

2019 SPRING NEWSLETTER

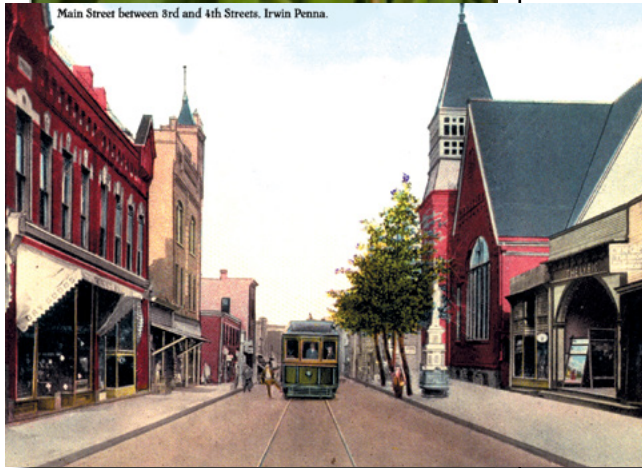


## Trolley Town

### Streetcar Traffic Aided Irwin's Growth

*by Bob Cupp*

**Did You Know?**



*Trolleys were introduced when walking and horses were the most common methods of transportation.*

Trolleys, or streetcars, as they were also known, played an important role in the development of Irwin and the surrounding area. With the introduction of trolleys, people could live farther from their jobs than walking distance, which was generally a limitation in the past.

Irwin grew up along the Pennsylvania Railroad's main line. The rapid growth of the coal industry allowed the town to develop into a thriving community; it became a Westmoreland County commercial center. People came here to transact business, shop at a wide variety of stores, do their banking or get a good night's rest. Salesmen arrived by train and traveled throughout the region on the extensive trolley system. By 1909, Irwin residents could patronize four different trolley lines to reach the area's coal patch towns, as well as farther destinations.

#### **Pittsburg and Westmoreland Street Railway Company (P&W)**

In March 1906, a charter was granted to the Pittsburg and Westmoreland Street Railway Company to build a line from Irwin to Herminie. The P. & W. constructed a line from Irwin to Hahntown and on to McKeesport, but their plans to complete the line to Herminie never materialized.

Prior to 1916, the line between Irwin and McKeesport used single "truck" cars, which made the ride quite bumpy and uncomfortable. Among the few repeatable names given the line was "Elderberry Express." The McKeesport line was later sold to West Penn Railways and operated until 1938.

#### **Pittsburg, McKeesport and Greensburg Railway (PM&G)**

The Pittsburg, McKeesport and Greensburg Railway, which also became part of West Penn Railways, provided trolley service or connections to points throughout Westmoreland, Fayette and Allegheny Counties. It started at the corner of Main and Third



*(continued on page 2)*

(continued from page 1)

*The Irwin extension route remained in operation as part of West Penn Railways until the 1940's.*



Streets in Irwin and ran to Manor, Penn, Jeannette, Greensburg and Hunker. Trolleys left Irwin every half-hour from 6 a.m. until 12 p.m.

Back in 1906, Irwin's borough council and the P.M. & G. had a unique standoff. Council required all streetcars going through Irwin to have fenders, an extraordinary piece of equipment for trolleys at the time. One trolley was equipped with the fenders and was used to shuttle passengers through town to other trolleys going west to Trafford and east to Greensburg. The franchise granted by Irwin provided for a \$30 annual payment for each car used in town. Since only one car was used, \$30 was the total collected.

The Trafford to Irwin extension of the P.M. & G. passed over the Larimer trestle, high above Route 993 houses, railroad tracks and Brush Creek. Operating from 1908 to 1931, it began its eastbound route at Trafford. From there, it snaked along Route 993 through Cavittsville and Ardara to the Larimer station. Then it crossed another trestle before arriving at its Main Street, Irwin terminus.

### **Irwin-Herminie Traction Company**

During the early part of the twentieth century, for people living in Hahntown, Rillton, Herminie and other points in-between, Irwin was the favorite place to shop. That would not have been possible without the Irwin-Herminie Traction Company, which provided trolley service between those towns for over two decades. The company was part of the Manor Valley Street Railways corporate organization headed by Charles Bolton. Unlike so many other area trolley companies, it remained independent and never affiliated with the West Penn Railway System, but did connect with it.

