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The Travels of Coal Miners in Cherokee and Crawford Counties

Jason Smith

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The ability of coal miners in Cherokee and Crawford County to travel was aided greatly by the creation and implementation of rail travel in both counties at the end of the 19th century. The availability and creation of these methods of travel became necessary and affordable for mining in both regions. As the wages of the miners increased the greater luxuries in life became available to them. This would allow for the creation of rail lines, trolleys and cars that enabled a larger majority of people to travel short and long distances. The invention of these modes of travel gave way to increased trips and daily commuting even on a less than desirable salary. The coal miner's ability to sustain jobs created a need for better methods of transportation in both Cherokee and Crawford County.

In order to evaluate the travels of coal miners, it is essential to understand how the coal miners increased in the area and how this created a need for enhanced travel methods. The population of Pittsburg alone in January of 1884 would be estimated to exceed two thousand people; however, the actual population reached over four-thousand.¹ The statistics from this area show that from 1880 to 1890 the population of Pittsburg alone grew 973.24 percent.² This extreme population growth could be attributed to the mining potential of the area. In 1890 alone in Crawford and Cherokee counties, the employment for coal mines was 1,668 and 1,377 for each area respectively. This workforce would increase exponentially in 1895 to 3,743 and 2,000. The start of the new century would see an even greater increase to 4,794 and 2,897 for each area.³

In 1876, the first rail lines from Joplin to Girard were built from financing by two smelters named Moffet and Sargent. These railroads were not the first to be established in

¹ Clarahan, Augustine M. *The Founding and early development of Pittsburg*, Pittsburg, Kansas. Kansas State Teachers College. 1934, 5.

² *Ibid.*

³ Powell, *The Historical Geography of Pittsburg*,

Kansas; in 1883 there were already 3,885 miles of rail lines in the state carrying 12,881,322.24 tons of product through the state and surrounding area.⁴ These smelters had the funds and ability to create a rail line in Joplin and Girard from the ore that they were smelting in Joplin. The previous lines would create a blueprint for the creation of lines in southeast Kansas. This first line would initially transport ore and other material from Joplin. This was a significant creation for the area, as the two understood the potential for travel of materials from one area to another. The lines were specifically made to transport material that these two were smelting in Joplin, which would provide greater profit for them as a partnership and individual businessman. In creating the railroad in this area, the concern for both of these men was to sell the line to a larger group in the area. The rail line gained interest from the Frisco line and was purchased on May 26th, 1879.⁵

The Frisco would be an important member of the railroads in this area as it would lead the charge for expansion into smaller areas of both Kansas and Missouri. The increase in trains would coincide with the increase in coal production in the area of Crawford and Cherokee counties, especially in the early 1890's. The creation of coal mines in these areas encouraged thousands of immigrants to move to the area and work in Crawford and Cherokee counties.⁶ The majority of the mine workman were centered in Crawford and Cherokee counties and had around twenty mining camps within a distance of two to fifteen miles from Pittsburg.⁷ In addition to the immediate boom to Pittsburg, the surrounding area towns were made up of between one hundred to one thousand people who were directly tied to the mining community.⁸ This increase in

⁴ Second Annual Report of the board of railroad commissioners. Topeka. 1884. Xxi.

⁵ Hickman, *A History of the Joplin and Pittsburg Electric Railway Company*, 1-2.

⁶ Powell, William E. *The Midwest Quarterly*. Sequent Occupence. Volume XXII. Number Two. 1981.

⁷ Schofield, Ann. *An Army of Amazons: The language of protest in A Kansas Mining Community*. American Quarterly. Vol. 37. 1985.

