

El Paso & Southwestern Flyer

OCTOBER 2013

The Union Electric Railway

by Ron Dawson

The next meeting of the Southwest chapter will be Wed., October 9, at Amigo's Restaurant, 2000 Montana St. Same meeting time, 6 pm. Ron Leiman will speak about the Pullman *James Watt*. Visitors welcome.



Loading at the Parsons interurban depot. This scene once appeared in *Trains* magazine. (taken Aug. 1, 1946)

Possibly one of the most interesting interurbans of the Southwest, rolling across the bucolic countryside from Parsons, Kansas to Nowata, Oklahoma was the Union Electric Railway. It is somewhat surprising that this railroad which, in the last two decades ran on rickety rails from nowhere to nowhere, survived as long as it did (1947.) No doubt it was a testament of the sheer will power and perseverance of the employees and the people it served that it managed to keep going. In the

1940's, the company advertised, "One cent per mile – only walking is cheaper."

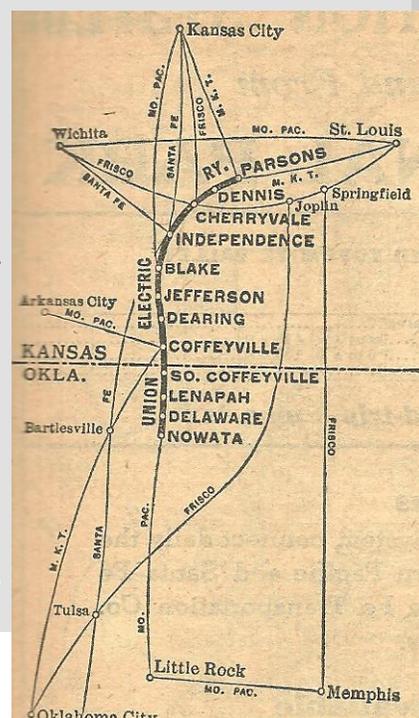
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The northern terminus was Parsons, Kansas, a town built around the MKT Railroad shops. In fact, it was named after Levi Parsons, the first president of the Katy. The Union Electric meandered south 77 miles, (but not in a straight line) to Cherryvale, Independence, and Coffeyville, Kansas, thence across the Oklahoma state line to the southern terminus, Nowata, Oklahoma. It operated city lines in both Independence and Coffeyville as well as freight service across the whole line, in spite of the fact that all of these towns were served by steam roads. The Union Electric covered the distance between Coffeyville and Parsons in 52 miles, while the M-K-T did it in only 31 miles.

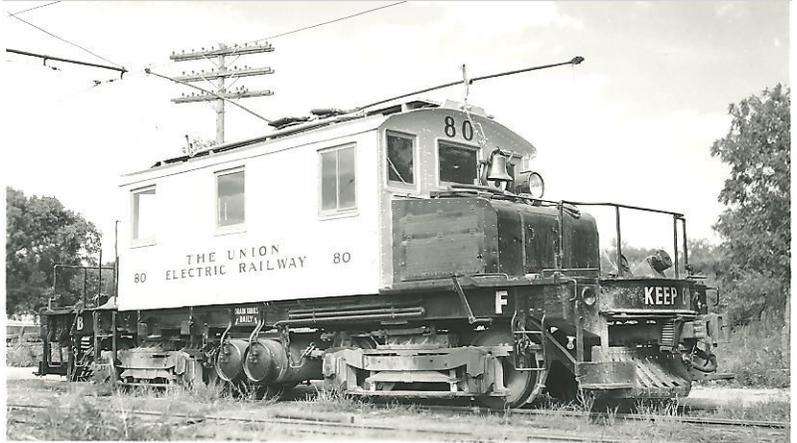
The Union Traction Company was incorporated by the Siggins Brothers of Pennsylvania in 1907, absorbing two



city lines in Independence and Coffeyville, then building the interurban connection between them, later extending both north and south. The road reached its full size by 1915 and the company operated large wooden interurban cars of conventional design until obtaining six lightweight double truck steel cars from American car Company in 1925.

Several freight locomotives had previously been acquired, but due to sharp curves, the size of the freights had to be limited and UER freight cars had the couplers removed and tow bars installed. The company struggled during the depression and went into receivership in the thirties. John P. Lying was appointed receiver and, to his credit, rescued the company from the scrap heap. He

Freight motor No.80, ex-Youngstown & Ohio River No.3, BLW 1917, taken Aug 31, 1946 at Independence



Freight motor No. 64, ex-passenger #25, taken at Coffeyville, 6/4/44.



Car 72 at Cherryvale, KS Aug. 1, 1946.

built up the freight business and provided personal service to industries along the line. He passed away and his successor, Mr. Francis, saw the company successfully through the war boom years. Unfortunately, Francis was not able to find the post-war funds to put the line back into first class shape. Towards the end, track was so bad that derailments were common and power leakage due to poor rail bonding was commonplace. Service was still a priority and, as late as 1946, the road was operating 11 trains a day between Coffeyville and Parsons and seven a day to Nowata. Soliciting freight business, together with low passenger service and frequent scheduling kept the line going longer than many interurbans.

