



In 1902 muddy Queen Anne Avenue was being undermined with a tunnel for the counterbalance.

Courtesy of Jean Goway

## Countering the Balance

WRITTEN BY PAUL DORPAT

**S**eattle got out of the cable car business on Queen Anne Avenue (then called Temperance Street) by the late 1890s. But the one part of cable it could not abandon for many years was under the most precipitous part of the hill, that lightheaded 20 percent which became known as the counterbalance.

Since cable cars were particularly good at climbing hills, the firm operating public transportation on the hill used it in tandem with the new electric cars. It worked like this: The streetcars were linked via the underground cable with a truck that



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Since 1940 trackless coach service has carried passengers up and down the steep incline.

ran on narrow gauge tracks through a tunnel. While the subterranean vehicle weighed 16 tons, the ones above ground were a heavier 18 to 24 tons. When the truck ran down hill it helped pull the streetcar uphill.

And, working the other way, the electric streetcar's descent was restrained by the counterweight's ascent.

The progress both ways was slow — about 8 miles an hour —

but still steady enough to remain in service for more than 40 years.

Today's historic photo was taken in 1902 by Asahel Curtis and shows the counterbalance at the muddy beginning. The rough dirt scar that runs up the western side of the street marks the beginnings of the second tunnel. Within a year, work would begin on resurfacing this entire stretch with sandstone. (Only the right hand track is in place in the photo).

On the evening of March 5, 1937, the Seattle Municipal Railway staged a counterbalance contest between a streetcar and a trackless trolley. The future of the counterbalance was evident by the results: The modern coach embarrassed the streetcar by climbing the hill in less than half the time.

Regular trackless coach service began on the hill Sept. 2, 1940. In the now scene, practically everything else in our earlier photo is gone except for what was always hidden, the two counterbalance tunnels that still run up Queen Anne Avenue.