

Conestoga Transportation Company 1931-1976

by Robert E. Sauer, Jr.

A four-mile horsecar line between Lancaster and Millersville opened in November 1874 was the first transit route in the network that was to become Conestoga Transportation Co. The first electric line in the area started operating along East King Street in 1890. Others were soon built within the city, and after 1893 suburban trolley lines branched out into Lancaster County like spokes of a wheel, eventually reaching Marietta, Lititz, Adamstown, Terre Hill, Manheim, Strasburg, Rocky Springs, Elizabethtown, and Coatesville (in Chester County). New construction ended in 1909.

Conestoga Traction Co. was incorporated in 1900 as a holding company for 12 components operated under lease. Five independent traction companies were consolidated in 1918 to unify street railway service in Lancaster. By that time the system was owned by United Gas & Electric Co., a large holding company, which transferred it to Lehigh Power Securities in 1926. Lehigh Power Securities also owned other transit companies. It was in turn controlled by United Gas & Electric through an intermediate holding company subsidiary, National Power & Light Co.

As was typical of the times, holders of securities in the original operating companies that were farthest downstream from ultimate control earned nothing at all on their investments with the onset of the depression. Because most of the bondholders in the 12 leased underlying companies were local people, they were able to act effectively to break Conestoga Traction away from holding company control. On December 4, 1931, they merged Conestoga Traction with the leased companies to form Conestoga Transportation Co. Stockholders received stock in the new corporation while Lehigh Power Securities got nothing. Electric power operations not required in the transportation business were promptly sold for much-needed cash to the Pennsylvania Power and Light Company.

After about 1928, most streetcar service was provided by a fleet of 41 "dinkey" cars purchased between 1920 and 1926, an economical approach that enabled trolley operation to continue much longer than it otherwise might have. Conestoga Traction began bus service with two Internationals running between Lancaster and Long Park in 1923 and inaugurated the Race Avenue line with two Macks in 1926. In accord with Pennsylvania law, buses were owned and operated by an affiliate, Conestoga Transportation Co.—later the name of the consolidated and independent bus and streetcar operator. A group of unusual Fargo buses replaced most of the long and lightly traveled suburban lines in 1932, as an economy move. Blue Ball, Manheim, Strasburg, Elizabethtown, and Quarryville cars were replaced by buses; outlying route segments Ephrata-Adamstown, Blue Ball-Terre Hill, and Gap-Coatesville were abandoned without replacement.

The Millersville car line became a bus route in 1933, and the former Coatesville line was further cut back to Leaman Place, again without bus substitution. New local lines designated Linoleum Plant and South Queen Street were started in that year with buses, and the Pearl Street line opened in 1934.

Buses took over Lancaster-Leaman Place runs on January 5, 1935, leaving only three suburban trolley lines. Small Yellow Coach buses enabled inauguration of additional local service on the Grandview Heights, Homeland, Elm Avenue, and Eighth Ward-Parkside routes during 1936. Larger ACF buses delivered after 1935 were principally assigned to suburban lines, with their wider headways. The Columbia line was converted to buses in 1938, as was the Lititz route. Marietta Avenue local service started in 1938, the Watch Factory line in 1939, and Rossmere in 1940.

The first conversion of a city car line was accomplished with ACF buses in 1939 and involved the College Avenue route; the West Belt line was abandoned at that time. Two new lines, Dauphin Street and McCaskey School, began in 1941. The Laurel Street, Seventh Ward, and East Belt lines were converted to buses in 1942, but increases in patronage caused by gasoline rationing and greater wartime employment forced the restoration of streetcar service on these routes in 1943.

With resumption of new bus deliveries in 1947, Conestoga Transportation Co. reduced its electric rail mileage as rapidly as possible and simultaneously replaced its oldest prewar buses with 42 new Brill C-36's, 26 of which were set up for suburban service with only one door. The only remaining suburban car line, Lancaster-Ephrata, was replaced along with local service on the Duke Street-PRR Station, Sixth Ward, Laurel Street, East Belt, and Seventh Ward-Rocky Spring lines, with the last-named being the last to operate streetcars on the evening of September 21, 1947. There were at that time approximately 115 motor buses serving 235 miles of route, and payment of a 7-cent fare carried riders throughout the city. There were also reduced-rate tickets and weekly passes.

