

Kenton County Historical Society

P O Box 641
Covington, Kentucky 41018

R E V I E W

July 1990

**GENERAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING FOR MEMBERS, FRIENDS,
GUESTS, AND THE PUBLIC**

On Tuesday evening, August 7, 7:00PM, at the Carnegie Arts Center, Mr. Earl Clark will give a slide presentation on the history of Covington street cars. Mr. Clark, who lived at Fifteenth and Madison as a youth, has an extensive collection of pictorial evidence depicting a bygone era of public transportation.

The program will be held at the Carnegie Arts Center, 1028 Scott street, Covington.

There will be a short business meeting before the program. The meeting and program is free and open to the public. People with interests or curiosity about the subject of the program are welcome.

The program is sponsored by the Kenton County Historical Society. Anyone attending will be free to join, or to renew membership, if desired.

Tuesday evening
August 7
7:00 PM
Carnegie Arts Center
1028 Scott Street
Covington

CARNEGIE ARTS CENTER

The center asks that persons with stories or experiences relative to the old Carnegie Library, or to the theater, please call or write. Arlene Gibeau and staff wants to borrow your anecdotes in order to portray life and times to patrons of the present and in the future.

COUNTY HERITAGE DISPLAYS

From October 15 to December 6, Kenton County will have a display of its own history in display cases at the State Capitol, Frankfort. Anyone who wants to contribute time, or some visible evidence of Kenton County History, please contact the Kenton County Historical Society by letter, or by phone.

PROGRAMS COMMITTEE

We would like to thank Mrs. Elizabeth Chavez for arranging the series of outstanding programs for the past number of months, and for future dates. Attendance at the genealogy and family history research seminar (given by librarian Mr. Charles King on July 10) totalled over fifty.

HISTORICAL CONFEDERATION OF KENTUCKY

Response to proposed meeting of members in the eight county northern region encourages history and cultural organizations to meet either in September or October at one of several suggested sites including Florence or Burlington in Boone county, the new Gallatin County Library in Warsaw, or at General Butler State Park. Time and location will have to be finalized in the near future. Affiliated with the Kentucky Historical Society, the Confederation invites all historical and cultural organizations in Kentucky to join, and to participate in regional meetings and in the Annual Meeting, and to receive the informative publications and other support. P. O. Box H, Frankfort, Ky 40602-2108.

NOTE ON AUTHOR

Would like to thank Mr. John Burns, retired school teacher, and long time student of our history for his wonderful series of condensed pieces on local history topics including the enclosed, "THE LAST STREETCAR."

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THE LAST STREETCAR

The year of 1890 was an eventful one for the Covington Area and indeed, for all of Kentucky. During that year the city observed its anniversary, and April 9th marked the 25th anniversary of the Union's victory at Appomattox Court House. On May 23rd the Kentucky legislature incorporated Bromley, while an act to incorporate Holmesdale won the approval of the state senate, only to then become stalled.

On May 24th the outstanding thoroughbred, Bill Letcher, won the Latonia Derby; on September 8th Kentucky's Constitutional Convention opened; and a week later, on September 15th, the Kentucky Post began publication. It sold for 1¢ a copy.

The day after the first appearance of the Kentucky Post all Covington was amazed by the sight of an electric-powered streetcar making its first test run over the city's streets. Even though it was nearly 11:00 P. M. when the run was made good-natured crowds lined the streets to heartily cheer the car throughout its route. The brightly lit car's performance was jubilantly declared to be perfect and without any serious defects.

Expansion of the city's corporate limits and the growth of its various neighborhoods received a sharp impetus with the arrival of electricity and the electrification of its streetcar lines. Indeed, the spread of such transportation systems in America's cities had been nothing short of phenomenal. It was in 1887 that the nation's first electrified line began at Richmond, Va., and within the next three years more than 5,000 miles of electric streetcar lines were operating in 51 American cities, including Covington.

Over the years horse and mule-drawn streetcar service had seen such a growth throughout the city so that at one time it was said that as many as 500 cars were crossing the Suspension Bridge every day.

