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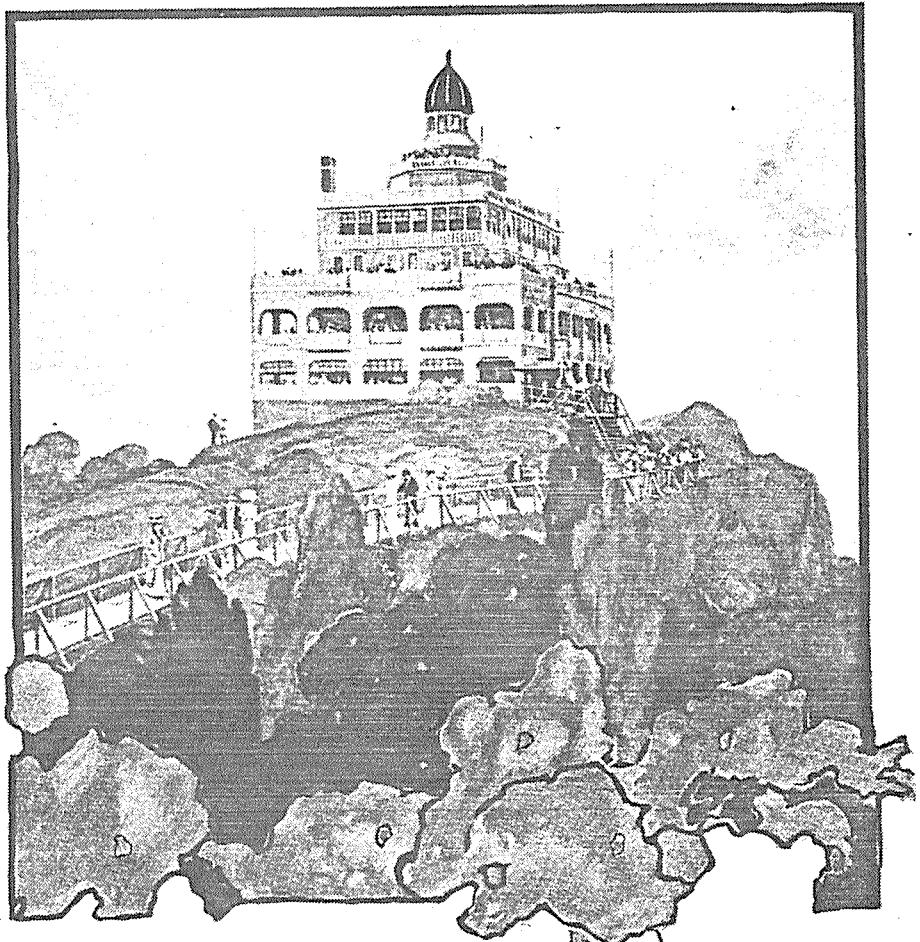
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MT. TOM
AND MT. TOM RAILROAD

The Mount Tom Electric Railway

Robert A. Young, Jr.

The Mount Tom Electric Railway, which operated in the early years of this century, forms an interesting chapter in the history of street railroads in western Massachusetts. Constructed by the Holyoke Street Railway Company in the late 1890s, it combined elements of the popular trolley park and mountain railway into a tourist attraction that was singularly unique in New England, if not in America. Visitors would arrive by trolley at the base of Mount Tom where they could spend the day enjoying the attractions of the Holyoke Street Railway's four hundred acre "Mountain Park" and ride the specially constructed mountain cars to the summit. The mountain top itself featured such amenities as railed walkways, a spacious wooden lookout platform, an open-air picnic pavilion, and a four story summit house. This study is an attempt to examine the resort in its heyday, from 1900 to 1915, and to illustrate its place both in the history of mountain railways in America and electric railways in western Massachusetts. The Mount Tom complex was truly a product of its time and place and was no doubt influenced by similar successful enterprises both in the Connecticut River Valley and other parts of the country.

