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Article Summary: Both large and small Nebraska towns provided horse car transportation during the late nineteenth century. Real estate developers and town boosters often used access to horse car lines as a selling point.

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Horse Car Days and Ways In Nebraska

By E. Bryant Phillips

In Lincoln, in the year 1871, persons who wanted themselves or their luggage transported to or from the depot were asked to leave their orders on the slate at Leighton & Brown's drug store.¹ The type of conveyance was not mentioned, but ten years later, Lincoln's local transit was by means of a "herdic" (carry-all). And by one account, "the mud on the streets of Lincoln was so deep that it required four horses to pull a herdic."² Likewise, it was reported that in Hastings there was practically no pavement, and such as there was, had been laid by individual merchants in front of their stores and often needed to be raised to the proper street grade. Also that trees and walks were out of line in Hastings, and when the walk ahead ended, one had to "wallow around in the mud to find the other end of the walk."³ As soon as snow disappeared the mud was "six inches deep" and "sticky" and "one day the sun turns it to dust."⁴ In Omaha, similar circumstances had prevailed earlier but were alleviated somewhat by the laying of rails in 1868 and the operation thereon of "an omnibus mounted on flanged wheels."⁵ Later it was found necessary to lay planking along the rails on Farnam street in Omaha to keep the horses out of the mud.⁶ And as if to demonstrate the advantages of a rail road over a dirt road

¹"Seventy Years Ago Today," *Evening State Journal* (Lincoln), February 21, 1942.

²"Sixty Years Ago Today," *Evening State Journal* (Lincoln), October 9, 1941; February, 26, 1942. See also, Everett N. Dick, "Problems of the Post Frontier Prairie City as Portrayed by Lincoln, Nebraska, 1880-1890," *Nebraska History*, XXVIII (April-June, 1947), 135.

³*Adams County Democrat* (Hastings), April 2, 1887; December 11, 1886.

⁴*Hastings Daily Nebraskan*, February 24, 1892; February 25, 1892.

⁵*Omaha Daily News*, January 31, 1909.

⁶*Sunday World Herald* (Omaha), November 20, 1898.



At the Barn, 17th and A Streets, Lincoln, November, 1885

for the use of vehicular traffic, it was common to see wagons driven on the street car track ("flat rails" several inches wide at the top surface) thus getting the rails themselves so muddy that the street cars proceeded with great difficulty.⁷

Perhaps a better explanation of the advent of horse railways in fifteen Nebraska towns in the 1880's was the urban real estate boom which was general in the state at that time. In Hastings, for example, the owners of one of the new subdivisions boasted street cars on three sides of their land, and the cars on one line bore the sign "Dawes and Foss Addition."⁸ The promoters of the Fremont Street Railway met in a real estate office to organize the company, and left little doubt that the cars would pass near or through Richards and Bowen's addition.⁹ Property owners in Shinn's addition in Omaha subscribed \$4,000 to finance a half-mile extension of the horse car line.¹⁰ The Lincoln Street Railway's first board of directors included five real estate dealers and the cars were to pass Sheldon's "South Park Addition," "Hawley's Addition," and "Sunnyside Addition."¹¹ The Plattsmouth Railway, Land and Improvement Company was incorporated in 1887 for a quarter of a million dollars, "for the purpose of building a street railway and developing real estate."¹² And so it was in such other towns as Beatrice, Columbus, Nebraska City, Norfolk, Grand Island, Kearney, Red Cloud, South Sioux City, Wymore, and York.¹³ Perhaps the most preposterous street railway project in the state of Nebraska was the Wittenburg Street Railway Company. It seems that real estate in the Wittenburg addition in Beatrice (Court street east of

⁷Interview with James C. Fergus, one time car driver, Hastings, Nebr., December 24, 1937.

⁸*Hastings Daily Gazette-Journal*, July 1, 1887; *Hastings Daily Tribune*, June 24, 1939.

⁹*Fremont Daily Herald*, March 2, 1887; April 6, 1887.

