

The Economic and Social Impact of the Electric Interurban Railways on Indianapolis: A Sketch for a Portrait

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The opening of the Indianapolis Traction Terminal on Monday, 12 September 1904 was heralded by a twenty-by-thirty-six-foot garrison flag, whipping in the wind from the top of the flagstaff on the building. The building symbolized the importance of the interurban electric railways in Indianapolis. The building, touted to be the largest such structure in the world, hosted hundreds of trains and thousands of passengers at the time of peak interurban use in the city.

The investment in the traction terminal building was a material symbol of the interurbans' impact on the economy and society of Indianapolis. Just how great was the impact of the electric interurban railways?

Note that this essay is but a sketch, not a full portrait. To do justice to the topic and to quantify the social and economic benefits would require a doctoral dissertation or a book. What follows suggests the areas of import and impact and the potential direction of the interurbans' influence, if not the amount.

Attempting to discern the real impact of the interurbans would realistically focus mainly on the period between 1900 and 1910. There were no interurban railways serving Indianapolis before 1900. After 1910 the increased use of automotive vehicles would erode the influence of the interurbans on the places they served. Automobiles and trucks and interurbans were competitors in similar transportation markets. The electric interurbans and their automotive rivals provided flexible transportation at relatively low cost between short distances. In the early 1900s automobiles were expensive and highly unreliable, tires were fragile, and roads were unpaved and usually best described by the word wretched. With the availability of paved, reliable roads and the production of less expensive cars, the influence of interurbans was at first diminished and eventually finished. The reality that motorists did not pay the full cost of the operation of their vehicles further supported the eventual triumph of the motorcar and truck over the electric interurban.

Passenger and freight transport between Indianapolis and outlying areas by the interurban electric railways may be categorized in three ways. First was the suburban ring from Indianapolis out to a distance of about fifteen miles. Within this distance was an area that could be reached in about an hour by the interurbans traveling at an average speed of twenty miles an hour. This would have been the commuter shed, an area attractive to persons wishing to live outside the city but still able to commute to work in Indianapolis in a reasonable amount of time.

The second ring included the rural areas, cities, and towns that were between fifteen and fifty miles from Indianapolis, or about a two-hour one-way passenger journey. These riders would not be daily commuters, but those on business or pleasure trips made a few times a month. The last group includes the cities and towns more than fifty miles from Indianapolis that would involve a journey of anywhere from two to five hours.

Considering the transportation alternatives available at the turn of the twentieth century, the interurban electric cars provided relatively fast and frequent service. Steam railroads, of course, offered extensive passenger services in the region, but direct service by steam railways between Indianapolis and other major Hoosier cities was relatively

sparse. The interurbans linked the capital with many of the Hoosier State's smaller cities, towns, and villages that were either bypassed completely by the steam railroads or were served only occasionally and at inconvenient times. Two or three trips a day by the steam railroads were more than matched by six, eight, or ten trips in each direction by the new electric lines; some interurbans offered hourly service on parts of their systems. The fares on the electric cars were usually lower than the rates on the steam cars. In addition, the electric lines were free of the smoke and cinders that accompanied rides on steam-powered railways.

There is some controversy over which was the first interurban to reach Indianapolis. The Broad Ripple line, which had enjoyed electric railway service since September 1894, was considered later to be in essence a suburban trolley line rather than an interurban railway. In 1895 Henry L. Smith proposed and organized the Indianapolis, Greenwood & Franklin Company and graded the line to Greenwood. The Indianapolis, Greenwood & Franklin was opened between Indianapolis and Greenwood on 1 January 1900 and, according to Indianapolis historian Jacob Piatt Dunn, was the Hoosier capital's first real interurban electric railway. Other railways soon followed.

The Indianapolis & Eastern interurban was opened to Dublin on 17 June 1900. A little more than a year later the interurban to Martinsville was opened to the public on 2 August 1902; an interurban to Shelbyville began service on 12 September 1902; and the line to Plainfield began service on 15 September 1902. Service to Lafayette began on 9 October 1902, to Rushville in July 1905, to Danville on 1 September 1906, and to Crawfordsville on 4 July 1907. These lines eventually became parts of larger, amalgamated systems, such as the Union Traction of Indiana, the Terre Haute, Indianapolis & Eastern, and the Indiana Service Company.

