

BEN AVON AREA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

NEWSLETTER

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The Car Line

by Gladys Phillips

This article originally appeared in our August, 1990 newsletter. In addition to being a popular subject to revisit for older readers, newer readers can learn much about why things are the way they are. Last issue we opened the door a bit with the Bellevue High Bridge making the connection with Pittsburgh. We continue the story of light rail transportation.

With the closing of the two bridges between Avalon and Ben Avon in 1989, the question was asked, "Why is the Port Authority of Allegheny County involved? The trolleys left this area almost 50 years ago. Since then "newcomers" to the boroughs are tortured when they hear, "so and so lived" or "such and such is located" on the "car line."

In one way the seemingly archaic "car line" is quite useful. In Ben Avon it means Church Avenue. In Emsworth it is a reference to Center Avenue. When talking about Avalon or the Pittsburgh side of the High Bridge it means California Avenue, but those two are connected by Lincoln Avenue in Bellevue. So if you are frustrated by a street a few miles long having four different names take to heart its common nickname – "the car line." Forget remembering the names and sound like a native all at once.

Occasionally one will hear about the first proposed route for the street car line that it's hard to believe as the borough has grown. It seems appropriate to present a short history of the street railway system as it developed and then disappeared, but left a definite mark on the area.

Tracks were laid in the City of Allegheny (now Pittsburgh's North Side) as far as Jacks Run that is the eastern border with Bellevue. A wooden bridge was built to span this broad valley in March 1893; this was a toll bridge until 1917. The old Pleasant Valley Street Railways, an independent company, paid 10¢ for each street car, each way and foot passengers paid 2¢. When this structure was replaced in 1925 by the present [1990, *that is*] bridge, a parade was held that included all the North Boroughs officials. This was followed by a luncheon at the Ben Avon Municipal Building for these local dignitaries.

Since Bellevue's small businesses had sprung up along Lincoln Avenue, this was the natural direction to lay the track, but not so in Avalon. Small shops had opened along Orchard Avenue between Birmingham and Cleveland Avenues. This was home to the majority of residents.

Thus it was that the original plan of the Street Railways Company was to

extend the track from the Bellevue/Avalon boundary to south on Home Avenue, right on Jackman to Chestnut, south on Chestnut to Orchard and west as far as Cleveland Avenue and then return the same way. Those of you who have ridden PAT buses today will find this similar to the present route of many of the 17B buses.

When a request was made to install the line as above described, Avalon property owners protested selling their property for right-of-ways. Five years after the ordinance was enacted, track was laid but the company's plan was substituted with a route along the crest of the hill known as California Avenue. This track extended to Avalon School by 1900. A switch-over there permitted a single track to continue down the hill to a point near the Avalon/Ben Avon borough line. In a few years the second track was laid to Division Street (the short area from the minimarket to the bridge). The Number 104 Avalon car started service in 1901.

The following year a cow-catcher added on the front of the car meant the car could not be reversed and so necessitated a turn around. This is why the western end of California Avenue is known as "the Avalon Loop" - where the street cars looped around to return to the city.

Initially the cars were able to be driven from either end. When they arrived at the end of the track, the motorman went to the outside and reversed the trolley pole. He then took his place at the opposite end for the return trip; these were called double end cars. Besides the tracks that kept the wheels of the car in position, a single overhead wire provided the electric power that was transferred to the motors via the trolley pole. Black iron poles held

the cross wires that supported the power line. For children, it was fun to put one's ear to the iron pole to hear the hum that announced an approaching car though it might not be in sight. Placing pennies on the track to be flattened by a passing trolley was another childhood pastime.

The electric to power these cars was provided by Pittsburgh Street Railways who built a large power plant on Bruno 's Island in the Ohio River. In 1907, they had to increase power by 50,000 horse power due to the extension of the car lines to suburban areas. This is why the close association of the car company and Duquesne Light Company who later owned and operated the large power plant.

In 1900, Brighton Road in Ben Avon and Beaver Road in Emsworth were "main street" for the new Boroughs. Ben Avon and Emsworth endeavored to have the line extended through this area, but Ben Avon presented difficult problems of topography. The intersection of Brighton Road and Forest was the center of town. Church Avenue started at Dickson and went west as far as School Street (a road from Church south to Brighton Road now known as Rostrevor Place). Two deep valleys had to be considered as well as the curve of Brighton Road due to the steep hillside above the football field.

