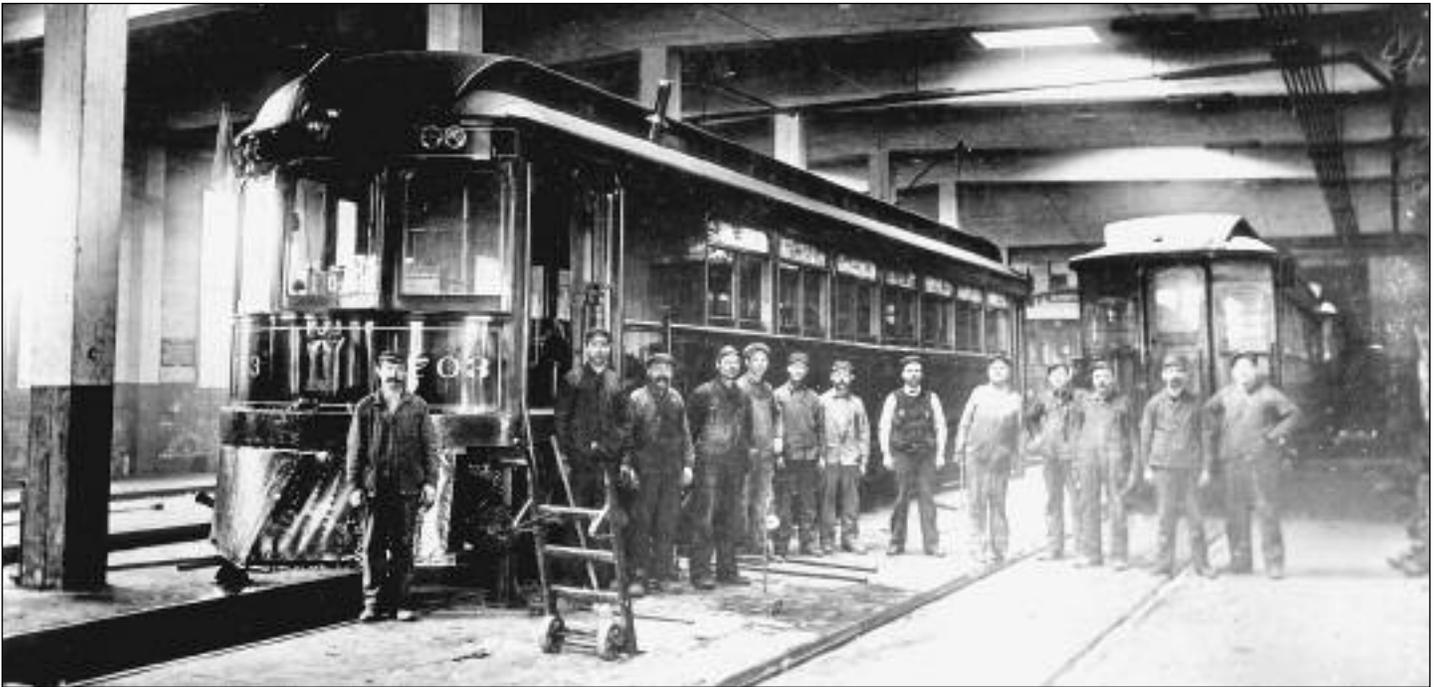


the Rockford & Interurban RAILWAY



▲ There is a bit of speculation in this caption. This could be the crew that rebuilt car 703 at North Shops in Rockford. Niles Car Co. built car 703 in 1902, and the rebuilding of the 700s began in 1912. The car is freshly painted in Pullman green with gold lettering and striping. One of the former New York elevated trailers is on the adjacent track.—Gordon Geddes Collection

A Capsule History of the Rockford & Interurban

by Norman Carlson

The Rockford & Interurban Railway was a holding company that operated city streetcar services in Rockford and interurban services from Rockford west to Freeport, Illinois, north to Beloit and Janesville, Wisconsin, and east to Belvidere, Illinois. The Rockford & Interurban connected at Belvidere with the Elgin and Belvidere, which in turn connected with the Aurora, Elgin & Chicago at Elgin to provide service to Chicago.

