

History

By Bob Boetticher Sr.



Death takes to the RAILS

A Look Back at the Rise and Fall of the Funeral Trains and Streetcar Era

In the late 19th century, in just about every city in the country, millions of citizens would take the daily commute on a streetcar, traveling from rural communities to the downtown shops, offices and factories. My great grandfather, Henry William Nass, who lived in Evansville, Indiana, was one of those daily commuters who would show the conductor his metal transit fare token – attached to his shiny gold

watch chain, which was secured though a buttonhole of his suit vest – as he entered the streetcar and took his seat.

By the 1880s, there were over 17,000 miles of streetcar tracks in American cities and the early streetcars were pulled by horses or mules, who were extremely slow. In 1889, streetcar lines were replacing the horse with new electrified streetcars – and soon after, the

streetcar lines became big mass transit business and very profitable. The businessmen who owned the lines became wealthy and were often called “traction magnates.”

At the turn of the century, many major cities, including San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, Baltimore and Philadelphia passed city ordinances banning new burials within city limits, forcing development of new cemeteries in the rural outskirts.

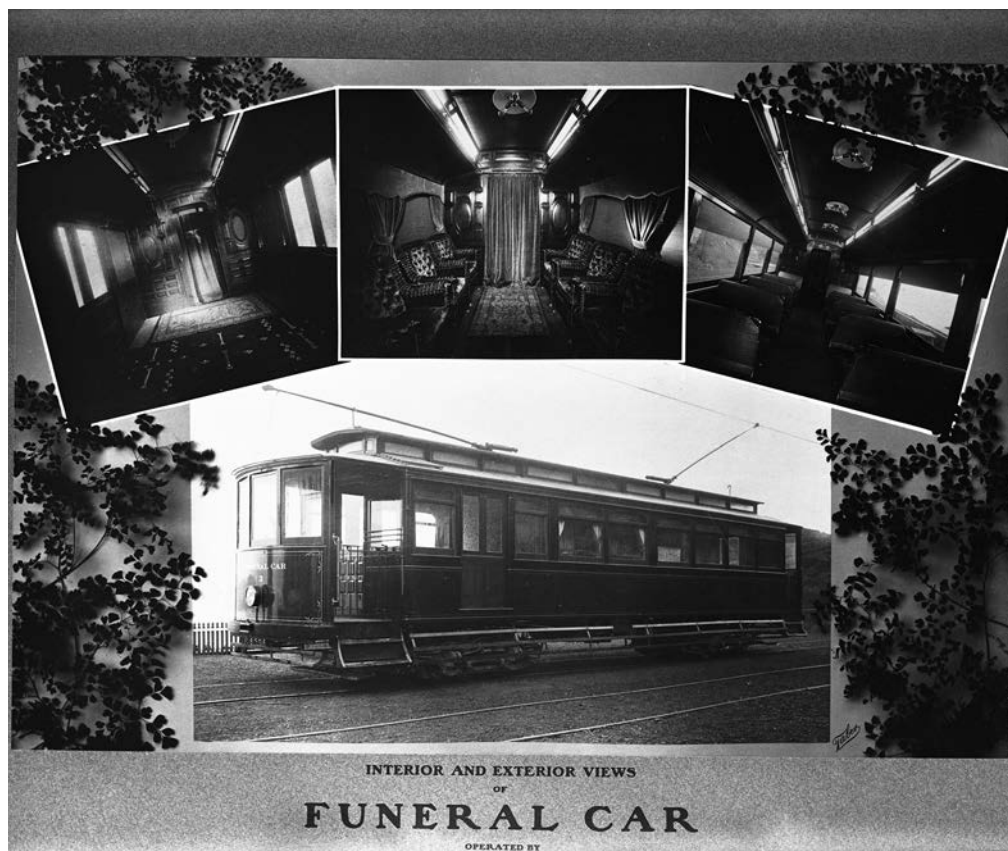


Opposite page: Funeral car No. 3 at Olivet Memorial Park in Colma, California, in 1905. Left: Crane cars working on a new section of tracks on East Street in San Francisco in 1912. Below: A 1911 advertisement for a San Francisco funeral car. (Photos courtesy of SFMTA Photo Archive)

The challenge was inadequate unpaved dirt roads not being maintained, making passage on them next to impossible – especially during the heavy rains. It was a long cumbersome ride with a horse and buggy – and passenger streetcars could not accommodate a casket and funeral party. To address this problem, the local railroad and streetcar companies built special tracks right into many of the outlying cemeteries near their cities.

