
The People's Railroad

The Leavenworth & Topeka, 1918–1931

by I. E. Quastler

The history of the Leavenworth & Topeka Railroad (L&T) is unusual in that the line was purchased, in 1918, by the people of its service area to prevent abandonment. Originally projected as an independent railroad from Leavenworth into central Kansas, it built only twenty-nine miles before the Union Pacific and the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe railroads jointly purchased it in 1881 to prevent competition in what they considered their territory. They completed construction to Meriden Junction, forty-six miles west of Leavenworth, from where the L&T used existing Santa Fe tracks for nine miles into Topeka. Serving a strictly agricultural area, the railroad lost money every year and required constant subsidies from its owners. Losses increased in 1887 when a competitor appeared at the largest intermediate towns, Oskaloosa (population one thousand) and McLouth (five hundred), and when the Santa Fe completed its own line into Leavenworth and diverted considerable traffic. Through most of its history, L&T service consisted of only a single mixed (passenger–freight) train in each direction, Mondays through Saturdays.¹

During World War I the owners lost patience with their money-draining subsidiary and sold it to F. L. Wells, a Chicago capitalist. Wells thought the L&T could be profitable, but when that proved impossible he allowed its physical condition to deteriorate. Because of the poor state of the Delaware River bridge, Wells then stopped service on the nine miles west of Ozawkie and applied to federal judge John C. Pollock for authority to abandon that section. The people of L&T country saw this as a first step toward total abandonment and objected strenuously. Fearing dire consequences, regional newspapers suggested that the communities take steps to prevent the demise of what they considered their lifeline.²

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1. A complete history of the L&T and its predecessors is found in I. E. Quastler, "People's Railroad: The Leavenworth & Topeka, 1879–1931" (manuscript, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society). Until reorganization in 1900, the corporate name of the railway was the Leavenworth, Topeka & Southwestern Railway.

2. *Leavenworth Times*, December 17, 24, 26, 27, 29, 30, 1917, January 2, 1918; *Minute Book, L&T Railway*, 24–26, Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Collection, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society; *Oskaloosa Independent*, March 31, 1916, November 23, December 14, 28, 1917; E. P. Ripley to Walter D. Hines, April 9, 1916, box RR112, Santa Fe Collection. The L&T's physical condition had started to deteriorate under the receivership that preceded the sale to Wells. For a time under Wells, the L&T provided service only once a week west of Leavenworth. An interurban electric railroad negotiated to buy the line, but nothing came of it.

The Junking of the L. & T.

MAY MEAN

The Loss of the K. C. Northwestern

Successful financial enterprises, like the measles, may become epidemic. When the Scott City road was junked, the material bro't \$115,000 more than the amount of the appraisement. Buyers of old iron looked for another pasture green and found the L. & T. If this road is "scrapped," it will net \$80,000 more than the Court's sale price to the people. Compared to the L. & T. and the Scott City roads, the K. C. Northwestern would be like a watermelon compared to a plum. It is about three times as long as the L. & T., and a harvest of a quarter of a million dollars awaits the men who can carry it to the scrap heap.

Jefferson County Cannot Afford

To take any chances with the L. & T., because it is not likely that another court will be as magnanimous as Judge Pollock has been in offering this railroad patrons at half its junk value.

A Good Investment

The Organization Committee has received subscriptions by mail from men well up in the financial world. It is a good investment. The government has taken control of the short line railroads and the L. & T. has been specifically inserted in the bill by Congressman D. R. Anthony. It is highly probable by saving the L. & T. you will save two railroads for Jefferson County.

Announcement appearing in the Oskaloosa Independent, March 22, 1918.

This threat set the stage for a brave experiment in local ownership. In February 1918 sixty-six people met in Oskaloosa to organize resistance to abandonment. They requested a delay to a scheduled court hearing to give them more time to prepare their case. After listening to community representatives at that hearing, who claimed the L&T could be profitable if operated "properly," Pollock decided to offer them an opportunity to prove their point. He gave them until April 3 to raise eighty thousand dollars, for which they could buy the L&T "providing its operation be assured."³

The communities felt that they had to try to raise the money, for anything was better than abandonment. On February 23 about 250 people, including many farmers, met in Oskaloosa to express their views. The only applause occurred when a farmer, who owned ten acres, said he considered the railroad so important that he would give one hundred dollars, or ten dollars an acre, to keep it operating. "When men applaud the proposed assessment of themselves," the *Oskaloosa Independent* reported, "it is a rather significant indication of their earnestness." Before adjournment, several committees were struck, including one to devise a plan to buy the property. When the Ways and Means Committee later met, its members thought "that the best and most feasible way to acquire the property [was] to raise the money by a stock subscription of \$100,000, . . . \$80,000 to buy the road and \$20,000 to operate it."⁴

More than four hundred people attended another conference in Oskaloosa to consider this plan. When the organizers decided to gauge the general sentiment and asked those in favor to stand, "the great audience stood as one man, amid great enthusiasm." The meeting also endorsed a recommendation to raise money by selling stock at ten dollars a share, and each city and township was apportioned a target amount. Leavenworth and Topeka were assigned twenty thousand dollars each, Ozawkie and Oskaloosa Townships fifteen thousand dollars, McLouth ten thousand dollars, Meriden five thousand dollars, and Ackerland-Jarbalo-Boling-Fairholme fifteen thousand dollars.⁵

3. *Farmers' Vindicator* (Valley Falls), February 8, 22, March 22, 1918; *Leavenworth Times*, February 5, 20, 21, 28, 1918; *Oskaloosa Independent*, February 8, 22, 1918; *Topeka Daily Capital*, February 20, 1918.

4. *Leavenworth Times*, February 24, March 8, 9, 1918; *Oskaloosa Independent*, March 1, 8, 1918.

5. *Farmers' Vindicator*, March 22, 1918; *Leavenworth Times*, March 14, 15, 1918; *Oskaloosa Independent*, March 15, 1918. An Oskaloosa elevator operator thought that, were the railroad abandoned, farmers would lose ten cents per bushel on wheat because of the added cost of the longer wagon haul to another railroad.

Soon newspapers carried advertisements urging people to buy shares. The purchase price, they claimed, was less than half the L&T's salvage value and included the profitable Leavenworth terminals. Abandonment would lower land values and cause great harm to businesses. The *Farmers' Vindicator* of Valley Falls reported there was "not the slightest possible chance for any one to lose a cent and an opportunity to make a safe investment that will at the same time save the wrecking of a road that the people of the county have paid thousands of dollars [in subsidies] to build."⁶

In March a large crowd gathered at the Ozawkie school to celebrate reaching that community's fifteen-thousand-dollar allotment. Newspapers reported considerable progress in Topeka, Leavenworth, McLouth, Oskaloosa, and Jarbalo, and by March Oskaloosa had "gone over." In fact, skepticism abounded in Leavenworth and Topeka about the plan's feasibility.⁷

On April 3 the special master's sale took place in the "dingy little suite of rooms" in the Leavenworth depot that served as headquarters. Topeka, stated the *Leavenworth Times*, was represented with \$20,000, Meriden \$5,000, Ozawkie \$16,000, Oskaloosa \$15,430, McLouth \$10,300, and Jarbalo-Ackerland-Boling-Fairholme \$15,000, making a total of almost \$82,000, "not counting the \$20,000 from Leavenworth which was still in the bank." The *Times* said that about eight hundred people, mostly farmers, had bought shares. The claims about some of the amounts raised and the number of shareholders were exaggerated.⁸

When the special master read the sales decree, he added that the bidder had to supply "a contract and bond guaranteeing the continuous operation of the road." Some people doubted his authority to require a bond, but attorneys for the buyers agreed to prepare a modified bid. The new clause stated that if service ever stopped, the new owners would have to pay Wells for his loss "in not being allowed to dismantle and sell said property . . . in the most advantageous manner." Thus, the buyers would owe Wells eighty thousand dollars, the difference between the purchase price and the estimated scrap value.⁹

6. *Farmers' Vindicator*, March 22, 1918; *Leavenworth Times*, March 13, 15, 1918; *Oskaloosa Independent*, March 22, 1918.

7. *Leavenworth Times*, March 16, 19, 20, 22, 23, 29, April 7, 27, May 2, 7, 1918; *Oskaloosa Independent*, March 22, 29, 1918; *Topeka Daily Capital*, April 27, 1918.

8. *Farmers' Vindicator*, April 5, 1918; *Leavenworth Times*, April 3, 1918; *Oskaloosa Independent*, April 5, 1918; *Topeka Daily Capital*, April 4, 1918.

9. *Leavenworth Times*, April 4, 1918; *Oskaloosa Independent*, April 5, 1918; *Topeka Daily Capital*, April 4, 1918.

