

Inside ...

Cousins build on their success at downtown Sterling store.

Bob Sondgeroth looks back on a lifetime of teachable moments.

Sterling DJ knows how important it is to be in tune with his clients

Plus ... Where Is It: Rock Falls — Casting the first stone.

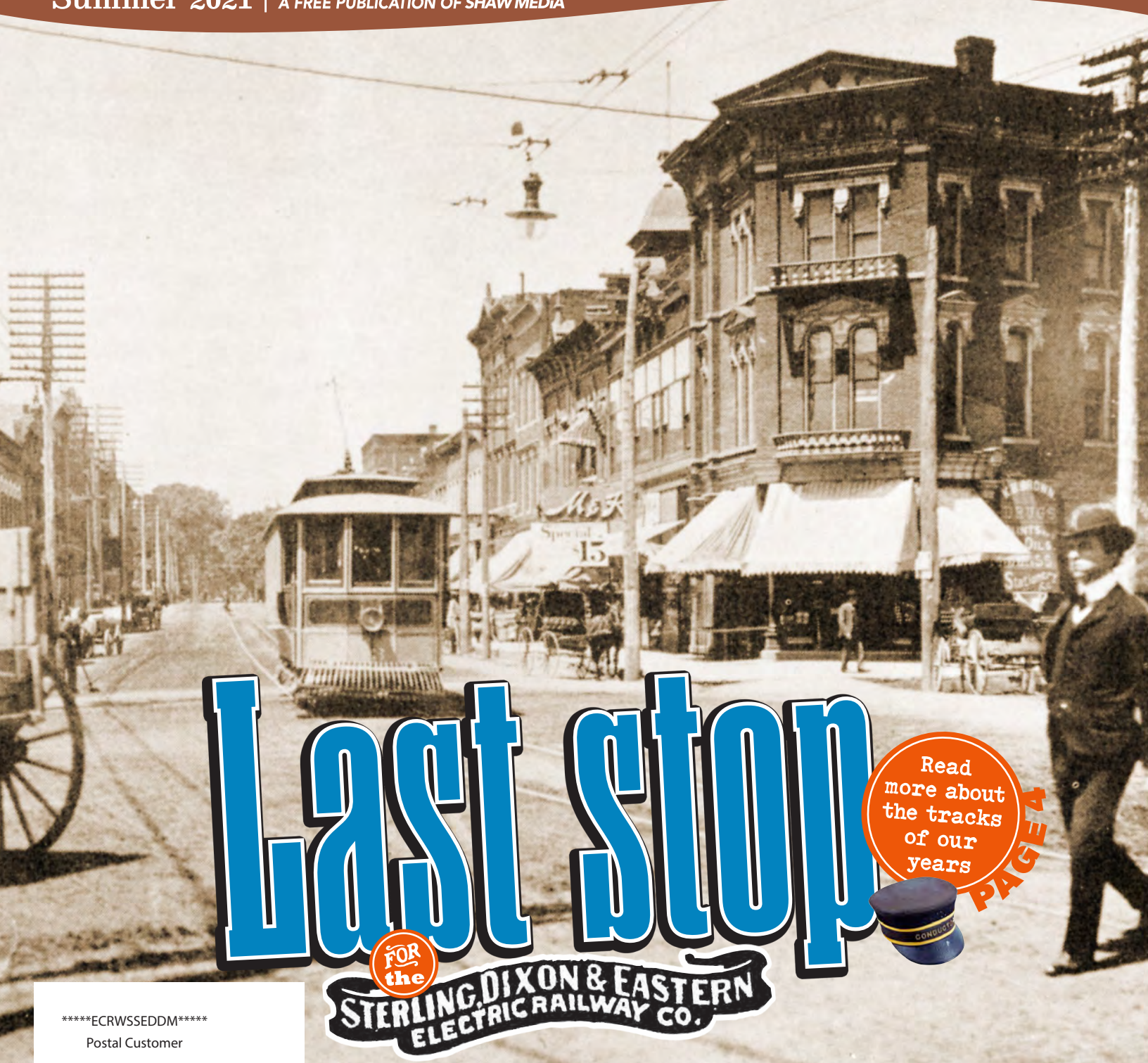
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Last stop

Read more about the tracks of our years

PAGE 4



FOR the

STERLING, DIXON & EASTERN
ELECTRIC RAILWAY CO.