⁸ *Ibid*.

population would require not only more trains for the amount of coal being brought out of the mines but also the people making up the majority of these towns. In order to accomodate the increase in coal, such companies as the Frisco, Santa Fe, and Missouri-Pacific built railroad tracks into the area.⁹

The massive expansion into the area was not a cheap undertaking by any of the railroad lines in the area. The second set of major lines being established in the area in 1889 would cost on average \$21,083.93 per mile of track being laid down.¹⁰ This would include, however, the costs of materials and workers being paid to do the work. While this is a major amount of money to improve the transportation of materials such as coal and zinc ore, it was this expansion and profit that would allow the development of passenger trains. The capital earnings made in 1889 alone from this expansion were \$21,674.37 per mile of rail line that was laid down.¹¹ The profit made in 1889 doubled as the railroads were carrying 24,454,367 tons of product across the region. This doubled the performance of transportation but only increased the costs by twenty percent to the public.¹²

With the increase in travel and transportation of coal and other materials in the region came the development of the passenger train. This passenger train really hit its stride in the 1890's in Crawford and Cherokee counties. By the 1890's, the invention of the steam train allowed many workers to easily travel greater than 25 miles. The cost of fares would prevent the majority of workers from using this method of travel for a daily commute to and from the workplace as the majority of the coal miners could not afford the fare daily. This would be left to

⁹ Powell, William E. *The Midwest Quarterly*. Sequent Occupence. Volume XXII. Number Two. 1981.

¹⁰ Eighth Annual Report Of the board of Railroad commissioners. Topeka Kansas. 1890, xx.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Eighth Annual Report Of the board of Railroad commissioners. Topeka Kansas. 1890, xxxi.

the men of affluence that had flexible and changing schedules.¹³

While this mode of transportation became cheaper in the later part of the 1890's, it also became apparent to businessmen that trains could represent a potential economic boom for them. This was displayed best in an article for the Port Author Rout as the shortest and best line in Joplin.¹⁴ The travel trains was not just limited to neighboring towns as there were also rates listed for Denver and Colorado Springs and a two way ticket only cost \$27.40.¹⁵ The most difficult part of getting a ride to another town or city may have been the rather stingy train schedule, as shown in 1886. The majority of scheduled stops only took place once a day, and ensuring that you knew the scheduled time would be important. It would be important to remember train times when taking trips to St. Louis or San Francisco or you could get stuck in either city.¹⁶ These could have been long distance family trips for upper class citizens, such as doctors, and lawyers, and other business people with more free time and money than that of the Crawford and Cherokee coal miner.

However, the revenue created from these new types of trains would be substantial even for commuter traffic. The town of Fort Scott had passenger revenue alone in 1890 totaling \$908,477.¹⁷ The town of Pittsburg, in particular, felt that maintaining and improving on the rail lines was an important part of the town's ability to keep and attract workers. With this same spirit, it was determined that revisions for electric railways would be made in March of 1899 to provide better access and shorter wait times for the people using rail lines for transportation.¹⁸

The idea of a railroad covering a large expansive distance was becoming somewhat

¹³ Conrad, *Tri State Traction*, 9.

¹⁴ Columbus Courier, 1899.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Home Talk, American Non Conformists.

¹⁷ Eighth Annual Report Of the Board of Railroad Commissioners. Topeka Kansas. 1890, xxxvi.

¹⁸ Clarahan, *The Founding and Early Development of Pittsburg*, 7.

outdated by the early 1900's in both Crawford and Cherokee counties. The rail road also saw a direct need to cater to the miners in the area, as by this time the amount of coal being produced was increasing and people speculated this would continue. With this mindset, the expansion continued in Weir, as a line of 10.84 miles was created to go to the city and the outlying mines.¹⁹

The creation of other methods of transportation also affected the miners in both Cherokee and Crawford Counties. As the wages of workers remained steady or average in the late 1890's, it became apparent that trolleys would be a reliable and useful form of transportation for smaller commutes than passenger trains. Once interurban trolleys pushed their way into the mining communities, the miners wanted to quickly embrace this transit system because of the clean, convenient, and economical nature of travel. These devices were used for a few miles at most and generally allowed the miners to travel distances of three to five miles around town.²⁰ The interest of the miners would best be served by the J&P railroad service. This service would serve the interest of mine workers, rural folk, the townspeople, and the city businessmen alike for many years.²¹

There are other factors, however, to consider in regards to the expansion of railroads in the area. The most important is the automobile and its accessibility to citizens in these towns. The cost of an automobile in the early 1900's would have been too much for coal miners; however these new vehicles were being used in a taxi system that would carry people around town. The motor became really common in the early 1900's with Henry Ford and the invention of his "Model" line of cars. These cars were too expensive to own for the majority of people in

¹⁹ Twenty First Annual Report Of the Board of Railroad Commissioners. Topeka Kansas. 1910, 450

²⁰ Clarahan, *The Founding and early development of Pittsburg*, 7.

