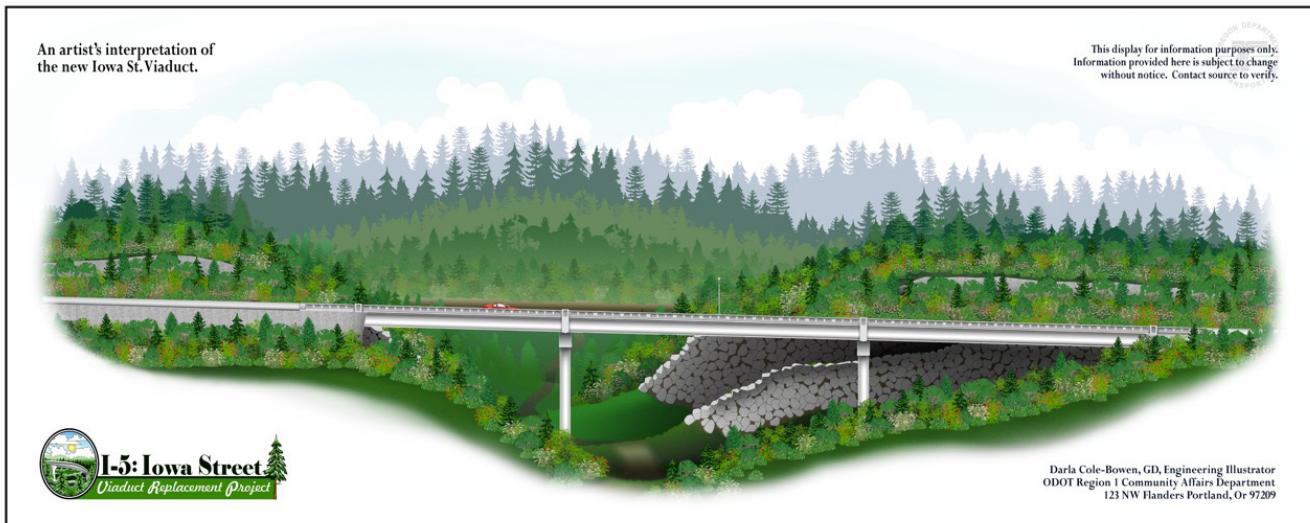


Relic of Oregon Electric Railway to be Destroyed

By Ron McCoy, Director-at-Large

If you've traveled on I-5 in southwest Portland, then you've passed a large concrete wall built by the Oregon Electric Railway. For many years, the wall was hidden behind a curtain of ivy and moss. Now the wall has been exposed, but its days are numbered. The Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) is preparing to replace a large bridge on Interstate 5 in southwest Portland, known as the Iowa Street Viaduct. The viaduct is obsolete and was not designed to withstand the major earthquakes we now know can occur. To make way for the new bridge, portions of I-5 will be detoured over a temporary bridge, and it is the approaches to this bridge that will necessitate the removal of the wall built by the OE.

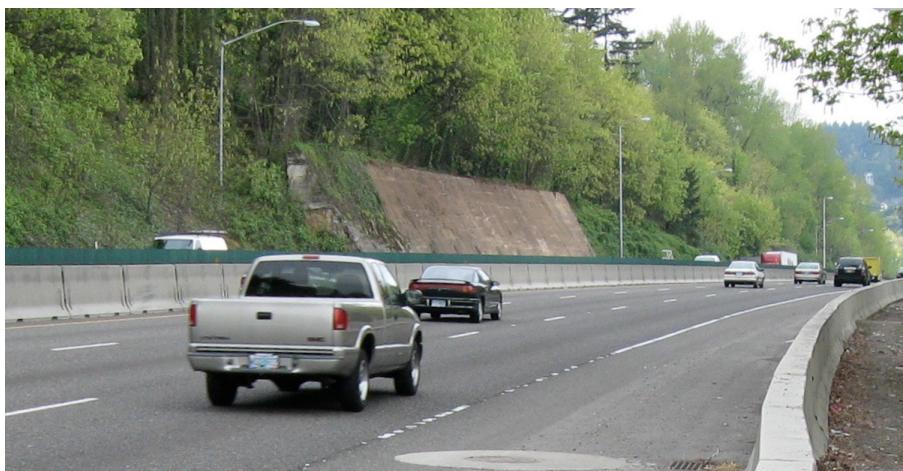
The OE chose this route into Portland partly because it was able to acquire the right-of-way from a former streetcar line,



the Metropolitan Railway Company, built in 1889. By February 1890, the steep hillside had slid over the tracks, blocking service until late March. This slide was a harbinger of many more earth movements to follow in the next 120 years. The streetcar line was abandoned by the time the Oregon Electric incorporated in 1906, but the unstable hillside continued to pose problems.

