

By William D. Middleton

The world's greatest interurban railway, they called the Pacific Electric Railway, and there just wasn't any disputing the proud title. For the tremendous system, which radiated in every direction from Los Angeles, operated over 1,000 miles of electric railroad, embracing a huge four-county area and reaching over 125 cities and communities.

This Southern Pacific-owned Southern California traction empire had more than just size to justify its title of greatest. It had an almost endless variety of lines, services and equipment. On the Pacific Electric you could speed for miles along Pacific beaches, almost within reach of the pounding surf. You could ride through snow-covered mountain scenery in little narrow-gauge open cars. Or you could travel through rural orange groves, vineyards and fields. The Pacific Electric had a subway and an elevated; it had four-track, high-speed interurban lines and single-track country trolley routes; it had small-town local lines and incredibly busy street car lines where multiple-unit trains were the rule.

# THE GREAT Pacific Electric

The Pacific Electric's four-track line between Los Angeles and Watts offered local and express service.

The Pacific Electric operated almost every possible type of local, suburban and interurban passenger service, and it had private cars, deluxe parlor car trains, boat trains, excursions with guide-lecturers and race-track specials. Its passenger rolling stock ranged from single-truck Birney cars to some of the largest steel interurbans ever built.

The system moved a huge freight traffic behind steam and diesel – as well as electric – motive power, and it had a tremendous box motor express and mail business.

The Pacific Electric traced its origin to an 1873 horse-car line. Its first interurban line, and one of the first in the nation, was created in 1891 when two local lines were connected by a bridge across the Arroyo Seco and interurban service was provided between Pasadena and Los Angeles. The agency itself came into being in 1901 when Henry E. Huntington, wealthy nephew of Southern Pacific's Collis P. Huntington, acquired the Los Angeles-Pasadena interurban and began construction of many of the lines that were to make up his great interurban empire. In 1911, the Pacific Electric was merged under Southern Pacific ownership with three other major companies: the Los Angeles Pacific, the Los Angeles & Redondo and the Los Angeles Interurban. By 1915, when the huge system was complete, it represented the construction and consolidation of some 72 separate traction companies.

Southern California electric line construction was tied closely to real-estate activities, and the completion of a new line usually set off a real-estate boom. Typical of the promotions that followed the building of an interurban line was the Grand Opening of Hollywood staged in 1905 to promote the sale of land in the new development. Special free trains carried passengers to the event, a free barbecue was served, a brass band played and many

lots were sold to future riders.

### A Vast Layout

During most of its existence as a passenger interurban, The Pacific Electric was divided into three major, semi-independent districts. Largest of them was the Northern District, which included some 400 miles of track and



33 lines, operating north and east from Los Angeles.

An impressive part of the north was the four-track right-of-way that carried trains to Pasadena and other San Gabriel Valley points. The system's longest and fastest line, the 58-mile San Bernardino line, was part of the Northern District. While the remainder of the agency was operated with 600-volt current, the premier San Bernardino line was 1,200 volts.

The Western District, made up largely of the lines of one of the Pacific

Electric's predecessors – the Los Angeles Pacific – served a vast area to the west of downtown Los Angeles. Among its many destinations were Hollywood, Beverly Hills, Glendale, Burbank, the San Fernando Valley and the beaches at Santa Monica and Venice.

The west also was the site of the

Pacific Electric's subway, a mile-long tube completed in 1925, that gave trains a fast exit from the Hill Street Subway Terminal in downtown Los Angeles, but then left them to battle miles of traffic-congested streets. The Los Angeles Pacific once had far more ambitious plans for a four-track subway and private right-of-way route from Vineyard to downtown Los Angeles, which would have created the greatest rapid transit system west of Chicago. But its plans were temporarily postponed during the panic of



1907, and the subway was never built.

The Southern District reached south from Los Angeles to Long Beach and San Pedro in the harbor area, southeast along Pacific beaches to Newport and Balboa and through the orange groves to Santa Ana and southwest to El Segundo and Redondo Beach.

The Pacific Electric's most fascinating piece of right-of-way was the spectacular four-track line south from Los Angeles to Watts on the Southern District. Trains of heavy inter-urban cars raced down the center tracks, overtaking the multiple-unit local cars that kept to the outer tracks. Box motors carrying mail and express, and long freights moving behind freight motors, shared the busy rails with the passenger cars. During rush hours the parade of trains seemed almost endless and the air was never quiet from the blasting of distinctive air whistles at the many crossings.

