

Lafayette Street Railway Birney Streetcar

Builder: The J.G. Brill Company

Date: 1922

Lot #: 21384-9/21

Type: Birney Streetcar, Single-Truck

Modifications: None

Condition: Stripped Car

Out-of-Service: 11 May 1940

Provenance: Lafayette Street Railway; Indiana Transportation Museum

Purchased: 11 July 2018

Price: \$600

Removal: From Indiana Transportation Museum, 11 July 2018

Removed to Schlatter's Incorporated, Francesville, Indiana

Status: On Hand

Intended Use: Restore as a Birney Streetcar, Site Specific to an Ongoing Project

Justification: Birney streetcars were the first attempt at a low-cost, high-productivity, mass-produced streetcar. The most common was a single-truck car; approximately 6000 were produced. Birney streetcars were primarily built for North American railways, but they were exported as well.

The Insull Group used Birney streetcars extensively in Indiana, including at Gary. The competing Chicago, South Bend and Northern Indiana Railway also used them in Michigan City and South Bend. At these three communities, Birney streetcars were quite a contrast of electric railway service and technology with the interurban cars of the Chicago, South Shore and South Bend Railroad.

As was common with larger interurban cars, the typical reuse of Birney streetcars during the Great Depression was as cheap shelter, often for farm animals such as chickens, farm implements, but occasionally for summer lake housing. The

provenance of this last Lafayette Birney is unclear, but Lafayette Birney streetcars sold after railway service were found repurposed for all these uses. There are 82 preserved Birney streetcars in North America. For museum operating purposes, they still embody the characteristics desired by their inventor, Charles O. Birney – low maintenance cost, reduced labor cost, and reduced power consumption.¹ Plus, in museum service, small streetcars are cute.

Conclusion

The Lafayette Birney should be preserved as a counterpoint to the large interurban equipment in the collection to interpret how railway managers, including those of the Insull Group, used better technologies to manage costs in the face of the competition from the automobile.



Lafayette Street Railway Birney Streetcar at Main and Third streets, 1939. Birneys were hard-riding, noisy cars.

Single-truck Birneys were a marvel of standardization in an otherwise balkanized industry of dissimilar products driven by the egos of each individual railway's master mechanics. Lafayette Birney photos are somewhat rare. But because of the standardization of the Birney streetcar, these images on the following pages of typical of single-truck Birneys will serve to stand-in for the cars of Lafayette.

¹ General Electric Co., The Safety Car, 3 (August, 1920).



Wood slat seats in an uninsulated interior was less than attractive in its day. Revived Birney operations at Fort Collins, Colorado, and Fort Smith, Arkansas, have proved popular with tourists and have endured, nonetheless. This car was built for Detroit, Michigan, but is typical of Birney interiors.



Chicago, South Bend & Northern Indiana (CSB&NI) Birney streetcar #602 in contrast with a train of Chicago, South Shore and South Bend Railroad (CSS&SB) interurbans. The cars seen here at South Bend were purchased hoping that new equipment would save their respective railways, but low-cost cars were not enough to save the CSB&NI; streetcar service in South Bend ended on 15 June 1940. But eighty years later, CSS&SB interurban service continues to the South Bend International Airport.