

# Electric Railways of Arlington

By FRANK L. BALL\*

\*EDITOR'S NOTE: *This is a condensation of a speech by the late Frank L. Ball to the Arlington Historical Society, January 14, 1966.*

I have been asked to talk about a very dry subject, to talk about electric railroads. I could talk to you about statistics, about fares, and about schedules, but it wouldn't mean anything. It would be just a mass of financial data and about the driest speech you ever heard. I want to try to bring something different—let you feel some of the romance of the development of our County.

America was first settled on the bays, the inlets, the rivers. They were about the only highways. The area that is Arlington County had about ten miles of water front but it wasn't used much when I was young. It isn't used much even today except near Alexandria and near Key Bridge.

Back at the turn of the Century, the highways were dirt roads. Arlington County's main thoroughfares were Wilson Boulevard, the Columbia Pike, and Glebe Road. Not a single one had any type of hard surface. You don't know what these roads were like—most of you probably have never seen a real dirt road in your life. They were different from most any dirt road; others had narrow lanes but most had a hard surface of some kind, even if only gravel. But Arlington's dirt roads were different! Maybe they were a little wider than some, but they were bottlenecks! A morass in winter, in summer they were long lines of dust and rocks. But they were the only means of communication from one part of the County to another. We had horses, buggies—above all, we had feet. Sometimes they were unshod—and it was a long walk.

Now if I were to say what were the two greatest things that occurred in Arlington County prior to 1900—great in building up the County, great in meeting the need of the people and in providing a convenience to the small farmers settled all over the County—I would say the reconstruction of the Aqueduct Bridge as a free bridge, and the coming of the electric railroads in 1890.

I'm not going to talk to any extent on the opening of the bridge. But I'll say this: there's a book written by a member of this Society about a church in town.<sup>1</sup> It relates how the President of the Methodist Conference making his annual visit in 1888, reported that he had just gone from Georgetown to Mount Olivet Church over the handsome new bridge, just opened and not yet completed. He wrote that it was a free bridge; that it didn't cost any money to get over the river any more. Then he added

<sup>1</sup> *Mount Olivet Methodist: Arlington's Pioneer Church*, by Frank L. Ball; Arlington, Virginia, 1965.

that during his visit he couldn't find anybody at the Church who would talk about anything but the new bridge.

Electric railroads in America began in the 1880's, many as small city or street railroads. The old horse cars were turned into electric cars. It happened in Washington; it happened everywhere. Pretty soon it began happening in the County. There were three lines. One was the old Washington, Alexandria and Mt. Vernon Railroad. It crossed the old 14th St. Bridge and went down along Number 1 Highway into Alexandria, and then down to Mt. Vernon. There were thousands of people coming into Washington then. If you wanted to go to Mt. Vernon you had to go by the river or drive. That road had its own carbarns at Four Mile Run. It had splendid cars.

The next road was the Arlington-Fairfax, later known as the Washington-Virginia Railroad. It started with a horse car line. I'm not sure whether I ever rode in them but I think I did. It started at Rosslyn and came up to the Arlington Gate at Fort Myer. It had two cars and four horses. So far as I know, only four men ever drove the horses. They hooked their horses to a car and pulled it to the Gate. While one car was being pulled up by a team, the other was sliding back by gravity. They'd go to a point about half-way where there was a switch and the cars could pass. That didn't last long but that was the beginning of this road: two cars, four horses, and \$600. And with this start the men who owned it opened up the whole center part of the County. In 1896 it ran from Rosslyn to Clarendon.

I remember the first car that got that far and I remember it very well. It was operated by a fellow by the name of Mike Lyons. The night the first car came we were having a church meeting at our house, and Stanley Forsythe's boys were there, and I remember his son Jim said, "I saw a car come to Clarendon today." This was a big event. In 1897, the road went up to Falls Church, and it was all ready when the Spanish-American War broke out. They brought in 23,000 volunteer soldiers into Camp Alger in West Falls Church. In 1898, the road did a land office business with people hanging on all over the car—I've seen 25 or 30 people sitting on the top. I never heard of a soldier getting hurt.

In 1905, the line was built from Falls Church to Vienna and then to Fairfax Court House. I drove stakes out there. The car stopped at West Falls Church and we walked all day long carrying the rods and the stakes, then we walked back from Vienna to Falls Church. Worked all day long for \$1.25 a day. That went on all summer until the cars got to Vienna.

