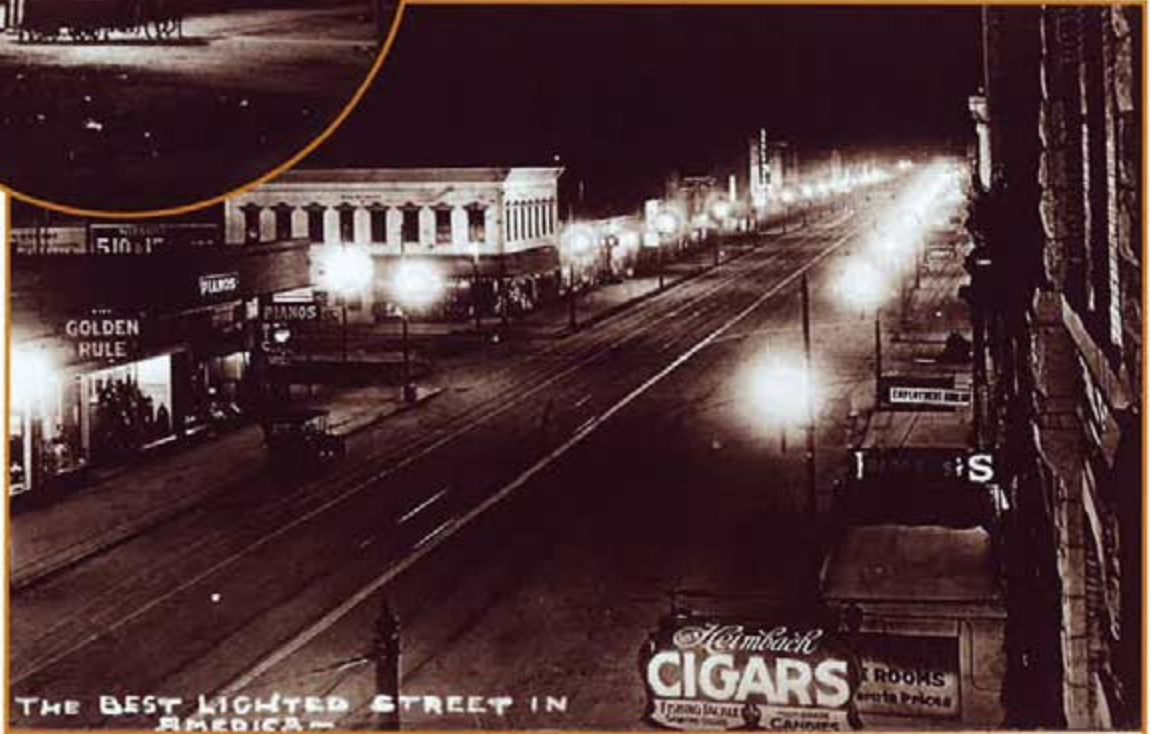




# MISSOULA'S STREETCARS AND STREETLIGHTS AN HISTORIC OVERVIEW



FOR WGM GROUP  
MISSOULA, MONTANA  
APRIL 2008

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**MISSOULA'S  
STREETCARS AND  
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(An Historic Overview)**

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## Missoula's Streetcar System

In 1888, in Richmond, Virginia, Frank J. Sprague advanced street railway technology beyond cable and steam by building a system operated by electricity. Daring entrepreneurs in Montana followed Sprague's lead when on July 13, 1889, Richard A. Harlow and Donald Bradford applied for a franchise to build the Helena West End Electric Railroad. The attempt failed. But within three years Helena and five other Montana cities had electric systems -- Missoula, Bozeman, Anaconda, Great Falls, and Butte.<sup>1</sup>

Missoula's first attempts at establishing trolley service were chaotic to say the least. Everyone wanted in on the new game of providing modern transportation to the public. The Missoula Street Railway Company, franchised in March of 1889 and incorporated in July of that year found itself facing delays in getting the system fully operational. While it struggled to get started, the Missoula City Council granted four more franchises for lines running in other parts of the city. Some of Missoula's most influential businessmen received the franchises, including lumber baron Thomas L. Greenough, W.M. Bickford and F.G. Higgins, among others.<sup>2</sup>



Horse-drawn trolley on corner of Higgins & West Main Street  
(All of the photos in this manuscript courtesy of Stan Cohen,  
Pictorial Histories Inc.)\*

A horse-drawn trolley, driven by Joseph Solomon in 1892, came to be known as "Solomon's Southern." Local Advertisements, portrayed electric trolleys shortly thereafter and it is certain that such a system was in operation by February of 1893 because the motormen of the Missoula Electric Street Railway Company went on strike. The system must have been popular by then as *The Missoulian* reported scenes of inconvenienced and stranded shoppers and businessmen. In a perhaps sensationalized account, an article of February 22, 1892 stated that, "The restaurants and hotels and spacious waiting rooms of the M.M. Co. were crowded to overflowing all evening."

