

APPLICATION FOR A TEXAS STATE HISTORIC SUBJECT MARKER FOR THE BRYAN & COLLEGE INTERURBAN RAILWAY

Introduction

The Bryan and College Interurban Railway began service in 1910 and operated passenger trolleys until 1923 between the city of Bryan and what was then called the Texas Agricultural & Mechanical College. During that period the BCI provided an important link between Bryan and the college five miles distant which permitted students and faculty to live in Bryan thus easing pressure on the limited college housing facilities. It also enhanced public mobility, generally benefitted the growth of Bryan businesses, and was a significant factor in stimulating development along the right of way. These factors influenced the two communities to grow together and determined the linear path that this development took.

Creation of the Bryan & College Interurban Railway

On October 7, 1909 the *Bryan Daily Eagle and Pilot* published a "Special Trolley Edition" which announced to the community that at a meeting of the Retail Merchants Association a committee had been formed to make plans for an interurban railway line to connect the city and the college. The committee, chaired by Ed Hall, president of the First State Bank and Trust Co., was composed of prominent citizens: A. M. Waldrop, Major L. L. Mcinnis, A. W. Wilkerson and W. E. Saunders. Mayor J. T. Maloney of Bryan was a strong proponent of the scheme; and he offered to form a stock company if \$10,000 could be raised for the project in Bryan. It has been speculated that Mayor Maloney had engaged in extensive prior negotiations with O. E. Gammill, of Caddo, Oklahoma, the builder and later, director of the Interurban, since the target date for the startup of service, late 1910, would not have been realistic if arrangements were not already well under way. Moreover, Maloney had a background as a promoter and developer and had experience in transportation having formerly been employed by the International & Great Northern Railroad (I & G N). In addition to the bonus an additional \$5,000 in Interurban stock was offered to local investors. Mayor Maloney and businessmen in the Merchants Association incorporated the Bryan and College Interurban Railway Company and mortgaged and underwrote it with \$100,000 in bonds issued through the Texas Railroad Commissioner.¹

President Robert Teague Milner of the College was reported as strongly in support of the project although some faculty members objected that dormitory living was an important component of cadet training.²

At this time Bryan had a population of 4,132 which was to grow to 6,307 in the next decade. There was a population of 757 students and faculty on the A. & M. campus. College Avenue connected the two communities.³ In 1910 Bryan and College Station were served by three railroad lines. The Houston and Texas Central Railroad (H & TC) which connected to Galveston and Ft. Worth was responsible for the establishment of Bryan in 1867. The town was named Bryan after William Joel Bryan, the owner of the one square mile of land purchased by the railroad. The coming of the railroad made Bryan the transportation center for the area principally for the shipping of cotton. In 1900 the

I & G N extended service to Bryan and later the Missouri Pacific Line was added.⁴ In 1897 a bicycle club was founded at the college for students and faculty with the purpose of promoting biking and building a bicycle track to Bryan. This path enhanced movement between those at the college and the town, but the difficulty the group experienced in maintaining it caused them to abandon their efforts in 1900.⁵

In 1910 travel in the Bryan area was mainly by railroad and by horse-drawn vehicles. This was an era marked by rapid growth nationally of networks of interurban lines connecting towns and cities such as the one which already connected Dallas and Ft. Worth. These lines provided inexpensive frequent service and enabled people to travel from one population center to another, making these centers accessible to those in rural locations. They were, in general, primarily intended for passenger service, they used heavier gauge, faster equipment than typical city streetcars, they operated on city streets and along rural highways, and they were most commonly powered by electricity although gasoline or alcohol was sometimes used as fuel.⁶

The first automobile owner in Bryan, in 1901, was a Mr. Boneville. Early autos were expensive and very prone to breakdowns. Bryan had no garage at that time, and all repairs had to be done by blacksmiths. These factors caused the numbers of Bryan automobiles to grow slowly, but by 1914 registration was imposed and the speed limit of 8 miles an hour enacted in 1906 was raised to 15 miles per hour.⁷ By 1910 a few Bryan residents owned autos and others had them on order.⁸ Local roads which were alternatively muddy or sandy were gradually improved as the needs of motorists began to become a factor. The advent of the interurban has been credited for precipitating the paving of College Avenue with asphalt, the first road with that surface in the state.⁹

In the enthusiasm which accompanied the building of the BCI I. M. Hewitt, an officer of the railway, advocated that Bryan should plan to build an interurban link to every city within thirty miles.¹⁰ Ultimately, the only other interurban line which was built in the area was the Bryan & Central Texas Interurban Railway which began service in 1912 and operated until 1920 when it was sold. It provided service from Bryan across the Brazos river to Smetana and served the plantations of the Brazos River valley.¹¹

