

Mr. Bucklin's Railroad

by

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In the fall of 1991, a friend of mine made arrangements to store his boat in a small pole building located behind his brother and sister-in-law's house. The house was on the north side of Sycamore Beach Road, along the north side of Crooked Lake's first basin. I came along to help. As we readied the boat for storage, he informed me that a railroad had once passed through the area where we were standing. No other details were provided, but the conversation served as my first introduction to the St. Joseph Valley Railway Company.

My curiosity was piqued because having grown up in Northeast Indiana, I thought I was aware of all the major railroads that passed through the region, both north-south and east-west. I knew there had been an electric interurban line connecting Ft. Wayne with Kendallville, Waterloo, Auburn, and Garrett. I even knew about the Lake James Electric Railway that ran between Angola and Paltysville. My friend's assertion was all I had at the time, but the conversation was filed away into the back of my mind.

A few years later, my wife and I were visiting her parents in Kendallville. Knowing that I collected old postcards, my mother-in-law told me that she'd found an old Crooked Lake card that I could add to my collection. To my surprise and delight, the photograph on the card showed several people disembarking what appeared to be an old interurban rail car. The caption said, "The Valley Line Station, Crooked Lake, Indiana." The card also gave the location as being Fred Sheets' Hotel. Having viewed many vintage Crooked Lake cards, I knew at once where that photograph had been taken. This piece of tangible evidence confirmed my friend's story from before. Buoyed by this serendipitous discovery, I pledged to find out more about this obscure railroad.

Finding information about the Valley Line was easier than I had anticipated due to the existence of a very active group of railfans. These folks study, research, and archive anything and everything related to rail travel. Some of these rail buffs are prodigious writers and have authored bulletins, articles, and entire chapters in books devoted to this forgotten railway. One can also query Google to discover many facts and details.

The St. Joseph Valley Railway, aka the Valley Line, was the brainchild of Mr. Herbert E. Bucklin, of Elkhart, Indiana. Mr. Bucklin made a fortune in the patent medicine business and was also heavily involved in real-estate ventures both in Elkhart and Chicago. While he marketed a wide variety of potions, tonics, and elixirs, his all-purpose, Arnica Salve, was his flagship product. The salve was so popular that his railroad was frequently referred to as the Arnica Salve Line, in jest. Mr. Bucklin combined his work ethic and business acumen to create vast personal wealth. He also, actively, promoted the well-being and advancement of Elkhart, and the St. Joseph Valley region.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the Midwest was experiencing a boom in interurban railway development. Networks were springing up throughout Indiana and Ohio. At that time, Elkhart was served by a single railroad. Mr. Bucklin was frustrated with the high freight rates this monopoly made possible. Having failed to negotiate more favorable terms he took matters into his own hands by joining the interurban craze. He decided to build his own railroad. The proposed railway would stretch 80 miles across Elkhart, Lagrange, and Steuben Counties, and would run from South Bend, Indiana to Pioneer, Ohio. Connections would be made with existing rail lines at either end to provide freight and passenger service between Chicago and Toledo.

The St. Joseph Valley Traction Company was chartered on March 28, 1903, and was headquartered in LaGrange, Indiana. The plan called for

the railway to be constructed first, to the west from Lagrange, through Shipshewana, Middlebury, Bristol, and ending in Elkhart.

It wasn't until the summer of 1905, that plans were begun, in earnest, for the eastward push. On July 23, 1905, a new company, the St. Joseph Valley Railway Company was organized to build a railway from Lagrange to Pioneer. This new company would later lease all the tracks west of LaGrange from the original SJVTC. Several different routes were considered. The most direct path from Lagrange to Angola would have taken the Valley Line in a straight line east between the two county seats. This would bypass Mongo and Orland, both of which were desirous of procuring rail service. It would also miss the popular resort areas of Lake Gage and Crooked Lake. Through a series of stock subscriptions and subsidies from Mongo and Orland, Bucklin was persuaded to take the less direct route to Angola. Bucklin himself made a real-estate investment in 1906. He purchased the Shady Nook resort on Lake Gage, hoping to develop it into a popular area for more cottages and summer visitors.