Two years prior to electrification, Missoula had started a horse drawn trolley system with tracks running from the first Northern Pacific depot, which was located just west of the north end of Woody Street and Railroad. The track ran south to Front Street, east to Higgins, north to Main, west to Woody and then back to the depot. A barn near the corner of West Broadway (then known as Cedar) and Woody Street housed the streetcar and served as a stable and repair shop. An extension of the line over the Higgins Avenue Bridge, brought service south of the river by 1895.



Laying the tracks for Missoula's streetcar line to Fort Missoula

Though advertisements in *The Missoulian* depicted overhead, electric trolleys, "The Solomon Southern" horse-drawn line was still operating in 1897. An article in *The Missoulian* on February 15, 1897 described troubles confronting the operation of the system as follows: "The Solomon Southern street car line is having a siege trying to keep ice off the track. In places the roadbed has become completely submerged with water, which has frozen solid, making it necessary for the cars to run upon the ice... This does not prevent the cars from making regular trips."

Continued deterioration of the tracks caused delays through the spring and summer of 1897, and when the city council replaced the planks of the Higgins Avenue Bridge, the rails were removed and not replaced. Thus, streetcar service came to an end.

The end of the first trolley system produced expected results. *The Missoulian*, of October 4, 1897 reported that: "Now that the street car track is torn up the students [at the new University of Montana] are wondering how they will get to the university in bad weather. If there was some means of rapid transit to and from the city, at regular intervals, the system would be largely patronized. What is needed is an electric system that will transfer people quickly..."<sup>iii</sup>

Behind the scenes, much effort was being put forth to provide the much-needed public transportation for a growing population that had become accustomed to it. However, it took four years before it looked as if a solution was near. On October 11, 1901 *Missoulian* headlines proclaimed: "AN ELECTRIC RAILWAY. Missoula May Have One Before Many Months." Within a month, on November 5, the editor trumpeted: "TWO STREET CAR COMPANIES."<sup>iv</sup> However, in reality, a system would not be realized for many years.

During the next six years, the subject of a new street railroad never left the public forum, with lively city council meetings and fiery editorials arguing the merits of every plan proposed. By 1903, three separate groups applied for franchise rights. Still, not one succeeded in incorporating, let alone in breaking ground for a new system. Such an endeavor required very deep pockets, something lacking in local investors. Nevertheless, there were vast fortunes being made in Butte copper, and the latest of a string of "Copper Barons," William A. Clark, eventually turned his attention to investing in western Montana and in particular, Missoula.

