

David D. Law (1852 – 1916)

David D. Law was born in Lebanon City, Pennsylvania on March 30, 1852 and was the son of William and Elizabeth Carmaney Law. David and his family most likely emigrated to Illinois sometime after David's birth in 1852 and before the birth of his brother Augustus in 1857. The family settled in Stephenson County, IL located in northern Illinois, west of Rockford.

It is unknown whether David's parents emigrated to Bloomington, but it is known that three of his brothers lived in town and all worked in transportation-related jobs. At one time, David and two of his brothers worked for the Bloomington and Normal Horse Railway. The horse railway was a new form of public transportation popular in the time following the Civil War, where a horse pulled a streetcar full of passengers on a regular route. At the Bloomington and Normal Horse Railway, John was superintendent and Augustus and David were horse-car drivers. The youngest brother, Henry, worked for the Chicago & Alton Railroad. Out of them all, David was the only one to stay at the horse railroad and the rest continued their professions elsewhere.

David is best-known for his thirty-three years of work with the Bloomington-Normal streetcar line. He had a good reputation as a cool-headed and reliable driver who had friendly relationships with his riders. When asked how far he had traveled, he would tell of how some of the "smart" university student passengers calculated his distance over the seventeen years he had been working at that time. They concluded that with his fifteen, five-mile roundtrips each day between Bloomington and Normal, he had traveled 558,450 miles, or 23 times around the earth, or one and half trips to the moon.¹

Life as a horse-car driver was tough. They worked seven days a week. Drivers sometimes woke up as early as 5:00 in the morning to walk about a mile to be at work by 6:45. Their day lasted until 10:30pm with two, twenty-minute breaks for lunch. The wages were enough to live on but did not allow much room for luxury. New men earned \$40 a month while those who had been with the company longest earned \$50.

On March 9, 1886 David married local resident Sarah Pratt who was born in Gainesville, Ohio the daughter of Araw and Sarah Clark Pratt. David and Sarah had two children, Ethel Louise and Richard E. In an article in the *Daily Pantagraph* regarding his career, David stated that some children of horse-car drivers saw their fathers so infrequently that they would ask their mothers, "Who's that strange man that's hanging around the house?"² David and the other drivers with children made an arrangement in which every ten drivers would pay the wages of an extra driver, so that every one of them could take a day off every ten days. David said, "Of course we lose that day, but by this means we have one day in ten to get acquainted with our wives and families."³

David was devoted to his job and said the company treated their men well and never discharged a man except for cause. In the 1889 interview he said, "I have stood on this platform with the thermometer twenty-four to thirty degrees below zero, and I have made my way through mountainous snow drifts, and when the rails were a glare of ice, as well as through beating rains and burning suns. No, we haven't a soft job and we literally earn our bread by the sweat of our brow...I have never done anything else...and to begin

¹ "Bone and Sinew," *Daily Pantagraph*, January 29, 1889, McLean County Museum of History Archives.

² "Bone and Sinew"

³ "Bone and Sinew"

to think now that I never will until I get to the other world, where wings are said to be used as motive power in preference to mules.”⁴

Even though his career as a streetcar driver was difficult at times, David experienced a few moments of proud recognition. One such moment was in 1879 when a runaway horse and wagon crashed into his car. Just before the impact, David calmly managed to turn the mules to the side avoiding greater damage and possible injury to the passengers. His calm came through once again in 1888 when something frightened the mules pulling the streetcar that David was driving. The team consequently flew from the track, dragging the streetcar with its passengers down the embankment near the bridge over Sugar Creek. David brought the car and animals under control before they all fell into the nearby north branch of the creek.

Perhaps the proudest moment of David’s career occurred towards the end of his career on August 31, 1903. The electric power at work was turned off for a day to allow a new boiler to be installed in the power house. The streetcar men decided to turn the day into a celebration and got out one of the old horse-cars, decorated it, hitched on a team of mules, and rode it around on the streetcar lines singing “In the Good Old Summertime.” In the afternoon the men even played a game of ball, conductors versus motormen, at Wesleyan’s field. David drove the mules around town while wearing the same corduroy cap he had worn in the old horse-car days and according to the *Daily Pantagraph*, he looked “natural to many a resident as he smiled and gave the mule a clip with the whip.”⁵

