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February 14, 1998

Mr. Alan Mortensen
Dwight Historical Society
120 East Chippewa
PO Box 7
Dwight, IL 60420-1302

Dear Mr. Mortensen,

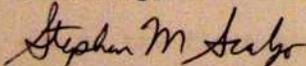
I am currently working on a project about the smaller electric streetcar/interurban systems that once operated in the state of Illinois. In your area, the Bloomington Pontiac and Joliet Electric Railway operated between 1905 and 1925.

I was in contact with Mr. J. H. Oughton, Jr., of your organization in 1976, Mrs. Louis J. Groll of Dwight in 1976, and Ms. Elizabeth Harris of the Daily Leader in Pontiac in 1981, who were able to supply historical information. I have obtained additional historical information from other sources, and with that information I have written a story on the interurban. Attached is a copy of my story for your organization's files along with copies of photographs that I have obtained to date to illustrate my story. Additionally, I have obtained maps and tickets on the interurban line.

However, I am still looking for additional historical information and photographs to round out my story. Does your organization have any additional historical information and photographs that could be useful for my project? Do you know of anyone else who could possibly help?

Any assistance that you can provide will greatly be appreciated. I hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,



Stephen M. Scalzo

Bloomington Pontiac and Joliet

by Stephen M. Scalzo

The Pontiac Street Railway Company was organized in March 1893 with \$100,000 of capital, and the Pontiac Transit Company was organized in June 1895 with \$100,000 of capital. However, those two companies never built anything.

The Bloomington Pontiac and Joliet Electric Railway was chartered by the state on December 20, 1902 with \$100,000 of capital. The company was organized by a group of Pontiac men, led by J. A. Carothers, president of the Pontiac Light and Water Company, and Fred L. Lucas, and built with local capital. It was the intention of the new company to build an interurban from Bloomington to Joliet to connect those terminals with other interurban lines, but in reality the line was never extended beyond the eighteen miles constructed between Pontiac and Dwight. The designers planned to make a substantial savings by using the novel system of high-voltage alternating current single-phase system to operate the railroad.

Construction began in 1904, with trackage being built and poles being installed for 10.4 miles from Pontiac through Cayuga to Odell. A very crude and simple catenary overhead system was installed, with separate northbound and southbound trolley wires into which 3300 volt, 25 cycles electricity was supplied. That was one of the first single-phase General Electric AC systems, and it was widely publicized at the time of the railroad's building as being a pioneer installation. The first interurban, named the "Dwight", arrived on a railroad flat car on February 3, 1905, and

the second interurban, named the "Pontiac", arrived on July 19. These interurbans were semi-convertible cars built by the American Car Company in which the platform controllers gave five running notches by tapping the "compensator" (transformer) at 400, 500, 600, 700 and 800 volts.

The car barn was constructed on the northeast edge of Pontiac near the Spartan Foundry, the J. P. McMurry Canning Company and the old coal mine that was located next to the Illinois Central, Wabash and Alton Railroad tracks. The main office and waiting room of the company was located in the Ruthbun Building at 211 West Washington Street in Pontiac. The company was the butt of many jokes, and its early acquired the nickname, taken from the initials and an obvious reference to its operation, of "The Bump, Push and Jerk".

The first interurban operated over the completed trackage between north Pontiac and Odell on March 15, 1905. However there was a controversy with the Illinois Central and Wabash steam railroads in the construction of a crossing with the interurban on the north side of Pontiac. On March 24, the city council created a right-of-way from Wabash Avenue across the Wabash tracks so that the interurban could get a crossing, and on April 23 a crowd rode the first interurban into downtown Pontiac to the southern terminus at the northwest corner of the reformatory. Afterwards eight daily interurban trains were operated between Pontiac and Odell, needing an hour to make the run. The first interurban left Pontiac at 7 AM and the last interurban returned to Pontiac at 9:30 PM.

