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Boiseans board streetcars in front of the Borah Post Office, about 1915. The Borah building faced the main trolley depot at Bannock and Seventh.

1 Boise builds a **STREETCAR**

by Chris Mansayon

While federal funding for a proposed downtown streetcar loop didn't materialize, the need for enhanced mass transit will remain high on the agenda as city leaders work toward solutions to more effectively move people into and around Boise's downtown core. Whether the proposed 15-block east-west loop through downtown or another route is eventually selected, the return of the streetcar appears to be only a matter of time—and money. As novel as the concept seems today, the current discussion over streetcars takes a page from a 110-year distant past, from a time when streetcar routes played a key role in shaping Boise's first neighborhoods, connected the city's core to the surrounding countryside and linked all of the communities in the valley. Perhaps a look at how streetcars benefited Boise in the past can provide some perspective on the future.

It is hard to imagine that the character of present-day Boise was shaped by something that existed a century ago—and is now extinct. Today,

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few residents remember an era when they could board a rail line in Boise and travel to Caldwell, Eagle or Nampa, or when farmers from Ustick and Collister used the Interurban streetcar line to ship goods to Boise. Even Boise's famous North End was originally created and shaped to be a streetcar suburb. For those who lived during the peak of the streetcar age, trolleys must have seemed as new and magical as the mysterious electricity that powered both them and the city. Will the streetcar in Boise work its magic once again in the second decade of the 21st century? That is a question yet to be answered. But there is no question that Boise's streetcar system was a magic potion when it spurred the region's development more than a century ago.

In 1869, the first transcontinental railroad connected the nation, effectively shrinking the United States. Long gone were the days of six-month wagon trips from Missouri to Oregon. Most of the nation could now be traversed in as little as a week. Just a few years after such a monumental achievement, steam cars were being seriously considered as a mode of interurban transportation to link nearby towns together and provide a faster mode of transit than walking, horse-driven carriages or horse cars, which were trolley cars and trams pulled by animals on steel tracks. But the noise and smoke of steam power was impractical, so most American inventors turned their efforts toward other forms of motion and the steam-powered trolley eventually went on to enjoy far greater support in Europe and Australia. Cable cars seemed to be a more practical substitute, but that technology also was short-lived. Only San Francisco and a few other cities held onto their old cable car systems. By the time the 1900s rolled around, many major cities were turning to new electric trolleys. Boise was one of the early adopters, establishing the first lines in 1891, only three years after Frank Sprague had completed his first electric system in Richmond, Va., and just four years after Boise first received electricity. Chartered in 1890, the Boise Rapid Transit Company (BRTC) laid down 2.25 miles of track between 14th and Idaho streets and continuing down Warm Springs to the newly constructed Natatorium. The two companies in charge of the electric lines and the construction of the Natatorium even coordinated their efforts to draw people onto the streetcars and provide them an easy way to get to the Natatorium pool. Like many of the early lines, the Warm Springs line was a great success, boosting migration to the area and promoting development east along Warm Springs Avenue and as far south as the Boise Bench. At the request of several prominent Boiseans, by 1900 plans were drawn up to take the first steps toward the creation of an interurban rail system by expanding

the trolley system outside the city limits. In 1904, the BRTC's first rival, the Boise and Interurban Company (B&I), was created and charged with the construction of a new electric rail line to connect Boise and Caldwell. Plans were immediately drawn up and tracks were laid following the same lines that



Streetcars connected the City of Boise to the independent village of South Boise via the Broadway Bridge, about 1910.

State Street and Highway 44 now occupy, passing through Eagle, Star and Middleton before heading south to Caldwell, ending where the iconic Saratoga Hotel stood until 1990.

At the same time the B&I began construction on its stretch of line, a third company, called the Boise Valley (Electric) Railroad (BVRR), received permission to begin working on a project of its own. Starting from within Boise at Broadway, going to Morris Hill and extending out from Fairview Hill, the BVRR laid tracks westward along Fairview Road until jutting north at Cole,

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following Ustick Road and eventually stopping at Meridian and Nampa. By 1912, the BVRR owned 31 miles of track, had 21 cars in operation and was the Boise Rapid Transit Company's main rival. The independence of the three competing companies was to be short-lived and by 1912 they were merged



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The Boise Valley Railroad had reached the fairgrounds at Orchard near Fairview by 1905. A funeral car extended the line to the city's cemetery at Morris Hill.

