

VANCOUVER'S GLORY YEARS



PUBLIC TRANSIT
1890-1915

HEATHER CONN
HENRY EWERT

FOREWORD BY MAYOR LARRY CAMPBELL



ing: some chivalrous conductors escorted female passengers home at night between stops; streetcars delivered bundles of daily newspapers to streetcorner news boys; vehicles delivered prescriptions from pharmacists; young couples on a date could flirt and travel to trysts without a chaperone; and conductors chatted with passengers and brought groceries to at-home housewives. Friendliness, warmth and camaraderie between staff and passengers of streetcars and interurbans seemed to dominate, despite a depression, ever-increasing competition for dwindling fares and a large drop in transit popularity.

Today, such informal, folksy connections seem like a lost art in our impersonal, high-speed world of daily urban travel. One observer commented about Vancouver's bus system in the late 1970s: "Camaraderie between operator and passengers is sadly lacking. Everyone seems insulated against his fellow being. Glumness prevails. We seem to be suffering from New Yorkitis – a dreadful disease."⁴

By 1913 to 1915, the sizzle of the previous two decades had disappeared and everything – jobs, businesses, homes, families, transportation methods, street railway vehicles – was threatened. Survival, rather than huge success, shaped decisions for the future. The razzle-dazzle was over – it was time to regroup and recover.

Vancouver's Hobble Skirt Car: "It will prove one of the greatest enemies of the limousine and taxicab"

In the city's early days, when less than a handful of rough, open-air streetcars teetered along utilitarian tracks, a sleek, low-floor vehicle designed and built to accommodate women's fashion would have seemed loony. But within about two decades, the glamorous "hobble skirt car" with low-slung lines did indeed appear on Vancouver streets. Critics could argue it was all style, no substance, but this trendy piece of equipment symbolized the quick transformation of the city and its public transit. Fuelled by visions of grandeur, pre-war Vancouver demanded more than bare functionality in its buildings, and also required public vehicles to be top of the line.

The city introduced its first "stepless" car on March 18, 1913. Known as a "dragon" in California and a "public welfare" car in New York, it cleared the rails by a mere seven inches (18 cm). Women who wore long, constrictive hobble skirts, which limited their stride to only 12 inches (30 centimetres), could easily board





BARE CALVES AND ALL – A woman boards an open-air streetcar in the U.S. in 1913, the same year that the hobble skirt car appeared in Vancouver. This flashing of bare legs was considered risqué for the times.

PHOTO SOURCE: LC 230516

The plight of lady passengers

Women rarely appear in transit-related photos or documents from Vancouver's glory years, even though they rode streetcars and interurbans every day. But they do receive mention as "lady passengers" in a B.C. government report on transit-related accidents between 1911 and 1915, where various women are impatient or headstrong, stride on and off still-moving vehicles, suffer nervous shock, have their dress torn, or receive cuts and scratches, bruises, sprains and other minor injuries.

A few wind up with broken ribs or end up unconscious after falling from a streetcar or interurban. One unfortunate woman has a miscarriage after a fall while boarding. Another emerges unscathed but with a lost purse and earrings following a 1911 collision between interurbans 1007 and 1011. Another female passenger in the same accident is reportedly shaken up and has her umbrella broken.⁸

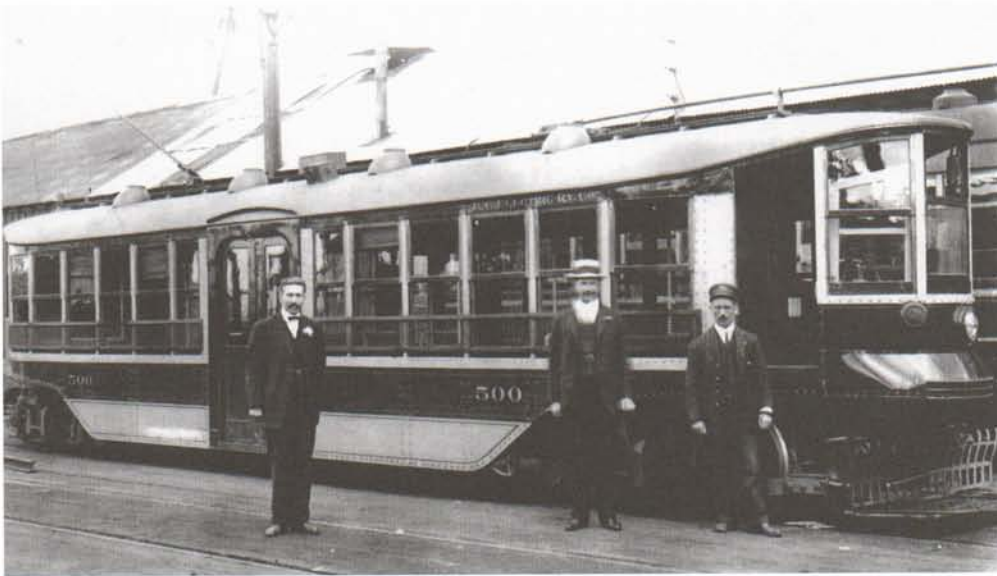
Yet another woman saves the day with her hairpin, as reported in a separate incident around 1913. The only passenger riding on the Oak Street line, she provides assistance when the vehicle loses electrical current and stops. One account states: "Acceding to the motorman's request, she graciously surrendered her hairpin, and with its help, the car regained its spark and proceeded without further mishap to its destination."⁹

