an era.

Over the years, many have pondered whether the trolleys could ever be brought back. During the years of the Urban Renewal Project in Boise’s downtown area, the idea was considered by city planners, but simply did not fly with most city officials or with many of the residents in the valley. Throughout the 1970’s and 1980’s construction throughout downtown and other parts of the valley uncovered miles of the old rails that had been paved over since the years of the trolley’s operation. Frequently articles would come out in the Idaho Statesman, talking of the nostalgia and warm memories of the Boise & Interurban, and occasionally of the possibilities of resurrecting the old trolleys. In 1978 Max Yost, who had grown up riding and harassing the trolleys, was interviewed by the Idaho Statesman. Although Yost acknowledged his family’s former dependence on the transit system, he believed that bringing back the trolleys just was not a possibility. “... Ada County residents are both too widely scattered and too spoiled to ever walk two miles to the street car.”

Other residents of the valley have echoed Yost’s feelings about the trolleys. Even as long ago as 1950, the statewide magazine observed the difficult and costly measures of retrieving the abandoned tracks and cars. Currently the outlook on the project is still grim. Even bringing the trolley back to only the downtown area would involve years of construction and thousands, if not millions of dollars.

However, as of the turn of the new millennium, new enthusiasm for the return of the trolley system has risen among residents and students in the valley. Individuals and institutions, such as Nick Casner and Boise State University, have cultivated this new interest through classes, books, and BSU’s quarterly publication, Focus Magazine.
the 2000 spring issue of Focus Magazine, Casner and one of his students were interviewed about the public history course being offered at BSU. The course was taught in different locations around town, where students could actually look at changes in an area and see progression and change first hand. “Casner [said] this type of class serves several purposes. The format engages students. They become personally involved, which boosts how much information they retain. Students also gain a new perspective on history itself – that it isn’t static but alive and ready to be discovered, molded and interpreted.”

In May 2004, KTVB News of Boise questioned Boise’s mayor, Dave Bieter, and the Capital City Development Corporation director, Phil Kushlan as to whether the city might explore this transportation option once again. A mobility study of the downtown area, conducted over an eighteen-month period suggests that it could be a possibility. Both Bieter and Kushlan believe that there are tremendous possibilities for stimulating growth and development in downtown Boise. Examining public transit systems around the country, such as Dallas, Little Rock, and the Portland light rail system, seems to prove their point. “Kushlan estimates an initial four-mile trolley line would cost about $160 million, and he hopes the federal government will cover 80 percent of the cost, although the Bush administration is attempting to limit rail transit grants to 50 percent.” There would be definite hurdles in the resurrection and construction of a trolley system, but it is far from impossible.

Endnotes

2. Faith Turner, “Boise Rode Rails for Forty Years Before Trolleys Passed from Scene” Statewide: Idaho’s Illustrated Weekly (April 27, 1950, Section 2)
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Faith Turner, “Boise Rode Rails for Forty Years Before Trolleys Passed from Scene” Statewide: Idaho’s Illustrated Weekly (April 27, 1950, Section 2)


27. Ibid.


29. Ibid., 23.

30. Ibid., 35.

31. Ibid., 41.

32. Ibid., 55.

33. Ibid., 19.


36. Margaret Pearson, “Pioneer Boiseans Rode to Town on Old-Time Toonerville” *The Idaho Statesman* (July 13, 1952)


40. Ibid., 63.

41. Ibid., 20.
42. Margaret Pearson, “Pioneer Boiseans Rode to Town on Old-Time Toonerville” *The Idaho Statesman* (July 13, 1952)


45. Ibid.


47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid., 61-62.

50. Ibid., 28.


57. Ibid.

59. Ibid., 69.

60. Arthur Hart, “Transportation Goes from Feet to Planes” The Idaho Statesman (Monday, May 16, 1983)

61. Stan Tate, interview, November 12, 2004, 5:30pm


64. “Cars Killed Valley Trollies” The Idaho Statesman (February 15, 1978) 4A.

65. Faith Turner, “Boise Rode Rails for Forty Years Before Trolleys Passed from Scene” Statewide: Idaho’s Illustrated Weekly (April 27, 1950, Section 2)


67. “Rail Transit Online” APTA Heritage Trolley and Streetcar Site (May 2004)

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