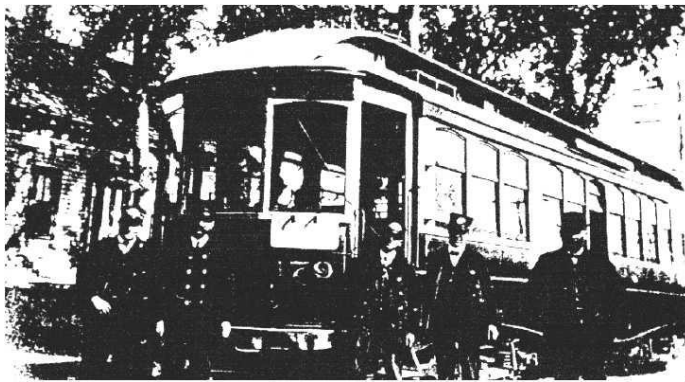


The Scarborough Trolleys

By Frank Hodgdon

The recent revival of a bus line between Knightville in South Portland and the Maine Mall brought to mind the highly efficient transportation network which served the residents of greater Portland, Scarborough included, about a hundred years ago at the last turn of the century. Instead of the stifling diesel fumes emitted by the present-day public vehicles, a sophisticated system of electric cars whisked people at high speed to their destinations without polluting the atmosphere or adding to the gridlock of the roadways, since they largely ran on their own roadbeds, except in the downtown area.

Electric cars replaced the old horse-car lines which had operated since the 1860s, soon after a man named Frank J. Sprague of New York developed the first practical means of transferring electric current into motors which applied direct traction to the wheels of trolley cars after capturing the current from a system of overhead wires or "trolleys" via a flexible spring-loaded pole or antenna. This technology allowed subways to be built in major metropolitan areas and



came to Portland in 1895 to power the surface transportation system, which revolutionized the way people lived.

Trolley lines were extended in all directions from the Portland "hub" and by 1910 it was possible, by hopping aboard connecting lines, to ride trolleys all the way to Philadelphia heading South and all the way to Bangor and beyond heading North. The line connecting

Portland with Old Orchard, Saco, Biddeford, and points south was built in 1901. A car barn was built at Dunstan Corner, the midpoint of the Saco Division line, because in the early days direct current could only be transmitted a distance of some ten miles without losing sufficient voltage to interfere with operations. The Dunstan car barn housed four to six trolleys which left on their first run of each day starting at 5:30 a.m., one car toward Portland, one toward Saco, and one toward Old Orchard Beach. A battery shed was located adjacent to the car barn to provide added "boost" at the end of the DC power lines.

The main line followed U. S. Route One on its westerly side from Lincoln Street at Main Street in Ligonias over Thornton Heights, through Oak Hill, across the great Marsh to the car barn at Dunstan, where at a junction immediately in front of today's Pride Motel, one line made a left turn down the Old Blue Point Road to the famous iron S-trestle which carried the cars over both Stuart's Brook and the Portland, Saco, and Portsmouth railroad right-of-way to follow Portland Avenue through Milliken's Mills into downtown Old Orchard Beach; the line straight ahead followed U.S. Route One through Saco, under the PS&P railroad overpass and up Goosefare Hill

to connect with the already existing Saco line near the present-day interchange which carries turnpike traffic to Old Orchard Beach.

A generator house was built in 1911 adjacent to the car barn, at which time the conversion was made from DC current to alternating or AC current, after which the batteries were no longer needed. Both the battery shed and car barn were phased out in 1916 and moved to St. John Street across from the main car barn, which today is the metro bus facility. Both of these structures are still there today hiding under a new mantle of siding and serving as retail outlets. The 1911 car barn at Dunstan now houses the Scarborough Historical Society.

The trolleys ran with amazing frequency in their brief heyday. Bill Robertson, in his book "Remember The Portland Maine Trolleys," cited a timetable from 1915 which shows Saco and Old Orchard Beach cars leaving Monument Square in Portland via Congress and St. John Streets for Oak Hill, Dunstan, and Saco at 6:15 am and 6:45 am, and then every 30 minutes until 9:15 p.m., then again at 10 pm, 11 pm, and 11:30 pm from Thornton Heights. The cars left Saco for Portland at 5:45 am, 6:15 am, and 6:45 am, then every 30 minutes until 10:15 pm, then again at 11 pm, and 12 midnight from Biddeford. (The early morning runs were omitted on Sundays only). There were also more frequent runs from Dunstan to Saco and from Dunstan to Portland.

Many of the motormen on these runs were Scarborough residents, among them the late Fred McNeil of Pleasant Hill and Clinton Higgins of the Pine Point Road. Higgins, by the way, was motorman on the final run when all trolley service was abandoned on May 14, 1941.

Once roadways were paved (Route One in 1916) and began to be plowed rather than rolled in wintertime, autos began to displace the trolley almost as rapidly as the trolley had replaced the horse car. The line between Thornton Heights and Saco was abandoned on April 16, 1932, one day after the Portland Railroad Company received notification from the Highway Commission that it would be forced to relocate its tracks in order to facilitate the widening of Route One through Saco, a project devised to create jobs in the early years of the depression. Service to Old Orchard Beach ceased the following day. The line from Old Orchard to Saco continued for one additional year.

The former generator house at Dunstan was deeded to the town, which used it for a time as a fire barn before it was used as a civil defense post, as a home to the Lion's Club, and ultimately as the Museum of the Scarborough Historical Society starting in 1961.

Tragically, not a single car of the Portland trolley system survived to join the ranks of the Seashore Trolley Museum. Every last one was junked and burned in an orgy of destruction in a salvage yard out back of the Stevens Avenue Car Barn--better known today as the Stevens Avenue Armory. Fortunately, a number of photographs and even movies survive showing these red and cream-colored conveyances in the course of their rounds at speeds of more than 50 mph on the straightaways, bearing their precious cargoes from the suburbs to the downtown hub to work, to shop, and transact the business of daily life.