

# THE TROLLEY LINE THROUGH WESTTOWN

By Dave Walter, Westtown Township Historical Commission Chairman

Few of us were privileged to ride, or to even remember, the fast trolleys of the Red Arrow Lines which zipped along the old West Chester Pike. Cutting across the northeast corner of Westtown Township, they ran 19 miles from the 69th Street Terminal in Upper Darby to West Chester, in the era when wagons and then automobiles could not make as fast a journey.

In 1848, the road from Philadelphia to West Chester was a muddy, bumpy trail running through sparsely populated farm country. Farmers and merchants, wanting a better way to get their goods to and from market, formed the Philadelphia and West Chester Turnpike Road Company.

By 1852, the road was planked to Newtown Square, and later improved with stone. It was initially profitable as more and more goods moved to Philadelphia which was, in 1865, the fourth largest city in the world and had 600,000 inhabitants. Beyond Newtown Square, the road remained a muddy or dusty path, sometimes unusable due to weather conditions.

Along came a man with a dream: John Shimer, an iron and steel merchant in Philadelphia, who had grown up along the Pike in Castle Rock, just west of Newtown Square. His dream was to build a railroad along the Pike to West Chester, then a market town of 10,000 citizens. West Chester was already served by two railroad connections to Philadelphia, but travel was expensive. Shimer overcame financing difficulties, legal battles with the Pennsylvania Railroad, and unsuccessful experimentation with steam-powered “dummies.” On December 17, 1898, the first trolleys of the Philadelphia and West Chester Traction Company reached the terminus at Gay and Adams St. in West Chester.



*Sixty Five Years Ago: Red Arrow high-speed trolley #86 headed for Upper Darby, on August 18, 1948. The trolley is in the Chester Road passing siding alongside West Chester Pike near Manley Road in Westtown Township. The tract of land in the background is now the Marketplace Shopping Center.*

*Photo courtesy of Railroad Avenue Enterprises*

The construction company, Pepper & Register, had been paid in traction company bonds.

They enlisted the help of Page, Allison and Penrose to sell the bonds. The job of selling the bonds fell to twenty four year old Merritt Taylor. Taylor was an ambitious young man of Quaker stock, born in New Jersey and educated at Penn Charter School and the Westtown School. Taylor saw the possibilities of a vast traction empire, coupled with real estate ventures, in Philadelphia’s western suburbs, and he and other investors took control of the P&WCT.

Taylor’s empire, later the Philadelphia Suburban Transportation Company (Red Arrow Lines), grew with lines to Ardmore, Sharon Hill, and Media. The track to West

Chester was constantly improved, faster and more modern trolleys were acquired, and speeds increased. For fifty-six years, people in Westtown could depend on the West Chester trolleys that stopped at Manley Road, Chester Road, and Pot House Road (now Green Lane).

An extension, never built, would also have traversed Westtown Township. Taylor proposed a branch off the West Chester line at Willistown that would have ran along Street Road to the Westtown School, his alma mater. This would have replaced the stage coach that ran from the School to the Pennsylvania Railroad's Westtown Station. Taylor asked the school to put up most of the construction money, but they declined as there was little chance of this extension ever being profitable.

From 1899 until 1925, there was a morning trolley that picked up milk along the line from Cottage Hill, West Chester, and delivered the cans to Philadelphia dairies at 63rd and Market Street. A twenty quart shipment cost nine cents in 1918. This, and other trolley freight shipments, succumbed to trucks in 1925, though the U.S. Mail contract was continued to Edgemont until the trolleys were abandoned.

Through the Great Depression, and then the boom of World War II, the West Chester line carried on even as other great trolley systems went out of business.

Even with brand new cars purchased in 1949, the post-war boom in personal automobiles and bigger and better highways doomed the line. The Commonwealth wanted to double the size of West Chester Pike and the trolleys did not fit into their plans. After a few years skirmishing with the highway proponents, the Red Arrow Lines gave in and the last trolley ran on June 4, 1954.

Now West Chester Pike is clogged with traffic and modern stores and businesses rim its boundaries. All traces of the trolley line are buried under the eastbound lanes. But now and then, on a clear quiet night, perhaps one can just make out the sound of the last car of the evening grinding up the hill from Milltown, braking for a stop at Chester Road, and then accelerating downhill toward Willistown, traction motors humming at top speed and the trolley pole sparking against the wire in the darkness. Oh, for a time machine!

## **Chester County SPCA Contract**

The Township contracts annually with the SPCA to pick up stray domestic animals in the Township. The dog or cat must be confined before you call the SPCA. The animal must be confined or restrained before the SPCA will transport. Please call 610-692-6113 for a pickup. The SPCA does not pick up any wildlife such as foxes, raccoons, skunks, etc.

## **DEER**

We have a large deer population in the Township which can result in deer being killed by vehicles. To have road kill picked up, please contact the Pennsylvania Game Commission at 610-926-1966. The Township is not responsible for removing dead deer.