

Street Railways in Grand Forks, North Dakota: 1887-1935

by Colleen A. Oihus

The history of the street railway in Grand Forks, North Dakota, reflects the national street railway era. The local system arose at roughly the same time as the national network, emerged for similar reasons, exemplified similar growth patterns, experienced like problems, and declined at approximately the same time for comparable reasons. The street railway system on both the local and national levels represented a stage in the evolution of public transportation.

The use of the electric streetcar as a means of public transportation resulted from the inadequacy of the horsecar, the principle mode of public transportation prior to the electric vehicle.¹ This type of transportation traveled under six miles per hour, frequently derailed, halted service under conditions of extreme snowfall, and could not be used on steep grades.² Moreover, a horse utilized by a transit company averaged only five hours of service a day, consumed approximately 30 pounds of hay and other grains daily, required the service of veterinarians, blacksmiths and hostlers, and sustained a short life expectancy.³ Finally, a transit company purchased approximately seven times as many horses as cars.⁴

Until the advent of the streetcar, several alternatives to the horsecar were unsuccessfully tried in American cities. For instance, high cost and dirtiness led to the failure of the steam dummy engine as a method of public transportation;⁵

the development of the tram, "operated by compressed air and internal-combustion engines," never reached a level of efficiency,⁶ and battery cars were simply too slow. One alternative which did receive limited use, the cable car, necessitated massive expenditures for underground construction that rapidly deteriorated.⁷ These alternatives all succumbed to the arrival of the electric streetcar.

¹ *Trolley Car Treasury*, as cited in George W. Hilton and John F. Due, *The Electric Interurban Railways in America* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1964), 4.

² *Ibid.*

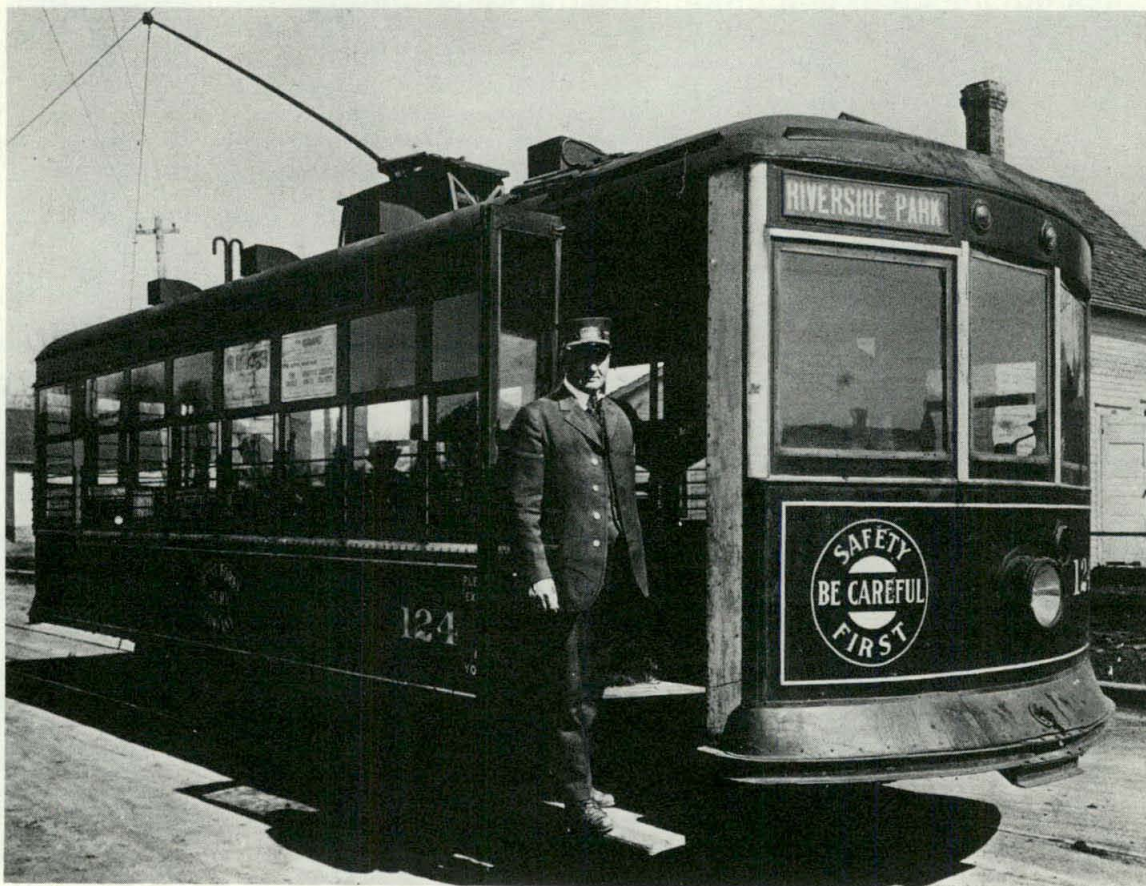
³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ George W. Hilton and John F. Due, *The Electric Interurban Railways in America* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1964), 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*



Conductor George Glass and car #124 of the Grand Forks Street Railway Company's Riverside Park Line. The photo dates from about 1921, immediately after the company purchased six of the Birney-type streetcars.

— Courtesy Orin G. Libby Manuscript Collection

The national street railway system emerged during the early 1890s after the use of the electric traction proved economically feasible.⁸ In 1887, only 29 miles of electric street railway existed in the country.⁹ By 1897, however, the total figure jumped to 13,765 miles,¹⁰ and another decade increased the total approximately 34,000 miles.¹¹

From 1900 to 1917, the national street railway system expanded greatly. The number of miles of line operated increased from 22,576.99 in 1902 to 44,835.37 in 1917. The number of passengers increased from 4,774,211,904 in 1902 to a surprising 12,666,557,754 in 1917.¹²

Together with this period of growth and expansion came two basic problems. First, franchises from city councils granted a company the right to construct a street railway system, but also required the company to pave and maintain areas where tracks were laid.¹³ As time went on, this paving requirement became quite a financial burden. A second franchise requirement that companies encountered was the fixed five-cent fare.¹⁴ This fixed fare failed to produce a net operating revenue and often created indebtedness, which led to receivership.