The Rockford & Interurban holding company operated streetcar services in Beloit, on behalf of another company that

shared some common ownership with it. In Janesville, a different company — which had some owners in common with the Beloit company — operated its own streetcar service there. In Freeport, an independent company operated a streetcar system that was partially on R&I trackage.

It would be genteel to describe the financial history of the R&I as tortured. The Rockford & Interurban name came into being on September 16, 1902, after the renaming of the company formed by the August 12, 1902 merger of the Rockford & Belvidere Electric Railway Co. and the Rockford Railway, Power & Light Co.

The Rockford & Belvidere constructed and operated a 14-mile line between its namesake cities, with service beginning on November 16, 1901. Rockford Railway was formed by the consolidation of street railway companies that dated back to a mule-car operation organized in 1880. Electric operations began in 1890.

These two companies were under common ownership and management as a result of Judge R. N. Baylies taking control of the streetcar company in 1889 through what was essentially a bankruptcy reorganization.

The Baylies management group formed the Rockford & Freeport Electric Railway Co. on April 9, 1901. It commenced opera-

tions between the named cities on April 6, 1904, a 28-mile route. An independent company, but still connected to Judge Baylies, was organized as the Rockford, Beloit & Janesville Railway Co. on June 9, 1900. Operations commenced over this 34-mile route with service to Beloit beginning on June 22, 1902 and to Janesville on December 10, 1902. One wonders in retrospect if this “independent company” was created for financing purposes or if it was a cruel “April Fools’ joke” when the line was sold to the Rockford & Interurban on April 1, 1906.

In 1909, Union Railway, Gas & Electric Co. acquired the R&I. In 1911 the streetcar operations in Rockford were “dropped down” into the Rockford City Traction Co., a wholly owned subsidiary of the R&I. With this action, the owners were taking the usual steps of “watering” the capital structure, with the goal of paying dividends up through the corporate structure to the parent company. The subsidiary paid the last such dividends to its parent company in 1918.

The railway felt the impact of the automobile as early as 1917 as the Ulysses S. Grant Highway (now U.S. 20), which paralleled the R&I from Elgin to Freeport, was one of the first in the area to be paved. The automobile proved to be much more convenient for most travelers than the interurban. An interurban trip from Chicago to Rockford took 3 hours and 45 minutes plus an additional hour to travel to Freeport and 90 minutes more to travel to Janesville. Travelers by automobile could reach their destinations in similar or slightly less time without needing to follow interurban schedules or wait at stations.

Steam railroads could make these trips in half the time or less, however, they did not stop at all the intermediate stops that interurbans did. Still, there was plenty of steam railroad competition. The Illinois Central offered service to Rockford and Freeport. The Chicago & North Western paralleled the line from Elgin to Freeport as well as to Beloit and Janesville. The Milwaukee Road offered service from Chicago to Janesville. Relations with the Milwaukee were apparently friendly as it offered connecting service from points in Wisconsin via Janesville to Rockford.

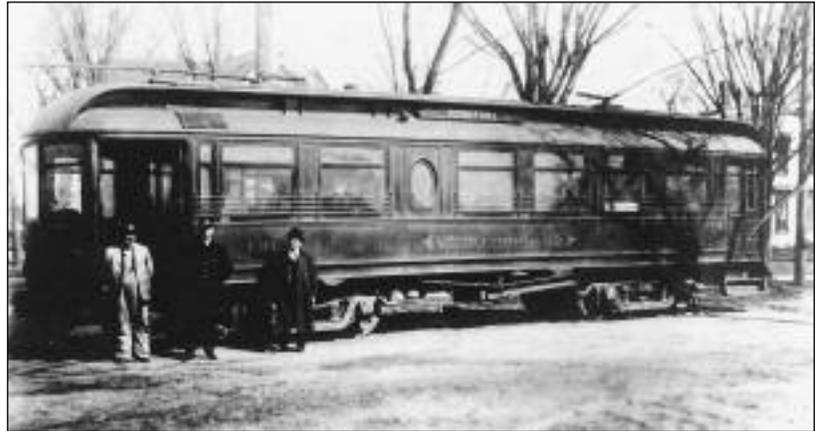
Passenger traffic in 1930 had dropped by 90 percent from the peak year of 1919. A financial reorganization occurred in 1922, and the company entered bankruptcy following a debt default on October 25, 1925. The Rockford Public Service Co. was organized on November 19, 1926, and the Rockford