Now the next line was east of Arlington, to Arlington Cemetery Wall. It swung from the wall across from Washington to what was known as Arlington Junction. Then the line swung back to Fort Myer and the Hatfield Gate. Later on they pushed it on to the Columbia Station on Columbia Pike, and on down to Green Valley, the end of the line. They didn't

have any beautiful stations but they had some ties piled up and that was the end of the line. In 1907 the line was carried from Arlington Junction into the District of Columbia. I drove stakes all along there in the swamp in 1906. To tell the truth, I still shiver when I think of it; I never did like snakes. I beat the bush ahead of me to beat the band. The station that was built at Pennsylvania Avenue and 12th St. stood for a long time.



*The Rosslyn Station, Washington and Old Dominion Railway.*

When I started fooling with politics there were two things I'd do. I'd go to the Georgetown end of the Old Dominion Railroad and I could see more people coming home than I could see in ten days going around to their homes. Then the next afternoon, I'd go to 12th and Pennsylvania Avenue and catch that crowd coming home.

The Old Dominion had more mileage than all the others when it got started. It was organized as the Great Falls-Old Dominion. The idea of the first line was to get to Alexandria and Mt. Vernon; the Arlington-Fairfax was concerned with building up Arlington County; but the Old Dominion was built to go to Great Falls, 14 miles out, and have a pleasure resort like Glen Echo for a one day excursion. The line ran into financial difficulties<sup>2</sup> and was taken over by Davis Elkins, Senator from West Vir-

<sup>2</sup> cf. "The History of the Washington and Old Dominion Railroad," by John F. Burns; *Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 1, October 1957.

ginia, and John R. McLean who had made a fortune in silver in Nevada and for whom McLean, Virginia, is named. The line hit Cherrydale some time in 1904. It got up in the area just west of Arlington County in 1905. They tried to get to Great Falls by July 4, 1906; the first train got there at 3 o'clock in the afternoon of July 3. Now the excitement was terrific and the cars were packed and jammed. Get on at the Thrifton Junction, get six tickets for 25¢, one ticket for 4 1/6 cents!—go across the bridge, transfer and go anywhere you want. No wonder it went broke!



*The electric railway tracks in Rosslyn, overlooking Georgetown.*

In 1912, the Washington and Old Dominion leased the old steam line that had been built years before from Alexandria to Bluemont and built a connection from the original Great Falls line to what we call Bluemont Junction.

These railroads were the greatest thing that ever happened to Arlington. We had a way to get around; in the rainy and wet weather we would ride the cars; we got off the mud roads onto steel rails! The County did build up. Great Falls built up and built up rapidly. To tell you what effect this had on my area, Ballston, let me read you this comment from the *Evening Star*: "The advent of electric cars in Ballston in 1896 has led our people into the assumption of city airs and ways." The old railroad turned a bunch of country bumpkins into a bunch of city slickers!

Maybe you never knew how great Great Falls was. Just listen to this taken from an early schedule of the Washington and Old Dominion Railroad:

“Great Falls on the Potomac, the Niagara of the South—Great by nature and its historical connection—while not equalling the Niagara in magnitude, surpassing it in beauty. The visitors traveling in the excellent cars of the Old Dominion Railway hear the rumble of the falls long before they are reached. On arriving at the station they pass through a magnificent grove of forest trees, and emerge on a high platform built below the falls, where suddenly the grandest view imagination can picture is spread out before their vision. They first behold the rapids where the water tosses and tumbles over mammoth boulders and jagged rocks, which from their enormous size at different places, change the course of the water, causing it to run in zigzag course which increases its wildness and fury, and seems to be dashing in every direction. It then rushes over sheer precipices forming three great waterfalls of majestic beauty, then passing down a narrow gorge, with perpendicular walls of granite, for about one mile, when it spreads out into one vast placid expanse. On the other side of the river there is a low mountain range studded with gigantic forest trees. The entire scene presents a panoramic view of wild and rugged nature, unsurpassed by any on earth, and it is utterly impossible to adequately describe the beauty and grandeur of that scene.”

No wonder they had crowds going out to Great Falls! I don't know who wrote that but it is one of the best things I've read. He did a lot of research and the description is terrific.