However, David’s career was not without incident and he encountered trouble on March 17, 1893 when he was involved in a horrible accident that resulted in the death of 21 year-old Harry Ryburn. Harry had been leaving his butcher shop, Ryburn and Shrigley, located at 615 North Main Street in downtown Bloomington. He then mounted his horse, which was said to be a rowdy Texas pony, to make some regular deliveries. David was now a motorman of an electric car and made his way near Harry’s shop. A team of horses that were pulling a wagon loaded with lumber was also moving south opposite David’s streetcar’s direction, complicating the matter. Harry’s horse suddenly whirled around several times and flipped over backwards, dropping Harry onto the streetcar track and then falling on top of him, directly in front of David’s streetcar. Before David could stop and reverse the car in time, the car ran over young Harry. After the car was moved, Harry’s body was carried into the nearest store where he passed away before the doctors could arrive.

This incident caused much controversy because the first jury in court took testimony of only two witnesses, David and Ryburn’s partner Harry Shrigley. They gave accounts that resulted with the jury declaring that David, who had a great reputation as a cool-headed and trustworthy driver, was not at fault and that Harry’s death was accidental. It was later noted that four passengers were in David’s car and their eyewitness accounts had not been heard. The passengers admitted that David had been in the back of the car collecting fares when the car came up against Harry and his horse. David had stopped and reversed the car after the moment of collision. At this news, Harry’s mother initiated a lawsuit against the Bloomington City Railway and after two trials and a refusal to accept a \$1,350 offer out of court by the company, received a mere \$500 in settlements. This would equal about \$11,888.88 today. She did not sue David because she realized that he would

⁴ “Bone and Sinew,” *Daily Pantagraph*, January 29, 1889, McLean County Museum of History Archives.

⁵ “An Old Mule Car,” *Daily Pantagraph*, September 1, 1903, McLean County Museum of History Archives.

not have much money to offer and his reputation with the streetcar company and as a positive member of the community would have most likely evoked the jury's sympathy. The company was to blame because the accident could have been avoided if they had both a conductor to collect fares and a driver on board as was required by city ordinance. Because of this accident, company policy was changed to make it a standard procedure for a two-man crew on board all street cars. David never again drove an electric streetcar after the incident and was henceforth referred to as "the veteran streetcar man."⁶

In 1902, the streetcar men organized a union and received a contract from the company for the year 1903. At the end of the year, the union bargained for a contract with higher salaries and shorter hours claiming they had the lowest wages of all of Illinois for the industry. The company would not consent. So on January 1, 1904 the union called a strike and David was one of the thirty-two men who went out after the company posted a notice informing the street car men to either report for duty the morning of January 2nd, or to surrender their badges and other company property they owned.

The union was large and refused to end the strike. On January 3, 1904 the company brought in strikebreakers from Chicago which led to an outbreak of violence. Six streetcars were partially demolished, several people were hurt by missiles thrown by strike sympathizers, and three arrests were made. For seven months neither side was willing to compromise and the local unions even boycotted the streetcars by leasing gasoline buses to compete with the streetcars. They placed David as conductor to gain recognition. Eventually the remaining members who had not left the community called off the strike in August admitting defeat. The strike cost labor organizations of Bloomington and friends of the strikers a totally of \$9,000 to prosecute the strike. That would equal about \$216,232 today.

Four months after the strike ended, David's wife Sarah passed away on December 29, 1904 at their home at 1111 North McLean Street. She died from Bright's disease which would be described today as acute or chronic nephritis, a kidney disorder.⁷

David did not return to work at the streetcar company after the end of the strike. Instead, he went to work for the Illinois Central Railroad in the freight house on the east side of Bloomington. For some time, David left the railroad to start his own business as a dealer in gas and coal oil but due to a lack of success, he returned to work at the freight house.

On March 27, 1916 David died at his home located at 203 Kreitzer Avenue having felt ill the previous after feeling ill for about five days. Many former fellow employees of the street railway company were present to pay their last respects. He was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery next to his wife. David's obituary in the *Daily Pantagraph* stated that "the passing of David Law removes a character who was an integral part of the city life for a third of a century. He was of a genial disposition and enjoyed a large acquaintanceship and popularity."⁸

By: Sarah Yoo, 2008

Edited by: Candace Summers, 2010

⁶ "His Leg Amputated," *Daily Pantagraph*, October 2, 1895, McLean County Museum of History Archives

⁷ "Bright's disease," Wikipedia.org, 2008.

⁸ *David D. Law: Bloomington-Normal's Veteran Streetcar Man*, Mary and Fred Rozum, Via Press 1995, page 17, McLean County Museum of History Archives