

A Whistle Stop?

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Commuter Marks 33rd Year

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Staff Writer

Nothing really changes after all—at least not the spirit of a town if that town happens to be Birmingham.

Hearing about the 1931 celebration contingent on the opening of the Grand Trunk's new commuter service is like listening to a playback of festivities surrounding Michigan Week.

A carnival mood pervades for the more up-to-date event, exactly as it did back in August '31 when the whole town got into the act to welcome its newest, modern facility.

A giant, all-day salute was staged by southern Oakland County communities heralding the new service, its \$8,000,000 right-of-way and the new \$125,000 station in Birmingham.

THE COMMUTER service was the first of its kind established by a "steam" railroad in the state of Michigan and brought Woodward Ave. communities closer to Detroit than ever before.

Festivities were centered in Birmingham, but residents of several other cities and villages joined in, arriving as early as 9 a.m. for the band concert at the depot.

This was followed at 10 a.m. by a Kiddies Parade held in the center of town with nearly 150 entrants vying for prizes for the best costume, the funniest costume, the best animal entry and the best decorated bicycle. Each young marcher received a piece of cake donated by a local bakery and a "frost bite" donated by Wilson Drug Store.

The Birmingham Fire Dept. put on a fire fighting exhibition, there was a ball game between Birmingham and Pontiac and in the afternoon a parade, "The Pageant of Progress," took place, floats representing the progress of a century in business and industry.

THE PARADE WAS divided into six sections with a band at the head of each and ranks were swelled by dozens of gaily bedecked automobiles.

Elizabeth Pollock, daughter of

the Howard Pollocks of Ruffner St., had been chosen queen of the pageant several days previously.

Starting from the center of town, the parade ended at the depot, where an air show and fire works entertained the crowd until two special trains, one northbound from Detroit and one southbound from Pontiac, met and discharged honored passengers picked up at various stops along the way.

Gov. Wilbur M. Brucker was the principal speaker at the dedication ceremonies, other speakers including Grand Trunk officials; Harry Allen, Birmingham village president, and David H. Ladd, general chairman of the day's program.

HONOR GUESTS were taken on a sightseeing tour around Birmingham and Bloomfield Hills, then to the Community House for a banquet. A street carnival, complete with beauty contest, took place after dinner, last scheduled event on the program a carillon recital by Anton Brees from the singing tower at Christ Church Cranbrook.

Since the days of its gaudy, colorful debut Birmingham's commuter service has kept the rails as hot as some of the controversy which periodically arose over rates, schedules, safety and strikes.

In 1952 one of the problems concerned the holes and breaks in the fencing along the railroad right-of-way, caused by shortcutting commuters and school students.

THESE FENCE breaks would permit small pre-school children, attracted by the speeding trains but unaware of the dangers, of getting too close.

In 1963, after only a day and a half of testimony, the Michigan Public Service Commission adjourned hearings on a Grand Trunk Railroad request to drop two commuter trains that pass through Birmingham.

John F. Saekfe, Birmingham administrative aid, presented the MPSC with a letter from city commissioners expressing concern over the possible loss of service to about 40 commuters.

The Grand Trunk was seeking

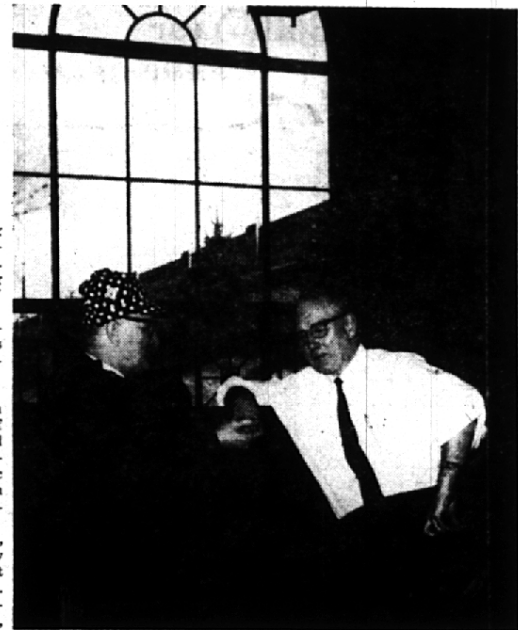
to eliminate an early morning train to Detroit and one that returned from Detroit at 11:30 p.m. They claimed they were losing \$75,000 a year on the operation of the trains.

Anyone who uses the commuter today knows these problems were resolved in favor of the passengers.