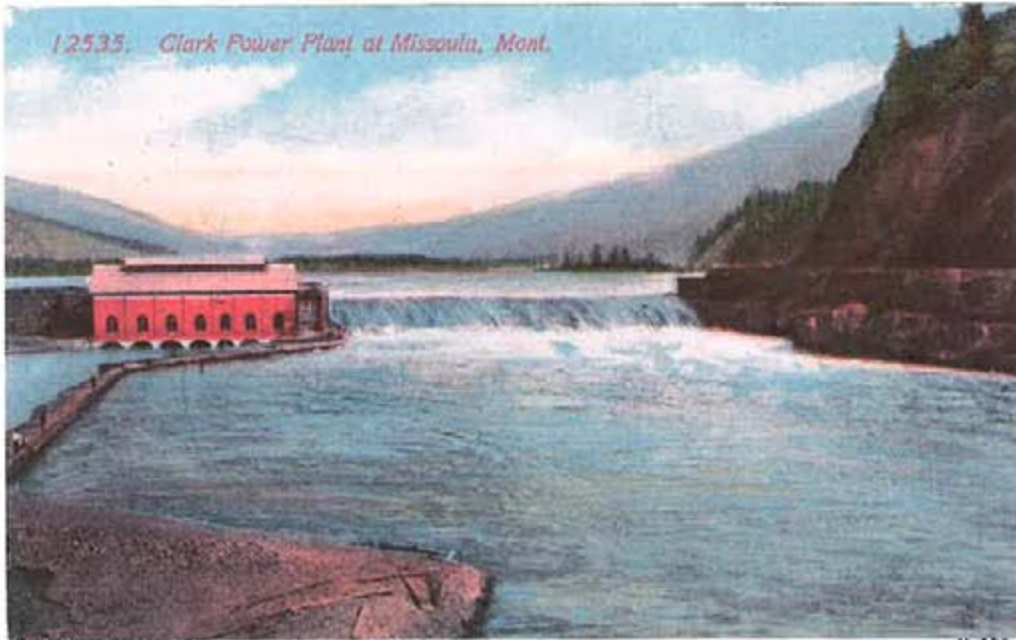


Streetcar meets horse & wagon – Higgins Avenue & Front Street

By 1907, Clark was a U.S. Senator and had a vast fortune to invest. Never one to think on a small scale, the senator came up with a plan for a trolley that would run hundreds of miles from Hamilton in the Bitterroot Valley through the Blackfoot to Great Falls. Missoula would have a substantial system to link the Bitterroot line to the Blackfoot. The following year, H.R. Wharton, Clark's representative filed for a franchise for a new street railroad in Missoula. Most everything that Clark did was political and the city council passed the request on to the public with a special election that gained Clark his franchise.<sup>v</sup>

During this same time period, William Clark began building the largest dam in western Montana just east of Missoula. Clark's dam would serve as the source of electricity for the streetcar system, streetlights and all of the general power needs of the growing city. As the dam neared completion in 1908, a flood breached it, causing considerable damage and a setback to Clark's schedule for bringing streetcars back to Missoula.





Clark's Dam (Milltown Dam)

Clark and his associates incorporated the Missoula Street Railway Company on January 20, 1909 and began construction of 2.5 miles of rail bed for an interurban railway from Cedar Street (Broadway) to East Missoula. It was also necessary to construct a trestle across the Rattlesnake River at the east end of Pine Street and another near East Missoula.

By the spring of 1910 the system was nearing completion and excitement filled the air. On May 12, 1910 *The Missoulian* reported the long-awaited news: "The joyful news emanated from the headquarters of the street railway company

yesterday..." 'Get Your Nickel Ready.' This is a rule of utmost importance!' Missoula finally had its modern trolley system.



A pedestrian stands in amazement as the new trolley vies for space with horses & wagons (corner of Higgins & Pine Street)

The trolley cars, manufactured by the American Car Company of St. Louis, a subsidiary of the Brill Company, the firm that provided cars for other systems throughout the country, were as modern as you could get -- requiring just one employee to operate. Three Brill semi-convertible cars arrived for the inauguration of service on May 11, 1910, and ran on 15 miles of track from the car barns, across the Higgins Avenue Bridge, and past the University campus, causing a disruption of the state track meet. "The mile run was in progress on Montana Field when the first car passed the university and the sight of the new coach nearly broke up the track meet: there was a stampede from the bleachers and there were cheers for the railway. Missoula has been patient in the matter of electric railway operation..."<sup>vi</sup>

