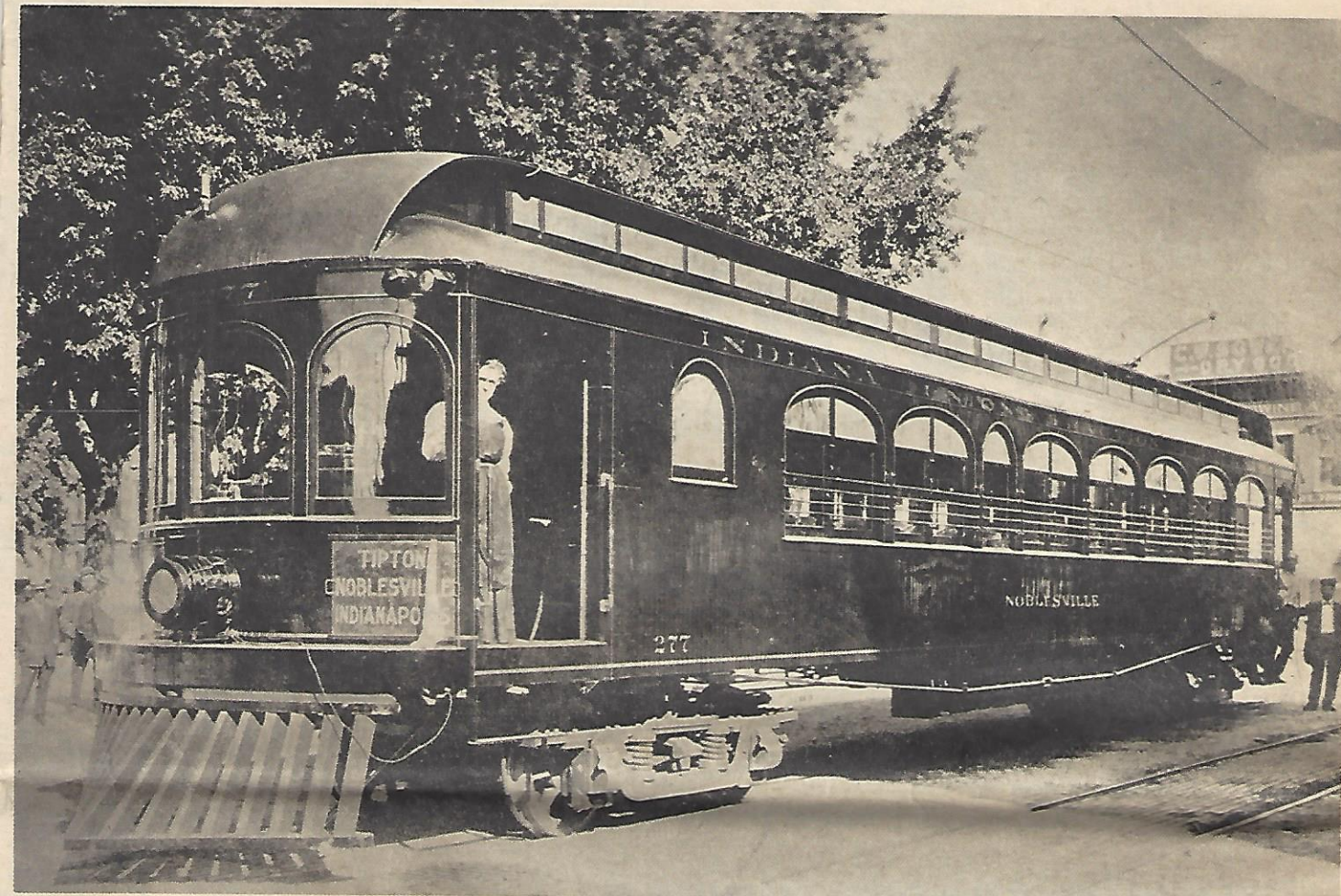


The INTERURBANS:



When The Trains Stopped

By VICKY FISHER

WHAT DO you do with a railroad when the trains don't run anymore?

