

**Interurban line**  
*an Oral History*

Hart Fisher, Interviewee  
Of Ottawa, Illinois

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Q: My name is Fritz Goodman and I'm here with Mr. Hart Fisher of Ottawa, Illinois and it's July 27, 1975, Sunday. And Mr. Fisher is an expert authority on the Interurban and we'll let Mr. Fisher talk a little bit about Interurban as he see fit.

A: Thank you, Fritz. Fritz, I think that probably to talk on the Interurban you would have to picture yourself at a period of around 1903. At that time, of course, the country was enthralled with the new invention of the automobile, electricity was being wired into many homes which heretofore had not had electricity, and probably the best way of transportation at that time which was a threat to the steam railroad was the electric Interurban. And Interurban being a con-nation of two words, of inter and urban, running from one town to another. Lot of times these Interurban systems ( BLANK ON  
TAPE ) limits of the town, town a short distance away they would decide to build a line between the two and there would be generated the Interurban system. The Interurban system that we're going to speak of right now of course is one that is very dear to my heart. It's one that my grandfather helped to build and operated as its general manager for a period of twenty some years. The line itself operated from the period of 1903 up to May 14, 1934, that last cars ran on that date. Going back to 1903, the line was built from Ottawa to LaSalle and then on from LaSalle to Spring Valley, and up to Ladd. And going eastward from Ottawa it went to Marseilles. In 1905 we saw the Interurban traveling from Ladd to Spring Valley, into Peru, LaSalle, Utica, Ottawa, and on into Marseilles. I might mention too, humorously,

A: they had such spots as Split Rock, and these were spots that were on their time tables. Split Rock was a spot where the Interurban crossed over the mainline of the Rock Island Railroad and the Illinois-Michigan Canal and then proceeded on into LaSalle. This was also a stopping-off point where people could climb to the top of the rock and see some beautiful scenery in all directions. Remnants of that Split Rock are still of course visible today. The line also had such stops as called Sand Rock, or Sand Pit Stop, and lot of places they stopped at just about every fence post of farm along the way to pick up their passengers. The line prospered under the name of the Illinois Valley Traction System, Illinois Valley Traction Company. They had at that time their shops were in the car barns at Ottawa and at the car barns at LaSalle. In 1912 they built a huge massive brick structure in the west edge of Ottawa and this became the general shops for the new company that actually leased the equipment of the Illinois Valley Traction System. This new company was called the Chicago, Ottawa and Peoria Electric Railway. The shops of course, was a massive big building 60 feet wide and 300 feet long and capable of holding almost twenty of the large electric heavyweight Interurban cars. By the time 1912 rolled around the line had gone on westward into Spring Valley, DePue, Bureau, and at that point there was a large decision made. They were going to go on down to Peoria which would have tied this branch, this Interurban system with the large parent company, the Illinois Traction System at Peoria, would have connected with the Peoria lines. But they decided not to do that route at that time and they did go instead from Bureau on into Princeton, entering Princeton from the south, going down

A: the main street or north on the main street almost to the far extremities of the northern boundary of the City of Princeton. The line was a single track line going down the middle of the street and they interchanged with the Burlington Line, they were just a block, the northern terminus of the Interurban at Princeton was a block from the Burlington depot. The ticket office at that time was in a hotel at the far northern end of the City of Princeton. The line also at the time it was being built into Princeton from Bureau, it was being built in the easterly direction, it had reached Marseilles and it went on into Seneca and Stockdale, which was an Interurban point where cattle were shipped from the west, they were watered, fed, kept for three or four days and shipped on into the Chicago meat market, the meat packing industry in Chicago. This was the village of Stockdale, the village itself no longer in existence. Going on from Stockdale, the Interurban, our Interurban, the Illinois Valley Interurban, went on to Seneca, it went from Seneca to Morris, and from Morris on into Joliet. For a very brief period of time the line, through intricate regulations, was able to go on into Chicago on the trackage owned by the Chicago and Joliet Electric Railway. This however only operated for a very short time, the line was cut back again to terminate in Joliet. About in 1915 the line had reached the maximum amount of trackage that our Illinois Valley Interurban was to ever own and this was a total sum trackage of 106 miles. This included a sixteen mile branch running from Ottawa south to Streator. And of course it included the mile and a half branch going north from Spring Valley to the village of Ladd. 1929 saw the Model T Ford, Henry Ford has mass-produced the Model Ts, they had gone into production of the Model As. Our Interurban Line lost passengers, it had gone on hauling freight, it operated where

