LOS ANGELES HISTORY LA TRANSPORTATION 9

Did a conspiracy really destroy LA's huge streetcar system?

It's long been suggested the iconic Red Cars fell victim to a scheme by automakers

By **Elijah Chiland** | Updated Dec 17, 2019, 11:15am PST | **9 comments**

The Pacific Electric Red Car system was completely dismantled by the early 1960s. | Photo by Alan Weeks, via the Metro Library and Archive

When it premiered in 1988, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* seemed most likely to be remembered for its innovative blend of live-action and animated footage (or for its uncomfortably sexualized presentation of a cartoon bunny).

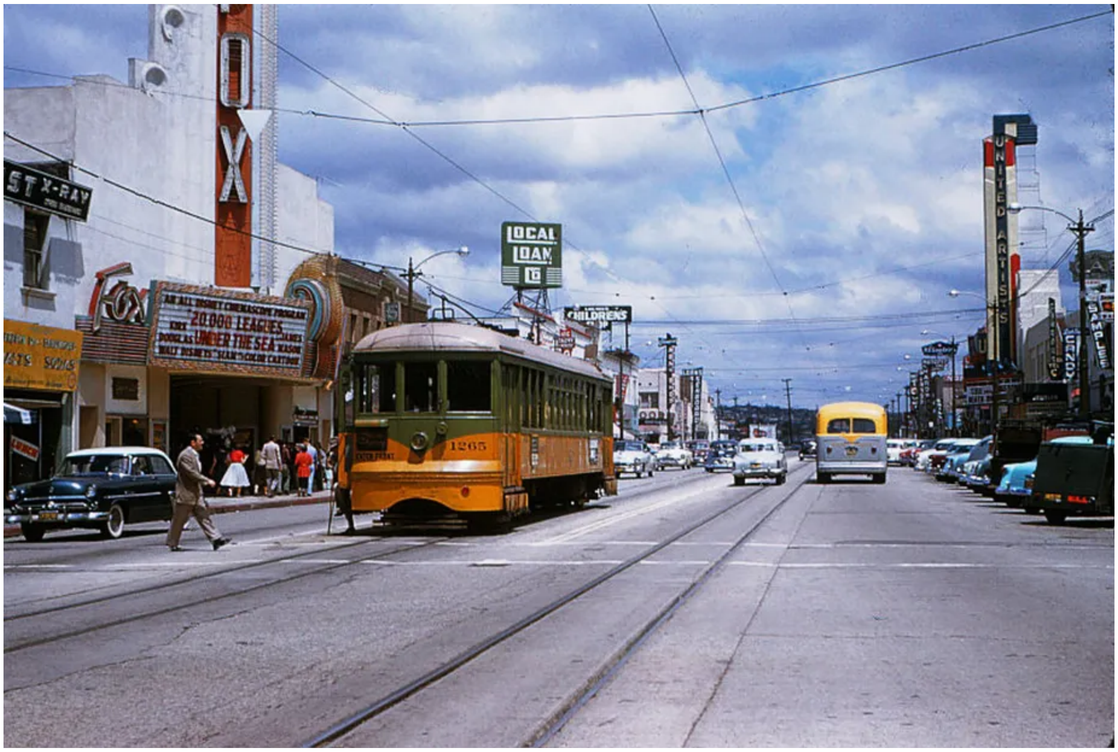
But in Los Angeles, the film's legacy might always be its story of a great conspiracy that destroyed a once-great public transit system.

In a climactic scene, the maniacal Judge Doom, envisioning a future of "gas stations, inexpensive motels, [and] restaurants that serve rapidly prepared food," confesses his plan to force Angelenos to embrace the freeway.

"I bought the Red Car so I could dismantle it," he proclaims.

The plot is a clear nod to one of LA's most enduring conspiracy theories: that an alliance of companies pushing an auto-centric future for Los Angeles schemed to bring down its sprawling rail network.

In a nutshell, the theory goes like this: Back in 1945, a sinister corporation called National City Lines took over the Los Angeles Railway, which served most of the central city. Then, over the course of the next two decades, LA's extensive streetcar network was eliminated and the city's iconic red and yellow trolleys were replaced with shiny new buses.



A Yellow Car trolley rolls through Inglewood in 1955. | Alan Weeks/Metro Library and Archive

The principal investors in National City Lines? None other than General Motors (a leading bus maker as well as an automobile retailer), Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, Standard Oil of California (now Chevron), and Phillips Petroleum.

The streetcar system, as the theory goes, was deliberately destroyed by the companies who stood to gain the most from its demise. Not only would this facilitate the sale of buses, it would induce greater demand for automobiles—along with tires and oil.

Ethan Elkind, director of the climate program at the Center for Law, Energy and the Environment at UC Berkeley and author of *Railtown*, tells Curbed that the theory is widespread enough that he's regularly asked about it at transit-related events in Los Angeles.

