

THE MOTORETTES REUNION

-Aaron Isaacs



The idea started in Russ Olson's garage. Tim Anderson and I were there to look at the Twin City Lines material that Russ has been storing for years. He handed me a slim hardbound ledger, saying that it contained the names of all the women TCRT hired to replace motormen and conductors during World War II.

I knew women had worked during the war, but it hadn't sunk in before. The ledger changed that. It is hand written in the kind of careful script we were taught in grade school. The women are listed by date of hire, the first being July 6, 1943. And there are

over 500 entries, many more than I had expected. Here was the Rosie the Riveter story played out on the streetcar system.

When I realized that it was 50 years ago to the week that the first woman had been hired, the lightbulb went on and I knew there had to be a reunion. The inspiration came from the movie *A League of Their Own*, which told of the women's baseball league founded during the war. The movie producers sponsored a reunion and made a documentary of it. It was great.

In order to have a reunion, one must first find the participants. At home I pulled out the Minneapolis and St. Paul

phone books to look for any obvious matches. That night I found and talked to eight of them. The first was Dona Turbes. Her sister Marion answered the phone, and I asked if Dona had driven streetcar during World War II. Consider for a moment what an odd question that is to put to a stranger. Without hesitating, she said, "Yes, and so did I." On the first call I had found motorette sisters. They weren't the only sisters listed in the ledger. I found several pair, often hired on the same date.

That call began a pattern that repeated itself over and over. I would ask the unlikely question. There would be an astonished "Yes" in



John Prestholdt photo.

reply. Then the memories, buried for years, would surge out. The stories were wonderful—funny, charming and sometimes moving.

At home I entered the names into the computer and sorted the list every possible way. Doing so revealed that the count of 507 was wrong. There were actually 464 individuals. Quite a few had been hired, then left and were rehired. At least two of the women I talked to had to quit when they were discovered to be under age 21. They later returned, either having turned 21, or by lying about their real age.

I was pretty excited about the reunion idea and so was everyone else who heard about it. The Women's Transportation Seminar (WTS) is a networking group for professionals employed in transportation. They had honored **Ruby Peterson**, the last working motorette, some years before, so I figured they might like to be involved. Their president this year is a friend of mine, **Biz Colburn**, and she enthusiastically agreed to have WTS be the co-sponsor.

An MTC driver, **Sheila Miller**, called me to volunteer. She is forming

a women's group within Amalgamated Transit Union Local #1005, which has represented most TCRT and MTC employees since the 1930's.

Next **Julie Johanson** asked about the reunion. Julie is the first female Director of Transportation in this transit system's history, and she recommended to top management that MTC become a co-sponsor. The idea was enthusiastically received, and MTC's PR firm was placed at my disposal.

The continuing challenge was to find the women after all these years. MTM member **Steve Edelman** let me appear on his TV show *Good Company*, along with several CHSL uniformed operators. We asked that anyone who was a motorette or knew one call us. **Don Ahern** of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* put the same appeal in his *Getting Around* column, as did **Barbara Flanagan** of the *Star-Tribune*. **Molly Maloney** of MTC's PR firm sent press releases throughout the state.

Reporter **Allen Constantini** of KARE 11 TV spent two hours taping at the trolley and aired an excellent feature on August 29th. The report featured **Helen Chamberland Zarembo** and **Bonita Jodell Rudeen**, sisters who hired out



The motorettes were encouraged to try their hand at the controller of #1300. Sandra Bergman photo.



The motorettes pose for a group photo at the reunion. Sandra Bergman photo.

Motorladies? *Girls Soon Will 'Man' Trolleys in St. Paul*

Streetcar motorman or conductor — which would you rather be, gals?

You can have your pick of those jobs, or even be a bus driver, any day now.

The St. Paul Street Railway Co., for the first time in its history, will begin to hire and train women for the operating end of the business just as soon as accommodations for them are completed at the Snelling ave. barn in St. Paul and the Nicollet barn in Minneapolis.

The girls will be taught to clang the bells, blow the whistles, call out streets, punch transfers and dispense tokens. They also will work in the car shops.

The type of uniform they

will wear, whether it will be a slack suit or a suit with a skirt, has not yet been decided.

But the pay will be exactly the same as that for men so employed.

There will be certain physical and mental standards for feminine candidates for the jobs, but individual cases will be decided on their merits. For example, according to officials, a girl will not be disqualified because she is an inch shorter than the standard thought to be ideal, or because she is two pounds heavier than the weight requirement.