¹⁰J. Wolfe, *Omaha in 1874* (Omaha, 1874), p. 23.

¹¹*Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln), June 14, 1885, September 1, 1885.

¹²*Omaha Weekly Bee*, March 2, 1887.

¹³E. Bryant Phillips, "A History of Street Railways in Nebraska" (MS Thesis, University of Nebraska, 1944).

Twentieth) was moving slowly in 1889. To speed things up a bit, a Wittenburg Street Railway was incorporated for \$30,000 early in 1890 and a clause in all real estate deeds specified that no further payments were due unless street car rails were laid by May the first.¹⁴ As that date approached, no car line was in evidence, so the Wittenburg officials borrowed two rails and a few ties from "Doc" A. L. Green of the Beatrice Street Railway and after spiking the rails down, left them to rust in the neighborhood of Twenty-second and Court streets.¹⁵

The incentive for promoting horse car lines was not limited to the purveyors of real estate alone. Judging from news items and editorial opinions, it would seem that in a sense whole towns vied with rival towns in their enthusiasm for street railways. For example, J. Sterling Morton expounded editorially upon the virtues of a horse railway for Nebraska City just one year after cars began operating in the rival city of Omaha.¹⁶ In Red Cloud a local scribe noted that "everybody wants to ride on the street cars . . ." and that the new enterprise (street cars) would put Red Cloud, "on a par with Beatrice and Hastings."¹⁷ In Hastings, a paper noted that the first street cars gave the town a "metropolitan appearance."¹⁸ And what with Hastings and its arch rival Grand Island each promoting car lines early in 1887, it is recorded that the Hastings cars were represented by a wheel barrow and a diminutive donkey in a parade held in Grand Island that year.¹⁹ Crowds watched the first laying of street car rails all day in Omaha in 1868.²⁰ Horse cars were inaugurated

¹⁴*Beatrice Daily Sun*, August 14, 1892; *Gage County Democrat* (Beatrice), January 30, 1890.

¹⁵*Beatrice Daily Sun*, August 14, 1892.

¹⁶*Nebraska City News*, June 2, 1870. See also, James C. Olson, *J. Sterling Morton* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1942), p. 177.

¹⁷*Webster County Argus* (Red Cloud), September 29, 1887; November 10, 1887.

¹⁸*Hastings Daily Gazette-Journal*, July 1, 1887.

¹⁹*Grand Island Weekly Independent*, January 29, 1887.

²⁰*Omaha Daily News*, January 24, 1909.

in Nebraska City with a parade of street cars, some speeches, and a runaway. City and street car officials occupied the first car; a band followed in the second car; and invited guests filled the company's third and fourth cars.²¹ Similar ceremonies were reported in other towns. In Hastings the immediate favorable patronage suggested heavy "curiosity riding"; and it was reported that the car drivers were "jingling the bells profusely and . . . many a person was not above going out of his way to see the interesting sight."²²

In Nebraska's small cities, adequate patronage for a street railway was provided, if at all, by a park, an important institution, or perhaps a railway station some distance from the business district. In Omaha, Norfolk, Red Cloud and Wymore, the principal railway stations were at least a mile from town. In fact, the horse car lines in Norfolk, South Sioux City, Wymore and Red Cloud had little to justify them on any other count. In Omaha, three of the five car lines in 1885 passed through the business section and on to the depot to accommodate the flow of traffic to that point. In Lincoln, each of the two companies had important lines radiating from the Burlington station. In Hastings, as in many another place, there were several railway stations and the cars were swamped with passengers on occasions. A load of forty-two passengers on a car built for half that number illustrates the point, but as the news item states, that little car "had room for one more."²³

Persons who arrived at Omaha's railway station in the late eighties (at the same location as the present Union Station) passed from the huge train shed out into the street for transportation about the city by street car, by hack, or by carriage. The street cars, though all were owned by the Omaha Horse Railway Company, might have been of the "bob-tail" or standard double-platform type, and in as many as four colors. The bob-tail car had a ten

²¹*Daily Democrat* (Beatrice), January 2, 1889.

