

THE MONTHLY STATEMENT

By GARRETT D. BYRNES

PREPOSTEROUS as it may seem, there was a rip-snorting party on Blackstone Boulevard at the entrance to Swan Point Cemetery just a quarter of a century ago this May 15. The bash began somewhere around 1:40 a.m., lasted better than an hour, there was a lot of noise and drinking, some of the celebrators were teary, some got bleary, and the cops didn't lift a finger.

The cemetery entrance seemed an appropriate place for the party because it was the final rites for the street railway system which had served Rhode Islanders since the waning years of the Civil War, first with horse cars, then with electric trolleys which made their debut in the late '80s.

To measure the importance of this sad-gay occasion, let's first have a quick look at the era of the trolley, the years when from Market Square, the tracks of the street railways fanned out to form a veritable spider web of iron throughout the state and beyond.

The horse cars were primarily for urban transportation. Two horses were sufficient to move the small wheeled and windowed boxes except on major grades when a "hill horse" was hitched on.

The great—and it was great—era of the electric trolley began in Woonsocket, where the first trolley went into operation on South Main Street on September 25, 1887. The line lasted only a few months because the passengers went joy riding for a nickel and enjoyed the novelty so much they wouldn't get

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IN THE beginning there were horse cars. This is the Elmwood Line, 1888.

off the cars to make room for others.

The first really successful trolley line began in Newport on July 31, 1889. The first route was from Thames, up Franklin to the Avenue and onto Bath Road. By the end of the first week there were eight trolleys in operation and 6,300 people were carried daily.

Providence had to wait a while. The City Council approved a trial electric line out Broad Street from the grand Union Terminal over the Providence River on Market Square. Approval came on May 18, 1891, and by the following January 19, in spite of snow on the tracks which interfered with traction, the trolley company made a trial run from the Narragansett Hotel, the car loaded with local poohbahs who had, if they were smart, stiffened their courage with a visit to the circular bar of the hotel at the Dor-rance, Weybosset corner. The car left at noon and arrived in Pawtuxet 45 minutes later. The official party

was back downtown at three o'clock and the next day, the general public in Providence began to enjoy the delights of the new trolley cars.

It took only a short time to convert the numerous Providence horse car lines to electricity. John Dodge drove the last horse run on April 24, 1894, leaving the Chalkstone Avenue terminus at 5:25 p.m. and pulling into the Elmwood car barn at 6:45 p.m. An era ended but there was no party.

The capitalists down the years—William and Amasa Sprague, Marsden Perry, J. P. Morgan and his Charles S. Mellen and many others—wheeler-dealered the trolley business for all it was worth because it was a gold mine. But the lode over the years ran out. Henry Ford with his tin lizzie and the other rascals in Detroit were making their tin gimmicks in increasing numbers, ruining the American landscape, changing its life style, polluting the

atmosphere and in general seducing a populace so stupid it didn't know when it was well off.

The trolley car was an exciting thing. If you missed one, there'd be another along in a few minutes; on the busiest lines, the headway was often five or ten minutes during rush hours.

Maybe they swayed a bit and rolled a bit but the noise they made was jolly. The motorman had his clanging bell to warn people out of the way. The conductor rang up the fares which showed on a clock-like device up front, a device designed, perhaps, to keep the conductors honest. Then there was the bell the conductor rang as a signal to the motorman that all was clear, go ahead. From under the floor, from the electric machinery, came an odor unlike any other in the world; being scientifically inept, I called the smell ozone. It made some people sick.

Best of all were the open trolleys which showed up as soon as the weather turned nice in the spring.

Rhode Island's street railways had freight cars, combination freight and passenger cars, sand cars, water wagons to lay the dust, snow plows, and the elegant car called *Oregon* which was a funeral car with handsome arched windows and a special compartment up front for the guest of honor in his coffin.

Before the automobile loused things up, going for a "trolley ride" was akin to taking a boat down the bay. It was the way to get to Crescent Park and Rocky Point and Oakland Beach, to Kerwin's Beach and Lincoln Woods, to Rhodes or Hunt's Mills to go canoeing. ➤ 4

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TROLLEYS

continued

The Rhode Island Company, predecessor of the United Electric Railway, found it profitable to get out monthly timetables, little booklets of many pages. And private publishers put out elaborate booklets, often up to 100 pages, which told the reader about the scenic wonders and recreational delights of New England and how to reach them by street car.

By making changes at transfer points, from Providence you could go to New York City by trolley in one direction and to Old Town, Maine, in the other. Via Woonsocket and Worcester, you could get to Springfield, Pittsfield and North Adams, Massachusetts, and then on to Bennington, Vermont.

