

“Taking the Tram”: Travelling to Sport and Recreation Activities on Greater Vancouver’s Interurban Railway - 1890s to 1920s

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Several historians of sport have examined the influence of transportation developments of sports and recreation in North America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The provision of electrified rail systems has received particular attention, and has been cited as one of the significant factors in the growth of organized sport. This paper examines the promotion of sport and recreation by the interurban transportation system of Greater Vancouver from the 1890’s to the 1920’s.

In 1891, the first intercity electric railway line in Western Canada began operation between Vancouver and New Westminster. Operated by the British Columbia Electric Railway Company (BCE), this was the start of an interurban system that became Canada’s largest (138 mile of line) and provided much-needed and frequent service between cities and rural regions in the district. A major feature of public transit, these interurban lines filled the gap between city street-car and steam railroad services.

Of the five lines constructed by the BCE, three provided specific services for sporting events and pastimes. The most important was the twelve-mile Central Park line, running east from downtown Vancouver to Queen’s Park in New Westminster. This park was the home of the New Westminster Salmonbellies (Minto cup champions for most of the years from 1908 to 1914) and up to 20,000 lacrosse fans travelled to the most important matches of this era on the interurban line. Demand for this service was so great that the BCE loaded passengers onto flat-bed cars, for runs through the forest between these two rival cities.

The Vancouver-Steveston line opened in 1905 to serve the communities south of Vancouver, and when the Minoru Park race track in Richmond was built in 1909, a few yards from the rail line, horse racing fans travelled to race meetings on the interurban. A

special siding was laid adjacent to the clubhouse to facilitate the arrival and departure of passengers, horses, and equipment. Passenger demand became so great that the BCE applied the “lacross train” concept to the Minoru Park specials, modifying several CPR flat cars for this service; the interurban company also borrowed deluxe passenger cars from the CPR for race days. In 1924, another race track, Lansdowne Park, was opened in Richmond, close to the interurban line, and once again the BCE constructed a siding to service the clubhouse.

The Fraser Valley line, running through a rural area to Chilliwack, sixty-five miles east of New Westminster, was completed in 1910. The line wound through excellent fishing and hunting country, and the BCE encouraged sportsmen to use the interurban for access to the best spots. Brochures were published, with detailed information about good hunting and fishing spots, dates of hunting seasons, location of no-shooting areas, and the best interurban stations from which to alight. In addition, telephone information lines were operated, dogs were carried in the baggage cars, and arrangements were made to pick up overnight campers along the lines.

The Fraser Valley line also facilitated the transport of racing pigeons to release points in the Valley, and transported picnicking spectators to the United States border point at Sumas-Huntingdon, for Sunday baseball games, in contravention of the Lord’s Day Act.

In the period from 1890 to 1920, few inhabitants of the Greater Vancouver region had access to the automobile. In 1904, for example, only thirty-two motor vehicle licenses were issued in British Columbia, and by 1910, this had been increased to only 1000. Also, while the CPR did operate a train service between Vancouver and New Westminster, it could not accommodate the large crowds attending lacrosse games.

Specifically, the BCE interurban service made a significant contribution to the success of lacrosse in British Columbia by providing the large partisan crowds for the fierce inter-city rivalry of this major sport. Outstanding players notwithstanding, the west coast version of this national sport would not have reached its levels of achievement if those thousands of fans had not been there to give the kind of solid support necessary for the success of a professional sport league.

Thus, from 1891 onwards, sports enthusiasts benefitted from the cheap and efficient interurban railway system of Greater Vancouver.



The conference in Vancouver included several outstanding sessions.