The year 1917 marked the peak of the national street railway system, and its prosperity continued until approximately 1927. However, by 1932 the number of street railway companies had decreased to a total below that for 1902.¹⁵ The advent of the bus and the increased use of the private automobile spelled the end of an era in American public transportation.

In Grand Forks, the street railway system was the response to the demand for adequate public transportation by

⁸ John H. Hanna, "Evolution of Community Transportation," *Electric Railway Journal*, 75 (September 15, 1931), 498.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Electric Railways and Affiliated Motor Bus Lines* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931), 7.

¹³ Henry W. Blake, "There Is Little Warrant for the Paving Tax as at Present Assessed," *Electric Railway Journal*, 60 (November, 1922), 839.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, "The 5-cent Fare Level Cannot Come Back Generally," *Electric Railway Journal*, 61 (January, 1923), 152.

¹⁵ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Electric Railways and Affiliated Motor Bus Lines: 1932* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1934), 4.

¹⁶ Untitled article on the street railways in Grand Forks located in the clipping-pamphlet file, "Grand Forks-Transportation," Dakota Room, Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota.

¹⁷ "Trolley Line Was Great Day For City, U," *Grand Forks Herald*, February 23, 1958, sec. A, 16.

¹⁸ Robert S. Anderson, "A Social History of Grand Forks, North Dakota 1880-1914," (Unpublished MA Thesis; University of North Dakota, 1951), 121.

¹⁹ Grand Forks City Ordinance, No. 6, April 20, 1887, as cited in Anderson, "A Social History of Grand Forks, North Dakota 1880-1914," 121.

²⁰ "Old City Trolley Had Final Trip in 1934," Grand Forks-Transportation File, Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota.

²¹ Grand Forks City Ordinance, No. 251, September 2, 1908.

²² "Trolley Final Trip," clipping-pamphlet file.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ "Trolley Line," *Grand Forks Herald*, February 23, 1958, sec. A, 16.

a growing population in the late 19th Century.¹⁶ Horsecabs, the existing mode of transportation, were too expensive; the average fare was fifty cents per ride at a time when "a dollar would buy three meals and a room for a day in a hotel."¹⁷ This need led to the first attempt to create a street railway system for the city.

On April 20, 1887, the Grand Forks City Council approved its first franchise for the construction of a street railway. The franchise granted to William O'Mulcahy and M.L. McCormack of New York City the right "to lay tracks and operate streetcars on Belmont, Division, International Avenues, and Third Street."¹⁸ The franchise stipulated that construction commence within 90 days and that one mile of track be completed within one year's time. Construction never began, however, and a street railway in Grand Forks never materialized in 1887.¹⁹

In 1892, the "sprawling city of some 5,500 inhabitants became real excited over the prospect of a real electric street-car line, which would run through its unpaved streets to the far reaches of the city."²⁰ On May 2, the city council granted a second street railway franchise to the "projectors" of the community and several St. Paul businessmen. The franchise gave,

the authority, right and privilege to build, equip, maintain and operate electric street railway lines, with double or single tracks, with all necessary side tracks and switches, poles, wires, conduits and appliances, over, along and upon the streets and avenues in the city of Grand Forks.²¹

On August 2, 1892, W.C. Merryman of the St. Paul Phillips and Merryman Engineering Firm reached the city and began to survey projected track lines.²² Along with the surveying came a series of problems and delays. The ordinance required the erection of guard wires above the trolley wires for protection against contact with telephone or telegraph lines. The "projectors," however, thought these wires both needless and unsightly, and therefore objected. The franchise also required paving both between and one foot to each side of the tracks. The "projectors" agreed to this, but desired a provision in the ordinance exempting them from the costs of relaying pavement due to sewer, water or gas line construction.²³

Consequently, the city council met on August 15, and amended several sections of the original franchise. With construction delayed, probably as a result of this process, C.F. Arrall came to the city to expedite the work. Regardless of these efforts, the St. Paul firm never laid any track.²⁴ The actual completion of a street railway line in Grand Forks took place over 15 years later.

In 1904, another attempt to effect a street railway system in Grand Forks began under the direction of Webster Merrifield, President of the University of North Dakota. At this time, the distance between the University and the city, well known by professor and student alike, effectively stimulated the final emergence of a public transportation system to bridge two "bleak and dismal miles . . . where the sun beat down in summer and arctic winds blew in winter."²⁵ Thus, "feeling the need for a connecting link between the Sioux Institution and the city," several professors and businessmen founded the

A Grand Forks Street Railway Gallery



William Budge



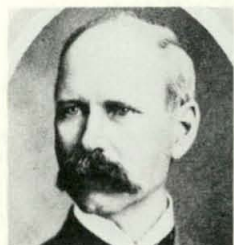
David H. Beecher



Edward J. Lander



Jeremiah D. Bacon



Thomas Roycraft, mgr.

— State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection



Elwyn F. Chandler



Adison I. Hunter



Earle J. Babcock



James A. Dinnie



Robert B. Griffith

Grand Forks Transit Company.²⁶ Webster Merrifield directed the enterprise; Dean Elwyn F. Chandler, Robert B. Griffith, Edward J. Lander, David H. Beecher and Oscar S. Hanson²⁷ were also involved.