the car. Fashionable females no longer had to suffer torn seams or the impropriety of hoisted hems. They could board "without trepidation, a stepladder and a screen . . . [and] without the fear of a hundred curious eyes," announced the March 19, 1913, edition of *The Vancouver Sun*.

Car 500 made its "delightful" trial trip a day earlier. More than two dozen prominent women in furs and finery joined dignitaries such as B.C. Electric general manager R.H. Sperling and his wife on the "lady's street car." It left the Carrall Street interurban station for an afternoon outing and travelled over the Fairview line to English Bay, with passengers treated to "dainty tea and ices" on the return trip. *The Vancouver Sun* reported on March 19, 1913: "[T]he unanimous opinion of all those aboard was that the car is here to stay and that it will prove one of the greatest enemies of the limousine and taxicab, which came into such vogue when the tight skirt was decreed."

The hobble skirt car came into service the same day as another marketing triumph – the first women's edition of *The Vancouver Sun*. Two hundred genteel matrons peddled thousands of copies of the special issue on street corners and rode "bannered automobiles" to promote its sales. The "Women's Extra," written, edited and distributed by women, sold out in three hours and had a successful second printing the same day. As a fundraiser for construction of a downtown "women's building," this neophyte news section "was a success unprecedented in the work of club women in Canada," reported *The Vancouver Sun* on March 20, 1913.

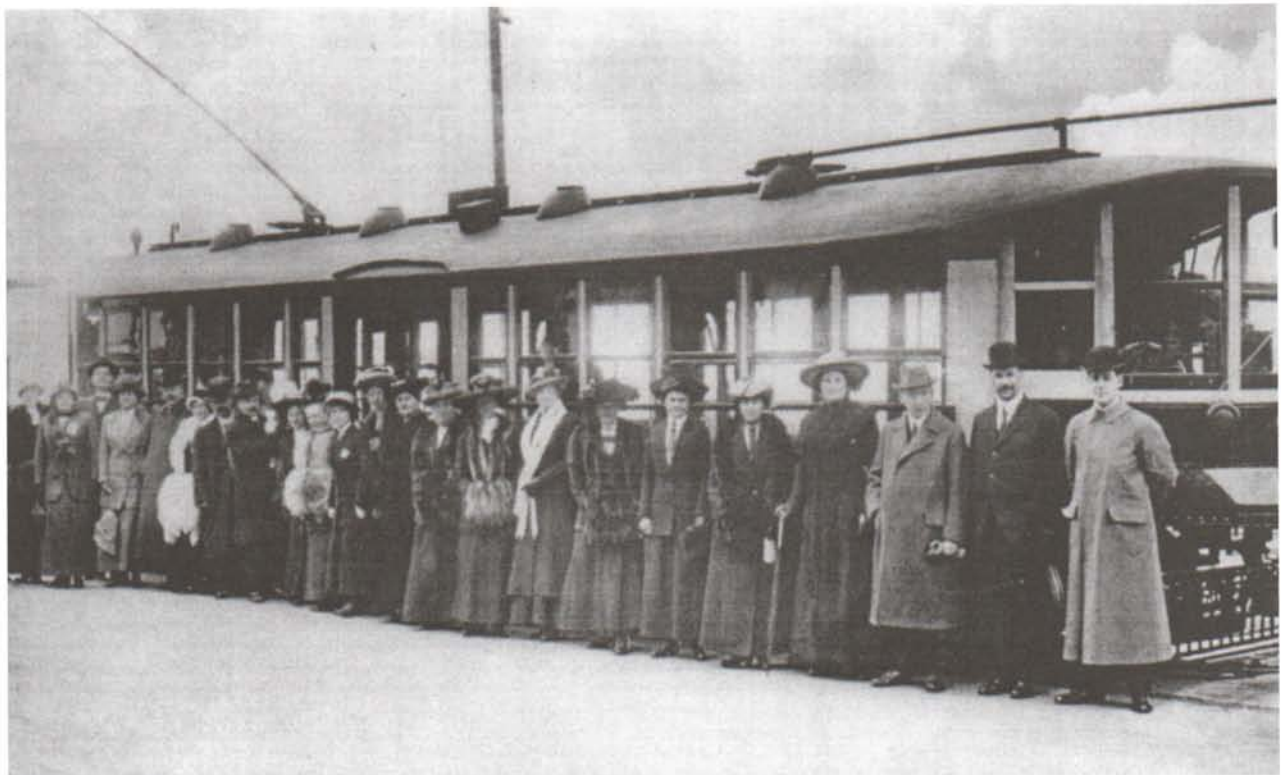
Sadly, the hobble skirt car did not prove popular in Vancouver; it operated for only a few months, with chief motorman Sam Wilcockson often at the controls, mostly on the Fairview belt line. Passengers found its single middle door confusing and "a nuisance"; they were used to the convenience of a single-door front entry and double-door rear exit. While in operation, the car frequently lurched off the track due to its low centre construction.