The eastward expansion was completed to Orland by May 4, 1907. Less than a month later, service was available to Lake Gage, and by August 22, the first train arrived at Angola Junction, just north of town. From Angola Junction, rails were laid in the street south to the Public Square. The rails looped the north-east quadrant of the Square and then headed back out of town the way they had come. On the northwest corner of Martha and Maumee, a two-story brick building was erected to serve as a station and to house one of the gasoline-powered motor cars that were used for passenger service. These motor cars resembled electric trolleys or interurban vehicles of the day. It is interesting to note that they were, actually, self-propelled vehicles with gasoline engines. These motor cars were quite innovative at the time and received heavy use moving visitors from Angola to Crooked Lake and Lake Gage. Steam locomotives from the Valley Line were primarily used to move freight and would pass east-west, just north of Angola. They were not routed through town. Despite his best

efforts, Mr. Bucklin's railroad never got to Pioneer, Ohio. The railway eventually crossed the state line and ended at Columbia, Ohio.

The arrival of the Valley Line to Steuben County had an immediate positive impact. In 1907 most roads and town streets were unpaved, and transportation was provided by horse-drawn cart or carriage. There were very few automobiles in the county at the time. The interurban fever that was sweeping the Midwest complimented the existing heavy railroads by making isolated rural areas more easily accessible. Wood frame stations were constructed in Orland, Inverness, and Angola Junction. Rural waiting shelters were constructed at Crooked Lake and Lake Gage.

The railroad corridor through Orland saw the construction of a grain elevator, coal yard, lumber yard, and stockyard. The Standard Oil Company maintained several large tanks for storage and distribution of gasoline, fuel oil, and kerosene. Potatoes and onions, a major crop in the area, were more easily shipped to market.

Crooked Lake was already becoming known as a popular summer resort destination. Several hotels and resort communities existed on the lake when the Valley Line arrived. Trains out of Fort Wayne had been dropping off passengers at the Angola station on summer weekends and holidays. Sometimes as many as 15 to 20 passenger cars were employed. Nearly all of these passengers came to enjoy lake life on one of Steuben County's area lakes. Getting to and from Angola by rail was no trick, but getting out to the remote lake areas was less convenient. While Lake James had electric rail service to Palmytown, the rest of the lakes could only be reached by a horse-drawn hack.

With the arrival of Mr. Bucklin's railway, Crooked Lake and Lake Gage could be more easily accessed from Angola and many cities and towns to the west. Because of this, a new surge of interest and development occurred on Crooked Lake. By 1913, the lake boasted three hotels and a

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dance pavilion. Many new resort additions had been platted, and cottages were becoming much more numerous. Ridership on the line was quite popular, and extra motor cars were scheduled on busy summer weekends.

A tragic accident occurred at the Inverness station on Saturday, December 30, 1916, at approximately 5:35 pm. Inverness is located along Orland Road about midway between Crooked Lake's third basin and Lake Gage. At that time, it consisted of the rail station, a couple of stores, a church, a dance hall, and some permanent homes. There were also numerous cottages nearby. One of the Valley Line's motor cars was traveling west when it made its stop at the station. The seating capacity for this vehicle was 21. Astonishingly, 77 passengers had managed to get on board. The motor car had stopped at the station, and 33 people were attempting to get off. While stopped, the motor car was struck from the rear by a westbound steam locomotive pulling freight cars. The accident resulted in the immediate death of two passengers, a woman, and her two-year-old daughter. Another passenger who had been injured died two weeks later. An additional 24 passengers were injured. Although the line had enjoyed a good safety record through the years, a report from the Interstate Commerce Commission was critical of the company's lax operating practices, suggesting that employees either disregarded or did not even know the most basic safety practices. A series of wrong assumptions and mechanical issues, coupled with inadequate safety precautions, led to the accident.

At the time of the wreck, Mr. Bucklin was seriously ill and bedridden. His condition was so grave that the family kept the terrible news from him. He died on January 11, 1917, at the age of 63.

With his passing, the future of the Valley Line was in doubt. While the railroad had been a great benefit to the areas being served, the St. Joseph Valley Railway Company had lost money from the beginning. Mr. Bucklin, himself, had kept the company going through his own personal wealth. His

family had little enthusiasm for owning a railroad, especially if it was losing money. There was some study and effort put into finding a way to make the company profitable, but ultimately, the decision was made to sell it. The United States entered WWI in April of 1917. Wartime demand had caused scrap metal prices to rise, and the railroad was sold to a scrap dealer from Chicago on April 3, 1918. The end had come quickly, and trains ceased running between LaGrange and Columbia on April 18, 1918.

The once-thriving Midwest interurban network that sprang up at the turn of the twentieth century would soon suffer the same fate as the Valley Line. Many of them had never been financially profitable either. This was true, locally, for the Lake James Electric Railway. Its last scheduled cars ran October 15, 1918. A new form of transportation was gaining momentum, and the handwriting was on the wall. Between 1908 and 1927, the Ford Motor Company built and sold 15,000,000 Model T automobiles and trucks. Other manufacturers were building cars and trucks too. Major roads were paved, and the interurban railways were no longer the preferred mode of transportation for passengers or freight. By the 1930s, most interurban railways had vanished and were no more than memories.

