2002

From Mules to TRAX: A Brief History of Salt Lake City's Mass Transit

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Published by the Sons of Utah Pioneers

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Published Quarterly
Salt Lake City, Utah
Subscription: $12.00 per year.
For reprints and back issues, please contact the SUP.

Mission Statement
The National Society of Sons of Utah Pioneers honors early and modern-day pioneers, both young and older, for their faith in God, devotion to family, loyalty to church and country, hard work, service to others, courage in adversity, personal integrity, and unyielding determination. Pioneer Magazine supports the mission of the Society.

Cover Art
Spring Sunset © by Don Rocky Used by Permission.
A Brief History of Salt Lake City's Mass Transit

By J. Michael Hunter

John Seelye, a young New York wagon-builder, created the animal-powered streetcar in 1832. His creation was an elaborate three-passenger stage-coach-on-rails, with elegant paintings on the side panels. By the 1880s, there were more than 500 animal-powered transit systems in 300 cities and towns in the U.S., with more than 100,000 horses pulling the cars along the rails. Salt Lake City's pioneering efforts into mass transit began on 17 July 1872, when teams of mules were hitched to the first streetcars in the city.

Like all mass transit systems, the animal-car system had its problems. Its biggest drawback was the pollution it caused. In New York City, for example, the horses annually deposited an estimated 2.5 million pounds of manure and 60,000 gallons of urine on the streets. Chicago street cleaners had to deal with two million pounds of animal waste a year. Salt Lake City's horses and mules left behind an estimated 60 tons of manure and 3,000 gallons of urine, and Salt Lake City had no program of regular street cleaning.

And there was the problem of what to do with the dead horses. New York had to deal with an estimated 15,000 horse carcasses a year, and Chicago 7,000. This problem was compounded in 1892, when an animal epidemic hit the East Coast, killing 3,000 horses in Philadelphia in three weeks and 18,000 more in New York. With 700 horses a day dying in New York, their bodies were being dumped in the Hudson River.

In Salt Lake City, people often left their dead animals lying in the streets to avoid the removal cost. When it was the city marshal's responsibility to see that dead animals were quickly removed, decaying carcasses were often left lying by a curb for many days.

In addition to these problems, Salt Lake City's animal-transit system had irritants unique to its mule-powered system, namely stubborn mules. For example, two new mules from Porter Rockwell's ranch were placed on the Liberty Park line in the 1870s.
In addition to pollution problems, Salt Lake City's animal-transit system had irritants unique to its mule-powered system, namely stubborn mules.

While crossing a narrow bridge over a twenty-foot sewer trench, the mules changed sides and turned to face the driver. The reins and tugs became tangled, and as the mules twisted and cavorted to get loose, they fell off the side of the bridge, hanging in the air. Miraculously the streetcar stayed on the track to the relief of panic-stricken passengers. The driver ended up cutting the mules loose and letting them fall.

Another hindrance was keeping cars on the tracks, as any bump on the rails could knock a car off the track. By shifting the passengers about, it was often possible to swing the car back into position. This had to be done carefully, however, because if passengers crowded to one end, the other end would often raise off the ground.

Since these cars only traveled four to six miles per hour, passengers got cold from sitting in the winter. In Salt Lake City, stoves were installed to heat the cars. Coal stations were placed along the line, where motormen could step from the car and get a pan of coal for the stove. Major cities began to look for alternatives to the animal-transit system. In 1873, a San Francisco man named Andrew Smith Hallidie developed a horseless streetcar system powered by underground cables. A giant stationary steam engine pulled a continuous cable through conduits beneath the street. The cable cars had a grip on the bottom to hold them to the moving cable.

A few other cities started cable car systems that proved successful. Chicago operated a cable system at half the cost of horse cars, but cable cars needed paved streets to protect their conduits. Salt Lake City never experienced with a cable-car system.

In 1887, Frank J. Sprague, president of the Sprague Electric Motor Car Company, obtained a $75,000 contract with the Union Horsecar Company of Richmond, Virginia, to develop "a rail system of 16 miles, a powerhouse, an electrically generated overhead system and 80 motors for 40 horse cars." Sprague's innovative electric streetcar system started service in Richmond on 2 February 1888.

