Interview with Roy Wiseman took place at history project on Dec. 15, 1977. Interviewer was Laurie Radke.

LR: How would you describe a streetcar to someone who's never seen one?

RW: They were little cars - about 20, 21 passenger cars. They were yellow and had a trolley pull in the middle of the car on the top. When you got to the end of the line you couldn't turn the car around, you just had to change ends so you'd change the trolley from one end of the car to the other and then you'd go back in the other direction. You run the car from either end.

LR: What were the cars made out of?

RW: I got a feeling that they were metal cars. The seats were straw - cane - and they would also turn from one side to the other, the back would flip in the opposite direction. There wasn't much wear on the seats, they were slippery and you'd slide back and forth on them. I don't ever remember replacing any of the seats when I was with the company. They were in good shape. They had a repair shop down on Superior Street. There's some trucking comapny there now.

LR: Is that were the barns were?

RW: Yes, kept them there overnight.

LR: How were the seats placed?

RW: On each end on either side. There was a seat along the wall that held four people bench-type seats parallel with the wall. There were about four seats between there, each side facing either forward or back, with an aisle between. That was the seating arrangement. They weren't comfortable but no one expected comfort; they got on the streetcar because they wanted to get someplace. The fare those days was seven cents a ride with or without a transfer. The transfer was free and you could buy 4 tokens for a quarter.

LR: When did you start?

RW: In 1929.

LR: When did they close up?

RW: I think 1932.

LR: Were streetcars popular?

RW: Oh yes, there were buses - the South Shore ran buses on the beach and there were buses between Michigan City and Benton Harbor. They operated a bus on the beach because it was too expensive to lay a track out there. These buses were bigger than our streetcars. They stopped their operation and when the streetcars stopped their operations, the Yellow Transportation took over and bought buses and they also furnished Long Beach with transportation. Streetcars were more popular than buses. In Chicago they had buses run by electric same as the streetcars. They had track as trolleys only they had rubber tires like the buses and could pull over to the curb and pick up the passengers. Of course Michigan City didn't have anything like that - the business didn't warrant that.

LR: Were people upset when the streetcar was discontinued?

RW: I don't think so because they had the promise of buses immediately. Ed Carlton had promised the people bus service so there was nothing to be upset about. There was several months in between before they got the buses but they run taxicabs for the same fare as the buses or streetcars. We drove these taxicabs on regular routes and schedule. I guess you could squeeze 7 or 8 people in but they were sitting on top of one another.

MRS. W: This was at the height of the depression and a lot of people couldn't afford seven cents so there was a lot of people walking.

RW: Yes, a lot of people without jobs and if it took them 2 hours to walk downtown and back, why it saved them fourteen cents, roundtrip.

LR: Do you think the depression had a lot to do with that?

RW: Oh definitely, that's what it was. We weren't showing a profit. The same company had an interurban running from Michigan City to LaPorte and to South Bend and on to St. Joe. The interurban stopped operation before the streetcar did. Streetcars stopped about a year later.

LR: Do you remember the name of the company?

MRS. W: Northern Indiana.

RW: Yeah, that was the last name. No. Ind. Street Railway.

LR: Was there a lot of maintainence on the streetcars?

RW: Not that much. The South Shore is a fast high speed operation and it's many many miles. I don't think any streetcar line in town was more than 6 miles from Eastport (Dolls Park to the end of the line:). The South Shore traveled more in one day than the streetcar would in a week.

LR: You said you didn't have a conductor?

RW: You dropped your fare in the fare box - there were holes in there that the money would go through but you couldn't put your fingers in and get any of it out again. From Dolls Park we went down Michigan Boulevard to 9th Street to Franklin. They had a passenger station on the corner of 2nd and Franklin. It was a beautiful station - they tore it down maybe ten years ago. Then we went around that loop, went up 2nd Street to Washington, Michigan and Franklin. You didn't have to change cars on that end of the line - we went around the loop up there.

LR: How far up Franklin did you go?

RW: Down to Coolspring. The West Side went out 9th St. to Willard Avenue and then to the prison. The streetcars ran in the prison grounds and stopped at the main door.

LR: Ed Crawford told about the stopping bell ......

RW: Yeah, that was before my time. They rang it and you had to be prepared to stop so you wouldn't run into another streetcar. If you went off the end of the track that was cause for dismissal.

LR: Did you have air brakes?