As an example, San Francisco had outgrown its old graveyards resulting in a ban of new burials within the city limits in 1902. This situation forced cemetery development south of the city in Colma, its origins linked to the Gold Rush era. Today over 300,000 people are buried there and often the city is referred to as “City of the Silent” or the “City of Souls.”

Seeing an opportunity to expand streetcar service, the United Railroads Co. of San Francisco established the first electric funeral rail car service in 1902 and with the rapid growth of service, by 1904 its fleet expanded to five opulent electric cars built by the St.



Louis Car Co., which had been established in 1887. Each car’s exterior was painted a rich deep green with a brick red-colored roof, gold lettering and numbers and a

sign that read “Funeral Car.” The interiors were luxury hardwood paneling, decorative rugs, adorned with heavy drapes and wooden blinds, padded wicker chairs for

comfort and in the corner was a highly polished brass spittoon. Even the steel wheels were designed with lead inserts, making a more comfortable softer ride.

The funeral streetcars were known as the 14 mission or cemetery line, which originated in downtown and traveled down Mission Street to Daly City, then out to Colma. This route was active and profitable until it was discontinued in 1921 due to the decline in ridership, primarily because of the popularity of the automobile.

Baltimore's History

Baltimore had only one funeral streetcar serving the city named "Dolores." It was built in 1896 by the Laclede Car Co. of St. Louis, as combined express/passenger car No. 22. Dolores was rebuilt by the United Railways & Electric Co. and placed in service by the Baltimore and Northern Electric Railway Oct. 1, 1900. She was refitted again in 1906, and in the rail shop, master craftsmen added modern features and no expense was spared. The car was 37 feet long and 12 feet high and painted with a high gloss black and silver color scheme and outfitted with a new 4-W.H.-49 (35-horsepower) motor. The interior was comprised of two compartments divided by carved mahogany and with a frosted glass partition.

The center roof had additional headroom with 22 upper roof windows, which were acid-etched frosted glass, and below them were brass handrails running the length of the compartment. Elegant black pleated fabric drape valances were above each of the 12 passenger windows with each having a black shade, which could be drawn for privacy. There were bronze lights overhead for overcast days and the car was equipped with an electric heater for chilly days during winter. There was also an electric bell available to summon the

conductor who would bring ice water for the funeral party.

The casket was slid sideways through a side exterior plate glass door and into the casket vault compartment measuring 7 feet 9 inches long by 2 feet 2¼ inches wide. Above the casket, the floral arrangements were displayed on a shelf secured by a guardrail. Across from the casket were four church style wooden pews believed to be for the conductor, funeral directors and other staff. There was a storage compartment located on the undercarriage of the car between the front and rear trucks (wheels) to accommodate the church truck used to transport the casket on and off the funeral car.

The mourners sat comfortably in the main passenger compartment on 12 rich black leather-upholstered walkover seats (reversible), accommodating 24 members of the funeral party with additional folding chairs available if needed.

When the undertaker had a large funeral, additional B&N passenger parlor streetcars were added for mourners. The rail cars were the "Lord Baltimore," furnished with 15 wicker chairs and a sofa; the "Maryland," furnished with mahogany furniture; and the "Maryland," furnished with cherry-yellow furniture offering comfort to their passengers.

On the "Dolores" a special funeral expert would accompany the funeral party and casket to the cemetery; his name was J. Edward Morris, who donned a shiny silk black top hat, which he kept on a hook in the lines dispatcher's office. Before leaving the depot, he would brush off his hat and place it on his head before heading off for his daily journey to the cemetery.

With the superior and lavish service, the rate from the depot to the cemetery was a modest \$20. For travel outside of Baltimore boundaries, an extra \$5 to \$15 would be charged.

"Dolores" was retired in 1927,

and in 1928, her destruction was ordered and her brass bell became silent forever.