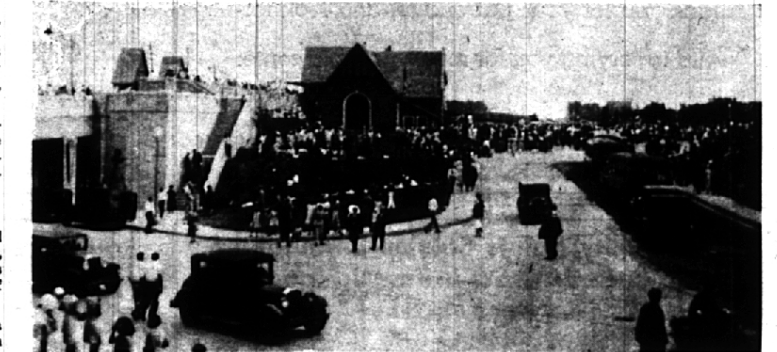
DURING THE SAME year, an organization known as "Friends of the Grand Trunk" became worried over rumors that the daily commuter trains running from Pontiac to Detroit were headed for oblivion because of the new Chrysler Expressway.

But this hasn't happened, either, and Birmingham continues to show up—about 900 strong—"down at the station early in the morning".

Passengers are greeted by genial Station Master H. J. Wichman, who has been at his post for the past 10 years, and can sit reading their Eccentric, or magazines provided by management, in one of the shiniest, prettiest stations in the whole U.S.A.



LIFELONG AREA resident Dike Baldwin (left), who has made railroading a hobby, and Station Master Harry J. Wichman, who's made it a business, get together frequently to swap reminiscences and plot the future at the commuter station.



A GIANT, all-day celebration took place Aug. 1, 1931, when commuter service was established between Pontiac and Detroit. The demonstration of welcome was centered in Birmingham, where a carnival mood prevailed around the new station.

EDISON ENDS OIL LAMP AGE

B'ham 'In the Dark' 'til 1908

The incandescent lamp was invented in 1879, one year after The Eccentric started, but it was the coal-oil lamp that supplied Birmingham with light until the 1900's.

The difficulty in developing systems to carry electricity to outlying areas held up Birmingham's franchise until 1908 when the St. Clair Edison Co. set about bringing Birmingham out of the dark. The first franchise ordinance in July of 1908 furnished current and lamps to the Village council-room, the jail, the public library, the water-works and the hose-house of the fire station.

ACTION TO extend service to the community began immediately. A substation was built on the east side of Pierce street, south of Maple and current from the Detroit Edison Delray plant began to flow in 1909.

1910 was a big year for Birmingham's electrical progress. Eastern Michigan Edison, a branch of Detroit Edison, took over the assets of the St. Clair firm and gave Birmingham its first lighted street.

At least 15 arc-type lights appeared in Birmingham that year. Several stores began using electrical signs. The Edison office and Shain's Drugs were two of the first.

In 1914, Detroit Edison bought out Eastern Michigan and, when the sub-station was knocked out of commission by lightning, the sales offices were moved to North Woodward.

IN 1916, Edison moved to 240 S. Woodward and Woodward avenue was lighted from Pontiac to Birmingham. Electricity had finally come to the area.

Edison moved into its present home on Merrill street in the spring of 1932. The new building cost approximately \$100,000. Following the company's policy of de-

signing offices to conform with those of the community, an English design was approved for the building.

The amazing progress of electricity in Birmingham can be illustrated in figures. In 1910, 54 years ago today, electrical customers numbered but 184.

At the same time, only 15 street lights were in use. The average Birmingham resident used only 366 kilowatt hours of current. Today, the typical resident uses dozens of times that amount at approximately one-fifth the cost per unit.



EARLY GASOLINE-DRIVEN EDISON TRUCK
Edison trouble-shooters looked more like cowboys.

Gas Service Came To B'ham in 1913

A four-inch steel pipe from Pontiac brought gas to Birmingham 51 years ago, in 1913. It came from the former Michigan Light Co., which two years later became a part of Consumers Power.

The company's first office in Birmingham was established in a drug store owned by J. W. Cobb on the west side of Woodward three doors south of Maple. Residents paid their bills and made application for service at Cobb's.

Old-timers recall that the late Henry Fortner, a company employee for 28 years, was the first full time employee reporting to the Cobb Drug Store for orders left by customers.

HE HAD A PUSH cart originally, later replaced by a Model T, and would leave the drug store daily with his list of jobs. In 1914 the company had about 160 customers in this area.

In those days artificial gas was supplied from coal and manufactured in several plants of the company located within the area. Al-

most its only use was lighting, both street and home use, with cooking and water heating fast becoming universal fuel within homes. Some customers used it for extra heat in small fancy heaters set into fire places.

Today, for more than 7,617 homes in the Birmingham area, the company offers many vital services.

WITH THE ADVENT of natural gas, which first reached Birmingham in 1942, these services include heating of homes, drying of clothes, burning of trash, heating water, refrigerating food and, of course, cooking meals.

In contrast to the little office in the drug store, the company now has in Birmingham one of the gas industry's most modern and beautiful customer service buildings, opened in May, 1962, at the southwest corner of Merrill and Henrietta.

Sometimes service is so fast that it's not uncommon for a truck to arrive at a customer's home within a few minutes after the call for service has been received.