into one large corporation named the Idaho Traction Company. The consolidation of the three companies was immediately beneficial to the traveling public and shortly after the merger a new segment of tracks was laid between Nampa and Caldwell, connecting the two former rival lines of the BVRR and the B&I into one large loop that spanned more than 60 miles after

completion. New stops were also added in the farmlands to accommodate the people who lived away from population centers. The new enclosed trolley cars carried people and their goods at speeds reaching more than 50 miles per hour. Not only was the new "Boise Valley Loop" a popular Sunday excursion, but just like Warm Springs, property values along or near the line skyrocketed and new developments sprung up seemingly overnight, allowing the ITC to boast more than 70 stops along the line at its peak of operation. Country depots were also informal communal hubs and farmers often set up produce shops near the trolley stops to sell and transport their goods all across the valley. These small towns, which constituted the majority of stops between larger hubs of Boise, Meridian, Nampa and Caldwell, earned the nickname of "Toonervilles" for the name of the clanging or "toon" sound that came from a trolley as it was about to arrive at a stop. In addition to a small station that resembled a modern sheltered bus stop, Toonervilles usually consisted of only a small grocer's store and a crossroad. The nickname was also given to country residents by upper class city dwellers and urbanites, but as the larger towns expanded and distinctions between town and country disappeared, so did the nickname.

Trolleys ran quickly between stops and during the early years of operation a trip anywhere on the rail line cost just 5 cents. After a few years, a trip to most places still cost a nickel but longer rides, such as the weekend excursions families took along the Loop, might cost up to a \$1.50. On a clear day, an entire trip around the valley took roughly two hours, with each trolley making between 50-70 stops for passengers and freight. The Boise and Interurban line highlighted stops at the Natatorium and Pierce Park, which were visited far more frequently than other attractions in the valley. After lines had been connected to Caldwell in 1907, promotional travel rates were given to patrons who were going to the Canyon County Fair. Through the years, the trolley cars created a way for people to connect with one another and were a unifying force within the Treasure Valley.

Popularity would not swing the way of the streetcar forever. By the time the Idaho Traction Company emerged in 1912, the automobile was winning over newspaper headlines throughout America for its low price tag and potentially lower maintenance costs. Before 1910, the privileged could be seen driving up and down Warm Springs Avenue and the popularity of the new mode of transportation steadily grew over the next 10 years. The costs of WWI temporarily stalled the fall of the American streetcar. Passenger traffic actually rose during that time, but that only put off the inevitable. New "trackless trolleys" began to emerge and slowly replaced the increasingly expensive and aging streetcars. The entire nation slowly succumbed to this

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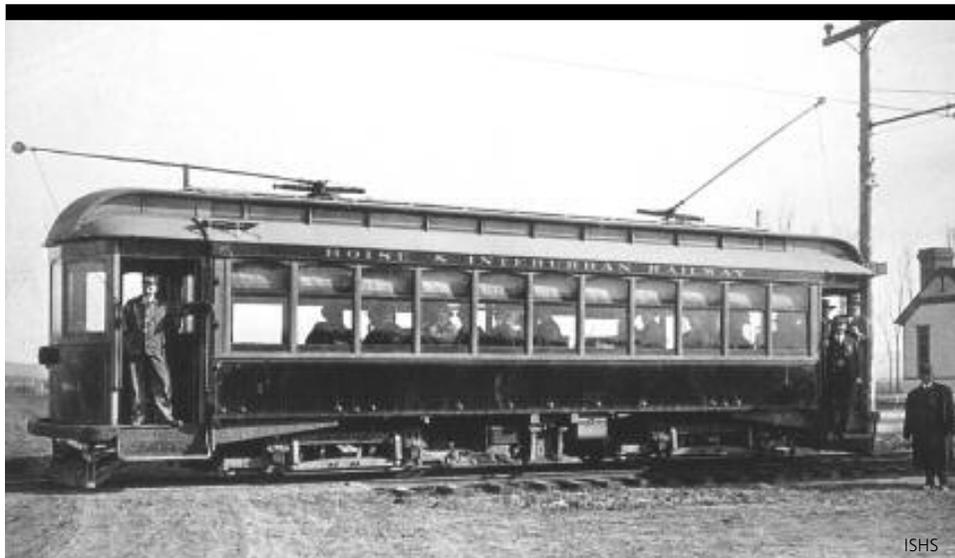
new trend, with only a few cities hanging on to their old urban and interurban lines. In Idaho, the Idaho Traction Company was divided into the Boise Streetcar Co. and the Boise Valley Traction Co. in 1915, and the two firms returned to their old ways of competing with each other. The upper hand eventually went to the Boise Streetcar Co. in the 1920s when it began switching all the trolleys out for new, gas-powered buses. The switch, combined with the growing popularity of the automobile, prompted many cities to begin large paving projects, further drawing away profits from the Boise Valley Traction Company, which had to cut back on car maintenance in order to cope.

