



History of Streetcars in Urbandale

By Virginia Gee

Trolley lines played an important role in the history of Urbandale. Developed by Des Moines City Railway started in 1905, streetcars operated on rails for public transportation on certain streets in and around Des Moines.

Technically, a trolley was a grooved wheel at the end of a pole for transmitting electric current from an overhead wire to the streetcar operating on tracks. The term "trolley car" is thus often used for this electric streetcar that gets its power by means of the trolley.

A promotional advertisement in 1908 encouraged people to take a trolley ride and see Des Moines. "You can reach all points of interest in the city by trolley for a 5 cent fare. Cars are available for rides to Fort Des Moines, University, Ingersoll Park, Union Park, Valley Junction, Highland Park, and Grandview Park."

The brochure continues: "The Urbandale Line is a five mile ride northwest of downtown Des Moines, past the large brick and tile factories and coal mines, west into the country. Many fine suburban homes are being built along this line which makes it an interesting ride and well worth the time spent. A beautiful view of the Des Moines River may be had along this line and many Kodak friends take advantage of it every summer."

Urbandale Line #7 came north to the area of Veterans Hospital, and then generally followed the median of Urbandale Avenue until it made a turn-around at Walkers Station at what was to be 70th and Roseland in Urbandale. (Urbandale did not become an official community until 1917) F. L. Hays built a two-story building on the NE corner with a blacksmith shop, general store, post office, and drive-in shed where the farmers could tie their horses when the family came to take the streetcar.

In the early years the streetcar came about every hour and a half, but by the 1930's a car came about every 15 minutes during the day, or every 5-7 minutes during rush hour. This was an important form of transportation for many people working or shopping in the Des Moines area. Coal miners came out to work in the mines in the Urbandale area. In the early years, hardware, feed, and grocery items were hauled, as well as passengers. Before the Urbandale High School addition was completed at 70th and Douglas in 1935, Urbandale students would ride to attend high school at North or Roosevelt.

Summary of later transit data for one year for route number 7 said it was 15.2 miles round trip, 10 cars used on the line, 106 round trips per day, total passengers carried on an average day {including transfers and fares} 4,900, 23 per trip, took about 15 minutes to arrive at the hub at 2nd and Walnut. (Of course not all these riders were coming all the way or leaving from the Urbandale turn-around.)

Originally the cars had both a conductor and a motorman. Fares were collected or passes punched. By 1930 the streetcar became a one-man operation. Eventually streetcars were replaced by gas shuttle buses and curb liner operation that did not require rails. The last trolley cars ran in Des Moines in 1951. The rails west of 49th Street and the 36 foot long trestle bridge over Merle Hay Road at Urbandale Avenue were removed. Many of the MTA and DART buses today follow what were originally streetcar routes.

The history of ridership on the streetcar is preserved at Trolley Park at the corner of 70th and Roseland in Urbandale. Bill Lawson, president of the Downtown Neighborhood Association was instrumental in leading fundraising for the park. This historical site includes a metal skeletal replica of a trolley car and riders, and historical plaques as a memorial to the importance of the trolley to Urbandale.