

Transcribed Excerpt of Interview of Harry Reece about His First Trip to Chicago, Illinois, November 29, 1938

"I was born in the middle west. Out in the state of Illinois ... and it was quite a while before the Chicago World's Fair of 1893. Measured by the things that have happened since then it seems like a long, long time indeed.

We lived on a farm, and even telephones were curiosities to myself and the country boys of my age. Electric lights were something to marvel at ... the old Edison phonograph with its wax cylinder records and earphones was positively ghostly ... and trolley cars, well they too were past understanding!

"Speaking of trolley oars (sic) reminds me of a trip to the 'city' once when I was about a dozen years old. My father and a neighbor, Old Uncle Bill Brandon, had to go up to the Big Town, which was Chicago, on some sort of business ... and I suppose I'd been extra diligent at doing chores, weeding potatoes, killing worms on the tomato plants, or something ... and Father rewarded me by taking me along.

"A country boy in a large city for the first time isn't any more curious to the city than the city is to the country boy! They are both something to look at ... and marvel about.

"You can imagine what a time I had seeing things I'd never seen before, in fact had only dreamed about or heard about. Curiosity wasn't the name for it. Speechless incredulity [sic] came nearer describing my emotions. (After twenty years down here in New York ... and all the intervening years in the cities of the world, American and European, my reactions are different. Nothing surprises or excites me any more.)

"But when I saw my first trolley car slipping along Cottage Grove Avenue in Chicago ... slipping along without horses or engine or apparent motive power ... well it was just too darned much for me. I didn't know what to think.

"Uncle Bill Brandon was almost as much in doubt about the reality of the darned thing as I was myself--and Uncle Bill Brandon was, locally, that is out on the farm, considered a very, very wise and sophisticated person. And he was wise, too. He had seen a lot of life ... Too much, he sometimes said--especially during the four years of the 1860's when he was fighting in the Union Army.

"Uncle Bill could understand horses, hogs and cattle, steam engines, army mules and row boats, and such thing--but that trolley car, with the little spinning wheel at the end of the pole, spinning along against the electric wire above it; was too much for him. Still, he didn't want to confess 'that there was any doggone thing on earth that he couldn't figure out!' And he didn't want to show his 'ignorance' and especially to my Father or to myself, a twelve year old edition of young Americana, species rusticana.

"I wasn't so anxious to conceal my own ignorance, so with legitimate curiosity asked my Father and Uncle Bill what made the thing go.

"My Father was a thoughtful (sic) man, and before answering studied for a moment. Uncle Bill was more spontaneous.

"'Gosh a'mighty, can't you see what makes her go?' he exclaimed, 'It's that danged rod stickin' up out of the top of her. People's gettin' so cussed smart these days all they need to do to run a street car is to got a fish-pole and stick it up out of the roof of her!'"

"Father let Uncle Bill's explanation ride. And I've never forgotten it, but since then, when I've heard variations of the same theme, I've wondered if Uncle Bill's rather [Doubting?] Thomas definition of the motive power of trolley cars was entirely original.

"Sometimes I wonder (although I still chuckle at it) if Uncle Bill hadn't been present when the alleged Chinaman, seeing an American trolley car for the first time, exclaimed excitedly: "No pushee--no pullee--but all same--ee go like hell-ee!" I rather think Uncle Bill must have heard the Chinaman's comment, taken his wisdom from the Celestial and added the 'fish-pole' as a delicate touch of completeness!

"Anyhow, I've remembered the incident."