*****ECRWSEDDM*****
Postal Customer

Last



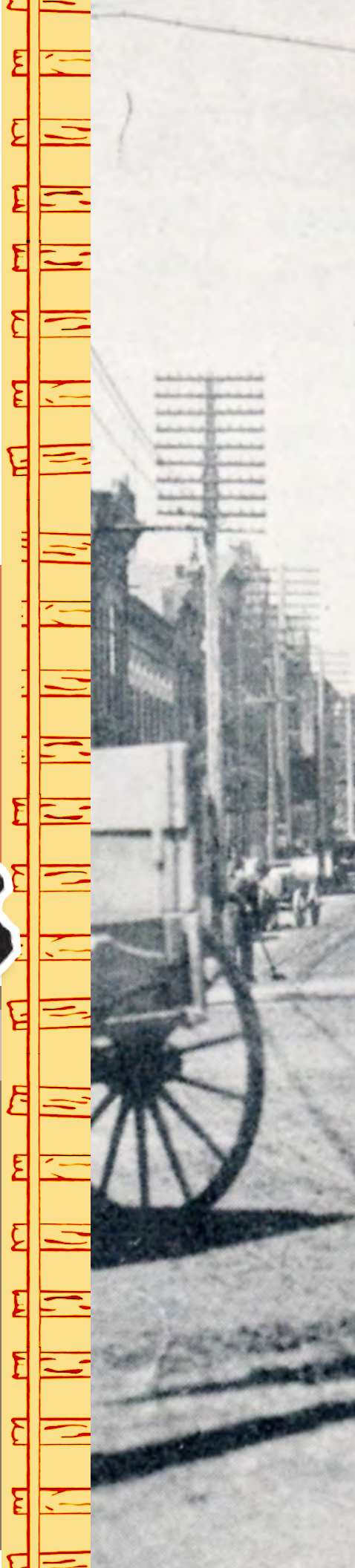
STOP

FOR
the

STERLING, DIXON & EASTERN
ELECTRIC RAILWAY CO.

DID YOU KNOW ...

Sterling and Dixon used to have an impressive track record — a railway system that could take riders around, and between, the two towns on some of *THE* “*MOST MAGNIFICENTLY AND LUXURIOUSLY EQUIPPED CARS*” *OF* *THEIR TIME*. But despite predictions that the public transportation system was here to stay, progress and profit loss derailed it, relegating it to little more than a fare to remember



The Sterling trolley, looking west on Third Street from Locust Street, circa 1915.

SOURCE: "THE STERLING, DIXON AND EASTERN ELECTRIC RAILWAY," PHILLIP KEISTER (1963)



GUEST COLUMN



Editor's note: This article was written by Dixon resident Tom Wadsworth, a writer, speaker, and a sixth-generation Dixonite. His background includes careers in ministry, broadcasting, corporate communications, and 20 years as the editor of a national trade magazine. He is currently completing a PhD in New Testament.

Virtually no one is alive today who remembers the famous interurban trolley line that ran between Dixon and Sterling from 1904 to 1925. Indeed, were it not for documentary evidence, you would be hard pressed to find any physical evidence of the line today.

When the seeds of the line were planted in 1903, public "electrification" was relatively new in the area, and automobiles were virtually nonexistent. So, the citizenry gladly welcomed the promise of fast and affordable transportation around town and to the neighboring city. Service was relatively reliable and safe; but in its 21 years, the trolley would also bring at least two grisly deaths.

Sterling-Rock Falls
LIVING
Cover story

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LAST STOP cont'd from page 5

It was sometimes called “the interurban” or “the streetcar,” but its proper name was the Sterling, Dixon, and Eastern Electric Railway, which we will abbreviate as the SD&E.

In May 1903, work began on the SD&E, a privately run enterprise that sought to serve the Dixon and Sterling population, which was about 7,000 to 8,000 in each city. Preparation work involved laying the tracks and stringing the electric trolley wires all the way from downtown Sterling to downtown Dixon, along with special spur lines to popular sites and entertainment venues.

Conductor “Boody” Anderson poses by Car No. 28, circa 1910. On the car, the letters, “S. D. & E. E. Ry. Co.” stand for “Sterling Dixon and Eastern Electric Railway Company.”