That's what a lot of people were asking themselves back in the late 20s and early 30s when interurban companies everywhere began to close their doors.

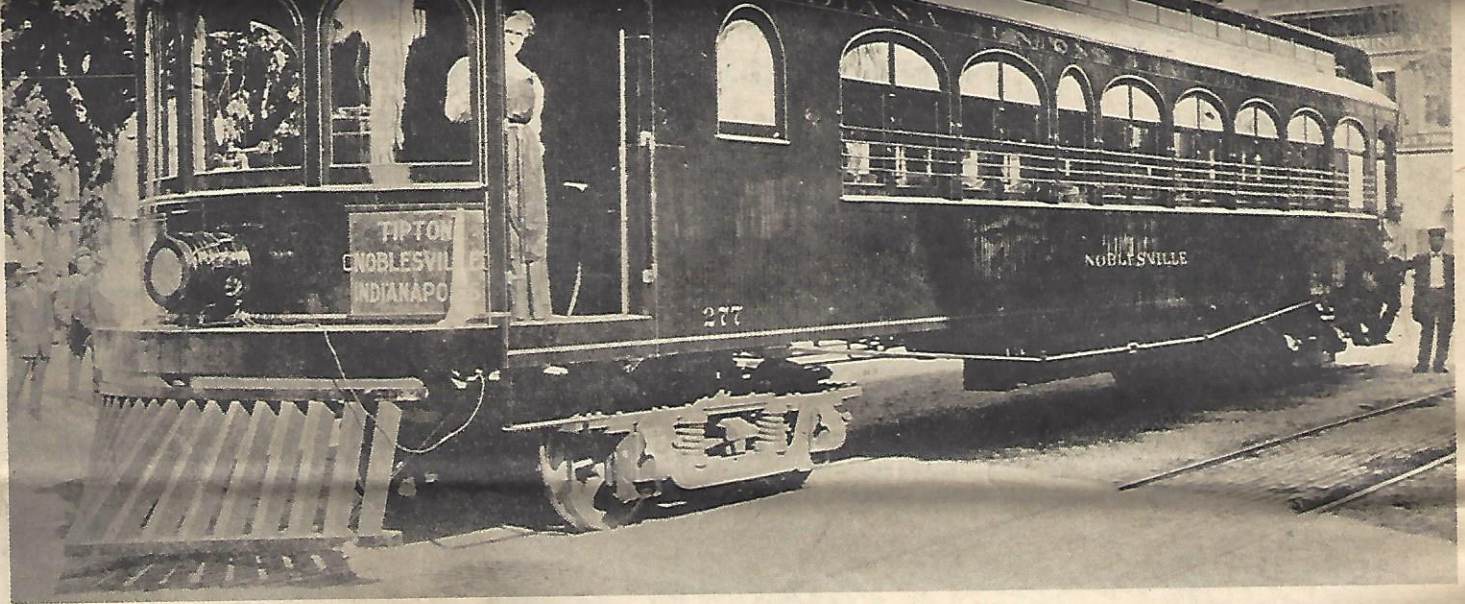
Most of the cars and rails were sold for salvage, often bringing in as much money, if not more, than they had cost new.

Tracks and trains were sold and shipped to other countries where they were restored to life in completely new surroundings. A few enterprising individuals bought passenger cars and turned them into everything from remote offices at quarry operations to roadside diners and vacation cottages where they have long since fallen into ruin.

Street were being torn up he talked the salvage company into giving him a truck load of the rails which he promptly carted to one of the parks near his shop. No doubt people thought this a bit eccentric and wondered what he would ever do with so many rails. Well they didn't have to wonder long, for soon T-rails began springing up in some of the darndest places.

One of these places was the bandshell built in Shelbyville's Morrison Park. Here the rails became beams supporting the structure. Using a similar idea he went on to build shelter houses in both of the city's parks and with the help of a friend he used more rails in the construction of a foot bridge across Little Blue River.

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In Shelbyville, a part-time park employe named Herbert C. Davis had a better idea for disposing of some of the traction companies old T-rails.

