

Ken Alexander  
Remembers . . .

## Trolley Song



My grandfather rode to and from work on the streetcar. In summer, when I had spent the day at my grandparent's house, I would go outside at six o'clock to see Grandpa, a copy of the *Chicago Herald-Examiner* under his arm, walking home from Chicago Avenue, where he had gotten off the streetcar.

Dad rode the streetcar, too. At five-thirty I would see him, carrying the *Chicago Daily News*, walking home from Pulaski Road.

When my family went to visit relatives on a Sunday, we would usually go by streetcar. If the weather was severe, my dad might call a taxi, but the Great Depression was upon us and people literally had to count their nickels and dimes. The streetcar was the cheaper way to go.

We had a family of four: my parents, my little sister, and me. The fare was seven cents for adults and three cents for children. Thus, two adults and two children could ride for a total of 20 cents — 40 cents round trip. Transfers were free.

When I started going to high school I took the streetcar. After graduation, when I went to work, I continued to ride the rails.

There were three mass-transit companies in those pre-CTA days: the Chicago Surface Lines, which operated the streetcars and some buses; the Chicago

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Motor Coach Company, which operated buses on boulevard routes; and the Chicago Rapid Transit Lines, which ran the elevated trains.

Of all those conveyances, I liked the streetcars best. They were red and they were noisy and they looked the same coming or going.

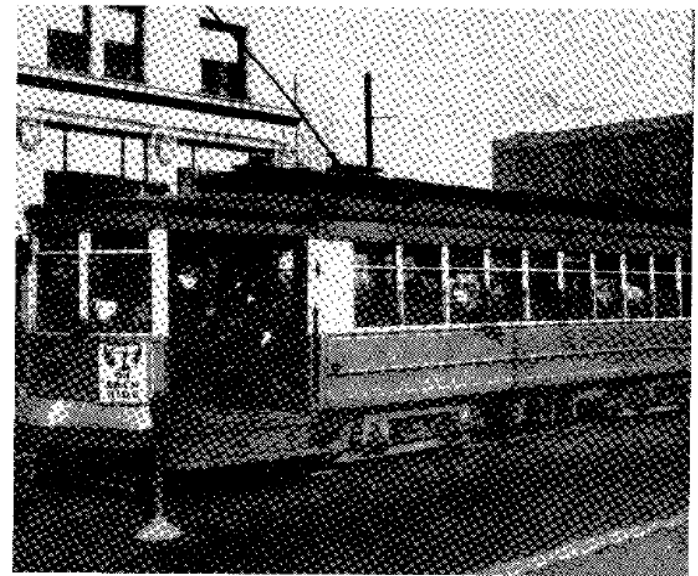
Dangerous as the practice was, you could flip onto a streetcar before it came to a stop, and you could alight from the car while it was still in motion and hit the pavement running.

You'd board the streetcar at the rear, where the door was always open. There, on the rear platform, was the conductor. He stood behind a black iron railing shaped like an inverted "U," its legs fitted into two holes in the floor. There was a coin-changer strapped to his waist. The conductor collected fares, made change (nothing larger than a five-dollar bill, please), and issued transfers.

When they boarded a streetcar, uniformed policemen and employees of the Chicago Surface Lines would merely nod to the conductor and say "Yes sir"; they rode free.

Each time the conductor collected a fare, he would step on a button mounted in the floor to register the fare on an overhead meter manufactured by the Ohmer company.

Because the wide door on the right side of the rear platform was always open, the



conductor worked virtually outside. That was an advantage in the summer when a breeze was welcome, but in the winter it was a distinct drawback.

Inside the passenger compartment was a heating system of sorts, which provided some comfort for the passengers. On a hot summer day, though, the only relief could be had by opening a window.

But I spent no time in the passenger compartment; I rode on the front platform, where the action was.

The motorman sat on a hard stool or stood, as suited his mood. Behind him was a black iron rail like the conductor's. The motorman ran the car with a controller handle, a heavy iron crank, which regulated the "juice" going to the motor. (The power came from a trolley wire overhead.)

As the car started up, the motor gave out a low-pitched groan, and as the motorman

clicked the controller handle further over, feeding the motor more power, the groan would slowly rise in pitch. Sometimes as I lay in bed on a winter night, I would hear that familiar sound from a block away. Under a warm blanket in a cozy apartment, I would think of the motorman and the conductor and their two or three drowsy passengers as the streetcar made its way at midnight through the city's cold streets.

