

Clang, clang, clang went the trolley through Westford

BY JUNE W. KENNEDY

The coming of the electric trolley car lines at the turn of the century played its part in the growth of our community. Thomas Edison's invention of the electric motor, and its application to a passenger car on rails had created a wave of enthusiasm.

In 1905, plans were proposed to build an inter-urban line from Ayer to Forge Village, and eventually to a connection with the Boston and Northern St. Rwy. (later Eastern Mass. Rwy.), at North Chelmsford. Several routes were presented, including one to Graniteville, thence to Westford Center via Graniteville Road to Cold Spring Road, thence across the fields to Forge Village Road (due to heavy grades on Graniteville Road), and to the Center, continuing down Depot Street to Lowell Road to Brookside, and on to North Chelmsford. Reported loud protests against the cutting of shade trees to enable stringing of trolley wires on upper Main Street led to the abandonment of this proposal. The road was then constructed through Graniteville, and continued straight out through the woods, crossing Nutting Road on stone abutments to Groton Road near the Baretto Monument Works, continuing past the Fletcher quarries to the Square in North Chelmsford. It opened in June, 1906. Apparently this service was well received from its beginning; cars operated in both directions every 45 minutes. It proved to be a great convenience to patrons from Forge Village and Graniteville.

Local travelers from Westford and Brookside (Nabnasset) were still without such service. Sufficient agitation was generated to convince the Street Railway that a "Branch Line" should be provided. Such a line was proposed and laid out from the so-called Triangle near North Chelmsford into West Chelmsford, to Brookside, and to Westford via Lowell Road, Cummings Road to Depot Street and along Main Street to the Common. Litigation ensued over the crossing of electric cars at Brookside Station. The State Railroad Commissioner's final ruling that no crossing would be allowed there necessitated a change of cars on either side of the Boston & Maine tracks. Construction continued in the summer of 1906, and the line from the junction on Groton Road to Brookside opened on Dec. 1 of that year. Work continued as weather permitted; on May 25, 1907, the first car on test was run to Westford Center. Road

officials and selectmen, Sherman H. Fletcher, Edward Fisher and William G. Edwards were on board. When the first car arrived, the pupils of the grammar school (the present Tadmuck Club building) formed an impromptu reception committee.

The first electric trolley

"The first electric car came to Westford Centre Thursday, May 23, 1907. When Miss Harriet Miller, teacher in the upper room, grades four through eight, rang the bell to call the pupils in from morning recess, not a child was to be seen. Like the "Pied Piper of Hamelin" they had disappeared as if by magic. Going to the road and looking up the street to the Common and seeing the figures moving and hearing voices and laughter, the two teachers rushed up to see what was happening. There at the end of the car tracks, just opposite the Unitarian Church [Today the First Parish United Church], stood this wonderful new electric car and many of the children had never seen one. They were in and out of the doors, felling of the outside and demonstrating their joy and approval. What a reception!"

"The next Saturday, May 25, 1907, the first car left the Common at 7 a.m., and there was so much noise that even the two school marmes joined the happy group to see the first regular trip made to Lowell. Progress had come to Westford!"

— Elizabeth Cushing Taylor

Local speeches in behalf of this new service opined the line to be a great convenience to citizens of Westford, especially the Center. Henceforth the first car left Westford daily at 6:15 a.m., and hourly service was advertised until 10:35 p.m. The superintendent noted that "First Class service was being provided patrons of the Spur Line, the cars keeping close to scheduled time."

Apparently "First Class Service, with cars on time," did not suffice for this new line to make a profit, or even break even; the record indicates that one fare increase was shortly implemented, and another proposed in the first year of operation. On the second proposal, the selectmen interceded, and advanced a fare schedule of their own with a stern admonition that regular patronage of the line was mandatory, or the line would cease. The winter of 1909-10 was severe, with much snow and ice; the Street Railway refused to underwrite the expense of clearing the line, and the service was closed until spring. Much of the income from the transportation of school children in the area, and voluntary collections from Westford's citizens were regularly taken. Many town meetings contained articles of appropriation for the "Branch Line." However the total income only allowed the barest maintenance; repairs to track and trolley wires were deferred, or at best, sketchy. Actually, the service was the least desirable of any means of reaching Lowell or way stations; the B&M

at Westford Depot [located at the foot of Depot Street hill] offered service three times a day with a 20 minute ride as opposed to the trolley service of over an hour and two changes of cars.