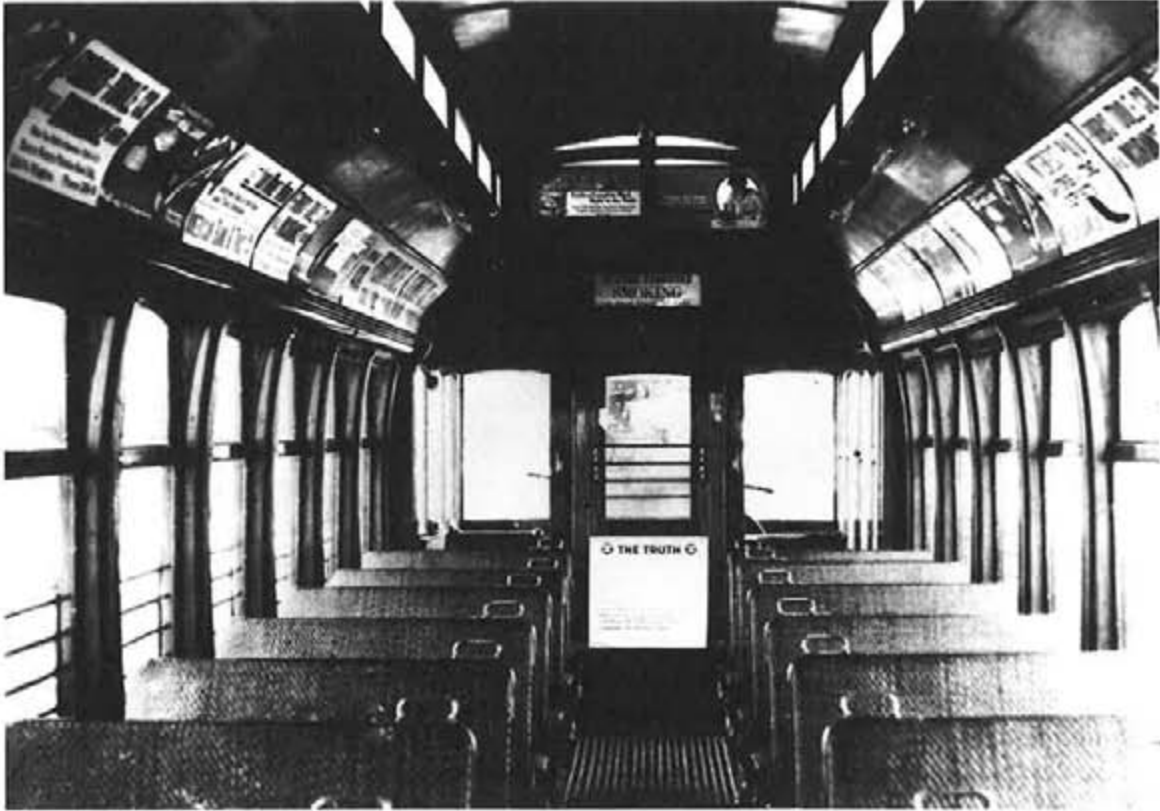




The band welcomes the Bonner Streetcar on Cedar (Broadway) 100 Block East

The initial run encompassed approximately 22 miles including the trip across the Rattlesnake Creek Bridge and out and back from Bonner. The following day three cars were used to provide service for the track meet crowds. Seeing the success of the initial runs and subsequent embracing of the new system by Missoulians, William Clark increased the capital stock of the company from \$100,000 to \$500,000 and set about expanding the track to 18.5 miles and adding seven new cars of the same make as the first three cars.<sup>vii</sup>

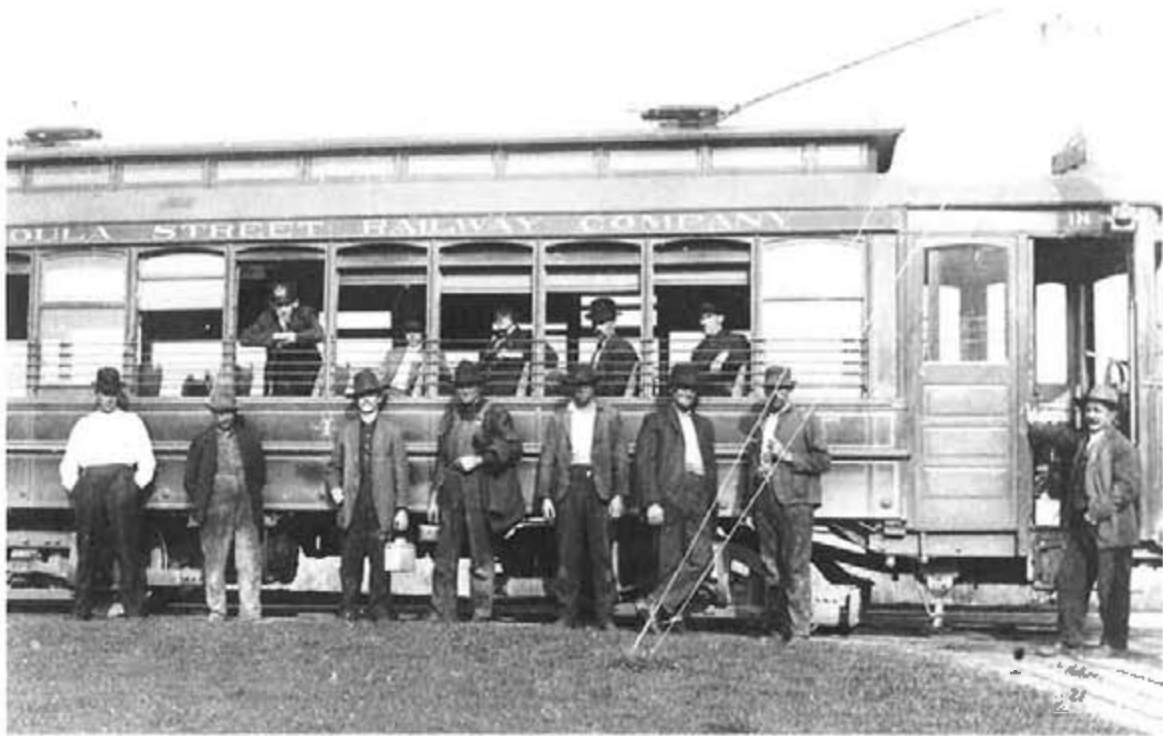
Each of the Brill streetcars, outfitted with cane seats that could be flipped over to face the opposite direction, carried 40 passengers. As the motorman pulled the door lever, a step folded down to provide easy access for the passengers. Dressed in uniforms of their own purchase, the motormen held a powerful position, especially when blasting the foot-operated bell to get the attention of pedestrians, and through the years, increasing numbers of motorists. The bell was said to be "of frightening volume."<sup>viii</sup>