The Mount Tom Range is located about seventeen miles north of Springfield. It serves as a natural boundary between the city of Holyoke on its eastern side, and Easthampton and Northampton on its western periphery. The Connecticut River passes the northern base of the range near Northampton, creating the familiar river formation known as the Oxbow. The river also separates the Mount Tom Range from the Holyoke Range, which is directly to the north. Mount Holyoke can be seen quite clearly from Mount Nonotuck, the northernmost peak in the Mount Tom chain. The Mount Tom Peak, located at the south-western end of the range, lies 1218 feet above sea level at its highest point.¹ This was the site chosen in 1897 for the construction of the Mount Tom Summit House by the Holyoke Street Railway Company. According to local tradition, Mount Tom and Mount Holyoke received their names in 1650 from surveying parties headed by Rowland Thomas and Elizur Holyoke, who climbed the mountains on their lines of survey.²

Geologically the mountain is composed primarily of trap rock and sandstone. The trap rock is a form of resistant basalt blasted out of the earth two hundred million years ago by volcanoes that extended from Deerfield (twenty miles north of Mount Tom) south to New Haven. The formation of the range and its current features, which leave it jagged and severe on its western face and more gentle and sloping on its Holyoke side, can also be linked directly to plate tec-

tonics that formed the Appalachian Mountain chain and erosion caused by the intercontinental glaciers.³

Much more recently the Holyoke Street Railway Company, which was to have a vested interest in the "ancient mount," began operation in 1884. By the early 1890s the company began to make interconnections with other street railways in the region. This would prove economically successful when the Mountain Park line was constructed in 1895 and the Mount Tom Railroad was built and put into operation in 1897. By being a part of a regional streetcar network the Holyoke line was guaranteed a much wider patronage than it otherwise would have had.⁴

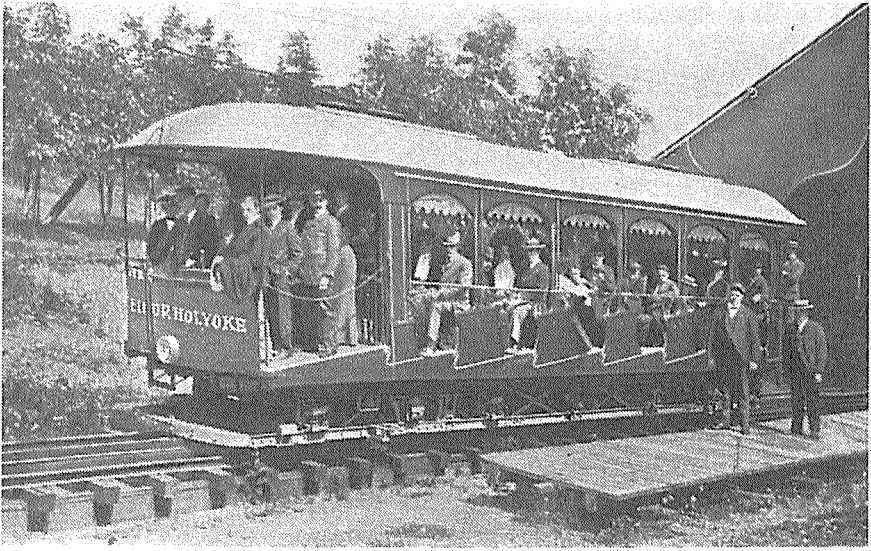
It is an interesting fact that in the Western Massachusetts counties of Berkshire, Franklin, Hampden, and Hampshire, over fifty street railway companies were established in the years between the end of the Civil War and the First World War. Northampton established and operated its first streetcar line in 1866; Springfield followed four years later in 1870. Although many lines were organized, only thirty companies were put into operation in the four counties. Some could not raise the funds needed before their charters expired and others were unable to obtain charters. A great many of the smaller lines were merged into the larger companies so that in 1910, the height of street railway operation in the four counties, only nine major companies were in service.⁵

The Holyoke line, being one of the nine, was connected with the Springfield, Northampton, Westfield, and Amherst lines by 1912. It also met two locomotive lines, the Boston and Maine Railroad, and the New York, New Hampshire, and Hartford Railroad.⁶ Of the streetcar lines connecting with the Holyoke railway, the largest was probably the Springfield system. By means of the Springfield line, visitors from as far away as Worcester and Hartford conceivably could have traveled to Mount Tom by making the necessary transfers.⁷

By the turn of the century, the network of trolley lines in the Northeast was quite unified. In his 1975 novel *Ragtime*, for example, E. L. Doctorow describes how the Jewish immigrant, Tateh, and his young daughter boarded a trolley near Hester Street on the lower east side of Manhattan and began an odyssey that took them north by streetcar through Connecticut to Springfield. From there they continued east, eventually arriving in Lawrence.⁸ Doctorow commented on the unique development which was occurring in the early 1900s:

