

[Send to Printer](#)[<< Back to Article](#)

Commentary

Antero Pietila: Streetcars past and present

Antero Pietila

2008-06-25 07:00:00.0

Current rank: *Not ranked*

BALTIMORE -

If you ask me, life as we know it is ending, except Americans don't realize it yet. The reasons are legion. The global economic balance of power is shifting, with BRIC countries — Brazil, Russia, India and China — flexing muscles. With the high price of gasoline, a serious scientific-industrial scramble is on to find an alternative. One way or another, the future is likely to look very different.

This upheaval will force us to change our lifestyles. Homes in neighborhoods with access to mass transit will command a premium. The Red Line — from Woodlawn to Patterson Park — may in fact become a reality.

State officials have yet to decide the mode of the Red Line — light rail or bus. Either way, we can wonder how much progress we have made because a perfectly workable public transit system existed in Baltimore for a hundred years until the mid-1950s.

We know how streetcars and trolleys disappeared: Buses took over.

But we don't quite know why. Was it indeed corporate collusion that killed streetcars, as some conspiracy theorists insist? Or was it just a consequence of inevitable technological change?

In any event, until the mid-1950s a dense network of streetcars and trolley lines ran through downtown to the suburbs, linking and binding together the Baltimore region.

Reliance on public transportation only increased during World War II, when gasoline and tire rationing forced residents of all social and economic backgrounds to ride streetcars and trolleys.

Once the privations ended, Baltimoreans could choose. And choose they did. In 1948, ridership on Baltimore Transit Co. streetcars and trolleys declined by 9.9 percent.

The next year, it went down by 20.4 percent; by 28.3 percent in 1950 and by a further 34.2 percent in 1951. The transit company responded by cutting routes and raising fares, and then cutting some more. Such measures did not help.

During that time, control of the transit company passed to National City Lines, a holding company with streetcar operators in more than 100 U.S. cities.

Owned by General Motors, Firestone Tire, Standard Oil of California and Phillips Petroleum, NCL scrapped electric streetcars, replacing them with buses manufactured by GM and equipped with Firestone tires. Those buses consumed plenty of fuel, which the two oil company partners were happy to sell.

Unexplained operational difficulties preceded the bus substitution on popular streetcar lines. The Maryland Public Service Commission cited the No. 8 streetcar line as the most egregious example.

The line connected Baltimore County's county seat, Towson, with downtown and the western suburb of Catonsville. No. 8 was so popular it carried 10 percent of the entire transit system's passenger load.

Mysteriously, in the early 1950s the No. 8 line's vaunted reliability faltered. Instead of arriving at predictable intervals, streetcars came late and in clumps, leading to charges they blocked traffic and caused congestion. Critics howled that

streetcars should be banned. Traffic planners concurred. The last streetcars ended service on Nov. 3, 1963. Commuters switched to cars — a lucrative alternative for NCL investors.

Streetcars and trolleys survive in some U.S. cities and retain their popularity in Europe. In my native Helsinki, Finland, 11 streetcar routes serve the downtown area of a city slightly smaller in population than Baltimore.

Because they run frequently, a single car is often enough to do the job, instead of the unwieldy three- or four-car trains Baltimore operates.

The going has been tough in recent years, though, because modern equipment is unreliable.

Helsinki has no funeral car, as Baltimore once did. Instead care is taken of the living in a pub car where passengers can ride nursing a beer.

Antero Pietila is a Baltimore Examiner columnist. He can be reached at hap5905@hotmail.com.

Examiner