In his annual report to the University Board of Trustees, Merrifield suggested the great value of a streetcar line:

The new motor line will, it is believed, prove of almost incalculable value to the University in putting it in cheap and easy communication with the city. The distance of the University from Grand Forks and the great difficulty during the greater portion of the year of getting back and forth has proved, heretofore, a serious handicap to the institution. Henceforth, the University will enjoy all the advantages of isolation with the added advantage of being practically in the heart of a considerable city. With the construction of the new railway the town will doubtless grow toward the University and there will, in a few years be an abundance of comfortable boarding places in the immediate neighborhood of the University for the accommodations of students. The lack of such accommodations, heretofore, has been one of the most serious difficulties in the way of building up the University . . . Not the least advantage of the line will be the possibility of bringing the townspeople to lectures of a literary or scholarly character, convocation addresses, class plays, receptions and other forms of entertainment at the University as well as making similar attractions of an instructive and social character in Grand Forks more easily accessible to the students at the University.²⁸

On April 11, 1904, the city council awarded a franchise to the Grand Forks Transit Company. It granted:

to Leslie Stinson, A.G. Schultheis, William Budge, E.J. Babcock and R.B. Griffith, and their assigns, permission to construct and operate a street railway along certain streets in the city of Grand Forks and to the University of North Dakota, and establishing regulations and conditions under which said street railway shall be constructed and operated.²⁹

²⁶ "UND Alumni Review," (December, 1938), located in the clipping pamphlet file, 16.

²⁷ The six men were prominent civic leaders in the city. Webster Merrifield (1852-1916) served as President of the University of North Dakota from 1891-1909; Elwyn F. Chandler (1872-1946) was professor of Mathematics at the University from 1904-1914, North Dakota State Engineer from 1904-1905 and professor of Civil Engineering from 1914-1938; Robert B. Griffith (1856-1934) owned the Ontario Store, a Grand Forks department store now known as Griffith's; Edward J. Lander (1856-1953) founded and operated the E.J. Lander Real Estate firm and had many local investments; David H. Beecher (no dates available) was a banking entrepreneur who was President of the Union National Bank; Oliver S. Hanson (1862-1939) was President of the Scandinavian-American Bank.

²⁸ "Annual Report to the Members of the Board of Trustees of the University of North Dakota, June 1, 1904," Merrifield Papers, Orin G. Libby Manuscript Collection, University of North Dakota, 10-11. Interestingly, Merrifield's prediction about the growth of the city of Grand Forks has proven apt. The city indeed filled the gap between itself and the University and is currently expanding westward beyond the Sioux institution.

²⁹ Grand Forks City Ordinance, No. 166, April 11, 1904, as cited in Anderson, "Social History of Grand Forks." Leslie Stinson (1861-1944) owned a large farm implement, coal and wood, and carriage dealership in Grand Forks; Albert G. Schultheis (1860-1945) was secretary-treasurer of the Grand Forks Foundry and Machine Company; William ("Billy") Budge (1852-1948) was a Grand Forks pioneer businessman who is sometimes called the "father" of the University of North Dakota; Earle J. Babcock (1867-1925) was Dean of the College of Engineering at the University of North Dakota from 1916-1925, North Dakota State Geologist from 1897-1902 and one of the leading early researchers into the industrial uses of North Dakota lignite coal. For biographical information about Babcock, see William O. Beck, "Earle Jay Babcock and North Dakota Lignite," *North Dakota History*, 41-1 (Winter, 1974), 4-15.

By the early months of 1904, Merrifield and the Transit Company accumulated \$15,000 through the sale of stock,³⁰ Therefore, with both the right to build and sufficient capital, the company began initial construction of the University Avenue line.

Actual construction under the supervision of Andrew Morrison, the University Registrar, began on July 13 after the directors finally decided to employ electric power. The directors approved the use of electricity after a second generator was installed in the University powerhouse.³¹ The laying of steel rails began on University Avenue directly in front of the present day Gamma Phi sorority house, and reached the Great Northern Railroad crossing on October 6.³² The switchboard arrived shortly thereafter. October 10 witnessed the operation of the first streetcar in the city; it ran from the University powerhouse to the railroad crossing.³³ Construction ended at the junction of First Avenue and Third Street on November 20, 1904, and shuttle service began on a half-hour schedule.³⁴ An estimated 300 people rode the streetcar daily "and at times reached a peak of 800 a day."³⁵

Initiative for a second streetcar line came from Robert B. Griffith, and resulted from the fact that the University car operated almost solely to the advantage of the students while the growing metropolis of over 12,000 people remained without a means of public transit.³⁶ Griffith organized a streetcar committee within the Grand Forks Commercial Club; together they started amassing the necessary construction monies, but encountered great difficulty because other projects competed "for the limited capital of the city."³⁷ The streetcar committee also went before the city council and requested a franchise. On September 2, 1908, the franchise was granted to:

E. J. Lander, John Dinnie, W.H. Kelsey, E.H. Kent, and O.A. Webster, their successors and assigns, the authority, right and privilege to build, equip, maintain and operate a street railway line or lines with single or double tracks together with all necessary side tracks, turnouts, switches, loops, poles, wyes, conduits, and appliances in connection there with in, over, across [sic] and along the following streets, avenues, bridges and public places within the limits of the city of Grand Forks, North Dakota.³⁸

The above mentioned streets included Skidmore (Gateway



Car #124 travels the Riverside Park Line about 1921.

³⁰ Allan Dearden, "The Days of the Trolleys," *They Came To Stay* (Grand Forks, North Dakota: Grand Forks Centennial Corporation, 1974) 25.

³¹ "Street Car Line Work," *Grand Forks Herald*, June 14, 1904, 8; "Electricity Will Move University Line Cars," *Grand Forks Herald*, June 11, 1904, 6.

