Astoria streetcar system

The Astoria Street Railway Company began horsecar operations on May 9, 1888. Five cars provided service over three miles of track along Commercial Street. By 1892, the threat of competition from proposed electric lines, a steam motor line, and a cable-car system had inspired the railway to convert to an electric operation. Four horsecars were rebuilt with two fifteen horsepower motors.

The cable railway idea was never realized; but on June 23, 1890, Judge Frank Taylor's Bay Railway Company began operating a steam dummy line around Smith's Point. The line ran from the western boundary of town, near present-day Washington and Astor Streets, to new tracts along Young's Bay, some three miles distant.

The Bay Railway hoped to electrify and build eastward through Astoria. Instead, on April 22, 1895, it was acquired by the Astoria & Columbia River Railroad, which desired its right-of-way for branches running across Young's Bay to Fort Stevens and Seaside.

The Astoria Street Railway went bankrupt in 1899 and was reorganized on March 2, 1900, by the General Electric Company as the Astoria Electric Railway. GE parent, Thomson-Houston Electric, was creditor for equipment used to electrify the line in 1892. Astoria Electric bought seven new trolleys, including Brill semi-convertibles in which the upper and lower window sash could be raised into pockets in the roof and stored there during warm weather. Such cars were intended to supplant separate fleets of open or closed trolleys that had to be swapped when the weather changed.

In 1910, the Astoria Electric Railway became part of the Pacific Power & Light Company (PP&L), which expanded the system to 5.7 miles and added six new streetcars. Unfortunately, the Great Fire of 1922 destroyed the plank streets carrying tracks through the business district, splitting the system. PP&L determined that it would not be cost effective to rebuild tracks through ten downtown blocks, so operations limped along over the two separated track sections until Astoria Transit Company buses took over on June 30, 1924.

Written by Richard Thompson

Further Reading:

Dennon, Jim. "Astoria's Streetcars" (part 1). *Clatsop County Historical Society Quarterly* 9:2 (Spring 1989), 24–36.

Dennon, Jim. "Astoria's Streetcars" (part 2). *Clatsop County Historical Society Quarterly* 9:3 (Summer 1989).

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