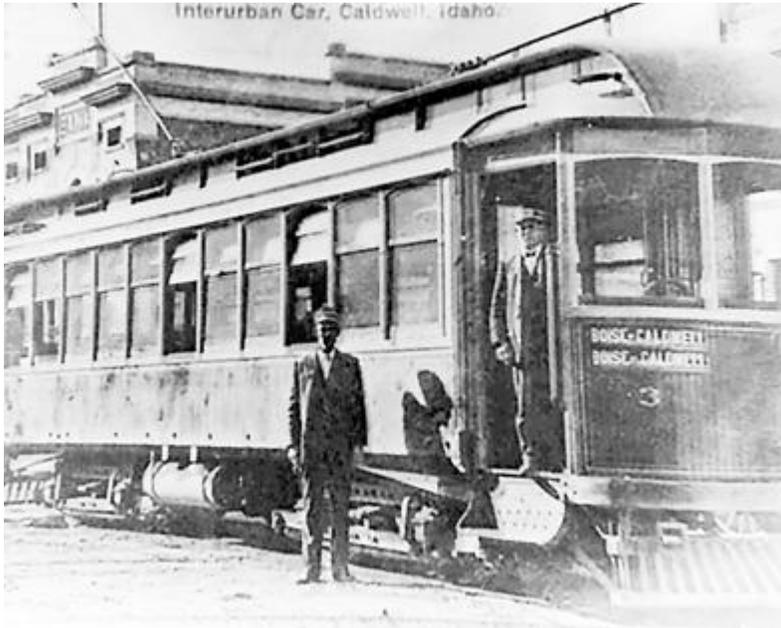


Looping the loop

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Caldwell-Boise connector linked Treasure Valley communities

CALDWELL — More than 100 years ago, a light rail system linked all the major communities in the Treasure Valley (then called the Boise Valley). Early town promoters and real estate developers saw the wisdom — and profit — in connecting growing communities with a quick and affordable mode of transportation.

Caldwell's beginnings provide a good example of the important role transportation networks played in community development. The town was platted in 1882 by Robert Strahorn, an advance man for the Oregon Shortline Railroad, and his associates.

The Oregon Shortline linked the Union Pacific Railroad to the Pacific Northwest, but bypassed Boise City, which would not receive a direct rail link until 36 years later. The Caldwell townsite boomed because of its proximity to the railroad, much to the anger of Boise's prominent citizens.

Soon settlers and businesses moved from other Boise Valley communities, as well as from all across the United States, to take advantage of Caldwell's new railhead status.

Boiseans, not to be outdone by Caldwellites, began developing an electric rail system in the 1890s. These investors were aware of the profitable development of the first electric streetcars in major U.S. cities. Boise Valley's electric trolleys ran first along city streets and were later extended to suburban additions such as Pierce Park and Collister.

By 1905, plans were made to expand the electric railway system to Caldwell and Nampa. Two different Boise-based railway companies competed to complete "interurban" lines to the west end of the valley.

The Boise and Interurban Railway laid tracks through Eagle, Star and Middleton. Its railway system reached Caldwell in 1907.

Its competitor, The Boise Valley Railway, developed its route on the other side of the Boise River. It extended up Fairview Hill to Ustick Road, then curved south into Nampa. This line was later relocated through Meridian.

Eventually, a Pittsburgh investment company bought several southern Idaho electric power plants and the two Boise electric railway lines. The lines were consolidated and renamed the Idaho Traction Company.

The new company finished laying tracks between Nampa and Caldwell, creating a valley-wide interurban "loop" system by 1912.

The loop was widely used by passengers for practical reasons and for pleasurable outings. Students from Boise City and the surrounding area could commute to the College of Idaho, which had a new campus on Cleveland Boulevard. Others planned sightseeing tours on the weekends along the route.

On a good day, "looping the loop" could be completed in less than two hours. Small stations and covered shelters were constructed at numerous stops along the loop. In the Caldwell area, one stop near the Boise River was called Canyon Station. Passengers would disembark there and enjoy a picnic at nearby Curtis Park. Another stop was located on the College of Idaho campus. It was first called "The Eaves" and later called "The Hat."

The Caldwell Interurban Railroad Company, an independent electric railway, was formed around 1907-1908. The Caldwell company leased the track built by the Bureau of Reclamation to carry freight and equipment for construction of the Deer Flat Reservoir (later called Lake Lowell).

After the dam was completed, the company's name was changed to the Caldwell Traction Company. Its owners electrified and extended the spur to Marsing. Freight and agricultural products raised in the Deer Flat and Sunnyslope areas, as well as passengers, were carried on this line.

Walter and Charles Sebree, sons of pioneer Caldwell businessman Howard Sebree (for whom Sebree Park is named), invested in this development. Walter became president of the Caldwell Traction Company, and Charles built a dance pavilion near the reservoir. The pavilion was completed in 1913, and Charles planned to build a hotel there to make Lake Lowell into a "destination" resort. Though locally popular, the spur line and the pavilion eventually proved to be unprofitable.

The Caldwell Traction Company also operated an electric railway line that ran from downtown Caldwell along Kimball Avenue to Wilder. The Oregon Shortline Railroad leased an existing steam engine line to The Caldwell Traction Company, which then electrified the rails. At the height of its operation, the Wilder line included five trips a day for passengers and one trip a day for freight.

In a few years, however, new and affordable transportation technology spelled the end for electric railroad lines in the Boise Valley. Mass production made the automobile available to more people, and trucks took over the business of hauling freight. By 1920, the Caldwell Traction Company defaulted on its lease of the Wilder stub and the Oregon Short Line returned it to its original use as a railroad line.

The Caldwell Traction Company ceased operations altogether in 1924 when it closed the Lake Lowell line. The Idaho Traction Company, also struggling financially, ended electric rail service on the valley "Loop" in 1928. By that time the Union Pacific railroad had constructed a railroad line

near Boise and motorized buses began to provide public transportation.

In the 21st century, with Treasure Valley's population booming, explosive growth is taking its toll on the area's antiquated road systems. As the costs of gasoline and new cars continue to climb, local leaders discuss the idea of a "new" public transit system to serve the valley.

They would do well to study the advantages and pitfalls of the electric railways that connected southwestern Idaho communities a century ago.

Note: The authors would like to credit previous research of this topic done by Lorene Thurston, Elaine Leppert, Jennie Cornell, Bill Dougall and Thornton Waite.