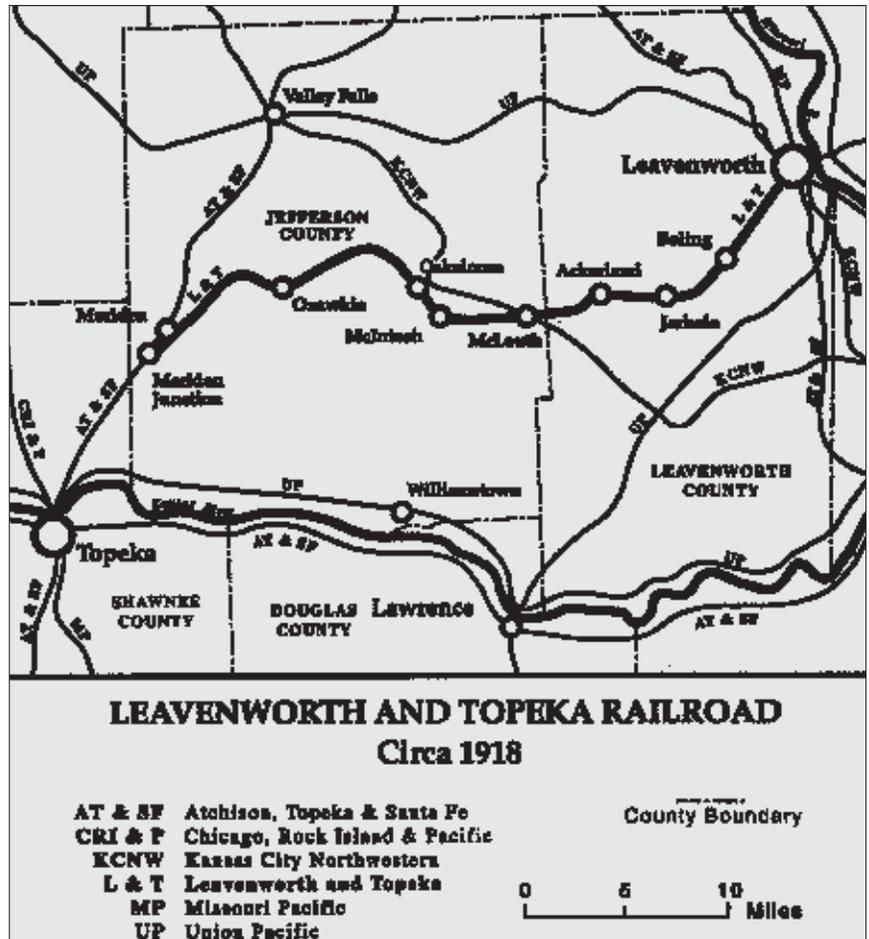
Judge Pollock decided not to require a bond but kept the case in his court to assure the railroad's operation. He stipulated that if the new owners ever failed to operate the railroad, for whatever reason, for fifty days in a row, Wells would receive an additional eighty thousand dollars. The judge gave the committee until May 10 to accept the new arrangement.¹⁰

At another well-attended Oskaloosa meeting, every town was represented. Because many people had bought shares thinking they could not lose money, and since this was not true under Pollock's final order, all who wanted to return their shares could do so. None of those attending took this opportunity. When the question of whether to continue with the purchase was posed, all who were "entitled to vote stood up—the whole crowd en masse—not a dissenting vote." Later, some subscribers in Topeka and Leavenworth, who did not attend, asked to be released from a portion of their pledges. After adjournment the largest stockholder (fifteen hundred dollars), J. E. Waddill of Kansas City, owner of three lumberyards on the L&T, joined the organizing committee. He would play a major role in the railroad's future.¹¹

In May, O. P. Byers of Hutchinson, president of the Anthony & Northern Railway (A&N) in west-central Kansas, inspected the property. He judged it in generally good condition and thought it required about five thousand dollars in repairs. That month arrangements for the sale were completed. By then there were more realistic estimates of the amounts raised by the communities, the total falling far below the one-hundred-thousand-dollar goal. Topeka and Leavenworth only contributed about ten thousand and six thousand dollars, respectively. The other communities raised fifty-six thousand dollars, for a total of approximately seventy-two thousand dollars. In a bit of drama, at the last

minute George H. Hanna, the corporate treasurer, wrote a personal check to complete the deal.¹²

Soon the new Leavenworth & Topeka Railroad received its state charter. According to this document, it had 615 stockholders. At the first stockholders' meeting, J. E. Waddill was chosen the company's first (and, it turned



The L&T Railroad in the context of northeast Kansas railroads

out, its only) president. Stockholders also elected fifteen directors, two from each on-line community and three at large. The *Oskaloosa Independent* discussed these developments under the headline, "THE PEOPLE WIN." The L&T,

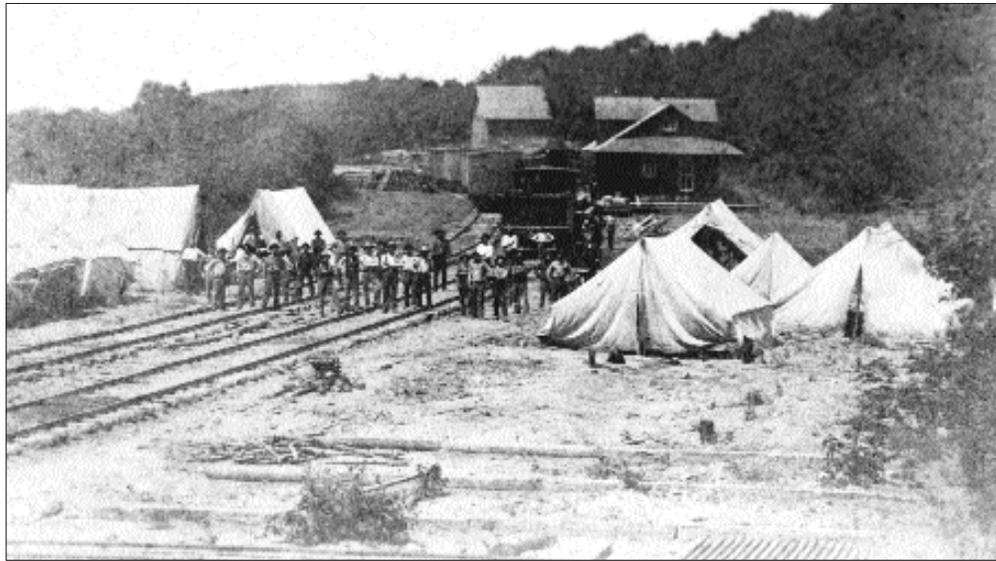
10. *Oskaloosa Independent*, April 26, 1918; *Topeka Daily Capital*, April 21, 1918.

11. *Leavenworth Times*, April 23, 24, 1918; *Oskaloosa Independent*, April 26, 1918.

12. *Leavenworth Times*, May 5, 11, 1918; *Oskaloosa Independent*, May 10, 17, 24, 1918, November 28, 1919; *Topeka Daily Capital*, May 11, 1918. Hanna, from Clay Center, was the only prominent person associated with the L&T who was not from the company's service area. Apparently he was a business associate of one or more of the other corporate officers.

it claimed in booster fashion, was now "The First and Only Railroad 'Of the People, by the People and for the People.'" ¹³

Later in May, Byers, Waddill, and Hanna signed a contract to operate the railroad. According to this agreement, the lessees were to run one passenger service each way



This scene depicts tents for the L&T construction workers at the Oskaloosa station, August 18, 1882.

daily and provide "adequate" freight service, while the owners agreed to spend seven thousand dollars to upgrade the physical plant. Byers, who became the general manager, brought some workers from his A&N to help put the railroad into shape for operations. ¹⁴

Service resumed on June 3 when a "nifty little motor car," a Reo bus modified for rail use and leased from the

13. *Leavenworth Times*, May 15, 18, 1918; *Oskaloosa Independent*, May 17, 1918; "Railroad Charters, 1855-1931," Lela Barnes Railroad Collection, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society; *Topeka Daily Capital*, May 18, 19, 1918. Board members elected for the first year were T. I. Mains and Floyd Harper of Leavenworth; from Jarbalo-Ackerland, S. M. Cockrell and S. H. Hill; from McLouth, W. M. Pennington and F. M. Casebier; from Oskaloosa, F. H. Roberts and H. T. Phinney; from Ozawkie, A. O. Kendall and Ira Puderbaugh; from Topeka, T. E. Whittaker and Walter Johnson; and at large, Charles H. Trapp, George W. Hanna, and J. E. Waddill. The previous company, formed in 1900, was the Leavenworth & Topeka Railway.

14. *Farmers' Vindicator*, June 7, 1918; *Leavenworth Times*, May 28, 1918; *Oskaloosa Independent*, May 24, 31, 1918. The contract called for the eventual operation of two passenger services in each direction, six days per week. Although he received no salary as general manager, Byers probably made some money by providing workers, through equipment rentals, and by selling materials to the L&T.

A&N, arrived in Leavenworth at 10:30 A.M. with twenty passengers. Because it was light, this "motor" could safely cross the Delaware River bridge, not yet fully repaired. Plans called for adding a larger vehicle after the L&T obtained Santa Fe trackage rights into Topeka. ¹⁵

That same day a leased steam engine took out the first mixed train. At the end of the train, which ran twice a week, was an A&N combination (express-mail-passenger) car. Under contract, the Rock Island railroad provided a switch engine and crew to serve the L&T's Leavenworth industrial tracks. Pending completion of bridge repairs, car-load freight service was restricted to Leavenworth-Ozawkie. ¹⁶

Early reactions to both passenger and freight services were largely positive, and business was brisk. This was especially true on the L&T's eastern half, where many passengers went to Leavenworth for business and where that city's merchants

shipped much of the freight and express that went to on-line towns. However, the intermediate communities and Topeka shareholders also wanted service to the capital. As Leavenworth was getting the bulk of the benefit, the *Oskaloosa Independent* asked whether that city would finally subscribe to her quota of stock, or would she "be a piker and let these country towns raise still more money with which to improve the road?" ¹⁷

On the west end, Byers tried to get trackage rights into Topeka, for he thought that without them there was "no hope of successful operation." The Santa Fe agreed, but at an impossibly high eighteen hundred dollars per month. The editor of the *Independent* thought that this was because

15. Lee Berglund, *Wheat Belt Route* (David City, Neb.: South Platte Press, 1998), 44-47; *Farmers' Vindicator*, May 31, June 7, 1918; *Leavenworth Times*, June 4, 1918; *Oskaloosa Independent*, May 31, 1918.

16. *Farmers' Vindicator*, May 31, June 7, 1918; *Leavenworth Times*, May 28, June 4, 19, 1918; *Oskaloosa Independent*, June 7, 21, 1918, October 31, 1919. The L&T continued to receive the switching revenues, as the Rock Island simply provided the service under contract to the owners.

17. *Leavenworth Times*, June 19, 1918; *Oskaloosa Independent*, June 21, 1918.