Tracks! Tracks! It seemed to the visionaries who wrote for the popular magazines that the future lay at the end of the parallel rails. There were long distance locomotive railroads and inter-urban electric railroads and street railways and elevated railroads, all laying their steel stripes on the land, crisscrossing like the texture of an indefatigable civilization.⁹

The trolley in its unification was also helping to create the first suburbs and a chance for the citizens of the inner city to escape to the countryside. Entertainment for the masses, whether it be going to see organized sports, weekends at the seashore, or just a ride out to the country on a warm summer evening,



Car leaving lower station, Mt. Tom Railroad, Holyoke, Mass.

became enjoyable pastimes which could be fulfilled through travel on the street-car. Railways also saw profitability in encouraging patronage of their lines, especially at slow times, such as on weekends. They saw the success of such amusement magnets as Coney Island, Atlantic City, and the periodic World's Fairs, and began to build parks at the end of their lines. The popularity of mass entertainment in the form of amusement parks was such that by the second decade of the 20th century they were becoming firmly entrenched on the American scene. Gary Kyriazi wrote in his book, *The Great American Amusement Parks*: "By 1919, there were over 1500 amusement parks in the country. Every city of decent size had a park, while the major cities had anywhere from two to six parks. It was almost possible to ride from the East coast to the West on roller coasters."¹⁰ Kyriazi elaborates:

Most of the amusement parks at this time were known as 'trolley parks.' These were built by transit companies who wanted an incentive for people to ride their lines. Trolley parks were constructed at the end of the trolley line, almost always on some large body of water and several miles outside of the city. On weekends and summer mornings people would crowd the small, open trolley cars and ride out for a day of amusement, picnicking, bathing, and relaxation. At the end of the day, the little cars would carry the tired and happy crowds back to the city.¹¹

Another social commentator on the same subject wrote that:

. . . these gaudy establishments with their Ferris wheels, band concerts, baseball games, vaudeville acts and boating ponds, offered

both recreation and relief from the oppressive heat of the city. Half the fun, it seemed, was getting there—the pleasure of the cooling breeze produced by the speeding trolley car on its way to the park.¹²

Mount Tom and its relationship with the Holyoke Street Railway began with a trolley park. In 1888 William S. Loomis, President of the Holyoke Street Railway Company, bought a large tract of land at the base of the mountain and shortly after established the Mount Tom Railroad Association. In 1895 the association developed Mountain Park and built a trolley line to reach it. The Mount Tom Association would also be responsible for the construction and development of the mountain railway in 1897. Although the Holyoke Street Railway operated and maintained the Mount Tom resort, the Mount Tom Association, headed by Loomis and a board of directors, owned the property and leased it to the railway. Through Loomis, however, ownership of the two companies was identical.¹³

Mountain Park, which still survives, enjoyed tremendous popularity from the moment it opened. It was described as “probably the largest street railway park in the world.” Even if this claim was somewhat exaggerated, by 1912 the park encompassed more than four hundred acres extending from the base of the mountain to the Connecticut River. The railway company tried to create an atmosphere that was perfectly in harmony with the surrounding environment. Instead of building a miniature Coney Island, an attempt was made to integrate carefully planned improvements without detracting from the surrounding wilderness. Contemporary photos reveal tree lined walks, lily ponds, a rustic vine-covered entry arch, and many attractive flower beds.¹⁴

Besides natural pleasures, the park offered its patrons a variety of amusements. The Mountain Park Casino, which had a seating capacity of 2500, presented musical comedies and light opera. One brochure assured that the performances were always of “high character.”¹⁵ There were also observation towers, tables for picnic parties, as well as a deer park and zoo. For the hungry there was the Mountain Park Restaurant, and for those wishing to “trip the light fantastic,” the dance pavilion. The merry-go-round was a favorite, as was the “gravity sleigh,” which appeared to be a small but obvious predecessor of today’s roller coaster. One could also have his or her photo taken at a photograph gallery, and women and children were offered a resting place at the Y.W.C.A. Cottage.¹⁶

While the park possessed many of the attributes of other resorts of its type, it differed from them markedly in one particular way. It lay in the shadow of one of the largest mountains in the region. Before the opening of the Mount Tom railway, hiking parties frequently climbed to the summit. Still, by later standards, the mountain could be enjoyed by a relatively small number of hardy individuals. The idea to extend trackage from Mountain Park up to the summit probably developed as a logical and economically appealing idea to Loomis and the Mount Tom Railroad Association. In 1893 the railway company bought additional land on the mountain for the purpose of constructing a mountain railway.¹⁷ Certainly the success of similar ventures set a precedent.