³² Telephone Interview with Mrs. John C. McLaughlin, October 29, 1975. Mrs. McLaughlin is the daughter of the last General Manager of the Street Railway Company, E.O. Odegard.

³³ "Street Car Line Ready," *Grand Forks Herald*, October 11, 1904, 8.

³⁴ "Grand Forks Street Railway, Grand Forks, N.D. — East Grand Forks, Minn.," unpublished manuscript, (no page numbers, no date), located in the Minnesota Transportation Museum, Bloomington, Minnesota. Hereafter cited as Unpublished manuscript from the Minnesota Transportation Museum. See also: E.O. Odegard, "Grand Forks," *Bus Transportation*, 14 (February, 1935), 62.

³⁵ Dearden, 26.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, See also, Odegard, 62

³⁷ Dearden, 26.

³⁸ Grand Forks City Ordinance, No. 251, September 2, 1908. John Dinnie (1853-1910) acted as Mayor of Grand Forks from 1896-1904 and became prominent as a contractor and builder; William H. Kelsey (1858-1936) owned a real estate, loan and insurance firm and was involved in city politics as either alderman or city commissioner from 1914-1926; Edward H. Kent (no dates available) was President of Kent Realty and Investment Co.; Oscar A. Webster (1856-1947) was President of the Pioneer Insurance Agency.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

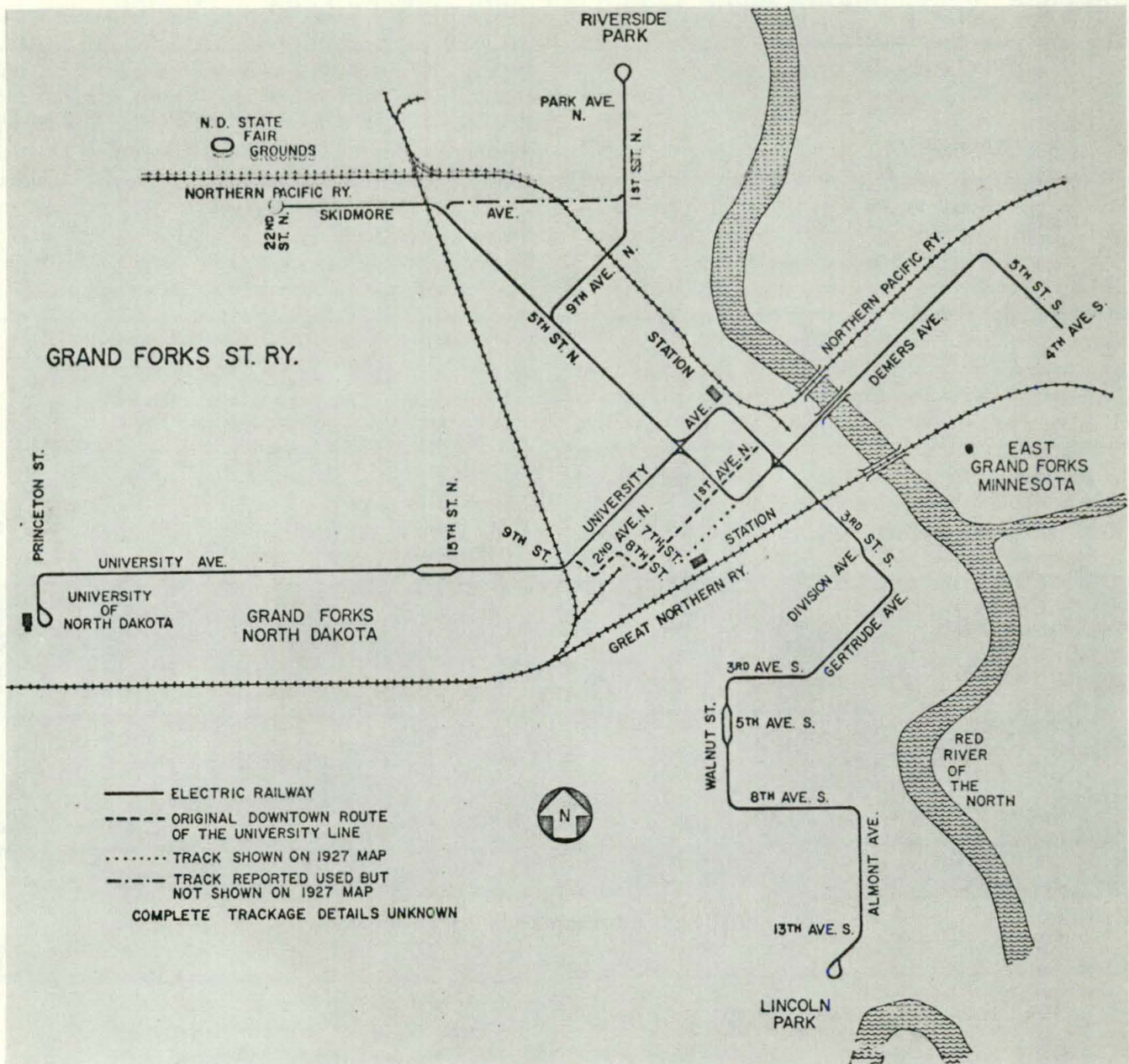
Drive), DeMers, International, Woodland, Minnesota, Belmont, Boulevard, L'Hiver, Second and Tenth Avenues and on Chestnut, Conkling, Third and Fifth Streets.³⁹

October 3, 1908, marked the beginning of construction. On that day the citizenry and a band gathered on south Third Street and listened to an optimistic address given by Edward J. Lander, President of the local Commercial Club:

Citizens of Grand Forks, I congratulate you on the important work that here and now is about to be undertaken. That is is one of supreme importance to the city of Grand Forks is without question. That it will prove to be the most important step toward the building of a greater Grand Forks I firmly believe. The city is larger than the men who comprise it. Every city is what the men who live in it make it. That's were [sic] our individual importance comes in. This movement has been undertaken and brought to its present initial stage by the united efforts of unselfish, patriotic citizens.