²¹ Chandler, *Trolley through the countryside*, 129.

Crawford and Cherokee counties. However the Model A, AC, and C in 1904 would have been purchased by wealthy businessman at a cost of \$800, \$850, and \$950 respectively. This would have been a minority of people; however the opportunity for business growth was a factor.²²

In 1905, the growth of Ford and his model F allowed for greater comfort and expansion for the choices that passengers had when choosing which vehicle to take. More importantly are the increased costs of maintenance and gas that would further prohibit the average coal miner from owning a vehicle. The Model F alone would cost \$1,200.²³ In the coming years cars such as the Model N four cylinder vehicle for \$500 would make cars more accessible but still not cheap enough for a struggling coal miner.²⁴ The creation of one of the most famous cars in the world, however, would truly expand the opportunities for taxi services to grow in Pittsburg. The creation of the Model T car for a mere \$250 could be purchased in large quantities and used to bolster the fleet for increased taxi services in the area.²⁵

This low cost of transportation would eventually lead to other activities other than traveling around town for work or to the market. The cost of transportation even by 1895 was so low that people could travel to neighboring towns and cities and experience other activities besides the relentless days that they had working. One account of this sort of trip happened on July 4th. The event was a celebration of Independence Day, and so nearly 10,000 people packed the Lake side Park in Carthage the event organizers realized that recreational resorts and activities for men, women, and children could be a viable economic pursuit.²⁶

²² Kires, Beverly Rae. *The Cars that Henry Ford built: A 75th Anniversary tribute to America's most remembered Automobiles*. Princeton Publishing, Princeton. 1978, 28.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Kires, Beverly Rae. *The Cars that Henry Ford built: A 75th Anniversary tribute to America's most remembered Automobiles*. Princeton Publishing, Princeton. 1978, 37.

²⁵ Kires, Beverly Rae. *The Cars that Henry Ford built: A 75th Anniversary tribute to America's most remembered Automobiles*. Princeton Publishing, Princeton. 1978, 40.

²⁶ Conrad, *Tri State Traction*, 48.

The need for services such as the trolley and automobile was further compounded by the strikes that workers would go on at the railroads for better wages and better working conditions. The strikes that took place in 1899 would be a good example for the Frisco line especially. The workers would strike because the cost of travel was too expensive in their mind, and the pay was not as high as it should be. This caused a lowering of fares by as much as two thirds in the year during the Frisco fare war of 1899.²⁷ These strikes would take place over several years, especially in Pittsburg, over the amount of work being done by rail operators and men laying the tracks, as many worked long hours for substandard pay. This would halt train travel and cause people to look elsewhere for their travel needs.

There were many reasons for the decline in passenger railways. The strikes caused massive delays, people were stranded for much of the time railroads were out of operation. This caused a desire to use cheaper and more efficient means of transportation, mainly automobiles and trolleys. However the decrease in ridership was not simply because of a few strikes here and there. The lack of efficiency and size of smaller operations began to cause people to stop riding. These locations started going out of business because of that fact.²⁸ The decline in coal was also a factor in many of the smaller towns losing the need for passenger railroads. This was caused by a decrease in shaft mining particularly in the area of Crawford and Cherokee counties.²⁹ This decrease in shaft mining left a void of workers who no longer needed to travel. As the decrease in coal was happening it was also becoming apparent that trains were also using a large portion of coal themselves. In the year 1921, one quarter of the annual output of coal was being used by

²⁷ Conrad, *Tri State Traction*, 48.