Byers was persona non grata with the Santa Fe, stemming from experiences with his A&N.¹⁸

In November the company achieved an indirect way to serve Topeka. Freight started to be interchanged with the Santa Fe at Meriden Junction, and passenger schedules were revised to connect with Santa Fe trains. Now the motor started from McLouth in the morning and ran west to the junction to connect with a train to Topeka. It then operated a round trip to Leavenworth, returning in time to meet the 5:25 P.M. train out of Topeka. At about 7:00 P.M. the unit returned to McLouth. This service pattern was excellent, as it allowed one-day round trips into Leavenworth from all parts of the line and a round trip to Topeka for those living from McLouth westward. Combined with the mixed train, which now ran daily-except-Sundays, this schedule was the best ever offered on the line.¹⁹

Despite such positive developments, corporate finances were precarious. In March 1919 the directors thought that the best way to cut costs was to reduce mixed train service and return the leased engine in favor of "Old No. 1," the L&T's only locomotive, then under repair after a long time out of service. Another topic was the "unfair and inequitable division of freight earnings" with other railroads. The company was getting about one third of these earnings, while management thought it should have at least 50 percent. Given the dissatisfaction with finances, Byers said he was willing to resign, if requested, at the end of his first year.²⁰

At the 1919 stockholders' meeting, Byers discussed results for the past year, claiming a small deficit of several hundred dollars. He also volunteered to continue as manager for the next two years. The directors accepted his offer, subject to certain conditions, such as obtaining a larger and safer motor.²¹

On May 16 a headline in the *Farmers' Vindicator* read "L. & T. Motor Wrecked." It had run over a dog, and in the process the unit ended up fifty feet from the track. Luckily, nobody was badly hurt. The damaged motor was placed

on a flatcar and returned to the A&N for repairs. A larger unit was supposed to replace it, but it failed to appear. Again only the mixed trains were running, originating in Leavenworth in the morning. Things were not going as the communities had hoped.²²

The directors met to discuss their options and devised a bold ten-year plan. It called for the formation of an L&T benefit district, which would deliver one hundred thousand dollars in bonds to the railroad in exchange for a like amount of L&T stock. Of that total, about thirty thousand dollars was for improving the physical plant and buying one or two engines and two motors. The remainder would be a reserve to cover any deficits over the next ten years. Interest payments on the bonds would only cost landowners about one dollar per year per thousand dollars of valuation. All area newspapers, except the *Leavenworth Post*, favored the idea. Supporters stressed that the district, extending about four miles on each side of the track, included only those who gained from the L&T. The plan, said the *Farmers' Vindicator*, was "so fair and equitable to all concerned, and the cost so little on each one that it meets with general favor."²³

By August the campaign for voter approval was in full swing, and the press published many pro-bond editorials. Their main theme was that the savings from having rail service would easily offset any additional taxes. Another argument was that the L&T could save much money if it owned, rather than leased, its equipment. The A&N engine cost more than three thousand dollars per year, and the motor about eighteen hundred dollars annually. With its own equipment, paid for by the bond issue (now reduced to seventy-five thousand dollars), the company could save almost five thousand dollars per year. Higher switching charges, recently implemented at Leavenworth, would also help the bottom line. The directors were confident the L&T could soon be self-sustaining and possibly better than that.²⁴

In Jefferson County the campaign called for a fifty-thousand-dollar stock subscription. A similar campaign for

18. *Oskaloosa Independent*, September 27, October 25, 1918.

19. *Topeka Daily Capital*, reprinted in *Oskaloosa Independent*, November 8, 1918.

20. *Oskaloosa Independent*, April 4, 1919. No. 1 probably was a former Santa Fe engine (No. 71) that the L&T bought for twenty-five hundred dollars in July 1900. It was a small locomotive with four leading wheels and only four driving wheels (a 4-4-0 type). See Minute Book, L&T Railway, 19, Library, Union Pacific Museum, Omaha.

21. *Farmers' Vindicator*, May 30, 1919; *Oskaloosa Independent*, May 23, 1919. The claim of a small loss referred to the operating deficit.

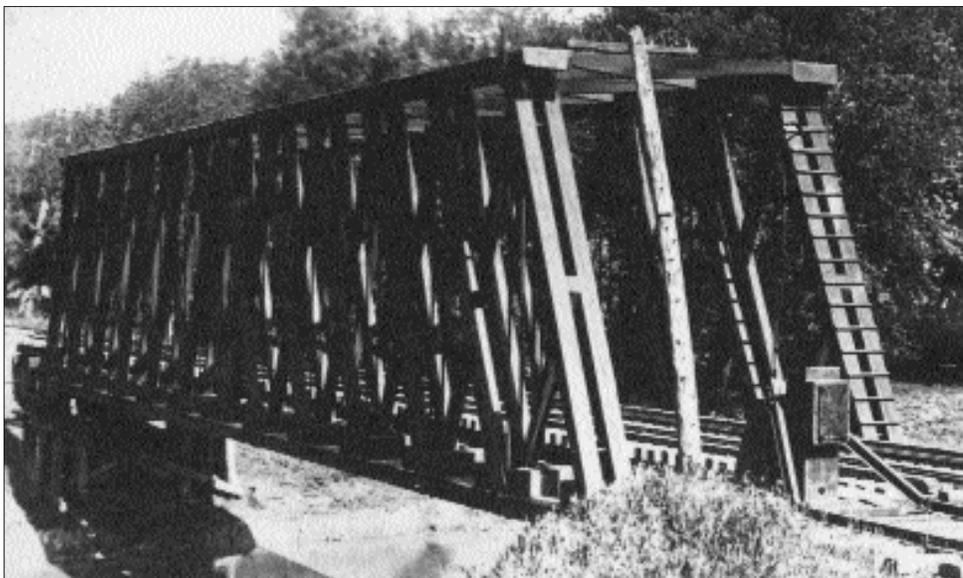
22. *Farmers' Vindicator*, May 16, 1919; *Oskaloosa Independent*, June 13, 1919.

23. *Farmers' Vindicator*, August 1, 1919; *Leavenworth Times*, July 27, 1919; *Oskaloosa Independent*, July 25, August 29, September 19, 1919. Similar benefit districts existed for road improvements. All property, not just farmland, was taxed.

24. For examples, see *Oskaloosa Independent*, September 19, November 7, 1919.

twenty-five thousand dollars was conducted in Leavenworth County. At Oskaloosa, the *Independent* warned that were the bonds defeated, the community would face “a wrecked road, diminished property values, long, expensive freight hauls, increased prices of merchandise, [and] decreased prices of farm produce.” The call for a yes vote

In the midst of this campaign Byers announced that he would step down as manager. At first the change was said to be amicable all around. However, some directors were dissatisfied with how Byers ran the company and that he was an absentee manager living two hundred miles away in Hutchinson. In December the *Leavenworth Times* published a letter from Byers saying that the only way the railroad could be profitable was to run into Topeka. He said he resigned because the owners were uninterested in extending operations there. With Byers went his A&N locomotive and combination car.²⁸



This likely is the L&T bridge over the Delaware River near Ozawkie. The structure gave the railroad trouble through much of its history.

was reinforced in October when the town’s other railroad, the Kansas City Northwestern, was abandoned.²⁵

The *Leavenworth Post* questioned the L&T’s value to on-line communities, for its current schedule did not allow one-day shopping trips into Leavenworth. It also doubted the firm could ever be profitable, and it suggested that those who had bought stock in 1918 wanted to unload it onto the benefit district.²⁶

In Jefferson County the vote was overwhelmingly favorable. The count around Ozawkie was 319 to 72, at McLouth 231 to 36, and at Oskaloosa 356 to 47. Jarbalo, the only voting place in Leavenworth County (the city was not in the district), favored subsidies by 359 to 92.²⁷

25. *Leavenworth Times*, October 2, 1919; *Oskaloosa Independent*, October 31, November 7, 1919.

26. *Leavenworth Post*, October 29, November 9, 1919.

27. *Farmers’ Vindicator*, November 14, 1919; *Leavenworth Times*, November 12, 1919; *Oskaloosa Independent*, November 14, 1919.

The directors selected O. B. Gufler of Topeka, manager of a wholesale business, the new general manager. At that meeting Gufler summarized the L&T’s recent progress, achieved mostly with the help of the Santa Fe. For one, the latter had supplied a combination car for the mixed train. He told of the establishment of favorable joint rates with that railroad and of the satisfactory work of its Leavenworth switching crew (replacing the Rock Island). Gufler defended his predecessor by explaining that, before Byers’s arrival, the Wells group had destroyed “all data, office supplies and everything that would guide the new management.” The property was in poor physical condition, and much of his energy had gone into upgrading it.²⁹

Seemingly little noticed by management, at this time major developments in road transportation were bound to influence the railroad. The Good Roads Movement started in the 1880s and progressively gathered force. Its full impact in Kansas was delayed until the late teens, when automobile ownership became fairly common. Kansas farmers were especially likely to buy cars, as the state ranked third nationally in 1920 in per capita ownership. The combina-

tion of the automobile and the railroad was a significant development in the history of the state. The quality of the Rock Island’s switching service had come under fire from Leavenworth shippers.

28. *Leavenworth Times*, July 27, December 20, 1919; *Oskaloosa Independent*, July 25, December 26, 1919. The departed locomotive’s place was taken by the L&T’s only engine, recently repaired after many months out of service.

29. *Farmers’ Vindicator*, December 5, 1919; *Leavenworth Times*, November 20, 1919; *Oskaloosa Independent*, October 31, November 21, 28, December 26, 1919. The quality of the Rock Island’s switching service had come under fire from Leavenworth shippers.

tion of private cars, buses, and good roads was a threat, particularly, to short-distance passenger trains.³⁰

The truck also was coming into its own. It was especially well fitted to delivering freight in small lots, such as express shipments. Once largely confined to cities, it spread out with improved rural roads. Early trucks were not adept at carrying bulk commodities, such as coal and wheat, and for such items, the railroad retained a considerable advantage. Overall, the car, bus, and truck were becoming increasingly well suited to providing much of the type of transportation offered by the L&T.