This surviving wall was built in 1913 to protect the newly double-tracked mainline of the OE as it descended the grade into Portland. As passenger service was reduced in the 1920s, the second mainline track was scrapped to save costs. When passenger service on the OE came to an end in May 1933, the OE became a freight-only operation. For the next decade, the route directly from Garden Home into Portland was used only to move the powerful electric freight locomotives to and from the OE electric shops, which were located just north of the west end of the Ross Island Bridge, in an area also now occupied by I-5. With a new electrical shop added in NW Portland, the remaining track from Portland to Garden Home was abandoned on March 22, 1944. By 1948 the tracks and trestles were gone, and a route that once handled 46 trains per day again fell silent, but not for long.

By the early 1950's, the demand on the publicly subsidized roadways was exceeding the capacity of Barbur Boulevard, built in 1935 on the former route



of the Southern Pacific's Red Electric line, just uphill from OE. Funded with federal interstate highway dollars, the Baldock Freeway (which would become Interstate 5) was constructed in 1957, following the exact route of the Oregon Electric as far as the Capitol Hill neighborhood in southwest Portland. The new freeway was built as fast and cheaply as possible, and within a year of opening, new landslides were affecting the freeway. More retaining walls were built, although none quite as imposing as the old OE wall.

Over the past two decades, ODOT has struggled to maintain the Iowa Street Viaduct, resorting to lashing steel I-beams to some of the supports, and constantly working to repair the expansion joints and deck of the towering bridge. (The OE trestle at this site was quite impressive too.) As ODOT began to plan the viaduct's replacement, they began a careful study of the geology and physical challenges they would face.

When pre-construction work began, I made contact with ODOT to determine the fate of the wall. It is to the great credit of ODOT that their staff recognized the historic nature of the wall, and had already written a condition into the project's contract that the 1913 date blocks, cast in each upper corner as part of the wall, would be salvaged. Acting on behalf of the Pacific NW Chapter of the NRHS, I set a time to meet with two ODOT employees working on the project. Mike W. Mason is the Community Affairs Coordinator, and Ron H. Kroop is the District Manager with responsibility over this huge project. Mr. Kroop was instrumental in seeing that the two date blocks would be preserved. ODOT first planned to keep both, mostly just to ensure they were saved, but after I met with them, they offered one of the date blocks to the Chapter. Now I must say, I like to see things preserved, but this was 'way outside the ability of the Chapter to store. We had a very difficult time dealing with some old marble slabs in our archives room at Union Station, can you imagine moving a possibly 900-plus pound block of concrete four feet long and 18 inches high?!

I've always found the history of the OE to be fascinating and can see its legacy throughout the Willamette and Tualatin Valleys today, but the general public knows little to nothing about it. It would be gratifying to see the date blocks preserved in a way that fosters learning about the OE.

With the permission of the Chapter's Board, I set about finding a proper organization to receive the date block, and the most obvious to me was the Oregon Railway Historical Society, located at Antique Powerland. I suggested that the object might make a suitable cornerstone for a new building they are preparing to build, and I'm happy to report that the OERHS is interested in receiving the date block. We'll be sure to provide you with updates.

ODOT anticipated that the old OE wall would be demolished by the end of August, but at the last week of August the wall was still standing. After that, the hillside will be cut back to make way for the temporary move of the freeway lanes. Learning from the past, the slope will be held with substantial new retaining walls. After the new viaduct opens, the retaining walls will be partly buried with the expectation that the freeway could be widened at some future date. Then again, the era of artificially low fuel costs and lopsided public transportation funding can't go on forever. Good ideas have a way of coming around again so who knows, maybe that future expansion might be two sets of rails.

All images courtesy of Oregon Department of Transportation