Brill Streetcar interior - Missoula



Streetcar #2 served the Daly Addition south of the Clark Fork River



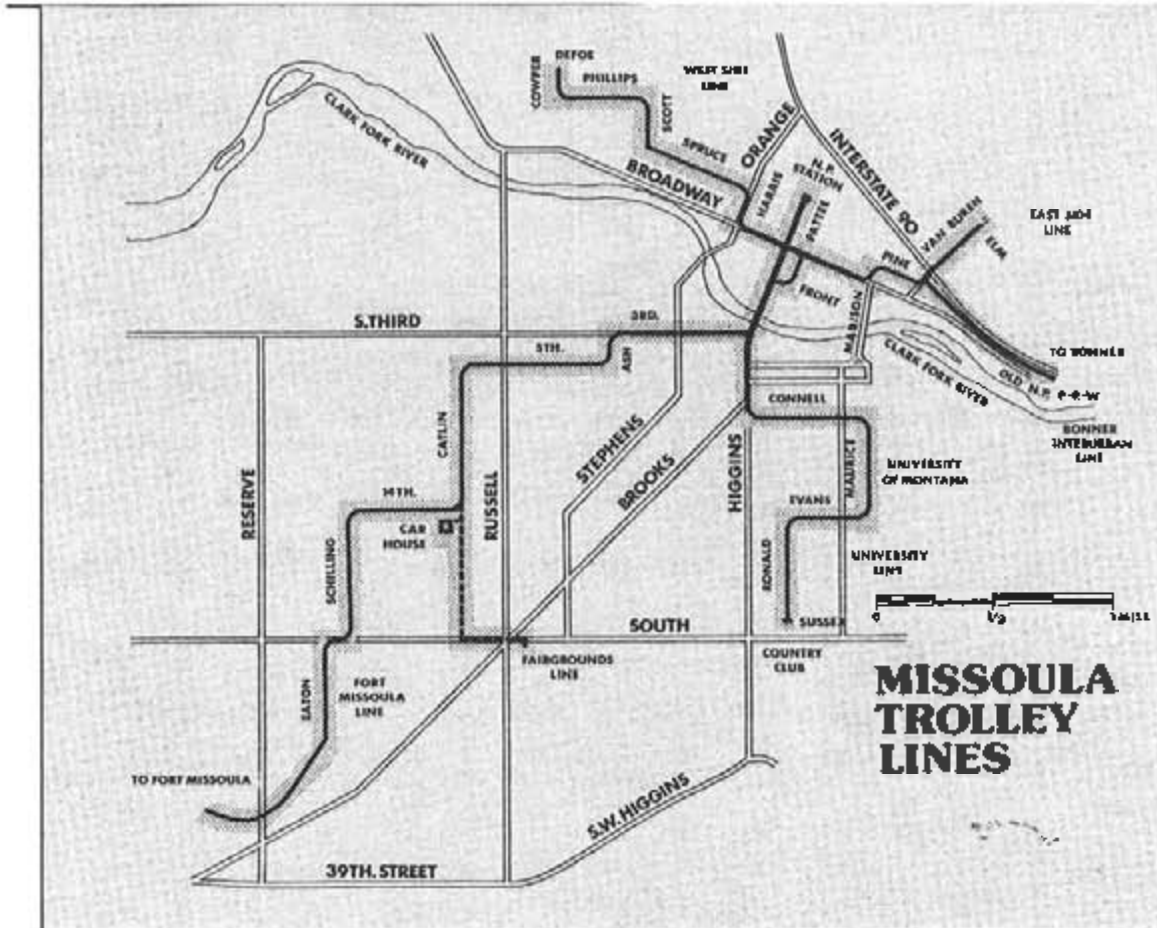
Streetcar conductor and workers

The clang of the trolley bell became a familiar sound to Missoulians for the next two decades. At its peak, the system had 10 cars and provided excursions and special trips to Bonner and Riverside Park near Milltown. Public relations were served well when extra runs were added when the circus arrived in town. In 1911, The West End line opened, carrying passengers to the fringe of town. It was extended later to serve the sugar beet factory and another short extension took passengers to the fairgrounds.<sup>xx</sup>