RW: Yes, we had air brakes but we also had about three of the old hand brake cars.

LR: How do those work?

RW: It was just a big wheel like the old wheel on the old washing machine. You just wind it up about 5, 6 turns. It was hard work, you'd really bear down for that wheel to stop. Nobody liked to run 'em - they liked the air brakes better.

LR: Was that a foot control?

RW: No, that was a hand brake. You turned it over and got air and then when you got stopped, you'd move it one more notch. When your passengers unloaded, you'd put it back to run position, close the door and go on. If you pulled the line switch the power would go off. If you overloaded the motors, that line switch would kick out to protect the motors from burning up.

LR: How did you get up speed?

RW: The only thing we used our feet for was the little warning bell we had. That wasn't electric - you just tapped it with your foot, a little plunger came up and you stepped on that and it rang a little gong underneath the car. That was the only thing you used your foot for. You had a controller and there was a handle with a wooden knob on it - a semi circle - there was 9 points and you moved them one point at a time so you wouldn't overload the motor, almost like stepping on the gas to gain speed, then you'd move that lever another notch to control it.

LR: What was your average speed?

RW: That would be hard to say. I would say the speed was probably 30 miles an hour. Every street was a stop. The streetcar ran in the middle of the street and you couldn't go very fast because automobile traffic had no restrictions and you had to be prepared to stop when they'd stop in front of you or cross in front of you. You couldn't class it as constant speed, depending on traffic, etc. It took a half hour to make a roundtrip from Franklin and 2nd out to Dolls Park and back - 15 minutes each way.

LR: How many runs did you make a day?

RW: Nine hours - two runs an hour - eighteen trips.

LR: When did they start running?

RW: I think the first one started at 5:45 and ran till about 11:15 at night. Of course there were two shifts - each one worked about 8 1/2 to 9 hours. They had a good schedule. Halfway along each line there was a sidetrack. Two cars running on every line so you had service every 15 minutes. The switch on East Side line was on York St. and 9th St. The car from Doll's Park would meet the one coming from downtown and if one was late, the other one would have to wait. You couldn't go through the switch without meeting your partner. The switch for the south side was up at Ripley and Franklin and the prison line was Ohio Street. In the morning from about 6 to 9 we put trippers on the east side that's another car to take the overflow during the busy hours. I think the East Side was the longest line and it was the most heavily populated.

LR: Who had to keep up the track?

RW: The streetcar company had to maintain the track. They laid the track.

LR: Even with the ground?

RW: No. it was down under the pavement so there wasn't much they could do as far as maintaining it. They were imbedded in the tar and in the pavement.

LR: What about snow?

RW: They had a snow sweeper; a more rugged built car, and out in front of it was a big broom that set on a slant and they'd go down the track and sweep the snow off the track. When the snow was 4 or 5 inches thick and the automobiles packed it down on the rails then we couldn't get through and we'd have to wait until they brought an interurban car out and clear the track - break that ice. These other cars were so small and so light that they wouldn't cut through that much snow. In 1931 or 32 we had a pretty big snow storm and the streetcars were at a standstill for 3 days. By the time the snow stopped falling, the automobiles had the snow packed down in the road, and they had to get an interurban on every line to get things started running again.

LR: Did the interurban use the same line?

RW: Yes, the station was at 2nd and Franklin and the interurban went south on Franklin close to where St. John's church is now and turned east. They were the same company. I stayed in the car for two days and two nights because we couldn't let the car stand out there alone because of vandalism. The motorman that was on duty when the car got stuck stayed with it until the weather broke. And I would walk home and eat a hot meal and take a lunch back with me.

LR: What about heating?

RW: It had electric heat under the seats. They were reasonably comfortable except when the wind was blowing and it was cold outside and you'd have to open the door to let someone off or on, you wouldn't freeze to death but it was rather uncomfortable in real cold weather. It was comfortable if we got tied up in a snowstorm and kept the doors shut.

LR: ....off and on doors?

RW: Got off and on the same doors. There had to be two doors for each direction. They had to go in the door by the motorman so he could see if they dropped in their fare and when they got off they would get off the same end. When you changed ends, you would use the other end. You couldn't open the back door from the front end.

LR: Did you have to stop when someone was standing on the corner?

RW: You better believe it - that was bread and butter for the company.

LR: What about when it was raining?