A: it was operating, trains every 30 minutes, it started operating trains every two hours, every three hours and gradually every four hours. The line from Ladd to Spring Valley was the first to go. The heavy spring rain washed out seven bridges between the village of Bureau and Princeton, this was in 1929. The Illinois Commerce Commission at that time sympathized with the Interurban and allowed the Interurban to abandon the trackage rather than repair that line. This brought quite an uproar from the business community of Princeton because the Interurban at that time was quite a source of revenue both for the city of Princeton itself and for the merchants in shipping their products and getting incoming products. However, the Interurban was successful in abandoning that trackage. The line was cut back to DePue with DePue being the western terminus for the remaining few years. The following January 9, 1929 saw the abandonment of the Interurban from Ottawa to Streator. This was a sad blow to the residents of Streator that like to traverse to Ottawa -- vice versa -- the Ottawa residents like to go to Streator. The Interurban for a brief period of time operated motor busses from the city of Ottawa to the city of Streator and these were curtailed in 1930. At the same time that the line was abandoned between DePue and Princeton and between Ottawa and Streator the Interurban went through a name change. From the then known Illinois Valley Division of the Illinois Traction System, which was a separate subsidiary of the massive Southern Illinois Electric Interurban System owned by the Sen. McKinley syndicate, it became a separate subsidiary and then a complete separate company. This company in 1930 was known then as the Chicago and Illinois Valley Electric

A: Railway. It operated, probably the last three or four years, it operated principally in the red, very little profit, the trains became intermittent, the schedules were, very rarely were the schedules themselves adhered to, and what used to be a pleasurable ride from Ottawa to Joliet became a tiresome, drudge ride, on dirty equipment, equipment that was constantly breaking down, and this last remnants of which was at one time a great Interurban ceased to function as an Interurban system in 1934, May 14 at midnight the last cars ran. Shortly after that the franchise rights of the freight of the Interurban System were sold to the Rock Island, Chicago, Rock Island, Pacific Railway. They to this date still operate and carry freight that originally generated on the Interurban system. As we go over the route of the system itself, there are still remnants throughout the entire three counties that it traveled, from Joliet to Princeton, and Ottawa to Streator. You can see remnants of the bridge abutments where the Interurban crossed streams, creeks, and of course even today the massive aqueduct at Ottawa where the Illinois-Michigan Canal crosses over the Fox River can be seen the frame stanchions that carried the trolley wire which in 1929 created a by-pass route for freight to be hauled around the downtown area of Ottawa in order for the Interurban to carry this lucrative part of their business, which was rapidly becoming more profitable than that of being principally a people-mover. The Interurban itself is now a memory in the minds of lots of the older people of the community, it's a source of collector's material for many younger collectors, and there are railway museums throughout the country that are springing up and at one in particular



A: at Union, Illinois can be seen several pieces of equipment of our Illinois Valley Interurban and one such car has been restored and is used on weekends up there for most anyone who should care to go there. I think that pretty well, in a nut shell, ends the story of the Interurban. Fritz, do you have any questions?

Q: What were your experiences with the Interurban?

A: Well my experiences were really very limited because the Interurban, when I was born, was already in its downhill run, let's say. And I remember only vaguely short rides on the Interurban between Ottawa and LaSalle, over Split Rock. I remember it was quite shaky ride at the time and I remember the car barns down west, and the equipment all around the car barns as the were shutting down the system. So my personal experiences with the Interurban are very small in comparison to that which I have been brought up in -- in the fact that my grandfather and my father had quite a bit to do with the construction of the system itself, operation of it, and the demise of it. So, I think that pretty well ties it up. Anything else?

Q: Do you suppose you could give us the names of your father and your grandfather?