²²*Hastings Daily Gazette-Journal*, July 8, 1887, July 9, 1887.

²³*Ibid.*, June 18, 1888.

foot car body with five windows on a side, a driver's platform in front and a step but no platform in the rear. This car was designed for the use of a single horse but in a hilly town such as Omaha, a team was often employed. Bob-tailed cars were usually operated on the "green line" (Thirteenth Street) in the late eighties. Other cars which might be waiting at the station were standard double-platform cars painted red (North 24th Street line), yellow (Hanscom Park line), or blue (fair grounds).²⁴ These cars were from twelve to eighteen feet in length with five, six or seven windows on a side. The cars were handsomely painted and lettered. The company's name was sure to be just above or below the windows. The car's number was certain to appear no less than four places on the outside and likely as often on the inside. The car's destination and sometimes even the schedule would appear on the car sides or on boards above each platform (sometimes facing forward, sometimes toward the sides). The early custom of designating and painting a car for a certain line was used in several Nebraska towns, and it meant that if ever a car strayed from its beaten path, the company carried many a passenger to the wrong address. The inflexibility of this arrangement caused the Omaha Horse Railway to adopt yellow as its standard car color and to attach a colored destination board in a conspicuous place. A prospective rider could thus distinguish his car a block away. In other towns, the same procedure was followed by 1890.²⁵ For the benefit of Omahans who rode after sundown, a colored glass disk was inserted in the "bull's eye" headlight. This "bull's eye" was located atop the front platform of the car and served to illuminate a path ahead of the car and also to add some to the lighting of the car itself. All illumination was by kerosene lamp. Several lamps with reflectors were suspended from the ceiling of each car just as on railroad cars at the

²⁴*Omaha Daily News*, February 7, 1909.

²⁵*Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln), April 12, 1887; September 1, 1888; *Lincoln Call*, September 10, 1888.

time.²⁶ A separate kerosene lamp lighted the fare box of the cars in Omaha.

As a passenger clambered aboard a horse car (usually at the front platform) the driver was charged with holding the horses still. The platforms were always open and were usually trimmed with brass fittings which a passenger might grasp while he mounted the single step. When once upon the platform the passenger was expected to drop his nickel or celluloid "check" into the fare box. The fare was a straight five cents in Omaha but was raised to ten cents during state fair week.²⁷ Tickets were used before 1885 and celluloid checks thereafter.²⁸ Mail carriers rode free in Omaha but a fare was required for each child over two.²⁹ In cool weather, it was best to have the exact fare, for the driver wore gloves and "frowned upon those who caused him to shed them."³⁰ In fact there were times when the passengers even had to "make change among themselves."³¹ It is recorded too, that the lack of a second employee on each car meant that the "no smoking" rule was "violated regularly without punishment."³² Conductors were added on special occasions, but several years were yet to elapse ere they rode the rear platform of all the cars.

The driver's most intimate contact with his passengers was in collecting their fares. If they dropped a coin in the fare box, he had little part in the ordeal. But in many a case, he kept tab on incoming passengers, then went back into the car and picked up their fares. If the car was stopped at a depot or at the end of a line the driver usually smoked or loafed outside the car until time to start his run. The driver would then collect his fares, or if a fare box were aboard, he'd check its contents against his "load." If the fare box was so much as a single nickel short, much embar-

²⁶*Omaha Daily News*, February 7, 1909.

²⁷*Omaha Daily Bee*, September 13, 1881.

²⁸*Ibid.*, January 10, 1885:

²⁹*Ibid.*, May 5, 1882; March 4, 1881.

³⁰*Omaha Daily Herald*, January 2, 1885; July 14, 1885.

³¹*Omaha Daily Bee*, January 17, 1882.

³²*Ibid.*, September 18, 1886.

rassment may have occurred for the driver would ring his bell ceaselessly while the passengers stared at each other until someone made good the deficit.³³ When the fares had been collected, the driver "klanged" the bell, called to his team, and the car rolled on.

