Chapter 5
Interurbans in Indiana

5.1 Introduction

During the first decade of the 20th century the prevailing means of passenger transportation, steam-power trains, faced increasing challenges from electric railways and motor vehicles. Offering greater convenience and flexibility than the steam railroad, the electric railway had remarkable success in urban service for short-distance travel, which quickly led to its rural and intercity operation. The urban electric railway is referred to as the streetcar, while in rural use it is called the interurban. The two systems differ in that the equipment of the interurban is usually larger, heavier, and faster. While the next chapter will discuss of the streetcar, this chapter is directed to the interurban.

Among those surface transportation modes that have thrived and then declined in North America (including canals, turnpikes, steam-power railroad train, streetcars, and interurbans), the interurban probably experienced the most dramatic change. Most interurban rails were built between 1901 and 1908, and by 1912 the interurban network had taken its final shape 25,000 km (15,500 miles) in the US. A marked decline set in about 1918, largely due to the competition from the automobile with even greater flexibility, and within two decades the network was virtually annihilated. As the interurbans experienced such a short and relatively recent life cycle, the history of these interurbans is well documented and retrievable. Hilton and Due (1960) presents a comprehensive review of this industry.

Over all phases of its operations, the interurban remained independent enterprises, promoted, owned, and operated by private interests. Some of the independent lines were financed by wealthy local businessmen; a number were promoted by syndicates formed by large urban financial groups, and usually developed into independent interurban systems of substantial magnitude through continuous exten-

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1 As Hilton and Due (1960) pointed out, public control over the interurban during the early years was limited to franchise requirements imposed by local government, such as paving requirements and restrictions on fares; state and federal control over the industry did not make a notable presence until 1907.
sion, new construction or acquisition across a region. Despite their occasional cooperation in developing joint ticketing and time tables, these interurban companies retained natural monopolies for local passenger transportation but were competitors for longer intercity trips.

Reaching a maximum of 2,937 km (1,825 miles), Indiana was second only to Ohio in the absolute size of its interurban network, and the only state where a large-scale grid-like interurban network emerged. Therefore the Indiana network has been the subject of interest to researchers for a long time (Haley, 1936; Marlette, 1959). The network had its first line in 1887, started to decline from 1917, and completely disappeared in 1941. In its complete shape, the topological pattern of the network can be best described as a series of irregular wheels, with their spokes radiating from major cities such as Indianapolis and Fort Wayne. By 1910, more than 20 companies/syndicates had been chartered in Indiana to build and operate interurban lines. For example, Union Traction Company, the largest interurban company in Indiana, had 660 km (410 miles) of interurban lines and 17 routes in operation; the Terre Haute Indianapolis and Eastern Traction Company, the second largest, operated 647 km (402 miles) of lines and 15 routes.

This chapter, extending the previous chapter’s investigation into the Minneapolis skyway system, examines the growth of the Indiana interurban network during 1887-1916. For the purpose of this study, the network of Indiana is separated from those other states basically along the state border. The portion in north Indiana is excluded because it was more connected to Chicago and the Michigan cities around Lake Michigan, than to the main body of the Indiana network. For simplicity, detour lines shorter than 3.2 km (2 miles) are neglected and the locations of the places as the terminals of these lines are adjusted as if they were located on the main line, including Milton, Richmond, Gas City, and Riverside Park. Consequently, a network of 53 places and 62 interurban rail segments is extracted for examination as shown in Figure 5.1, which represents the interurban network of Indiana in 1916 in its “full” shape. Hilton and Due (1960) recorded the open/close dates of each interurban line in Indiana so that the actual topological evolution of the network can be retrieved through years. The franchise owner of each line is also displayed in Figure 5.1. Table 5.1 lists main franchise interurban companies in Indiana and their abbreviated names according to Hilton and Due (1960). This research aims to answer several questions including whether the deployment of interurban lines in Indiana had followed a logical path, whether accessibility, as in the Minneapolis skyway system, predicted where the network expanded, and whether different ownership organizations of the two systems had resulted in different courses of link additions.

The remainder of this chapter proceeds as follows: the next section introduces connect-choice analysis, which is followed by two alternative hypotheses of ownership organization of the interurban system; then results are discussed and conclusions drawn.