Chicago's History

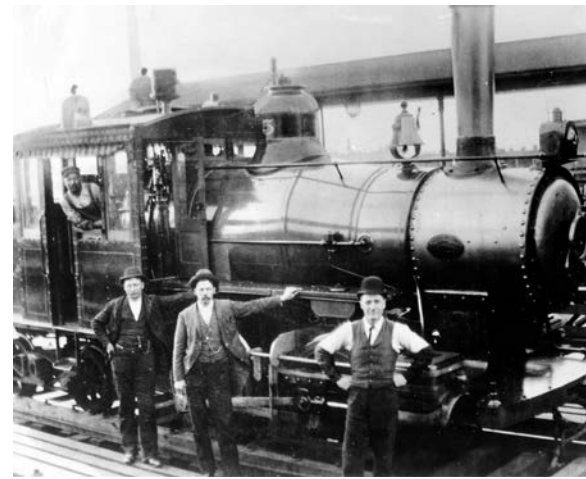
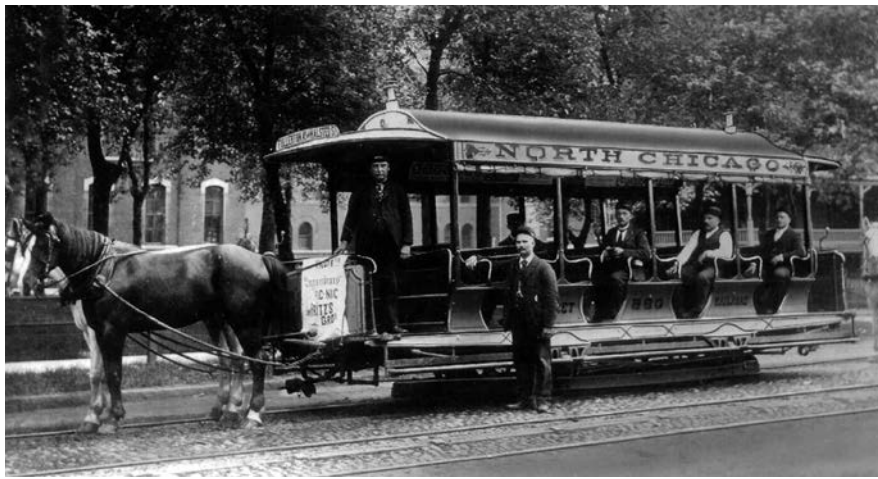
Chicago, with a population of 112,000, started construction on its public transit system Aug. 16, 1858. The city council hired Chicago City Railway Co. and North Chicago City Railway Co. to build new lines of railway tracks down important streets. By 1865, there were more than 40 miles of tracks throughout the Windy City. The first trolley cars had made their debut in April 1859, pulled by horses or mules. The drawback was their speed – or lack thereof. They traveled at a painfully slow 3 mph.

In 1881, the horse-drawn trolleys on the south side were replaced with cable-traction-system passenger cars attached to an underground, continuously moving cable. In the 1890s, the new electric streetcar, which was attached to overhead power lines, was integrated into the system. The Jewett Car Co. of Jewett, Ohio, manufactured most of Chicago's wood and steel passenger streetcars in the early 1900s.

During this same period, Chicago officials signed ordinances prohibiting further burials within the city limits, which led to new construction of larger cemeteries outside Chicago's boundaries.

Many of the established undertaking firms were located in storefronts in the downtown area, while William C. Smith Undertakers, established in 1915 and still serving families today, was on the northwest side of the city. All the undertakers were faced with a similar issue: Their horse-drawn hearse or buggy had only one way to get to the new outlying cemeteries, and the inadequate dirt roads were not maintained very well, which made travel on them next to impossible, especially during heavy rains.

To further complicate the



Top row (from left): The interior of “Delores” in 1904, Baltimore’s only funeral streetcar. The casket compartment is on the rear right. For larger groups of mourners in Baltimore, another parlor car, “Lord Baltimore,” would be utilized as shown in this 1904 photo. (Photos courtesy of Enoch Pratt Library) Bottom row (from left): A horse-drawn trolley in 1883 in Chicago. Forney locomotive “Lizzie A No. 5” pulled funeral trains through Chicago starting in 1892. (Photos courtesy of Flickr)

problem, streetcars could not accommodate a casket. A city ordinance clearly stated that the railroads and streetcar lines keep a “sufficient number of funeral cars for funeral purposes.” This opened up the beginning of a new era for the creation of both funeral trains and funeral streetcars serving Chicago, while most cities in America only had funeral streetcars.

As construction began, special spur tracks were laid off the main line, going directly to the outlying cemeteries, including Rosehill on the north side of Chicago and Calvary in Evanston. To make it safer for Chicago residents to cross the tracks, city officials in 1897 passed an

ordinance that required the tracks to be elevated.