As the car lumbered along an occasional passenger would "pull the bells" and prepare to alight. In Omaha, two bells meant stop immediately (even in the middle of a block); one bell meant stop at the next crossing. Car drivers were often insulting to passengers who made mistakes in ringing the bells. There was danger in the actual exit from the car, too. Horses often became frightened and threw passengers off the car step, or perhaps street traffic might endanger their safety as they stepped from the car. The driver was supposed to keep a sharp lookout for prospective customers who might shout, nod, hail, or signal their intention of boarding the car. "Men shouted themselves hoarse and women shook their hands nearly off" in their vain attempts to attract the attention of many a car driver.³⁵ One new driver from the rural districts "lifted his hat to every lady who nodded to him, and drove on not thinking it a signal for him to stop . . ." ³⁶ As a passenger paid his fare, and approached a seat, the car frequently lurched forward just in time to pitch him into the lap of some fellow passenger. All manner of stories were told about two hundred twenty-five pound bankers falling into the arms of light, medium or heavy blondes, or vice versa. It is not recorded that straps were suspended from the ceiling to avoid this and other trying ordeals so common to the street car patrons prior to 1890.

The car seats were of wood and were really just benches paralleling the sides of the car, thus causing each passenger to look across the car into the faces of passengers seated opposite him, or to turn half way to one side and look

³³*Ibid.*, May 5, 1881.

³⁴*Omaha Daily Republican*, June 22, 1886.

³⁵*Omaha Daily Herald*, June 12, 1884.

³⁶*Ibid.*, May 13, 1881.

about the car or out of the window beside him. Early cars were without heat (though in winter they did have straw on the floor), and in cold weather passengers sought comfort by huddling in groups and stomping their feet on the floor. According to contemporary accounts, several street cars have had the bottoms kicked out by passengers trying to keep warm.³⁷ Some men and boys acquired the habit of walking as soon as cold weather began. But street cars in Lincoln were heated with stoves in 1889, and car riders in other towns soon shared the same advantage.³⁸ The interiors were usually ash and maple panelling, with ads filling the space above the windows, ("Use Dr. Sanders Electric Belt, for rheumatism, liver and bladder complaints . . ." or "Smoke Perfecto Cigars.")³⁹

A street car conductor or driver was in a position to be a conspicuous character. In calling out street names, in his manner of dress (no uniforms at first), in his treatment of horses and passengers, he was likely to be an individualist. One might quickly conclude that these car men were a hardened lot and in truth some of them were. At one time, a hundred and fifty sugar factory workers in Grand Island boycotted the local horse railway for several weeks because of the administration of an unnecessarily severe reprimand by a car driver following a show of bad conduct by a passenger.⁴⁰ There were fights among drivers at times over right-of-way or for lesser causes. Once in Omaha, a crowd of 500 gathered at Boyd's Opera corner to witness such a fight between drivers. It is reported that language and fists flew; other street cars "piled up behind them," and that passengers lost patience and set out on foot.⁴¹ Another time when two drivers were disputing over their meeting point, "a passenger whipped up the horses and

³⁷*Omaha Daily Republican*, January 3, 1888; *Grand Island Daily Independent*, March 5, 1887.

³⁸*Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln), January 1, 1889; *Lincoln Call*, November 29, 1889.

³⁹*Hastings Daily Nebraskan*, August 4, 1892; April 25, 1893.

⁴⁰*Grand Island Daily Independent*, January 2, 1890; January 29, 1891; *Omaha Daily Bee*, February 5, 1890.

