

## Life on the Westerville Car Line

in the years when I was there

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For the first half of the [Twentieth Century] the street now known only as Cleveland Avenue was better known as the Westerville car line. Then as now it pushed northward out of central Columbus, and after passing through the communities of Milo and Gorgan and the more northward Linden Heights – all now absorbed into metropolitan Columbus – it continued still northward through meadow, wheat and corn lands.

It passed Maple Heights and Blendon Corners to a junction with Minerva Park, where Cleveland Avenue itself was lost. The car line, passing this woodsy amusement area, debouched on the northeast into the Westerville Road, which carried it on to Westerville, 12 miles from downtown Columbus.

Along this length of twin steel, to and fro on hourly schedules, streaked the orange panthers that so enraptured – and in the earliest years terrified – me in the days of my boyhood.

From the age of three to my 21<sup>st</sup> year, I lived – except for a few months – in the buxom, square-built brick house that faced the western sun. It stood stolidly planted behind a gray picket fence in a yard filled with maturing shade and fruit trees. Its location was just north of what then was the eastern terminus of Carl Pike, now Walnut Park Avenue, but on the east side of Cleveland Avenue.

Around us in those early years of the [Twentieth Century] was only farmland. All our neighbors were farm families. While a few of them raised produce for the Columbus markets, the great majority were corn, wheat and hay farmers. Every farm had a dairy, but for many this was only a family table necessity plus a pin-money resource for the farmer's wife. At that time the raising of Yellow Dent corn was the chief income source for the average Central Ohio farmer.

Here and there – as across the car line in front of our tree-shaded yard were sizable orchards, predominantly apple. Always they were important farm adjuncts. But in time these faithful providers of fruit and cider, as well as delicious pies and green apples for little stomachaches, gave way under age to the rigors of violent storm. Or were uprooted for additional sowings of wheat and oats, for long rows of corn, or for still more truck gardens.

It was down the straight green aisles between the gentle swinging corn-swords that the bare legs of my boyhood took me for more times than I can remember – through the now humid, now dry heat of full summer, toward some imagined discovery in the fence row beyond. Or perhaps over the rail fence into an adjoining field of corn, or yellowing grain, or grazing cows.

And always coursing alongside or closely adjacent was the Westerville car line with its handsome, orange-colored electric cars – cars that provided such dependable service

for the several hundred families who lived along its tracks, for the hundreds more who lived on crossroads farther back and for many the more living in Westerville.

McKendrie Chapel was a landmark on that line – for it had been there before the traction line threw down its bright rails in the miry clay soil of the wagon road. This small red brick structure, with its conical steeple, stood only about a sixth of a mile north of our home cluster of farm buildings. Only two fields lay between.<sup>1</sup>

Before this simple and historic center of worship grew two rotund maples with softly clapping leaves. In growth these aspired to outdistance the steeple in its reach toward heaven. Only behind the chapel in the green half-acre burial ground of that bucolic countryside one tree a pine planted in some undetermined past, did ably exceed the steeple's height. Through its close-knit density, in summer as in winter, moved the restless Ohio winds with a note like somber music, not unpleasant to the ears of the moody youth who sometimes wandered there among the graying headstones.

It was just beyond McKendrie Chapel that the Westerville car line angled northeastward continuing its journey. Here usually, the “up” car waited for the “down” car, passing on the hour.

Here and there, at scattered locations along the car line, side roads entered. To the south of us was Carl Pike – with quite the best surfacing of any road for miles around – which ran west. A half-mile north of us the Mifflinville Road ran east to that small nearby community. There was an east-running road, a mile northward, at Maple Heights. Beyond that was Blendon Corners. In between those, a few other small unsurfaced roads and lanes ran to the homesteads where most of them ended.

The car line itself was closely flanked by an almost constantly rutted road of wagon and carriage travel. In wet seasons the ruts were deep in mud, which in winter froze over, adding to the difficulties of travel. In summer, between sudden showers or deluges of rain, it wore a semblance of level smoothness, softened greatly by dust two and three inches deep. Only the bare feet of little boys and girls appreciated this velvety carpet, which passing vehicles too readily lifted into choking clouds. But despite the average difficulties of travel, only the excessive snows of winter, sweeping along the road, actually slowed horse-drawn and foot travel alike, and sometimes impeded the trolleys.

One experience, infrequent of occasion and magical above all others, made memorable the early years of the boy's life on the Westerville car line. Over the rails from the south, moving slowly through the hot summer dusk, approached the brightly lighted, open-sided interurban pleasure car popularly known as “The Electric.”

This was magic unbelievable! No car was ever more brilliantly lighted, no crowds ever gayer! Such singing and laughter aboard! Such joyous spirits! But most of all, what brightness! If the suddenly breathless boy sighted this approaching wonder soon enough he would race for the front picket fence and there gape in wide-mouthed wonderment as the magical spectacle moved past – gazing raptly until its receding glory was eclipsed by the chapel to the north.

It should be observed that the destination of the electric always was Minerva Park, the popular amusement resort that flourished about four miles farther north and was operated by the same concern that provided the interurban trolley service.

At some time in the ebullient 1890s this Columbus concern had acquired a large parcel of land a little more than midway of its route to Westerville. Here in slightly irregular terrain it laid out Minerva Park, scooping out several lakes, added wooden bridges and gravel paths and landscaped a portion of the extensive wooded area. Here also it built pavilions and added the exciting paraphernalia of a mechanized amusement park. And since electrical power – then virtually in its infancy – was something it already had at its command in operation of the interurban cars, this further use of the energy was an easy additional one.