Plenty of people, he says, "want someone to blame for the situation that they're in, and this is a convenient way to blame a clear enemy."

The basis for the idea that GM and others "killed the streetcar" comes largely from testimony before the U.S. Senate by antitrust lawyer Bradford C. Snell. In 1974, when thick layers of smog routinely blanketed Los Angeles, Snell argued that "General Motors and allied highway interests acquired the local transit companies, scrapped the pollution-free electric trains, tore down the power transmission lines, ripped up the tracks, and placed GM motor buses on already congested LA streets."

It's a claim that's more convincing given that the companies were convicted in 1949 of conspiring to monopolize bus and equipment sales to National City Lines. On a very basic level, a "conspiracy" was at the heart of the National City Lines business plan.

Did it go beyond shutting other automakers out of the bus-selling business?

In a 1998 essay debunking the streetcar conspiracy, Portland State University researcher Martha Bianco acknowledges that GM and its partner companies engaged in an "aggressive campaign" to sell public transportation equipment to companies that were otherwise reluctant to purchase it.

Doing this involved buying up electric trolley operators like the Los Angeles Railway, operator of the Yellow Cars (National City Lines never purchased the Pacific Electric Red Car system).

But Bianco points out that this plan wouldn't have been feasible if the streetcar companies National City Lines purchased weren't already struggling.

By the 1930s, LA's streetcars had become wildly unprofitable and were quickly losing riders. In *Transport of Delight*, Jonathan Richmond points out that the Pacific Electric company managed to turn a profit in only one year between 1913 and the beginning of World War II.

During the war years, transit ridership spiked because of government gas rationing. But the streetcars emptied out again in peacetime. Between 1945 and 1951, the number of riders carried each year fell by nearly 80 million.

Cheaper to operate and requiring less maintenance, buses began phasing out the streetcars very early. As Richmond points out, in 1926, 15 percent of the total miles traveled by Pacific Electric riders was along bus routes; that share would more than double by 1939.

By the time that National City Lines entered the picture, the dismantling of the streetcar system was well underway.

Discarded streetcars sit piled up at a scrapyard.

Elkind notes that streetcar service became increasingly unreliable as the automobile grew more popular. With more cars on the road, the streetcars, which were bound to the same traffic rules as cars, slowed to a crawl.

Richmond points out that a ride on Pacific Electric's Long Beach Line took just 41 minutes in 1910. By 1954, it was up to a full hour, with trains regularly arriving up to 30 minutes behind schedule.

The problem was compounded by the sprawling urban geography of the Los Angeles region—largely a byproduct of the streetcar system itself.

The wily Henry Huntington, who was at one time the proprietor of both the Pacific Electric and the Los Angeles Railway systems, built lines that rather conveniently brought people to-and-from large tracts of land where he was developing housing. For Huntington, developing an efficient and economically sustainable network of rail lines may not have been as much of a concern as unlocking the massive profit potential of his considerable real estate holdings.

As UCLA professor emeritus Martin Wachs points out in a 1984 essay, "The extent of the metropolitan region has not grown significantly since [1910]. And most of the more recent growth has consisted instead of filling in the spaces between outlying centers associated with important stations on the Pacific Electric."

The expansiveness of the original rail network allowed the region to accommodate a huge population increase (the number of residents of Los Angeles County grew from under 200,000 in 1900 to more than 2 million in 1930) while preserving low-density neighborhoods full of single-family homes.

That, in turn, made buses an attractive choice for transit operators; they were much cheaper than trains and could be easily rerouted as the urban area developed and rider demand shifted.

Elkind says the streetcar still could have been saved, but that "it would have taken some imagination and foresight on the part of the public to think, 'what if we did subsidize this transit service? We might be able to address some of the problems that we have and make it a better service.'"

Instead, local and state officials repeatedly punted on plans to finance badly needed infrastructure that could have helped salvage key portions of the streetcar system.

A Pacific Electric-backed plan to build elevated tracks in Downtown Los Angeles was defeated at the ballot box in the 1920s. Instead, voters chose to fund Union Station, which gave the city a consolidated rail terminal but no infrastructure to speed up streetcar service.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, proposals for subway tunnels and new rapid transit lines simply fell by the wayside. Meanwhile, local leaders eagerly gobbled up federal funding to build new roads and, eventually, freeways.

These investments made automobiles even more appealing to Angelenos who could afford them, further cutting into the streetcars' ridership base.

Elkind explains that the demise of LA's streetcar system was less a conspiracy against the public and more a public failure to anticipate the smoggy, drive-thru future described by Judge Doom.

"The leadership wasn't there and the foresight wasn't there," he says.

RELATED

Mapping LA's Red Car system in its 1920s heyday

Into the depths of LA's old Red Car subway terminal

These old photos show the evolution of transportation in LA