The "Branch Line," in spite of this adversity, continued through World War I. Shortly thereafter, with lessening of war shortages, better roads and increased use of automobiles, the service was discontinued. The date of 1920 constituted official abandonment.

The remaining line from North Chelmsford to Ayer through Graniteville and Forge Village, and the branch to Brookside, continued until 1929. At this time, The Eastern Mass. Street Railway took over the through line and provided service until 1932; the Brookside line was discontinued.

From 1932 until 1935 the Eastern Mass. Co. provided bus service in the hopes of retaining some business. It scheduled routes throughout the Westford villages. In 1935, Marinel of North Chelmsford took over the bus service which continued until the beginning of World War II.

Edmund Whitney 1887-1976

"I was the conductor of the electric car, but left because it didn't pay enough money to keep the family going. Had the run from Ayer to North Chelmsford to Brookside (Nabnasset). Fare was 25 cents. It was an eight-wheel car — all good and solid. In winter a snow plow was attached to the front. A coal stove was in the corner, the conductor was the fireman. It used too much electricity.

"The Westford Center car was bright yellow; the others were a darker color. The conductor was in the back; the motorman up front. This was just a little car — "little dinky" or the "Jolly Jumper" — a four-wheeled affair that would bob up and down. Charged the children five cents for the school run. This one was electrically heated."

Elizabeth Carver McKay, born 1910

"I remember the motorman, Mr. Cutter, and the conductor, Ed Clements. They would take us to Brookside, then we'd take another trolley to North Chelmsford, and still another to Lowell. It was the same coming back. By the time the trolley car hit our driveway [then next to the Roudenbush School], we two little Carver children were sound asleep. Mr. Cutter would carry my brother, and Ed Clements would carry me — right into our house. Then they'd drive up the street to the white church. [At night the car was parked there because the motorman and the conductor lived in the Centre.]

"One time the trolley broke down and it was parked right in front of our house. My brother and I, and all our friends, thought the town was so mean. If they had only opened the door, we could

