

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

BOISE VALLEY ELECTRIC RAILROADS

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A mere two years after Frederick Sprague had installed a practical electric streetcar system in Richmond, Virginia, Boise chartered a street railway company on May 28, 1890. Service commenced a little more than a year later, with additional miles of track laid to reach newer parts of town during a period of rapid community expansion. Finally in 1905, construction began on new lines designed to connect Boise, Nampa, Caldwell, and other commercial centers and farming areas. Eventually consolidated into a single system, Boise Valley's interurban rail service continued for two decades before cars became so popular that traffic declined and operation became unprofitable.

More than one interurban company sought to function after 1905, and some were competitive. One (Boise and Interurban Railway) approached Caldwell in 1906 along a valley route through Eagle, Star, and Middleton, while another built toward Nampa. After more than a year of preparation, Boise and Interurban Railway service commenced to Caldwell August 16, 1907. Facilities included power substations at Pierce Park and Middleton (both still standing), a large car barn at Pierce Park, depots in Caldwell and Boise, a freight interchange track with the Oregon Short Line Railroad at Caldwell, and small way stations or shelters at one- to two-mile intervals along the route. A new Boise depot was built in 1910 at Seventh and Bannock. Interurban cars stopped inside this depot, which had a passenger waiting room and an express office. Limited freight service was provided between Boise and Caldwell, primarily to agriculturally oriented industries. City streetcars were added in Boise on a loop called the "belt line" which ran north on Tenth and Fifteenth streets to Dewey and back on Eighteenth.

Meanwhile Boise Valley Railway was laying track up Fairview hill to Ustick Road, which it followed until the rail line curved south into Nampa. This line was later relocated through Meridian. An effort to reach Caldwell failed during a national financial panic that halted construction in 1908, but local Boise passenger service was added along Fairview to Cole School. Another branch went to Hillcrest and South Boise, where carbarns were located on Rossi, one block west of Broadway.

After Pittsburgh capitalists consolidated both interurban companies with their power-generating facilities at Swan Falls, Salmon Falls, and Shoshone Falls into the Idaho Traction Company,

a Nampa-Caldwell connection was completed in 1912. A popular Sunday-afternoon pastime was to ride the interurban cars around the entire loop. Schedules sometimes were as frequent as thirty minutes, but ninety-minute service was more common. All intercity trips began and ended at the depot at Seventh and Bannock streets, in the shadow of the new state capitol. When Idaho Power Company was formed in 1916, Boise Valley's interurban electric system was included in that merger.

Another independent interurban company, the Caldwell Traction Company, operated two routes from downtown Caldwell. One ran west to Wilder and consisted of leasing and electrifying the Oregon Short Line branch. Another ran south to Huston and on to the Snake River at Marsing's ferry with a branch to Lake Lowell. Never a paying proposition, this system operated for only seven years, 1915-1922. Shortly after that, other electric railroads also became unprofitable. One by one, city lines were replaced by buses. Finally electric service to South Boise and Nampa-Caldwell was discontinued on May 26, 1928. Several freight customers formed a company to operate freight trains on part of the former interurban trackage. Called the Boise and Western, this railroad ran one old steam locomotive as far as Star along State Street, and several miles west of Boise beyond Ustick. This limited operation lasted for several years. Following abandonment, intercity tracks were eventually dismantled, but most Boise trackage was merely paved over and forgotten. Occasionally, however, these rails and ties reappear through the paving to remind us of Boise Valley's early transportation network.

Prepared by Bill Dougall