So it was that Ordinance #113 was enacted regarding "the car line" in November 1899. The route was to start at the Avalon line, Brighton Road to Berringer Place to the edge of the ravine, cross the ravine by a bridge over Spruce Street, Ravine Street, Ridge Avenue to the intersection of Dickson Avenue at Brighton Road (approximately where Dickson, Boulevard and Brighton Road meet), north on Dickson to Church, left on Church to its end at School Street, to

Perrysville and between Plumer and Crawford property to borough line. Work was to start in three months.

Obviously problems arose, for nothing happened until December 1903, four years later. The above route was repeated again in Ordinance #169. It then continued with an alternative route " ----the track to follow Division Street to the ravine, a bridge to be constructed over Spruce Run, through the J. C. Cook property to the second ravine where a second bridge was to be constructed, through the Avon Place plan of homes, and down the hill where it will meet the beginning of Church Avenue at Dickson - ----". The remainder of the ordinance was similar to #113.

Besides extensive grading and two bridges to be built, several properties were moved. The Mishbaugh house had to be moved for the road to the bridge; it is the white frame house next to the mini-market known as 241 Division Street. Mr. Cook, owner of the Ben Avon Lumber Company, lived in the only house in what is now known as, "between the bridges" on Virginia Avenue in Avalon. Cutting and grading was relatively easy. Mr. Cook had a road put up the hill from the lumber company that turned toward Virginia Avenue, very likely where a paper street is located beside the property at 401 Walnut Road.

About this time, Mr. Cook was developing the Lewis property that he had purchased from the estate. This is the land that was bordered by Church Avenue, Dickson, Perrysville, Juniper Way, and the ravine. He razed the beautiful mansion and had the barn/carriage house (that was in the way of extending Church Avenue to the bridge) moved back along the hillside with access beside the bridge or by steps

down from Prospect Avenue, 6808 Prospect. This block of land was recorded in 1905 at the County Building as the Avon Place Plan.

The first houses of the Crawford plan to be laid out and built were on the West side of upper Perrysville. The last two frame houses at the bottom had to be turned and moved and are now known as 7502 and 7506 Church Avenue. This was to permit Church Avenue to be cut through to the borough line.

Two further ordinances approved the delay of the construction of the line. A strike of structural iron workers of the American Bridge Company was responsible for the non-completion of the Ben Avon-Emsworth line. Only 60 days were needed to complete the job. Abutments were completed, much of the track laid, and the stone culvert [underneath Church Avenue] in Plumer's (or Plummer's) Hollow erected. The strike was very unjust, having been declared because American Bridge had sold structural iron to a company who employed non-union men to erect a structure. Also, contractors who were doing the grading of the new line were having difficulty in securing laborers. They offered special inducement of free board but still found men scarce for work.

Finally, the line was in operation in June 1906. The first year of operation the company offered a shuttle or transfer car; this required riders to change cars at the Avalon Loop. In the second year of operation, the Emsworth Car Barn was constructed by contractor Murdock in the section of Emsworth known as Riverview Park. It fronted on Front Street now known as Center Avenue, between Lowries Run Viaduct and Vista Street. This is the large piece of land and vacant building opposite Red Bird Point. At

times in the past tenants have included Shop N Save, Rite-Aid Drug Store, Dollar Store a bowling alley and a farmers market. The barn was a large red brick building that had 8 sets of tracks inside with office and store room for parts. There were 12 additional sets of track outside for the storage of street cars.

By this time double tracks were laid to Hazelwood Avenue in Emsworth. This was called "the end of the line". Soon after, though, a crossover was put in that extended the track to Beaver Avenue (known as Ohio River Boulevard) and down the hill to the borough line. Later a company called the Ambridge, Dixmont and Emsworth Street Railway laid track nearer to the Dixmont steps and station. A franchise car was in operation for two hours in the AM and two hours in the PM for visitors and employees. This lasted until about 1915.

The regular Emsworth car made a loop at the end of Center Avenue behind the automobile agency. After the street car tracks were lifted, the car agency bought that lot.

The construction of the two Ben Avon bridges was done by the American Bridge Company of Ambridge; the original Emsworth wood bridge was built by W. B. Scaife Co. All the abutments and grading were done by the Twin City Construction Company of Pittsburgh

Street cars did very well for fifty years. Special cars could be rented for parties and special events; in 1911 a theater car took the locals to town and brought them back at the end of the performance. Several amusement parks were developed by the Pittsburgh Railways so that usage of the line would increase. Kennywood Park is the best known of these. Although Mr. T. M. Harton developed West View Park in

1906 (same year as the Ben Avon line began operation), it is hard to believe the company was not financially involved. The company spent \$200,000 erecting a terminal facility, power station, and tunnel under the tracks at the park entrance. This was the loop for the Bellevue car. By 1914, route numbers were established as 6 West View, 13 Emsworth, 14 Avalon, and 15 Bellevue.