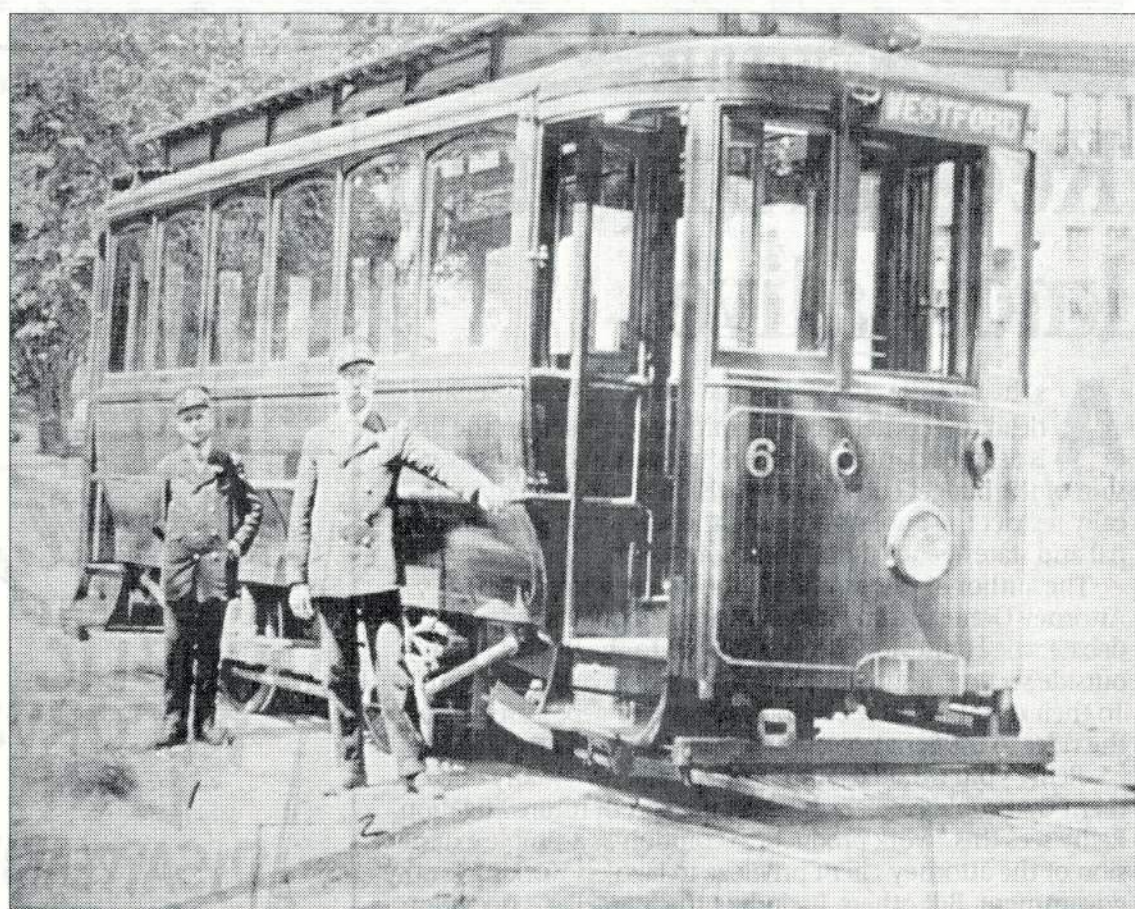


PHOTO COURTESY OF JUNE W. KENNEDY.

The first electric car came to Westford Center on Thursday, May 23, 1907. It was bright yellow in color. Called the "Jolly Jumper" it was just a little four-wheeled affair that would bob up and down.

have played trolley car all winter.

"Another small-town, homey touch comes to mind. My mother had had a friend visiting her one day. Having boarded the car and ridden down the hill past Old Homestead (next to Abbot School), the friend ran up to the conductor and exclaimed, 'I've left my watch at Cora Carver's. I've left my watch at Cora Carver's!' They stopped the trolley, reversed direction, and went back while she got her watch."

Fred Fisher 1903-1980

"We kids used to put rocks on the tracks. It didn't endanger the car, but it sure annoyed the motorman. The old trolley really used to sway coming up and down Westford hill."

Allister MacDougall 1891-1989

"My whole orchard was brought to town on the trolley. Of course they were just seedlings then, but it's hard to believe now."

Ben Prescott 1893-1978

"The train didn't run the hours the old trolley ran. The 6 o'clock train might be the last out of Lowell and the 6 or 7 o'clock train the last one in. I remember when we were kids. Three or four of us in that neighborhood (Chamberlin Corners) — boys, you know — we'd take a train into Lowell, get off at Middlesex Depot, walk down Middlesex Street. This would be a Saturday night and the first place we headed for was Page's Restaurant to buy a great big bowl of oyster stew for 15 cents. Then there were two or three different movie houses around that we could go to for a dime — silent movies (Chaplin) with the old piano going. I was

never too much about movies. Course everybody went, but I was more interested in them days in vaudeville. Practically every Saturday night, the Wheelwright's son and I used to go to B.F. Keith's. They had vaudeville there. What a time we would have! We'd stay until half past 10 or 11 o'clock, then we could get the electric car out to North Chelmsford, change there and then out to "Nab." From there, we walked home. Start with half a dollar, get home broke — once a week, but have a good time."

Alex Belida, born 1918

"The original Fitchburg & Lowell cars were made of wood sheathing like the wainscoting in the kitchens of that period. The cars were painted a dark brown. When coming to a stop, they smelled richly of ozone; it used to make some people very sick. At the end of each trip, the rear over-

head trolley wheel which connected to the electric wires, was hauled down; the wheel at the opposite end was raised. This enabled the car to make a new run the other way. Similarly, the trolley's headlight was switched to the other end. Later, the Eastern Mass. cars were made of steel and painted a bright orange. They were a faster and smoother car."

Wardsman Sam Taylor, born 1909

"The Sunday School of the Methodist Church at West Chelmsford, which includes Westford corner, Oak Hill, Brookside, and various other scattered fragments of rural life not yet large enough to be named village, would take a trolley ride excursion to Canobie Lake Park."

Credit to H. Arnold Wilder for background material. This is article number 15 in the continuing Westford Recollections Millennium Series.