Double track along Cedar (Broadway) allowed the trolley line to serve the "West Side" of Missoula

Passengers could expect to wait 20 minutes between streetcar arrivals. This was cut to 15 minutes for a time, but that proved impractical. Ten-minute service was available between Higgins and Broadway and the University with the help of a third car operating along the University line. Just about any part of Missoula could be reached by taking the streetcar system.\*



Map from Montana Historian, March 1976

The Missoula trolley system was operated by the Missoula Street Railway Co., a subsidiary of Missoula Light and Water Company from 1910 until 1924. That year, the Missoula Public Service Company took over operation, and Montana Power Company purchased the company in 1928. Achieving its peak number of riders in the early 1920s, the Missoula system, with its single motorman-conductor set-up, was considered one of the most efficient lines in the country and became a model for other cities to emulate.<sup>xi</sup>

Despite its general efficiency, the streetcar system faced competition from its very beginning from the automobile. With mass production, automobile numbers rose dramatically during the first two decades of the Twentieth Century. By 1932, economics resulted in the demise of the streetcar system in Missoula. Passenger numbers had fallen to a degree that the system was losing ever-increasing dollars, and a general feeling of irritation by automobile drivers, who now claimed the streets as their own, translated into the end of the grand experiment in public transit.



1130. N. P. Depot, Missoula, Mont.



With only a few cars on the streets, competition for space was no problem during the early streetcar days.

On January 24, 1932, Montana State "Grizzlies" band serenaded the last passing trolley run. Two days prior, *The Daily Missoulian* had expressed its view of the situation as follows:

*"In the 22 years of its operation, the railway has never paid a dollar on the investment." then continued: "No one is at fault, no one to blame except, perhaps, the ninety-five per cent of Missoula citizens who didn't patronize the cars while they were operating on regular schedules every day in the year... Even though they didn't patronize them while they were available, Missoula citizens undoubtedly regret to see the cars disappear. They gave a decidedly metropolitan air to this little city of ours. Those who live on or near a car line receive a substantial amount of comfort at the sound of a car rattling past. When the last rolled by on its way to the barns somewhere around midnight, one felt that night had finally settled down and that it was time to turn in."*<sup>xii</sup>

As the last trolley reached the end of the line, a crowd gathered. Dean A. L. Stone of the School of Journalism read a statement of appreciation and presented motorman, George Richards, who had ridden on the first trolley run of 1910, with a "fine fishing pole." Bus service began the next day.

In 1935, most of Missoula's streetcars were sold to Sam Mercer, who operated a tourist "Motor Park," on the northwest part of town on Sherwood Street, where they were converted into tourist cabins. Two of the summer cars were sold to T.K. Thompson for a similar purpose. The remaining stock, consisting of the locomotive, a work car and seven flatcars, was sold to various sources during the following two years.<sup>xiii</sup>



### **Missoula's Historic Streetlights**

Missoula has had a number of streetlight designs throughout its history. However, the General Electric 6.6 ampere, inverted, luminous arc lamps installed in 1912 on bracketed posts rising 18 feet above the street, were by far the most elegant. Manufactured by the General Electric Company of Schenectady, New York, they represented "the last word to date in first class lighting." So proudly received, that they inspired postcards proclaiming Missoula, "The Best-Lighted City in America!" these lights and stanchions endured into the 1950s and became one of the symbols of downtown Missoula. Nothing before or after has equaled the beauty of their design.

The story of Missoula's most impressive streetlights is told in great detail in the following *Missoulian* article of December 12, 1912.

Missoula The Best-Lighted City in the World!  
So Experts Declare After Viewing the Municipal Betterment of  
1912

Let there be light!