Closer to home, you could take the "snake line" to Fall River and thence to Newport or to New Bedford and on to Wareham, Onset and Monument Beach. Or you could go down through Warren and Bristol, take the ferry to Bristol Ferry on the Portsmouth side where you had a choice of trolley lines going down East or West Main Roads to Newport. By way of East Greenwich and the Sea View Railroad, you went to Wickford, Barber's Heights, Saundertown, the Pier and Wakefield. This ride of 33 miles took 2 ¼ hours and the fare to the Pier was 90 cents.

Until the Scituate Reservoir put an end to it, there was a 35-mile ride from Providence to Danielson, Connecticut, via North Scituate, Ashland, Rockland, Clayville, Foster Center, and East Killingly. If you took the whole trip, the fare was \$1.10. The 55-minute trip to Woonsocket cost 30 cents and there you could transfer for Slatersville, Nasonville, Harrisville and Pascoag. It was 17 miles to Chepachet through Harmony; the service was hourly, and the 1 ¼-hour ride to Chepachet cost 35 cents.

To get to Boston, you could go by way of Taunton and Brockton or by a route that roughly followed the Post Road through Plainville, Walpole and Norwood.

The private automobile and buses began to put the quietus on the trolleys in the '20s. The jitney war didn't help. By the end of 1920, the Boston route through Taunton and Brockton was done. So was the Sea View route to the Pier and the line to Danielson. The trolley link between

Providence and Worcester broke in 1927.

The first trackless trolleys, which were to give way to buses, showed up in January, 1932. Gasoline rationing in the second big war drove many passengers back to the trolleys and buses but the scrap metal drives caused the rails of many old trolley lines to be torn up.

You will recall that the first trolley line in Providence was out Broad Street to Pawtuxet. The last trolley on that route ran on March 20, 1948. On that day, the city had left only 29 trolley cars; all running to the East Side; in 1929, the car barns of United Electric had housed 711 cars.

All of which brings us to the 25th anniversary of the last trolley in Rhode Island. It was on a drizzly, chilly Saturday. President Truman got the banner lines on page one of the *Journal* that morning because, to everyone's astonishment, he had recognized the Zionist State of Israel.

The only picture above the fold on that page one showed the front end of UER car No. 2108 with William Durfee, a 39-year veteran of the trolleys, at the controls. The car was the official last car to run in Rhode Island.

The schedule called for No. 2108 to leave Dorrance Street on the Butler Avenue run to the Swan Point terminus at 1 a.m., but the last car didn't get away from downtown until 1:17. It was jammed—every seat, every strap, front and back platforms. So three other trolleys were assigned to back up No. 2108 and they ran jammed, too. The trolleys were escorted by three police scout cars and about a dozen private automobiles.

In the official last car rode William Morton, then as now bur-nishing the name of Sheraton. Bill at that time was doing the publicity work for the Sheraton-Biltmore and true to his expectations, he got the name of the hotel—and his, too—in the story of the last trolley. He simply took along a case of Moet et Chandon champagne, two waiters from the Bacchante Room, plenty of ice, a cooler and, instead of champagne glasses from Waterford, a goodly supply of paper cups.

At Swan Point, in the glare of red fire flares, drinks were on the SHERA-

►6

TROLLEYS continued

ton. Some of the sentimentalists in the large crowd had their own stimulus to tears in their hip pockets. Fifty members of the German Club of Pawtucket brought along the makings of their own celebration in honor of Thomas Giblin, 62, who had the controls of the second trolley in line. There being no more trolleys, Mr. Giblin was about to retire.

Someone got into the Sheraton's ice bucket and began to throw the ice overboard. This prompted a true trolley buff to shout "Ice on the rails!" and he began throwing sand from the front platform sand box on the ice to assure traction. The sand got into the eyes of Alphonse McGloin, a character who showed up in the columns of these newspapers frequently in those days to the delight of readers with a taste for persiflage and piffle.

When the champagne and other drinks ran out and the red flares burned down to a flicker, the people

on the last ride together boarded the four trolleys shortly before 3 a.m. and rode back down through the tunnel to Dorrance Street, some tired, some tiddly. Many insisted on continuing on to the Broad Street car barn where No. 2108 and the others were put away for the last time.

For the benefit of those who can recall the trolley cars, and also for the benefit of the wet-behind-the-ears generation which can't, I asked my friend Dick Wonson, the finest trolley historian in these parts, where you could see a trolley car in motion today.