Information for this document was obtained by reading from the following sources:

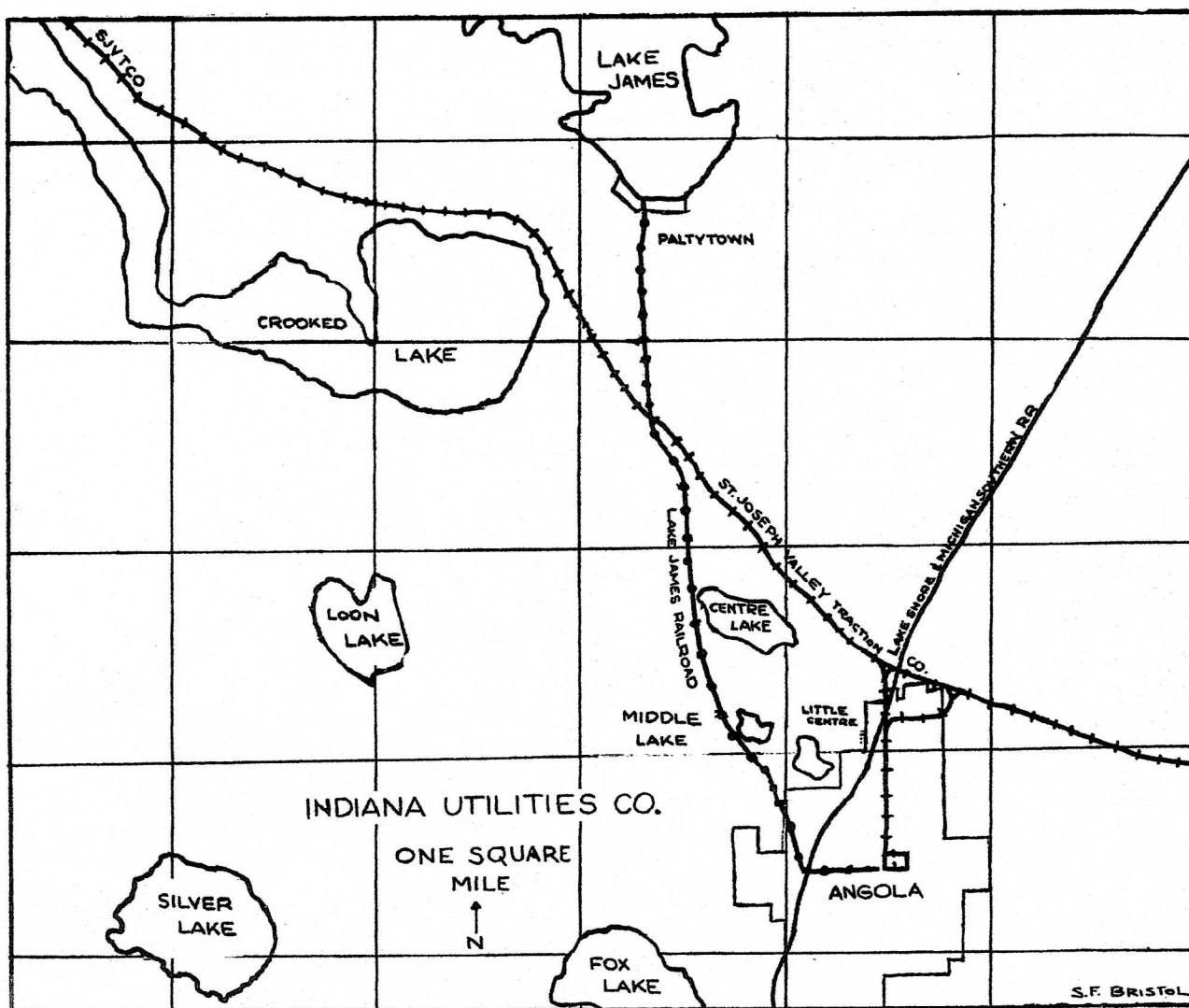
Electric Railway Historical Society, Bulletin No. 16