Applicants must be over 21 years old; they may be married or single but, if they are married and have children, they

must show that they have made arrangements for proper care of the youngsters.

The company has about 900 men under 38 years old in its employ and it has been advised that about 50 per cent of them will be called for military service within the next nine months.

The training of women for operating jobs has become an absolute necessity, officials said.

Application for jobs may be made at the regular employment office, 1526 University ave. Training will take three weeks. Two women already are working as streetcar checkers, at downtown transfer points in St. Paul.

together as motorette and conductorette respectively. WCCO radio picked up on the story and mentioned the reunion on Boone and Erickson's August 30th show. Laurie Blake, who covers MTC for the Star-Tribune, wrote an excellent piece on the reunion featuring motorette and former MTM member Helen Murphy White. Motorette Julia Droz Krienac appeared on KTCA's Almanac. Newspapers throughout the state carried the story.

All of this publicity paid off as people began calling. Sometimes it was the women themselves, but often it was a relative or friend. Mary Ann Jones Turner called and later sent an audio tape of her memories, including piloting the University Avenue car at the moment World War II ended. A transcript appears in this issue.



The first three motorettes copy their assignments at Nicollet Station in 1943. They wear the original women's uniform provided by TCRT but later abandoned. They are (l to r) Blanch Lindall, Ida Vrooman and Katheryn Sherwood. Minneapolis Daily Times photo, Minneapolis Public Library collection.



WHY NOT YOU?

The above picture shows a Twin City woman who is now working as a street car conductor on the Twin City Lines.

This is easy-to-learn work, clean working conditions, good pay while in training. Why not count yourself in on this patriotic opportunity? Most women with a grammar school education, not now working in war industry, can qualify. Apply 1526 University Avenue in Midway District. Why not come in tomorrow? Transportation is vital to winning the war. Here is an opportunity to do your part in an essential job.



Motorette Count MOTORETTES & CONDUCTORETTES IN SERVICE

Month	Hired	Number Left Service	Total Active	
July 6 - First hire at Nicollet Station				
July 15 - First hire at Snelling Station				
1943	July	15	2	13
	Aug	15	1	27
Sept. 1 - First hire at Lake Street Station				
	Sept	7	4	30
	Oct	13	3	40
Nov. 8 - First hire at North Side Station				
	Nov	16	6	50
	Dec	14	3	61
1944	Jan	18	9	70
Feb 16 - First hire at Duluth Station				
	Feb	16	7	79
	Mar	26	7	98
	Apr	33	6	125
	May	34	16	143
	June	30	16	157
	July	22	17	162
	Aug	29	15	176
	Sept	16	15	177
	Oct	12	18	171
	Nov	2	17	126
	Dec	6	5	171
1945	Jan	21	19	173
	Feb	10	8	175
	Mar	15	13	177
	April	12	11	178
First conductorette hired				
	May	15	15	178
	June	16	11	183
	July	19	20	182
	Aug	6	25	163
	Sept	7	12	158
	Oct	4	21	141
	Nov	2	17	126
	Dec		5	121
1946	Jan		19	102
	Feb		8	94
	Mar		7	87
	April		6	81
	May		6	75
	June		7	68
	July		8	60
	Aug		6	54
	Sept		3	51
	Oct		2	46
	Nov		1	48
	Dec		2	37
1947	Dec		9	37
1948	Dec		8	29
1949	Dec		1	28
1950	Dec		3	25
1951	Dec		1	24
1952	Dec		4	20
1953	Dec		3	17
1954	Dec		3	14

A gentlemen from Concord, CA, called to get more information. It seems that our mailing had gone to him instead of **Ellen Campbell**, his 84-year old mother. A Twin Cities native, he had accompanied her when she worked and even got to run the car for short distances late at night. He decided to fly out with her for the event. **Della Gerber Olson** traveled from Milton, WA. **Beatrice Dombrowski** came with her husband, a former motorman. There was the two-woman crew of **Connie Rondeau** and **Germaine Diehl Loscheider** who had worked Nicollet Avenue together and stayed in touch over the years.

