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## Student researches interurban railway failure

By **Jeff Samoray**, OU Web Writer

At the dawn of the 20th century, Detroit had more miles of electric interurban railway than any other city in the country, except Indianapolis. This low-cost transportation system, which provided timely service to both large and rural communities, became popular in the Midwest and across the nation. But by 1931, Detroit's interurban rail companies had vanished, taking southeast Michigan's mass transit system with them.

What led to the swift demise of these companies? Why did they disappear so suddenly? Were the auto companies to blame? Were there other contributing factors?

These are some of the questions Oakland University history major Tobi Voigt asks as she delves into her research. Voigt is one of many students who have conducted comprehensive research projects through the **Provost's Program for University Student Research Scholars**. OU faculty serve as mentors for the students, who become exposed to the challenges and excitement that come with research.

"I feel like a detective," said Voigt, who first became enthralled with her topic as a volunteer for the Rochester Hills Museum. "There are volumes of secondary sources written by other scholars who comment on the demise of the interurban railways across America, but they don't address why they failed."

To find answers to her questions, Voigt, who is a senior, is pursuing leads to primary sources – financial records and other documentation from the failed companies themselves. Besides area libraries and archives, Voigt also found material in unexpected places.

"On eBay I purchased a report for \$16 on the earnings, expenses and rates of fare for the Detroit United Railway," she said. "I was very excited when this item arrived in the mail, which will be very valuable to my research."

"I've also given presentations to the community on this topic at local historical societies. And every time I give one, someone will come up to me afterwards and tell me that their father or a family member worked for an interurban company or that they remember riding one as a child. Those oral histories can also provide information."

Through her research, Voigt was surprised to learn that the auto and railroad companies had less to do with the failure of interurban companies than the interurban developers themselves.

"There were 14 interurban companies in Detroit in the 1890s, and they failed for multiple reasons," Voigt said. "In their zeal to capitalize on the interurban trend, they placed themselves on a shaky foundation by entering into hasty contracts and agreements and overbuilt in areas too sparsely populated to provide consistent revenue. They also paid little attention to maintenance and service in order to boost their profits. They basically set themselves up for failure."

Professor and Chair of History Carl Osthaus, Voigt's faculty mentor, said her research could be invaluable to present community leaders who have proposed bringing mass transit back to southeast Michigan.

"The failure of mass transit is an area of public history," Osthaus said. "The historical research Tobi is performing should be a part of contemporary policy making so we can avoid the mistakes of the past. I don't know exactly where Tobi's research will eventually lead. You begin with a hypothesis, then examine secondary source material and follow up leads for primary sources. Sometimes you get very lucky. You might come across some private papers. I look forward to seeing Tobi's final paper. I know a little about the subject, but every week when I meet with her, I learn something new."

"Tobi is the first student from our department to participate in the research scholars program. I hope that my colleagues will look for more students who are doing first-rate work in their history classes and encourage them to apply. If a student is enthralled with a researchable topic, has a strong sense of curiosity and can write well, that person can do very sophisticated work for a scholarly and popular audience. Tobi has the training, curiosity, abilities and resources to do this."

In addition to producing a publishable scholarly paper on her topic, Voigt also plans on presenting her research at the Phi Alpha

Theta History Honor Society regional conference, which will be held on OU's campus in March.

Students in the research scholar program receive up to \$1,000 to support their projects for a minimum of one semester and have the opportunity to apply for up to \$500 in travel support to present their research results at a professional conference. By accepting an award, student research scholars agree to work on the proposed project for at least one semester (15 weeks) and submit a final research report within one year.

"The research scholar program is fantastic, particularly because it's geared toward undergraduates," Voigt said. "The program provides undergrads the opportunity to conduct some real research and develop skills that are critical in history or any other career path."

Applications for the research scholar program are accepted three times per year. The next application deadline is Monday, Oct. 6. Award announcements will be made Nov. 3. The Research Advisory Committee, comprised of faculty from a broad range of disciplines, reviews and evaluates each submitted proposal. Students are selected based on their academic strengths as well as the quality, significance and potential impact of their proposed research projects.

Guidelines and application material is available on the **Provost's Program for University Student Research Scholars** Web page. For additional information, contact Assistant Vice Provost Pat Beaver at (248) 370-3222 or **beaver@oakland.edu**.

**SUMMARY**

OU history major Tobi Voigt, one of many students conducting comprehensive research through the Provost's Program for University Student Research Scholars, is researching what led to the demise of Detroit's interurban rail companies. Professor and Chair of History Carl Osthaus, Voigt's faculty mentor, said her research could be invaluable to present community leaders who have proposed bringing mass transit back to southeast Michigan. In addition to producing a scholarly paper on her topic, Voigt plans to present her research at the Phi Alpha Theta History Honor Society regional conference.

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