city lines and the three interurban lines were sold to separate companies with separate receivers. A series of corporate reorganizations occurred to forestall the obvious.

The most feeble attempt to restructure was the sale of the Belvidere line on October 20, 1927, to a new company: the Elgin, Belvidere and Rockford Railway, which brought together the R&I line with Bion Arnold’s

Elgin & Belvidere. These two companies essentially operated as one with each other’s rolling stock running through from Elgin to Rockford and, in some cases, Freeport.

Service between Beloit and Janesville came to an end on July 29, 1929. The Elgin, Belvidere and Rockford Railway did not even last three years, and service was abandoned on March 9, 1930. Service to Freeport and Beloit



▲ Car 131 was one of six cars, 121–131 (odd numbers only), that were built in 1903 by St. Louis Car Co. for the Rockford & Freeport Electric Railway. The date and occasion of this photo is unknown. Signed for Freeport, the car is at West State and Day streets in Rockford where a wye was located.—Stephen M. Scalzo Collection



◀ One of the 121-series cars has found its way to the east end of the railway at Belvidere. This station, shared with the Elgin and Belvidere, was literally across the street from the Chicago & North Western in the heart of Belvidere’s commercial district.—Stephen M. Scalzo Collection

► Judging by the crowd, this could be one of the first cars to reach the northern terminus of the railway at Janesville, Wisconsin. That certainly is an impressive carriage, so there must be some important passengers or officials in the area.—Stephen M. Scalzo Collection



ended on September 30, 1930, the day before payment on the bonded indebtedness was due.

The rails were not salvaged until the fall and winter of 1931–32 — when scrap prices were at historic lows because of the Depression — under the pretext that service would resume.

Streetcar operations continued until July 3, 1936 while the company's four trolley buses lasted until 1948. Incredibly the surviving bus operations were sold in 1953 to Rockford Transit Co., a subsidiary of the Chicago North Shore & Milwaukee Railway Co.

In 2005, as the Chicagoland area contin-

ues to grow, more people are living in the territory the Rockford & Interurban served and are working in the northwest suburbs of Chicago. As a means of mitigating congestion on the Northwest Tollway, a group of officials from Winnebago and Boone counties — the counties surrounding Rockford and Belvidere — has proposed that Metra extend its Milwaukee District West Line to Rockford.

This extension, estimated at \$89 million, would continue past Elgin to Huntley, Marengo, Belvidere, and Rockford, following the original line of the Chicago & Galeana Union, which was later the Chicago &

North Western and is currently owned by the Union Pacific. For much of this proposed route, the Elgin and Belvidere and the Rockford & Interurban were adjacent to the Chicago & North Western's tracks.

A federally funded study concluded that the commuter rail extension is feasible but several funding and legislative hurdles stand in the way since Winnebago and Boone counties are not part of the Regional Transportation Authority, which currently oversees mass transit in six Chicagoland counties.

The Best Job I Ever Had

Reminiscences of John Hines, Motorman on the Rockford & Interurban Railway

Recorded by Gordon Geddes and Stan Griffith

“Stan, that was the best job I ever had! I had more fun doing that, hanging onto the open-air trailers taking people home from the Harlem amusement park on the north side of Rockford. ^&#%@, that was neat. The people used to flock out there, but it was about the only place that they could experience electric lights. They had a dance pavilion, a roller coaster, a bandstand, a midway, boat rides, the whole thing! I worked for the interurban company, but they would loan us to the streetcar people to handle the three-car trains that used to take people downtown from the park.