The first funeral train featured a coal-burning Vauclain compound Class 1, 0-4-4 Forney 45 locomotive called “Little Giant,” built by Baldwin Locomotive Works of Philadelphia, and delivered in 1892. The “tender first” locomotive stored coal and water in the tender, and the engine regularly ran backward since the track generally did not have a turnaround at the last depot.

The steam locomotives eventually became electrified, later running mainly on the elevated tracks at 15 mph. They generally were coupled to three passenger coach cars and a baggage car. Caskets, sometimes up

to six at a time, were placed in the baggage car, and the mourners sat in one of the passenger coaches. The undertaker would purchase a corpse ticket for the casket that was usually double the cost of a regular one-way fare, and the mourners would pay a regular fare. Large funeral parties could charter the entire passenger coach for \$15.

On March 23, 1903, a new funeral streetcar depot was built across from the main entrance of the Rosehill Cemetery, and the exterior of the depot was adorned with stone that matched the main cemetery entrance. The depot was named Chittenden Station, after the town, and later became Rosehill Station.

The Chicago & Milwaukee Railroad Funeral Train No. 31 left the Wells Street Depot on the northbound track every day at 12:30 p.m., including Sunday, for the 30-minute trip to Rosehill Cemetery, arriving at Calvary Cemetery a short time later. A beautiful stone-covered building with an elevator and leaded glass windows – it looked like a chapel – was located to the north of the Rosehill Cemetery entrance.

The engineer of the No. 31 Funeral Train brought it to a stop on the elevated northbound track at Rosehill's elevator building. The casket, under the watchful eye of the undertaker, was then unloaded from the baggage car, placed on a church truck in the elevator and slowly lowered to the ground level of the cemetery. A horse-drawn wagon waited patiently below on the cemetery grounds for the arrival of the casket and the solemn journey to the gravesite.

The No. 31 Funeral Train returned to Calvary Cemetery at 3:06 p.m. and Rosehill Cemetery at 3:15 p.m., and the mourners and undertaker would be safely back at the Wells Street Depot by 3:45 p.m. to catch the train back.

The streetcar companies unified in 1914 under one name, Chicago Surface Lines, as mass transit became a big and profitable business. A passenger could ride the Chicago Surface Lines streetcar for only 5 cents one way.

The special Jewett electric funeral streetcars typically were converted passenger cars. At the streetcar maintenance shop, craftsmen would remove the advertising signs bolted to the sides of the cars and add a passenger compartment, lavatory and storage closet, as well as a casket compartment with a large glass window to display the casket.

Depending on the line, the funeral streetcars had different methods of loading the casket. Some used a side door located under the casket display window, while others were able to load through the window. Several funeral streetcars were modified with a large baggage door with elegant stained-glass windows for loading. The floors usually were covered with dark green carpet in the mourner's compartment and green linoleum in the casket compartment.

The compartments, always converted with elegance in mind, had highly polished oak paneling, with

decorative wood inlays adorning the walls and accented with the finest brass door handles and window hardware. The car windows had beautiful custom-made drapes, along with black shades that when drawn added additional privacy. Twenty-eight rattan wicker chairs added comfort for the mourners' journey.

Each funeral streetcar had a motorman who drove the streetcar and a conductor to serve the needs of the funeral party. They both wore dark uniforms consisting of a vest and jacket with brass buttons and a visored cap with a number on the front. The undertaker would place the obituary in the local newspaper, which included what time the funeral train or streetcar would depart the downtown Chicago depot for the cemetery. If a large crowd of mourners was expected, an extra passenger car would be added to the funeral train or another passenger streetcar would be summoned to the depot to carry the additional mourners to the cemetery.

Once the casket was removed from the horse-drawn hearse and secured in the streetcar, the undertaker, wearing his black mourning coat and hat, along with the conductor, would assist the mourners onto the lavish funeral car for the journey to the cemetery. The transportation fares were \$2 for the casket and 25 cents for each mourner.

Sadly, the funeral train and funeral streetcar era soon came to an end. It lasted only 30 years in Chicago – and around the country for that matter. The last funeral train that ran on the elevated system ceased operating July 13, 1934, as the clatter of the steel wheels gliding along the tracks and the ringing of bells have now fallen silent forever. As progress continued on, Chicago rapidly expanded into the suburbs, and, with the improved roads and the introduction of motorized hearses, the funeral processions now drove directly to the cemetery. •



Funeral Car No. 109 in Chicago. The casket was loaded in the front through the sliding lead-glass door. The mourners sat in the rear. (Photo courtesy of Flickr)