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TRANSPORTATION CITY

**Small town transit
can be saved!**

KEWANEE KEEPS ITS BUS SYSTEM

"Ease That Squeeze" promotion awakens interest which enables bus system to survive two bankruptcies and go on to actually increase riding and show a profit

A COUPLE of courageous and hard-working men—one a veteran former street car motorman and the other an enterprising, young chamber of commerce executive—may have proved that small town transit can be saved. Kewanee, Illinois is a 125 year old industrial (boilers and electronics) town of 18,000 located on the Burlington main line 125 miles south west of Chicago. Once trolleys clanged on Kewanee streets. Then came buses. And in recent years Kewanee's bus system, like many another small town bus operation across

the country, has gone the route of fewer buses, more breakdowns, less riders and decreased service.

How "Ride the Bus" Program Started

Back in 1954 Kewanee City Lines had 15 buses—and both the buses and the system were just plain beat. Eugene Curry tried to continue operations—as Boiler City Transit Lines—starting with nine buses and dropping to six in 1955. Buses were poorly maintained and broke down frequently. And relations be-



Here is the combination that saved Kewanee's transit system—Eber Jernberg (left), the energetic Chamber of Commerce executive who recognized the importance of mass transportation to his city and worked to save it; George Dykes (right), the transit veteran whose faith and hard work brought success where others had failed; and one of the clean, well-maintained buses which has helped lure back riders who had quit riding transit.

tween Curry and the city he was trying to serve had broken down, too.

Into this all-too-typical small town transit picture came a new force—in March, 1955. Back in the thirties, Kewanee City Lines had been one of E. Roy Fitzgerald's early stepping stones toward what is now the National City Lines empire. Early in 1955 NCL Public Relations Director W. H. "Billy" Spears was looking for someplace outside the NCL family to launch his now famous "Ease That Squeeze" campaign. He picked Kewanee—and sent his side-kick Homer Brown out to Kewanee with a stack of "Ease That Squeeze" records. Brown was welcomed, however, with something less than open arms. The bus company wanted no part of the promotion!

Jernberg Has Been Spark Plug

But the Executive Secretary of the Kewanee Chamber of Commerce, Eber D. Jernberg, and the editors of the Kewanee *Star-Courier* thought Brown might have something. By June "Ease That Squeeze" was being heard many times each day on Kewanee's WKEI, merchants had a full-fledged "Ride-the-Bus" drive under way and the mayor had issued a proclamation. Bus service, however, continued to deteriorate. Everybody was talking about Kewanee's buses—but hardly anyone was riding them.

Curry died early in 1956—and the Boiler City Transit Lines died with him. Backed by Jernberg, Robert Lutes, who operated the bus system in nearby Galesburg, bought the Boiler City buses at foreclosure for \$3500 and, within a week, had buses running again in Kewanee.

But Lutes, again like many another small town transit operator, found himself in financial hot water—in both Galesburg and Kewanee—and had to give up the ghost in June, 1956.

For six weeks Kewanee was without bus service. But Jernberg was sold on the value of bus service to a community—and he worked tirelessly to get buses running again, making trips to Springfield and elsewhere.

Dykes Succeeds Where Others Failed

Late last summer George Dykes, who had been involved in Kewanee's transit story for over 30 years—as a street car motorman, bus driver and official in a couple of the ill-fated companies, got financial help to the tune of \$6000 from Walter Nobiling (a retired grocer whose hobby is transit) and bought three buses from the Ottumwa (Iowa) Transit Lines and two from Lutes—and organized Kewanee Safety Lines.

Backed to the hilt by Jernberg, the press, the radio station, city officials and the merchants, Dykes kept his buses clean and on schedule—and immediately began to succeed where others had failed.

During Curry's day, revenues were dropping as low as \$62 per day, at fares of 15 cents cash, eight tokens for a dollar and eight cents for children. Lutes had boosted revenues to an average of \$75 a day, partly by dropping tokens and increasing the child's fare

to 10 cents. Today Dykes, at the same fares, is averaging over \$100—with typical takes of \$119, \$123 and \$132. Curry's buses carried about 500 passengers per day. Lutes hauled about 570 riders a day. Dykes extended one line two blocks and another line eight blocks and has 750 (600 adults, 150 children) riding with him each day. School riding is up 20 per cent, industrial riding is up 40 per cent and retail shopping area riding is up 10 per cent. All three—Curry, Lutes and Dykes—offered service from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. on week days, 6 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. on Saturdays and no service on Sundays and holidays. Headways have always been 30 minutes—with 15 minute service in rush hours.

Five Factors Which Brought Success

Dykes' success can be chalked up to a number of factors:

- (1) *The town wanted bus service.* "Ease That Squeeze" had persuaded merchants and civic leaders that transit meant business for any city.
- (2) *Someone cared enough to work for better transit.* That someone, of course, was Eber Jernberg—who would not rest until his town had good bus service.
- (3) *Publicity was continuing and consistent.* NCL's Homer Brown persisted long after many another similar transit promotion program has been dropped in discouragement.
- (4) *Civic cooperation was complete.* Police chief Clyde Rorah and Street Commissioner Milton Hamilton helped in many ways—including snow-plowing of all bus routes, salting and sanding bus stops and grading certain areas. The mayor cooperated with proclamations and no taxes. The Junior Chamber of Commerce put benches at important bus stops. Retail merchants contributed an average of \$40 a month—for "free riding days." The *Star-Courier* was generous with both money and space. Radio Station WKEI did a great job every day. The radio station even put radios in all of Dykes' buses—permanently tuned to WKEI—and WKEI programmers broadcast a lot of "ease that squeeze" and "ride the bus" spots.
- (5) *Dykes is providing good bus service.* Buses are clean—and run on time. Breakdowns are few and far between. Drivers are courteous—and often give "to-the-door" service.

It Can Be Done Because It Has Been Done

Today the company is debt-free (Nobiling has been paid off—and Dykes' sons, Robert and Don, have invested in the company and control it), all bills are paid and the operation is making money. If it can continue to do so, Dykes, Jernberg and the people of Kewanee will have proved that small town transit can be saved. Other towns will point to Kewanee and say "it can be done, because it has been done."