If the car had a heavy load and the motorman started up too suddenly, there would be a loud report, and white sparks would shower on him: the circuit-breaker had popped open. The motorman would shut off the power, reach up and whack the circuit-breaker back on, and re-start the motor—more gradually this time.

There was a handle to operate the brake and another to operate the door. The door was not electric or pneumatic; it was opened and shut strictly by muscle power.

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Unlike the door on the rear platform, this was normally closed; it had to be opened and re-closed each time a passenger or passengers exited.

Even though the door was closed, the front platform could get mighty cold. I recall seeing a motorman on a winter day standing at the controls and shifting his weight from one foot to the other to keep his feet from going numb.

I used to stand behind the motorman, holding onto the rail and observing all he did. I found it very interesting and I would have liked to ask some questions, but I refrained: I was a shy lad; besides, there was a sign which read, **MOTORMAN MUST NOT TALK TO PASSENGERS.**

To warn pedestrians and motorists to clear the track, the streetcar was equipped with a gong, which the motorman sounded by stomping with his heel on the end of a shaft protruding from a hole in the floor.

Because the motorman couldn't see what was taking place on the rear platform, the conductor had to let him know when a passenger back there wanted to get off at the next stop. He also had to let the motorman know when it was safe to start moving after the passengers at a given stop had finished exiting and boarding.

To signal the motorman, the conductor would yank on a cord which hung from above. The cord ran along the ceiling the length of the car, from the rear platform to the front platform, and terminated at a bell above the motorman's head.

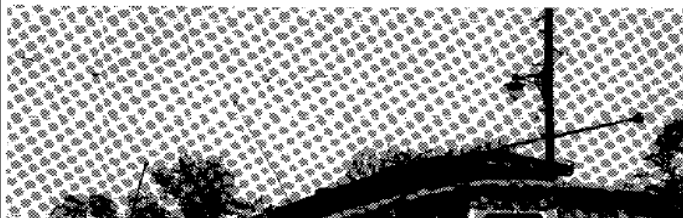
(Although the device was designed to ring, it didn't go "ding"; it went "click." Because hearing the bell clang hundreds of times a day would have ruffled the nerves of the calmest of men, the motormen would wedge a wad of transfers against the bell to keep it from ringing. Thus, when the conductor yanked the cord and the clapper struck the bell, only a dull clicking sound would result. In fact, I don't believe

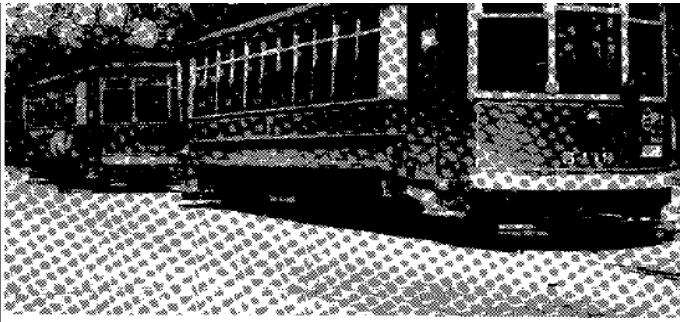


that in all my years of riding streetcars I ever heard one of those bells ring.)

One yank of the cord meant that a passenger wanted to get off at the next stop. Two yanks meant it was safe to start up again. Three yanks meant stop now. During one of my rides, I heard a fire engine approaching from behind. The bell

The front and the rear of the old red streetcars were identical, the cars having been designed so that they could be operated from either end. Thus, when the car reached the end of the line, it didn't turn around for the run in the opposite direction; the conductor and the motorman would simply change places after





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engine approaching from behind. The car above the motorman clicked three times, and the motorman stopped the car right in the middle of the block to let the fire engine pass. Then, two clicks from the bell and we were on our way again. It was a dramatic moment.

Occasionally the trolley would slip off the overhead trolley wire, and the car, lacking power, would roll to a stop. Since the conductor was at the rear of the car, where the trolley was, it was his job to get off and reposition the trolley on the wire. That done, he would board the car, yank on the signal cord twice, and the run would be resumed.

would simply change places after rearranging some of the equipment.

They would change the configuration of the doors and reposition the railings on the platforms. The conductor would move the fare meter to the opposite end of the car. The motorman would do the same with his controlling handle. They would change the signs showing the car's destination and flip the backs of the seats so that the seats would face forward.

The trolley pole at what had been the rear of the car would be pulled down and fixed into position flat on the car's roof. The trolley pole at the other end would be raised into position with its wheel in

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contact with the overhead wire.

After a few more adjustments had been made, the car would be switched onto another track for the run back.

