

THIS IS the "Dummy Line" steam engine which touched off a riot in 1888.

The Day Parishioners Turned Against the Railroad

By Tom La Belle

THE IRON Horse may have opened the West and bound the nation together with ribbons of steel and helped the North win the Civil War and accomplished a number of other important things, but for three ferocious nights it was a flat failure on Eastern Ave. SE.

Of course it wasn't a real Iron Horse in the historical sense. It was more of a steam street car. But it had a sure-enough steam engine and it ran on tracks towing a string of cars, right past Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church—once.

It didn't run on Eastern Ave. a second time because in the course of that interesting week in May, 1888, the devout parishioners of the church, summoned to action by the ringing of the church bell, ripped up the track with their bare hands.

THEN, man and woman, they stood off with rocks and fists the mercenaries of the line, the Grand Rapids Police Department and assorted community toughs who came out to help deal with the "lawless foreigners," as a newspaper of the day described them.

The so-called "Dummy Line Riot" had its origins in the ambitious improvement plans of the newly-formed Street Railway Co. of Grand Rapids.

The company had bought up existing horse ear and steam car transportation lines in the city and launched a major program of expansion.

One of the changes, as the Diamond Jubilee history of the Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church reports was to build a track from the existing line on Sherman St. northward on Eastern nearly to Cherry St. where new barns were being built.

That the company planned to operate two modern and 'quiet' Baldwin steam 'motors' and 'twenty four elegant Summer open cars' impressed the members of the church not one bit," the history says.

"They did not want the nuisance to pass noisily by their new church and create a dangerous hazard

for their children, to say nothing of the all too common rowdyism and drunkenness prevalent among the merry makers on the line on Sunday.

(It might be pointed out that Sunday afternoons for many in old Grand Rapids meant taking a public conveyance to Reeds Lake which at that time had an impressive number of gin mills, dance halls and other establishments loosely termed "low resorts.")

THE CHURCH members drafted a petition, but this only delayed matters a bit. The court supported the railway.

Knowing the sentiments of the church and anticipating trouble, the company put 45 track layers to work at 9 p.m. on Wednesday, May 9.

A crowd gathered muttering. More came when the church bell began to ring, and continued to ring for a long time. The Dutch church members warned

the track layers they would not be permitted to lay the rails. The track layers went to work anyway.

"Then the crowd congregated," reported the old Telegram Herald. "As fast as the men would be spiking a rail at one end, 15 or 20 men and women would have hold of the other end trying to carry it away. They commenced to shower the men with stones and clubs."

But this first battle went to the railway. Despite interference from the angry church members, the tracks were put down before morning.

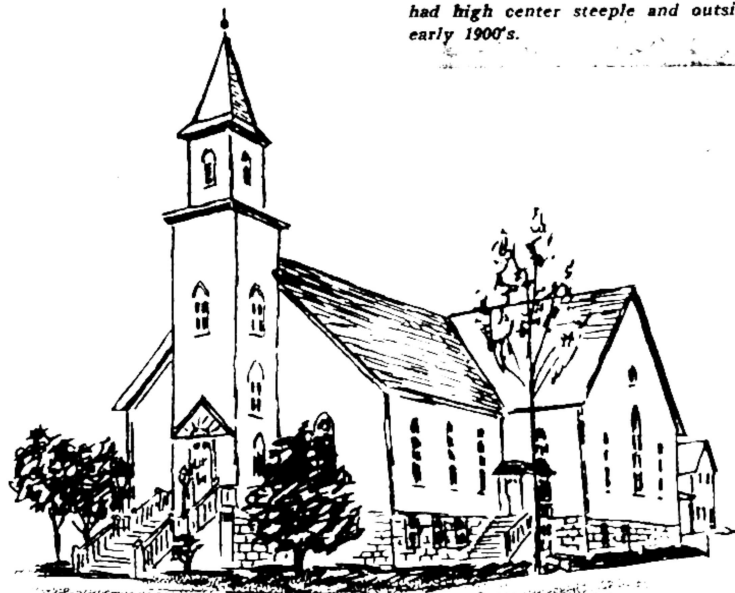
THE FIRST train went snorting by that day.

But the next sundown, the members met in the church. At 10 p.m. just as they were leaving the building the church bell again was rung for a half hour.

The night watchman on the railway line was stam-

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EASTERN Avenue Christian Reformed Church had high center steeple and outside steps in early 1900's.



**Rioters Toss Up
The Car Tracks
With Bare Hands**

Eastern Avenue Streetcar Came To Sudden Halt

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peted by a volley of stones and "an immense crowd of Hollanders began to tear up the track that had been laid Wednesday night."

Police were called, but had no luck quelling the disturbance. The crowd was estimated at more than 1,000 persons. Some were tossed into the patrol wagon, but were rescued by their friends "two heroines in particular," the church history recounts.

A POLICEMAN, an engineer and a lantern boy were injured. Shots were fired. Arrests were made.

But three blocks of track were ripped from the street "... some portions of it stand upon the ends of the ties, resembling a huge picket fence," the news account said. Other sections were thrown into the frog swamp which used to border the west side of Eastern Ave.

Twenty-five deputy sheriffs patrolled the area the next night and there was only one incident. A man was arrested for breaking a streetcar headlight with a rock and was "rather badly cut up when the crowd tried to prevent his arrest."

The church members, "the deluded, ignorant Dutch men," as the newspaper termed them, were accused of having been egged on by property owners on Eastern Ave. who saw the railway line as a threat to values.

"Actually, the 'lawless foreigners' reacted in very much the same manner as the typical rough and ready American of that day who refused to be imposed upon," the church history remarks.

AND THEY, won, too. A temporary injunction was issued by the court restraining the company from operating its steam engine on Eastern Ave. that summer.

A perpetual injunction was handed down by Kent County Circuit Court on Dec. 23, 1889, "despite legal maneuvers and permissive ordinances."

The conduct of the Street Railway Co., which apparently made no effort to avert trouble by meeting with the church members and trying to work something out, may seem incomprehensible to a later age.

Perhaps, however, while the last rock was in flight on Eastern Ave., headed toward the cranium of a Grand Rapids police officer, the concept of public relations may have dawned on someone.



WHEN the building was rebuilt in 1916, Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church acquired the all-brick front which it has today.