²⁸ Gordon and Dee, *Passage to the Union: How the railroads transformed American Life, 1829-1929*. Chicago, 1996, 336.

²⁹ Powell, William E. *The Midwest Quarterly*. Sequent Occupence. Volume XXII. Number Two. 1981.

these vehicles.³⁰ With the decrease in coal output in mines in the area and the inability to find other work, the majority of these miners no longer had the spending money to use on trips even to Joplin.

This would cause a decrease in revenue for the railroads that starts as early as 1910. The revenue for riders in 1910 was only \$325,575.45, a decrease of more than fifty percent from twenty years earlier.³¹ At the same time revenues were decreasing, the cost of establishing and maintaining a rail road was increasing. The cost to establish and maintain the railroad in 1910 was \$84,298.19 or more than nearly three times the cost 20 years earlier.³²

The strikes in the area involving coal mine workers were not helping the matter when it came to ridership or income required to ride the trains. In the 1920's the account of the Army of Amazons shows clearly how much wages affected the household. The majority of miners during this stretch of mining would earn between \$1,800 and \$2,000 a year in wages.³³ This caused difficulties for the families, and rather than focusing on transportation, the women would be forced to focus more on the living conditions of their families, which would put added pressure on the men to resolve the strike or attempt to find other methods of work.³⁴ It was also becoming apparent that coal in other areas was siphoning out workers and creating a ridership void in that fashion for the railroads in Crawford and Cherokee counties. These factors weighed heavily on the ability of railroads to maintain in smaller areas for passenger purposes.

The decrease in wages caused considerable issues as the e 1920's progressed. The

³⁰ Fogel, Robert William. *Railroads and American Economic Growth: Essays in Econometric History*. John Hopkins Press. Maryland. 1964

³¹ Twenty First Annual Report Of the board of Railroad commissioners. Topeka Kansas. 1910, 445.

³² Eighth Annual Report Of the board of Railroad commissioners. Topeka Kansas. 1890, 444.

³³ Schofield, Ann. *An Army of Amazons: The language of protest in A Kansas Mining Community*. American Quarterly. Vol. 37. 1985.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

ridership of the trains and trolleys were decreasing because of low employment and high prices of the trains and trolleys. In the 1920's a trip from Pittsburg to Chicopee would cost 14 cents for most riders. A similar trip to Cherokee Junction would be as much as twenty cents. If a coal miner was trying to find work in Columbus during this time it would cost as much as 70 cents per trip.³⁵ As the coal mines started to run out of coal and provide less work for the coal miners the luxuries of riding a train even to find work became difficult in the early 1920's.

The displacement and decreased ridership caused a surplus of workers in Crawford and Cherokee counties. The workers stopped using the train and trolley services in town as the automobile became more and more popular, it became clear to the city that the large amount of lines in Pittsburg were not needed anymore. This started the deconstruction of lines in smaller towns and cities in southeastern Kansas.

The decision of many coal miners who still had work in the early 1920's to use buddy cars was a major reason the decline and abandonment of railroads started in Jasper county. The Joplin Special Road District seeing the need for roads now that cars had become the main source of transportation started to create concrete roads. By 1928 Jasper County had seen eight such roads created in response to the use of cars by coal miners and other citizens of the town.³⁶ The decrease in travel into Crawford County from Jasper County because of declining zinc ore deposits weighed heavily on the ability of railroads to continue the transportation of people on long journeys. The bulk of the riders in Jasper counties to other areas were made up of coal miners and as the coal mines started to close one by one in the area it became apparent the need for long distance travel was unnecessary.³⁷

³⁵ Chandler, Allison. *Trolley through the countryside*. Sage Books. Colorado, 1963. 136

³⁶ Conrad, Edward A. *Tri-State Traction* "The interurban Trolleys of Southwest Missouri, Southeast Kansas, and Northeast Oklahoma". Heartland Rails Publishing. Missouri September 2004, 42.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