A number of separate companies had been chartered to serve the various neighborhoods. The oldest of these, the Covington Street Railway Co., was commonly known as the White Line because of the color of its cars. The Covington and Cincinnati Street Railway Co., chartered in 1870, was known as the Yellow Line, while the South Covington and Cincinnati Street Railway Co., which was chartered in 1876, adopted green as its distinguishing color.

The South Covington and Cincinnati Street Railway Co. was undoubtedly the most aggressive of the numerous local companies, and it was no sooner chartered than it proceeded to acquire the Covington and Cincinnati Street Railway Company. It then proceeded to win a measure of approval from the city's Irish by promptly changing the

color of the newly-acquired yellow cars to its own favored green.

The South Covington continued its policy of acquiring the other companies so that by 1883 it had gained complete control over all such transit facilities in the city, and was working toward doing the same in neighboring Newport. In the summer of 1889 city officials authorized the line's management to convert its cars to electricity, yet it was not until September 16, 1890 that the first test run of such a streetcar was made.

The city's lawmakers had decreed that the new cars would not be driven at a speed of more than 10 miles an hour, and the wisdom of this became apparent on the second night of test runs. This time, the motorman on one of the cars stepped up the speed as he came racing over Pike Street toward Madison Avenue. He made the turn onto Madison without reducing his car's speed, and, according to one observer, received "a good shaking up" when it jumped the track. No serious harm was done, and the car was returned to its track "and continued on as if nothing had happened."

Once again the new cars were proclaimed an unqualified success. Critics of the city administration were quick to excuse the derailment by pointing out that "the tracks, mainly due to the wretched condition of the streets, are in bad condition."

The new cars won the praise of the entire community, and on their first Sunday in operation attracted throngs of the curious. On Madison Avenue the cars were hooked together in tandems of two, and like those on the Main Street line, were literally filled with humanity throughout the day.

It was later announced that every effort would be made to have the electric cars running to Cincinnati by Christmas. Because of unexpected problems though, the first such car did not cross the Ohio until nearly mid-January of 1891.

Eventually, in 1892, the South Covington and Cincinnati Street Railway Co. merged with two Newport streetcar companies to form the Cincinnati, Newport and Covington Railway Company. The merger also gave the new company the capital stock of all remaining local companies, and marked the beginning of the area's most extensive period of transit development. The entire system of tracks was rebuilt and enlarged, and on February 5, 1893 the last of the horse and mule powered cars was taken out of service. That was when two of the company's favorite mules, "Wildcat" and "Ginger," pulled the last such car into the carbarn, and 225 mules were dismissed from their jobs.

The newly-formed Cincinnati, Newport and Covington Street Railway, or C. N. & C., retained the South Covington line's color of green for its cars, and throughout the remainder of its existence was popularly known as the Green Line.

The electric car routes which crossed into Cincinnati continued using Fountain Square as their northernmost stop until 1921 when the Dixie Terminal Building was completed and began use as the Ohio

turn-around point. As an Ohio based corporation, the car company's management also decided to continue carrying the name South Covington and Cincinnati Street Railway on its local cars until 1922 when the name was finally replaced by the C. N. & C. logo.

Local residents developed a remarkable amount of pride in their new streetcars and at least one newsman expressed compassion for residents of the Ohio side of the river who, he felt, would surely be moved to jealousy at the sight of the new Kentucky cars. "People of Cincinnati," he wrote, "have been so accustomed to riding old, dilapidated and filthy cars that brand new, clean and roomy cars from the progressive City of Covington might create some jealousy."

The newsman proved to be somewhat of a prophet, for in May of 1895 the local streetcar company was asked not to send its special party car, the Blue Grass, into Cincinnati because "...the people will soon be clamoring for one."

Still, these early electric cars, like the horse and mule drawn cars, pre-dated the city's 1896 law requiring that any car which was operated during the months of November through March be equipped with an enclosed front vestibule. The job of the driver or motorman on the open vestibule cars could be unusually strenuous during winter when bone-chilling winds struck. At those times such drivers as Tom Green, Charles Perry, Henry Thomas, and Clarence Peabworth stood bundled in heavy clothing with their feet tied up in straw while the biting wind continued slapping them in the face. To drive one of these open-front cars across the Suspension Bridge on a bitterly cold day was truly an heroic task.