I believe this to be a critical time in the history of this city. I believe that having and not having a street railway means whether Grand Forks shall spell c-i-t-y or spell v-i-l-l-a-g-e. Without it our claim for metropolitanism is unwarranted and unfounded. With it our opportunity to make good is here. I have travelled over every portion of the United States and I tell you here and now no city is surrounded by a superior agricultural society.

Think, act, and work metropolitanism, and a greater Grand Forks and it will surely be yours.



The Grand Forks Street Railway system. All known lines are shown on this map.

— Courtesy Colleen A. Oibus

With the conclusion of Lander's "boosting" address, Robert B. Griffith drove the first spike and inaugurated the construction of a true system of public transportation.⁴⁰ At 4:00 that afternoon, contractor McDonald and his crew began laying the steel rails.⁴¹ Construction ended with the completion of the line to Lincoln Park on July 16, 1909.⁴² This line offered public transit to a large residential section of the city.

While construction continued in the fall of 1908, the members of the streetcar committee formed a new company, the Grand Forks Street Railway Company, which incorporated on December 9, 1908. The Articles of Incorporation established an 11-person Board of Directors; they included

Edward J. Lander, Oscar A. Webster, Carlos F. Whitcomb, William H. Kelsey, James Dinnie, Jeremiah D. Bacon, Adison I. Hunter, David H. Beecher, William J. Murphy, Oliver S. Hanson and Oscar M. Hatcher. The Articles authorized capital stock of \$150,000, divided into 1500

⁴⁰ "R.B. Griffith Drives Spike While Band Plays A Cheering Refrain," *Grand Forks Herald*, October 4, 1908, 8.

⁴¹ Dearden, 27.

⁴² Corporation Records of the Grand Forks Street Railway Company, unpublished manuscript consisting of four volumes located in the holdings of the E.J. Lander Realty Company, Vol. 1, 50. Hereafter be cited as Corporation Records.

shares at \$100.00 per share.⁴³ Four men, Lander, Robert D. Campbell, Paul Griffith and Elwyn F. Chandler were the principal stockholders.⁴⁴

Throughout 1909, the company consolidated its holdings. On June 18, it purchased the large Merrifield holdings in the old transit company. On July 31, director Kelsey "reported that he attended the meeting of the Grand Forks Transit Co., and that the purchase of all its assets by the Grand Forks Street Railway Company had been effected." Final incorporation of the old company into the newly-established one resulted shortly thereafter.⁴⁵ The company also secured power for the car service from the Grand Forks

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 52. Carlos F. Whitcomb (no dates available) acted as Secretary, Treasurer and General Manager of the Kent Realty and Investment Corporation; James A. Dinnie (1863-1938) was President and General Manager of Dinnie Brothers, a construction firm, and Mayor of Grand Forks from 1914-1918; Jeremiah D. Bacon (1865-1933) was proprietor of the Dakotah Hotel, publisher of the *Grand Forks Herald* and owner of a well-known grain and stock farm near the city; Adison I. Hunter (1860-1936) was President of the First National Bank and a leader in the ill-fated Red River Valley Brick Corporation; William J. Murphy (1859-??) owned the Grand Forks Gas and Electric Corporation; Oscar M. Hatcher (no dates available) was President of the Hatcher Brothers Corporation, an investment and mortgage firm.

⁴⁴ Unpublished manuscript from the Minnesota Transportation Museum. Robert D. Campbell (1867-1961) was a very prominent physician and surgeon who was a bank director and at one time President of the North Dakota Medical Association; Paul B. Griffith (1887-1957), the son of Robert B. Griffith, became General Manager of his family's firm in 1934 and had substantial business interests in Grand Forks.

⁴⁵ Corporation Records, vol. 1, 50, 52.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁷ Odegard, 62.

⁴⁸ Corporation Records, vol. 1, 76.

⁴⁹ Unpublished manuscript from the Minnesota Transportation Museum.

⁵⁰ Odegard, 62.

⁵¹ Corporation Records, vol. 2, 179.

⁵² Unpublished manuscript from the Minnesota Transportation Museum.

⁵³ Corporation Records, vol. 2, 27.

Gas and Electric Company at a rate of two dollars per month per kilowatt.⁴⁶

The year 1910 saw the extension of track across the Red River into East Grand Forks, Minnesota. This decision was made because Grand Forks, located in constitutionally "dry" North Dakota, simply offered less in the way of alcoholic beverages than did its "wide open" sister city.⁴⁷ With approval of the franchise,⁴⁸ work began from the Grand Forks Great Northern Railroad Depot, and eventually terminated at the corner of Fifth Street and Fourth Avenue in East Grand Forks. This line opened service in early 1911.⁴⁹

This extension had immediate financial problems. According to one source, "it was thought that people from Grand Forks would like to ride by street car when going for their daily constitutional. However, this did not prove to be the case. It seemed that people thought they were too conspicuous when riding the cars to East Grand Forks and after being over there for a while they were unable to ride at all."⁵⁰ As revenue decreased during succeeding years, the directors finally decided on June 30, 1919, to discontinue this line.⁵¹

