



Episode 10, 2006: Cleveland Electric Car, Cleveland, Ohio

Wes: Our next story investigates the demise of a once-universal form of transportation: the electric streetcar. The U.S. has had a long love affair with the automobile, but in the early part of the 20th century, the country was taken with another vehicle: the streetcar. With its steel tracks and overhead electric lines, the nickel trolley moved the masses. Some called it the people's automobile. By World War I, nearly every town of more than 10,000 people had an electric streetcar system. But in the years following World War II, electric trolley systems began to disappear in city after city around the United States--a vanishing act that has long puzzled many of those who grew up hearing how wonderful the trolleys once were. Now, an Ohio man wants to know why the trolley cars in his hometown disappeared.

Robert Nunney: I've lived in Cleveland all my life, and I've always heard about the terrific streetcar system that we had here. All my relatives raved about the system: how the streetcars ran frequently, how they were convenient, and I just wonder why we ever got rid of it.

I'm Wes Cowan, and I've come to Cleveland, Ohio, to meet Robert Nunney. So, Robert, what are we looking at here?

Robert: This is one of Cleveland's electric streetcars from one of the best streetcar systems in the United States. My family talked a great deal about the streetcar system. Most of them did not own automobiles, and they rode the system throughout their entire lives.

Wes: Robert tells me that the streetcar system in Cleveland was dismantled in the 1950s.

Robert: I'm wondering why we got rid of such a useful vehicle, especially now with rising fuel prices.

Wes: He's done some reading on the internet and suspects that Cleveland's streetcars didn't die a natural death.

Robert: I believe that automobile companies and oil companies had a vested interest in killing off the electric streetcar systems.

Wes: I've heard about this, but I always thought it was some really far-fetched conspiracy theory, but that's an interesting question. I'm anxious to get started on this investigation. The automobile and the highway system have shaped the American landscape. If streetcars were still around, the country would look a lot different. I'm headed to meet Blaine Hays, director of the Northern Ohio Railway Museum, to get some background on Cleveland's streetcar system. Wow, Blaine, great view of the skyline of Cleveland, but why did you bring me here? Wait a minute: streetcar tracks, right?

Blaine Hays: Right, this is one of the few locations, right here, where you can still see these tracks.

Wes: Blaine tells me that Cleveland's horse-drawn streetcars were electrified in the 1880s.

Blaine: The next few years saw an electric-streetcar boom as companies sprang up around the country. By 1906, electric railways carried over 17 million people every day. Streetcars enabled people to live further from their jobs and became part of city life. Cleveland had one of the finest streetcar systems in the country. There were lines and lines of cars like you'd have lines and lines of automobiles on the freeways today, a wonderful, huge, fantastic electric railway system that we just went -- [kisses] -- and kissed goodbye.

Wes: So if the system was so great, what happened to it?

Wes: The automobile. Eight million cars were on the road in 1920. By 1929, that number had nearly tripled to over 23 million. The transportation ridership statistics went down in direct proportion to the increase in automobile sales. To cut costs, many trolley companies around the country began to convert to buses, which were cheaper to operate. In 1942, Cleveland's city government took over the struggling private Cleveland railway. Four years later, the city council voted to replace the streetcars with buses. From today's perspective looking back, I doubt if there would be too many people that would look at that as progress.

Wes: Blaine is skeptical the auto industry conspired to get rid of Cleveland's trolley cars. He refers me to Brian Cudahy, an author of several books on streetcar history. I meet Brian at the National Capital Trolley Museum in Colesville,

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Maryland. Hey, Brian!

Brian Cudahy: Hello, Wes, how are you?