Half of the people in Arlington County my age proposed to their best girls at Great Falls. I feel sorry for the men and women who didn't have the experience of a country courtship, but they didn't know what they missed. These folks here today with these automobiles think it's so wonderful; doesn't equal the horse and buggy days—the horse knew the way home! Great Falls was one of the great honeymoon places.

I couldn't find a copy of a poem somebody wrote about the Arlington-Fairfax Railroad, but as I remember, it started like this:

You've heard them singing of the grapevine swing  
I sing of the grapevine road.  
It goes, with many a jog and lurch  
From Aqueduct Bridge to the town of Falls Church  
Past many a rural abode.  
They say that the man who laid out the plan  
Just followed a wandering cow.  
But she must have been blind  
You'd have hard work to find  
A pasture to suit . . .

Then there are some words I don't know. Then there is something that cuts the heart and it's true, too.

The motorman gay and the conductor they say  
Very often just side-tracked their car  
And then one and all at Ballston played ball  
While the passengers sat it out.

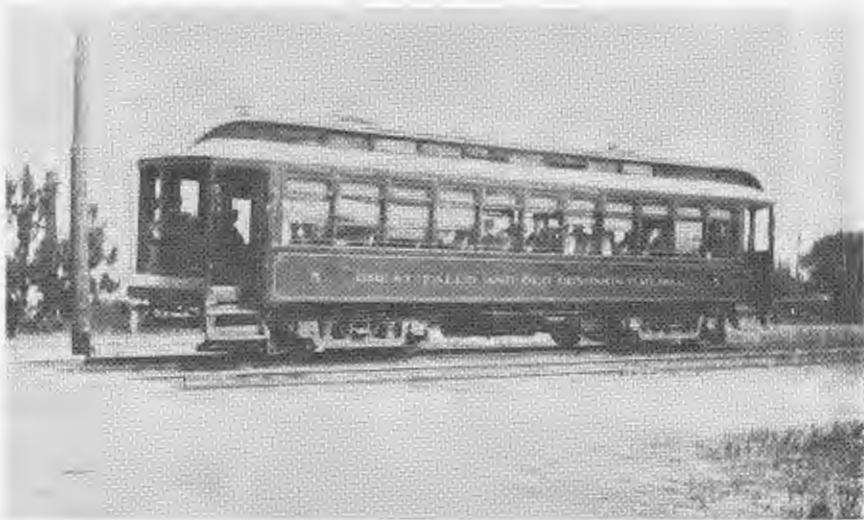
The motorman was the catcher on our ball team; he'd come by in the afternoon, stop his car, grab his mask, come over, and catch a few balls.

These railroads were very close to our hearts; such a wonderful thing for us to have. We learned to love the railroads; the Arlington-Fairfax Railroad was just like a little dear in our home. We knew everybody who worked on it, and everybody who worked on it knew everybody who lived on it. Everybody was a friend with everybody. If you said anything about that railroad you said it about the whole community. We took great pride in it. I remember the great storm of 1899, one of the worst storms ever; we had 30 inches of snow in February, the thermometer 11 below zero. Terrific winds for two solid days, snow drifts as high as this room. The street cars in Washington didn't run for over two weeks. The first railroad open around Washington was the Arlington-Fairfax road. It didn't get started for a week, but it started before anyone else. When the storm first began, they tried to keep the railroad open. Folks got the idea to cut down the pine trees and drag them along by the cars. They dragged them up and down the road all that evening but the next morning they had to close.

We had a man on the railroad—George Downs—a conductor. He was on the railroad a long time. He was a natural wit; he said things that were funny, but if anybody else said it, it didn't sound funny at all. The County put up a sign at the Cherrydale station; Nancy Donaldson didn't like it so she took it down. George knew her name so he'd announce the stop as: "All off for Nancy's house." One night there was a man and his wife on the car. George asked who the woman he was with was; he said that was his wife. George said: "That wasn't the wife you had with you the other night."

One morning the car was packed with 80 people. The fare had been raised to 10 cents. A passenger offered the conductor 5 cents—the conductor said no, 10 cents; he said no, 5 cents. So the conductor stopped the car but the people were packed so tightly they couldn't let him out. So George said, "Let's use common sense and we'll go to the Court House." Then there was a sit-down strike for an hour and a half. They weren't going to pay a cent more than they had been paying.