RW: All right, I'll till you a little bit about that. The headlight gave about as much light as a candle, not as much as a flashlight. But they had a few street lights around and these people would stand on the corner and they'd expect the motorman to see them, which was okay - they couldn't stand out in the middle of the street. We had no windshield wipers to wipe the glass and the waters running down the glass you're looking through and a headlight that doesn't amount to any more than a candle, you just had to kinda feel your way. It was really a misdemeanor if you missed a passenger. Someone would call up and say you didn't stop for them and regardless the condition of the weather, you were called in and reprimanded. It was a public service and you were expected to see those people standing there.

MRS. W: So many people rode regularly that if they were a little late you waited for them. After years you got to know your passengers and know what time of day they rode. If there was someone missing on this corner you would slow down and look up and down the street.

LR: Did the cars have signs?

RW: Yes, we had a destination sign on the outside - there was a glass in front of it and there was an East Side 1 and an East Side 2, etc. You had to crank the destination sign to the right line before you went to work.

LR: Were the summer and winter cars the same?

RW: Yes, the open cars were gone before I came to work for them.

LR: Could you open windows?

RW: Yes and it was then like it is now - one person wanted the window open to cool off and another didn't wnat it open cause it would blow their hair so there was a constant oh they weren't bickering - it was a difference of opinion. You almost had to have them open.

LR: Was the motorman's area partitioned off?

RW: No, there was a metal bar shoulder high when you were sitting down. I think it was more for people to take a hold of when they got on and steady themselves - like a grab handle. In back of the motorman at night time there was a shade that you could pull down and hook behind you and that would keep the lights from the car from blinding you. When you moved from one end to the other, you'd take everything - your fare box, brake handle, and control box - all had to be taken. They had a control box on each end of the car that was stationary and all you had to do was take your handle from one end to the other.

LR: Did you have to wear a uniform?

RW: We had a blue uniform and a badge that said Northern Indiana Railway Company in front of a stiff cap, a good deal like any other conductors cap, and we had to buy and maintain our own uniforms. Light blue and white shirts, and neckties.

LR: In 1918 they had no uniforms - that's why I wondered what yours were like.

RW: They were regular uniforms that we had to go to a tailor and be measured for. They cost around forty to forty-five dollars in those days. We got paid about $45 every two weeks, depending on time worked. It was around twenty-two, twenty-three dollars a week. So when you needed a uniform that was two weeks wages.

LR: Did you work seven days a week - did you get a day off?

RW: No, there were no days off. I think the runs were from 8 1/2 to 9 hours.

LR: Did you have to work holidays too?

RW: Yep, no overtime, no vacation. There was no such thing as vacations. Most holidays the streetcar would be jammed to the hilt. The Fourth of July was a real heavy day. You talk about better paying days - not for the operators but for the streetcar line itself. They sometimes made more money on holidays but we got the same pay. There was no difference between night or day job - holiday pay was the same as any other day. We weren't overpaid but it was a livin'.

LR: Was being a motorman an envied job?

RW: The streetcar lines workers were discriminated against - we were a small operation. It wasn't considered a high class job. South Shore, those men were looked up to. They were more fascinating than a streetcar was.

LR: Pranks....

RW: There were some kids - they weren't exactly being mean but it was fun to do. We had to stop at the South Shore track on Michigan Boulevard and also at the New York Central on 9th Street. It didn't happen so much on the west side but on the east side there'd be some kids hiding around there and when we'd stop they'd run up behind the car and pull the trolley off the line and you couldn't start. You'd get out and put the trolley back on and before you'd get back in the car, they'd pull it off again. Sometimes you'd make two or three trips before the kids would let you alone so you could start. That was a game the kids played with us. They was just having fun - like Halloween. It didn't happen all the time - it wasn't an epidemic.

LR: Were there any pedesterian sign sidearms on the streetcar?

RW: No.

LR: Did this cause accidents?

RW: We had a few accidents but we were required by the company to be alert at every crossing because the automobile had as much right as we did. Most of the people would look but if someone was in a hurry or didn't know the crossing was there, they'd scoot across in front of us and we'd have to be in control so we could stop. And also running it the same direction. If they wanted to pass they'd get out on the track. You had to be constantly alert for such automobile traffic because the company couldn't afford to be paying for all these automobiles.