Locomotive railways had been running up mountains even before the introduction of the electric trolley. In New England the most famous was probably the Cog Railway that climbed Mount Washington in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. It began operation in 1869 and continues today as one of the most popular tourist attractions in the region. Of the mountain railways which were operated by street railway companies, one of the earliest, and certainly one of the largest, was the Alpine Division of the Pacific Electric Railway. Oliver Jensen wrote of it in his book, *America's Yesterdays*:

Disneyland is tame stuff beside the vanished thrills of the Alpine Division of the Pacific Electric Railway, once the world's largest trolley and inter-urban system. You left Los Angeles in the big red P E cars for Pasadena, continuing up Echo Canyon to Rubio; there you transferred to an incline that climbed 3500 feet with all Southern California spread out below. At the summit was the narrow gauge alpine open trolley which twisted over 18 high trestles and 127 curves to the Alpine Tavern just below Mount Lowe, named for Professor Thaddeus S. C. Lowe, the daring Civil War balloonist who constructed the line in 1893.¹⁸

While this was definitely the grand dad of electric mountain railways, probably a more influential example for the Mount Tom developers was the famous Mount Holyoke Tramway which ran for almost ninety years. Unlike the summit of Mount Tom, Mount Holyoke had been popularized since 1821 when a public meeting in Northampton had led to the decision to build a house on the top of the mountain to attract visitors. The establishment entered its most successful period when John French acquired the property in 1849 and set out to build a first class resort. French razed the old mountain house in 1851 and built his famous Prospect House, which could accommodate overnight guests. To solve the problem of water transport and the difficulty of getting materials up the mountain, he also built a tramway in 1854 which was originally operated by horses in harness but was eventually mechanized. In 1866 the tramway was expanded to carry passengers and it was enclosed. It ran six hundred feet up the mountain. The tramway cars were simple three seat affairs and ran on a single narrow gauge system. From its opening until well into the twentieth century, the tramway was a popular attraction. Service discontinued only in 1942 when the old motors burned out. Although in the 1950s there was talk of reviving the historical landmark, it was eventually torn down because it posed a fire hazard.¹⁹

The building of the Mount Tom Railway in 1896-97, while it hoped to emulate the success of the tramway, was in some ways different than the other mountain resort. For one thing the Mount Tom Summit House would not accommodate overnight guests. John French had provided rooms, a restaurant, and croquet and tennis courts for people who wished to linger on Mount Holyoke.²⁰ The Holyoke Street Railway opted to build a four story structure to serve only as a lookout point and restaurant. It is possible too that both resorts sought to appeal to a slightly different clientele. Those who patronized Mount Holyoke seemed to be looking for a few days rest in a peaceful natural setting. The Mount Tom Railway by its nature sought to appeal to day trippers seeking

fun at Mountain Park.

The Mount Tom Railway was constructed during the years 1896-97 by Charles F. Parker and Company of New York City.²¹ The cable road was unique in its way, being the first railroad to be built with a grade so steep that the use of a counter balance was required. This meant that when one of the cable cars came down the other went up.²² The building went smoothly and it was hoped that the line would be opened in June of 1897. On May 22, 1897 *The Springfield Republican* reported that

The Mount Tom railroad has been nearly completed, and it may be said to be in running order, although the cars will not be started for several weeks. The railroad company wants to move to the top of the mountain the materials for the new house that will adorn the peak and afford a resting place for the patrons of the road. The railroad is thoroughly built, and there need be no fear of accidents on it by any probable breakage of the apparatus. The road bed is thoroughly graded and framed together with heavy timbers, the lower course of sleepers being bedded in trap rock, of which a large supply was uncovered in excavating the line. The cable that will connect the cars and the trolley (sic) wires, of which there are two were put into position this week, some delay having been caused by the failure of material to arrive when it was due. The cars are odd looking affairs on a level track, but on the mountain grades they will run with nearly level floors.²³