“There is something about a uniform that women love [Note: John was a really nice-looking young man] and they used to just paw me to pieces. I remember I used to run the four-wheeled dinkey from Belvidere to the knitting mill outside of town, and the whole car would be made up of young women. They had evidently planned this — one day when we got out of town they all ganged up on me, pulled me off the stool, and took my pants off. You should have heard them laugh.

“I was born in Indiana, and there was an electric railway with a siding into a rock quarry. When we were little kids we would go down and play on the electric cars down there. My family [had] railroad people, and when I was discharged from the army at Camp Grant at Rockford, I went down to the Chicago, Milwaukee & Gary round-



▲ A 700-series car is trundling down the streets of Janesville with little competition for the street space. This photo is circa 1915 as the car has been rebuilt.—Stephen M. Scalzo Collection

house and asked for a job. The line ran right through the camp so I knew about it. I made one student trip, and I decided that there must be an easier way to make a living so I went to the Rockford & Interurban and got a job there. During the war the streetcar company built a line out to Camp Grant, and the guys would mob the last car out to camp at night — they'd be riding on the roof and everywhere. There was also a bus that ran out there; it was an independent.

“You hired out as an extra board conductor, and then eventually you'd be promoted to motorman. I worked on the freight motor for a long time. We'd haul all sorts of things. There was a brewery in Rockford, and they

would ship barrels of beer. We'd drive a nail between the staves and make a little hole and the beer would shoot out and the guys would get their liquid refreshment that way. When they got enough, they'd drive a matchstick in the hole, and nobody knew anything had happened. The interurban ran alongside the C&NW near Belvidere, and the brakemen would be sitting on top of the cars, and we'd break into crates of apples and throw apples to them while we ran along side by side. (I wonder about this sort of thing. Surely the grocery would know that they were short of apples. Did the interurban company have continual shortage claims?)

“The freight was a dog. We would bring

stock for the grocers in all of the little towns, and they were supposed to be ready for you — but they never were, and we'd have all sorts of delays. Finally they got the idea of putting a Model T truck in some towns along the way, and we'd transfer the merchandise to the truck and get it to them that way. It was never a smooth delivery. The R&I was a reasonably progressive company, and they came up with an early-day version of piggyback. They tried hauling Model T trucks on flatcars, but it didn't last long. Somehow it just didn't click. You can find pictures of this service.

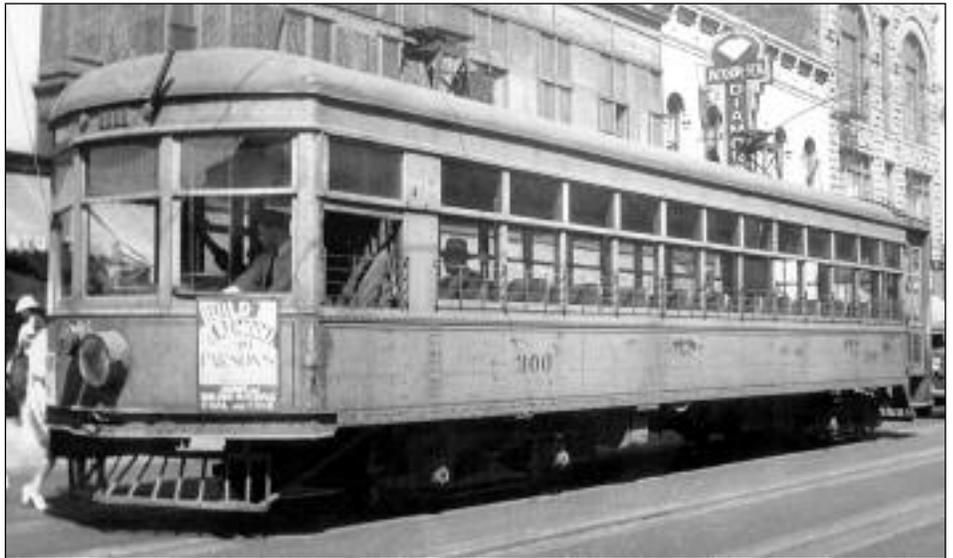
"I was on the freight when the two passenger cars hit head on at Farwells Bridge. We were the first along to the wreck site. We were supposed to go into the hole the first siding east of the wreck site. When the car didn't come and we couldn't reach them on the phone, we went on west with visual clearance. The crew [members] on the car at fault were both extra board men, and they just simply ran the siding. The weather was foggy, and the two cars hit at full speed. There were all sorts of stories about people who were unaccounted for and unidentified bones found at the scene. The burned hulks of the cars sat there off the right-of-way for a few days, and then they brought them into town at night so people wouldn't see. A C&NW train came along shortly after we did, and they loaded up the injured and took them to Rockford.

