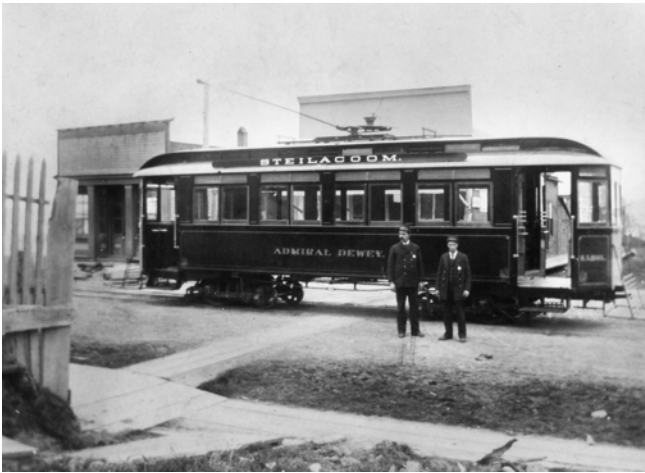


From Steilacoom to Tacoma...by Streetcar?

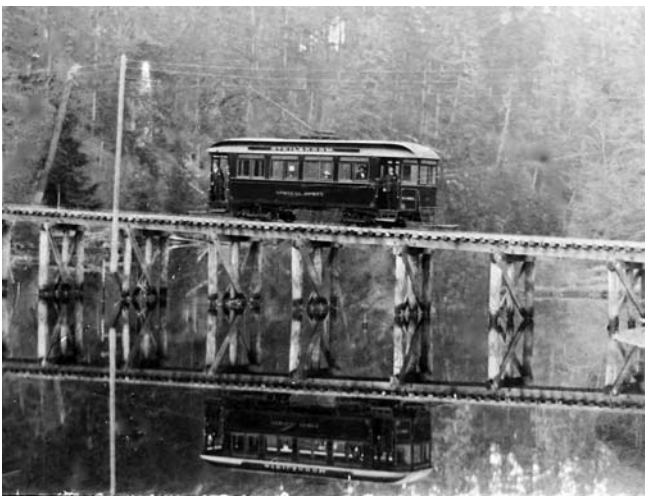
by Perry "Buzz" Brake, University Place

Many regional residents know that an electric streetcar line ran between Steilacoom and Tacoma in the early 1890s through the mid 1920s. Some seniors may remember seeing the streetcars, or the lights dimming in the Bair Drugstore as the electric streetcars demanded extra power as they struggled up the Lafayette Street hill. Others may have seen only a photo (below) of the streetcar *Admiral Dewey* waiting to pick up passengers in front of the Bair Drugstore on Lafayette Street in Steilacoom.



[Railroads001CroppedLoRez.jpg](#)

Those interested enough to look further might have seen a photo of the same *Admiral Dewey* as she crossed Chambers Creek, then called Steilacoom River, at approximately the location of the current dam across the headwaters of Chambers Bay.



[Railroads003ACroppedLoRez.jpg](#)

But few know where the Tacoma-Steilacoom Railway Company streetcar line went from there, perhaps assuming it followed the path of what is now Chambers Creek Road on its

climb out of the Chambers Creek Valley. That's exactly what the author thought a few months ago.

Having volunteered to scan and upload all of Steilacoom Historical Museum's 4200+ photos (see www.steilacoomhistoricalphotos.com), the author was aware of one historical photograph which indicated the line stayed in the valley. The photo (below) was marked as "the center streetcar bridge" hinting there were at least three railway bridges on Chambers Creek, one at the current dam, a "center" bridge, and a third located somewhere upstream.



[Railroads021CroppedLoRez.jpg](#)

Researching many historical documents, the author found that, after crossing Chambers Creek at the third bridge, the streetcar line followed the west bank of Peach Creek, exiting the valley to the north at "Albert Wythe's peach farm" (in the vicinity of the current Charles Wright Academy).

With this information, the author was determined in early spring 2011 (before foliage obscured the scene) to see if any trace of the old street car line remained a century later. Finding the old line was easy enough...as one walks up the Chambers Creek Road toward University Place after leaving the first bridge, a look over the guard rail on the creek side of the road reveals the old grade. One might wonder why vegetation hasn't taken hold, erasing the line's path forever. Historical documents say the line was "well ballasted", a road maker's term for applying a thick bed of coarsely crushed rock upon which the railway ties and rails are placed. Plants don't grow readily in such an environment.

Leaving Chambers Creek Road as the road climbs the steep hill adjacent to the Pierce County Wastewater Facility, the streetcar line is still readily visible as it follows within a few yards of the creek bed, far enough away that floodwater wouldn't readily take it out. Carved out of the north slope of the valley, the streetcar grade is easy to spot because it is flat, having been carved out of the side slope, and it still lacks vegetation.

About a half mile upstream from the first bridge (at the dam), the readily visible railway grade starts a steep ascent up the north slope of the valley. This turned out to be the

grade followed by the streetcar after having been re-routed by the Tacoma Railway and Power Company in 1916). At the same point, the beginning of a grade staying in the valley was also visible for a few yards, but then was obscured by vegetation (floods had probably deposited enough silt on the historic grade to support growth of trees and bushes). And at that same point, the valley starts to narrow, so much so that at some point shortly upstream, it would be too narrow to sustain a railway grade on the north bank. Figuring the “center bridge” must have been located nearby, the author followed the north bank of the creek and after only a few yards came to what was obviously the remains of a bridge abutment. Photographing it so it would look like an abutment was problematic without wading the seasonably flooded creek to its south side, so photos were taken from the north bank, upstream of the abutment (the historical photo of the bridge above had been taken from the south bank).



[bridgesitepanoramaLoRez.jpg](#)

The abutment, to the right in the above panoramic photo, contains large granite boulders. Presence of granite, not native to the immediate area, meant this was undoubtedly the manmade “center bridge” abutment. Another convincing indicator that this was the right location is the down-sloping tree line along the upper part of the panorama. Comparison to the tree line in the historical bridge photo shows an identical slope.

The author also tried to find the exact location of the upper bridge, but the valley floor is so narrow at that point that the abutments on each side have been completely eroded by floods. The streetcar line along the south side of the creek between the center and upper bridges make up much of what is now is a path in the Chambers Creek Park trail system. Evidence that the old line followed Peach Creek’s west bank northward is still evident. After coming out of the Chambers Creek valley, the line crossed Peach Creek and continued northward. The photo below shows an early open-air streetcar crossing the Peach Creek bridge, in this case headed west toward Steilacoom.



[Railroads011CroppedLoRez.jpg](#)

By the mid-1920s, the streetcar line going up Chambers Creek had been replaced by a more economical line running through what is the Oakdale area of Lakewood, initially ending up at the “Insane Asylum” (now Western State Hospital) and what remained of Fort Steilacoom. The new line crossed Chambers Creek at its origin at the outlet from Steilacoom Lake, ran across the flat plain above the southern bank of Chambers Creek (now Oakdale) and crossed Garrison Creek (also called Asylum Creek) above the Cascade Paper Company (later Boise Cascade, and most recently, Abitibi). Initially, the line ended at the Asylum but was eventually extended down the hill to Steilacoom, entering town on Starling Street. The photo below shows the bridge crossing Garrison Creek behind the paper mill.



[Scenes202.jpg](#)

More photos, and references to historical documents mentioned above (and much more) are available in the Steilacoom Historical Museum Library at the corner of Main and Rainier Streets.