The names of the odd looking mountain cars which the reporter mentioned were the "Elizur Holyoke" and the "Rowland Thomas," named after the two mountain-climbing surveyors. While they did share many of the features of conventional trolleys they were indeed different from the average streetcar. For one thing, they were much larger, weighing twelve and a half tons.²⁴ They also seated more people and the rows of seats were leveled off in stairlike tiers, so passengers sat upright on the uphill climb. Both cars were constructed by the Wason Manufacturing Company of Springfield, which was responsible for much of the equipment operated by street railways both in Western Massachusetts and in Connecticut. Wason's reputation for excellence, and the fact that Wason could deliver directly from the factory to many of the electric railways in the region through the Springfield line, made it a very successful enterprise.²⁵

While the report from the *Republican* had claimed that work had been delayed on the Mount Tom Railway, the official opening of the line occurred about on schedule. On Thursday, June 17, 1897 the Holyoke Electric Railway invited a special group of local citizens to ride the line for the first time. Springfield sent a special Rockrimmon parlor car with city officials and representatives of the Wason Manufacturing Company. Holyoke also sent a special car headed by President Loomis of the Holyoke line. When both cars arrived at the mountain, passengers from both streetcars were able to board one of the large mountain cars. On the way up the mountain, Loomis enthusiastically described the mechanical aspects of the railway to his guests.²⁶

The length of the track incline from the lower station located in Mountain Park was one mile. The two mountain cars were connected by a cable made of one hundred twenty interwoven steel wires which passed around an eight foot sheave at the top of the incline. Each car was powered by two electric motors; electricity was furnished by a power house located five miles away in Holyoke. The cars had electric brakes, as well as powerful automatic grip brakes which would grab a safety third rail to prevent the cars from speeding out of control. Midway up the mountain was the turnout which permitted the ascending and descending cars to pass on the single track incline by redirecting one of the cars onto a side track before continuing. The cars were also connected with each other by a telephone system, as were the upper and lower stations.²⁷

On the first passenger run those who got off on the summit were able to see the nearly-completed summit house. This was the first of two large mountain houses that were to be built by the Holyoke line. The original house, which was destroyed by fire in 1900, contributed enormously to the initial success of the resort and paved the way for the construction of an even more elaborate building in 1901. In its three year existence people flocked to the attractive four story building to enjoy the superb view and to eat in the spacious first floor restaurant.²⁸ In 1901 the second summit house, which was constructed on the site of the first building, was at once acknowledged as a worthy successor. Larger and more solidly-built it was also four stories high and included an open-air observation tower capped with a gilded onion dome. Wide porches or "piazzas" surrounded the first two stories. On the fourth floor was a large observation room surrounded by plate-glass windows. The observation room was furnished with telescopes for the use of visitors as well as with topographical maps of the northeast.²⁹ The restaurant was much larger than the first and there were arrangements by which two private dining rooms could be created by partitioning the main hall.³⁰ A brochure published about 1915 advertised that the restaurant made a specialty of fresh vegetables and chickens from the surrounding farms.³¹ A lunch counter and a rustic picnic pavilion were also part of the 1901 construction.³²

For the first decade the combination of amusement park and mountain railway made the Holyoke Street Railway's enterprise a great success. Yearly attendance averaged approximately 75,000 visitors.³³ In 1899 President William McKinley visited Holyoke to attend the graduation of his niece from Mount Holyoke College and he was taken to the Summit House by his host, Congressman William Whiting.³⁴ McKinley is reported to have said, "this is the most beautiful mountain outlook in the world." For many years this quote was used in the resort's promotional literature.³⁵ However Baedeker's guidebook, the last word in turn of the century travel, which rated views with asterisks (one for fine and two for superb) only gave one to Mount Tom. Still, in that pre-airplane world the scene was probably one of the best views of the valley one could find. The western view was and is still the best, affording one an expansive lookout of Easthampton, Northampton, the hill towns and, with a good pair of binoculars, much farther.

