

OFF AND ON



The arrival of electricity changed almost every part of life for Canadians who lived in towns and cities. Here's a look at one change that didn't last, and one that did.

Passengers board a Toronto streetcar, 1905.

STREETCARS

Between 1886 and 1920, nearly 50 Canadian communities had electric street railways. Picture a train, but much smaller, usually with just a few cars. They ran on special tracks and had cables connecting them to overhead power lines. And they weren't just for big cities, either. Cornwall and Peterborough, Ont., Sydney, N.S., Lethbridge, Alta., Moose Jaw, Sask., St. Stephen, N.B., Nelson, B.C., Trois-Rivières, Que. — you could have hopped on an electric streetcar in any of them. Well, at least until after the Second World War, when cities decided to replace their street railways with buses, and more people started driving cars. Several cities such as Vancouver, Ottawa, Calgary and Montreal have electric light rail systems that run on separate tracks, but only Toronto has kept its streetcars.



A streetcar in Toronto's Chinatown, 2007.

STREETLIGHTS

When Canadian cities started installing reliable electric lights along their streets in the early 1880s, people were dazzled — literally. Suddenly the night felt less dangerous. People could walk around confidently after the sun had set, now that they could see almost as well as during the day. Women in particular felt more comfortable and could leave their houses with less fear. Crime dropped because there were fewer dark spots to hide in. Just imagine walking around your city or the nearest town in the pitch black, without streetlights or friendly brightness spilling out of houses and businesses. Traffic lights were another welcome invention. The first ones in Canada went into operation in Hamilton, Ont., in 1925, and soon afterward in Toronto. They would certainly have made life easier for the police who had to try to direct horses, cars, streetcars and people walking.



An undated drawing of Notre Dame Street in Montreal.

Two police officers walk down Vancouver's Pender Street, around 1967.