Until the reunion, pictures of the motorettes were hard to find. The only one I had seen until then is featured on page 2 of **Alan R. Lind's** 1984 Twin City Traction Pictorial. It shows two women who look like sisters standing on the rear car steps with a male crew member. The photo is credited to the Minneapolis Public Library, so I went there to find it. It turned out to be a Star-Tribune photo showing **Reuben Lundquist**, his wife **Adeline Johnson Lundquist** and her sister **Jeanette Johnson**. With this information I was able to find them, since they all still live in town. All three showed up.

The attendees were requested to bring photos, and many did. Several were willing to loan them for reproduction. The Minnesota Historical Society is reproducing them for their collection.

Quite by coincidence, New Orleans also put on a 50-year motorettes reunion on August 24th. They drew about 30 motorettes. Of course, the original streetcars from that era are still in daily service there.

My two fears were that no one would show up, and that the weather wouldn't cooperate. When it rained the entire morning of the event I was nervous to say the least. Thankfully, beautiful blue sky arrived just before the motorettes. The rest of the day was a tremendous success.

Forty-five of them showed up, along with numerous family and friends. Twelve motormen from that era also appeared, plus a number of MTC employees and MTM members. Soon the "Memory Extra Board" was covered with personal photos, plus one uniform shirt. A couple of the women wore their uniform hats.

There was a short program which I emceed. **Biz Colburn**, **Julie Johanson**, **Sheila Miller** and **Louis Hoffman** all spoke briefly. Sheila's comments were particularly moving. A bus driver for 16 years, she told them, "You were my inspiration."

The program concluded with the women filing past the microphone and introducing themselves. Then they lined up along #1300 for a group photo.



Women weren't the only non-traditional TCRT employees during the war. They also hired some high school boys as conductors. One of them was Robert Montgomery, who sent this picture of himself on duty. Montgomery worked at East Side Station during 1943 and 44 while attending nearby De LaSalle and later Southwest High School. He recalls working the Como-Harriet 40 or more hours per week.

Since this was a one-time opportunity to gather some oral history, the reunion featured a "Tell your story" video corner, staffed by MTM videomeister **Mike Buck**. The result is a video which will be available for sale.

After the program, much of the crowd piled onto the cars. #265 shuttled between 42nd Street and Lake Calhoun to accommodate the public along with reunion-goers. #1300 ran between 42nd Street and the carbarn for anyone wishing to run a trolley again, under the supervision

of **Kathy Prestholdt** and **Debbie Beers**. Quite a few did, including one who is now blind, and there were many abrupt stops as old hands got reacquainted with the air brakes. **John Prestholdt** reports that smooth stops were not uncommon.

Joel Gensler brought out Mack bus #630, itself a war veteran, and gave rides around the lake.

All in all the reunion was a great success. Everyone who was there will agree that the atmosphere was very special. The attendees met old friends and revived many memories. WCCO-TV had a crew on hand and ran a fine feature on the news that night, then reprised it a week later on Moore on Sunday. KARE 11 also aired a brief report, although ironically their long feature that night was on #328 at Osceola.

Hopefully the reunion will inspire other similar events. My thanks to all who worked to make it possible.

PIONEERS

As the war ground on, Twin City Lines found itself in a very tough situation. Up to 900 of its male employees were potentially fit for military duty and many had already left for the service. At the same time ridership was soaring and the streetcars were terribly overcrowded. Like so many other industries, TCRT turned to women to fill the jobs. Though less remarked than the motorettes, they also hired 47 women as car cleaners, plus a number in other jobs, including mechanics.

Ads appeared in the newspapers and the women responded. Some followed family members onto the cars. **Marcella Anderson** joined her father, an East Side motorman with over 30 years seniority. **Adeline Lundquist** joined her husband, a North Side motorman. **Elvita Verite** filled the job at Lake Street vacated by her husband when he went off to war. **Helen Chamberland Zarembo** and her sister **Bonita Jodell Rudeen** applied for jobs in the lost and found, only to be told that they were needed more on the cars. Neither had a drivers license, but they were put to work anyway. Many of the women commented

that they felt they were helping the war effort by working.

Since the title "motorman" wouldn't do, the company substituted the awkward "motorette". Motorettes were hired continuously from July 1943 to November 1945. The first "conductorettes" were hired in on April 15, 1945. The company ledger that accounts for all the motorettes includes a hiring summary taped to the first page. It says that 507 women were hired in all, 83 in 1943, 271 in 1944, and 153 in 1945. Of these, 381 were motorettes and 126 were conductorettes. Many (76 motorettes and 17 conductorettes) didn't make it through training.

