

Electrifying the City

By William Toll

Just as the railroad network expanded the scale of Portland's economy, new technologies for moving people around the city, spanning rivers, and erecting multistory buildings expanded the scale of urban living. Electrified street railways extended the distance people could travel in thirty minutes from two to ten miles or more. New structural steel enabled engineers to build longer, higher, and lighter spans across rivers. Steel girders and elevators made it possible to construct buildings at least ten times the height of masonry structures. People could now live farther from where they worked and shopped, and the density of land use intensified.

Within seven years, from 1887 to 1894, private investment in new technology led to permanent changes in the boundaries, the government, and very idea of Portland. In 1887, the first drawbridge was built across the Willamette River at Morrison Street, and the next year the Union Pacific Railroad spanned the river north of Burnside with the first steel bridge on the Pacific Coast. Street railway franchises began to convert their horsecar lines to electricity in 1889, as a new company, later renamed Portland General Electric (PGE), ran transmission wires to Portland from Willamette Falls, fourteen miles away. It was the first time an American generating facility transmitted electrical power over such a long distance.

By 1896, the Union Pacific, whose freight and car repair yards were in East Portland, opened Union Station north of Burnside. The Southern Pacific and other railroads connected to it. By the early twentieth century, James J. Hill—whose Spokane, Portland, and Seattle Railroad had built a line down the north bank of the Columbia and planned a bridge across it—built a deep cut through northeast Portland to gain access to Union Station. As more bridges were completed, civic leaders sought to unify control of the roadbeds by having the legislature create the Portland Bridge Commission.

To acknowledge the frequent and integral connections between activities on both sides of the Willamette, in 1891 voters in Albina, East Portland, and Portland overwhelmingly voted to consolidate into one city, and Portland's land area increased to twenty-six square miles. The *Oregonian* was especially impressed, both by the large voter turnout and by the importance that downtown businessmen placed in the measure. In the same year, the state expedited the modernization of Portland's economy and added another layer to its government by creating the Port of Portland Commission to improve ship passage along the Willamette and Columbia Rivers. So crucial to the city's economy was waterfront traffic that when the legislature appointed members of the commission, they chose representatives of the city's key industries: railroads, grain, and timber. The Port of Portland, like the school district, could raise revenue by asking voters to pass bond issues.

Electric trolley lines, at first franchised to different local entrepreneurs, appeared along First, Fifth, Morrison, and Washington Streets. They then radiated from the downtown to various western, eastern, and southern suburbs. Entrepreneurs applied for franchises to run electric cars to St. Johns, Mt. Tabor, and Gresham. Several lines went to parks, which families visited on weekends for picnics, but electric streetcar lines were extended into the countryside primarily to raise the value of suburban real estate by making it accessible to downtown stores and offices. The carlines in most cities rarely made a profit, but the owners made fortunes by selling their real estate adjacent to the lines. A carline built by local bankers to extend to Riverview Cemetery was eventually acquired by James J. Hill and extended by 1912 through Salem to Eugene.

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