

BeeLines...

...by Marybelle Beigh, Westfield Historian

Trolleys, Trains, Railways, Street Cars, Cable Cars, Traction Cars...

“But the JW & NW Trolley started way back in 1880’s!” exclaimed the Westfield Historian during a spirited discussion with another presenter at the recent Second Chautauqua History Fair of August 13th and 14th, 2016.

“Sorry to disagree with you, but NO, the JW & NW became a trolley line when it was electrified by Broadhead in 1916! Before that it was a Rail Road – powered by steam locomotives,” was the equally strongly voiced reply. “I’ll be back shortly with a book that documents this.” And shortly he returned with a book by Kenneth X. Springirth about the railroads and trolleys that dominated Westfield and surrounding communities in the first half of the 1900s.

“Oh yes! I have that book!” I replied, and was asked if I had read it, to which I explained that I’d read it several years ago, when I was writing some BeeLines articles about trolleys and railroads in Westfield.

The two of us pored over the book and your Westfield Historian had to admit that she learned something new that day. There are some very specific definitions and distinctions for what constitutes a “railroad” car, a “trolley” car, a “street” car, a “cable” car, a “light rail” car and so forth.

Most accurately, a trolley car operates on rails and is powered by electricity obtained via a pole and a wheel- or boot-device, called a trolley, that connects from the vehicle to overhead electric power lines. A street car is most often a trolley car, although originally street cars were drawn by horses, that usually runs on rails in the streets. A light rail has an off-street rail but is powered by electricity – sometimes overhead trolley-lines, sometimes via a third rail between the wheel rails that carries electricity. A cable car runs on tracks but is powered by a mechanically operated cable that runs beneath the street, between the rails. A trolley bus is operated on overhead trolley lines but runs on rubber tires, not rails. Any vehicle that is gasoline powered and does not run on rails, or is electric powered by battery and does not run on rails is NOT a trolley car. Railroad cars are drawn by steam engines or electric diesels.

So the JW & NW (Jamestown, Westfield, & North Western) was originally a steam railway which started as Chautauqua Lake Railroad from Jamestown, northward along the East side of Chautauqua Lake, and around the head of the lake and back south to Chautauqua Institution in 1890. It became the Jamestown, Chautauqua & Lake Erie Railroad (JC & LE) in 1901 as an extension was built between Mayville and Westfield that was completed and opened in 1903. Prior to this, in 1892, there was passenger service between CLR and Buffalo using what was commonly called the “Crosscut” – the Western NY and Pennsylvania RR (WNY & P) – that connected between the Buffalo-Erie (later NY Central) RR and Pittsburgh PA through Mayville.

In 1914, Broadhead, who owned/operated the Chautauqua Traction Company (CT) – an electrified trolley line that ran along the west side of Chautauqua Lake from Jamestown, to Mayville, to Westfield (1906), and to Barcelona (1909) – purchased the JC & LE, and proceeded to electrify that railroad. It was then a Trolley line carrying both passengers and freight between Jamestown and Westfield, and was renamed the JW & NW (Jamestown, Westfield, and North Western RR). Both the CT and the JW & NW trolleys connected at Westfield with the Buffalo and Lake Erie (B&LE) Trolley line between Erie PA and Buffalo NY.

One of the books by Kenneth Springirth at the History Fair was particularly pertinent to the discussion at hand – “ABC’s on the Rails.” Although promoted as an educational tool for young people, it is a fun read, and quite informative for rail-buffs of any age, including yours truly; so I purchased one. The entry for “B” – “B is for Boat Trolley” describes a boat-like looking trolley in Pittsburgh PA which runs on dry land. Interestingly, research in old Westfield Republicans for “trolley” before 1900 turned up an article from November 22 1893 about “Electric Power on Canals a Grand Success” that described the propulsion of commercial boats on the Erie Canal near Rochester NY using electric power via an overhead TROLLEY. Did this ever become a reality?