Each car had a motorman who drove the car and a conductor who collected fares and controlled the doors. During rush hours, a second car was pulled behind on certain routes. Only a conductor manned this car, called a trailer car. Extra tracks were laid in the Avalon Loop to store the trailer cars, so it was known as the trailer yard.

During the depression, conductors were removed as an economy move. Also, for the same reason, the Emsworth Car Barn was closed. Although a few old cars were left on the property, it remained vacant until after the Second World War when it was sold and rebuilt as a bowling alley.

Through the installation and development of the street car line, a great boom of house building and selling took place in all the boroughs. Property sold very quickly. More houses were under construction in Ben Avon that first year than had been built in the previous ten years.

Design of the cars did not change too drastically until 1936 when streamlined cars were introduced that were quiet and smooth-riding. Buses had been started in the area in 1934. Needless to say buses were less expensive than street cars to operate and more versatile in movement. These and other reasons brought about the elimination of street

cars to the North Boroughs in the middle sixties.

According to the ordinances establishing the street railway system, the company was responsible for the track section of the street plus 18 inches outside the track. They were also responsible for the bridges and their maintenance. When PAT arranged to remove the tracks, Ben Avon agreed to remove just the tracks rather than the more expensive method of complete removal of wood ties, etc. Pittsburgh Street Railways gave Ben Avon Borough approximately \$50,000 for maintenance of this part of the road when necessary. The council established a Capital Reserve Fund for Church Avenue. The interest from this fund has maintained that part of Church Avenue.

Once again PAT is involved in our road problems since they are responsible for the two bridges being closed in 1989 in Ben Avon and Avalon. Although an earthen fill to replace the one between Ridge and Walnut Road was considered, in the end both valleys were crossed by new bridges.

In about sixty years this mode of transportation flourished but now is just a memory. If you are interested in seeing some of these old trolleys, do plan an afternoon to see the Arden Trolley Museum <http://pa-trolley.org> Mr. Louis Redman of Ben Avon was a founding member and past President.

For a complete history of Pittsburgh Railways Company see <http://www.pittsburghstreetcars.com> where volume one of a planned three volume set is available.

Publication of the above triggered many members to write about their memories about the street cars and the

car line. Below are anecdotes originally published in November, 1990. Send us your own stories to add the memory of the street cars.

The article on the old street car line brought back memories to so many. Copies were requested for those who live all over the country who were native to this area; this was the one mode of transportation everyone used at one time or another, until it ceased operation in 1965.

Two who reflected on their experiences were Jim and Margie Miller. Those of us who attended college in the city knew two ways to get to Pitt or Tech. Fortunately, most of us were able to get rides to school in the morning (paying the student who drove 10¢ a ride) but many had to rely on street cars for the return trip. For 10 cents, one could get a special transfer and take a car into town and then the Emsworth car to home. In our lives today, the difference between 8-1/3 and 10¢ would not mean anything, but it did for most people in the 30's and early 40's, so there was a car that one could get at Craig and Forbes Street called the 77/54 or the "galloping fraction". It started in the Knoxville, Carrick area went to South Side, across the Birmingham Bridge and up Forbes to Craig. Car checks, or tokens, cost 8-1/3¢ (3 tokens for a quarter) and one of these took you on a circuitous route through Bloomfield, the Strip District, across the 16th St. bridge and west on East Ohio Street to Federal Street at the Allegheny Carnegie Library. Here, one left the car and waited for a 13 Emsworth coming from town. The transfer received when depositing the car check was given at the end of the second car ride. That was a lot of riding and a lot of time – all for 8-1/3 cents.

Several mentioned the sway of the cars that caused nausea or car sickness. One person wrote that they could get one-half the way to Pittsburgh but had to get off until they felt better and were up to attacking the remainder of the trip.

Jim Miller tells of boys who placed a rope across the main street tied to tree branches high enough for a street car to pass under but low enough to catch the trolley pole and disconnect the electricity. This required the motorman to get out to put it back on the wire.

Another trick was to soap the rails near trolley stops. The motorman would not be able to stop the car until he pushed a button to release sand to coat the tracks that gave the rough surface to halt the car. This was done also when the ice or snow coated the tracks.

