The streetcar tracks catch the afternoon sun at the corner of Florida and North 19th streets. Powered by electricity, streetcars rolled through Baton Rouge until 1936.

Eras meet as work uncovers streetcar stretch

By TOM GUARISCO
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A small piece of Baton Rouge history is shining in the sun on Florida Street, but it won't be long before workers hide it under asphalt again.

Road crews repaving the busy street unearthed a short stretch of tracks at the corner of N. 19th Street, the remains of Baton Rouge's once thriving streetcar system. With the year 2000 just days away, the shiny metal tracks offered a glimpse of a time that predates traffic jams.

With nickel fares and all-day service, the streetcars thrived for more than 30 years. At their peak, they served downtown, Midcity and north Baton Rouge.

Streetcars clanged their last a year after Huey P. Long was gunned down in the halls of the State Capitol in 1935.

Joey Tureau is the project engineer overseeing the repaving of Florida for the state Department of Transportation and Development.

The exposed trolley tracks at Florida and North 19th streets kindle memories for 85-year-old Louise Landry. She remembers riding the streetcars as a little girl, and even recalls getting lost on one.
Quinn recalls one summer day in her childhood when Dr. Carl Adam Weiss, father of the man accused of killing Long in the State Capitol, was walking near tracks after lunching at home.

A car drove over the streetcar tracks where some water and mud had puddled, and that mud splashed all over him," Quinn said. "He got awfully upset because it ruined his white linen suit, but he went to work."

Mayor Pro Tempore Mary Fry Eaton remembers her first trolley ride because it knocked her off her feet.

"It was the first time my daddy ever took me on a streetcar and I probably was 5 or 6," she said. "When it started, it jerked my feet out from under me and I sat down real hard in the aisle. My feet left me."

Some city planners hope streetcars will make a comeback.

The master plan for downtown Baton Rouge calls for a public transit shuttle to make regular loops through downtown to serve workers and visitors.

That shuttle could be a bus — or a trolley, said Davis Rhoter, director of the Downtown Development District.

"We've uncovered something we know that, in the past, worked great," Rhoter said. "We are going through some growing pains with development downtown, and the idea of shuttles or trolleys would be great."

The key would be offering trolleys frequently, such as every 10 or 15 minutes, he said.

Baton Rouge has more than 100 years of streetcar history. Louis C. Hennick and E. Harper Charlton detailed much of it in their 1962 book, "Louisiana: Its Street and Interurban Railways, Vol. I."

Hennick and Charlton reported that streetcars and trolleys got their start in Baton Rouge in 1890 with mule-drawn trolleys serving downtown. In 1893 the city took the bold step of switching to overhead electric lines to power the trolleys, which locals often called "dinkies."

In 1898 a fire gutted the car barns and destroyed the fleet. In 1907 new cars rolled on new track work. By 1924, separate lines served Midcity and shuttled plant workers to north Baton Rouge.

In the 1930s the trolleys were on the way out. Motor buses replaced the East Boulevard line in 1932, and the North Baton Rouge line faded out in 1934.

The last electric-powered streetcar clanged up a Baton Rouge road on April 23, 1936, when Clem Pearson steered it one last time into the North 23rd Street barn and into the history books. He recounted that day in a 1973 story in The Advocate's Sunday Magazine.

"I'll tell you, it was kinda sad, driving that old streetcar to the barn for the last time," Pearson said. "Those dinkies just sort of seemed a part of the city."