Conestoga made money from 1934 to 1937 and again earned a reasonable profit in each year after 1941, though dividends paid to the common stock holders were meager and in some years non-existent. Between the complete bus conversion and retirement of many of the construction and mortgage bonds, however, dividends were once again possible beginning in 1947. A 10-cent fare was put into effect on June 18, 1950, with three tickets for a quarter and no weekly pass; on suburban lines, tickets offered 12 rides for the price of 10. In the early 1950's, the Grandview Heights and Homeland lines were combined, and extension of certain trips of the Duke Street-PRR Station route enabled abandonment of the Linoleum Plant line. The Watch Factory route was discontinued without replacement.

The local investors who had organized Conestoga Transportation Company in 1931 had all died by the mid 1950's, and in 1955 the voting trust into which all of the company's common shares had originally been placed was dissolved. Estates sold blocks of stock on the open market, and early in 1956 control of the company was secured by Herbert C. Lebovitz, owner of York Bus Co. since 1954. Thomas W. Meredith of Lancaster, who was Lebovitz's associate, became executive vice-president and was also a director. Starting in 1958, the controlling stockholders caused the company to buy back and retire most of its common stock, reducing the number of shares from 76,000 to 19,000 by 1970.

Starting in 1962 with transfer of control from Lebovitz to Meredith, a number of old Brill buses were extensively refurbished by the installation of new seats and new flooring, and they received a bright new blue and silver paint scheme. For the most part, however, they ran for only a short time, as 44 second-hand buses were acquired for the regular routes between 1963 and 1969. During the 1960's, charter business increased greatly and enabled Lancaster bus service to continue under private ownership longer than most comparable cities.

On April 1, 1963, Conestoga took over the Lancaster-York train substitution service formerly operated by Greyhound. Most trips of the College Avenue line were extended to replace the Race Avenue route, and the Seventh Ward and Rocky Spring lines were similarly merged. T.W. Meredith purchased Penn Highway Transit Co., a small interurban and charter operator in 1967. A new local route serving Park City shopping center was started in July 1970 and replaced the extended College Avenue-Race Avenue operation; in 1971 the Manheim suburban line was rerouted via Park City. In January 1973 the College Avenue and Dauphin Street lines were through-routed, and base service was eliminated (except on Mondays and Fridays) on the Duke Street, Elm Avenue, Marietta Avenue, and Seventh Ward routes.

In spite of gradually declining service levels, Conestoga lost money in the years following 1969. Talks began in 1971 between the company, the city, and the county, looking toward a subsidy plan that would also

provide 32 new buses with federal help. Neither the city nor the county was anxious to commit itself to an open-ended and very likely permanent operating subsidy. In the end a one-year subsidy contract for 1973, with no provision for capital expenditures, was signed in 1972. In ensuing years, the subsidy program was continued.

During the middle 1970's, the basic fare was raised to 45 cents—triple the 15-cent fare of 1962. Mileage declined from 2,170,000 in 1965 to 1,110,000 in 1975; passengers also decreased by over 50 per cent in the 10-year period, from 3,533,000 in 1965 to 1,494,000 in 1975.

The Lancaster City and County Joint Transit Authority (now Red Rose Transit) was incorporated, through action by Lancaster City and County, by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania on November 28, 1973. It was not originally envisioned that the Transit Authority would own and operate transit service; rather the purposes were to (1) purchase fixed route transportation service from the Conestoga Transportation Company in Lancaster City and County and (2) purchase and lease buses for use by Conestoga. However, the Authority charter was amended on April 2, 1975, to allow it to own and operate public transportation within the city and county.

On April 1, 1976, Red Rose Transit began to own and operate bus service as it acquired the fixed route assets of Conestoga Transportation Company and Penn Highway Transit Company. In early 1977, Red Rose Transit replaced the nation's oldest bus fleet with 24 new air-conditioned buses. Except for two new buses purchased in 1960, no new city buses had been purchased for Lancaster transit service since 1951. Since takeover, RRTA has also started several new routes and changed existing service to serve the public better.

Transit still provides a vital service for about 3,000 people who need bus service—especially the elderly, the disabled, youngsters, the Plain People, and the poor. With new buses and routes, ridership is increasing.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Robert E. Sauer, Jr. was born in Reading, Pennsylvania in 1940, the son of Robert E. Sauer and Margaret Schaeffer Sauer. He attended the public schools of Reading and is a 1957 graduate of Reading High School. He has a B.S. in Economics degree from Albright College and did graduate work in transportation at the Pennsylvania State University. Public transportation has been a lifelong interest of Mr. Sauer, and he is employed by the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority in Washington, D. C. as a planner. He resides in Washington.