St. Joseph Valley Railway by Joseph Galloway and James Buckley, 1955

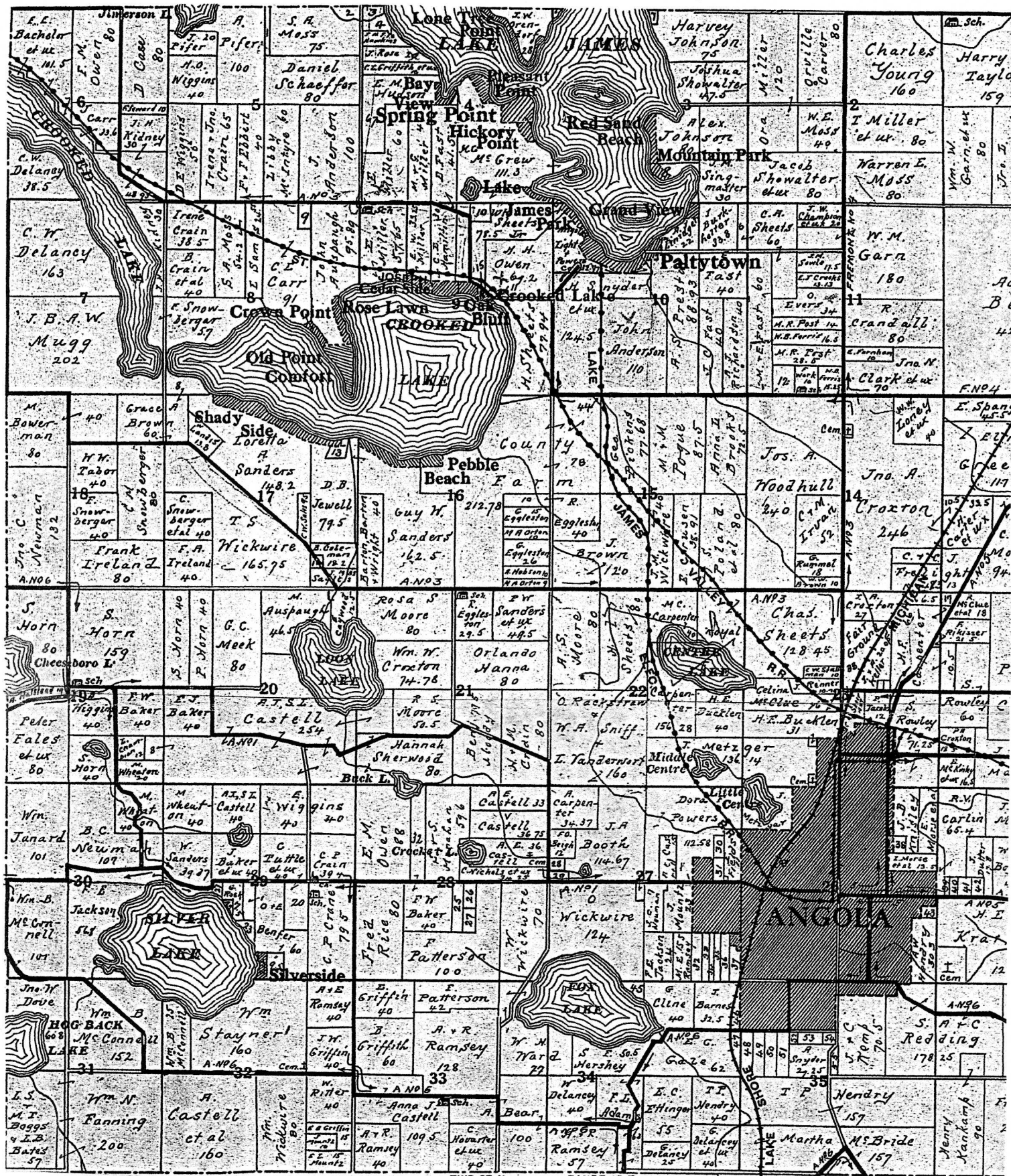
Twilight Rails by H. Roger Grant, 2010

Railroads of Indiana by Richard S. Simmons and Francis H. Parker, 1997

The History of Steuben County 1955 by Harvey W. Morley, 1956



This map shows the path of the three railways operating in Pleasant Township early in the twentieth century. The Lake James Electric Railway was 3.75 miles long. It ran between Angola and Lake James from 1904 to 1918. The Valley Line was nearly 80 miles long and serviced the area from 1907 to 1918. The first rail service in this area was the Ft. Wayne, Jackson & Saginaw Railroad. It arrived in the 1870s. It later became part of the Lakeshore & Michigan Southern RR and then became part of the New York Central system. The Indiana Northeastern Railroad still uses a portion of the old line between Hillsdale, Michigan, and Steubenville, Indiana.