Besides the hire date, the ledger listed the name (with middle initial), the employee number, the station and the end of service date. There were also notes about changes in status, such as changing stations or switching jobs.

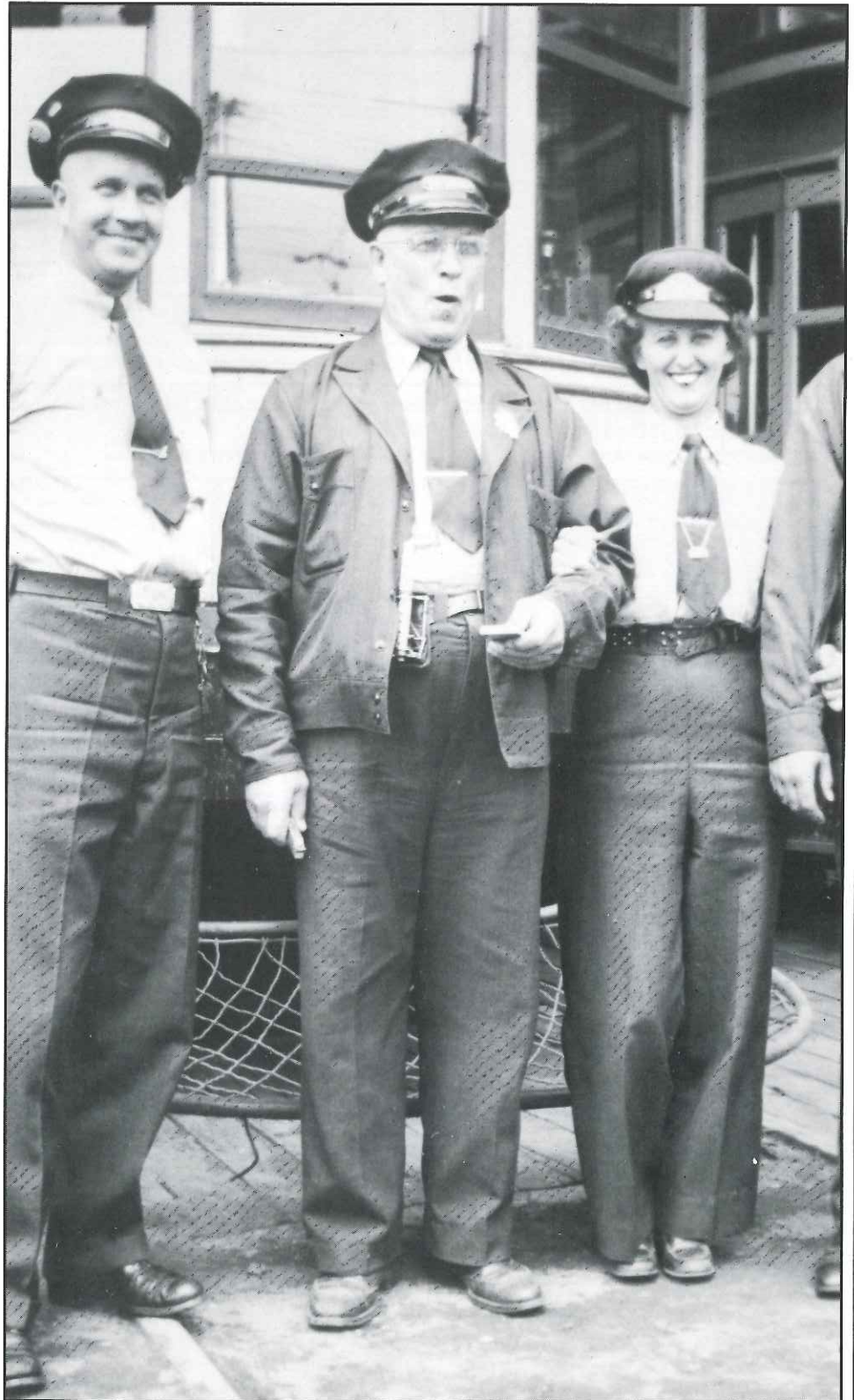
Though generally well received within the company, the public wasn't always so accepting. Several motorettes told of waiting passengers refusing to ride with a woman and waiting for the next car. In 1945 conductorette **Florence Hill** was beaten by a drunken returning serviceman who accused her of taking a job from a man. The motorettes also had their share of derailments and collisions, and a number were injured on the job. **Noella Sitzman** backed into a Cadillac after missing her switch at Rice and Como. **Marcella Anderson's** PCC car jumped the tracks at 51st and Bryant South and ended up in a front yard.