When the interurban tracks down Shelbyville's Harrison

Street were being torn up he talked the salvage company into giving him a truck load of the rails which he promptly carted to one of the parks near his shop. No doubt people thought this a bit eccentric and wondered what he would ever do with so many rails. Well they didn't have to wonder long, for soon T-rails began springing up in some of the darndest places.

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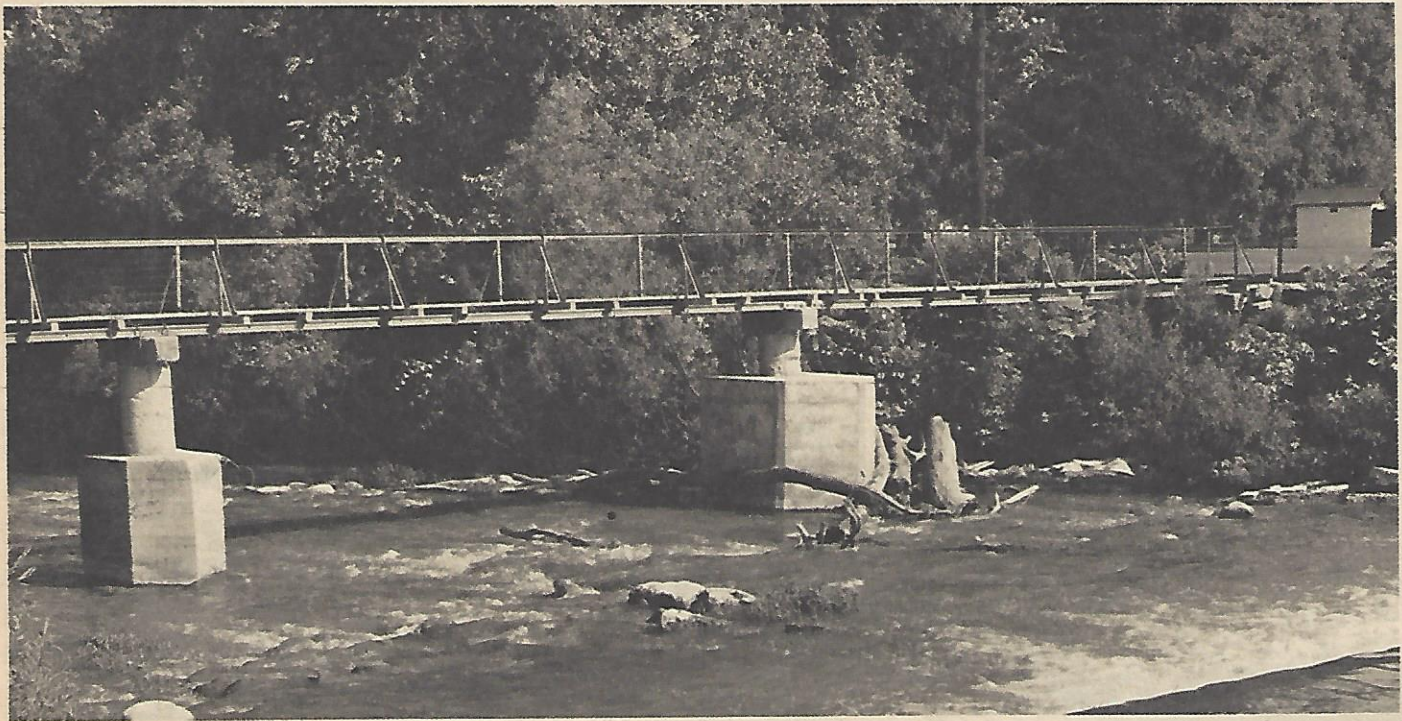
Most ingenious of all his creations were the swing sets and picnic tables he devised with the rails as framework. Having stood in place for over three decades they have to be one of the most sturdy swing sets in history.