MRS. RW: Talking about the rails being imbedded - wasn't that all brick at 9th Street? 9th Street was brick, Franklin Street was a brick pavement - the old ties are still under there - that's why 9th Street is bumpy. They just paved over it. I wouldn't be surprised if the rails are still there.

LR: Were the streets wide enough for two cars?

RW: Most of the streets, you're probably talking about a car parked - two cars between the curb and the track. They were wide enough for that.

LR: Were there many major accidents?

RW: When you come down Michigan to 9th Street there was a 45 degree angle and some of the boys used to come down there too fast and they would come off the track. I don't think it ever happened more than once to each man because if it did they wouldn't be on the job anymore. But it never happened to anyone when I worked there except when the snow would get packed down on the rail. You'd think you could get through if you had enough momentum that the car might climb up on this ice and just scoot off and you'd be off the track. The company kinda wanted you to try and get through so they didn't feel that was your fault.

LR: How'd they get this back on the track?

RW: You wouldn't believe and nobody listening would believe. If you got off of the rail your motor wouldn't ground - it has to be grounded like any piece of electrical equipment, and you couldn't operate it to get back on the rail. We had a long switch bar that we used to turn the switches at 9th Street. That switch bar would reach from the rail to the frame of the car and that would give you ground and you'd put it in reverse and if you were lucky and you'd back up and follow the same little ruts back on the rail. It wasn't an operation that required a wrecker. We were always able to rerail our cars. If one happened to get out too far, maybe they'd have to bring an interurban out with a chain and pull us back.

LR: Where was the power generated from?

RW: LaPorte, didn't they have a powerhouse in LaPorte, there was no powerhouse in Michigan City that I know of. I really don't know who furnished the power. Probably Northern Indiana furnished it but I don't know where the hookup was.

LR: I didn't know the cars could go in reverse.

Rw: The reason we didn't talk about reverse was that you used it only in an emergency.

LR: Major changes?

RW: There weren't any changes on the streetcar-we had the same equipment when I left and the same group of men.

LR: How many men?

RW: There were four on each line, about eleven or twelve operators, one or two men maintaining the track - they didn't do much but grease the rails and curves. They had a line car that maintained the overhead wire but that operated from Michigan City to South Bend.

LR: You said you had transfers?

RW: Yes, but they didn't have to buy them. A lot of people lived on the east side but worked at the prison so they'd ride the east side down to 9th and Franklin. Our schedules were almost the same and these cars waited for one another.

LR: Tours to the prison were popular in the early 1900's - did you take many there?

RW: There wasn't any sightseers - we'd haul people who'd go out to visit someone. Doll's Park didn't amount to too much anymore. There was a little business out there but not where they'd run five or six cars out there. I've heard some of these old-timers say there were eight or nine streetcars there after a dance. But that was pretty near all over by the time I went to work there.

LR: Did you enjoy being a motorman?

RW: Yes, I made a lot of friends. They depended on you for service and you depended on them for livelihood. It was enjoyable work only from the sense of association with people, they were nice people that rode the streetcars. It was monotonous but we didn't think much of that either because jobs weren't plentiful.

LR: Do you think streetcars would be worth bringing back?

RW: No, the cost is prohibitive. There isn't any track. It's not in the books because we have buses that can go anywhere they want to without any preparations. If they had them, I think people would ride them for a novelty but not as a business - it's too expensive. Buses are so much more flexible - they go all over town and are big and comfortable but I have yet to see a bus with more than five people in it. Public transportation isn't used too much as long as people have their own cars, they're not going to use it. You've got to set up your life and your hours to correspond to public transportation and if it takes you a minute longer to shave in the morning then you miss the bus and you're in trouble. With your own transportation you'd just drive a little faster and get to work on time. It's a convenience to drive your own car from where you start to where you want to go. People aren't going back to public transportation as long as they have an automobile. They had buses in 1933 and they ran an excursion boat from Chicago to Michigan City every day and there'd be hundreds of people on that boat and we'd be down there with every piece of equipment we had to take those people on sightseeing tours. They had to pay extra for that. Their boat fare didn't include that. They'd get off at the harbor in the park and we'd take them to Long Beach and the prison and different spots. That was during the Worlds Fair. Buses were run by Ed Valentine and A1 Carlton (?). They were in the taxicab business and when streetcars discontinued services, they arranged with the city and got a franchise to put on buses. We drove back and forth in taxicabs during the period before the buses.