*Trolleys were part of the Irwin scene along South Main Street for over a half-century.*

*PHOTO COURTESY OF OLD TOWN VIEWS*



The company signed a contract with the Greene and Reed Construction Company of Pittsburgh to build the line. By mid-October 1909, it was operating from Hahntown to Herminie, but there were problems at both ends. There was a disagreement with the Pittsburg and Westmoreland Railway

about using the P. & W. line from Hahntown to Irwin, and with the Pittsburg, McKeesport and Greensburg Railway, regarding the use of tracks in Irwin. At the other end of the line, the trestle over Sewickley Creek into Herminie was not completed until April 1, 1910; initially, streetcars could only go as far as the creek.

Irwin business owners were pleased by the news reported in the Republican Standard on October 15, 1909. "The new line from Hahntown to Herminie is in operation. It works like clockwork and bids to become one of the most paying

(continued on page 3)



(continued from page 2)

The trolley tracks ran parallel to Pennsylvania Avenue. This photo was taken circa 1906, long before the area became known as Penglyn. The trolley stopped at nearby Strawpump where the tracks curved off to the left toward Manor.

PHOTO COURTESY OF IMAGES OF IRWIN



West Penn Railways was formed as a result of a merger of 13 trolley firms on April 23, 1917. Passengers in Irwin could go east to Greensburg and continue south to Uniontown, or go west to McKeesport and Trafford. Operations between Irwin and Greensburg ended July 12, 1952.

PHOTO COURTESY OF OLD TOWN VIEWS



investments that has yet come to local light. The track is down, the wires strung, the power turned on, and a brand new baggage or express car has been operating for the past week. The express has not jumped the track nor is it likely to. The management is greatly pleased with the condition of things and will have three big new cars running with lightning rapidity within the next three days. This will be great news to the people of Irwin, Chambers, Rillton, Herminie and other points who are waiting for the passenger cars."

Numerous shoppers rode the trolley to Irwin from Herminie and points in between, and the baggage car hauled a large amount of freight, particularly from Irwin to Herminie. An old shipping ticket, dated Jan. 1, 1916, showed that a five-gallon container of ice cream shipped from Irwin to C&B Drug Company in Herminie cost 25 cents in freight charges.

The line was well patronized for years. In July 1920, the fare between Irwin and Herminie was raised from 18 to 25 cents. At the peak of service, the first trolley left Herminie every hour on the hour from 6:00 a.m. through midnight.

On Saturdays, half-hour service was necessary to accommodate the large number of passengers.

Students from Sewickley Township, whose high school was not yet operating, could purchase a monthly school ticket and ride the trolley to Norwin High on Pennsylvania Avenue across from the Irwin-Herminie streetcar barn. Passengers arriving at Irwin could transfer to other lines, such as West Penn Railways, and travel to McKeesport, Trafford and Pittsburgh to the west, or Manor, Jeannette and Greensburg to the east. At Greensburg, additional connections also made travel to other towns possible.

In its busiest years, the company used "summer" cars. An open car, which had no aisles, could be boarded from steps on the sides. The open-sided summer car resembled the famous San Francisco cable cars. In case of rain, the car had curtains which could be dropped. Many people went for joy rides on hot summer evenings. Oakford Park, near Jeannette, and Olympia Park, near McKeesport, were popular summer destinations for holiday or Sunday outings.

Initially, the streetcars were operated by both a conductor and a motorman. Later, decreasing revenues forced the elimination of one man. Construction of the Irwin-Herminie Road, which was started in 1922, and increasing use of private automobiles, resulted in a steady loss of riders for the trolley line. The end of the trolley operations between Irwin and Herminie came March 15, 1931

(continued on page 4)



*Irwin's Main Street was a busy place during the trolley era, with a wide variety of retail stores and a steady supply of shoppers. (1939 photo)*

PHOTO COURTESY OF EILEEN MCCANN

*(continued from page 3)*

when the franchise to operate the Irwin-Herminie Traction Company was sold to the Cantoni Brothers of Monessen. The Irwin-Herminie Bus Line was formed, substituting buses for trolleys, but continuing to operate on the trolley's schedule.