By 1906 the remaining eight miles of trackage had been completed into Dwight. The right-of-way was graded and culverts

installed from Pontiac south beyond Chenoa, but no trackage was installed because the company ran out of money. A city streetcar was acquired for use on the local two mile city line through Pontiac from the car barn to the Reformatory; the fare for that service was five cents. Later two old elevated railway trailers were obtained to handle the interurban passenger demands. During September 1906, the Pontiac city council protested that the company was not replacing street bricks between the rails within the town. Traffic was heavy in the early years, as dusty paths served as the only roads.

The interurban was an important factor in the lives of people in the area. A dance hall at Interurban Park south of Odell attracted many excursions, and the park also was a popular spot for baseball games, picnics and the chautaugua. Competition came from the Chicago and Alton Railroad who operated thirteen daily steam passenger trains through Pontiac, and the Illinois Central and Wabash each who operated four trains. On evening of August 4, 1907 while carrying a large crowd back to Dwight from a baseball game in Pontiac, the two northbound interurbans were involved in the company's one serious wreck, a tail-ender collision below Catuga Hill which kill two and injured twelve. That accident necessitated the lease of Illinois Traction System equipment to maintain service while repairs were made.

In October of 1907 the company was sold to the Fisher Syndicate in Joliet, who had formed the Joliet and Southern Traction Company with plans of building an interurban line between Joliet and St. Louis; it was envisioned that the existing trackage

between Pontiac and Dwight would be used as a nucleus for the proposed line. For the year ended June 30, 1910, 162,144 revenue passengers were carried to produce \$22,035 in revenue. However, because of financial difficulties, the Joliet and Southern Traction went into receivership in February 1911. On March 1, 1913, the company was again sold along with the other Pontiac utilities for \$750,000 to the Public Service Company of Northern Illinois, which became a part of the Insull empire.

There were times when the interurbans would lose power and would be stuck out in the middle of nowhere. The electrical system had been designed so that 600 volt DC could be accommodated by merely adding a suitable set of resistors in place of the transformer. Because of continued unresolved problems, the original AC electrical system soon became undependable, and the electrical system was changed to 600 volt direct current during 1913. During the fall of 1915, a new route was constructed north out of Pontiac, with new trackage constructed on Main Street to connect with the old tracks on Wabash Avenue. A blizzard on January 12-13, 1918, accompanied by twenty degree below zero temperatures and twenty foot snowdrifts, closed down interurban service for several days, isolating Pontiac for over two days.

The traffic potential of the company was very limited and was confined almost exclusively to passenger service operating on two hour headways. There was one freight and six work cars. Highway construction and World War I inflation squeezed the company. In June 1920 the Illinois Public Utilities Commission granted the company permission to increase fares to three cents a mile; however

another ruling by the commission provided that tickets had to be sold for 2.5 cents a mile. In the fall of 1920, the company petitioned for a three cent a mile fare regardless of a ticket sale or cash fare. Permission for the new tariff was given on February 1, 1921. Between 1906 and 1921, earnings increased from \$15,918 to \$34,055.

The paving of Highway 4 between Dwight and Pontiac in the early 1920s brought automobile and bus competition that cut heavily into the interurban passenger traffic. By 1924 only 21,000 passengers were carried compared to 154,000 in 1919. Earnings were on the decline, and by late 1924, only five daily round trips were being operated. The opening of the Vermillion Street bridge in Pontiac to automobile traffic in August 1925 further compounded the passenger loss problem. Additionally, the competing parallel Chicago and Alton Railroad operated 4-6 passenger trains between Pontiac and Dwight on a 27-42 minute schedule. The handwriting on the wall had become a reality, as the company was operating at a loss.

On August 19, 1925, the company determined that continued operation was unfeasible and asked permission from the state to abandon service. After permission was granted on November 24, the last interurban operated on November 25. No objections were presented at the ICC hearing to junk the line, and the line was quickly dismantled, rails taken up and the equipment burned.