The high hopes generated by the benefit district vote soon gave way to disappointment, as the bonds proved difficult to sell. By September 1920 the railroad had sold only a small percentage, although money was borrowed with bonds as collateral, so just a third of the issue was still available. The directors decided to sell the rest at a discount, offering them first to stockholders. Within a year they were almost all gone, the proceeds used for debt, roadbed improvements, bridge repairs, a second locomotive, freight cars, and operations. In the end the \$75,000 issue yielded only \$54,815, and it accomplished much less than anticipated.³¹

Despite many optimistic reports to the public, by early 1921 the company was in financial trouble. During the previous thirteen months, management reported, the L&T had an operating loss of \$26,737, with a deficit every month. Including \$11,460 in betterments, the total loss was \$38,197.³²

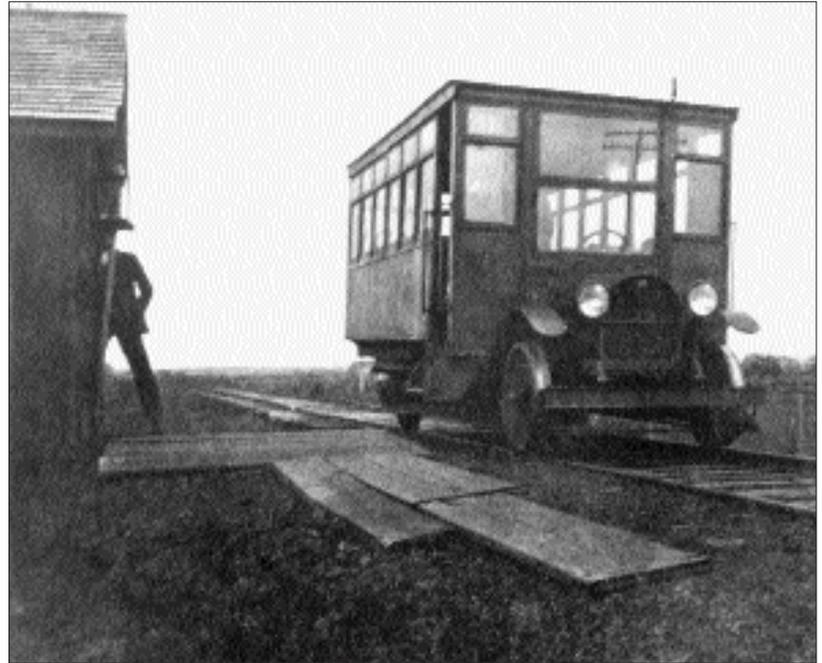
The directors could think of only one remedy, another type of subsidy from the benefit district. With a thirteen-million-dollar district valuation, a two-mill levy on property would make up the deficit. This idea was well received, and all newspapers except the *Leavenworth Post*

30. Paul S. Sutter, "Paved With Good Intentions: Good Roads, the Automobile, and the Rhetoric of Rural Improvement in the Kansas Farmer, 1890–1914," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 14 (Winter 1995–1996): 285–99.

31. *Farmers' Vindicator*, October 1, 1920; U.S. Interstate Commerce Commission, *Decisions of the Interstate Commerce Commission of the United States* 170 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1931), 411; *Leavenworth Times*, September 25, 1920; *Oskaloosa Independent*, September 24, 1920, February 4, 1921; *Topeka Daily Capital*, September 26, 1921.

32. *Farmers' Vindicator*, February 11, 1921; *Oskaloosa Independent*, February 4, 1921.

supported it. A levy, ran the argument, was a small price to pay for retaining the railroad. Without the L&T, the communities would have to pay high truck rates and spend a great deal on road improvements. However, a letter to the *Oskaloosa Independent* from "A Farmer" took an opposing view. Recalling recent history, the writer argued that farm-



The leased Anthony & Northern "motor," a modified Reo highway bus, at Ozawie in 1918 or 1919.

ers were first asked to help buy shares in the railroad, and they did. Then they were called upon to vote bonds to take care of the L&T for ten years, and they cooperated. Now yet another subsidy was looming, with no certainty about the size of future deficits. Further, the argument that farmland would lose value after abandonment was counterbalanced by lower values because of heavy taxes. Not many merchants, said "A Farmer," used the railroad any more, "as they have most of their hauling done by motor trucks." The *Post* also took a dim view of more subsidies, especially questioning how well the railroad was managed.³³

In February 1921 supporters introduced a bill in the Kansas legislature to authorize a yearly benefit district

33. *Farmers' Vindicator*, February 11, 1921; *Leavenworth Post*, reprinted in *Farmers' Vindicator*, February 25, 1921; *Oskaloosa Independent*, February 4, 11, 1921

levy. Under it, whenever the railroad needed financial help for operating deficits, maintenance, or new equipment, it had to outline its needs for court review. If the court thought the request justified, and if 40 percent of the taxpayers signed a petition, it could call for a special election for a tax levy.³⁴

Concurrently the company negotiated with Wells to buy out his interest in the L&T, and he settled for sixty thousand dollars in bonds. This put the L&T under full local control, but the new bonds also required a mortgage on the railroad. Later this deal was criticized as adding an unnecessary fixed burden when the railroad usually could not meet its monthly operating costs.³⁵

About two hundred people attended the annual stockholders' meeting that May. Management explained that the monthly deficit was decreasing steadily and was only nine hundred dollars in March. With more tonnage and better rate-divisions in prospect, Gufler predicted profits. Stockholders approved a plan to purchase a motor and to reinstate the schedule that made it possible for passengers to spend the business day in either Topeka or Leavenworth. Not stated was that such service could be good public relations for the railroad and might make voter approval of subsidies more likely.³⁶

Shortly thereafter the L&T made a contract with the White Motor Company to buy a twenty-five-seat unit for sixty-three hundred dollars. After a trial trip on July 27, 1921, the new motor entered scheduled service. Those who went on the trial run liked what they saw; the *Leavenworth Post* reported that it "should prove to be Leavenworth's best shopping train." As in Byers's time, the unit first took a morning trip from McLouth to Meriden, followed by a round trip to Leavenworth, and returned to McLouth in the early evening. It also ran on Sundays, giving daily passenger service on the route for the first time.³⁷

34. *Farmers' Vindicator*, February 25, March 4, 1921; *Kansas Laws* (1921), ch. 216; *Oskaloosa Independent*, February 25, 1921. The Kansas legislature gave the Court of Industrial Relations jurisdiction in this matter.

35. U.S. Interstate Commerce Commission, *Decisions of the Interstate Commerce Commission of the United States* 70 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922), 288; *Leavenworth Post*, reprinted in *Farmers' Vindicator*, May 20, June 3, 1921; *Leavenworth Times*, February 14, 1928; *Oskaloosa Independent*, May 27, 1921.

36. *Oskaloosa Independent*, May 20, 27, 1921; *Topeka Daily Capital*, September 26, 1921.

37. *Leavenworth Post*, reprinted in *Farmers' Vindicator*, August 5, 1921; *Leavenworth Times*, June 26, July 5, 25, September 1, 1921; *Oskaloosa Independent*, June 10, July 1, 29, September 2, 1921; *Topeka Daily Capital*, July 23, September 26, 1921.

Ridership and revenue were higher than expected. In August the motor had gross receipts of \$1,234.31, while operating costs were only \$277.07, leaving a net of \$957.24. Even with capital costs, it made money. During September it carried 2,007 passengers, or about 67 per day. Some months later a particularly noteworthy trip occurred: "Coming out of Leavenworth there were 60 grown people and 12 children passengers, about 120 grips, suitcases and packages, about a ton of mail." Traffic was so heavy that the company considered ordering a trailer or a second motor.³⁸

Passenger data reflected the improved service (Table 1). In 1920 the L&T carried 11,694 passengers, but this increased to 15,271 in 1921. In the same period passenger revenues rose by 45 percent to \$12,906. Freight revenues also increased from about \$43,000 to more than \$51,000, and in 1921 the company actually showed a small operating income of \$2,870. With taxes and other fixed costs, however, the net loss was \$12,260. Freight revenues in 1921, it turned out, were the highest the company ever achieved.³⁹

In June the courts gave the benefit district permission to conduct a vote. The company needed about twenty-four thousand dollars to meet next year's operating deficit. This was probably the last time, stated the *Oskaloosa Independent*, the L&T would need financial help. Support was healthy at most locations, but in Leavenworth County many thought they were close enough to Leavenworth that they did not need the railroad. Numerous posters urging a "no" vote appeared.⁴⁰

On August 2 voters in Jefferson County favored the 2.5-mill tax levy, and the *Independent* trumpeted, "ONCE MORE THE PEOPLE SAVE THE 'PEOPLE'S' RAILROAD.'" However, the proposal lost in Leavenworth County. Management thought that the benefit district law held that a majority in the district as a whole would govern. The courts ruled each county a separate district, however, and that Leavenworth County did not need to assess the tax. With this decision, the L&T became highly dependent on the good will of the voters of just Jefferson County.⁴¹

38. *Leavenworth Times*, September 21, 1921; *Oskaloosa Independent*, August 12, September 9, 16, December 30, 1921.

39. Henry Varnum Poor, *Poor's Manual of Railroads*, 56th annual ed. (New York: H. V. and H. W. Poor, 1923), 263.

40. *Leavenworth Times*, July 24, 30, 1921; *Oskaloosa Independent*, June 17, July 1, 22, 1921.

41. *Leavenworth Post*, reprinted in *Farmers' Vindicator*, December 15, 1922; *Leavenworth Times*, August 3, 5, 6, 7, 1921, December 10, 1922; *Oskaloosa Independent*, August 5, 12, 1921.

TABLE 1

YEAR	NO. PASSENGERS	TONS FREIGHT	PASSENGERS REV.	FREIGHT REV.	OP. DEF.	TOTAL DEF.
1918	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1919	N/A	N/A	\$ 7,250	\$31,262	\$ 1,827	\$12,866
1920	11,694	34,647	\$ 6,533	\$42,929	\$12,041	\$24,163
1921	15,271	30,808	\$ 9,456	\$51,217	(\$2,870)	\$12,260
1922	21,473	24,343	\$12,906	\$40,830	(\$4,720)	\$ 6,967
1923	16,900**	N/A	\$10,154	\$32,756	(\$4,712)	\$ 9,190
1924	14,277	30,140	\$ 8,381	\$37,338	(\$3,062)	\$ 8,016
1925	11,550	25,703	\$ 6,579	\$34,690	\$15,449	\$19,894
1926	9,156	25,703	\$ 5,440	\$30,807	\$ 5,545	\$12,953
1927	N/A	N/A	\$ 3,515	\$26,326	\$ 1,929	(\$5,405)
1928	N/A	N/A	\$ 2,321	\$42,056	\$28,422	\$18,270
1929	302	21,445	\$ 203	\$20,905	\$31,946	\$29,872

**estimates

Information is for number of passengers carried, tons of freight carried, passenger revenues, freight revenues, the operating deficit, and the total deficit. Annual data from *Poor's Manual of Railroads* (various years). All data for calendar years. No information available (N/A) for 1930 and 1931. Figures in parentheses denote income. The exact matching of freight tonnage for 1925 and 1926 suggests an error on the part of the information source.