I don't know how much the men were paid but two strikes were called, one on the Old Dominion and one on the Arlington-Fairfax. They brought in strikebreakers for the Old Dominion. One of the things the strikers did



was to put soap on the tracks at Nauck, in Green Valley. The first car coming up the next day couldn't get up the hills. They tried to put on the brakes, but it just wouldn't work. Nobody got hurt. One night they went down and cut some of the poles. That settled the strike.

We had tragedies on the railroad, too. They had a wreck on the third day of July, 1907. There were signals for the down car and for the up car. One of the freight cars had some steel rails on it. This day it turned out Bob Crack was the motorman on one of the cars. My brother, Dallas, was standing in front with the motorman on the down car. Bob Crack held up one finger instead of two as the signal that the road was clear. Actually there was another car coming up behind him. When they got to where Sears Roebuck is today, at the curve, the down car ran into the car coming up and the motorman lost both his legs.

There was another wreck at the Court House curve where the motel is today. The wreck smashed the car all to pieces but the conductor walked out unhurt.

I remember another incident, that embarrassed Mr. Croson, the oldest motorman on the line, very much. That whole family worked for the line: Ed and Jim his sons, and old Jim himself from the time he came here about 1893, just when the horse car started. Mr. Croson was running by old Mulhall station there by Ballston one day, and Henry Rector, a colored fellow who was working for Col. Mulhall, had imbibed a bit too much in some of the shops down in Rosslyn, and there he was on the track. Mr. Croson didn't see him until he almost got to him. You know, if they wanted to stop those cars, they didn't throw on the old hand brakes; they threw it into reverse. That would stop the car much quicker. When Mr. Croson saw Henry standing there, he threw it full into reverse,

but it didn't stop; he rode over Henry. But he couldn't get the reverse off; and he came back and ran over him again. Henry was in the hospital three or four days and was back on the job, good as ever.

I want to tell you about the wildest night ever in Ballston. We came pretty near having a lynching in Ballston one night. There were two times in my life when we almost had a lynching. One time was when I was Commonwealth's Attorney. I found out in time that it was going to happen and I had the man moved from the Arlington jail to the Winchester jail that afternoon. The mob came that night all right; it came twice, but the prisoner was gone.

The other time happened on this Arlington-Fairfax Railroad at Mulhall station. We had two Negro men who lived in Falls Church, Sandy James and Lee Gaskins. Sandy James was the hardest man I ever saw. I heard Howard Fields [long-time Sheriff] say one time that he hit Sandy James with a blackjack with lead in it about 25 times just as hard as he could hit him in the head and it never fazed him. His skull must have been that thick. And Lee Gaskins was a bad one, too. One night they got drunk; they got on at Rosslyn and they went into a wrangle on the car. So when they got to Ballston the conductor decided to put them off; they still hadn't paid their fare. Ranny Miller was the motorman and Arthur Niles, our next door neighbor, was the conductor. So they started to take them off, and they started to fight back. The people in the car were not like they are now, sit back and watch a fight go on and say nothing. The whole carload got into it. And there was a giant on there named Putnam; his grandson worked in the office of the Treasurer or the Commissioner of the Revenue over at the Court House for many years, just resigned a year or two ago. Mr. Ernest Putnam was a blacksmith and he had a great big bag of horseshoes in his hand. And this crowd was trying to push these two Negroes off and they had them back on the back platform, and he said, "Let me get at 'em." And he hit them with that batch of horseshoes and off they went. And the car went down the road.

Pretty soon here came my brother Wade, and Ralph Ball, my cousin, on a car coming down. And they stopped at Farlee, right above Clarendon Square, Virginia Square it is now. There was a woman waiting to get on, and a man by the name of Jack Bolden, one of the giants of the neighborhood, weighed 280 lbs.; he was married to a cousin of mine. The car stopped and the woman started to get on and Jack coming right behind her, and right behind them were these two drunken Negroes. And Wade was a little fellow, not near so big as he was later on, and he said, "Jack, kick him. They'd cut us to pieces." One of them had a knife about that long. And Jack Bolden kicked the first Negro just as hard as he could, and he went back into the second one, and down off they went—off the trolley again.