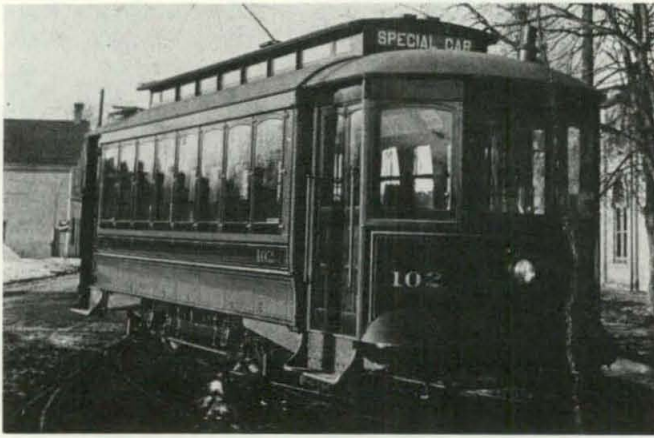
Since the State Fair had become quite a popular attraction during this era, the directors also extended the line to the State Fair Grounds north of the city. The tracks began from University Avenue, continued up north Fifth Street and ended on Skidmore Avenue (Gateway Drive) south of the fair grounds. Scheduled service began in 1911. In addition, the Riverside Park line, possibly an extension of the State Fair Grounds line, stretched from the corner of Fifth Street and Ninth Avenue to the junction of First Street and Park Avenue.⁵² This line, completed either in 1911 or early 1912, offered public transit to the northern residential district. Reconstruction and relocation of the University line also took place in early 1913.⁵³

By 1913, the Grand Forks Street Railway Company operated lines from the downtown district to the University, Lincoln Park, East Grand Forks, the State Fair Grounds and Riverside Park. These five lines constituted the entire amount

The street railway system pressed its special cars into service for events such as football games at the University of North Dakota.

— Courtesy Orin G. Libby Manuscript Collection





Car #102, one of the early, "double-end" models used in Grand Forks, turns for the car barns on Fifth Street.

— Courtesy Orin G. Libby Manuscript Collection

operated throughout the lifetime of the Grand Forks street railway system and totaled approximately 8.5 miles.⁵⁴

The company purchased and operated 16 streetcars during the system's existence. The first, "a small second-hand, double-end passenger motor car" purchased from the Duluth Street Railway Company, provided service on the first line constructed, the University line.⁵⁵ The term "double-end" meant that the car operated in both directions. When it reached the end of a line, the conductor simply switched the poles leading to the cable wire and thus reversed the direction of operation. The other man used in the streetcar operation, the motorman, ran control boards located at both ends of the car; when the car switched directions, the motorman switched control boards.⁵⁶

The company bought additional cars as the various lines opened. Until 1920, it conducted service with seven cars purchased from the American Car Company with a "single truck, double end, deck roof semi-convertible" type construction.⁵⁷ The term "truck" referred to the number of sets of wheels carrying the car;⁵⁸ in this case, the cars used one truck with four wheels. The company painted the car bodies dark green and the roofs brown, and evenly numbered them from 102 through 108. Car number 110 resembled the other four cars, but was longer and had narrower windows. The last two of the seven cars, numbered 112 and 114, were second-hand and had a double-truck-type construction. The company also owned four trailers; these were open air structures with assigned numbers 2, 4, 6, and 8 that simply connected onto a regular car to provide extra seating for passengers when the need arose. The trailers operated almost exclusively on the State Fair Grounds line.⁵⁹

On February 10, 1920, the Board of Directors approved the purchase of six Birney-type streetcars from the Safety Car Trust Corporation in St. Louis, Missouri.⁶⁰ These Birney cars were of single-end construction; in other words, they traveled in only one direction.⁶¹ Therefore, the company built "turn-around" loops on the various lines in order to accommodate the new streetcars.⁶² Construction of the loop on

University Avenue near Chandler Hall, took place even before the company secured approval from the University Board of Administration.⁶³

The new streetcars began operation on the Riverside Park line on January 27, 1921, and on the University and Lincoln Park lines on January 30 of that same year.⁶⁴ The company acquired three additional Birney cars in 1930 from a firm in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, but these second-hand cars, numbered 128, 130 and 132, operated only on special occasions.⁶⁵

The streetcar was a means of public transportation, but it also served as an object of mischief. If a sufficient number of people climbed on the back of the trolley, for instance, the front end rose up and the car slid off the track. Students found it quite amusing to hide the control lever from the conductor, and to knock the pole off the cable wire with snowballs and thereby immobilize the car.⁶⁶ The Birney car was also a source of complaints; they were light-weight and "swayed from side

⁵⁴ Unpublished manuscript from the Minnesota Transportation Museum.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Interview with William E. Thoms, held November 6, 1975, at the University of North Dakota.

⁵⁷ Unpublished manuscript from the Minnesota Transportation Museum.

⁵⁸ J.S. Dean, *The A B C of the Electric Car* (East Pittsburgh, Pa.: Westinghouse Technical Night School Press, 1924), 29.

⁵⁹ Unpublished manuscript from the Minnesota Transportation Museum; Thoms interview.

⁶⁰ Corporation Records, vol. 2, 199.

⁶¹ Unpublished manuscript from the Minnesota Transportation Museum.

⁶² Corporation Records, vol. 2, p. 209.

⁶³ "Report and Recommendations to the Board of Administration, November 12, 1920," (University Archives, University of North Dakota), 4.

⁶⁴ Corporation Records, vol. 2, 209.

⁶⁵ Unpublished manuscript from the Minnesota Transportation Museum.

⁶⁶ "Trolley Line," *Grand Forks Herald*, February 23, 1958, sec. A, 16.

During North Dakota winters, the snow sweeper was a very necessary piece of equipment for a streetcar line. The sweeper cleaned the tracks by means of large steel brushes attached to the car's undercarriage.