The L&T's biggest financial problem was its intercity carload freight service, which was expensive to operate. At this time the company saw its main roles as carrying passengers and express freight, and as a Leavenworth terminal railroad; it made money only in those areas. This was in stark contrast to most railroads, where intercity carload freight was the bread and butter. One way to improve this situation was to cut the frequency of mixed train service. This carried a public relations problem, as the arguments for benefit district aid had stressed freight. Nevertheless, the railroad applied for authority to reduce service to tri-weekly, and the Public Utilities Commission (PUC) consented.⁴²

In January 1922 the motor began to make two round trips daily, leaving Leavenworth for Meriden Junction at 7:00 A.M. and 3:00 P.M. The *Oskaloosa Independent* made an improbable claim about this service: "Traveling men say they will all patronize it and give up their autos." Still, the new schedule was successful and lasted for several years.⁴³

42. *Leavenworth Post*, reprinted in *Farmers' Vindicator*, October 7, 1921; *Leavenworth Times*, September 7, 1921; *Oskaloosa Independent*, August 12, October 21, November 18, 25, December 16, 1921, January 13, 1922.

43. *Leavenworth Times*, January 1, 28, 1922; *Official Guide of the Railways*, July 1924 (New York: National Railway Publication Co., 1924), 1167; *Oskaloosa Independent*, December 30, 1921, January 20, 27, February 3, 1922.

The stockholders' meeting that May saw general agreement that L&T service, especially for passengers, was better than ever. Gufler reported that average monthly losses for 1920 were about \$2,000, while in 1921 they were half that amount. The motor received much of the credit, for in the first nine months it had net revenues of \$10,496.67. Yet, it was clear that "as long as the freight [i.e. mixed] train was operated, there would be a deficit."⁴⁴

Given the recent losses, the L&T again approached the court for aid, this time asking for twelve thousand dollars. The request was approved, and the election was set for July 25. The L&T then applied for PUC authority to abandon all carload freight service. Management said it wanted permission as a contingency if the tax measure failed—therefore, the timing smacked of blackmail. In July the PUC heard the application. By then its audit of the past thirty months showed that no officer or director received pay and that the railroad was operated economically and honestly. However, the auditor added that the company

44. *Leavenworth Times*, May 17, 1922; *Oskaloosa Independent*, May 19, 1922. It is noteworthy that neither Waddill nor Gufler mentioned the 1921 operating profit, the first for any company on the route. Perhaps they feared that any type of profit would hurt the company's chances for community subsidies.

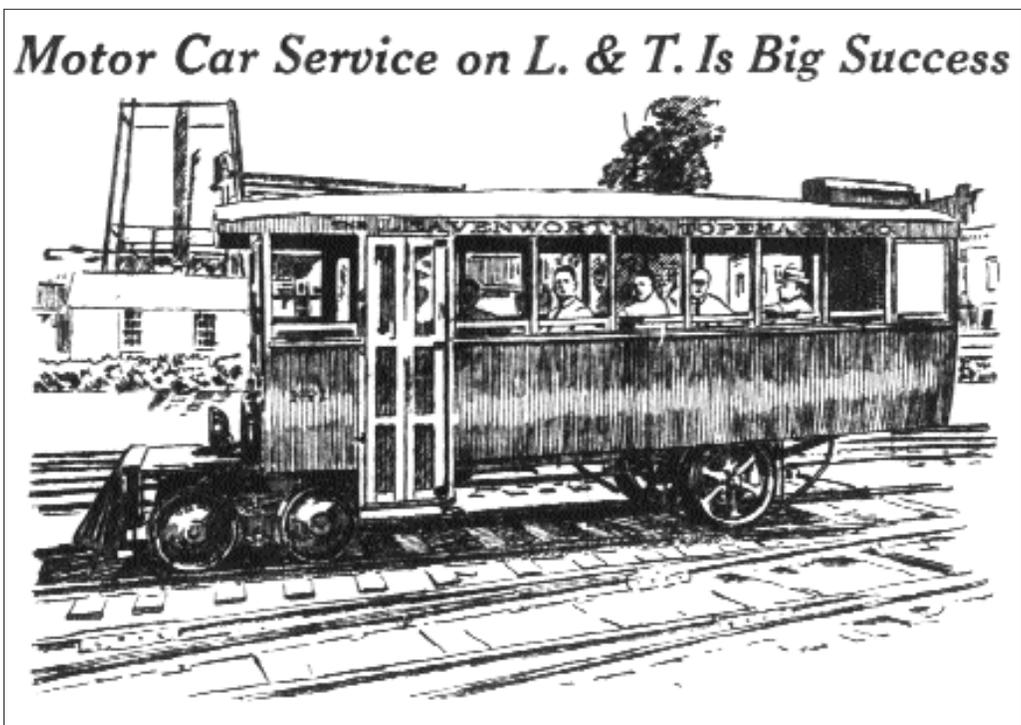
could not “pay unless some other power than steam [could] be found to take care of the freight business,” and that no satisfactory substitute was available. In December the PUC denied the application.⁴⁵

Despite questions about future freight service, Jefferson County once more approved the subsidy. Of the 1,036

aged it was withdrawn from service. Now passengers had to ride a “combination caboose,” just as in Santa Fe days. It was far less comfortable than its predecessor, and the alternatives of the bus and private automobile must have looked better than ever.⁴⁷

Shortly thereafter a law outlining how to modify benefit district boundaries went into effect. It was used to strengthen support within the districts by eliminating those who felt the L&T offered them no advantage. Testimony on this measure showed that the company took out five hundred to six hundred carloads of farm products in 1922, and that six elevators would suffer greatly from abandonment. It also revealed that between six hundred and seven hundred of the eight hundred stockholders were farmers.⁴⁸

The court ruled that the company needed \$19,500 for the following year and approved a third benefit district vote. The *Leavenworth Times* thought the measure might win this time in Leavenworth County because those areas most strongly against aid were no longer in



Sketch of the White Motor Company unit, which appeared in the Topeka State Journal, August 12, 1921.

the district. However, the result was the same, with a victory in Jefferson County and a decisive defeat in Leavenworth.⁴⁹

votes cast, 80 percent were positive. However, Leavenworth County again rejected aid, this time by more than three to one. The *Farmers' Vindicator* said that the people of Jefferson County were “up in arms and threatening to boycott Leavenworth merchants and wholesalers, and some of the more radical are for closing all the depots in that county. The result is that Jefferson County will pay and keep the line running while Leavenworth will not and reap almost as much benefit.”⁴⁶

That December the old combination car used on the mixed trains derailed at McLouth and was so badly dam-

The inexorable advances in highway transportation continued. In 1922, for example, two bus firms started daily services from Oskaloosa, one to Kansas City and the other to Topeka. The following May the *McLouth Times* reported that the railroad had just lost

45. *Farmers' Vindicator*, June 2, December 15, 1922; *Leavenworth Times*, May 31, June 8, July 25, December 7, 1922; *Oskaloosa Independent*, June 2, 9, 16, 23, July 21, 1922.

46. *Farmers' Vindicator*, July 28, 1922; *Leavenworth Times*, July 27, 1922; *Oskaloosa Independent*, July 28, 1922.

47. *Leavenworth Times*, December 29, 1922; *Oskaloosa Independent*, December 22, 29, 1922, January 5, 1923. The combination caboose was probably an extra long one with room for a few passengers. During most of its pre-1918 history, the L&T had been operated by the Santa Fe.

48. *Oskaloosa Independent*, February 23, March 2, June 22, 1923. Occasionally, the L&T was also called the “farmers’ railroad.”

49. *Leavenworth Times*, June 21, July 24, 1923; *Oskaloosa Independent*, July 13, 20, 27, 1923.

another regular customer to trucks. Added the editor: "When we all get to doing that there will be no railroad and mighty little town left." More positively, by August a White Star bus met the L&T motor at Meriden for a connection to Topeka. Westbound, this run now took about an hour less than via the Santa Fe. One factor favorable to the L&T was the lack of a parallel paved road, for all improved roads in L&T country ran north-south.⁵⁰

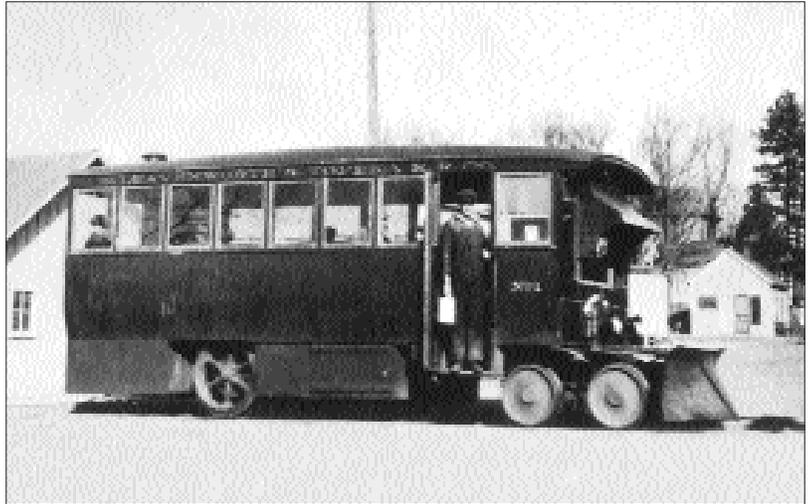
The following year stockholders elected Frank H. Roberts, editor of the *Oskaloosa Independent*, the new general manager. The *Leavenworth Times* said that the L&T had "an acutely felt need for a general manager who is able to devote time to the management of the road's affairs." Roberts received no salary, although he hoped to make money by selling advertising space on the motors, as explained below. Now the *Topeka Daily Capital* called the L&T "the world's only People's Railroad, with a country editor for general manager."⁵¹