Well things were getting pretty well aroused then, and they had some people out there looking for them, but nobody could find them. And so



night came on. And a little after nightfall, about half past seven or eight o'clock, Ralph and Wade were going up the car line, up toward Falls Church, and before they got to Mulhall Station a stone came through the window and hit Ralph on the chest and knocked him down. He got up but he was afraid to stop the car. They went on a little further, and when they got to Mulhall Station, these Negroes had piled the old station platform and a whole lot of stones and things on the line, and threw the car off the track.

Well, that was the straw that broke the camel's back. The news got down to Ballston—that Sandy and Lee had done this. Boy! They organized the biggest mob that had ever been organized here, that had real evil intent in their minds, because they were going to kill 'em. And they would have done it. They had shotguns, and pistols and rifles and axes when they went up there that night. And they knew where Lee lived and they knew where Sandy lived, in Falls Church, and they went up to Falls Church and they searched every colored house there at East Falls Church; there must have been 25 houses. But they couldn't find them.

When they did find Lee, before morning, lying out in the woods somewhere in hiding, fortunately the mob had left and it was just Sheriff Palmer and one other got him. They didn't get Sandy for three or four months. They couldn't catch them, and it was a blessed thing they didn't 'cause we would have had a disgraceful lynching on our hands. Well, they tried old Lee, and the jury gave him ten years. But he had a smart lawyer, found the indictment faulty in its wording so it was set aside. It came back, "Try him again." And they tried him in the spring of 1909 for the second time. And he was charged with wrecking a car, car No. 35, Arlington-Fairfax Railroad car, at Mulhall Station in the county of Alexandria, thereby endangering the lives of E. W. Ball and others. Well, they tried him, and his lawyer put up a big fight, and what do you think he got? Ten years again. Exactly what he got the first time. And he served that.

You can never understand the joy these railroads brought to us. And you can never understand what a help, what a blessing it was to the community. I saw them pass out. The first one to go was the one east of Arlington. It closed up in '21. The next was the line from 12th St. in the District up to Clarendon. It closed in '32. At least the electricity was shut off in '32; I reckon it didn't run any more. Couldn't find the exact time it closed but I did find the time the contract for the electricity was cancelled by the Corporation Commission. Then the line from the Key Bridge operated until 1937. The last electric car was on that line. And in 1938 the electric railway to Mt. Vernon also closed. No more lines into 12th St., on any line.

After 1937 they had what they called puddle-jumpers on the Arlington-Fairfax line for a while. These were cars that could run on the track or

off the track. They ran off the tracks plenty of times, too. They ran on rubber wheels just like an automobile but they had flanges hanging down to keep them on the track. They didn't last very long. Well, the Old Dominion operated for quite awhile, and still operates; no more electric lines, and no more passengers, but it still operates freight lines, Alexandria to Purcellville. And they're talking of selling the right of way to the State for a road. The people up that way are trying to block them because they say the railroad is still a great advantage to them.

These roads were great friends. I came here tonight to pay tribute to them. They brought more joy to this old man's heart as a boy than you can imagine. We used to go up and down those roads when they first started trolley rides, everybody on the car—the whole community out—the car packed and jammed—to Falls Church and back three or four times, singing hymns and songs, whatever you wanted to, great doings all evening. Went up to Great Falls; they'd charter a car—get the whole crowd, everybody in the whole community—and get on and go up there and spend the day; it was a beautiful place. Eat up there, with the ants, out in the open. And the men who were on there were wonderful, friendly people. They had whole families on, some of them, almost. George Veitch's boys: Clayton and Morgan and Albert. I think Arthur worked on there a little, too. Henry Croson had three of his sons work on there regularly for a short time. Harry Miller and Ranny; Ranny was the first employee they ever had. He spent his whole life on that railroad. And everybody knew everybody else. What a wonderful time we had!

The railroads were a public amusement. We didn't have any fights with them; they didn't have any fights with us. Just one big happy family!

I wish they were here today; I believe they'd make money. I'll tell you one thing: they'd furnish a lot of fun if they would let me ride on them.

Thank you folks ever so much for listening to me tonight. It's wonderful to have this kind of audience. You've given me the attention I didn't deserve. I hope that I said something that may be of interest to you, and may have given you some idea of the days that are gone. We buried these roads; "they ain't going to rise again. They ain't got no faith in the here-after." We said goodbye to them. But they sure served their day.

Many, many thanks to you . . .