A: Well, my grandfather's name was F. E. Fisher, he was the general superintendent under Sen. McKinley. Sen. McKinley was the owner of the massive traction system which later became separate in operation from the Illinois Traction System. My father's name was William Frederick Fisher, my father held the position of -- starting out when he was quite young he was a motorman, conductor for the system and then in later years he was the commercial agent and the last years the

A: system was in operation he was the park manager. And at the time they had gone through three parks. In 1905 through 1911 they had what was called Majestic Park and it was at that time quite fashionable for Interurban systems to have some amusement park away from the community, away from the town that they principally served to generate additional traffic on their electric cars. And the -- our Interurban had the first park, as I said, Majestic Park. They decided in 1912 to build a new amusement park, this they built between Ottawa and Grand Ridge on their Streator branch and it was called McKinley Park, after the owner of the system, Sen. William B. McKinley. This park operated for a few years and in 1922 in sort of a last ditch effort to try to generate additional traffic, additional patrons, they decided to build a super electric park and they called this park Illini Park, Illini Beach. And they had -- this was built on Covel Creek three miles south of Ottawa, there was -- which today of course there is remnants of the dam that they had constructed to hold back waters of Covel Creek. They had tobbooggan slide, beach houses, there was a dance pavilion and they would have quite a number of the big name bands brought into this new electric park which was called Illini Beach Park. And this of course ceased to function when they abandoned their Streator division in 1929, Illini Beach also. So Illini Beach which was the last park ceased to function in 1929 along with the Streator division.

Q: Could you tell us how the Interurban worked. I know it was electricity, but could you tell us a little more?

A: Allright. The -- of course the electric Interurban systems throughout



A: the nation were basically all the same, they operated much like city streetcar systems. They had sub-stations that would convert the power which in most cases was brought in either from outside generating plants, or in case of our Illinois Valley division, they had their own generating plant at Marseilles which is now being operated by Illinois Power Company, but at that time they owned it themselves. They would convert the AC power which in most cases was usually 33,000 volts -- AC, alternating current power -- into their sub-stations which were placed strategically along the line approximately eight miles apart, and this was converted -- this AC power was converted to DC power in the capacity of 600 volts, and this is what propelled these electric cars with massive electric motors. The heavier cars of course had four motors on them and these motors generated anywhere from 50 to 150 horsepower apiece. And the power of course was transmitted to the trolley car or to the Interurban car by means of a trolley pole which ran along a trolley wire what was some 20 feet over the track itself. Return current or ground line was carried back on the rails of the system, so you had a complete circuit. The car picked up -- if it lost what they called -- lost their trolley pole which didn't mean that they went out and lost it, but occasionally the little wheel that followed the wire would actually jump the wire and in that case when it would jump the wire, it had a retriever on the trolley car that would pull it down so the pole wouldn't bang against the span wires which were the wires that held the electric trolley wire. They would immediately -- the car would of course come to a pretty fast halt because there was no more power going to the motors, much the same as small table-top electric train sets that most children are familiar

A: with, if it's going at full speed and you pull the plug on the transformer -- our Interurban trolley cars would do the same thing, they would come to a halt. Until -- usually the conductor or the motorman could reach out and release the cord that held the trolley pole down, and release it and put it back on the wire and once again power would be restored to the car and they could proceed. It's interesting too to note that the earlier Interurban cars were older cars and most of them were city cars that had been converted and regearred to Interurban use. And if maybe one or two of them were on the same line at the same time, the same distance between substations, naturally the power drain was greater and they would, especially in the early evening hours when the lights were on in the car, they would go to what was called an electric twilight, the power drain was so great that the lights would actually dim in the car because there was another car on the same eight mile section of track. And of course later equipment was updated and of course they had rather a little more sophisticated systems, not as we know electronics today, but at that time it was considered quite a marvel and they did actually operate fairly well that way. The -- of course the speed of the car was controlled from the motorman's end of the car at the front end of the car and it was a rheostat arrangement, or control handle, a large S-shaped handle, that the motorman would hold the handle and put it into the different notches, much like the speed control on a model train layout, which is very, very similar to what the electric Interurban cars were of the time.

Q: What were the cars made of, were they metal and wood or what?