This map of Pleasant Township, published after 1907, displays several lake resorts located on Crooked Lake's first and second basins. The arrival of the Valley Line provided easier access from Angola and the many towns and cities to the west.



Fred Sheets' Beach Hotel postmarked in 1921. Notice three automobiles. There is also a horse-drawn hack partially visible under the flag.

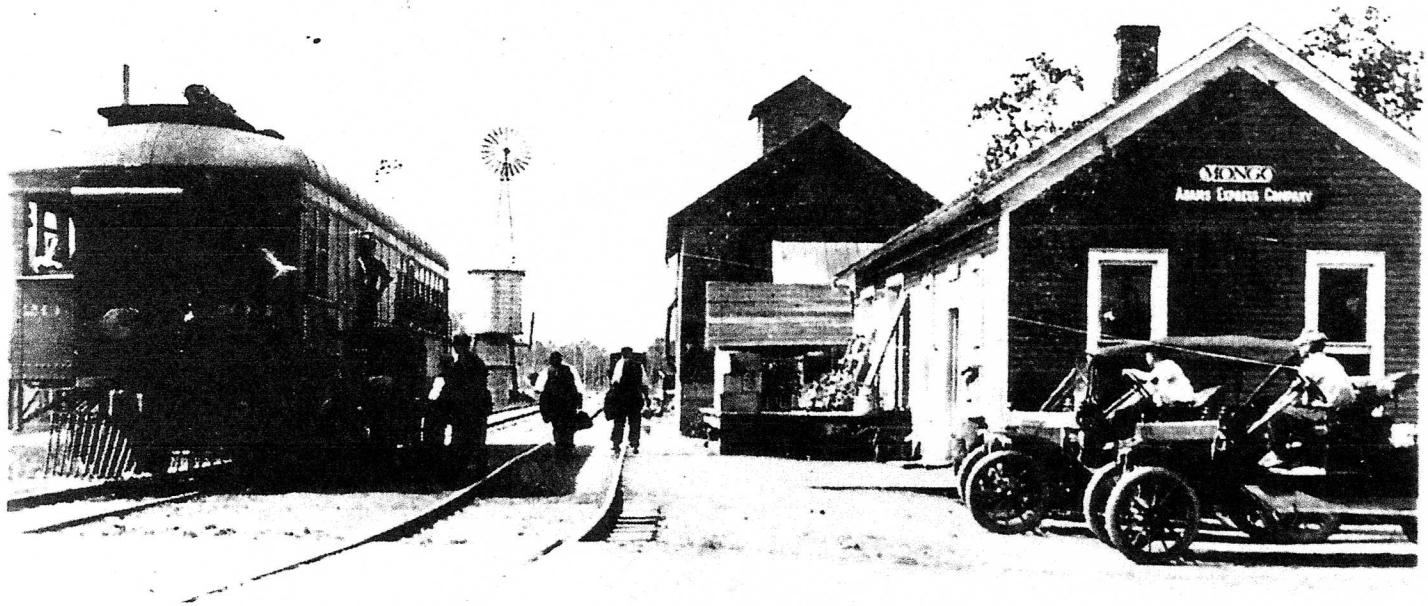


CROOKED LAKE, IND.

PHOTO BY SHEETS

FT. WAYNE, IND.

Passengers board one of the Valley Line's gas-engine powered motor cars. The four-cylinder engine was started by placing a 12-gauge shotgun shell into a chamber above the number one cylinder. The shell was discharged by striking it with a ball pean hammer. No electric starter or crank was used.



A St. Joseph Valley motor car at Mongo. Automobiles were becoming more common and played a part in the demise of the interurban era.



Locomotive number 122 approaches the wood frame station at Inverness. Steam locomotives were used to haul freight on the Valley Line, but could also be used for passenger service.



A group of men and boys appear to be waiting for the train at Fred Sheets' Beach Hotel. This card was postmarked in 1912. The hotel was located on the same corner as the now-defunct Sunset Inn and Nauti Turtle.



Passengers arrive at Crooked Lake on one of the Valley Line's gas-engine powered motor cars. Mr. Buklin's goal was to, eventually, electrify the entire line. By 1914, overhead electric lines were appearing at various points along the rail path, including LaGrange and Angola, however, the plan never came to fruition. Bonafide electric interurban cars appeared briefly between Elkhart and Bristol. In 1913, the Valley Line experimented with a self-propelled passenger car powered by storage batteries. Unfortunately, it failed to maintain its charge and was frequently towed back to the station.



A stream locomotive crosses the Orland Road north of the Beach Hotel.
Notice the wooden waiting shelter on the left.