Roberts's biggest enthusiasm was to acquire "a combination motor." Besides passengers and light freight, it would carry milk and cream, which Roberts thought would be highly profitable. An appropriate unit cost about ten thousand dollars, and he felt that the Leavenworth business community should buy the motor and lease it to the L&T at a nominal rate. However, there was considerable skepticism about the practicality of the idea, and several attempts to raise money in the city proved disappointing.⁵²

Almost one hundred people attended the 1924 stockholders' meeting at the Leavenworth Chamber of Commerce. All officers were reelected, as was general manager Roberts, who reported 1923 expenses as about eight thousand dollars lower than a year earlier. Turning to his favorite subject, Roberts projected net earnings from his proposed motor as five hundred dollars per month. Current business was well ahead of 1923, with Leavenworth switching revenues at record levels and large shipments of livestock and road paving materials. Roberts hoped soon to buy "a tractor engine run by oil or gasoline" for freight,

with savings of at least ten thousand dollars per year. If it proved successful, the company could dispense with subsidies (Table 1).⁵³

That summer Jefferson County voters approved another two-mill benefit district tax to cover the fourteen-thousand-dollar loss expected in the coming year. The vote



The White Motor Company motor, L&T No. 1, at McLouth in the 1920s.

was 495 to 196, with 72 percent in favor. The company did not even ask for a Leavenworth County vote, as there was no chance for passage. The *McLouth Times* said it hoped the levy would not always be needed, but "we are not letting that hope shut our eyes to the tremendous disaster that would result from a neglect to vote this tax at least once more."⁵⁴

After considerable delay, Roberts ordered his new "double motor" from Burdick and White, a partnership established for this purpose. The forward unit contained a 3.5 ton White engine installed "in a plain freight car body" and room for one hundred cans of milk and cream. Behind it came a thirty-two-seat trailer, with a shell built by the Sunflower Body Works of Topeka. Assembly took place in the repair barn of the Topeka Railway, the streetcar line, which also supplied some parts. The final product cost only fifty-five hundred dollars, reflecting the partnership's

50. *Leavenworth Times*, February 21, 1923; *McLouth Times*, reprinted in *Oskaloosa Independent*, May 18, 1923; *Oskaloosa Independent*, November 3, 1922, August 3, September 28, 1923.

51. *Leavenworth Times*, May 6, 1923; *Oskaloosa Independent*, May 18, 1923; *Topeka Daily Capital*, reprinted in *Leavenworth Times*, July 21, 1924.

52. *Leavenworth Post*, reprinted in *Oskaloosa Independent*, January 19, 1923, March 2, 1928; *Leavenworth Times*, February 9, April 7, June 18, October 14, 1923, February 8, July 25, 1924.

53. *Leavenworth Times*, May 21, 25, July 17, 1924; *Oskaloosa Independent*, May 23, 1924.

54. *Leavenworth Times*, July 23, 1924; *McLouth Times*, quotation from *Leavenworth Times*, July 13, 1924; *Oskaloosa Independent*, June 20, July 25, 1924.

eagerness for business, the L&T's poverty, and the fact that Leavenworth businesses had contributed only three thousand dollars. Led by a converted boxcar, this combination was one of the homeliest trains ever to run in Kansas. Nevertheless, with modifications it was successful enough to serve until 1928.⁵⁵

To encourage milk and cream shipments, the L&T lowered rates and advertised the service extensively. To make shipping by rail more convenient, farmers were encouraged to erect loading platforms where the L&T crossed roads, for the train would stop almost anywhere. Despite these efforts, the desired traffic did not materialize. By this time, trucks had proved themselves superior for handling most milk and cream shipments, especially because they could make the pick-ups right on the farm.⁵⁶

Under the revised schedule, the new motor left Meriden daily-except-Sundays at 7:15 A.M., stayed in Leavenworth for about six hours, and returned late in the afternoon. The older unit continued to operate two daily round trips, starting at Leavenworth at 7:00 A.M. and ending back there at 8:10 P.M., while the mixed train ran on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Now, said the press (probably with justification), no other Kansas branch or short line could boast such good service. This schedule was the most intensive the railroad ever had.⁵⁷

Despite excellent service, ridership was starting to show the impacts of severe highway competition. It peaked in 1922 with 21,473 passengers, but just two years later it was down by about a third to 14,277, and then it decreased a further 36 percent to 9,156 in 1926. Passenger revenues also peaked in 1922 at \$12,906, after which they began an uninterrupted decline. Just four years later such income was only \$5,440 (a 58 percent decline), and it was but \$203 in 1929. The new service helped to stem the decline in ridership, but it could not reverse it. Illustrating the severity of bus competition, in 1925 a company introduced every-two-hour Oskaloosa–Topeka service (Table 1).

55. *Leavenworth Times*, May 25, July 21, August 29, September 8, 1924; February 27, 1925; *McLouth Times*, quotation from *Leavenworth Times*, July 13, 1924; *Oskaloosa Independent*, July 11, September 12, 1924, March 2, 1928. The unit, also reported as having a 3 or a 5.5 ton engine, entered service on September 8, 1924.

56. *Leavenworth Times*, August 29, September 24, 1924; *Oskaloosa Independent*, July 25, September 12, 26, October 17, 1924.

57. *Official Guide of the Railways*, June 1925 (1925), 120; *Oskaloosa Independent*, August 11, September 5, 12, 1924.

Freight revenues likewise showed the increasing impacts of trucks. Such revenues peaked at \$51,217 in 1921 and started an uneven decline to \$30,807 in 1926 and \$20,905 (59 percent below the peak) in 1929. Tonnage trends also moved generally downward (Table 1).

Late in 1924 management announced plans to retire the mortgage bonds issued to buy Wells's interest in the railroad. This was accomplished by using some cash from a sinking fund, selling certain real estate assets, and issuing new ten-year bonds instead. This reduced both the principal and interest. People in Oskaloosa, McLouth, and Ozawie took about twenty-five thousand dollars of the new bonds, and four directors took the rest. Now all bonds were in the hands of officers and stockholders, eliminating "foreign" (in the *Oskaloosa Independent's* words) ownership.⁵⁸

The following July, Roberts resigned as general manager. He had been elected to serve without pay, with the proviso that he could keep the revenue from selling advertising space on the motors. Now the double motor, the main potential source of such revenue, was being removed from service after only about ten months. As he explained in his letter of resignation, the unit was being taken out of service "because the people in whose interest it was put on do not patronize it." This applied especially to the traffic in milk and cream, where "the dream of years had failed, the hard tireless effort of months had failed." Roberts's resignation followed considerable dissension about his plans at the recent stockholders' meeting.⁵⁹

His replacement was Jesse Davies, formerly auditor and assistant manager. He said that most immediate efforts would go into improving the roadbed, such as renewing ties. In August the two-unit motor reentered service on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday afternoons to handle light merchandise and passengers.⁶⁰

Despite many discouraging signs, in July Jefferson County voters approved another benefit district tax. Again, a main argument in favor was that higher truck rates after abandonment would cost far more than the two-mill levy. Although trucking was increasing, L&T towns still had "no

58. U.S. Interstate Commerce Commission, *Decisions of the Interstate Commerce Commission of the United States* 94 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1925), 440; *Leavenworth Times*, December 24, 1924, February 22, 1925; *Oskaloosa Independent*, December 26, 1924, February 6, 27, 1925.

59. *Farmers' Vindicator*, July 10, August 14, 1925; *Leavenworth Times*, July 5, 1925; *Oskaloosa Independent*, July 3, 1925.

60. *Leavenworth Times*, August 11, 1925; *Oskaloosa Independent*, July 31, August 7, 1925.

adequate means for shipping wheat, corn, stock, coal, oil, and other necessities [by truck] . . . except at an excessive cost to the shipper.” The vote was 549 to 210, with 72 percent in favor.⁶¹

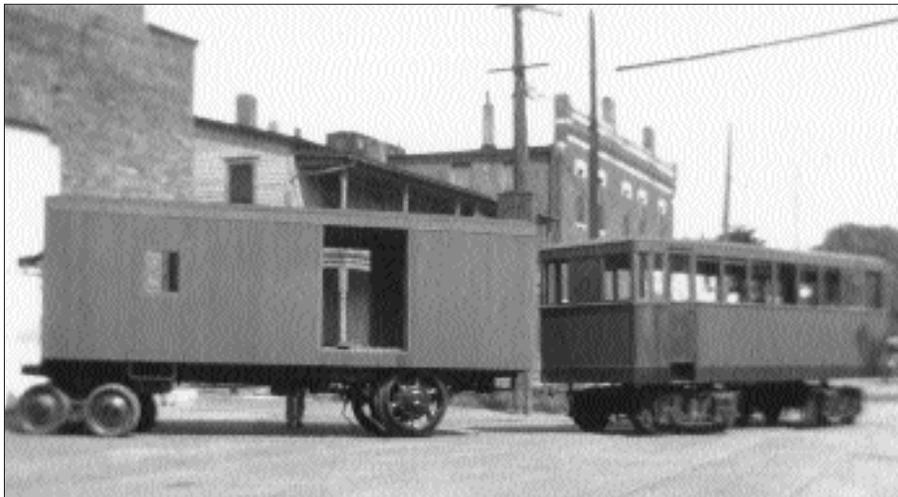
In 1926, for the first time, some directors publicly voiced concern about the L&T’s future. Because of a traffic slump, the past year’s levy was not enough to make up the deficit, as the operating loss hit \$15,449 and total deficits were about \$20,000. “Unless drastic action of some nature is taken the road will decline rapidly, directors intimated. Poor roadbed, poor rails and ties, and poor equipment are getting rapidly worse, it is said” (Table 1).⁶²

To cut losses, the directors decided to discontinue carload freight service outside Leavenworth, effective May 1. Trucks were now handling most of the non-agricultural traffic; what traffic was left was highly seasonal. The idea was to stop service during the slow spring and early summer months, and to restart at harvest time. However, the PUC issued a restraining order, for state regulation required its permission to discontinue service. As that agency allowed Kansas railroads to operate on an “as needed” basis, the L&T decided to use this option instead.⁶³

That July citizens voted on a two-mill assessment to raise eighteen thousand dollars. Despite such disadvantages as the lukewarm backing of the *Oskaloosa Independent* (which called the L&T “a sick man”) and the reduction in carload freight service, it passed 575 to 292. Now about 66 percent voted in favor, six percentage points lower than in 1925.⁶⁴

Heavy freight shipments that summer helped the L&T’s balance sheet. In July the company generated many outbound loads of wheat, an annual movement that usually took place in August. The two other busy months were normally November and December, with corn shipments outbound and coal inbound for winter heating. In those

three months the L&T usually came close to breaking even; at other times, losses averaged one thousand dollars or more a month. The main outbound commodities now were grain and livestock, and the major inbound articles were coal, lumber, and oil. Except for livestock, these commodities were poorly suited to trucking.⁶⁵



The “double motor” at the Topeka Railway shops, ready for delivery to the L&T, August 25, 1924.