SOURCE: “THE STERLING, DIXON AND EASTERN ELECTRIC RAILWAY,” PHILLIP KEISTER (1963)

“Undoubtedly the best”

The Dixon-Sterling line was just one of hundreds sprouting up throughout America at the time. In the early 1900s, as many as 50 Illinois cities were launching or operating electric railways. Most of these cities were larger than Sterling or Dixon, but other, smaller towns had electric trolley service, including Amboy-Lee Center, Princeton, Ottawa, and Mount Vernon.

LAST STOP cont'd to pages 7 & 8

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SOURCE: "THE STERLING, DIXON AND EASTERN ELECTRIC RAILWAY," PHILLIP KEISTER (1963)

The trolley tracks on the Galena Avenue Bridge in Dixon, looking south, as seen in 1913. Note that the rails split into two lines so that two trolleys could run on the bridge at the same time.

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In its inaugural year of 1904, the local crowds using the interurban were reported as “very large,” and everyone was expecting a long and successful history. Sterling gave the SD&E a 50-year franchise, while Dixon’s franchise was eventually extended to 1960.

In 1904, the Telegraph gushed, “This service will undoubtedly be the best of any two cities in the country for their size.” The Sterling Gazette bragged that the SD&E cars were “undoubtedly the most magnificently and luxuriously equipped cars of any interurban railway with the exception of an Ohio line.”

In March 1906, a Telegraph story noted the rapid growth of interurbans nationwide, saying, “The interurban road has come to stay. There can be no doubt about this ... (because they are) of incalculable value in bringing into closer touch sections which hitherto have been isolated.”

A fleet of street cars

In 1903, the SD&E purchased nine cars, four for in-city use (two each in Sterling and Dixon) and five for interurban use between Sterling and Dixon. A typical interurban car cost \$8,000, measured 60 feet x 9 feet, weighed 10 tons, and carried 60 passengers. Initially, the four in-city cars carried 30 passengers each. Later models varied in dimensions and capacity.

Some of the cars had oak interiors, and featured a toilet, and a smoking section. Cars were also equipped with a “St. Louis

life-saver” fender that made it “utterly impossible for an individual to fall under the wheels of the car at the front end.” (See “Double Fatality” below.)

One car was a baggage car that would also deliver milk to Dixon’s Borden Condensed Milk factory on Palmyra Avenue. Each morning, local dairy farmers would bring their milk to the interurban, which then hauled it to the Borden factory northwest of Dixon.

Creating local jobs

At first, the company expected to hire 12 conductors and 12 motormen, but the total was later increased to 36. SD&E wages started at 17 cents an hour but by the 1920s had increased to 35 to 40 cents an hour.

The SD&E initially ran with two men on each car (a motorman and a conductor), but that was later reduced to one person per car. Instead of a conductor picking up fares, passengers would drop their nickels in a box at the front of the car.

SD&E management instructed its conductors to look each passenger in the face when collecting fares and to “not easily be bluffed.” Conductors were required to be gentlemanly and to keep their uniforms and cars clean, “but freshness of the part of the conductors will not be tolerated.” SD&E employees were prohibited from entering any saloon at any time.

LAST STOP cont'd to page 9

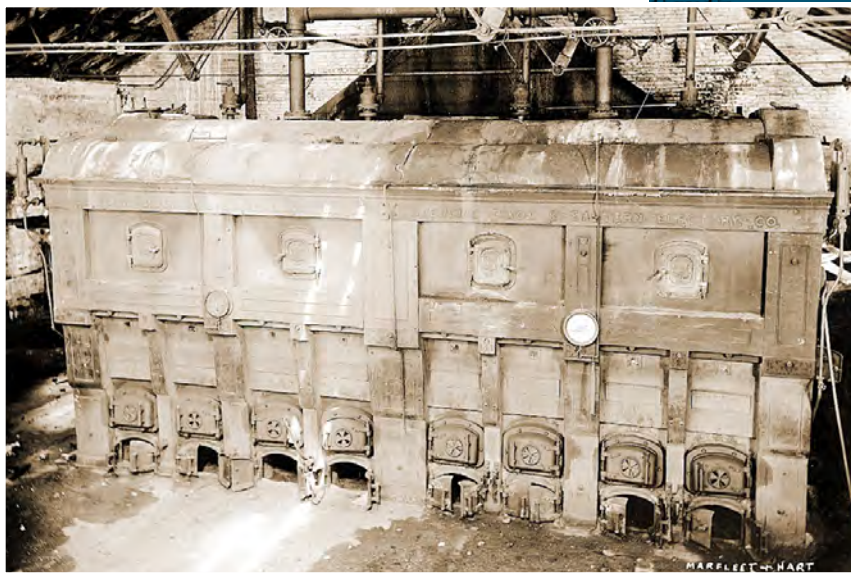
Passengers board a rail car along the SD&E rail system near Prairieville, between Sterling and Dixon. This photo is part of the Sterling-Rock Falls Historical Society collection. Go to <https://srfhs.com/> for more information on the group. The collection can be viewed at idallinois.org/digital/collection/stpl/search.