So it was that here by day the wooden menagerie of the carousel, or merry-go-round, revolved tunefully, while the roller coaster went hurtling along its figure eight track. There was an “Old Mill” boat ride and a laughing-mirror gallery. There were popcorn and ice cream and lemonade stands and many “take your chance” deals. There were benches everywhere and picnic tables under the trees.

Here then we came – my mother, her sister, sometimes my grandparents, always my slightly older brother – and frequently with groups of our happy friends – for our best picnics. These occasions were in those golden years from about my fourth to my tenth birthdays. And while the great basket dinners we packed with us were the core of every happy visit to the park, there were other features that made these visits memorable.

For one thing, there was boating on the small lakes. And fishing. But most important, there was a small zoo and a large deer preserve. This later was on the extreme south side and occupied perhaps several hundred acres. Behind a high wire fence, furtively wild, moved perhaps a half-dozen deer, although never more than two or three were glimpsed a one time. But they had the native wildness in them, and they charmed the small boy who stood staring in at them. A sight of wonder! Why couldn't they be free?

But Minerva Park was doomed to a short heyday. Around 1908 a new and grander enterprise was developed on the immediate north edge of Columbus, besides the Olentangy [River]. The old park's amusement rides and concessions were closed down and moved away. Only the deer enclosed there were the latest to go.

Growing up in a family of six, on a small 12-acre farm (very small for that day), the boy had certain chores to perform each day after school. He had the chickens to feed and coal and kindling to bring in. His older brother did the heavier jobs. There was a typical Midwestern farmyard, with sheds near and the barn and granary farther out. Here lay the garden and the larger potato patch, with the small fruit running in rows or hanging on arbors. A few fences divided. Beyond the potato patch to the north stretched the cornfield which spread for several hundred feet to the stake-and-rider fence that separated the home property from the farm beyond.

It was in this cornfield that the boy saw the deer!

Out of the soft dusk of the north – it was mid-evening in late September or early October – over the thicketed fence, soundless in movement, bounded the graceful form of the deer. Into the twilight cornfield it moved, proud head and antlers erect, alert, questioning. It halted. Then a little closer it came. Briefly it peered nervously toward the human life – the boy's brother and aunt were with him – that stood rapidly gazing in

response. Perhaps not more than 200 feet separated the wild creature from his surprised on lookers.

Then, whether with curiosity satisfied or with fear overcoming the spirit of daring that had brought it so far, it gathered the speed of lightning into its limbs, and turning, leapt away. Thus for a moment the wild came back . . . then vanished forever.

Varied but not heavy was the traffic that moved along the Westerville car line in the early decades of the century. Perhaps the heaviest car traffic was on Saturdays, when many people within walking distance of the car line took the electric cars to Columbus for banking or shopping purposes. Travelers usually came home with their arms laden. Night and morning car schedules also provided “throw-off” newspaper service, delivering Columbus papers to customers along the right-of-way. The line provided a daily freight service, with two schedules each way. The earliest such freight car was popularly known as the “hobo,” because it rocked along on a minimum number of wheels. It also once ran completely over “Old Rich,” an occasionally inebriate countryside character that owned and profitably operated a small farm. He survived the humiliating episode with but a few scratches. His spirited white horse, too, survived – took out for the security of the home-lot and never stopped. Demolished was Old Rich’s single seated driving rig that had long been a showpiece of the countryside.

Of rigs that passed on the car line route only a few had regular schedules. There was the plump German coal-oil man, with his three tank wagon, who came by every other Friday. He kept the home wicks burning. The ice man, leaving a moist trail in the road-dust came twice each week in warm seasons.

Pedestrian traffic along the car line was scant – perhaps six to a dozen persons a day was average. Farm wagons were numerous and carriages fewer. A few motor vehicles passed, raining clouds of dust. From time to time in clement seasons principally, a few tramps plodded the road; some of these were fed. A few peddlers came by some afoot, some in rigs. But always mornings and late afternoons, school children were the most numerous, with roads serving only where a shorter cut across fields was impossible.

Probably the larger number of travelers, by foot or in buggies, came by on Sundays, bound for McKendrie Chapel. Another occasion that brought increased traffic was Memorial Day, then more commonly referred to as Decoration Day.

On that day persons with relatives or friends buried in McKendrie church yard came from all directions to leave their tributes. Surrounded on three sides by farm fields, this memorialized area, in the usually bright warmth of early summer, blossomed briefly with uncommon brilliance.

Marching up from Linden in those early years came the veterans of the GAR fife and drum corps in advance. Somehow their mournful music charmed a small boy’s heart and tingled in his veins. For on at least two Memorial Days that the boy recalled, several of the opposing men in gray, defenders of the lost cause, marched in step with the more numerous men in blue.

Perhaps it was in the middle years of World War I that the growing youth realized that the age in which he was maturing was an age that was passing away. Each year

witnessed more and more of the surrounding fields of corn folding their tawny tepees, like the Indians there before them.

Fences that many years earlier had gone up to restrict the land now were coming down to give it freedom again.

But with a difference! For now, new roads and narrow streets were cut across the displaced earth.

Rows of neat, modern homes – only a few at first, but soon increasing in numbers – came to face others of their kind along the growing network. So the rural, long-familiar passed away. Only the earth, and the seasons and the weather remained.

*(The End)*

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<sup>i</sup> The chapel is now part of the McKendee United Methodist Church at 3330 Cleveland Ave which places the Corning farm to the south of Huy Road.