The decrease in ridership would finally break the back of the J&P line in Pittsburg and the surrounding areas of Crawford and Cherokee counties. The town of Girard ordered the J&P to remove its tracks in February from the North and East sides of the town so that increased parking space could be had for busses and cars in the town.³⁸ In Pittsburg however the J&P tried not to give up hope on the passenger service that had served the city well for many years as the sum of \$200,000 was used to try and update the cars and attract riders. In the local paper it was determined that this would be the last ditch effort and if this failed the railroad may no longer succeed in Pittsburg. Indeed the efforts were decided a failure in December of 1928.³⁹

In a similar fashion to Pittsburg and Girard, the town of Joplin was no longer pleased with the J&P's lack of service and declining revenues. This town had several tracks in place and determined that it was best for the railroad to either fix the declining tracks or simply get out of town. After some speculation regarding the likelihood of passenger service ever being useful in Joplin the assistant manager Fenimore decided to file an application to abandon passenger service from Joplin to Pittsburg. This officially took place at the end of December 1928 and ended what had been one of the most promising services of the early 1900's in both cities.⁴⁰

The company of J&P would go on auction in December of 1928 as the business had practically stalled in the major areas of the state. The group that purchased them was led by the assistant manager Fenimore and other businessman who saw a future in J&P as a freight service only. This caused a slight improvement in ridership and caused the sale to be postponed until early May 1929.⁴¹ This would not be the end of the railroad in Pittsburg as the company was reformed as the Joplin-Pittsburg Rail Road Company. The new line only operated about 60 miles

³⁸ Conrad, Edward A. *Tri-State Traction*. 84.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Conrad, Edward A. *Tri-State Traction*. 85.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

worth of track which was an all time low from the previous high of 110 miles during the peak years of service. The employee headcount also saw a decrease and was only 110 compared to 210 in 1920. The decrease in employees only led to more abandonments as the lines discontinued all passenger service except Pittsburg and the Pittsburg to Frontenac run in 1929. Ultimately the rest of the passenger lines were sold to the NEO lines ending the long runs from Pittsburg to Joplin.⁴²

The importance of selling the lines to NEO can't be understated as the ultimate failure in Pittsburg of trolley lines would happen post J&P owning the lines. In 1933 the entire passenger service would be ended in Kansas. There would still be a small amount of trolley activity in Pittsburg and a twelve-mile route to Miami, Picher, and Century, however these lines would only last a few more years as the NEO had also purchased a stake in Yellow Coach bus services and started making a profit in March of 1936. This purchase would eventually lead to the dismantling of trolley lines in Miami as of 1934 and from Fourth and Main to the loop at South Fifth Street the tracks were dismantled and torn up. This would cause the entire amount of trolley line to be torn up in the city as more and more companies moved toward bus service.⁴³

The benefit that all of these lines being torn up however was that it gave people without jobs a way of staying in the towns they had lived in for a long time and allowed a new area to be ushered into the area of Crawford and Cherokee counties. This also led to expansion of work in various other areas like Miami and allowed a slow economy to provide jobs for people. The dismantling of a trolley service in all of these towns did not mean the end of transportation itself as many of the existing lines for transporting ore and other material still existed in Pittsburg,

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Conrad, Edward A. *Tri-State Traction*. 117.

Joplin, and other areas like Miami.⁴⁴ The companies simply shifted from a passenger service to transporting goods.

The travel of coal miners was aided greatly by the creation of different modes of travel including the railroad, trolley, and automobile. The most prominent service was the railroad as it allowed for travel at great distances for coal miners and businessman alike during the early 20th century. Traveling short distances of two to three miles became easier with the creation of the trolley system. This would lead to the automobile which would change the way people in Crawford and Cherokee county traveled on a daily basis. As this mode of transportation became more popular the decline in ridership and decline in jobs in the area would cause many railroads to dismantle and leave the area for good. These changes took place over several years and came to a head in the late 1920's after a sharp decline of coal mining jobs. These different modes of transportation helped shape both Crawford and Cherokee counties over the course of 30 years.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

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