⁴¹*Omaha Daily Bee*, July 25, 1882.

drove on to the terminus, making all the stops, but keeping ahead of the frantic driver running behind."⁴² One Omaha driver whipped a path through a Republican street parade and even went so far as to knock the mayor over when His Honor tried to grab the car horses.⁴³ And most drivers kept a whip handy for use on small boys who tried to steal rides and were unfortunate enough to get caught. One ex-driver in Wymore recalled years later that boys often had jumped aboard the rear platform of his car and that when he tied the lines to go back and remove the little culprits, the gang would split, urge on the horses, thereby starting the car and leave the driver running behind.⁴⁴ In Grand Island, the car drivers solved this problem by using black snake whips with an effective radius of twenty feet.⁴⁵

Nearly any car driver would have been willing to discuss encounters with "toughs" and "drunks." Many a driver armed himself with everything from a gruff manner to a shotgun, or even to police escort. Most robberies occurred at the end of the line when the horses were changed to the other end of the car. One Omaha driver was robbed and wounded near the end of the line and the company later had to issue a mandatory order for "all cars to run to the north turn tables when they had passengers aboard."⁴⁶ Sometimes the robbers failed to break into the fare box or were beaten off by irate car drivers, but in Lincoln one driver had the misfortune of losing a cash box containing twelve dollars to a woman who made away with it while he was changing the horses.⁴⁷ And a few years earlier in Lincoln there had been so many robberies that owner Durfee of the Capital City Street Railway often slept in the car barn

⁴²*Ibid.*, October 16, 1882.

⁴³*Nebraska State Journal (Lincoln)*, November 8, 1888.

⁴⁴*Wymore Arbor State*, October 7, 1938.

⁴⁵*Grand Island Daily Independent*, July 2, 1932.

⁴⁶*Omaha Daily Republican*, May 11, 1892; *Omaha Daily Bee*, May 12, 1882; October 19, 1887.

⁴⁷*Omaha Daily Herald*, October 23, 1884; *Omaha Daily Republican*, July 14, 1885; *Nebraska State Journal (Lincoln)*, December 23, 1884.

to protect his interests. One night as Durfee slept, some one made off with his shoes.⁴⁸

In most towns the horse railway shared in entertaining the populace. A brass band might tour the town in a car decorated like a float or adorned with advertising.⁴⁹ Summer cars were brought out in appropriate and inappropriate weather, in several Nebraska towns. On these summer cars (about seven rows of seats running crosswise of the car) it was always an interesting sight to watch the conductor grapple ape-like from post to post as he walked along the conductor's running board of the right-hand side of the car, ever alert for additional nickels. Cars were operated on Sunday (though not at first) "for the accommodation of the church going public," but actually for use of any one out for a ride.⁵⁰ In Hastings, as elsewhere, the number of Sunday riders was so great that there was no thought of curtailing Sunday car service thereafter. Then there were special events such as the circus, a fair, an important baseball game, a chatauqua, or an unusual speaker. These were the cause of sporadic street car traffic in all of the towns of the state. The opera was always cause for several extra cars of passengers. In Lincoln, as in most towns, special cars waited until perhaps half past ten to carry the opera goers home.⁵¹ One of the novelties of early horse railway systems was the means of transferring passengers from one car line to another. In Omaha the passengers were "personally transferred" to and from the Hanscom Park cars by an employee who turned switches at the corner of Fifteenth and Farnam.⁵² In Hastings, all cars (of one of the two companies) passed the Nebraska Loan and Trust Company offices, so passengers were transferred at that point.⁵³ A regular waiting room seems to have

⁴⁸*Nebraska State Journal*, August 21, 1884.

⁴⁹*Hastings Daily Gazette-Journal*, December 17, 1887.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, November 14, 1887; *Hastings Weekly Independent*, November 14, 1887.

⁵¹*Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln), January 29, 1889.

⁵²*Omaha Daily News*, February 7, 1909.

⁵³*Adams County Democrat* (Hastings), July 5, 1889.

been placed at the disposal of car riders, in that case. But in all of the towns involved, paper or pasteboard transfers were employed eventually.