SLEEK AND STEPLESS – Vancouver’s hobble skirt streetcar, shown here in 1913, echoed transit and fashion trends in New York City. Despite

its advanced styling, the car never caught on anywhere in North America.

PHOTO SOURCE: CMBC: SCR-155-P



A STAB AT SOPHISTICATION – Vancouver’s society women pose with the city’s only hobble skirt, or stepless, car on the day of its trial run, March 18, 1913.

PHOTO SOURCE: CMBC: SC-10-8

“It turned out to be such a fizzle,” said retired car repairer Ted Gardner in 2002. “It was underpowered and useless. It only had two motors and four axles with small wheels. The other streetcars had four motors with eight large wheels.” The hobble skirt car got stuck going up from 1st and Main to Kingsway and Main, says Gardner, and it couldn’t negotiate the hill up to Granville. By contrast, Fairview streetcars 260 to 274 “just walked up the hill with a standing haul,” using their four 38-horsepower motors.

The one-of-a-kind qualities of car 500 ultimately proved too costly and inconvenient to maintain; the vehicle, built by J.G. Brill of Philadelphia, did not share interchangeable parts with the rest of the fleet and many of its mechanisms were reportedly hard to get at to repair. Besides, at a time when the average streetcar cost \$8,000, the hobble skirt car came in at \$15,704. (Gardner recalled one expensive feature of car 500 and 501: the leather straps used for standing passengers had ivory on them.) The car was withdrawn from service, its motors taken out, and the body sold for a mere \$50 in 1939.⁵

However, the car’s novel steel construction and 51 seats (most wooden streetcars of the day had 36 to 42 seats) seemed ahead of its time. New York Railways Company, which developed the car in 1912, decided that all new cars for its system would be stepless by the end of that year. Within a few years, 176 were built for use in that city alone.⁶

Despite New York’s backing, this had-for-a-fad streetcar did not catch on anywhere in North America. Instead, it spawned political concerns in Vancouver. W.G. Murrin, soon to become general superintendent of B.C. Electric’s railway department, warned his superiors in a November 1912 letter that delayed introduction of the stepless car to Vancouver could prevent the company from gaining public recognition as an innovator; credit would go, instead, to a top provincial politician. In his words: “. . . a very serious tactical error has been made in allowing so great a delay. It might have been used as a very strong argument with the Attorney General that we were doing everything possible to keep ahead of the times, while now the Attorney General may claim the credit of having forced us to adopt lower stepped cars.”⁷

1914

1914 would be a year of going backwards, and a time to recognize that the golden years of 1909 to 1912 were phenomena, things of the past in more than a chronological sense, and that the world, indeed, would never be the same.

Who would have thought that Fairview-type car 274 would be the last streetcar ever built by the car shops when it poked its vestibule out into the sunshine of June 14, 1913?

Henry Ewert, *The Story of the B.C. Electric Railway Company*

- The First World War breaks out on August 4; the first troop train leaves Vancouver on August 21.
- The population of greater Vancouver is 175,000, comprising 42 per cent of the total population of the Lower Mainland. The city itself has almost 98,000 residents.¹²
- Eighty per cent of Vancouverites are of British origin.
- B.C. Electric has 232 streetcars in daily service.
- Frank Stillman Barnard (later Sir), one of B.C. Electric’s founders, becomes B.C. lieutenant-governor.
- The third, and final, C.P.R. station opens in Vancouver.
- The Panama Canal opens on August 15, shortening the distance from Vancouver to London, England, from 14,292 to 8,700 miles (23,000 to 14,000 kilometres). This creates exciting new potential for global freight trade from both Vancouver and New Westminster.