

An Interurban History: The Transportation Legacy of Charles L. Henry

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In his weighty two-volume “History of Indiana,” published in two installments in 1915 and 1922, Professor Logan Easerly writes of the then current Interurban rail system, “It is generally conceded that the Interurban has failed to solve the question of local transportation.” (Easerly Pg 1041). Easerly was writing at a time when the total Interurban track mileage in Indiana was by his estimation 2,083¹. Following his statement of the Interurban’s essential failure, Easerly moves on to speak favorably of the potential of the automobile.

This seems to show that even at its height sentiment about the Interurban Rail was tepid among industry and the intelligencia. Industry is represented in particular by Easerly’s account since the only support for his claim against the electric railroad that he offers is its impracticality for commercial use, “Hauling to the road and delivery from the terminal station make it necessary to handle freight at least four times.” (Easerly 1042) he writes, making no mention of ridership or the benefit to personal mobility. No doubt Easerly would be gratified by the ubiquity of freight trucks on the highways today. Yet one wonders how he would feel being forced to share the road with these heavy conveyances in a world without transit options.

In her book “Trolleys” Ruth Cavin, writing in 1976, from a context wherein those 2,083 miles of electric Interurban line in Indiana had been reduced to a beleaguered 90 in one line

¹ A later more thorough study by George W. Hilton and John F. Due, in their book “The Electric Interurban Railways in America,” puts the total at a slightly more modest 1825 miles.

moving between South Bend and Chicago, saw a somewhat more nuanced and humane relevance of the historic Interurbans. Before the advent of electric regional transit farmers, she suggests, could more easily ride the steam rails one hundred twenty-five miles to a major eastern city than take their horse to market thirty miles to their west (Cavin pg 3). Whatever Easerly's reservations about the impracticality for freight haulage, for individuals The Interurbans were a revolution in the battle over distance.

But how can we look past the prosaic numbers of track miles and the cold impersonal visage of freight handling, while not losing sense of reality among the romantic notions of faceless classes of people universally empowered? We have to look for a name, a person who experienced the Interurbans. This will ground our analysis in real events rather than abstractions. Fortunately there is just such a person, a man who was instrumental to the very inception of the electric rails in Indiana. His story involves business but it is also uniquely human, with place names, memories of other people, and humane motivation behind large and influential action. The Interurbans were one of the most influential currents in Indiana's development at a time when her population had nearly tripled and opportunity seemed to spring up from the ground². Our subject, man named Charles L. Henry was not a statistic, an industry, technology, or a social class. He was a person who changed his city and his state for the better.

In the last decade of the 19th century Anderson, Indiana was a town on the leading edge of a regional industry boom. Large deposits of natural gas were being discovered throughout the East-Central Indiana region and in the spring of 1889 Charles T. Doxey drilled the first natural gas well in Anderson (Henry pg 1). Meanwhile wells were being discovered in Marion, thirty-

² This is not entirely a poetic conceit. Since Indiana was experiencing a natural resource boom wherein natural gas literally sprung up from the ground.

two miles to the north, in Muncie, eighteen miles away and in Alexandria some eleven miles distant. All of these towns would eventually see an influx of manufacturing jobs around the availability of natural gas over the next twenty years. Even as the gas eventually dried up, the towns continued as manufacturing hubs with glass works, metals and masonry proliferating throughout. But first people had to be able to get to these jobs.

In Anderson a Lawyer named Charles Lewis Henry purchased and developed land throughout the area surrounding Anderson in order to attract factories and potential workers to the town. He worked to build roads to connect the lots he bought and sold, and was successful in rapidly developing the north and western ends of Anderson throughout the first years of the 1890s.

Recognizing that the plots of land he was developing were at a particular remove from the city center and were also cut off by the White River he feared that neither factories nor citizens would be enticed to the area unless, "...some good means of communication could be provided."(Henry pg 3). This fateful realization is what turned Charles Henry from a land developer to a transportation pioneer.

In the summer of 1891 as he puts it, "...we built an electric line from Anderson out North to that part of the town agreed upon for factory sites." (Henry Pg. 3). He is referring to a two-mile rail line, the exact means of "communication" he sought to attract buyers and businesses to his city. Charles Henry was building electric rail to connect Anderson with its new manufacturing assets. After some technological difficulties that saw the cars briefly pulled by mules the line eventually "...operated splendidly and was very popular from the start." (Henry pg.4).

All of this marks Henry as an exemplary developer, a man who combined complimentary

endeavors to considerable effect. His two miles of track outside the city were successful enough that in 1892 the City of Anderson granted him a franchise for a street railway line within the city. Elsewhere in America electric streetcars were proliferating. By 1889 there had already been well over a hundred cities with electric streetcar systems (Cavin pg. 6) and now Anderson was among them.

In May of 1893 The World's Fair opened in Chicago. Celebrating the four hundred year anniversary since the landing of Columbus (only off by a year but close enough for a party) it was called The Columbia Exposition. Spread over six hundred and ninety acres and featuring participation from forty-five countries the fair attracted twenty seven million visitors between June and October. One of the people in attendance over the course of summer was Charles L. Henry.

He had the year before run for the Indiana state legislature and lost, followed by a trip to Missouri to visit his brother in law and as he puts it, "I became obsessed with the idea of interurban railroads." (Henry Pg. 6). He saw the three mining towns of Carthage, Webb City and Joplin, developing rapidly and believed electric rail connecting them would be very profitable. But it was not until he was at the World's Fair the next year that he, "...developed the word 'interurban' as a name for such a railroad."³(Henry pg. 7).

