

## RG&E Employees Help Electrify a Trolley Line

The New York Transportation Museum in Rush is restoring trolleys – not just the cars themselves, but a working trolley line that you may be able to ride as early as next summer. The effort involved – getting cars in working order, setting poles and electrical wire, and developing a reliable power source – is all done by volunteers using donated and surplus materials from around the world.

RG&E employees **Scott Gleason, Charlie Lowe, Neil Bellinger,** and Employee Emeritus **Dick Holberg** volunteer their time to set poles and mount the cabling needed to supply electrical power. About a third of the 150 poles needed are in place so far.

On the **United Way Day of Caring**, ten RG&E employees helped mount 18 poles, using equipment donated by RG&E. “I like to operate heavy equipment, so digging the holes is the fun part,” explains Gleason. “We set the poles so that they angle away from the track and won’t be pulled inward by the weight of the brackets used to hold the wires.”

“When we string the copper wiring, we have to be very careful to get just the right tension and angle over the track, especially around curves,” says Gleason. “You can imagine what might happen if the wire was too slack or didn’t align precisely over the center of the trolley car.”

Another challenge is supplying electrical power. Plans are in the works for building a substation that can step down the AC voltage commonly available to 600VDC. “All of the trolley cars were wired for DC,” explains Jim Dierks, museum director, “and that’s something we just can’t change.” Dierks goes on to say that they did a trial trolley run last summer using a generator that not only made a lot of noise, but barely supplied the power needed.

The heyday of the electric trolley was between 1900 and 1930. At that time, you could travel from Maine to Iowa via inter-urban trolley and get around cities by streetcar. The electric trolley was a huge improvement over its horse-drawn predecessor. “Just think of the mess left by the 800 horses that pulled Rochester streetcars in the late 1800’s,” comments Dierks.

Water powered the first trolley substations, with one of the oldest located at what is now Jillian’s restaurant at High Falls. Little by little, automobiles and busses put trolleys out of business and most of the trolley cars were dismantled. “A lot of people ended up taking off the wheel trucks and using the cars as summer cottages and chicken coops,” explains Dierks. “It’s quite a job to restore them to their original splendor.”

Gleason became interested in the museum about five years ago when he started working on model railroads with his two boys. “We used to come here to see the real thing until my kids got too old for it,” he explains. “I’ve been volunteering ever since.”

The museum currently has four trolley cars. A semi-restored car that ran in the early 1900’s is housed in the museum along with one that was once a dining room in the Spaghetti Warehouse, a local restaurant. Both cars are being restored as closely as possible to how they looked originally, including brass fixtures, canvas roofs, and stained glass detailing. On the track outside the museum sits an inter-urban car, waiting for the track to be fully electrified. Next to that is a streetcar, the city version of the trolleys that ran between small towns and cities.

RG&E has donated the use of two-bucket trucks to help with the wiring. “Every little bit helps,” says Dierks. “Right now, we have most of the supplies we need, but we can always use volunteers. People like Scott are invaluable because they understand electricity and are willing to take the time to do it right.”

**[Editor’s Note:** Check out the trolley project at the New York Transportation Museum on 6393 East River Road in Rush. The museum is open Sundays from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. ([www.nymtmuseum.org](http://www.nymtmuseum.org)).]

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