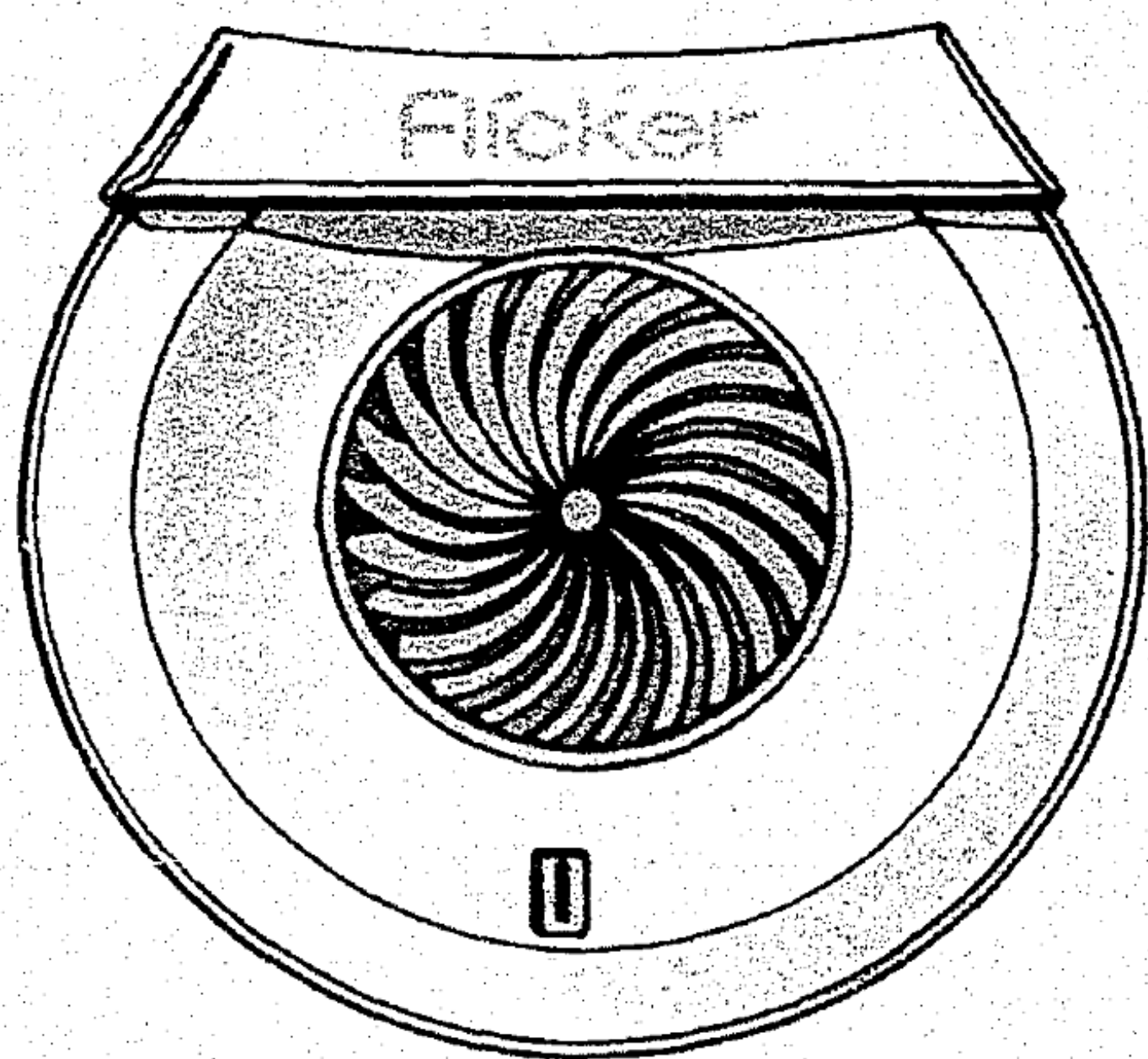
New Orleans is the last United States city with trolleys in commercial operation. Closer at hand, there are trolley museums, with operating trolley cars, at Branford (near New Haven) and Warehouse Point (near Hartford) in Connecticut, and at Kennebunkport, Maine. □