Other experiences were merely humorous. The St. Paul paper told of a novice motorette who mistook a police call box for a company telephone and asked the cops where to park her streetcar at pullin. **Maxine Magnuson** found two mice on her streetcar and dutifully turned them in to the lost and found. They were unclaimed so she took them home for her children. A kid put candy in **Arlyne Taylor's** changer. Conductorette **Catherine Ruley** thought that her car was stopping so she could flag a railroad grade crossing, so she got off. Her motorette was actually stopping to pick up a passenger and took off, leaving her standing there for 45 minutes.

TCRT had a reputation for doing things right, and in the beginning this

extended to the uniforms the women wore. A tailored jacket was designed, along with vest, trousers and hat, that was different from the men's uniform. The hat was softer and smaller in diameter, with a braided hatband. The initials TCL were intertwined to form a

new logo which was displayed on the cap and coat lapels. Wartime shortages apparently doomed the new look, because women soon were wearing the same uniform as the men, but often providing their own trousers. Skirts were never worn.



Marcella Anderson with her father (center) at his retirement in 1950. Marcella Anderson collection.



Helen Pastorius flashed her "Pepsodent smile" for her boyfriend in April 1944. Helen Pastorius collection.



Hat cocked to one side, Lu Fairbanks was all attitude. Lu Fairbanks Norgren collection.



This studio portrait of Helen Swanson made the Lake Street News, whose caption read, "Helen is a real American girl with a smile that you can see real friendship in and a personality that can't be beat. She is working and saving her money so when her husband comes home from the war they can buy a home and start life out right. Helen drives a run on the Selby-Lake Line." Helen Swanson collection.



Bernice Nelson on duty. Marie Hagen collection

It turns out that up to 183 women were employed at any one time. Their tenure was usually short. Most worked less than one year, and left soon after the war ended in September 1945. By the end of 1946 there were 46 left. By 1950 this had dwindled to 25, partially because of a layoff in 1948. A handful made the switch to buses. Ruby Peterson was the last one, working run #1 on Selby-Lake for many years. I remember riding her bus and wondering how this tiny old lady did it. She used to stand up to turn a corner. She retired in 1980.

No other women were hired to drive streetcar or bus from 1945 until the early 1970's. There are now 215 women driving for MTC.

VJ DAY

As remembered by **Mary Ann Jones Turner**, Snelling motorette #4605.

"It was at six o'clock in the evening in the middle of the old Washington Avenue bridge. The whistles started blowing and the windows were opened so you could hear the noise and people didn't know what was happening. Of course some of us had heard the reports that the war was gonna be over so I stopped the car and I turned around and some lady said to me, "What's going on? What's happening?", and I said "Ma'am, I think the war is over".

Then I looked at the people, and I have never in my life seen so many expressions on people's faces. Some people were laughing, some were crying, some were hugging each other. So many were praying. They got out in the aisle, kissing and hugging, yelling and screaming. It was the most magnificent thing I have ever seen and I shall never forget it. That is my most memorable experience and it still brings tears to my eyes to see the faces.

By the time I got the streetcar to 5th and Hennepin it was virtually impossible to get through. People were converging on downtown like they had gone absolutely mad. The police got us through and we got up to 5th Avenue North and 5th Street where the wye was. We turned the car around. In about an hour and a half I got back to the University of Minnesota but from then on it was absolute lost time. The kids from the university did everything but sit on the roof. My conductor, she came up and she says she couldn't get any fares and I said, "You weren't really trying, were you?". She said, "No", and I said why don't you sit up here on the control box and so she did. When we got to the capitol, they pulled us into the wye right at the top of Wabasha by the state capitol and we sat there until probably two in the morning. You never saw so many people in your life. They couldn't even move. When it started breaking up one of the checkers got to us and told us to put on a pullin sign, "Snelling Station". So we did and we got back to Snelling Station after three o'clock in the morning. It was quite a night. I'll never forget it. I was always grateful to the streetcar company, because I had the best seat in the house."



The motorettes displayed their old photos on the "Memory Extra Board".
Sandra Bergman photo



Helen Gunther and Sonja Kmiecik at Nicollet Station.
Germaine Loscheider collection.