Finally, on May 17, 1928, with work already underway on a new, state-of-the-art highway between Nampa and Boise, the Interurban system shut down all passenger and freight service indefinitely. The last streetcars unceremoniously ran the last routes of the Loop and at 6 p.m. they were all shuffled into barns and passengers were handed bus schedules. The closure of the Boise Valley Traction Company met with strong opinions on both sides. Farmers and businessmen who relied on the routes protested the loss of the system, while many citizens who no longer used it praised the notion that they would never have to hear the screeching of the railcars again. Newspaper headlines boldly proclaimed that during its last few years of service, the Boise Traction Company had gone \$2 million into debt and that in September of 1925, a foreclosure suit had already been filed on the dwindling company. Bondholders split up and bought portions of the lines, which were all eventually removed or paved over to accommodate growing automotive and bus traffic. For Boise, and much of the rest of the United States, the magical age of electricity and the street rail was over in a flash.

With the exception of an occasional lament over the lost trolley car or a reminder of the "good old days" by an Idaho newspaper whenever old lines are dug up to repave an existing road, little attention is given to the old system in the age of the auto and "super highways." Occasional *Idaho Statesman* articles give readers cause to reminisce about Boise's long lost trolley car system, which was hastily buried underneath new road developments. Titles like "Remember? Buried rails recall a bygone era" or "Newfangled streetcars found popularity quickly in Boise" graced the paper as people began to realize that no matter how large the freeways and roads were, or how many lanes wide they were, that they would never solve the problems of congestion alone.

Perhaps the most noticeable reminder of Boise's streetcar legacy is a restaurant aptly named "The Trolley House" located on Warm Springs Avenue. Originally built in 1922, the building served as a dispatch station at

the east end of a line that ran as far west as Eagle and Star. This building in particular was constructed so people could visit the area's largest attraction, the Natatorium. The only indication of the building's former use is a large mural painted on the western wall depicting a red trolley car with several



The Boise and Interurban Company extended its line from Main Street to Caldwell along Valley Road (now State Street). In 1912 the B&I merged with its rivals to create the Idaho Traction Company.

passengers on board. Inside, the walls are adorned with pictures, newspaper clippings, photos and other various crafts contained within display cases. Another remnant once nestled in the Boise Bench neighborhood at Rose Hill and Roosevelt. The "Trolley Bar" began life as a train car in 1882, serving as both a passenger car and a caboose for the Oregon and Washington Railway & Navigation Co. before being rebuilt in 1911 to serve as a trolley car in downtown Boise. In 1930, it was retired and moved to Rose Hill to become an ice cream parlor before finally being converted into a local tavern in 1934, where it became one of the longest running businesses in Boise. All that came to an end in 2006 when the Trolley was partially burned in an arson fire, subsequently forcing the owner to board up its doors and shut down. Restoration estimates have ranged anywhere between \$10–40,000 depending on the scope of reconstruction.

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The last 20 years have seen the successful reintegration of the trolley car into urban transit systems as cities have realized that highways alone are not sufficient to move masses of people from growing suburbs to the urban



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Portland's streetcar has inspired a controversial campaign to rebuild Boise's system as an economic development tool. Pictured: Portland's Pearl District.

core. San Diego began building a new system in the 1980s. Denver also revitalized its streetcar system as a light rail system in 1994. Many major cities quickly followed suit and either recreated, or in the case of Boston and San Francisco, renovated and expanded their still-existing systems into popular and invaluable assets to the communities they serve. One of Boise's closest sister cities in the west, Portland, entered its second age of light rail in 1986 under the direction of the Tri-County Metropolitan Transportation District of Oregon. Between 2001–05 alone the interurban rail system produced more than \$2.3 billion worth of urban development. More than 30 cities in the

U.S. and Canada currently have a streetcar or light rail system, or both, and more than 80 cities either have plans or have begun construction on new streetcar systems, including Washington D.C.

Some local leaders and business owners are saying that now it is Boise's turn. In 2004 various proponents from the local and state levels came together and created what they called the "Boise Mobility Study" in order to determine the growth needs of downtown Boise. The study concluded that the development of a new form of transit to serve the downtown sector was much more desirable than widening streets to accommodate more traffic. Two years later, the Treasure Valley High Capacity Transit Study examined how to successfully integrate a new transportation system that would not only include downtown Boise, but also eventually connect the major Treasure Valley communities back together; streetcars were the answer. They also concluded that a downtown system would not only enhance the transportation system, but also help revitalize underdeveloped areas served by the streetcar route. As a result, the downtown streetcar proposal came to the fore. The project didn't clear its first financial hurdle and is back on the drawing board. But the streetcar emerged as a major player in the mass transit discussion. Will there someday be a new valley "loop" that extends to Star, Emmett and Kuna? Will the old headline, "Valley Once Had Trolley Line," someday be replaced with, "Valley Once Again Has Trolley Line"? Time can only tell.

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What are the most important aspects of a "livable" city?

"The most important aspect is planning, planning, planning. Not just selfish planning for 'us' and 'right now,' but planning for 10, 15, or 20 years down the road. It would greatly serve our community to take the time and MONEY (I know this state hates spending money) to do it properly the first time around rather than rush to employ patch solutions."