— Courtesy Orin G. Libby Manuscript Collection



to side and bobbed up and down." Passengers referred to the Birneys as "tin cans" and "jiggers."⁶⁷

The company occupied two buildings in Grand Forks for offices and housing-maintenance of the streetcars. The location of the business office was 217 South Third Street. A building at 1008 North Fifth Street became the "carbarns" for service and upkeep of the cars.⁶⁸

The amount charged for fares doubled throughout the existence of the streetcar system, even though the 1908 franchise limited the price of the fare to no more than five cents.⁶⁹ In September, 1918, however, fares increased to seven cents, with a special rate of 15 fares for one dollar and six fares for forty cents.⁷⁰ A second increase took place in January, 1929. At a special meeting of the Board, director Lander suggested increases to eight cents for cash fares, fifty cents for seven tokens, one dollar for 16 tokens, and \$11.00 for 176 tokens. The directors approved and placed the new fare policy in operation.⁷¹ By 1933, a fare sold for ten cents and four tokens sold for twenty-five cents.⁷²

In 1921, the Street Railway Company entered a very critical period. The purchase of the six Birney cars, the cost of paving requirements, the issuance of bonds and the outstanding loans for operations put the company heavily into debt. By December 31, 1921, the company's debt statement included the following items:

Bonds (secured by first mortgage on all property owned by the company)	\$50,000.00
Banks and Trust Companies (money borrowed)	9,100.00
Unpaid balance purchase price of cars (secured by conditional sale contract)	19,005.08
Ties and other miscellaneous	1,280.00
North end pavement claims	8,260.60
Total	\$88,695.68 ⁷³

Committees from various civic bodies gathered to express their concern. They posed a number of questions in the form of a petition that evidenced how popular the street railway was:

- 1) The Street Railway Company furnishes cheap and convenient service to all of the parks, Lincoln, Central, University, and Riverside. How much would the value of these parks be diminished if there were no street car service?

⁶⁷ Unpublished manuscript from the Minnesota Transportation Museum.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Corporation Records, vol. 2, 163.

⁷⁰ Odegard, 63.

⁷¹ Corporation Records, vol. 2, 165.

⁷² Odegard, 63.

⁷³ "Statement to the Citizens of Grand Forks in Reference to the Street Railway Situation," prepared by Committees from the Civic Bodies of Grand Forks, (no publisher, no date), 9.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷⁶ Corporation Records, vol. 3, 15-18.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 66-67, 79.

⁷⁹ Unpublished manuscript from the Minnesota Transportation Museum.

⁸⁰ Corporation Records, vol. 3, 82.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

2) The Street Railway Company furnishes invaluable service during fair week. What would the State Fair amount to without street railway service?

3) We have had in Grand Forks during the past 13 years the best little street car system in existence. Shall we continue it?

4) Shall we continue to be a city, or shall we turn back and again be a country town?⁷⁴

The several civic committees also formulated a policy in their petition for partial liquidation of the debt. They recommended:

that the Company be given a ten year vacation from the expense and cost of construction, repairing and maintaining pavement to begin January 1, 1921 and expire December 31, 1930. The company will pay for its own rails, ties and other material and the labor of installing its tracks, but the City will pay for all paving, including the north end pavement, the University avenue repairs and the south end pavement, together with such other construction, repairs and maintenance charges as may accrue during such period.⁷⁵

This petition evidently never met with approval from either the general public or the city council because the company continued to pay for paving requirements and to request exemption from this requisition.⁷⁶ Too, the company evidently liquidated its debts because the street railway system endured until 1934.

Although no people gathered, no band played and no address was given, October, 12, 1926, was also an historic day for Grand Forks; it marked the beginning of the decline of the street railway system and its replacement by the bus. At a Board of Directors meeting, director Hunter suggested "that it might be well for the company to consider the possibility of operating buses." Hunter thought the bus a better means of public transportation because it operated without tracks and therefore could provide service to areas not covered by the streetcar.⁷⁷

Discussion of the change to bus service continued until 1930 when the directors finally decided in its favor. At a special meeting, held July 29, 1930, the Board of Directors instructed the General Manager to purchase two Reo buses with Eckland bodies from the Eckland Brothers firm in Minneapolis. On September 9, the directors approved the purchase of a third bus. These rubber-wheeled vehicles began total service on the Riverside Park line in June, 1931,⁷⁸ and on the Lincoln Park line later that year.⁷⁹ The 1931 also saw the purchase of two Mack buses at a total cost of \$10,000.⁸⁰

The complete transfer to buses took place in the spring and summer of 1934. The board met on April 10 and director Griffith reported the following conclusions:

- 1) The condition of University Avenue is so poor as to require large repairs immediately if street car service is to be continued long hereafter, perhaps [at a cost of] \$1,500.00
- 2) If track is maintained on Fifth Street and DeMers Avenue after repaving, estimated cost would be \$6,000.00.
- 3) Streetcar operations should therefore be abandoned permanently whenever the paving necessitates [sic] it.
- 4) A fleet of five buses (2 large and 3 smaller) ought therefore to be purchased now.⁸¹

On July 1, 1934, the only remaining streetcar "clanged through the city for the last time." There was, however, a final "sentimental" run on July 15. Loaded with company directors, professors, city officials and businessmen, it traveled down University Avenue where track construction first began 30 years earlier. The company sold the old rails and cars to the public. Several farmers purchased the rails for supports in structures such as potato bins.⁸² The old cars "became anything from farmers bunk houses to beer parlors, from living quarters to chicken houses."⁸³

The establishment of the streetcar on the thoroughfares of the nation's cities took place between the years 1895 and 1905. In Grand Forks, it occurred later even though the intent had existed previously. The streetcar met a demand and a need for an adequate system of public transportation and it expanded rapidly until 1917. During this period, Grand Forks, like the other cities, increased its mileage of operation and thus increased service to the public. During this period, too, the various streetcar companies, like the Grand Forks

company, encountered two problems, the paving requirements and the fixed fare.