The Pacific Electric's elevated was even shorter than its subway. Only two blocks long, it carried trains into

the Sixth and Main Street Station from the Northern and Southern districts.

The nine-story terminal building was headquarters for the agency and the Los Angeles offices of its owner, Southern Pacific. In addition to the elevated platforms for interurban trains, the building housed a ground-floor terminal for trains that arrived over Main Street trackage, and a terminal for extensive box motor express and mail service.

The road once had great ideas for its elevated, too. During the 1920s plans were ready for an extension of elevated trackage that would have carried Northern and Southern district trains from the Sixth and Main terminal across the Los Angeles River to connect with existing private right-of-way. But the Great Depression and public sentiment against elevations, killed these and many other PE improvement plans.

The Pacific Electric survived longer than most of the great traction empires. The system's major rail lines were intact at the beginning of World War

II, and carried the greatest traffic in PE history – a peak of nearly 110 million rail passengers in 1945. Ancient wood cars, already being scrapped, were pressed back into service, and 80 big interurbans were obtained from abandoned SP traction lines in the San Francisco Bay area to help handle the record crowds.

But bus substitution came swiftly in the years following the war. The fate of the dwindling Pacific Electric passenger operation was sealed in 1953, when the company sold its passenger business to bus operator Jesse L. Haugh's Metropolitan Coach Lines, which immediately announced a goal of all-bus service.

### **Famous for Excursions**

The Pacific Electric operated all manner of excursions. One of Southern California's greatest tourist attractions was the system's famed Mount Lowe line, originally built in 1893 by Professor Thaddeus Lowe, for whom the line was named. Standard-gauge trolleys carried excursionists up Rubio Canyon to a pavilion, where there was a hotel, dance hall and refreshment stand. Above Rubio, the Great Cable Incline carried people to the summit of Echo Mountain, where two additional hotels – the Chalet and Echo Mountain House – were surrounded by such attractions as hiking trails and bridle paths, a zoo, a museum and an observatory equipped with a 16-inch telescope. The 3-million-candlepower Great World's Fair searchlight, which Professor Lowe bought and installed on Echo Mountain in 1894, was visible 150 miles at sea.

Above Echo Mountain, the four miles of track of the Alpine Division carried excursionists through spec-

tacular mountain scenery to Mount Lowe Springs, where a fourth hotel – the Alpine Tavern – was built 1,100 feet below the summit of the mountain. The narrow-gauge line wound through 127 curves and crossed 18 trestles, and its grades exceeded 7 per cent at points. The roadbed was carved out of solid granite throughout its length. An outstanding feature of the Alpine Division was the Great Circular Bridge, which described an almost complete circle as it carried the cars around a small peak, high above a canyon.

Although the Mount Lowe line operated for over 40 years, and was billed as the Greatest Mountain Trolley Trip in the World, troubles plagued it from the start. Fire destroyed Echo Mountain House in 1900, and a 1905 windstorm toppled the Chalet and started a fire that destroyed every building on Echo Mountain but the observatory. A rock slide smashed Rubio Hotel to the canyon floor in 1909. In 1936 fire wiped out the last hotel – Alpine Tavern – and two years later a cloudburst destroyed much of the railway itself, closing it forever.

The Pacific Electric's predecessor, Los Angeles Pacific, had become known as the Balloon Route, after the appearance of a map of its trackage. One of the most popular trolley trips in the West was its Balloon Route Trolley Trip, which the Pacific Electric continued for many years after the 1911 merger. The Balloon Route excursion, a "10-dollar trip for a dollar," took sightseers out Sunset Boulevard to Hollywood for a visit to the studio of world-famous flower painter Paul de Longpre, through the bean fields around a place called Morocco – better known today as Beverly Hills –

and to the Soldier's Home at Sawtelle, where group pictures were taken. The excursionists made a stop at the famous Camera Obscura in Santa Monica before proceeding to the Playa del Rey Pavilion for a fish dinner. Before returning to Los Angeles, the tour visited Moonstone Beach, Redondo and Venice, which then boasted genuine canals and gondolas.

Similar excursions were operated on almost every part of the vast Pacific Electric system. The Orange Empire Trolley Trip carried trolley excursionists on a 150-mile round trip from Los Angeles to Redlands, visiting scenic attractions in the San Bernardino County citrus area. The Triangle Trolley Trip offered a tour of the beach cities south of Los Angeles.