The directors’ main concern now became how to keep the railroad going until completion of the local network of paved highways, for it was obvious the L&T could not operate “after these hard surface highways parallel the line.” This led to discussions about selling the Leavenworth terminals. The sales price, plus the scrap value of the rest of the line, might be enough to repay all stockholders in full and (with benefit district help) keep the line operating for two more years, or “until such time as the East and West road is paved to a Kansas City connection.” At the 1927 annual meeting, stockholders authorized the directors to sell or lease the terminals, should the opportunity arise.⁶⁶

In June voters approved another L&T tax levy by 305 to 168, or 64 percent. With poor financial conditions, including an inability to take up some maturing bonds, discussions about selling the Leavenworth terminals became more serious. In January 1928 the Santa Fe offered to buy

61. *Leavenworth Times*, July 12, 1925; *Oskaloosa Independent*, July 10, 24, 31, 1925.

62. *Oskaloosa Independent*, March 26, 1926.

63. *Leavenworth Times*, May 2, 1926; *Oskaloosa Independent*, March 26, April 16, 30, July 23, 1926; *Tonganoxie Mirror*, December 30, 1926.

64. *Leavenworth Times*, July 30, 1926; *Oskaloosa Independent*, June 11, July 30, 1926.

65. *Leavenworth Times*, July 30, 1926; *Oskaloosa Independent*, July 16, 23, 1926.

66. *Leavenworth Times*, December 9, 1926, May 16, 18, June 2, December 19, 1927, January 23, 1928; *Oskaloosa Independent*, December 17, 1926, May 23, 1927.

them for \$140,000. The *Topeka State Journal* pointed out that, ironically, such a sale would dispose of the only part of the L&T that still was profitable, with about \$16,000 in annual earnings. The previous year, passenger revenues were just \$3,515, and most express freight had gone to the highways (Table 1).⁶⁷



The powered unit of the “double motor,” a converted boxcar, at Ozawkie near the end of service. Its greatest competitor is parked at the left. By this time the trailer seems to have been superfluous.

Shortly thereafter the company received a second bid. The Chicago, Burlington & Quincy (CB&Q) offered to pay \$140,000, plus \$12,500 in each of the next two years, to keep the short line in operation. The deal included track-age rights for the L&T in Leavenworth.⁶⁸

Approximately 500 of the 814 stockholders attended a special meeting in Leavenworth that February. Waddill explained the new offer, adding that the current annual deficit was about ten thousand dollars, and that five thousand dollars in bonds was due. Unless the company took care of the latter, a receivership was inevitable and all would be lost. Given this “Hobson’s choice,” stockholders accepted the offer almost unanimously. After the meeting one stockholder compared the L&T to the cat with nine

67. *Leavenworth Times*, January 18, 23, February 14, 19, 22, 1928; *Oskaloosa Independent*, June 17, 24, July 29, 1927; *Topeka Daily Capital*, reprinted in *Oskaloosa Independent*, January 26, 1928; *Topeka State Journal*, reprinted in *Oskaloosa Independent*, February 10, 1928.

68. *Leavenworth Times*, February 21, 22, 1928; *Oskaloosa Independent*, February 24, 1928. The CB&Q served Leavenworth via a short branch from its main line along the Missouri River in Missouri.

lives; every time it seemed about gone, something happened to revive it.⁶⁹

Now at least two more years of operations seemed certain. This would give Jefferson County ample time to haul sand and gravel to pave U.S. Highway 30 between Ozawkie and McLouth. Soon workers repaired the Delaware River bridge (unusable by carload freight since 1925), making it possible to deliver many carloads of road-building materials from the Santa Fe connection at Meriden Junction. Because of these shipments, freight revenues in 1928 jumped 60 percent over the previous year to a level not seen since 1921. Ultimately, this traffic assured the railroad’s demise, but refusing it would hardly have changed the outcome (Table 1).⁷⁰

In July the Interstate Commerce Commission authorized the sale of the terminals, which

included all 2.2 L&T route-miles within the city of Leavenworth. The company agreed to abandon its offices and passenger–freight station there in favor of nearby Burlington facilities. After these changes, it retained just three of its six Leavenworth office employees.⁷¹

At the next annual stockholders’ meeting Davies reported a 1927 deficit of twenty-nine hundred dollars, the smallest in years. This figure apparently did not include the subsidy, for the 1928 edition of *Poor’s Manual of Railroads* showed a profit of \$5,405. This was the first, and only, time that a company on this route showed a yearly profit. For political reasons, it appears, Davies emphasized the loss.⁷²

69. *Leavenworth Times*, February 21, 22, 26, March 25, 1928; *Oskaloosa Independent*, February 24, 1928.

70. *Leavenworth Times*, April 29, 1928; *Leavenworth Times*, reprinted in *Oskaloosa Independent*, March 16, 1928; *Oskaloosa Independent*, February 24, 1928.

71. *Leavenworth Times*, February 22, 23, March 25, August 7, 26, 1928; *Poor, Poor’s Manual of Railroads* (1930), 1076. The L&T paid the CB&Q only ten dollars per month for renting depot space for both passengers and freight.

72. *Leavenworth Times*, May 15, 1928; *Poor, Poor’s Manual of Railroads* (1928), 1277; *Oskaloosa Independent*, May 18, 1928.

On September 1 the terminals were transferred to the CB&Q. Some of the proceeds paid off the L&T's indebtedness, including the first mortgage bonds. Now the company owned its line west of Leavenworth free and clear. Of the remaining money, forty thousand dollars went into bonds and twenty-five thousand dollars into certificates of deposit in several local banks. The company also spent five thousand dollars on a replacement for a worn-out engine, leaving a working balance of about thirteen thousand dollars.⁷³

Given the small size of recent losses, in 1928 the court ruled that the firm needed only \$3,373 for the coming year, or a half-mill levy. The July vote was 301 to 154, with 66 percent in favor in a light turnout that reflected decreasing interest. Ironically, the company actually had a record operating loss of \$28,422 in 1929 (Table 1).⁷⁴

In November the directors applied to the state Public Service Commission (PSC, formerly the PUC) and the federal Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) for permission to withdraw the last passenger trains. By this time such traffic had almost disappeared, and the small amount of accompanying express freight was considered a nuisance. Because of good parallel bus service, few people opposed the move. The last motor trains operated on January 19, 1929. The tri-weekly mixed trains, still going only as far west as Ozawkie, continued to carry passengers in the unlikely event someone wanted to ride the caboose. Even under these conditions the 1929 benefit district vote was positive, albeit close (136 to 117, or 54 percent in favor).⁷⁵

On May 20, 1930, stockholders decided to seek authority to abandon. Said the *Oskaloosa Independent*, "The swan song for the Leavenworth & Topeka Railroad was sung last Tuesday night at a meeting at Leavenworth, where all the stockholders present joined in the chorus and unanimously carried a motion to discontinue service . . . after the summer wheat crop is removed." Those attending also decided not to seek any more local subsidies, as voter approval was unlikely. The PSC held a hearing on the proposed abandonment, and as there was no opposition, it granted permis-

sion. The L&T also filed an application with the ICC, which sent a questionnaire to be used in making its decision.⁷⁶

Before that questionnaire was completed, Leland W. Warner visited President Waddill as the "special representative" of a group that wanted to buy the L&T. Warner said his group "had a major purpose in getting the road," planning to turn it into an extension of a trunk railroad. Almost half (seventy-five thousand dollars) of the L&T stock was held in trust by the Jefferson and Leavenworth county commissioners, on behalf of the benefit districts. The two boards met to consider Warner's proposal, and both favored cooperation. The other seventy-seven thousand dollars in outstanding shares belonged to individuals.⁷⁷

In July, Waddill entered into a contract to turn all the property over to Warner, plus at least 90 percent of corporate shares. In return, Warner was to pay four thousand dollars in cash, representing the value of the rolling stock. The directors and county commissioners approved the agreement, which excluded L&T assets and securities worth about sixty thousand dollars. After signing the contract, Warner assigned it to the Alton Corporation.⁷⁸

Alton's president was Charles Clay Briggs of Detroit, a man "fairly well advanced in years" who said he would rehabilitate the railroad for \$130,000, including \$24,000 for two fast passenger motors. Briggs said he would attract "heavy freight from Chicago to the west" by giving shippers an opportunity to avoid the congested Kansas City terminals. He did not explain how these heavy trains would negotiate the L&T's steep grades and sharp curves.⁷⁹

The agreement called for Briggs to deposit the four thousand dollars at a Kansas City bank, but twice he failed to do so. Further, the ICC disallowed the entire contract, saying that it did not adequately protect the stockholders. A new agreement, drawn up in October, called for all L&T

76. U.S. Interstate Commerce Commission, *Decisions of the Interstate Commerce Commission of the United States* 170, 410; *Leavenworth Times*, May 21, 1930, February 10, 1931; *Oskaloosa Independent*, June 30, July 11, 1929, May 23, 1930, February 13, 1931.

