

## MULE CARS TO BUSES

*1957 marks the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of public transportation in New Albany – a span of years that has seen the city served by mule cars, electric trolleys and now by buses. Public transit is a vital necessity in larger communities, and when New Albany's first mule car jingled down Main Street early in 1867, it was an indication of the industrial growth that was to follow the Civil War years.*

River traffic suffered a severe blow during the Civil War and the years immediately following. That may have been the reason that Captain Ephraim S. Whistler, who had commanded the steamer *Huntsville*, launched a new enterprise – the New Albany Street Railway. This infant public transportation venture began operating mule cars along the city's most important thoroughfare – Main Street – early in 1867. The route extended from West 10<sup>th</sup>, where the car barn was located, to Vincennes Street where it connected with the depot of the new railroad from Jeffersonville – the railroad that operated the well-known “Dinky Trains”.

By the middle 1870s the tracks had been extended up Vincennes to Beeler where a new car barn was built on the site of the present Home Transit Company bus garage. Business was good during the first few years the line was operated, but then the Dinky Line tracks were extended from Vincennes along the river to State Street and the mule cars lost many transfer passengers. This, coupled with the business depression of 1877, hit the company so hard that all service was suspended for more than a year and the City threatened to cancel the franchise unless the cars were put back in operation.

At this point of crisis a new company was organized – the New Albany City Railway – which put the cars back in operation again. Then, during the prosperous 1880s service was extended to Spring Street between Vincennes and West Eighth.

Mule car travel could be something of an adventure. There was no heat on the cars in winter and straw was spread on the floor to warm the passengers' feet, but sometimes the straw also contained mice. The mule car drivers had to face the wintery blasts on an open platform and received \$9 a week for a 14-hour working day.

Winter caused one freak accident that almost halted service. On March 31 New Albany residents awoke to find the city blanketed under a sudden knee-deep snow. The weight of snow on the car barn on Vincennes Street was so great that the roof collapsed and every car the company owned was smashed beyond use. Fortunately, the mules were protected by the overhead hay loft which caught the roof and held it up in that part of the structure. The resourceful management of the company was able to borrow cars from Louisville which were hauled to New Albany on the ferry boat – but the only cars Louisville could spare were the old open summer type, and for the rest of the winter New Albany riders had to bear up with cold winds whistling down their necks.

The 1890s ushered in big changes in New Albany's public transit. In 1893 the mule cars gave way to the new electric trolleys and the Highlands Railway had in 1891 built its scenic route to the top of Silver Hills. The Silver Hill line increased the popularity of the hill as a residential area, but revenues in the early years were low and finally in 1903 the line shut down completely. The next year it was purchased by the New Albany Street Railroad which started operating the cars through to the Daisy Depot. At first the Silver Hill line ended at

the bottom of the hill at Spring Street and passengers had to transfer to another car and pay another fare to continue their trip.

Other improvements came after the turn of the century. Tracks were extended out State Street and out Charlestown Road to the Fairground at Silver Street, and in 1903 interurban service was opened in Jeffersonville.

At about this time the local company came under the ownership of the Louisville & Southern Indiana Traction which was controlled by utilities magnate Sam Insull. Insull's influence in traction and power companies spread over the whole Midwest and in the early 1920s he consolidated his interests in Southern Indiana into the Interstate Public Service Company, and the New Albany local lines were part of a small empire which included city lines in Jeffersonville and Columbus and interurban lines to Charlestown and Indianapolis.

Insull's huge bubble burst during the stock market crash of 1929 and his empire crumbled into dust. The scenic Silver Hills line was one casualty and in 1932 the last car squealed down the winding track, writing finish to a route that had once carried as many as 8,000 people in a single day to camp meetings at the Methodist hilltop camp.

But the other trolley lines were kept in operation by the new Home Transit Company, a home-owned corporation which purchased the New Albany transit system from Interstate. The little cars, affectionately called the "Tonnerville Trolleys" continued to ply the streets and when World War II came they did yeoman service hauling greater loads than ever before. But they were getting old and worn out and when the war ended, Home Transit found it would be cheaper to buy new buses than new cars and early in 1946 the cars made their last sad trip.

Today Home Transit buses serve all parts of the growing city and their flexibility permits easy extension of service to new areas. It has been 90 years

since the first mule car rolled down Main Street, but public transit continues to play its vital role in New Albany's economy.

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