Of course those who now get

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These interurban T-rails ended up in this foot bridge across the Little Blue River.

the most enjoyment from Davis's playground creations probably never have heard of the interurbans, nor are they aware that at one time Indiana was considered the interurban capital. Indiana had more miles of electric tracks than any other state, and it was in Indiana that some of the earliest experiments with the electric railroad took place.

INDIANA'S first such venture came in 1882 when the South Bend Street Railway was built. Designed by Charles Van Depoele, a pioneer of the electric railroad, the current in this first experiment passed by so quickly that the car could only move a few feet. After some modifications in his designs Van Depoele exhibited a working model of his electric railroad at the Chicago Worlds Fair in 1883. Also on hand with his own version of an electric railroad was Thomas Edison, another pioneer in the uses of electric energy.

In 1885 the owners of the South Bend line were ready to try it again. On Nov. 15 they opened a 1½-mile section of track through South Bend for the paying public. Unfortunately their ex-

perimentation was cut short when the Street Railway opened for business. It was the second of its kind west of the Alleghenies and paved the way for its larger counterpart, the interurbans, as those electric railroads between towns came to be called.

Sharing the honors as the first successful interurban operations in Indiana was a 1.5-mile track between New Albany and Silver Hills which opened to the public May 17, 1892. Followed by the opening of the Brazil Rapid Transit Company's 4.5 mile road from Cottage Hill to Harmony in 1893 and Charles L. Henry's operation between Anderson and Alexandria in 1898.

Soon after other lines began making their appearance around the state and dozens more were in the planning. The first of these to reach into the Capitol city was the Indianapolis, Greenwood and Franklin Company. It made its maiden run Jan. 1, 1900. Such a wave of track building hit the state that by the end of that year Indiana boasted 678 miles of electric railroads in operation.

The Indianapolis Traction Terminal opened September 12, 1904, as a central station for all traction companies coming into

once took place as passengers tried frantically to make connections to other cities. The largest and busiest interurban terminal in the world, and Indianapolis terminal at its peak handled as many as 500 arrivals and departures a day. Some companies offered both local and express services between cities and provided Indianapolis with direct non-stop avenues of travel and one day service with major cities in three of our four bordering states, including Detroit, Dayton, Columbus, Cincinnati and Louisville. A direct line connecting Indianapolis with Illinois cities was never developed.

The cost of the interurban was low and they were considerably faster than conventional railroads. Thus the ultimate dream in the interurban era was to build a road 750 miles long connecting New York with Chicago. A high speed track with curves capable of speeds up to 90 mph, the plan was to tunnel through the Pennsylvania mountains and level all hills to an incline of only one-half of one per cent. A company was organized, stocks sold and a monthly bulletin was published for its share holders called the Air Line News.

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In 1885 the owners of the South Bend line were ready to try it again. On Nov. 15 they opened a 1½-mile section of track through South Bend for the paying public. Unfortunately their experiments with electricity had cost the company a fortune, the project was a financial failure and the next year the railroad reverted to its original mule cars.

In 1889, the state's first totally electric line, the Lafayette

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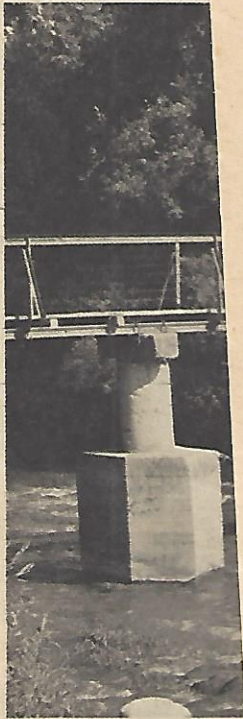
The Indianapolis Traction Terminal opened September 12, 1904, as a central station for all traction companies coming into Indianapolis, allowing them to co-ordinate their efforts and offer better service. July, 1905, the first joint ticket office was opened in Indianapolis. The first of its kind anywhere, it eliminated much of the waiting and confusion that

once took place as passengers tried frantically to make connections to other cities. The largest and busiest interurban terminal in the world, and Indianapolis terminal at its peak handled as many as 500 arrivals and departures a day. Some companies offered both local and express services between cities and provided Indianapolis with direct non-stop avenues of travel and one day service with major cities in three of our four bordering states, including Detroit, Dayton, Columbus, Cincinnati and Louisville. A direct line connecting Indianapolis with Illinois cities was never developed.