Routing and Building the BCI

Routing of the trolley line between Bryan and the College was influenced by the desirability of negotiating for right of way with the minimum number of landowners. Much of the land it came to traverse in that area was owned by Fred L. Cavitt. In the immediate college area it was to pass through "Boyett's Corner" (presently the block of University Drive extending to Wellborn Road from Boyette Street) owned by W. C. Boyett, who operated a grocery store serving the campus. It would also seem that the interest and cooperation of Cavitt, Boyett and the other property owners was an important factor in selecting the exact route the interurban was to transect. Construction work began with a groundbreaking ceremony January 21, 1910 on Cavitt's land two miles south of town.¹² Work was directed by O. E. Gammill who later became responsible for its operation. He was later succeeded as director by L. M. Levinson.¹³ Cavitt and other landowners along the line actively developed subdivisions for homes and small farms, and population growth clearly followed the interurban route.¹⁴

The original projected route was from Gathright Hall on the college campus north across Boyette's Corner to what is called Cavitt Avenue today which was referred to on maps as "Car Line." At the intersection of Burnett (or Elgin) Avenue¹⁵ the line went north along College (or Dallas). The northern portion of what was then College is now Texas Avenue (or Business Route 6). The line then turned west on Burleson (or 27th Street) and resumed its northward path on the Plaza (Tabor or Regent Streets). A station was located at Anderson Street which marked the terminus of the line. The plan called for the line to extend westward across the H & TC tracks to Main Street, but that never came about.¹⁶

Two years later when the line was electrified it was extended north to Caldwell (or 24th) Street. On Caldwell it turned east to Robertson where it went north to Franklin (or 22nd Street). From there it extended past the Allen Academy on Booneville Road (or Ursuline) and terminated at the Ursuline Academy. At the southern end of the line it was extended across the campus to the drill field.¹⁷

The BCI Begins Service

The first gasoline-powered car arrived by railroad on May 28, 1910 and it was scheduled to go into service the next day.¹⁸ The remaining three cars were added later and when service got under way it consisted of ten thirty-minute trips per day in each direction. By 1912 the schedule consisted of eleven daily trips and nine on Sundays.¹⁹

After two years of operation some complaints arose over "very irregular and unsatisfactory" service. The cars which had been manufactured in Michigan had to be sent back to the factory when they required servicing. President Milner of Texas A. & M., called a meeting and stated that he recommended electrifying the system. He estimated that it would cost \$22,000 to purchase and install the necessary equipment including two new "pay-as-you-enter" cars. The financial report for the previous two years showed it to be a "very profitable investment," and he urged campus residents to subscribe to \$11,000 in stock.²⁰ This was followed by a notice placed in the *Eagle* signed by J. T. Maloney indicating the intention of the directors to increase the capital stock from \$20,000 to \$40,000 to underwrite this work and to extend the line at both ends.²¹

In 1917 according to the *Eagle* service seemed to be satisfactory since a report of a BCI stockholders' meeting indicated that they expected that within a year the line would have paid off all its old debts and the costs of improvements which had been authorized by the City of Bryan. The Board of Directors consisted of local prominent bankers, attorneys and merchants. S. S. Hunter was president and others on the Board were W. E. Saunders, J. W. Doremus, L. L. McInnis, H. O. Boatwright, A. W. Wilkerson, W. H. Cole, M. H. James, John M. Lawrence, and L. M. Levinson. It also stated that the Country Club was planning to build a concrete walk across Dellwood Park to link up with the Interurban.²² Dellwood Park had been created at the time the line was built to provide an attraction along the route.

An intimation of problems occurs in an *Eagle* item which appeared the next year. It was stated that complaints were raised at the meeting of the Commercial Club that BCI freight deliveries were often two days late. The fact that the BCI had begun freight service would seem to be indicative of a decline in passenger revenues. Apparently the difficulty with deliveries was due to problems in getting labor to do the work. There was also a report of speculation in Interurban tickets. To remedy this it was decided to put tickets on sale at the College for ten cents each, five cents below the standard fare.²³

A clear statement of the growing woes of the line appeared in 1919 when College President William Bennett Bizzell appeared before the Commercial Club and suggested that, in view of plans to cut the schedule on December 21 and frequent service interruptions, a committee be created to investigate the situation and make recommendations for greater efficiency and profitability. It was stated that the main problems were labor difficulties and competition from the jitney and car-hire services which had begun operating.²⁴ No mention was made of the growth of the use of private automobiles. Nonetheless, that has to be considered as a factor in the decline of the Bryan interurban just as it was a leading cause of the nationwide decline in patronage of interurban lines as a means of transportation between towns.²⁵ By 1919 929 automobiles were registered in Bryan.²⁶