77. *Leavenworth Times*, August 8, 13, 29, 1930, January 18, February 10, 1931; *Oskaloosa Independent*, August 8, 15, 29, 1930, February 13, 1931.

78. U.S. Interstate Commerce Commission, *Decisions of the Interstate Commerce Commission of the United States* 170, 412; *Leavenworth Times*, August 8, 29, 1930, February 10, 1931; *Oskaloosa Independent*, August 15, 29, 1930, February 13, 1931. The choice of "Alton Corporation" invites suspicion as there was a well-known Alton Railroad at this time. It is not clear whether an Alton Corporation really existed or whether anything Briggs claimed was true.

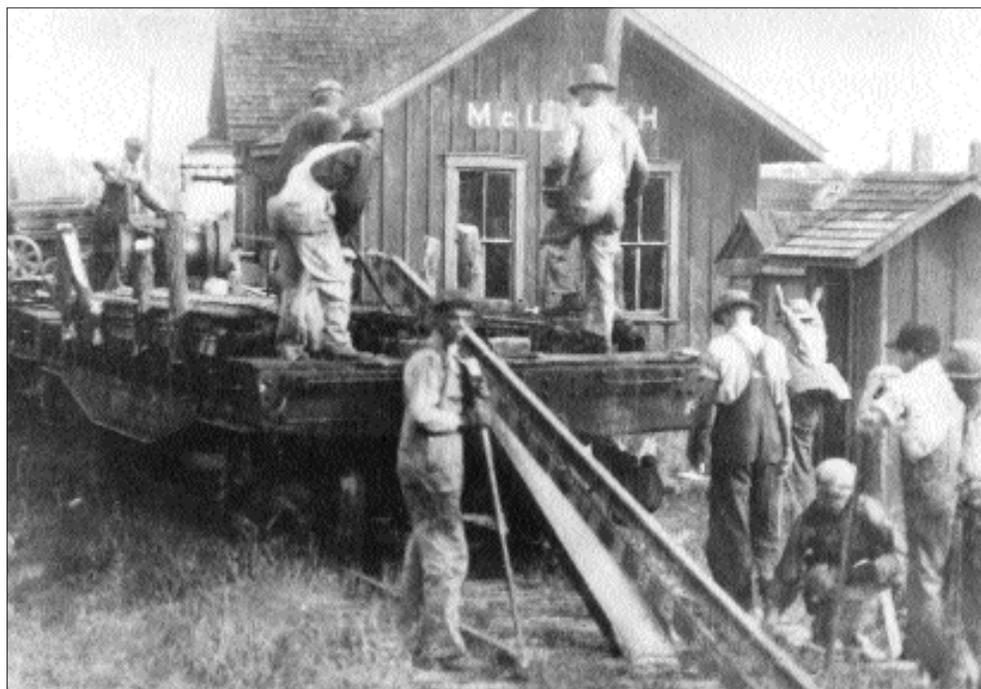
79. *Leavenworth Times*, January 18, February 4, 1931; *Oskaloosa Independent*, September 26, 1930, January 23, 30, 1931.

73. *Leavenworth Times*, September 2, 1928; *Oskaloosa Independent*, September 7, 1918.

74. *Oskaloosa Independent*, June 22, July 27, 1928. The first of the CB&Q's yearly payments helped reduce the loss for 1929.

75. *Leavenworth Times*, November 7, 15, 18, December 9, 1928, January 4, 21, 1929; *Leavenworth Times*, reprinted in *Oskaloosa Independent*, January 11, July 26, 1929; *Official Guide of the Railways, May 1929* (1929), 1263; *Oskaloosa Independent*, November 2, 23, 1928.

stock and assets to be sold to Alton for \$64,870, and for the latter to post a bond guaranteeing operations until August 1, 1936. Briggs had until October 28 to accept this contract, to post the bond, and to pay the money. However, he failed to come up with the funds, and the whole episode turned into a farce.⁸⁰



Pulling up the rails at the McLouth station, 1931.

On March 11 the ICC accepted that recommendation, authorizing abandonment in thirty days. In their decision, the commissioners noted that only about four thousand people were served exclusively by the line, that most traffic came from five small grain elevators and three lumber yards, that all stations were from six to twelve miles from alternative railroads, and that trucking was “prevalent” in the area. They added that it would take at least two hundred thousand dollars to rehabilitate the property, and that the bridges were in particularly poor condition.⁸²

The dismantling firm of Sonken & Galamba of Kansas City, Kansas, bought most of the L&T for sixty-five hundred dollars, including the rails, bridges, and the sole engine. The salvage value was considerably less than predicted for years, reflecting the onset of the Great Depression. Waddill estimated that about forty thousand dollars would remain for distribution to stockholders. Their stock, however, had a face value of \$152,000.⁸³

On April 30, 1931, the Leavenworth & Topeka Railroad operated its last train. The day before abandonment the *Leavenworth Times* de-

scribed the upcoming trip:

The dinky little 8-wheeler locomotive of a type in use on railroads 40 years ago will leave the Burlington depot at Fifth and Choctaw streets at 7:50 tomorrow morning on its last run over the ‘Orphan’ railroad. A machine to inspire awe in the early days when the Leavenworth & Topeka railroad was first put into operation, 50 years ago, today is no more than a thing past its usefulness, which must give way to the march of progress, a victim of gasoline engines and modern all-weather highways.

With all hope of an Alton rescue now seen as hopeless, the L&T continued with its abandonment application. Said the *Independent*, “the death certificate for the . . . railroad . . . is ready to be signed and sometime in the near future the corpse will be laid to rest. . . . the estate [is expected to] yield somewhere in the neighborhood of \$56,000 to be whacked up among countless heirs.” By then the yearly CB&Q payments had stopped, and it was a logical time to wind things up. Said a shareholder: “Let the poor thing die, junk it and pay off. There is no hope for it.” In February 1931 an examiner recommended that the ICC grant authority to abandon the line.⁸¹

80. U.S. Interstate Commerce Commission, *Decisions of the Interstate Commerce Commission of the United States* 170, 412; *Leavenworth Times*, February 10, 1931; *Oskaloosa Independent*, January 23, February 13, 1931.

81. *Leavenworth Times*, February 19, 20, 1931; *Oskaloosa Independent*, February 6, 27, 1931. The examiner’s role—to recommend action to the Interstate Commerce Commission—amounted to a preliminary hearing.

82. U.S. Interstate Commerce Commission, *Decisions of the Interstate Commerce Commission of the United States* 170, 410–14; *Leavenworth Times*, April 10, 1931; *Oskaloosa Independent*, March 27, 1931.

83. *Leavenworth Times*, April 22, 1931; *Oskaloosa Independent*, April 21, 1931; *Topeka Daily Capital*, April 22, 1931.

There was no ceremony, and the trip passed without incident.⁸⁴

Dismantling did not begin immediately, for a group represented by A. S. King offered to buy the L&T and to renew operations. King's plans called for stockholders to turn all assets over to him, "including the \$40,000 nest egg." He spoke of rebuilding the line and promoting it as a "short-cut for freight from the northeast via Leavenworth to Topeka," or "just what L. & T. officials [had] argued for years." In July he filed for a charter for the Leavenworth, Topeka & Western Railroad (LT&W) to take over the property. However, the ICC rejected his plans, and eventually King gave up his efforts. Thereby both plans for revival had come to naught, and it was time for the company to pass into history.⁸⁵

That November the directors voted "to 'cut the melon' in the treasury" for the stockholders, and in 1932 checks began to go out. For each dollar invested in the L&T, a stockholder received thirty-one cents. This was a pleasant surprise for many who had given up all hope of salvaging anything. Some people pointed out that most stockholders owned ten shares, and that the thirty-one dollars they received under depression conditions might look bigger than had the one hundred dollars when originally invested. As stockholders, the benefit districts also got their share of the distribution.⁸⁶

84. *Leavenworth Times*, April 29, 1931.

85. *Kansas City Star*, reprinted in *Oskaloosa Independent*, September 18, 1931; *Leavenworth Times*, July 2, 13, 30, 31, August 2, 3, September 15, 20, October 14, November 19, December 13, 1931; *Oskaloosa Independent*, July 10, 17, August 7, September 11, 18, 1931; "Railroad Charters, 1855-1931." King recently had helped reorganize a short line railroad in South Dakota.

86. *Leavenworth Times*, December 13, 1931, February 9, 1932, January 20, February 5, April 12, October 27, 1933; *Oskaloosa Independent*, December 11, 1931, February 2, 1932, January 19, April 20, November 2, 1933. The *Leavenworth Times* said stockholders received thirty-seven cents on the dollar.

No definitive study has been done on the topic, but apparently the L&T was an early example of a railroad bought by local residents to prevent abandonment. It may even have been the first and possibly unique in that its stock was held so widely. Through a series of subsidies, including a benefit district bond issue, yearly district tax as-



After the railroad was abandoned, the L&T's Oskaloosa station became a gas station, as shown here on June 6, 1937.

sessments, and work without pay by management and the board of directors, the L&T managed to maintain service to several small towns for thirteen years after its brush with abandonment. As such, it represents a notable experiment in rural self-help.

The "people's railroad" was a product of its time. Around 1920 the railroads formed the backbone of the national transportation system, and generally it was assumed that they would retain that role indefinitely. Every community thus considered it vital to have a railroad; as a headline in the *Oskaloosa Independent* proclaimed in 1925, "Towns Without a Railroad are Dead Ones." This perception helps explain the willingness of the people of L&T country to subsidize the L&T for about a decade. By the late 1920s, however, a revolution in American transportation was under way, and it was becoming increasingly clear that highway transportation often was superior to rail. When the L&T proved highly susceptible to such competition, community support waned, and after a noteworthy struggle the company went out of business in 1931. 