## West Penn Railways

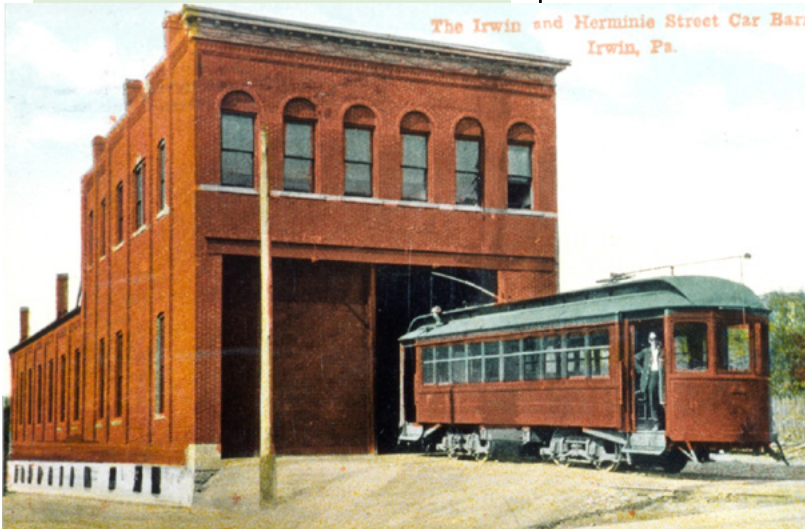
West Penn Railways was the final result of a merger of 13 trolley firms on April 23, 1917. Passengers in Irwin could go east to Greensburg, and continue south to Uniontown, or west to McKeesport and Trafford. At Trafford, passengers could reach Pittsburgh by transferring to the Pittsburgh Railways streetcar system. From Irwin they could also reach Herminie by transferring to the Irwin-Herminie Traction Company's trolley.

West Penn Railways' traffic peaked in the 1920's, and then began to decline as the automobile became increasingly available and the preferred means of local and regional transportation. With the growing popularity of the automobile and the gradual improvement of local roads, the demise of the trolley was inevitable.

On July 12, 1952, the Irwin-Greensburg West Penn Railways service was finally discontinued. Prior to its shutdown, free trolley rides were offered so that patrons could experience one final trolley ride before that chapter of local transportation history ended.

The Irwin-Herminie streetcar barn, built before 1908, still stands on Pennsylvania Ave., across from what is now Queen of Angels School, serving as a reminder of that nostalgic, bygone era. When buses replaced trolley transportation, it became a bus garage and, later, housed other businesses, including Performance Machining, Inc.

Since the end of the trolley era, we've become increasingly dependent on the automobile as the preferred means of transportation. Now, due to increases in gasoline prices and concerns for the environment, that attitude may require an adjustment. The trolley system once played a key role for Irwin residents who traveled for work, shopping, school and recreation. Perhaps, by necessity, motorists will be forced to return to the use of light-rail-transit – just like the old days. Maybe the Irwin-Herminie streetcar barn could be converted to its former use.



*Irwin-Herminie Traction Company's streetcar barn – Pennsylvania Avenue, Irwin*

PHOTO COURTESY OF JAMES K. STEFFEY,  
PERFORMANCE MACHINING, INC.



# NORWIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## PROUDLY PRESENTS

# ANTIQUES

on

MAIN

*Come experience Antiques and Collectibles on Irwin's Main Street.  
Come stroll back in time and find a desirable collectible.*

*one day only*

SATURDAY

*rain or shine*

SEPTEMBER 14TH, 2019

8 AM THROUGH 4 PM

THROUGHOUT MAIN STREET IN DOWNTOWN IRWIN, PENNA.

➤ Admission is free. Discover vendors, food trucks and more ➤

SPONSORED BY



**Somerse Trust**

COMPANY

Member FDIC



Redstone Highlands



**Duncan**  
FINANCIAL GROUP

Making It All Work Together

**C•Harper**  
AUTO GROUP

**S&T Bank**

MEMBER FDIC

# NORWIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

PO Box 623  
219 Main Street  
Irwin, PA 15642  
724-309-1161

## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Carl Huszar, President  
Tom Witman, Vice President  
Geraldyn DeFelice, Secretary  
Diane Holderbaum, Treasurer

Tom Agnew  
Sandy Carlson  
Robert Cupp  
Bill Hawley  
Regis Holecko  
Brian Jovan  
Sharon Lunn  
David Sinclair  
Richard Siniawski  
Noreen Turkowski

*Newsletter  
design and production  
by Sandy Carlson.*

**2019 SPRING NEWSLETTER**



TO:

*Your gift to the  
Norwin Historical Society  
helps to preserve our history!*