"Farwells Bridge was the site of a picnic grove and a popular destination. It was also the site of manufacturing company picnics. The R&I would charter a bunch of cars and haul the entire company picnic out to the siding there at the bridge. The cars were all single-ended, so we would have to go on to Freeport to turn and lay up till [it was] time to go back. This added up to a lot of unproductive mileage.

"Another guy and I got the job of cleaning up the cars at the barn at what is now Loves Park. Rockford was dry, but Janesville was wet and we would get all the drunks going home. We would carry a trailer so that the drunks would not have to share a car with the regular passengers, and then we would push all of the drunks off the car at Rural Street, which was the north city limits at that time. There would always be a cop car at the terminal to arrest any drunks, but they didn't catch many that way. We would have to take the cars out from the downtown terminal to the barn and clean them up. I didn't drink, so I made a lot of money by



In 1927, American Car Co. built the 300-series — cars 300–306 — for interurban service. The final interurban runs operated on September 30, 1930. Thereafter, the cars were used in Rockford city service until the city lines were converted to bus operations on July 3, 1936. After less than a decade of service, the Oklahoma Railway acquired the cars (see "Rockford's Seven Little Indians," Summer 2001, First & Fastest.) Above: In August 1934, car 300 is on West State Street, in city service, on the former interurban line to Freeport. At that time State Street was also U.S. Highway 20. Below: Just west of the Rock River was the heart of the system, including in earlier days the interurban station. There was a double-track loop on State, Main, and Wyman. Car 306 is westbound on State Street between Main and Wyman, circa 1935.—M.D. McCarter Collection, both photos from the Gordon Geddes Collection



picking up the partially filled bottles left in the car and selling them to the crews. If one of the drunks didn't have enough money to get home, I never threw anyone off, I'd let him ride and they usually remembered and paid me later.

"Those late-night runs were a joy. The company generated their own power and although there was enough, the voltage always suffered during high-demand periods. [During] the late-night runs we might be almost the only thing on the line — and the voltage was way up — the cars would just snap.

"Now that there is a lot of population it is a

little hard to visualize, but the interurban used to run through pretty uninhabited country, and the winters seemed to be more severe in those days. We would get marooned in the snow banks in the country every now and then. One time we got marooned with no houses in sight and were there for a couple of days. Fortunately we were pulling a trailer that had a bunch of hams on board, so we didn't suffer any from hunger.