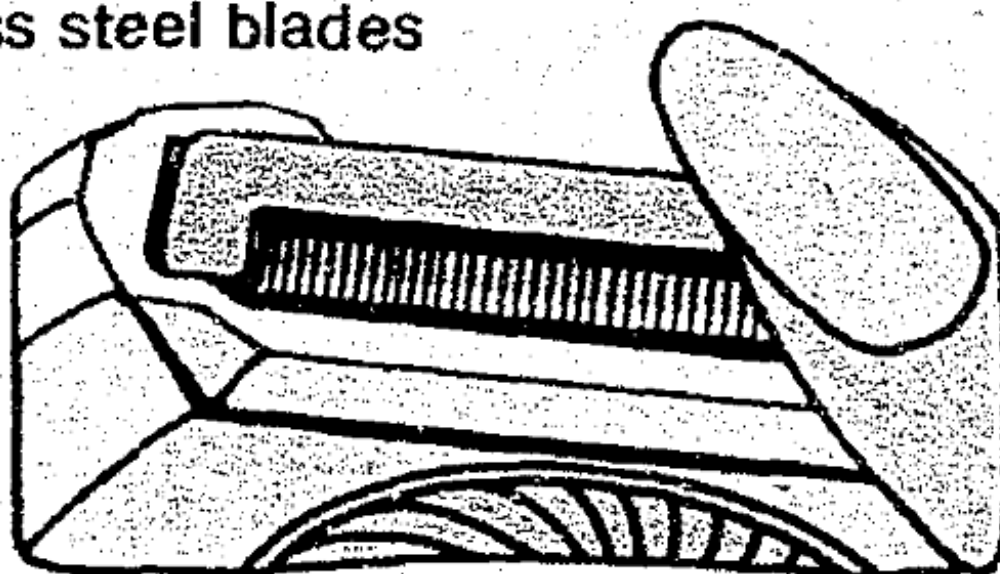
THE LAST TROLLEY carried mourners in the wee hours of May 15, 1948.

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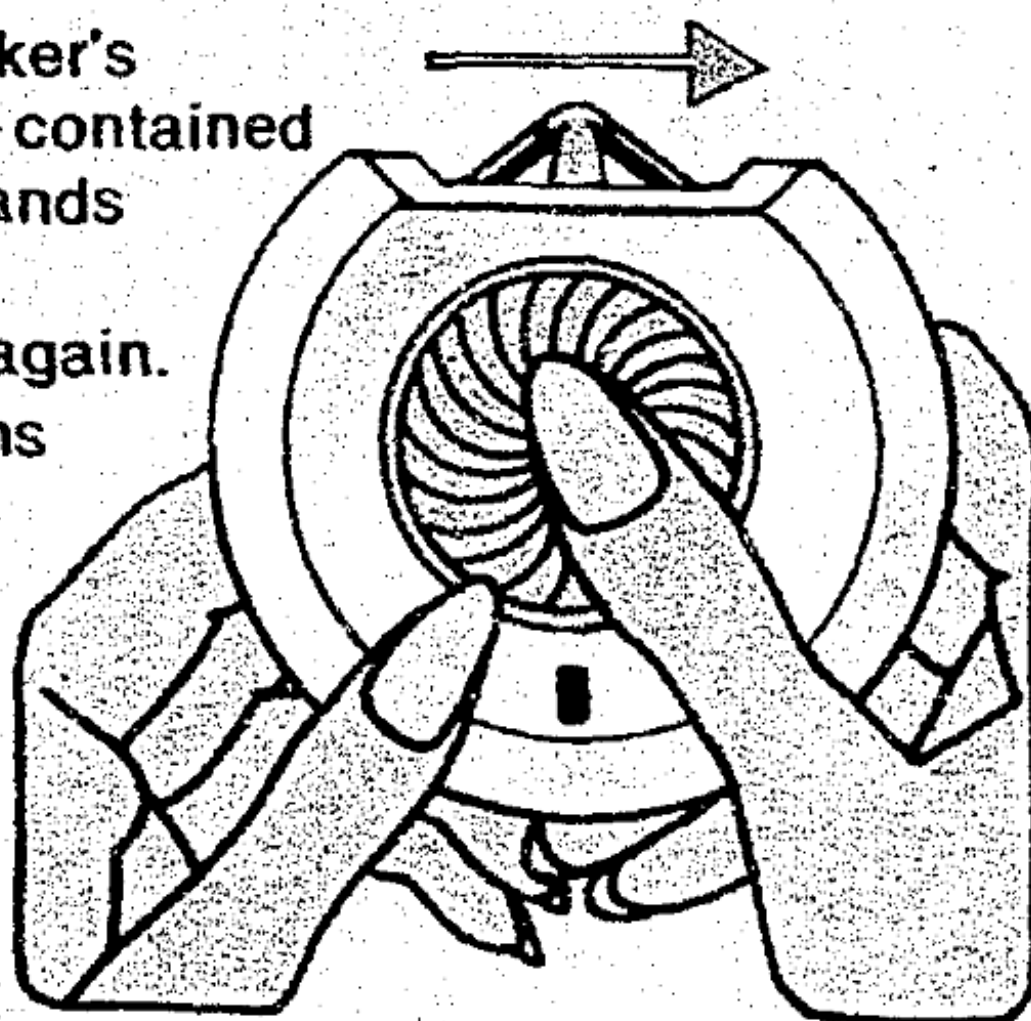
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