Returning home to Anderson with this new word in his vocabulary, over the winter of 1893/94, he conceived of an Interurban line connecting Anderson, Muncie, Marion and

³ Again George W. Hilton and John F. Due throw a cold light on the claims of others, stating that the word had been used "...to describe the street car line between Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Indianapolis. When a man of vision has such visions it may take a while for them to come to fruition but only the very foolish would bet against him. The nationwide financial panic of 1893 meant that very little of consequence could be accomplished toward Henry's ambition. But it did not cost anything to begin talking and in 1894 he began negotiations with Henry Sellers Mckee of Pittsburgh who owned the Indianapolis Street Railway and obtained the privilege of running his proposed Interurban cars over the Indianapolis rail.

It was not until 1897, after having been elected to the Indiana legislature, that Henry finally succeeded in beginning to lay an interurban line. It ran the eleven miles between Anderson and Alexandria and the first car to make the trip ran on June 1, 1898. Thus The Union Traction Company of Indiana, the first electric Interurban in the state, began service.

Between 1850 and 1900 Indiana's population had grown from 988,416 to 2,516,462 and Henry's innovation began a rail-building boom fueled in no small measure by this sense of a rapidly expanding economy of people. Union Traction was followed a year later by the Fort Wayne and Northwestern Railway and in 1902 Henry, perhaps restless for new accomplishments, left Union Traction to work on the Indianapolis and Cincinnati Traction Company. New lines, new stock offerings and new rail were fast and common commodities in those years. Thanks in large part to Henry's connections and negotiations, by 1903 Union Traction had expanded its modest inaugural eleven-mile run to include Marion, Muncie, Kokomo and many points in between.

In 1917, as Professor Easery labored in Bloomington⁴ over the second volume of his History of Indiana, Union Traction Company carried 19,683,276 passengers (Hilton & Due pg 281). From that point on though, their business dwindled and their operating deficits rose.

⁴ One of only three Indiana cities with population over 5000 never serviced by the Interurbans.

However reductionist Easery's analysis of the utility of Interurbans may have been, his prescience regarding the larger preference in the culture for automobiles is undeniable. By the time Union Traction was forced to enter receivership in 1928 their ridership had dropped by five million from their peak and their annual operating deficit crept upward near \$800,000. Meanwhile a company like General Motors was posting annual sales of 4.6 million cars and showed no signs of slowing.

Still as of 1929 Union Traction had not abandoned any track and Chicago utilities and traction baron Samuel Insull was preparing to fold it into his traction empire as part of a planned "Indiana Railroad." But for the stock market crash and the subsequent anti-trust cases brought against the Insull Empire, Union Traction might have formed the cornerstone of a much more unified and sturdy long-term transportation system.

In 1930, three years after Charles Henry passed away at the age of Seventy-Seven, Union Traction Company finally abandoned track for the first time. At issue were two lines, one a short run between Anderson and Middletown eleven miles to its east, and another running thirty-five miles east from Muncie to Union City.

The Interurbans in Indiana now entered their final phase of widespread utility. Insull succeeded in acquiring Union Traction and his company proceeded to consolidate it with other suffering and nearly obsolete lines in the belief that the system could be made viable on the model of his successful Chicago South Shore and South Bend line in Northern Indiana, and his Chicago North Shore and Milwaukee. The company had particular plans to renovate and modernize the two lines connecting Ft. Wayne with Indianapolis one hundred and twenty-six miles away. But due to the mounting misfortunes of the Insull Company, ultimately culminating

in a fraud and anti-trust case with Samuel Insull at its center,⁵ the Indiana Railway interurban system slowly dwindled over the 1930s.

First to go was the approximately twenty miles of track connecting the towns of Alexandria and Tipton on June 30, 1931. Over the following year towns like Lafayette, Richmond and Peru saw lines abandoned. Then on July 1, 1932 the Anderson to Marion line ceased service. This included Charles L. Henry's pioneering Anderson to Alexandria line.

It is not recorded in any of the sources I have reviewed what notice was taken at the loss of a public transit option that had run reliably for thirty-five years. Everyone was suffering in 1932. In General Motors' annual report for the year ending December 31, 1932 it is stated that their sales figures had dropped 78% from their high water mark only three years before, from 5.6 million vehicles sold in 1929 to 1.4 million in 1932.

People were not buying cars and Anderson was a General Motors production town. It had been since 1918. So the high times had been particularly high. People had had jobs and could by cars and get where they needed to go and take things like the Interurban for granted. But in 1932 with General Motors suffering and the Interurban ending its long standing service it must have felt as though the arteries of life were being irreparably cut and the world was becoming harsher and more strange every day.

Today Indiana is connected by 12,000 miles of paved road as reported and mapped by The Indiana Department of Transportation. We still live with the dearth of options left by the failure of the Interurbans. Whether they were inherently doomed or the victims of circumstance, their network of 2000 rail miles present at a time of considerable opportunity and growth shaped the Indiana we inherit. And persons like Charles L. Henry exemplify the kind of vision and

⁵ Insull was ultimately acquitted but was personally and financially ruined. He fled the country and died in Paris in 1938.

persistence that will be necessary to move Indiana into a more connected and dynamic future.

SOURCES

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