The infrastructure

Electricity to the trolleys was conveyed via wire suspended 18 to 23 feet above the street. The Galena Avenue bridge required additional steel girders and re-planking to handle the weight of the cars. Electric power came from the power station at the Dixon dam and from a Sterling power station.

The total length of the track was about 19 miles, which included about 14 miles of track from the Dixon post office to the Sterling post office. Between the city limits of the two cities, the interurban line maintained a 40-foot-wide right-of-way.



With the average rail car weighing 10 tons, and the biggest one clocking in at 24 tons, it took a lot of power to keep them moving. The powerhouse in Sterling, seen here in a 1923 photo, sat on the 100 block of 15th Avenue.

In Dixon, power came from a station at the Dixon dam. This photo,

taken by the Marfleet and Hart Photo Studio in Sterling, is part of the Sterling-Rock Falls Historical Society collection. Go to <https://srfhs.com/> for more information on the group. The collection can be viewed at idallinois.org/digital/collection/stpl/search.

The in-city routes

SD&E headquarters were originally in Sterling, but in 1907, the home office moved to Dixon. The main Sterling station was at Avenue B and West Third Street, where County Market's fuel pumps are today. The main Dixon station, which had an office, a waiting room, and a car barn, was located at West First and Madison, next to where Kitman's Lumber stands today. That car barn building later became the home of Northern Illinois Gas.

LAST STOP cont'd to page 11



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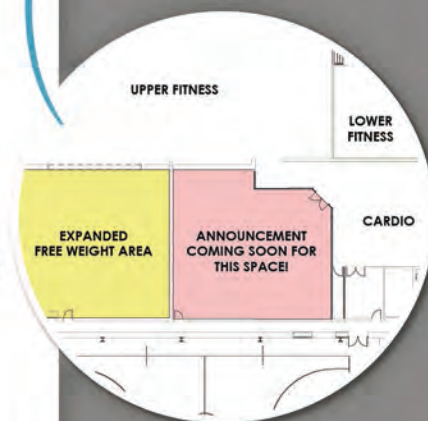
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Inside Dixon, the route ran from West First Street to Galena, then across the bridge to Fellows Street. From that point, the track went both east and west. To the east, additional track ran from Galena Avenue down East Fellows to the popular dome at Assembly Park. To the west, the track ran down Lincoln Way to Palmyra Avenue, in front of the Borden factory, then on to Sterling.

On the south side, an additional stretch of track was laid from West First Street to College Avenue to Sixth Street to Depot Avenue and then to the Chicago and Northwestern railroad depot station. In 1915, when Dixon landed the "Epileptic Colony" (a state school), an additional line was added on the north side, running from Fellows Street up Crawford Avenue (Brinton Avenue) to the colony, two miles to the north.

In Sterling, the route ran down East Fourth Street to Broadway, where it curved slightly south onto East Third Street toward downtown. The route weaved back onto Fourth Street at Avenue B on Sterling's west side and went west to its terminus just past Avenue L, passing the old Sterling hospital at Avenue I along the way.

The powerhouse in Sterling sat on the 100 block of 15th Avenue, a three-block spur ran there from the main line; this is now the site of Redfield Park. Another spur route went to Mineral Springs just off of Woodlawn Road; once the site of the resort and fair, but now is a quiet, wooded subdivision.



Rock Falls goes off the rails

Sterling had been an established city by the 1880s, while Rock Falls still was in its infancy a couple of decades after its founding. As the two were close, but different in size, the idea of merging the two communities was often brought up around the turn of the 20th century – mostly from Sterling folks.

