Trolley Makes Tracks to History Center

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O HELP preserve Pittsburgh’s rich public transportation history, the Historical Society has acquired interurban streetcar #1724 from Port Authority Transit of Allegheny County. After the consolidation of numerous regional transportation companies early in the century, the Pittsburgh Railways Co. was the immediate predecessor to the Port Authority. In addition to its urban streetcars, the company also ran two interurban lines that served a host of mining and mill towns throughout Washington County: line #35 to Charleroi and Allenport, 35 miles south of Pittsburgh, and line #36 to Washington, 25 miles southwest of the city.¹

In the late 1940s, Pittsburgh Railways upgraded its two interurban lines. The company purchased Presidents’ Conference Committee cars from the St. Louis Car Co. in 1946 and again in 1949. These cars featured forced air heating and cooling systems, as well as heat-absorbing glass windows manufactured by Pittsburgh Plate Glass.² Nine of the 1600-Series cars and 24 of the 1700-Series cars, including #1724, were specially equipped for interurban travel, featuring air whistles, emergency kits, luggage racks, and rear windows that opened. These windows permitted the operator to maneuver the trolley from the rear as it crossed trestle bridges. After 1948, all interurban cars were equipped with “trolleyphones,” enabling the operator to stay in contact with the dispatcher.³

During the 1950s, many American cities began to replace trolleys with buses. Pittsburgh retained its trolley network because, unlike buses, trolleys were able to traverse the hills and curves of the city’s narrow streets. In 1953, Pittsburgh Railways reduced the range of its interurban lines, terminating #35, and #36 at Drake. The company removed the trolleyphones and emergency kits from the interurban cars, including #1724.⁴

In 1961, Pittsburgh operated the largest trolley network in the nation, with 41 lines, but the decade would bring a drastic reduction in trolley service due to the growth of suburban shopping centers, increased dependence on automobiles, and improved highway systems. The Port Authority retired car #1724 in the late 1970s, but continues to use similar cars in its current system.

The Historical Society plans to restore car #1724, and to use it as an interpretive tool for showing how transportation, both public and private, changed the face of the city. The trolley will be in the lobby of the Society’s Pittsburgh Regional History Center in the Strip District.

Currently the Society is looking for materials relating to transportation in Pittsburgh: a Pittsburgh Railways Co. or Port Authority uniform, tokens, transfers, photographs, or home movies. We are also interested in collecting memories of trolley rides. Did you ride trolleys to Forbes Field, Kennywood or West View Park? Did you commute to work or school by trolley? Did you use trolleys to go downtown to shop? If you would like to share your memories, donate transportation-related items, or help underwrite the trolley restoration, we’d like to hear from you. Please call the Society’s Museum Programs Department at 412/281-2465.

Notes
¹ Carlson, Stephen, and Fred Schneider, eds., PCC: The Car That Fought Back (Glendale, Ca., 1980), 196.
² Ibid., 113.
⁴ Ibid.