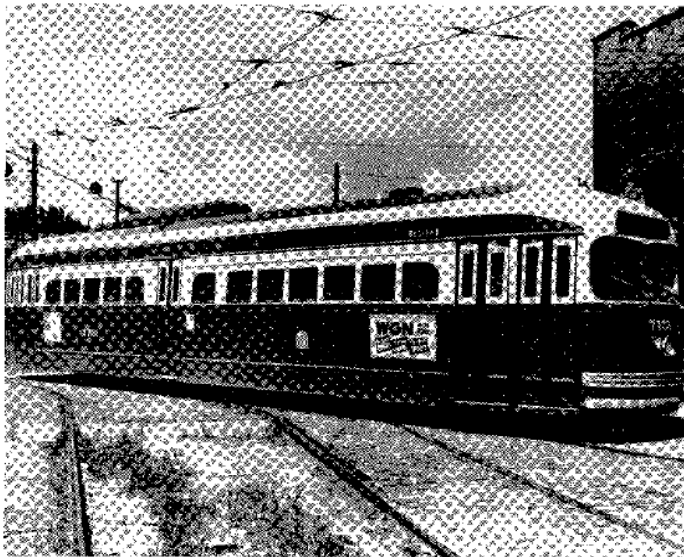
In 1936 the Chicago Surface Lines introduced a new, lightweight streetcar, whose body was sleek and streamlined. In this car the conductor and the motorman worked inside the passenger compartment; there were no platforms. The Motorman sat in a comfortable seat, rather than on an iron stool.

The new streetcars were put into service on several lines, including Madison Street, where they ran between Austin Boulevard and downtown. Newer models appeared from time to time. The one I remember most vividly was a post-war model, colored blue-green and cream, which we called the Green Hornet.

The Green Hornet was probably superior in every way to the old red streetcar: it was faster, smoother, quieter, safer, more comfortable, and more modern in design. But it wasn't fun to ride, and for that reason I preferred the old red streetcars.

The typical streetcar motorman of that era was born around the turn of the century. As a boy he must have daydreamed, as all boys did, about what he would be when he grew up: baseball player, aviator, lion tamer, war hero. He probably never dreamed that he would earn his living by operating a streetcar.

I, too, had boyhood aspirations. Some were pretty grandiose. But I recall a time in my early teens when I felt I would be happy and proud if, when I grew up, I could go to work as a motorman for the Chicago Surface Lines. ■



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## Early TV Studios

BY TODD NEBEL

The year 1948 is often noted as the benchmark year for television. This was the year when commercial television finally took off while becoming a real force in the worlds of entertainment and communications. But, before Uncle Miltie, Ed Sullivan, and the television freeze years between 1948 and 1952 (when demand shot up but the FCC kept station licenses down), there were many lingering doubts whether television would ever catch on — especially by those who knew it best; the network managers and the television technical personnel.

Years earlier, an experimental learning period had begun for those working behind the scenes in the new industry. It was quickly apparent, following the green light given by the FCC for commercial development of television in the spring of 1941, that the production of a network television program would be more involved and complicated than putting on a network radio program.

But just as the industry was poised to take off, with ten commercial stations on the air, Pearl Harbor occurred and the FCC halted further building of stations and licenses so that materials and personnel could go towards the war effort. Soon many of television's brilliant engineers were using their research talents in the armed services while the production of TV equipment for commercial use was ordered to stop.

But broadcasting did not stop. Like being stranded on an island, a few thousand Americans were fortunate enough to own a television set. And about

three quarters of these sets survived the war though many were in poor condition. Burke Crotty, one of NBC's first producers, said, "In the early days of television the majority of television sets were in two places in New York City — RCA executives' homes or bars. I bought a brand new car in 1940 for a thousand dollars and they wanted \$660 for this TV set when there was virtually nothing on the air. At that price, no one wanted them."

But the few viewers who had television during the war did enjoy a gradual increase in entertainment programming during this experimental stage. The studio people, who would become the first generation of television technicians and directors, became artists in their own right as ingenuity compensated for small budgets and limited manpower. Many worked overtime on their own time because there was no money and radio was still the networks', as well as America's, darling.

Most of the early television stations like WCBW (CBS) and WNBT (NBC) in New York, had been converted from experimental to commercial status in 1941. By FCC regulation, both stations were on their air about 15 hours a week. Most television programs in those early years were produced within the studio as discussions, game shows, musical programs, wrestling and boxing matches. Some sports events were covered live or on a remote basis. Films, particularly free ones, were also widely used.

Many early television stations varied greatly in layout, construction and equipment. In the largest cities, giant radio

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