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As construction of the road began in Northern Indiana it became necessary to build grades leading up to its overpasses more than a mile long to achieve the desired elevation. A costly scheme indeed, it was not until the com-

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Shelbyville's Morrison Park has an abundance of tables built from interurban tracks (above). T-rails were also used as beams to support the concrete floor of the bandshell (below).



transportation for only \$7.50. In addition some companies built amusement parks between towns and featured special cars coming and going at all hours of the day. There were also special trips to far away places at reduced rates for groups. Two of the favorites in the Hoosier state were those to Niagara Falls and those going to elegant resorts along Lake Erie.

In some communities the interurban also doubled as a street car carrying passengers from one end of town to the other. By the 1920s long distance travel on the interurbans had become so popular that dining cars and sleeping

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and in time electric freight trains became a common sight. Indianapolis tried to alleviate daytime congestion by confining its freight trains to night runs. In the end two terminals were built to handle the freight. The Indianapolis Freight Terminal and the Industrial Terminal each could handle as many as 100 cars at one time. Some companies built their own freight facilities using such modern conveniences as overhead doors and electric lifts. Others expanded their services to include free pick-up and delivery anywhere within the city.

As one might guess, antagonism ran high between rival railroads, but the contention between steam railroads and the electrics reached a feverish pitch, often resulting in fierce courtroom clashes for rights of ways or permission of one to cross the other.

The development of a suitable electric current was expensive and costs of construction was high. The work was oftentimes shoddy and the maintenance on those early roads was tremendous. Franchise protection was one of the traction company's earliest headaches. Racing to complete their roadways within the allotted time, construction often went along smoothly only to be halted in its final phase by the owner of a crucial strip of land when he decided he didn't want to sell it after all, at least not for the price first agreed upon.

ANOTHER problem facing the traction company was that in order to get and keep his franchise he had to deal with politicians. Take for example the city of Crawfordsville. For instance, in 1903 a franchise was signed permitting the Indianapolis Northwestern Company to build a railroad down the center of Crawfordsville's main street. Just hours before construction within the city limits was to commence the city council revoked the company's franchise. Determined to build their road, the company sent its entire construction crew into town. Greeted by both the Crawfordsville police and fire departments, the result was one of the biggest riots that city has

planned. In the light of this development all the city councilmen dropped their charges.

Not all construction problems were created by man, in fact, nature presented more than her share of engineering difficulties. In the 1913 flood, for instance, the Cincinnati, Lawrenceburg and Aurora Traction Company suffered an estimated \$145,000 in damages and three months later declared bankruptcy.

A number of traction companies were forced into receivership, many within their first five years of operation. Some never progressed farther than the initial planning stages before financial ills forced them to fold. Mergers of small lines with larger interurban companies began as early as 1900 and the abandonment of some runs as early as 1910. During the war years of 1917 and 1918 seven abandonments were recorded and by 1925 eight more operations were closed. Despite this many other companies were approaching financial stability and were looking forward to a profitable future when the crisis on Wall Street struck the nation. Only two of Indiana's interurbans were forced to shut down in the depression, though all the others merely hung in the balance.

The Midland United Company which came up with the idea of consolidating all of Indiana's remaining interurban railways into one giant corporation and Aug. 1, 1930, the world's largest interurban company went into operation under the name Indiana Railroad.

It was evident that the line must carry out a complete reorganization of the state's electric railroad system. Weaker, less profitable lines were cut out. Eleven operations with a total of 300 miles of track were abandoned that first year and by 1933 19 other operations similarly bit the dust.

