

# Memories of the “Roarin’ Elgin”

Reflections on the sad end of a magnificent Chicago interurban

**M**Y MOM TOOK ME on my first train ride. At the Villa Avenue station in my hometown of Villa Park, Ill., 20 miles west of Chicago, we stepped aboard the blue-and-gray electric cars of the Chicago Aurora & Elgin—the “Roarin’ Elgin” to us. I was excited and more than a bit terrified.

The station had a drugstore in front and a waiting room in back. We bought our tickets from the pharmacist behind his lofty counter, complete with the traditional colored apothecary bottles, and stepped up to the waiting room. I remember the dark wood round-top doors and the big windows facing the track. Outside was the concrete platform and two tracks, each with a third rail, separated down the middle by a wooden fence. I have a vague memory of a tall watchman’s tower across the tracks.

Socially, things were quite different then. Everyone dressed up to ride the train. Men wore suits and hats; there were few women or children aboard. Our neighbor, who worked in a factory, put on a three-piece suit for his daily commute and coveralls when he got to work. Mother hushed me after we climbed aboard, and I noticed that nobody talked or looked out the window. Instead, everyone sat in silence reading his scientifically folded morning paper. To a small boy, it seemed oppressive.

Once I remember asking Mom why we heard a thumping sound. A man nearby broke the usual silence and vol-



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unteered that our car had a flat tire. I didn’t believe him. It was, of course, the air compressor.

I remember the cars swaying side-to-side and how you could see the cars ahead through the end windows, swaying differently. I also wondered how people could ignore the ever-changing sights out the window; I still can’t.

This was a shopping trip, during or just after World War II when, once or twice a year, Mom would go to the Loop to shop. We usually transferred to the “L” and rode around to the huge Marshall Field department store. Sometimes we stopped off to visit my father

**One of the very last CA&E passenger trains, a Central Electric Railfans’ Association special, arrives at Villa Park on a rainy October 26, 1958.**

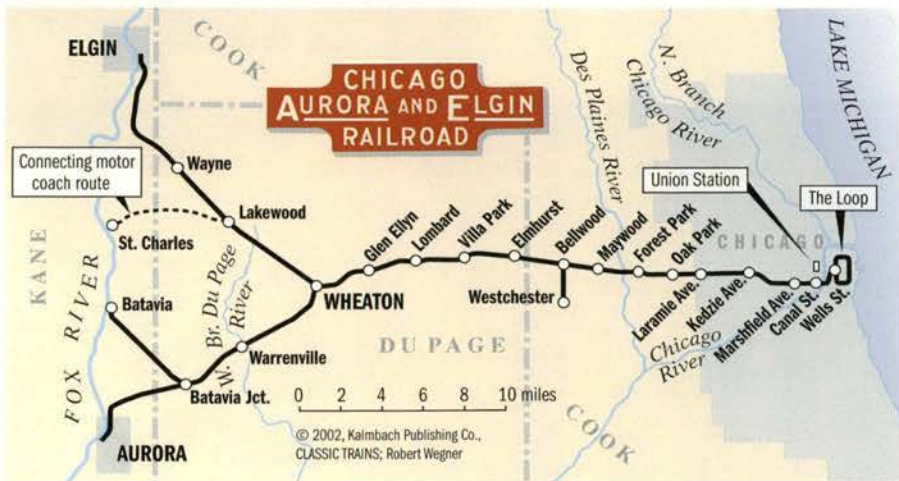
at his office in the Morton Building.

Several years later, I was in North Western Station collecting railroad public timetables. There were timetables for all the steam roads in Chicago, but none for the three major electric interurban lines: CA&E, North Shore Line, and South Shore Line. I asked and was told that interurban timetables were never carried. Apparently there was still a lingering resentment by steam roads over the whole interurban enterprise.

Like the other electric lines, CA&E was a relative latecomer to Chicago. Service began in 1902 as the Aurora, Elgin & Chicago but didn’t reach downtown until rights to operate over the Metropolitan West Side Elevated’s line to Wells Street Terminal (then called 5th Avenue) were obtained in 1905.

CA&E formed a “funnel shape” with double track to Wheaton and single-track lines beyond to four Fox River cities. (A branch through West Chicago to Geneva, and later to St. Charles, was abandoned in 1937.) Its early nickname of “Sunset Lines,” used in the logo and on cars, came from trains heading west from Chicago in the evening.

Also known as “the great third-rail”



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(it did employ overhead wire in yards, terminals, and in early street-running), CA&E was a high-speed interurban from the start, running trains at a mile-a-minute for 56 years. In 1925, it became part of the huge Insull interurban and utility empire, which lasted until 1932. In my youth, the name Samuel Insull was still much venerated in Chicago.

CA&E had an efficient operating pattern. There were locals and expresses, so you had to be careful which you boarded at Wells Street, or your train might streak right through Villa Park without stopping. The expresses would be separated at Wheaton to go on to Aurora, Elgin, and St. Charles (Batavia was a shuttle). Mom always made a point of looking for the steel cars when we caught our train; she knew they were safer in a collision. Many CA&E cars, right until the end of service, were first-generation wooden cars. The car fleet spanned 45 years of construction dates, the last group being 10 St. Louis Car "curved-side" coaches ordered in 1941 and delivered after the war in 1945.