Sprague's invention foreshadowed the end of animal-drawn streetcars with their inevitable messes. Cities all over the country converted to electric-powered lines. At the time these conversions were taking place, Salt Lake City's animal-powered streetcar system included some fourteen miles of track and twenty-one streetcars. A ten-cent fare was being charged.

On 11 October 1889, Salt Lake City's first electric streetcar went into operation. Competition soon grew between three electric streetcar companies—Salt Lake Rapid Transit, Popperton Place and Fort Douglas Rapid Transit, and East Beach Street Railway Company. By 1901, they had all merged into the Consolidated Railway and Power Company.

The new electric system took care of the pollution problem but brought problems of its own. Most of the electric cars were open, and no provisions were made for heating them in the winter. To help avoid frostbite, straw was spread deeply over the car floors. The single-track cars often centered themselves on humps in the tracks and stopped. Passengers and crew would unload and vigorously rock the car over the hump.

Another problem was street congestion. Salt Lake City's downtown streets were covered with track and overhead power lines. The streetcars also hit careless pedestrians. Yet, by all indications, the electric streetcar system was a success. By 1914, E.H. Harriman had bought controlling interest in the streetcar system and renamed it Utah Light and Railway Company. As a subsidiary of the Union Pacific Railroad until Utah Light and Traction Company assumed management. By this time the system was used extensively.

Approximately half of the adult population of Salt Lake City rode the streetcars every day. Passengers paid five cents for rides around town as far as North Salt Lake and Emigration Canyon, or thirty-five cents round trip to Saltair. In 1914, a record 38.9 million fares were collected.

Wanting to save every nickel, Salt Lake's streetcar company devised a plan to crack down on abuse of transfer privileges. The transfer stated that they were "Not Transferable," and streetcar officials made sure they stayed that way by designing a ticket with seven faces on it—five men's faces and two women's faces. The men's faces ranged from clean-shaven to handlebar mustaches to beards. The women's faces were of two sorts—the younger sporting a sailor's cap and the older a bonnet. When a patron requested a transfer, the conductor punched out the face that most closely matched the patron's appearance.

By 1917, there were 45,000 miles of U.S. streetcar lines. By the 1920s, there were 80,000 streetcars in America. By 1923, over $9 million was invested in Salt Lake City's streetcar system with 143.92 miles of track, 217 cars, and three million passengers a month.

So what happened to it all? The first blow to the trolley system in the U.S. came in 1893 with the development of the automobile. Streetcar investors had nothing to fear at first. The automobile was little more than a toy for the rich for more than a decade. But when Henry Ford put his Model T into mass production in 1908, the car became affordable to the masses.

Soon editorials in the newspapers began to call for the removal of outmoded streetcars from the streets. The Salt Lake Tribune ran a series of articles on the "question of the street trolley cars" on 16 and 17 October 1895, reporting on the deaths of two children from accidents caused by streetcars. On 22 January 1899, a girl was run over by a streetcar as she crossed the tracks. The following month, a man was killed when a streetcar ran into him. A woman was hit by a streetcar as she crossed the tracks on 10 March 1900. By 1 April 1900, the Salt Lake Tribune was calling for the removal of streetcars from the streets.

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Main Street and
looking north.
Light rail is simply a modern version of old streetcars. Light rail, however, is faster and more efficient. Passengers don't have to jump off and push the cars over humps, nor do they have to warm themselves in knee-deep straw.

Main Street eastward along 400 South to Rice-Eccles Stadium. Transportation officials hoped to have the line completed by February 2002 so it could be used to transport spectators to the opening and closing ceremonies of the Salt Lake 2002 Winter Olympics. The 2.5-mile, $18-million TRAX line from downtown Salt Lake City to the University of Utah opened on 15 December 2001. However, security concerns prevented this line from being used during the Winter Olympics. Meanwhile, transportation officials began seeking funding for a 1.5-mile extension to the University of Utah Medical Center, and officials along the Wasatch Front began planning for eventual light rail access to their cities.

1. Michael Hunter is the American, British, and Mormon History librarian at Brigham Young University.

Notes
10. McCallough, 45.
11. McCallough, 125.
12. McCallough, 126.
15. Scott, 56.

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