The volume of interurban business increased over the decade between 1900 and 1910. In 1900 the two lines into Indianapolis provided a total of 377,761 arrivals and departures. This number rose in 1909 to 4,979,371. Less-carload or package-freight service was important early on, and in 1902 there were 533 freight car trips on all the lines that operated in and out of Indianapolis. By 1909 there were 8,596 freight car moves.¹

What the interurban electric railways primarily provided was a mobility link between Indianapolis and smaller towns and cities and rural areas. As mentioned earlier, the steam railroads did not always offer frequent service to communities close to Indianapolis, and many places were bypassed completely. Passenger service on steam railroads was usually geared to markets that were fairly far apart, such as Indianapolis to Columbus, Ohio, or Indianapolis to Chicago.

The interurbans opened new horizons for people in rural areas and small communities. One of the earliest factors of importance to Hoosiers was the convenience of commuting to work in Indianapolis, offering a greater variety of jobs and perhaps higher pay for Hoosiers living outside the capital. Persons in outlying areas were also given opportunities to shop for and purchase a variety of goods that were not commonly available in early-twentieth-century small towns and cities. The large number of businesses in the capital city often meant more effective competition and lower prices for customers.

Entertainment choices were also available in Indianapolis that were not present in small communities. Indianapolis had a number of theaters, and plays, concerts, and

vaudeville shows were available to residents in the outlying areas via the electric railway lines. Sports events, particularly baseball, also attracted persons from outlying areas. Indianapolis hosted major league baseball teams, and visitors took the electric interurbans into the city to watch nationally known professional baseball stars.

Cultural events and facilities were available in Indianapolis that were not present elsewhere. Visitors to the city enjoyed concerts by well-known performers and speeches by distinguished persons and access to major libraries and art museums. Educational institutions in Indianapolis were also an attraction. A farm boy could do his chores early in the morning and be in high school in time for classes, thanks to the interurbans. Facilities of the major religious institutions in the state were also available to visitors to Indianapolis.

The interurbans promoted ease of travel, making courtship between young men and women in outlying areas and Indianapolis relatively easy. Young people found it easy to get acquainted and to maintain relationships, thanks to the improvement in transportation. A colleague told me his grandparents carried out a three-year courtship between Martinsville and Indianapolis prior to their marriage.

Better transportation not only made it possible to visit one's beau but also to visit state government and other institutions to deal with the various agencies or to meet with members of the general assembly or representatives of the governor's office. Citizens were able to attend sessions of the Indiana General Assembly and see their government at work. As travel eased, people in rural areas became part of a larger society in a way that had not been possible before the interurban electric railway service was available.

An important part of participation was the advantage of gaining timely information through personal visits and conferences. Because many of the interurbans carried mail, either in sacks or in railway post office cars, mail service was improved. Interurbans also facilitated faster delivery of newspapers between Indianapolis and outlying cities, as well as between outlying cities. A common market of up-to-date information, state, national, and international, opened new horizons to Hoosiers, ranging from Theodore Roosevelt's action to end the Russo-Japanese War, George M. Cohan's latest musical triumph on Broadway, the latest fashions and products, and box scores for sports events.

The benefits to Indianapolis were probably larger in the aggregate than the benefits to the outlying communities. Although it is impossible to know this definitively, the fact that there were more participants and more customers in Indianapolis meant that economic activity was stimulated. More customers for stores and shops and for theaters and restaurants obviously was an economic benefit for these institutions. As far as social activities were concerned, it was also possible for fraternal, religious, and professional organizations to attract members from a broader area for the exchange of ideas and information.

A key factor for Indianapolis businesses was the larger labor catchment area that was available as the interurban lines began to serve the city and spread out in all directions, thus expanding the commuter shed. The fact that there was more competition among job seekers meant that employers did not have to offer higher wages to attract workers. A wider catchment area also meant that there was a larger pool of specialized laborers available to Indianapolis businesses than otherwise would have been the case.