One development that would have brought the two cities closer to one community was the ill-fated Union Street Railway of Sterling and Rock Falls. Established by the Sterling Gas and Electric Company in 1889, the line would have connected the downtown areas of both cities via the First Avenue Bridge, with a powerhouse located north of Riverside Cemetery in Sterling. The Rock Falls Electric Company was in charge of building the lines in its town, which ran along West Second Street (*the street is seen today in the photo above*).

P.T. Van Horne was in charge of drawing up designs for the line's buildings along the route; including a large hexagonal depot building near the corner of Locust and Third streets in Sterling, but that, along with the line itself, never came to fruition.

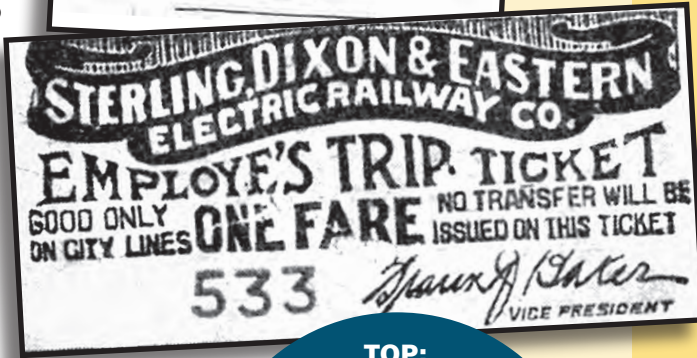
The line was supposed to have nine cars, each made at the Pullman Company in Chicago. However, the company could not afford a means to physically transfer the cars from the Chicago and North Western rail line in town to the powerhouse. Upon realization of this, the Union Street Railway ceased to exist.

The rails remained, and Sterling businessman John Charter once tested an experimental steam vehicle of his on the Rock Falls side of the line in 1890. Nothing came of that, however. After 4 years of non-use, the rails were removed. The removal was prompted by a buggy accident where it got stuck along the track and was hit by a runaway horse, injuring driver Maggie Wells – who successfully sued the City of Rock Falls and was awarded \$2,100 in damages.

– Cody Cutter

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TOP: The Interurban's Dixon schedule, as published in the Dixon Evening Telegraph, April 7, 1911. **BOTTOM:** An employee's trip ticket for the Sterling, Dixon & Eastern Electric Railway Co.

Car No. 23 makes its way down West First Street in Dixon, heading to/from the Chicago and Northwestern railway depot station in Dement Town, as seen here in this circa 1910 postcard.



LAST STOP cont'd from page 11

The between-city route

Between Sterling and Dixon, the track ran mostly along the south side of Palmyra Road, not along Route 2. The Palmyra route was one mile longer than a route that would have paralleled the river, but the northern route had the advantage of serving customers at Gap Grove (Palmyra) and Prairieville. The process of laying the rails between Dixon and Sterling took only three months, as the last spike was driven near Prairieville on Nov. 4, 1903.

The grand opening in May 1904 featured a band concert between the two cities at Oak Park at Gap Grove (probably near the intersection of Lenox and Palmyra roads). The gravel pit by Gap Grove (now known as Palmyra Quarry) supplied much of the needed gravel for the ballast foundation beneath the ties and rails.

Keeping on schedule

The interurban cars could reach speeds of 50 MPH on rural straightaways. Initially, the interurban cars were to leave Sterling for Dixon every hour on the hour. At one time, pay stations were located at downtown Dixon, Swissville (at the Borden milk factory), Gap Grove, Prairieville, Mineral Springs, and downtown Sterling. The in-city cars were expected to run every 15 minutes, while the Dixon-Sterling trip generally took 45 minutes to an hour.

Cars generally operated on a specific schedule from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. The fare from Dixon to Sterling was initially 25 cents but increased to 30 cents in 1910. For in-city rides, the fare was

a nickel but was increased to 8 cents in 1920. Children under 10 paid half fare, while “children in arms” could ride free, unless occupying their own seat.

Delayed by dresses?

To keep the cars running on time, passengers were asked to get on and off quickly. If a man was traveling with a woman, the man was urged to get off the car first so that he could assist the woman to the street.