A: The early cars were usually metal underframe and sheathed in wood and they were quite handsome works of art. The newer cars came out were completely steel cars, usually they had wood flooring in them and in some cases they even had carpeting, they were quite handsome cars, quite heavy. The large, what they called the heavyweight cars on our Illinois Valley line, the 260 series, had large stained glass windows on them, they were all steel cars, with wooden window frames. Later models of the same cars of course had complete steel framing. The seats of course were plush seats and in the later cars were reversible seats, seats what could be faced in either direction, much like the early steam trains, coach seats were completely reversible. Rather than turn the car around, they would pull one trolley pole down and put the other trolley pole up and just run the seats in the other direction and the car could immediately be headed in the opposite direction. A lot of our Interurban systems operated on single track and so they every so often they had to have what was called a passing track, so that the Interurban car coming towards them, they would have a meet, and they would be at a certain time on the schedule, they would meet and if the first car at this passing siding had to wait until the other car that it was supposed to meet got on the track otherwise they'd have a bad collision. And of course this sometimes did happen, they would misunderstand their instructions and they did have accidents.

Q: Was the Interurban a one day trip or could you stay overnight depending how far you wanted to go?

A: Well essentially yes, it was -- you could ride from Ottawa to

A: Princeton, it would take probably an hour and a half to make that ride. Of course you have to understand too that you went right through the heart of every town along the way and you were subject to the local traffic ordinances, they could only go so fast. Speed on the countryside was quite a bit faster than it was in the towns, they could go 40-50 miles an hour. Some of the heavyweight Interurbans could go as high as 70 and 80 miles an hour, and this is in the early teens of our century that we're talking about. To bring to point, presently the Chicago, South Bend and -- Chicago, South Shore and South Bend Interurban System which is still in existence operates with equipment built in 1922 and these coaches operate at a speed of 80 miles an hour. They have not been -- they have been refurbished several times but the original equipment is the equipment that they had when they were first built. And electric traction was speedy, it was fast, The reason it took so long to get from one end of the line to the other, it would take probably four hours to ride the line from Ottawa to Chicago -- it takes only two hours to ride the steam train, excuse me, diesel train, our Rock Island Rocket into Chicago -- it now takes roughly two hours -- but the Interurban of course went through quite a number of towns between here and Chicago and being subject to the traffic rules they had to slow down, they had to make stops, and pick up, so for a very short time they did have a limited train and rounded it about at three hours, but they still had to slow down. The diesel lines and the present railroads, the hard railroads, now of course the road bed is bad. I have ridden the Rock Island Rocket and it's taken about an hour and twenty minutes, this was when the road bed was in good shape. Now it takes two hours. But it was, it was speedy

A: for the day. Rapidly the automobile came into being and as it did people chose to, even though it cost them more to drive their car from Ottawa to Streator or Ottawa to LaSalle than it would have cost them to ride the Interurban, the novelty of the new cars was such that roads were getting better, what was dirt roads in the beginning of the Interurban became paved roads, and paved roads of course made traveling by car more fashionable than traveling by our Interurban.

Q: I think that's pretty good.

A: Well I hope I've pretty well covered it, it's difficult to completely cover it in a few minutes or a half an hour or so, it's almost an hour, I guess. Anyway, it's difficult to cover it because there's so many important things that were important at the time but right now are merely facts, but dates of course are important, it's something that at the time, it was a terrific people-mover. It's unfortunate that our system could not have lasted longer, it died an early death compared to the Interurban systems throughout the country. The mainline that I've referred to several times which operated between Peoria, Springfield, St. Louis, Decatur, Danville -- operated as a passenger-carrying system even though it went through several more name changes, it operated up through 1956 under the name of the Illinois Terminal Railroad. The Illinois Terminal Railroad is still in operation though now it's no longer in the passenger business, it's no longer electrified, it operates strictly freight, it has considerable interchange business in the St. Louis area and as I said, 1956 was the last that the mainline operated as a people-mover.

Q: I'd like to thank you for having this interview I know that many people will benefit from hearing this.

A: Well, Fritz, I've enjoyed talking about it and of course you probably by now guessed that the Interurban in our valley here, Illinois Valley Interurban was -- is a favorite subject of mine and I do runneth off at the mouth.

Q: Well, that's what we really want.

A: Well good, feel free at any time to call me or drop by and I'll be glad, if there's any void to any other questions you have, I'll be more than glad to at least answer them if it's within my power.

Q: Oh, thank you very much.

A: Okay.

END OF SIDE ONE

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(INTERVIEWEE)

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