AS THE fourth decade of the 20th Century drew to a close and the shroud of war enveloped the nation, only 14 electric railroads remained in Indiana. Three of these were abandoned in 1941 and

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Crawfordsville citizens rallied with a petition bearing more than 1,000 names asking that the interurban be built into the city as

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pany attempted to fill a gorge 180 feet wide at the bottom and 2 miles wide at the top, that the venture proved to be a failure and the whole idea completely abandoned.

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FINDING itself left with nearly 15 miles of completed track in the middle of nowhere, the Air Line Company decided to offset its losses by building an amusement park at the end of the road. Feeder lines were constructed connecting the park with LaPorte, Valparaiso, Gary and Chicago.

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Riding the interurbans became a sport for many and the traction companies devised a number of gimmicks to encourage business. The Central Electric Railway Association and its members offered a "2,000 Penny Coupon Ticket" or \$20 worth of

rationing renewed interest in the interurbans and perhaps served to prolong its demise for at least three years.

The war also provided some financial gains for the interurbans, not in demands for services, but need for scrap metals. Obsolete and broken down equipment and abandoned tracks were sold to the military.

With the end of the war also came the end of two more electric railroads in Indiana: the Fort Wayne to Garrett line and the New Albany to Louisville operation. On December 31, 1946, the interurban era in Indiana officially came to an end. On that day the Evansville and Ohio Valley Company made its final run and the Southern Indiana Railway converted its electric engines to diesel power.

In 1947 the electric street railways in Fort Wayne, Marion and Gary converted to buses. Indianapolis continued to use trains until 1953.

So long as she lived the interurban was a queenly figure even in her declining years. During her time only three cities in Indiana with a population of more than 15,000 went without her services—Bedford, Bicknell and Bloomington. People revered her, poets

wrote songs to her and artists captured her mood in comic strips.

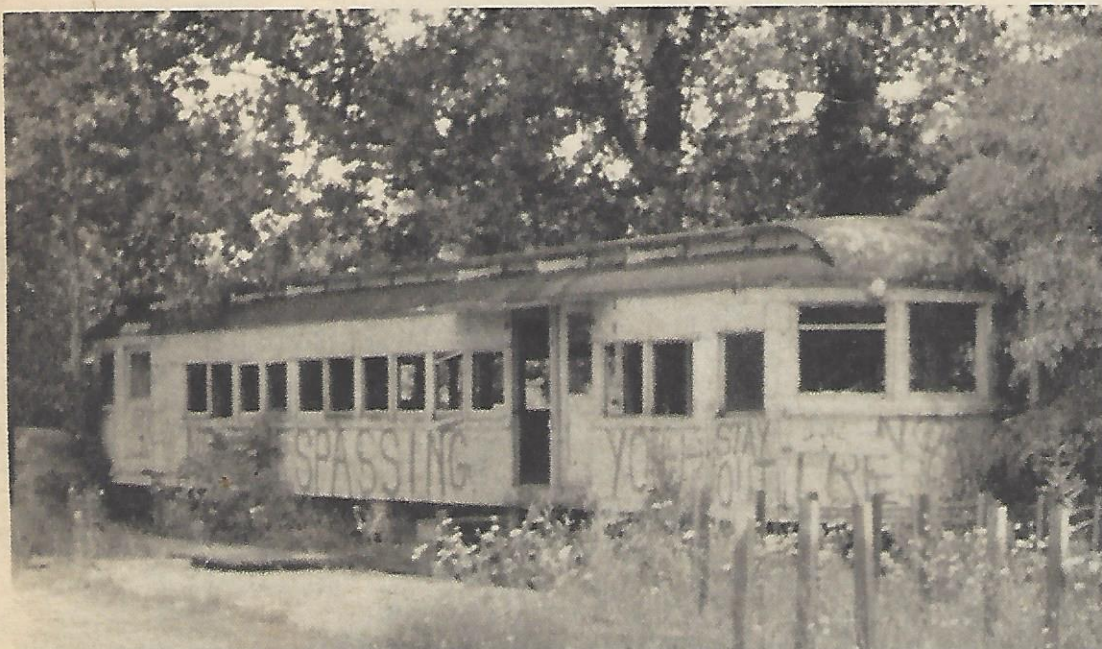
Although part of an era of train robberies, an interurban was held up only once in Indiana.