"The Freeport line was cut by a flood in 1925, and they should have abandoned it right then, but they could not get ICC permission so they had to spend money to put



◀ Prior to the delivery of the 300-series cars, all city and interurban cars, except car 198, on the Rockford system were assigned odd numbers only. The 300-series cars, which were delivered in a striking red and cream paint scheme, broke that pattern. The seven cars of the series were consecutively numbered, 300–306. Mark Alter is on the steps of car 306, and John Larson is standing behind him during a layover at Kishwaukee and State streets in downtown Rockford, circa 1935.—M.D. McCarter Collection and Gordon Geddes Collection

back the bridge and keep going. By the time that the lightweights came, I had enough whiskers to hold a regular job even with the one-man cars. Those were wonderful cars, and each one had its own personality. The Blackhawk was red with black trim and a fast runner. Sinnissippi had white interior with pale blue trim and ran fast. The Pecatonica had a light green interior and ran OK. The Winnebago was green. The Mississippi's interior was blue with white trim and the trucks shimmied. This car rode so rough that when it was assigned, the crew — motorman — would take the car and hide it in the back of the yard, and take another car. The sixth car, name unknown at the moment, was not a favorite of the crews either.”



John told us more stories while we visited together.

On one trip John lost his air, with a lightweight, on the downhill trip into Cherry Valley and went sailing through town almost at full speed, with no whistle and no brakes. The tower operator at the C&NW crossing knew they were due and had set the plant for them since the car could not blow the whistle for the crossing. Also, the hardware store in downtown Cherry Valley was on fire with fire hose across the tracks. The Fire Chief was extremely unhappy that his expensive hose was cut. John commented that there was almost physical damage to the motorman as a result!

Most of you have seen pictures of Elgin and Belvidere car 208. That was rebuilt with the controller built into a sort of phone-booth-

looking thing sticking out from the center of the front. The idea was that the motorman could see better, but what they didn't do was give the car good brakes. John hit a peddler's cart on the downgrade on West State street, and the cart distributed vegetables for a couple of blocks before he could stop.

We asked if the cars often split switches. John said that as a rule you would catch it and the car could be backed up and routed both ends the same, however he said one day someone split a switch so badly that they had to take another car and tow it back.

The end-to-end connection with the Elgin and Belvidere was at the Belvidere station and the equipment would run through, but the crews would change. Due to recurring delays in Elgin, the cars tended to run late, so if they did not show, the R&I crew would continue on east with the car until they met. They didn't get any extra pay for these probably unofficial moves but at least that way the eastbound car ran through on schedule. Was this a commonplace practice where lines met end to end?

John told us that the late evening car east out of Freeport would often be so jammed

that he would be lucky to get to stand on the steps, and he'd collect fares as the people got off until the car emptied enough for him to get into the car. He said that he would accumulate so much silver that it would just ruin a uniform eventually. We asked about how the company accounted for the fares and he assured us that he always turned in all the money that he collected. Then he thought a moment and said, “Well, when we would do extras from Rockford to Freeport, the car line ended about two blocks short of the school. We would have to sit out there waiting for the game to end and I used to treat my motorman to supper during that time” — so there was at least some leakage. He told about a streetcar man who always dressed really well — had silk shirts — and everyone knew he was dipping fares. The company finally relieved him of his job right in the middle of the State Street bridge.

We enjoyed our time reminiscing with John about his days on the Rockford & Interurban. As we wrapped up our conversation, he left us with one final thought — “Stan, that was the best %\$#&* job I ever had!”



◀ Car 102 is standing in front of the interurban station on Wyman Street, just south of State Street, prior to a Belvidere trip, circa 1902.—Gordon Geddes Collection



◀ A 121-series car is at the Pecatonica station, circa 1905. Going west on the line to Freeport from Rockford, the two major towns that the railway served were Winnebago and Pecatonica.

▶ The 701-series cars were classic examples of the arch-windowed wooden-bodied cars of the prior turn-of-the-century era. Cars 701–713 (odd numbers only), built by Niles Car Co. in 1902, were 57 feet, 11 inches long. They weighed 69,000 pounds and had seats for 54 people. Three more cars — 717, 719, and 721 — were 60-foot cars built by Kuhlman in 1903. These cars were the backbone of the fleet until the arrival of the 300-series cars.—Three photos from the Gordon Geddes Collection