The UER connected with the M-K-T at Parsons and Coffeyville; with the Santa Fe at Independence and Coffeyville; with the Missouri Pacific at Coffeyville, Nowata, and Blake; and with the Frisco at Cherryvale with headquarters at Coffeyville. In 1945, there was service from 5:30 am to 12:50 am. The last run on the Parsons to Coffeyville segment was June 16, 1947 and the last on the Nowata run was August 1, 1947.

The six lightweight cars were sold to Oklahoma's Sand Springs Railway as well as a line car, freight motor No. 84, and a number of wheels.

No. 74, crossing the Missouri Pacific north of Nowata, OK. 9/1/46



Picking up passengers at Delaware, OK



The Coffeyville shops.

(An unknown railfan's commentary from June, 1947.)

"After an interminable bus ride from KC to Coffeyville, we debussed in front of the interurban depot at 8th & Walnut. Coming down the middle of busy 8th St. toward us was freight motor 604 hooting cheerily at each cross street (motors 603 and 604 are ex-Okla. Rwy's, built in their shops, 1929). Rumbling past us, the impressive old motor curved into the freight interchange with the Katy, picked up three tank cars, and reversed its way up 8th St. Track was so poor that old 604 picked its way with extreme caution; a policeman told me that only a few days previously, this same locomotive, on a night run, hauled six cars across the poor special work at 8th & Walnut, derailed all of them and tied up the town's main intersection for several hours.

Track is universally poor. UER evidently constructed all of the special work itself, using light T-rail. Crossings and switches are amusingly contrived. Only switch point tongues appear to be made of anything other than T-rail. The homemade crossings and switches have worked for years, but certainly the UER has suffered, probably losing more from derailments and poor bonding than the usual factory made special works would have cost. That the bonding is poor was demonstrated by the cut of tank cars we observed; at every joint each wheel of each car would



Rare color image of city car No. 15, and a double truck Birney in Independence by the interurban depot.

send
forth

References:

Official Railway Guide, December, 1945.

The National Electric Railways Newsletter, August, 1947.

Chandler, Allison & Maguire, Stephen: *When Oklahoma Took the Trolley*, Interurban Press, 1980.

Hilton, George & Due, John F. : *Interurban Railways in America*, Stanford U. Press, 1960.

(all photographs from the collection of Ron Dawson or the Paso del Norte Streetcar Preservation Society, unless otherwise noted)



Southwest Chapter
Railway & Locomotive Historical Society

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SEPTEMBER MEETING & PROGRAMS:

The Southwest Chapter met at Amigo's Restaurant on Sept 11th. Eleven People were present. Terry Hammond and Mark Steele were visitors. Vice Chairman, Phil Wiborg presented a very interesting program on a Rotary Snow Blower operation of the Denver & Rio Grande RR. Phil went on the trip and documented the action with his camera. The blower gave an impressive power demonstration. The next meeting will be held at Amigo's Restaurant on October 9, at 6 pm. Ron Leiman, will present the program on the AT&SF "James Watt" Pullman car owned by the S W Chapter. He will show photographs with details of the condition and recent repairs. Everyone is invited, Amigo's is at 2000 Montana Ave. near Cotton St. Call Prince McKenzie for directions, (915) 256-4409.

MUSEUM NEWS: LOCOMOTIVE NO.1 EXHIBIT is now open at the old Museum location, Monday - Friday, and Saturday mornings. The space is being used as a Visitor Information Center. The City had demanded that most of the original static exhibits be kept in place in spite of copyright questions about the text and ownership of the photographs. Prince McKenzie trained the Visitor Information Specialists to answer questions about "Old No.1" and railroad history. They will refer visitors to the Museum for more information and Walking Tours. McKenzie will continue giving tours of historic sites including No.1 and the Union Station.

FT. BAYARD FRONTIER DAYS: The EP&SW Historians joined more than 100 educators and re-enactors at the National Historic Landmark to present railroad history for the annual program on military, medical and cultural history. Don Beem from Silver City, taught students the skills of the Iron Men, Gandy dancers, Brakemen and Firemen with demonstrations of their tools. Prince McKenzie spoke on the Transcontinental Railroad links and the cultural diversity of the builders. Don Beem provided many railroad tools and a locomotive bell. Darrell Heitt, Museum Guest Curator, who used to describe the life and times of locomotive engineers, presented the military traditions of the "Rough Riders" and Teddy Roosevelt during the Spanish American War. Heide Green presented the history and traditions of the Harvey Girls. Patricia Kidney presented the issues of women's suffrage. The keynote program was presented by Dr. Doug Dinwiddie, on the international boundary survey work of Major William Emory in the 1850s. Emory recognized the need to renegotiate the border boundary for a transcontinental railroad across the Southwest. He then participated in the plans for the Gadsden Purchase, that opened the way for the Southern Pacific, the T & P, and the G H & S A Railroad lines.

CONCORDIA CEMETERY, WALK THROUGH HISTORY: The EP&SW Historians will describe the life and times of pioneer railroaders buried at the cemetery. Tom Seward will be presenting the Conductor of the first AT&SF train into El Paso in 1881. Prince McKenzie will be presenting the Locomotive Engineer who ran the first S P Train that entered El Paso in 1881. The Harvey Girls of El Paso will describe the Union Station restaurant operations. The program will be on Saturday, October 19, from 11 am to 3 pm. For more information: call (915) 842-8200.