So many mentioned that sleeping "to the end of the line" was a common occurrence. They stayed on the car and got off at their stop on the car's trip back to town.

During an early period there were summer cars with open sides. Most of us remember the yellow cars with the cane seats. During this period, before the streamlined cars were introduced, ventilation and heating were quite unpredictable.

The following abstract of an article in *Suburban Life*, May 5, 1966, tells of the last ride on the North Boroughs Line. The last car leaving the Avalon Loop occurred Sunday at 2:00 AM, May 1st. Some parked in town and took the ride to Avalon to make the last return trip. Hundreds congregated at the Avalon Loop and by midnight, Retzer-Hyde (at the Avalon Loop) decided to stay open to provide coffee and donuts.

Among those who kept the vigil were Mr. and Mrs. Leininger. Mrs. Leininger, the former Mary Crawford of Ben Avon, recalled that her father had been an obstacle to keeping the street cars out of Emsworth for several years. Mr. Crawford owned the last house that stood on what is now Church Avenue. This blocked the Railway Company's proposed track to Emsworth. The house was later purchased by the company and moved to the hillside so the tracks could be laid.

Educational Support

From its beginning BAAHA has worked with the local schools. Last year we joined Avonworth Middle School and Heinz History Center in a primary research project in the eighth grade. Our archives are used by students to learn more about a local historical topic they choose. They also learn by doing an oral interview with a person who has firsthand knowledge on their chosen topic.

Avonworth teachers Jason Smith and Melissa DeSimone led this effort, assisted by educator Bob Stakeley of Heinz History Center. Bob teaches the students how to access material in collections such as BAAHA has. Through Bob, Heinz volunteers are enlisted to help students with the process of locating and organizing materials.

Some student research resulted in a donation of materials they collected to BAAHA. From a project to learn about the school campus on Dickson Avenue a brick from the demolished 1893 building was donated. Another project focused on recording the story of the Avonworth Eagle football team. For this one, the students collected and donated uniform jerseys and a helmet, along with interviews with key leaders of this team

which serves as a feeder program to high school football by teaching 5 to 13 year old boys the fundamentals of football and good sportsmanship. The Eagles have been active since 1968. As a result of the research by students Darius Simmons and Michael Sefick we now have a start on recording their role in our community.

Below are sample comments of other students as they finished the project.

When I interviewed the two women [*Avon Club past presidents, ed.*] I realized, I also wanted their own stories of the park. Learning official history and technical things with the park is great and all, but I also wanted to know community members history with the park. One woman I interviewed mentioned how her children would always come home muddy after a park visit. Stories like that could make the park seem more of a larger aspect to the community than just a place on a map. [Maura Corder – Avon Park]

Besides teaching us great and fascinating facts about our school's history, the BAAHA Project also taught us more about what it means to be a historian and how important historians are to our community. Without people like those at the Ben Avon Historical Association, we would probably not know much, if anything, about the beginning and early history of Ben Avon. [Lily Jensen and Jennie Morris – Old Ben Avon School]

With the help of my interviewee, Betty Hahn, I was able to discover what my house was like before I moved in. She wrote a book on the house, Grandma's House, which was written for her grandchildren. It explains what the house was like in a first grader's perspective. With its creaking steps and

large tree in the front yard my house stands out from the rest. [Leila Wynnyckyj – her house]

Vinegar Hollow, like any woods, serves an important role to our community. Although it may not have a large impact in a large area, Vinegar Hollow provides us with a place to get away. Everybody needs a place to go when they feel stressed, and Vinegar Hollow offers a shady, natural relief. Kids need a place to be kids and adults need a place to relax. While Vinegar Hollow's impact is easily dismissed, it still plays a very important role in the community. [Ben Houser – Vinegar Hollow]

About five months ago, a group of people and I were told about an extensive research project. It had to be related to Ben Avon, and the final product that we came up with was to benefit the community. ... I have had such an amazing time interviewing people and researching Dixmont Hospital. I am so glad my teachers gave me this opportunity. [Twesha Modi – Dixmont]

Public Program
 Community Presbyterian Church of Ben Avon
 Saturday, September 6, 2:00 PM
Melanie Lynn Gutowski
 presents a talk and photos on
Pittsburgh Mansions

Renewing Members – THANK YOU!

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We cover all five Avonworth municipalities: Ohio and Kilbuck Townships and the Boroughs of Ben Avon, Emsworth and Ben Avon Heights.

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We ask all who share a passion for history, a reverence for the past, and an interest in preserving our common heritage for future generations to join as a contributor to BAAHA.