Catalina Island vacationers rode the Catalina Special, which provided boat-train service to the docks at Wilmington, where a connection was made with steamer service to Avalon. The service still was operated during the summer of 1956, the last of the agency's once-numerous special runs.

Special events in Southern California usually meant tremendous passenger traffic for the Pacific Electric. Every New Year's Day, thousands rode to Pasadena to view the Rose Parade. A race meet at the Santa Anita track meant three- and four-car trains operating on as little as 10-minute headway. The Los Angeles County Fair at Pomona was another event that called for frequent special trains.

Thousands of cars and locomotives of endless variety were operated by Pacific Electric in its long history as the greatest of all traction empires. Hundreds of city cars were required to operate its many local lines in Southern California communities. Single and

double truck, open and closed, wood and steel cars – the variations were many.

## Passenger Equipment

The balmy Southern California climate was perfect for open-air trolley riding most of the year. Most of the Pacific Electric's local, suburban and interurban cars in the earlier years were of the California type, with a closed center section and open at each end; or semi-open cars, with one end open and the other closed. Many of the system's earlier cars came from predecessor companies and included all manner of designs. Some were former steam road cars, rebuilt for electric operation, while others were once narrow-gauge cars.

The largest of the Pacific Electric's car classes, and some of the finest suburban cars ever, were the 160 steel cars known as Hollywood cars. Built in the 1920s, they saw service on almost every city and suburban line, and even operated for a time on some interurban routes.

The system's most modern cars were 30 PCC-type suburban cars, which served the Glendale-Burbank line throughout most of their 16-year career. Buses took over the line in 1955.

Many of PE's steel interurbans were boomers, having come from other Southern Pacific traction properties on the West Coast. Some came from SP electric lines at Portland. The most recent arrivals were the 300 and 400 classes, which came early in World War II from Northwestern Pacific's third-rail lines north of the Golden Gate, and SP's Interurban Electric at Oakland. Over 72 feet in length, and weighing up to 63 tons, they were among the

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largest and heaviest interurbans ever built.

Many deluxe cars graced Pacific Electric rails. There were observation cars for the numerous trolley excursions, and parlor cars for boat-train service to San Pedro. There were luxurious officers' cars that transported many celebrities, including several presidents, as well as system brass. Several of them served for years on the deluxe Newport-Balboa Commodore. Grandest of them all was the mighty *Alabama*, Henry E. Huntington's private car. Regarded as one of the fastest and finest interurbans ever built, the huge 63-foot 52-ton car, the personal property of Huntington, was kept at his San Marino estate. In later years the ornate car became a parlor-buffet trailer on the Sacramento Northern and its motors and controls were installed on a Pacific Electric freight locomotive.

### **Freight Service**

A wide variety of box motor cars, many of them former passenger cars, were operated in the Pacific Electric's extensive mail and express service. Until 1951, the system operated the last interurban Railway Post Office service in the U.S., on the San Bernardino line. Trucks took over the agency's box motor service in 1952.

The backbone of the Pacific Electric's freight motive power was a fleet of heavy steeplecab locomotives, almost all of them Baldwin-built or a homemade copy. There was a wide

range of lighter electric freight motors as well, and the agency had several gas-electrics for operation on isolated sections of track. In earlier days, there were even a few steam locomotives on its roster.

During World War II, when freight traffic reached unprecedented levels, the hard-pressed Pacific Electric leased SP steam power for service on the San Bernardino line. Steam power always was double-headed with an electric locomotive in order to actuate trolley-operated signals. Triple headers sometimes were operated, and there were occasions reported when steam, diesel, and electric power all teamed up on the same train.

Work and service cars were a necessity on any electric line, and the Pacific Electric had them in profuse quantities: tower cars, wire greasers, crane cars, dump cars, rail grinders, portable substations, wreckers, weed burners, even a portable vacuum-cleaner car.

### **A Slow but Sure Return**

Many of the famous Red Cars of the Pacific Electric were senselessly burned in the 1960s – an act that has come to signify, for many, the official end of the first passenger rail age. And as the Los Angeles area begins to rebuild its once mighty passenger rail network with commuter rail, light rail and subways, the image of the Pacific Electric is never far from view. 📄

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*William D. Middleton has written extensively about railroads and rail transit for more than 50 years. His newest book, Metropolitan Railways: Rapid Transit in America, an illustrated history of North American rail transit, is scheduled for publication by Indiana University Press late this year.*