Wes: I'm great! Brian tells me that like many conspiracy theories, the tale of GM's involvement in the demise of streetcars has some basis in fact. In the 1930s and '40s, GM, Firestone, and Standard Oil formed a company called National City Lines. [Streetcar bell dings] National City Lines was a management company that bought up individual trolley lines in various cities and operated them for a profit. National City Lines profited from converting streetcars to buses, buses which were made by GM, which ran on Firestone tires, and used Standard Oil gas. In 1949, these corporations were convicted of conspiring to monopolize sales of supplies to the bus industry. While this plot did involve dismantling streetcars, Brian says that wasn't the reason for the conviction.

Brian: If you want to claim there was an antitrust conspiracy, that's fine, but if you want to try to say that the conspiracy was one to destroy public transportation, I think that's going a little too far.

Wes: I ask Brian whether Cleveland had been a part of this court case.

Brian: I don't really know that much about Cleveland, although I could give you a good resource.

Wes: He says the 1949 conviction was reexamined in the 1970s, when some United States senators had grown concerned that the automobile industry wielded too much power. There were congressional hearings, and the transcripts of those hearings would be very, very detailed. I've tracked down a copy of those 1974 senate hearings. They include several sections that deal with the National City Lines case. Here's a report written by a guy named Bradford Snell. He was the general counsel for the Senate Antitrust Subcommittee. Snell's report went further than the 1949 court verdict. He said that the evidence uncovered showed that GM and others had set out to destroy the streetcar. In his testimony, Bradford Snell said that, "As long as people had adequate mass transportation, they wouldn't buy the product that GM was fundamentally interested in selling, meaning automobiles. The only way to bring about a situation where it sold more cars was to eliminate rail alternatives and to supplant them with buses, which were unattractive." You know, that's quite an allegation. GM denied Snell's claims and attached a rebuttal to his report. Here's what they say: 'Street railways failed for economic and demographic reasons which had nothing to do with any plot by General Motors.' Although the hearings don't mention Cleveland, it's clear the auto industry wielded enormous political power in the years just prior to and immediately following the Second World War, and they certainly stood to gain as cities replaced trolleys with buses and cars. The question is: Did they exert unfair political influence as cities decided on the fate of the people's automobile? I'm heading back to Cleveland to the Western Reserve Historical Society. I want to see if the local press ever investigated any links between GM and Cleveland's streetcars. You know, Blaine Hays said that in the 1930s, the Cleveland Railway Company went through some really tough times. Now, this was the same time that National City Lines was going around and trying to buy up as many streetcar systems in the United States as they possibly could. Wonder if they ever tried anything here.

Normally, I work with microfilm. It's so great to be able to work with original newspapers... But they're heavy. Here's something: "April 14, 1939, Omnibus Corporation reveals offer for railway company. Spending calls for shift from trolleys to buses." I recognize Omnibus from the Snell report. GM had a stake in the company, and the head of GM's bus division was president of Omnibus in the late 1930s. So a GM-linked bus company was sniffing around the Cleveland trolley system before World War II. Although the Cleveland trolley company wasn't sold to Omnibus or National City Lines, GM was certainly looking to sell buses to the city after the war. You know, looking over these annual reports of the Cleveland transit system, it's clear: they were buying hundreds of GM buses. I find a curious news clipping. It's dated August 1950, just one month after GM made a big sale to the city. Now, here's something. Headlines: "Ray Miller gets GMC dealership." Miller, who is the county democratic chairman for Cuyahoga County and is the former mayor of Cleveland, has just gotten a GMC truck dealership awarded to him. Now, that doesn't mean anything in itself. Let me see if there's anything else. Front page: "Miller employs councilman as truck salesman." Later on, it says in the same article, "In July, Cleveland transportation system ordered 40 GMC buses." I mean, this reporter is obviously trying to put together some connection here. The press is suggesting that at least one influential politician had ties to GM. I also discover that Miller had been on the city council's transportation committee in 1946, when the decision was made to dismantle Cleveland's streetcars. Award-winning investigative journalist Edwin Black has written a new book



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called Internal Combustion. In it, he criticizes what he says is the self-interest of the U.S. oil and car industries. Black has compiled thousands of original documents related to GM and the National City Lines case--documents that most historians have never seen.