Thus spoke the people after due thought and consideration had been given the proposition which was presented to them by the Missoula Light and Water company, the decision having been reached after many meetings and conferences. Opinion was divided at first and there were some strong objections to be overcome. But the proposition was fair. The spirit of municipal improvement was in the air, and finally the proposition submitted was adopted by an overwhelming majority of the property holders interested. Let there be light, said the people. And there is light, pure, white and glowing, and as it shines and makes bright as day the city's business section, Missoula sits back and boasts of three of the best-illuminated thoroughfares in the United States. It is not an idle boast, for there are facts and figures available to prove the statement to be absolutely correct. There are cities with a greater number of similar lights in use; there are cities, which have spent thousands for a more artistic arrangement of

ornamental posts and clusters; but there is not city that has a district of equal size as well lighted as Missoula. By its adoption of the plans Missoula will always enjoy the distinction of being the first city west of the Mississippi to have installed the new lamps—the latest thing in street lighting that is known. Other cities have as great a number of the same magnetite arc lamps within the same space, but most of these are set on brackets only 14 feet from the pavement. Missoula's lamps are 18 feet above the street. This takes them up above the range of direct vision of pedestrians and makes the diffusion more perfect. A street set with these lamps has a dignified appearance. The comparison between Missoula's system and those of other Montana cities where generally any attempt at special lighting has been carried out with tungsten clusters, gives the Garden city a striking advantage. As beautiful as are the lights in both Great Falls and Kalispell, they grow dim and weak when, in the mind's eye, they are brought face to face with Missoula's new lamps. In every way the local plan has proven to be the best. Higgins avenue and several blocks of Front Street and Cedar Street have been equipped with the new pole lamps and the effect is more than was expected and all that could be asked.



Postcard extolling the beauty of Missoula's new streetlights & streetcars  
(ca. 1914)

The lights of which Missoula is now so proud are known as the 6.6 ampere, inverted, luminous arc lamps. They are manufactured by the General Electric Company of Schenectady, New York, and represent the last word to date in first class lighting. Each lamp gives an actual candle power of 1700 c.p. And consumes about 600 watts of electricity. This compares very favorably indeed, with five-light Tungsten lighting, where only 400 c.p. is obtained for a current consumption of 500 watts. It is seen therefore, that for a very slight increase in current consumption, more than four times the amount of light is obtained for

each of our new lamps than is furnished by the five-light tungsten post cluster, such as are in use in other cities of the state, and in places like Minneapolis, Spokane, and Seattle. Indeed, so tremendous is the improvement in street lighting offered by these new lamps, that it may be confidently stated that no considerable tungsten post lighting systems will hereafter be installed in the downtown sections of any progressive city. Tungsten lighting, however, will continue to be popular for street lighting in residential districts, particularly in places where one or two lights per post will give sufficient illumination.

Missoula has the distinction of being the first city west of the Mississippi to adopt these new lamps. The first town in which they were used, however, was New Haven, Conn. Up to the present there are 10 installations working in different parts of the United States, and a very much larger number of towns are considering the installation of these lamps. Providence, R. I., is making plans for the installation of 1500 of these luminous arc lamps. It should be a great source of satisfaction to the people of Missoula that the downtown streets of their city are equipped with these lights, and it is certain to have an excellent advertising value to the town. Missoula is the only town where the installation of these lights has been made by the public service companies of the city. In every other place, the lamps having been installed at the cost of the abutting property owners or of the city at large. When, in addition to this fact, it is stated that the amount paid by the city for the light furnished to these lamps is no greater than it is in places where the public service companies have been put to no expense in connection with the installation, it would seem that the people of Missoula should feel that they have been very well served in this matter through the liberal policies of W. A. Clark, who owns the properties referred to.



W. A. Clark

This installation and the way in which it has been handled at a minimum cost to the people of the city, may be taken as one of a long series of



improvements which Mr. Clark has made in Missoula, and which has given to the town public service facilities which are rarely equaled in towns many times the size of Missoula. These include the construction of a large water power plant at the confluence of the Missoula and Blackfoot rivers, the conserving, by the development of lakes in the upper Rattlesnake district, of Missoula's water supply, the construction of one of the most-up-to-date street railway systems in existence anywhere, and finally, the installation of the new lighting system, which up to the present, Missoula shares with only 10 other cities in the United States.

It is safe to say that no other municipal improvement which Missoula has ever undertaken will be of greater value to the city than the new street lighting system for the business section. It is serving in several different ways to advance the city's interests. First, is its utility, and this was evident from the moment Mayor Rhoades pressed the button that turned on the current and the lamps blazed forth in all their glory. For some years Missoula has considered her streets well lighted, but increased volume came with the turning of the switch which made the difference between the old and the new almost as much, as that between the former system and the old-fashioned, flickering oil lamps. Missoula's business center at night now sends out a great, soft, white magnetite glow that can be seen for miles. It not only illuminates the walks and the streets, but the diffusion is so perfect that even the highest buildings shine forth in bold relief against the dark background of the sky. So perfect is the light that splendid photographs have been taken of the streets at night, with only a few seconds exposure. The safety of life and limb is now as fully guaranteed to pedestrians at night in the district where there is naturally a congestion of traffic as it can be in the same district at high noon. There are no confusing shadows, no dark corners. The beauty of the window displays, for the excellence of which Missoula is noted, is greatly enhanced by the influence of the light from the new lamps. The illumination from without has made it possible for the merchants to reduce the number of lamps within and has been the means of effecting considerable saving to them in this manner.