Of all the irregular or unusual car traffic, that destined toward a park on the edge of town, was the most conspicuous. In Omaha, it was Hanscom Park; in Beatrice it was the Chatauqua grounds; In Lincoln it was Durfee Park (Western League baseball); in Grand Island it was the G. A. R. Annual State Encampment on the far north side of town. In Hastings, the Citizens Railway was saved from an earlier demise by Fred Wilkinson who acquired both the street car line and Cole's Park. Ball games were well advertised and usually the customers were reminded that "cars leave Second street every few minutes," or six cars "land the passenger just a few steps from the ball park," or it "costs only a nickel" to ride the cars, or "many improvements in the line since it is under the management of Wilkinson."⁵⁴ A state league ball club was organized and crowds began to pour through the gates at Cole's Park. The street car business improved accordingly. Two cars were purchased from the defunct Hastings Improvement Company, and placed in service on the Citizens Railway Cole's Park line.⁵⁵ The Hastings club had a "winning streak" of seven games and how those baseball "cranks" (not fans) did like Umpire Haskell!⁵⁶ It should be related however, that a few days later, Mr. Haskell's virtues were forgotten when this string of victories was broken by a team from Beatrice.⁵⁷ The cars carried so many baseball "cranks" out to Cole's Park that James C. Fergus was kept uptown to collect fares on all the cars as they loaded and started back to the park. Mr. Fergus relates that many a time he collected over a dollar off the top of the car.⁵⁸ Some one would collect the nickels up there and hand them down to him. In

⁵⁴*Hastings Daily Nebraskan*, May 14-25, 1892.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, June 15, 1892.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, June 13, 1892.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, June 17, 1892.

⁵⁸Interview, James C. Fergus, December 24, 1937.

Omaha the street railway donated five hundred dollars to the Western League Baseball Club.⁵⁹ And surely they did not lose money by so doing.

Horses, drivers, and passengers were subject to frequent danger in horse car operation. The human factor and the occasional lack of horse sense were never completely controlled by those in charge. Good horses were sometimes scarce, and untrained horses "could not accustom themselves to the appearance of the car, and became very nervous at the jerking motion when they stopped and started."⁶⁰ Passengers were injured by the score in street car accidents; a few were killed.⁶¹ In Omaha, pedestrians were warned of the approach of horse cars (at the rate of five miles an hour) by the tinkling of bells around the horses' necks. Horses balked, ran away, kicked out dashboards, fell down, broke legs, or sometimes pulled a driver off the front platform. A balky Omaha horse "turned around in its traces and fell down, then it struggled up, and sticking its head through a window tried to bite a lady in the front seat. After skinning his head and neck, the horse started off again."⁶² In Hastings a horse belonging to the street car company became frightened one day and finally came to rest with its head jammed through a French plate glass window in front of Thompson's Shoe Store on Second street. The horse was "severely cut up."⁶³ Many an animal had to be shot after an accident. And horses often ran away with a street car. Two such accidents within a week in Omaha resulted in wrecked cars and bruised passengers.⁶⁴ Two others within a few months caused passengers to jump from the car; some were injured.⁶⁵ And

⁵⁹*Omaha Daily Republican*, April 2, 1887.

⁶⁰Federal Writers Project, *Lincoln City Guide* (Lincoln, 1937), p. 16.

⁶¹*Omaha Daily Bee*, July 10, 1881; May 12, 1885; February 12, 1886; October 16, 1886; September 20, 1886.

⁶²*Omaha Daily Herald*, July 23, 1881.

⁶³*Adams County Democrat* (Hastings), July 2, 1888.

⁶⁴*Omaha Daily Herald*, November 30, 1886; *Omaha Daily Republican*, December 4, 1886.

⁶⁵*Omaha Daily Bee*, June 7, 1887; August 12, 1887.

horses attached to buggies, hacks, and omnibuses, were also frequently injured in accidents caused by slippery car rails.