In August of 1922 a headline in the *Eagle* announced that the BCI had gone into receivership. Louisiana bondholders had petitioned in Houston federal court, and Judge Duval West had appointed I. C. Griffith, Assistant Cashier of the National Bank of Commerce, receiver. Griffith subsequently filed a \$15,000 bond and admitted the accuracy of charges filed by J. D. Wilkinson of Shreveport acting as trustee for the estate of S. S. Hunter who had owned all of the \$100,000 issue of bonds floated in 1910. The bonds were to bear 6% interest and a total of \$49,344 in interest was unpaid for 1921 and 1922. Subsequently Griffith placed a notice to creditors to file claims, and the Chamber of Commerce set up two committees to study and report on the condition of the interurban.²⁷

On April 10, 1923 the BCI was sold at auction from the steps of the Courthouse to the S. S. Hunter estate for \$40,000, and the work of tearing up the track commenced.²⁸ The last recorded trip of the Interurban occurred on April 13, 1923. Seven years later Eugene Edge, President of the Bryan College Traction Company announced the sale of steel and overhead wiring and equipment to Crandall & Perry, Inc. of Dallas for \$6,500. The Traction Company which operated a bus service in Bryan and to the College had evidently come into possession of many of the assets of BCI. They retained the franchise right of way, real estate, and business and office equipment.²⁹

Conclusion

The BCI only operated for thirteen years, but it had a significant effect on the ultimate direction of development of Bryan and College Station and provided the first tangible indication of what was to become a binary social system. Although Bryan and College Station, which was incorporated in 1938, are independent political entities today they merge indistinguishably. Only the town boundary signs clearly mark the transition from one to the other. There is no question that having this line also stimulated commerce and provided mobility for the citizens of Bryan and the residents of the Texas A. & M. campus until it was superceded by other means of transportation. The memory of the Interurban is preserved for today's residents by buses serving both cities which are designed to look like the old trolleys.

Endnotes

¹Mary Ann Riversd Marshall, "Bryan & College Interurban Railway: Historical Perspective on Its Development, Ownership, and Disposition" (Paper written in fulfillment of Master of Cultural Geography Degree, 1987) 39-40.

²*Bryan Daily Eagle and Pilot*, 10-7-1909.

³Marshall, BCI Railway, 2-3.

⁴J. B. Humphreys, "Early History of the Street System of Bryan, Texas," (Paper prepared for Professor C. J. Keese, Department of Civil Engineering, Texas A&M University, 1965) 3-6.

⁵*Ibid.*, 5.

⁶James E. Vance, Jr., *Capturing the Horizon: The Historical Geography of Transportation*. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1986) 392-395.

⁷Lois Aylne Wilcox, "The Early History of Bryan, Texas" (Thesis submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Texas for the Degree of Master of Arts, 1952) 65-68, and Humphreys, *Street System*, 6-7.

⁸*Bryan Daily Eagle & Pilot*, 5-31-10.

⁹Humphreys, "Street System," 7, and Wilcox, "Early History," 65.

¹⁰*Bryan Daily Eagle & Pilot*, 5-2-12.

¹¹Marshall, BCI Railway, 33-36.

¹²*Bryan Eagle*, 1-20-10.

¹³Marshall, BCI Railway, 14.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 21-22, 45-47.

¹⁵Alternative names for Bryan streets are indicated in parentheses.

¹⁶Marshall, BCI Railway, 19.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁸*Bryan Daily Eagle & Pilot*, 5-28-10.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 7-1-12.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 9-25-12.

²¹*Ibid.*, 9-26-12.

²²*Ibid.*, 1-30-17.

²³*Ibid.*, 7-30-18.

²⁴*Bryan Daily Eagle*, 8-24-22.

²⁵Vance, *Horizon*, 394-395.

²⁶Marshall, BCI Railway, 9.

²⁷*Bryan Daily Eagle*, 8-24-22, 9-6-22, 10-6-22.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 4-10-23, 5-18-23.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 2-12-30, and Marshall, *BCI Railway*, 32.

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Wilcox, Lois Alyne. "The Early History of Bryan, Texas." Master of Arts thesis, Graduate School of the University of Texas, 1952.

Other

Bryan Eagle, *Bryan Daily Eagle & Pilot* and *Bryan Weekly Eagle*

Sanborn Insurance Map of Bryan, July 1925. New York: Sanborn Map Co. 1925.