The new electric cars, it should be noted, sometimes proved to be an aid to expediting the flow of traffic in a most unexpected way. Heavy wagons often became mired in the deep mud of unpaved streets and on many occasions the electric cars, moving easily on their smooth rails, were called upon to help the struggling, overburdened horses disengage their loads from the muck.

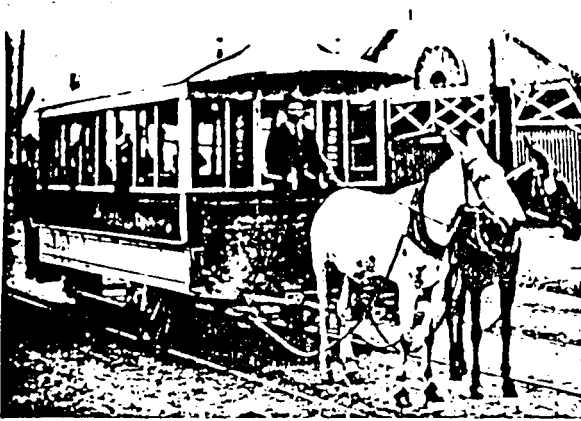
There were those individuals, however, who continued to lament the passing of the horse and mule drawn streetcars from the scene. For some it represented an exchange of a quieter and more leisurely era for one lacking in certain intangible amenities. They kept a fond remembrance of the sounds of tinkling bells which decorated the car company's horses and mules. To them, the electric car's loud "CLANG" was a step backward. Future generations, however, came to enjoy the raucous "CLANG, CLANG," and would recall it with nostalgia when it too, passed from the local scene.

The era of the electric streetcars' regular service ended in Kentucky on Sunday morning, July 2, 1950 when Green Line double-truck car number 513 made the last run on the Ft. Mitchell line. Operated by Elmer Denigan of 1503 Scott Street, it was scheduled to leave the Dixie Terminal at 12:05 S. M. and arrive at the end of its line 32 minutes later. From there, Denigan took the now-historic streetcar to the Madison Avenue car barn for the very last time.

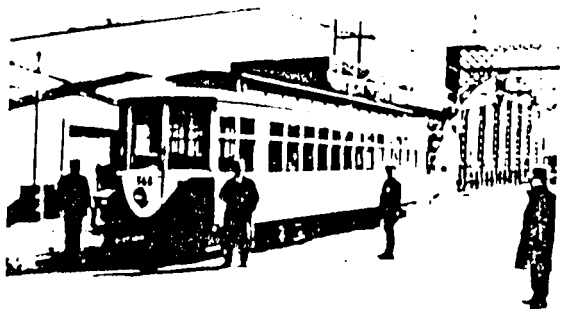
Later, a ceremonial parade of old streetcars and newly-acquired

buses took place. Then, an antique parlor car was retired to a Devou Park museum where a correct, but highly misleading sign was placed alongside it declaring it to be the last streetcar to operate in all of Kentucky.

The fleet of large, double-truck cars now met the ignominious fate of being sold for a variety of uses, including those of rabbit hutches, tool sheds, chicken coops, hamburger stands, and at least one saloon. Those remaining unsold were then heaped on the Licking River bank at Newport where they were burned and their remaining steel parts fed into the fiery furnaces of that city's steel industry. (John Burns, Director)



RETIRED, 1890



RETIRED, 1950

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Two people recently indicated difficulty with reading our R E V I E W because the typed copy is reduced from standard size, obviously to save space. Will try to make some adjustments.

BEHRINGER-CRAWFORD MUSEUM

During the county's celebration of 150 years, the Behringer-Crawford Museum's Sesquicentennial History Panels have displayed Kenton County's story at various sites. Any one of the series of four panels have been seen at schools, libraries, offices including the Kenton County Public Library and in the lobby of the offices of the city of Covington.

THE KENTON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

P. O. Box 641

Covington, Ky 41012

Membership \$5.00 per year

Non Profit. Educational.

Organized to collect, organize, display, and preserve local history



**THE KENTON COUNTY SESQUICENTENNIAL YEAR
1990**

7-90

Kenton County Historical Society
P. O. Box 641
Covington, Ky 41012

Kenton County Birthday, April 30, 1990 (150th)
Covington Birthday, February 8, 1990 (175th)
Bromley Birthday, May 23, 1990 (100th)

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