



The history of trolleys in West Elmira is the story of a transit network that physically shaped the layout, economy, and social fabric of Chemung County. For nearly seven decades, streetcars were the undisputed lifeblood of the community. They formed an essential artery connecting the affluent, tree-lined residential enclaves of West Elmira with the bustling factories, downtown businesses, and rail stations of Elmira proper.

From Horsepower to Electric Sparks

The county's journey into mass transit began on August 23, 1871, when the Elmira and Horseheads Railway Company opened its first line. These early routes were incredibly modest operations: a single horse pulled a small, lightweight car over rails set into the dirt streets. Fares within Elmira were just five cents, while the longer journey out to Horseheads cost fifteen. The transit company briefly experimented with a steam engine to replace the horses, but it was a spectacular failure. The engine was excessively dirty, belching soot into the streets, and the sheer noise of the machine terrified the horses pulling private carriages and delivery wagons alongside the tracks. The steam engine was quickly abandoned, and horses returned to the rails.

By 1890, the region finally embraced the electric age. The West Water Street Railroad Company was organized that year with a specific mission: pushing the transit network westward. As the electric trolley system expanded, the demand to reach the developing, upscale neighborhoods

in the west grew rapidly. In fact, residents along West Water Street—the main thoroughfare leading straight into West Elmira—actually pooled their own money to fund a one-mile track extension between Main Street and Foster Avenue to ensure they had direct access to the new, high-speed network.

The Golden Era of the EWL&RR (1890–1939)

By 1900, local transit companies underwent a massive consolidation, merging into the **Elmira Water, Light and Railroad Company (EWL&RR)**. The company held a virtual monopoly, controlling not just the transportation routes, but the region's water and electric utilities as well. During this golden era, the transit system became a well-oiled machine. The daily operations of the trolleys created a familiar rhythm for West Elmira residents. Each car featured its destination printed on a roller sign high on the front. On late afternoon runs, conductors routinely threw bundled copies of the *Star-Gazette* out the doors to waiting paperboys along the route. When the trolley reached the end of the line in West Elmira, passengers would hear the familiar clanging of the wooden seats as the conductor forcefully flipped the seatbacks over so passengers would face forward for the return trip, while the motorman hopped out to manually reverse the wheel on the overhead power wire.

Ridership skyrocketed, culminating in a record-breaking year in 1919 when the county system logged a staggering 10 million fares.

The West Elmira Divide: Wealth and Labor

For West Elmira, the trolleys served highly distinct social and economic purposes, reflecting the demographics of the neighborhood. West Elmira historically developed as an affluent, upper-class residential area—home to wealthy industrialists, business owners, and the local Country Club.

The trolleys provided a seamless daily commute for these executives traveling to their downtown offices. But equally important, the trolleys transported the neighborhood's workforce. The streetcars allowed domestic workers—including cooks, maids, butlers, and chauffeurs—to easily commute from the more working-class and diverse neighborhoods of Elmira into West Elmira for the day. Every day at 5:00 PM, the eastbound streetcars leaving West Elmira were packed wall-to-wall with domestic laborers returning home after their shifts.

The Rorick's Glen Phenomenon

To drum up weekend and evening ridership, the EWL&RR made a brilliant business move in 1900: they took over a massive plot of land on the south bank of the Chemung River, just adjacent to West Elmira, and opened **Rorick's Glen Park**.

It instantly became the premier destination in the region. During the summer, open-air "breezer"

trolleys departed for the glen every 7 ½ minutes. The trolley line ran out along West Water Street to a dedicated stop, where passengers would disembark and walk across a long, suspended wooden footbridge over the Chemung River to reach the park. (This bridge was notoriously fragile and was washed out by floodwaters multiple times over the decades). The park was designed to generate trolley fares, so the perks for riders were immense. Anyone who arrived by streetcar received a free, unreserved seat in the glen's massive summer theater. Those with more money could purchase reserved seasonal boxes. The theater hosted vaudeville acts, minstrels, and the Manhattan Opera Company. Famous actors and performers, including Edward Everett Horton and the legendary illusionist Harry Blackstone, graced the stage.

Rorick's Glen catered strictly to a family-friendly crowd. The park banned liquor entirely, offering instead manicured picnic grounds, walking trails up to pre-Iroquoian Native American earthworks, and a highly cultured artistic center. It remained the "in" place to be until about 1918, when the rise of the automobile allowed residents to travel further afield for entertainment.

The End of the Line

Like most American streetcar networks, Elmira's trolleys were ultimately doomed by a combination of the personal automobile, the economic devastation of the Great Depression, and corporate apathy. As cars became affordable, the massive crowds heading to trolley parks dwindled, and the longer interurban routes were the first to face the chopping block.

Corporate Takeover

Spring 1932

The transit system was taken over by the Elmira Light, Heat and Power Corporation (a subsidiary of what would become NYSEG). Primarily a utility company, they had very little use for transit. Over the next few years, they let the tracks fall into disrepair, replacing trolleys with buses only as the electric motors burned out.

Permission to Abandon

December 30, 1938

The company officially received permission from the Elmira City Council to abandon all remaining 30 miles of trolley tracks throughout the county and transition entirely to a bus network, giving them 90 days to finish the substitution.

The Winter Storm

January 30, 1939

A heavy snowstorm hit the area, and the transit company used the weather as an opportunity to permanently swap out trolleys for buses on most city routes a month earlier than planned.

The Chaotic Final Ride of Car 501

March 11, 1939, marked the absolute end of the trolley era, and the city decided to send the system off with a massive, albeit chaotic, parade.

The city selected "Car 501" for the final run. The trolley was draped in black mourning crepe and bore signs reading "To Graveyard" on the front and "Good-by, Elmira" on the back. The motorman mournfully turned the destination roller sign to read "Home for the Aged." To honor the system's 1871 origins, a team of horses was hitched to the front of the trolley to ceremonially pull it from City Hall to Third Street, before the electric motors took over for the final push to the East Fifth Street car barn.

However, the final ride quickly devolved into a frenzy of historical looting. The trolley was packed to the brim with dignitaries and locals, and the great American tradition of souvenir hunting began while the car was still in motion. Passengers pulled out pocket knives and dimes, using them as makeshift screwdrivers to frantically unscrew and steal the brass seat handles. One enterprising passenger even climbed onto the roof of the moving trolley and attempted to steal the overhead power assembly.

The situation became genuinely dangerous when a passenger successfully unbolted and stole the fuse to the trolley's air brakes as a keepsake. When the trolley hit the first downward grade heading toward the barn, the motorman realized he had no brakes.

At exactly 4:16 PM, Car 501 limped into the barn. The order was relayed to the powerhouse, and Fred B. Reynolds flipped the switch, shutting off the electricity to the entire county transit system. It was a poetic finish: nearly 46 years earlier, Reynolds was the exact same man who had turned the power *on* for Elmira's first electric trolley.

In the weeks that followed, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) immediately began ripping up the rails along West Water Street to pave the roads for buses and cars. The beloved trolley cars met unceremonious ends—sold off for scrap wood, converted into roadside diners, or

dragged into fields to serve as chicken coops and hunting cabins, leaving only memories of West Elmira's golden transit era.