“If the women get off first,” reported the Telegraph in 1904, “there is always some confusion, and the cars are invariably delayed.”

Imbibing and the Interurban

In the early 1900s, when the (anti-alcohol) temperance movement was raging, the voters of Sterling and Dixon vacillated between making their cities “wet” or “dry.” But when Dixon was dry and Sterling was wet, the interurban became even more popular. Dixonites could hop on the SD&E to Sterling for an evening of imbibing and then return safely to Dixon as the streetcar did the driving.

First accident

In December 1904, the SD&E’s first major accident took place when a city car and an interurban car smashed into each other at the north end of the Galena Avenue bridge. As was required, the city car was supposed to yield to the interurban car, but the city car’s brake was not working.

LAST STOP cont'd to page 14

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As cars became more commonplace during the 1920s, they competed for space on city streets with SD&E's rail cars, and accidents like this one – at the corner of Locust and Third streets in Sterling – would become inevitable. Other, more serious, accidents would also occur, including a double fatality in Sterling in 1923. This photo is part of the Sterling-Rock Falls Historical Society collection. Go to <https://srfhs.com/> for more information on the group. The collection can be viewed at idaininois.org/digital/collection/stpl/search.



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Both cars were damaged in the crash, with glass flying in every direction, but the only injury was to the motorman, Ned Stroup, whose shoulder was badly bruised. The other motorman was thrown into overturned cans of buttermilk on board. Both motormen were expected to be suspended for carelessness.

A double fatality

In May of 1923, a Sterling man and wife were killed in a horrific collision with the interurban. Mr. and Mrs. Lloyd Thompson, ages 47 and 45, were in the process of moving their belongings to a residence two miles east of Sterling, near the interurban tracks. It was there where they had both just entered their

“Dodge machine” to return to Sterling for another load.

With their view of the tracks partially obscured by a tree, and their hearing probably dampened by the noise of their own car, they pulled out directly in the path of the interurban car, which was going about 25 MPH. The 24-ton rail car, the largest interurban in the fleet, smashed into the couples’ car, crushing the Thompsons and their vehicle.

The newspaper bluntly reported that Mrs. Thompson’s head was “cruelly crushed and mangled and one foot severed.” Mr. Thompson, also crushed under the rail car, suffered “terrible internal injuries and with his back broken.” Within two hours, he was also dead.

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Another fatality

More bad news hit the interurban in February 1925, when two interurban cars on the Rockford-Freeport line collided and burst into flames at 45 MPH in foggy conditions. Two died and 11 were seriously injured. The motorman of one car was found crushed and it was reported that his “charred bits of flesh and clothing (were) frantically dragged from the burning car.”

Weather delays

The cars continued to run in winter, but heavy snow sometimes delayed service. After one heavy snowstorm in January 1910, it was reported that “a gang of twenty men” worked all day to shovel snow off the tracks nearly all the way from Dixon to Sterling. In January 1918, “monster snow drifts” were said to be as high as the cars. In 1923, blizzards paralyzed service for three full days, as blowing snow covered the tracks as quickly as shovelers could remove it.

In March 1919, heavy rains also affected interurban service. The water-soaked ties and spongy ground allowed the rails to spread easily, causing two cars to run off the tracks.

The inevitable emise

In 1903, when the massive SD&E project was under construction, little note was made of a man named Henry Ford, who started the Ford Motor Company in Detroit that year — but

within a few years, he was producing hundreds of thousands of his Model T automobiles. Annual production hit one million cars in 1921, and production continued to soar through the Roaring Twenties. By 1924, Ford’s mass production efficiencies brought the price of a Model T down to \$290, well within reach for the average American.

All this spelled defeat for the electric railway. By 1917, cars started to jam the streets, crowding out trolleys. After a paved highway (Alt. U.S. 30, the Lincoln Highway) was completed in 1920 along the same Palmyra Road route between Sterling and Dixon, interurban revenues began to plummet as more people bought cars.

Financial failure

At its peak of popularity, the SD&E carried 891,000 passengers in 1911. By 1924, that number plummeted to 239,000. Over its 21 years of service, the SD&E operated at a deficit in 12 of those years, and the deficits only got worse after 1917. In 1924, for example, the SD&E took in \$47,000, but expenses were \$91,000.