It happened Jan. 30, 1923, along the Terre Haute, Indianapolis and Eastern near Maywood. Three gunmen stopped the train and quickly relieved its passengers of all the cash and other valuables, then escaped on horseback. It is believed the men were amateurs for in their hurry they overlooked an unguarded strongbox containing several thousand dollars.

Today except for the massive Chicago, South Shore and South Bend electric railroad (because of its weight it was not considered to be an interurban) the interurbans are now considered to be a part of our Hoosier heritage.

Slowly but surely nature is reclaiming the earth and stones that once served the interurbans as grades and abutments, but thanks to Herbert C. Davis and his imaginative construction in Shelbyville at least one part of the old girl is still doing one of the things she liked best—bringing laughter and joy into the hearts of those she served.

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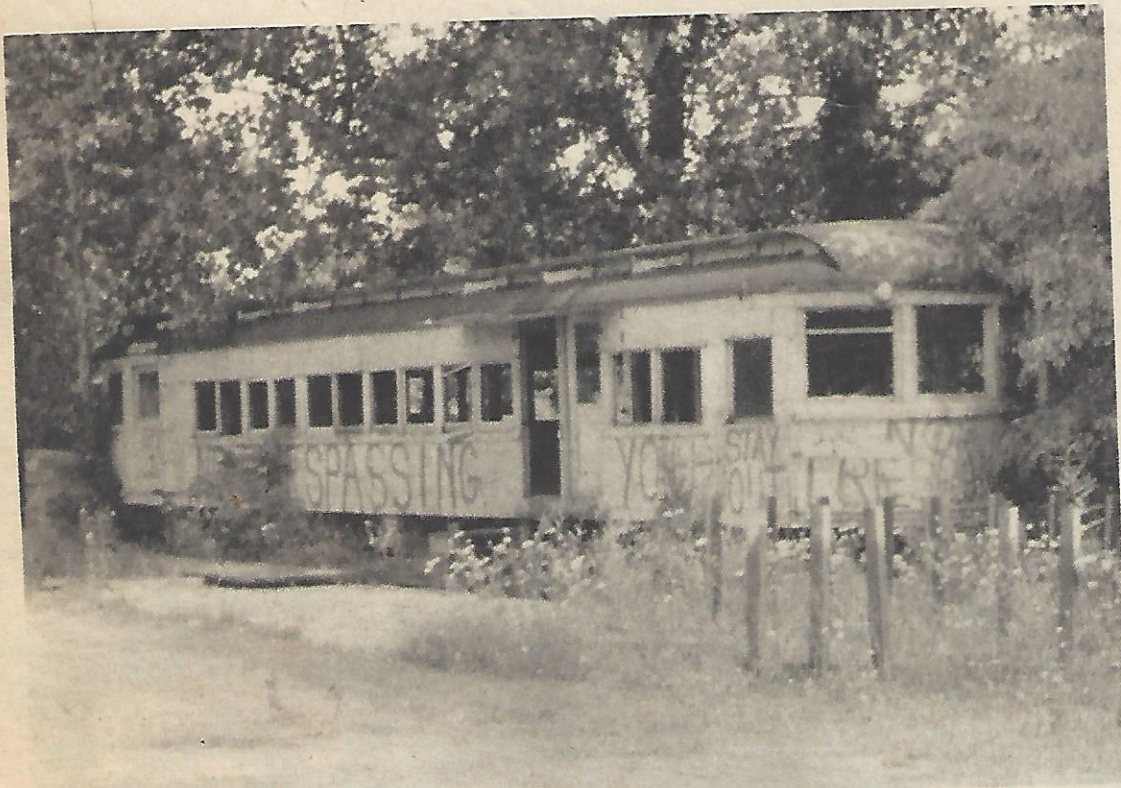
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This abandoned interurban car was once used for an office but it is now in a state of decay. Once Indiana had more miles of electric tracks than any state.