There were a number of minor accidents and annoyances. The Hastings City Council felt compelled to pass an ordinance making it a misdemeanor for "persons under fourteen to jump on or off a street car while in motion," or to interfere with its operation. Fines ranging from two to ten dollars were imposed with possible imprisonment until the fine was paid.⁶⁶ But in spite of this ordinance two boys received injured hands and another one sustained a leg injury by a Citizens Railway car left standing out with no one in charge.⁶⁷ One of the Hastings car drivers, in reminiscing years later, concluded that boys have always been boys. He recalled the time when the company kept a car out at the south end of the line near the Missouri Pacific depot every night. One night some boys released the brakes and pushed the car back up the line. Then, aided by a strong wind, they started it back south again where it eventually came to rest after breaking off several trees.⁶⁸ In Hastings also, one incident of another nature, not quite as serious, occurred when "someone scattered patent pills and dream books and almanacs around." The street car drivers had a contest to see who could swallow the most pills. As a result Superintendent Kraft "had a hard time getting enough [drivers] for active duty this morning."⁶⁹

Street cars had several encounters with railway trains at crossings and an early law in Omaha required them to stop at all such crossings.⁷⁰ In Omaha, a horse car was out of control on a hill with a train approaching nearby. The driver whipped up his horses and the little car bounced, rocked and jolted over the crossing just ahead of the train.⁷¹

⁶⁶*Hastings Weekly Independent*, October 14, 1887.

⁶⁷*Hastings Gazette-Journal*, April 11, 1888.

⁶⁸Interview, James C. Fergus.

⁶⁹*Hastings Gazette Journal*, May 11, 1888.

⁷⁰*Omaha Daily Bee*, March 21, 1882.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, August 6, 1882.

Another car was "grazed by a switch engine."⁷² A car in Grand Island had an encounter with a Union Pacific engine.⁷³ And in Hastings, a Citizens Railway car was hit by a switch engine, causing considerable damage to both the car and the horse.⁷⁴

A horse railway presented several peculiar problems. The "horse track" needed a cinder bed. It was often muddy for "lack of proper drainage."⁷⁵ The ties were often too far apart, and the light rails expanded and buckled in hot weather. Jim Fergus in Hastings frequently solved this problem by sawing an inch or so off the end of the rail.⁷⁶ A "car off the track" was not an uncommon incident. A Citizens Railway car ran off the track at a railway crossing in Hastings, and only after "considerable lively work the car was put back on the track before any passing train came along to make it interesting."⁷⁷ Driver Fergus stated that he frequently put school children at the other end of the car to weigh it down, then about half a dozen men would raise the car onto the rails.⁷⁸

In Omaha the horse motive power was scarcely adequate on certain hills. The Dodge street hill remained unconquered until the advent of cable cars. A hill on St. Mary's avenue was especially steep above Eighteenth street and was negotiated only by the aid of an extra "hill horse" attached to the right front corner of the car.⁷⁹ The Sixth street hill in Nebraska City caused no end of grief in icy weather. Cars slid down the hill to the discomfort of helpless, frightened horses. One driver freed his team on one such occasion, only to see them run away and to barely avert injury to himself by the oncoming car.⁸⁰ It is reported that one horse dropped dead while pulling a Farnam car up

⁷²*Ibid.*, January 20, 1881.

⁷³*Grand Island Weekly Independent*, September 21, 1889.

⁷⁴*Hastings Daily Gazette-Journal*, April 11, 1888.

⁷⁵*Adams County Democrat* (Hastings), May 27, 1892.

⁷⁶Interview, James C. Fergus.

⁷⁷*Hastings Daily Gazette-Journal*, February 25, 1888.

⁷⁸Interview, James C. Fergus.

⁷⁹*Omaha Daily News*, February 7, 1909.

⁸⁰*Plattsmouth Daily Journal*, January 15, 1892.

a hill in Omaha.⁸¹ Horses were usually used in pairs, dividing the day into three shifts with the assignment of about fourteen miles for each team (prime horses—five year olds, weighing 1500 lbs., cost from \$75 to \$125 each).⁸² When horses seemed to fail, the Omaha Street Railway experimented with bronco ponies and with mules, but these were no asset to the service.⁸³ Finally as if to spell the doom of animal power for the drawing of cars, an equestrian disease, epizootic lymphangitis, swept the country in 1889. In Lincoln, twenty horses in the South street barn alone, came down with the dread disease, and service was materially reduced throughout the city for more than a month.⁸⁴