Although the streetcar era of prosperity generally continued until roughly 1927, the national system started to decline thereafter. In Grand Forks, the decline began in 1930 with the purchase of two buses and ended in 1934 with the change to a total bus system. The street railway system in Grand Forks and in the nation's other cities, declined primarily because buses were more versatile. It also declined as a result of the financial burden created by the paving requirements and the increased usage of the private car.

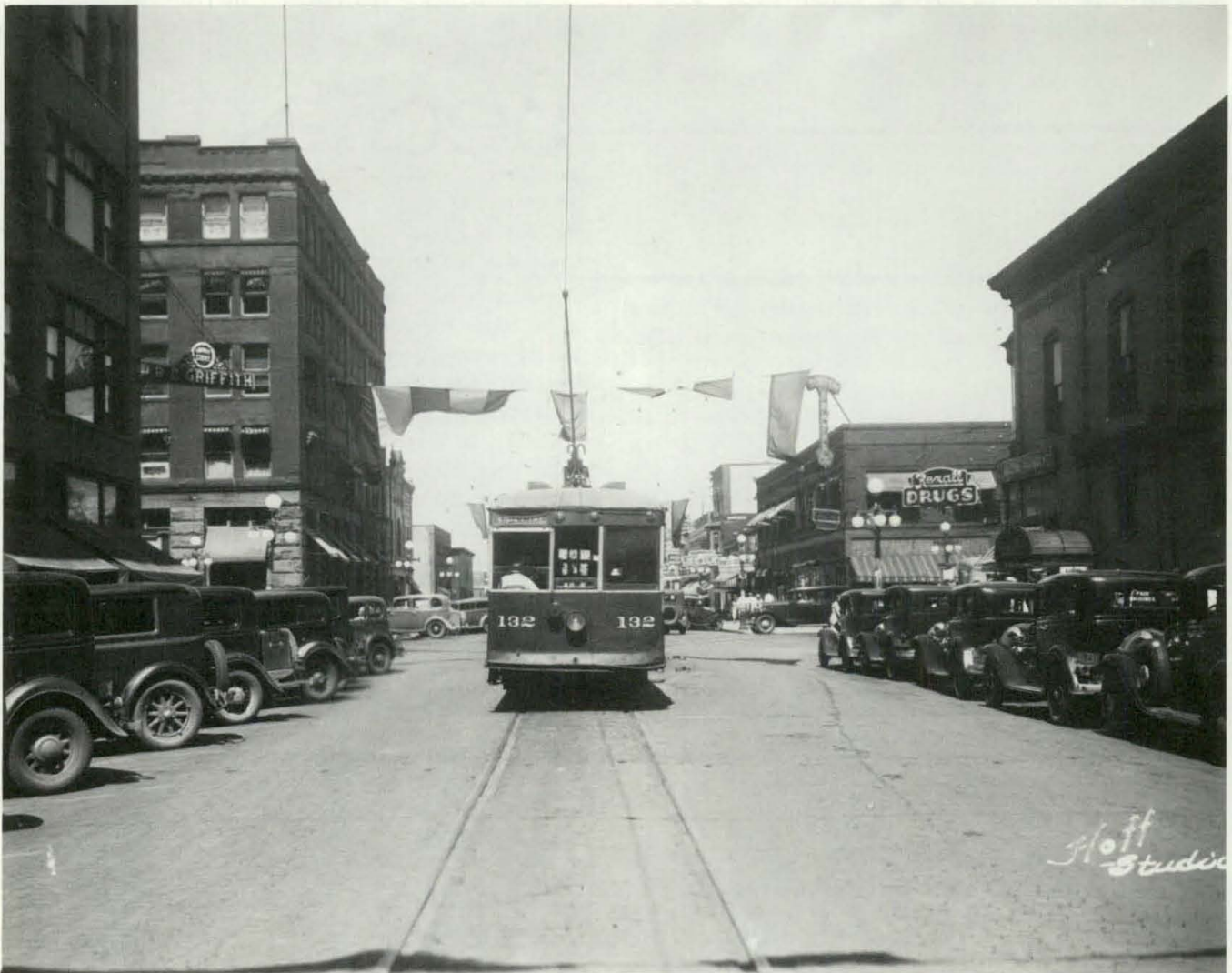
The streetcar was a stage in the ontogeny of public transportation. Its use marked a phase between the outmoded horsecar and incoming bus. The streetcar emerged of necessity, grew because it was useful and declined when it became obsolete. The Grand Forks street railway system exemplifies one part of the history of American public transportation.

⁸² Dearden, 27.

⁸³ *UND Alumni Review*, (December, 1938), 16.

Car #132 heads down Fifth Street in 1934, shortly before the complete switchover to buses.

— *Courtesy Orin G. Libby Manuscript Collection*





By the early 1930's, the street railway in Grand Forks was running largely on rubber tires.

— Courtesy Orin G. Libby Manuscript Collection

Car #114, the sole surviving streetcar from the Grand Forks railway network, was recently nominated to the National Register of Historic Places as an historic object and is presently being refurbished. The rebuilt car will be displayed in a local museum.

— Photo by Dawn Maddox. State Historical Society of North Dakota Collection.



Dakota Poets

Breckenridge-Wahpeton

First, the storage
bins, flax houses,
elevated grain;
provisions mustered
for breaking camp.

Beyond the banks of the Bois de Sioux
down the street where the bank
keeps track of waiting,
heat, and today's buffalo

to the nearest hundredth
the corrugated
tents of Wil-Rich
Industries are pitched
and flanked
by alloyed bones.

Nothing is fleshed out;
we are a trend.

— Mark Trechock
*Mark Trechock lives near
Wyndmere, North Dakota*