Even in the '40's, those wooden cars were antiques. They creaked when in motion, and the lights would flicker as the car lost contact with the third rail at road crossings, but they were a credit to the cabinetmaker's art, inside and out.

Development of Villa Park, a late-comer among western suburbs, came largely due to the convenience of the "Roarin' Elgin." My parents settled there in 1928 partially because it offered two commuter lines to the Loop, CA&E and Chicago & North Western, tracks that were never far apart from Wheaton eastward. Father rode the C&NW because

its terminal was closer to his office.

The Wander Company, maker of the Ovaltine drink and Villa Park's only large industry, had also picked the town because it offered competing rail service (and good water). Its large brick complex was just east of Villa Avenue between the CA&E and Chicago Great Western, with spurs on both.

At home, I was constantly drilled never to go near CA&E's third rail. The right of way was fenced, but the third rail was easily accessible at every one of the many grade crossings. The only protection was something resembling a cattle guard and a small white sign with red letters reading "Danger Electric Current Keep Off Tracks."

Although our house was several blocks from the tracks, I remember the eerie flashes on stormy winter evenings caused by poor electrical contact owing to ice on the third rail. When we went shopping locally, at Villa Avenue or Ardmore Avenue, the trains were always a fascination. Long expresses roared by without stopping, and during rush hour, the crossing gates seemed to go up and down constantly. I could hear the bells and constant activity from our dentist's second-floor office on Ardmore.

In September 1953 came the serious threat of abandonment when the west side elevated structure to the Loop was razed for construction of what would become the Eisenhower Expressway. CA&E cars could not fit in the subway that formed the new route downtown, so a "temporary transfer" terminal was

**The only train: Two of CA&E's six steeple-cabs switch Ovaltine after passenger service ceased.**





TWO PHOTOS, MERT LEET



**A five-car train waits at Des Plaines Avenue in Forest Park (top) on the last day of 1955. In April 1957, curved-side car 456 leads a Wheaton Local at Wolf Road in Hillside; CGW is at the left.**

built at Des Plaines Avenue in Forest Park. Just before the "L" came down, I remember seeing the destruction of surrounding buildings, which looked like a World War II photo of a bombed-out city.

CA&E never had much freight traffic, so despite its ridership zenith occurring in 1947, its shutdown was inevitable after the Forest Park transfer was established. Passengers deserted the line in droves for the more desirable single-seat service on parallel C&NW. Passenger-service suspension occurred, abruptly, at 12:15 p.m. on July 3, 1957, stranding hundreds of angry riders in Chicago.

I was seriously affected by the demise of the CA&E; I even wrote a letter to the governor. CA&E refurbished cars and planned a trial service resumption, but money ran out before the Des Plaines River bridge to the Forest Park transfer was put back in service.

During the final years, I wanted to record what I could. At first we had only a cheap camera, but I took a few shots at Ardmore. I remember the crew dropping off the evening newspapers when the train stopped. It was about that time that my father bought an early postwar Japanese camera. With it, I was able to photograph some late CA&E activity: a railfan special, a few freight moves (which lasted until June 10, 1959), cars in the Wheaton yard, buildings to the west, and scrapping.

The last days of freight operations were interesting. One day I watched as the crew switched the Ovaltine spur. Since only a few of the most senior employees were still working, it was a slow-motion affair, but there was no hurry.

I was standing on the Villa Avenue platform, camera in hand, when the very last CA&E train came through, the "clean-up" run to pick up all remaining freight cars, on June 17, 1959. I made several trips to the Wheaton shop to take pictures, and I scoured the line west of Villa Park for any interesting





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**By this time a moot point, a little red-and-white sign hadn't been much to protect the innocent.**

photo opportunities. It was a sad sight, and clearly an end to all hope, when, one day, I found most of the cars had been turned over, doused with gasoline, and burned for scrap-metal recovery.

Today, much of the CA&E right of way is the Illinois Prairie Path, a 55-mile recreation trail in Cook, DuPage, and Kane counties. Both Villa Park stations still exist, and the Villa Avenue station is the home of the Villa Park Historical Society Museum. Further, 18 of CA&E's interurban cars and one line car have been preserved [see "Second Section"]. I've enjoyed many train rides since 1957, but I'll never forget the "Roarin' Elgin," or its unfortunate (and I believe unnecessary) demise. ■

## CA&E fact file

(comparative figures are for 1929 and 1956)

**Route-miles:** 66; 54

**Locomotives:** 9; 7

**Passenger cars:** 87; 89

**Headquarters city:** Wheaton, Ill.

**Special interest groups:** Shore Line Interurban Historical Society, P.O. Box 346, Chicago, IL 60690; Central Electric Railfans' Association, P.O. Box 503, Chicago, IL 60690; Chicago Aurora & Elgin Historical Info Site, [www.midwest.railfan.net/CAE/caehome.htm](http://www.midwest.railfan.net/CAE/caehome.htm).

**Recommended reading:** *The Great Third Rail*, edited by George Krambles (CERA, 1961).

**Sources:** *The Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 1999); DuPage County Historical Museum; Villa Park Historical Society Museum.