While the business proved a success, there was trouble looming on the horizon. As early as 1910 precursors at the mountain and elsewhere pointed

toward the beginning of the end of the trolley in America. Henry Ford was already producing his Model T in record numbers and the process of transforming the automobile from a plaything of the rich to a nationwide necessity would soon radically change the nation's transportation habits. Ironically, and perhaps sadly, the Holyoke Street Railway advertised the fine auto road leading up to the park in order to attract patrons.³⁶ In the valley, during the second decade of the twentieth century, street railways began to shut down. The first of the nine larger Western Massachusetts companies to discontinue service was the Shelburne Falls and Colrain Street Railway in 1917, followed by the Ware and Brookfield line in 1918 and the Conway Street Railway in 1921. By 1933, when Northampton closed down its line, only three railways were left and by 1935 only the Springfield and Holyoke lines remained as the last vestiges of a business victimized by advancing technology.³⁷ As a matter of fact the Springfield line, which had been dying a slow death since it began to close its branches in 1925, was only a pale ghost of its former self.

In 1929 the Holyoke Street Railway spent \$30,000 on refurbishing the Mountain House which had seen a steady decline in popularity. Just before the 1929 opening however, a fire destroyed the second Mount Tom Summit House at a loss of about \$75,000.³⁸ With the depression making itself felt throughout the region the company could only afford to construct a temporary structure of corrugated metal as a replacement. In 1936 the Mount Tom Electric Railway discontinued service and in 1937 the Holyoke Street Railway abandoned trolley service completely.³⁹ Springfield ran its last cars in 1940 and the era of the trolley ended in Western Massachusetts.⁴⁰ Mountain Park passed into private hands and television antennas eventually arose where dandies in straw boaters and ladies in ankle length skirts, carrying parasols, had once walked in the shadow of the Mount Tom Summit House.

The era of the trolley, while a fine one, was also a brief one. In Western Massachusetts it spanned less than one hundred years. During the time it offered, by its very size and inter-connectedness, a valuable public service to the people of the region. The Mount Tom Electric Railway, coupled with Mountain Park, served as a place of entertainment and recreation at a time when most people could not just hop into a car or board a plane for a vacation. By the early 1900s however, new forms of faster, more personal transportation began to replace the streetcars and trains. Today automobiles take us up the area mountains and diesel busses run over streets once crisscrossed with streetcar rails. While in some ways the new system may be more efficient, the era of the trolley appears in retrospect to have been quieter and cleaner, and in some ways much more appealing.

NOTES

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4. The Connecticut Electric Railway Association, Inc. *The Language of the Trolley* (Ware House Point, Connecticut, 1977), Supplement (hereafter cited as C.E.R.A.)
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Mount Tom and Mount Tom Railroad*, p. 5
7. C.E.R.A., Supplement
8. E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (New York, 1981), pp. 101-107
9. *Ibid.*, p. 109
10. Gary Kyriazi, *The Great American Amusement Parks* (Secaucus, New Jersey. 1976), p. 98
11. *Ibid.*, p. 99
12. Time-Life Books, Vol. 1, *This Fabulous Century* (New York, 1969), p. 266
13. "Mount Tom Summit House, Burned Last Night, May Not be Rebuilt," *Daily Hampshire Gazette* (May 3, 1929), p. 17
14. *Mount Tom and Mount Tom Railroad*, p. 29
15. *The Mount Tom Summit House*, p. 3
16. *Mount Tom and Mount Tom Railroad*, p. 29
17. *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, May 3, 1929, p. 17
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19. Stephen Berkowitz, *Holyoke Range*, p. 14
20. Donald Purcell, "High Road to Happiness," *Yankee* (August 1955), p. 29
21. *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, May 3, 1929, p. 17
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24. *Ibid.*, p. 8
25. C.E.R.A., Supplement
26. "Mount Tom Line Inspected," *Springfield Republican*, June 18, 1897, p. 4
27. *Mount Tom and Mount Tom Railroad*, pp. 5, 10
28. *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, June 4, 1964, p. 20
29. *Mount Tom and Mount Tom Railroad*, p. 11
30. *Springfield Republican*, May 16, 1901, p. 8
31. *The Mount Tom Summit House*, p. 2
32. *Mount Tom and Mount Tom Railroad*, p. 11
33. *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, May 3, 1929, p. 17
34. *Ibid.*, June 4, 1964, p. 20
35. Oliver Jensen, *America's Yesterdays*, p. 14
36. *The Mount Tom Summit House*, p. 1
37. C.E.R.A., Supplement
38. *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, May 3, 1929, p. 17
39. *Ibid.*, June 4, 1964, p. 20
40. C.E.R.A., Supplement