Edwin Black: Not only did we look at the court documents, we have the FBI documents, we have their internal documentation.

Wes: Black shows me how GM tried to monopolize bus sales around the country.

Edwin: This is an internal document from National City Lines. It says, "I am enclosing a GM survey of Tampa, Florida, together with a map of Tampa's streetcar system showing the streetcar routes together with a summary of their schedules." From that, they began to map out exactly how many buses it would take to convert them. Tampa was typical of the way GM operated.

Wes: Black says once they understood the local system, GM and its partners would fund the purchase of the streetcar line. Now, was all of this done with sort of a handshake and a pat on the back, or were there actual contracts?

Edwin: Oh, yes, there were ironclad contracts. These companies would insist that only their products would be used, only their buses would be used, and of course that the trolley systems would be dismantled, destroyed, and quickly converted. And that is how our mass transit was converted from clean electric trolleys that people loved, to these-- these smoke-belching, petroleum-addictive motor buses.

Wes: Oh, come on, from what I've been able to discover, National City Lines was only in, what, 40 cities?

Edwin: It's true; they were stopped by the prosecutors, by criminal conviction after only some 40 cities.

Wes: GM was convicted of monopolizing bus sales, but Black believes they had a bigger agenda. What they desired was the takeover of the entire national transit system. They had created a whole new mind-set, and ultimately, the momentum that they had put in motion subverted the entire trolley system. Now, in the research that I've done, I've come across a number of newspaper articles. I show Black the news stories about former Cleveland mayor Ray Miller and his GMC dealership.

Edwin: Oh, sure, typical. We have a case that we discovered in Tampa and St. Pete where people were complaining to the FBI and the justice department that the members of the city council who had ratified this takeover suddenly all were driving around in GM Cadillacs.

Wes: Black shows me the FBI report. Witnesses describe how local politicians seemed to have benefited after doing away with the streetcars. While no indictments were ever filed, the FBI said in its report that it declined to investigate further because it was such a hotly debated political issue. So much of this is sub rosa. So much of this is done with a wink and a nod. So much of this is so hard to pin down. I also point out that while Miller got his truck dealership within a month of GM getting a bus contract, that was four years after the city council's decision about the streetcars. So in all your research that you did, did you ever see any mention of Cleveland?

Edwin: Wes, I knew you would ask that question, and so I pulled one of my documents that actually, we can show this here for the first time.

Wes: I think Robert is going to be really interested in seeing this. Well, Robert, this has been a great story. The first thing I want to say is that in one way, you were right. This is a story of corruption and major corporations, and it involves a very famous case. First I bring him up to speed on the complexities of the National City Lines case. Now, National City, I've got to tell you, never purchased the transportation system in Cleveland; they never did. Then I show him the articles I found about GM's links to local Cleveland politicians.

Robert: Well, I think this raises serious doubts about how politicians back then handled it.

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Wes: You know, all of these things are circumstantial, but I found this other document that I think you're going to find very interesting. I have the actual hit list of GM and National City Lines. This is the hit list, and it's never been seen before, and it shows all the cities that they had targeted, including Boston, Massachusetts, and Wichita, Kansas. And as we turn the pages, we find also the state of Ohio, Cleveland, clear as day. They had Cleveland's system in their sights. This is an important chapter in our history. Ultimately, the demise of the streetcar systems in the United States and here in Cleveland is a multifaceted affair. We've got the depression that's rocking these companies on their heels with rising costs, the rise of the automobile industry. All of these things combine to set the streetcar industry back. Now, that's not to say that powerful corporate interests weren't interested in these systems, and the National City Lines case reveals that.

Robert: Well, I appreciate your research. It's not just a Cleveland story. This is the story of any city that had an electric transit system.

Wes: Cleveland sold many of its streetcars to Toronto after dismantling its system in the 1950s. There, they were used for almost three decades until they were retired from service in 1982.

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