In addition to the loss of revenue, maintenance expenses continued to mount. About 6,500 ties had to be replaced in 1921, with 24,000 more in the next 2 to 3 years. Because of the struggles, the SD&E considered abandoning the service in 1921 and was urging Dixonites to “patronize the lines a little more liberally.” But the fate of the streetcar had already been sealed by the automobile.

LAST STOP cont'd to pages 16 & 17

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Wall-to-wall history

Among the several murals that take drivers and passersby in Sterling on a tour of the town's history are two that feature the SD&E, one of which is dedicated entirely to the inter-urban rail system. "The Sterling, Dixon and Eastern Railway" mural (top) was painted by Dan and Peter Sawatzky in 1995 and can be found at First Avenue and East Third Street.

According to the "The Murals of Sterling" brochure, the SD&E rail company obtained its ballast (the gravel that formed the trackbed for the railroad ties) from a gravel pit near Prairieville. As cars became more common and better roads were needed, the company would sell its gravel to road contractors, thereby helping to hasten its demise, as cars replaced the need for rail transport. The second mural to feature a railcar is "Old Downtown" (bottom), also complete by the Sawatzkys in 1995.

A portion of the mural at First Avenue and East Third Street shows a car traveling along East Third Street during the early 1900s





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The end of the line

In July 1925, the SD&E filed an application with the Illinois Commerce Commission to discontinue service. The application was quickly approved, and the glorious era of the Dixon-Sterling electric railway came to an end in October.

In memoriam, the Ashton Gazette aptly said that, when the service started, it “was hailed as the beginning of a new era, but the automobile has produced another new era.”

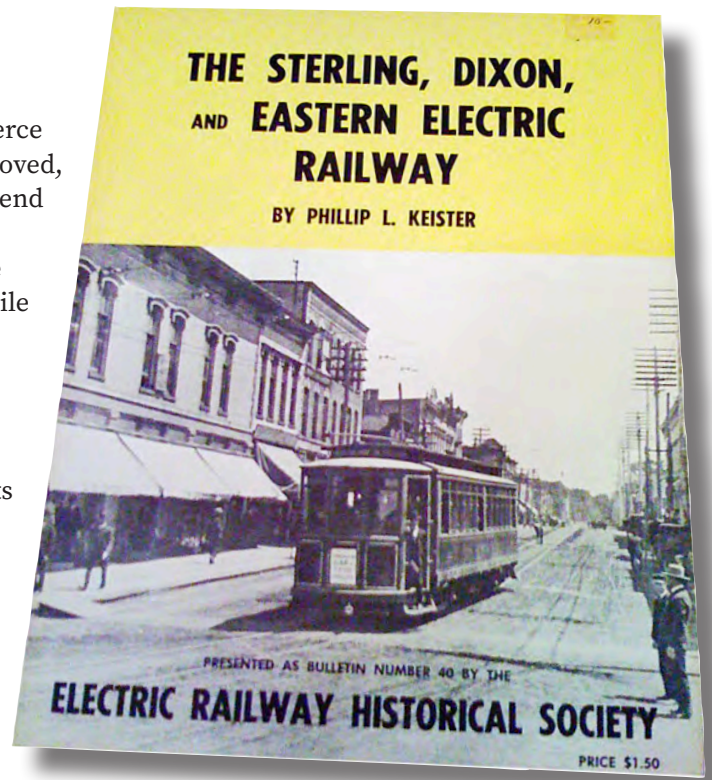
Lost memories

Memories of riding the SD&E now reside only with our deceased ancestors. If you were five years old and rode the interurban during its last year of operation, you would be 101 years old in 2021.

If you want to see where the SD&E route ran, drive out Palmyra Road through Gap Grove and Prairieville. Look for the electric power lines. For the most part, the interurban ran where those power lines now run.

To my knowledge, the only other physical evidence of the line is in the main hangar at Walgreen Field. When you walk in the hangar, look up. In 1934, the hangar’s roof rafters were built with discarded steel rails from the SD&E.

Author’s note: The sources for this story are dozens of articles in local newspapers from 1903 to 1935 as well as Phillip L. Keister’s 28-page booklet, “The Sterling, Dixon, and Eastern Electric Railway” (seen at right) published by the Electric Railway Historical Society in 1963. For more info, see the files at the Lee County Historical and Genealogical Society at 113 S. Hennepin in Dixon. ■



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