

Lewiston History Mysteries

“Great Gorge” Ride Thrilled Millions from 1895 to 1935

Between 1895 and 1935, trolley cars that were powered by overhead electric lines, thrilled 17,000 thrill seeking passengers a day. Also known as the Beltline, the Great Gorge Route ran along the Niagara River on both the American and Canadian sides. The circuitous route was 22 miles long and passengers could get on and off at any number of stops along the way. The attraction became an instant marvel and some even said it rivaled the Falls itself. The route between Niagara Falls and Lewiston provided the public with an unparalleled view of the mighty Niagara River including the mountainous waves of the Whirlpool Rapids. It became so popular that a second track was installed. In order to improve service, the Great Gorge Route purchased additional land in Lewiston in order to allow passengers easy connections from the trolleys to the New York Central Railway and the Lake Ontario steamships that transported nearly 10,000 passengers a day back and forth from Toronto.



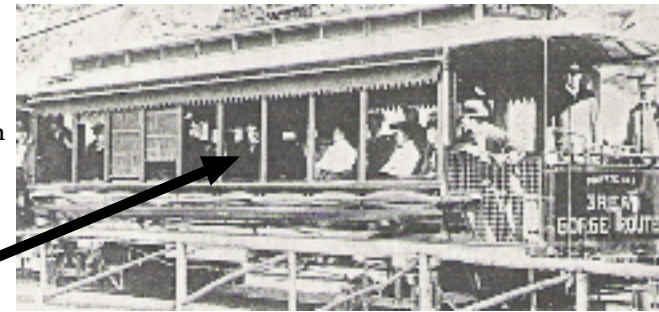
Ride was Spectacular and Dangerous

The Great Gorge Route was plagued by several accidents, including a head-on crash of trolley cars in 1907. But there were other more serious accidents.

In 1915, a group of sightseers from Toronto were on a trolley coming down the Escarpment in Queenston, Canada. 157 people were crammed into a car made for 84. The extra weight, combined with wet brakes, caused the car to derail and hit a tree. 13 people were killed.

Two years later, another accident claimed 12 lives when a trolley filled with passengers derailed and plunged into the Niagara River just below the Whirlpool Bridge. Heavy rains had undermined the rail bed causing the trolley to roll down a 30 foot embankment and into the raging river.

The trolley line ceased in 1935, victim of a rock slide that took out 200 feet of track, and the Depression. Tourists also switched to cars and buses to get around. The track lines were essentially abandoned and today are used by hikers as part of the Niagara Gorge Trail.



President Visits Lewiston on Great Gorge Route

If you look closely, you can see President William McKinley on board the Great Gorge trolley on his way to Lewiston on Sept. 2, 1901. Later that afternoon, he was assassinated in Buffalo.

Lewiston Man Recalls Great Gorge Ride

Duane Jordan of Hillside Drive in Lewiston can remember riding the Great Gorge Route Trolley when he was a youngster. Here is his story:

“I can remember it was 1934 and I was 12 years old. My older brother, Lloyd was a newspaper boy for the Gazette and I was his substitute. One day, the Gazette included a flyer with the newspapers saying that they were going to reward the carriers with a free ride on the Great Gorge Route. We lived in downtown Niagara Falls on 5th St. and Jefferson Ave., so I was aware of the attraction. But the cost was \$1.50 per ride, and as kids, we could never afford to go on it.



Duane Jordan of Lewiston remembers riding as a youngster.

“We walked over to the Gazette after delivering the papers in the afternoon. There must have been a couple of dozen other carriers too and we all walked over to the Gorge Terminal which was on the south side of Falls Street. The circulation director and a couple of other Gazette employees came along with us. It was there we boarded the trolley.

“This was quite a treat and all the kids were very excited. After a few minutes the car made its way over the edge of the gorge, right across the street from where the Aquarium is today. Then we began our long descent to the bottom of the gorge along the tracks which made a gradual incline along the gorge wall to the bottom. It was spectacular and the first time I had seen the gorge and the river below.

“A little further down the river we were only a few feet from the giant rapids as we passed by. The tracks were right next to the water and everyone was spellbound. Later, we arrived in Lewiston and stayed in the same trolley car as it turned around at the end of North Water Street. We took the same track going back to Niagara Falls.

“After, we all got off and walked over to a Third Street restaurant for ice cream and cake. It was a day that we would all remember for the rest of our lives and we all had a great thrill to get a chance to ride it.”
(Interview, Feb. 2007)

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