Horse cars were doomed for a variety of reasons. Of course, the horses were too slow. A half hour's ride was necessary to reach the edge of any one of Nebraska's larger towns. And with a real estate boom in the offing, interest was turned toward any scheme which promised speedier transit. A "Belt Line" railway served Omaha's suburbs for a while and the idea was considered seriously in Lincoln and Hastings. Some cars were pulled by "steam dummy" engines in Omaha, Lincoln, and South Sioux City. Omaha had cable cars for six years and a cable railway was chartered in Lincoln, but the project failed to materialize. Finally, of course, electric cars were developed, and they replaced horse cars in Omaha, Lincoln, South Sioux City, Beatrice, Kearney, Norfolk, and Plattsmouth. But in only the first three of these cities did electric cars survive the panic of 1893.⁸⁵

Horse cars were operated irregularly or not at all in various Nebraska towns after 1889. James Fergus, the

⁸²W. A. Smith, a horse buyer in 1872, later became president of the street railway in Omaha—*Omaha Daily News*, February 7, 1909.

⁸³*Omaha Daily Herald*, March 13, 1884; *Omaha Daily Bee*, November 19, 1884.

⁸⁴*Lincoln Call*, April 5, 1889; April 11, 1889; May 4, 1889; John Anderson Miller, *Fares Please* (New York, 1941), 32.

⁸⁵Phillips, *Op. cit.*

Hastings car driver referred to previously, had time to tend O'Shanosy's Confectionary store at his uptown terminus between trips.⁸⁶ But Fergus often had to go in search of O'Shanosy when it was time to take the car out again. Drought, crop failures, unemployment, and bank failures were compelling facts by 1893. "Keep a cool head—no cause for alarm," wrote a Hastings scribe.⁸⁷ But an entire real estate sub-division (South Park addition) was officially vacated and half of the 1,400 houses in Kearney were empty according to a school census.⁸⁸ In Hastings, Grand Island, Nebraska City and Red Cloud, the cars were operated in each case by a single driver who leased the line for the last year of its operation. In Grand Island, for example, the line was leased in 1898 for fifteen dollars a month; several unused cars were sold to Otto Wiese who moved them to a farm west of town for feeding bins; and a year later the company's rails were sold to a junk dealer for \$1,200.⁸⁹ The local press was silent concerning the demise of most horse railways and prior to 1907 there was no regulatory commission to keep vital statistics on Nebraska's tram lines. A horse car was operated north of Lincoln to Belmont as late as 1906 despite the ridicule of Lincoln's citizens, the playful pranks of small boys, and the complaints of the Humane Society.⁹⁰ In Nebraska City the last horse car made its final run to Morton Park during chatauqua week in 1910; but here as in many another town, the rails were not entirely removed from the paved streets

⁸⁶Interview, James C. Fergus.

⁸⁷*Hastings Daily Nebraskan*, June 14, 1893.

⁸⁸*The Argus* (South Sioux City), November 22, 1895; Herbert Leslie Glynn, "The Urban Real Estate Room" (MS Thesis, University of Nebraska, 1927), pp. 53-58.

⁸⁹*Grand Island Daily Independent*, August 5, 1899; *Grand Island Weekly Independent*, January 14, 1899; October 25, 1899.

⁹⁰*Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln), March 27, 1900; August 13, 1903; A. J. Sawyer, *Lincoln and Lancaster County* (Chicago, 1916), p. 146; *Lincoln Evening News*, April 28, 1906; *Lincoln Daily Star*, July 2, 1906.

until 1942.⁹¹ In Red Cloud, the horse cars, like the Tooner-ville Trolley, continued to meet all the trains until 1918, and thereby Red Cloud shared a doubtful honor with half a dozen other towns in the United States. For in 1918 the horse railway was not an accomplice of real estate vendors, and none wrote that year that it lent a metropolitan appearance to the town.

⁹¹*Nebraska City Daily News-Press*, November 14, 1929; *Omaha World Herald*, July 11, 1942.