A streetcar runs in winter and a description of the new streetlights in a 1913 postcard.



Our "new" Higgins Avenue at 1a.m. - 1913



**"Torch Streetlights" and trolley at corner of Higgins and Front Street**

And then the new system is the greatest advertisement Missoula has ever had. It gives strangers a correct first impression as against a misconception which for years has been only possible. Strangers reaching Missoula at night over either the Northern Pacific or the Puget Sound railways can not escape from a most enchanting view. North Higgins avenue, with its extension of the bridge across the Missoula river, now directly connects Missoula's two passenger depots. It is a distance of about 10 blocks between the two stations and it is impossible for incoming travelers to escape a walk or a ride along at least half of this distance to reach the down-town section. As the lighting system is carried out across the bridge as well as along the avenue, the view at night is startlingly realistic and by the time the stranger reaches his hotel he is sufficiently impressed with the sight to make such impression lasting.



Missoula's Downtown (ca. 1940)

The streetcars are gone, but the historic streetlights remain

From a publicity standpoint, too, the city has gained much on account of the installation of the system. Scores of magazines and engineering journals have sent urgent requests for pictures and written descriptions of the Garden city's new street lights and many illustrated articles have already been published. The keen interest of other cities in the street lighting problem is indicated by the letters, which come almost daily from all sections of the country asking not only the light company but the city officials to furnish figures concerning the efficiency and the general plan of installation of the new pole lamps. It is with much satisfaction and pride that these letters are answered because by these requests is Missoula's leadership demonstrated.

Missoula has gained more than illumination by the installation of the new lights. The proposition submitted by the company carried with it the provision that if an agreement for a three years' use of the lamps was entered into the street railway company would double track Higgins avenue and Cedar streets, thus facilitating service and eliminating congestion. This provision has already been carried out, Higgins avenue and Front Street have been paved with vitrified brick and Cedar Street with wood blocks. The lamps are carried on ornamental brackets attached to steel poles set in pairs along the streets 100 feet apart. At the intersections there is a double lighting effect that is brilliant, two posts having been set within a few feet of each other at the intersection of the curb lines, giving eight lamps in all for this small street space.

Missoula has just cause to be pleased with and proud of the new street lighting system. It is a municipal accomplishment that has placed her at the head of a list of the only 10 cities in the whole United States. It has brought acknowledgement of her leadership. Surely these, combined with all of the local

advantages the new lights extend, are reasons good and sufficient. Missoula's holiday season was never before as brilliant as it is this year. It's the light.<sup>xiv</sup>







Modern versions of streetlights in Missoula's Downtown.



\*Note: All photos in this report may be reproduced only for use in conjunction with the preparation of Missoula's Downtown Master Plan (2008). Permission for additional use should be requested from Stan Cohen – Pictorial Histories Inc. Missoula, Mt. 59801 (406)-549-8488

#### Endnotes:

- <sup>i</sup> Meyers, Rex. "Trolleys of the Treasure State." Montana The Magazine Of Western History, Vol. XXII, Number 2, Spring, 1972. 38.
- <sup>ii</sup> The Weekly Missoulian, Aug. 7, 14, Oct. 7, and Nov. 6, 1889. Also March 2, 1891 and April 15, 1892.
- <sup>iii</sup> Meyers, "Trolleys," p 42.
- <sup>iv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>v</sup> Griffing, Ben. "Street Cars Of Missoula." Montana Historian, Vol. VI, no. 1, March 1976. p. 24-25.
- <sup>vi</sup> Missoulian, May 12, 1910.
- <sup>vii</sup> Swett, Ira L. "Montana's Trolleys." Interurban Magazine, Vol. III, 1970. p. 73.
- <sup>viii</sup> The Daily Missoulian, March 30, 1958.
- <sup>ix</sup> Forstall, Al. "Missoula, MT." Traction & Models, Run No. 217, May, 1984. p. 14
- <sup>x</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xi</sup> Missoulian – Centennial Edition. 1960.
- <sup>xii</sup> The Daily Missoulian, January 22, 1932.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Missoulian, August 25, 1935.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Missoulian, December 12, 1912.

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*The Missoulian Centennial Edition*. 1960.

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