The interurbans had a definite impact on the development of suburbs and what eventually became urban sprawl. The desire for better and more spacious housing led to the development of suburban areas and satellite towns. These developments on the outskirts of the city provided residents with spacious, high-quality, low-cost housing and access to the city through the local street railway and interurbans.

The economic impact of the interurbans was stimulated by the larger market area reached by the electric cars—businesses served a larger area due to the interurbans' ease of travel, retailers enjoyed patronage from a larger customer base, and major department stores chose Indianapolis sites. Large structures were built in the period between 1900 and 1910 to house full-service stores, such as L. S. Ayres and the William H. Block Company, where customers enjoyed the advantages of better products and services at lower prices. The large market created by the interurban also expanded the need for professionals in medicine, law, and education. The breadth of the market and the broad economic base that evolved in Indianapolis made the city and its region less susceptible to severe economic ups and downs.

There was a downside to the influence of the interurbans insofar as the regional economy was concerned. In local areas there was reasonable concern that Indianapolis-based chains might dominate at least a part of the economy of satellite cities and towns.

Another potential negative was the development of suburbs. The classic suburb, which was linked by public transportation to a major center, used land with reasonable efficiency. However, the classic suburb was a forerunner for the eventual urban sprawl of the early twenty-first century since it created an appetite for living in outlying areas. The close connection of public transportation to the urban center was particularly susceptible to competition from the automobile. Eventually the sprawled suburb, a product of the automobile and the highway, came to be the principal form of development around Indianapolis and across the nation.

In 1890 the population of Indianapolis was 105,436. By 1900 it had risen to 169,164. Ten years later the census showed 233,650 residents in the Hoosier capital.² Growth in the community was also reflected in interurban railway patronage. The traction terminal kept figures on the number of persons coming and going on the interurban cars:

1904—	3,251,522
1905—	3,839,706
1906—	4,418,034
1907—	4,977,295
1908—	4,901,384
1909—	5,064,210
1910—	5,618,946
1911—	6,279,822 ³

It was projected that by 1913 the traction terminal might handle ten million arrivals and departures.⁴ Obviously, these people were not simply tourists but were customers and employees.

By one estimate, over a period of six years following the opening of the traction terminal, average annual business income in Indianapolis went up 40 percent, and the

city's wholesale trade increased by 15 to 20 percent. Freight business was increasing rapidly; four million gallons of milk and cream and an estimated 100,000 tons of freight were brought into the city by the interurban electric railways in 1908. Freight moved by interurbans in 1909 equaled 174,000 tons. The United States Express Company provided much of the service, offering pickup and delivery service for the interurbans. It was typical during this period for merchants in outlying towns to phone in orders to wholesalers in Indianapolis and have the merchandise delivered that afternoon or by the next day, thanks to the speedy interurban freight service.

The types of freight moved by the interurbans were typical of the time. Major items included dry goods, furniture, carpets, shoes, clothing, and hardware. While the population within the Indianapolis city limits was 246,000 in 1910, it was estimated that the interurbans, along with the steam railroads, created a regional shopping center serving two million people.⁵

In 1913 visitors by interurban outnumbered city shoppers by two to one. Between 1900 and 1913, the traveling population on interurbans had increased 1.700 percent; at the same time there was no decrease in traffic on the steam railroads. In 1913 a daily average of 9,000 persons based on 17,573 departures and arrivals used the traction terminal.⁶

The influence of the interurbans was extensive but transient. By 1910 increased automotive traffic on the highways was beginning. In 1912, a time in which interurbans were improving their rights-of-way, buying additional cars, and adding modern signal systems, it was noted that no new interurban lines were being built into Indianapolis. This marked a turning point. Although the interurban electric railways continued to play a relatively significant role into the 1920s, the system's doom was sealed by the Model T, the highway, and the effectiveness of the automobile and the truck.

Notes

1. Jacob Piatt Dunn, *Greater Indianapolis: The History, the Industries, the Institutions, and the People of a City of Homes*, 2 vols. (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Co., 1910), 1:339.

2. *Indianapolis Star*, 3 Jan. 1913.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, 3 Jan. 1910.

6. *Ibid.*, 19 Mar. 1913.