

Transportation and Urban Expansion

Americans have always had a fascination with transportation. The United States “get up and go” attitude has been in place throughout our history. From the “Manifest Destiny” pioneers to the Moon landing, the United States has always been evolving with new technologies.

This narrative will divide the history of transportation in Muncie into three different periods, pre-gas boom, gas boom, and the Middletown stage. In the years before 1886 Muncie was in the pre-gas boom era, a time in which most of Muncie’s citizens were working in agriculture.

To get to town from farms the main mode of “inter-urban” transportation during this time was the typical horse or basic foot traffic. Carts, buggies, and coaches pulled by horses were also popular during this time of limited mobility (Griner 1). Because of this limited mobility Muncie was a semi-isolated town in the fairly new state of Indiana, formerly known as the Northwest Territory. The roads in Muncie were primitive at best. Other than the very few paved roads most were pure dirt. During rainy periods the roads turned to traps of mud and in dry stretches the streets turned into pure dust (Griner 1).

Then, in 1852 a new technology would find its way to Muncie and forever influence the outlook and growth of the city, the railroad (Abel 6). Shortly after, Muncie’s first Railroad depot was completed and the railroad line became known as the “Bee line” that ran from Indianapolis to Muncie. This line eventually came to serve Cleveland, Columbus, Cincinnati, and St. Louis, earning another name as the “Big Four” and the depot in Muncie, rebuilt in 1883, gained the name “Union Station” (Abel 14). The railroad facilitated travel between major cities in the Midwest, the transportation of goods, and the population growth of Muncie. However, the true implications and benefits would not be realized until a cloudy day in November 1886.

On that day, after a couple months of drilling, the “Muncie Exploring Company” hit a vast deposit of natural gas and the first Muncie gas well was lit. The discovery of this gas would be the division point between the city’s agricultural past and the industrial future (Griner vii, 13). After gas was discovered, industry and population in Muncie took off. In the 1885 census the population was just over eight thousand, then in 1895 that number had grown to just over sixteen thousand and in just five short years after that to around twenty-one thousand (Griner 39). Along with this population came new businesses, new money, and new neighborhoods.

Jams Boyce, one of Muncie’s leading businessmen, saw the potential of creating a new neighborhood. Boyce bought 154 acres of land on the east side of the city and laid out a suburb to be known as Boyceton (Griner 18). Because of the population boom it was becoming increasingly difficult to live near downtown. Eventually, new neighborhoods and suburbs formed with the help of new modes of public transportation. “In 1887 proposals were made for the construction of seven or eight miles of a street railway, whose cars would pass a scheduled point as often as every fifteen minutes for a cost of five cents per passenger.” The tracks however were not completed until 1890 when the first steam-powered cars were in operation. The cars could sit seventy persons comfortably and featured open-air sides in the summer and closed cars in the winter. Because of this new technology the development of the suburbs was more feasible, downtown could easily be united with these outer lying residential areas. These cars provided cheap transportation and

were the first mechanical vehicles to ever be used in Muncie's city streets (Griner 68,69).

In 1900 these streetcars were scrapped and replaced by bigger ones with a capacity of seating one hundred and fifty people. Unfortunately, these streetcars had made the streets of Muncie more dangerous. The combination of these massive mechanical vehicles with the traffic of horses and carriages proved hazardous when one of Muncie's most prominent men, Mr. Thomas Neely, fell onto the tracks and was hit by one of the streetcars (Griner 74).

These earliest trolleys ran six lines in total to different suburbs. Avondale, Congerville, Heeken Park, Industry, Whitely, and the West Side also known as Normal City were all connected to downtown Muncie by this marvelous convenience. (Masing 25). During the hot summers these cars had removable sides, allowing a cool breeze to wash over the passengers who had paid their five-cent fare (Masing 24). The I.U.T. Station downtown housed the trolley cars overnight until it was demolished in 1959 to make way for a J.C. Penney department (Masing 15).

The Citizen's Street Railroad, (the streetcar company), provided many services to the general population to events such as banquets at the Elks, patriotic festivals, and other events, sometimes for a discounted rate (Griner 50,57,65)

Vehicles were also used as entertainment and sport during the gas boom years. The young people of Muncie had wagon parties in the summer and sleighing parties in the winter. Trolley parties were also popular and encouraged by the streetcar company. The car would be decorated elaborately, refreshments would be served, and the guests would enjoy being whisked around the city (Griner 62). Also during this time, bicycling became popular in Muncie. Cycling gave the rider freedom of movement that was previously unknown, it was faster than walking and easier to control than riding a horse. Bicycle clubs were organized by the wealthier populace, as they were quite expensive at this time, and people would gather during the evenings to take rides together. The livery stables did not take nicely to the bicycling fad as many owners thought the new invention would threaten their businesses (Griner 35-37).

After the decline of the Gas Boom era, Muncie went through a lot of changes. Muncie had many signs of a modern city including, a new city hall, sanitary system and paved roads that came with the consumerism of the car (Hoover 25). In the 1920's America had become obsessed with the automobile, and that obsession found its way to Muncie. During this decade the automobile contributed economically to Muncie through manufacturing and the growth of auxiliary services. The skilled labor already residing in Muncie made the city a prime place for automobile building. By 1923 there were approximately 9,721 privately owned passenger cars in Muncie (Hoover 48, 49). Estimates figure out to about ten different brands of cars being made in Muncie before 1930, none of these brands survive today. Among the most prominent brands of these locally produced cars were the Durants and the Stars. The Durants were heavily photographed and can be seen through the Middletown photographs. During this time the automobile became a firm fixture in the lives of Munsonians. Families sat for pictures beside them, wives said they would sacrifice food to keep them, and it was more likely for a family to own a car than a bathtub (Hoover 49). Muncie's physical surroundings also changed with the introduction of supporting services for automobiles such as gas stations. These early stations offered more than just gasoline, services often included having car parts available for purchase on site (Hoover 51).

After the Middletown era Muncie would develop other public transportation systems, mainly bus lines like the MITS we see today, but the automobile would remain most Munsonians main mode of transportation.

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