Clang, clang, clang went the trolleys

When Baton Rouge was incorporated in 1817, the town was little more than a village. Industry had not found its way here, LSU was not yet in the city and the shifting location of Louisiana's capital was such that Baton Rouge had by no means established itself as the undisputed seat of state government. It was a sleepy sort of little river community for a number of years with a population totalling only 5,428 in 1860. By 1881, area residents had grown only to 7,000. But it was in that year that the first attempt at a street railway system for the city was discussed.

The Baton Rouge Street Railroad Company was chartered on October 11, 1881, franchised for lines over certain streets with a fee limit set at 25 cents and a top speed allowed for the mule or horse driven cars to be 6 m.p.h. This ambitious venture quickly folded, however, and Baton Rouge saw no public transit system reach an operable stage. Necessary funds were not available. There weren't enough businessmen who believed the proposal to be a profitable investment at the time.

In 1888, William Garig, a member of the original 1881 group, went to Massachusetts in search of the necessary funding to once again attempt formation of a company to operate a street railway here. November 19, 1888, saw a charter granted to the Baton Rouge Street Railway Company as filed with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. A Baton Rouge city ordinance on November 13 gave the new company the same privileges as had been established in 1881, but once again, enough money was not realized and the project was not carried forward.

The following year, J.N. Ogden, H.W. Ogden and J.A. Andrews, contractors of work on the area levee system for the Baton Rouge Electric Light and Power Company, bought interest in the still floundering Street Railway Company and the franchise was sold to designate operation and construction responsibilities to Andrews and the Ogden brothers. Lines were slow in arriving and it was June 1890 before construction could actually begin. In four weeks 2.05 miles of track were laid in the dirt streets running at Main and Dufrocq street going west on Third, turning onto Third heading south to North where the route swirled over to St. Ferdinand to run southward to Government Street for a mile and a half that terminated at the fair grounds where went Dufrocq. Six mule cars arrived from a with service being opened after ceremonies held October 16, 1890. In 1890, the line was made into a belt by an extension down Dufrocq between Main and Government.

The Capital Railway and Lighting Company, formed in September of 1892, took over operation of the line one month later and April 16, 1893, saw the first electric cars used in the city.

It was the advent of automobiles that was to spell the end of the streetcar lines as revenues declined and motorbuses were introduced to replace the electrically driven trolleys. When LSU moved from the State Capitol grounds location to its campus south of the city, buses were introduced for the first time. The first cancellation of a line came when the East Blvd. run was closed in 1923, replaced by buses. The North Baton Rouge line was likewise revised in 1933 with the last line to go being, ironically, the original City Belt line. A ceremony held at Third Street and North Blvd. on April 23, 1936 marked the end of streetcar service in the city. The same 5-cent fare had been maintained throughout the history of the street railway system.

In Street Railways of Louisiana by Louis Hennick and E. Harper Charlton (Pelican, $19.95), this part of the history of Alexandria, Baton Rouge, Lake Charles, Monroe, Shreveport and other systems is studied with pictures accompanying to give some insight into the various systems in each city or area, some lines covering great distance. Diagrams chart the varying systems and their track layouts.

The book is a reprint, a revised edition of an earlier work by Hennick and Charlton in 1934. It is for the most part republished in that the same information is covered for every railway system and all is pretty technical. The pictures, which could have been much more effectively displayed, comprise many varying examples of cars, facilities and shots of the cities with their respective trolleys clanging along.

Though obviously well-researched and presented with ample diagrams and pictures, the book would have to be recommended to those with an interest in the subject or just Louisiana or railway history in general. It tends to be tedious, dull at times, through picture after picture of streetcar. Haven't you seen them all after you've seen one? If you've got a knack for this sort of work or know someone who does, it's worth the investigation, but if you're merely interested in glancing a little knowledge on the subject or one city in particular, go to the library.

— Dawson Corley

— Photos courtesy the Department of Archives and Manuscripts, LSU