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10 min read

## LA Railway Yellow Car exhibit, a trip back to the future of mass transit

Panels filled with faded photographs and single-spaced text retell the story of the lesser known Yellow Car electric trolley system that once dominated the streets of Los Angeles, until the automobile became king in Southern California.



Matthew Barrett, Director of the research library at Metro, shows a vintage map of the bus and trolley lines through Los Angeles on display at the Yellow Car exhibit at Union Station in Los Angeles Monday, November 28, 2022. The exhibit features photos and

history of the old transit and bus lines in Los Angeles up until 1963. (Photo by David Crane, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)

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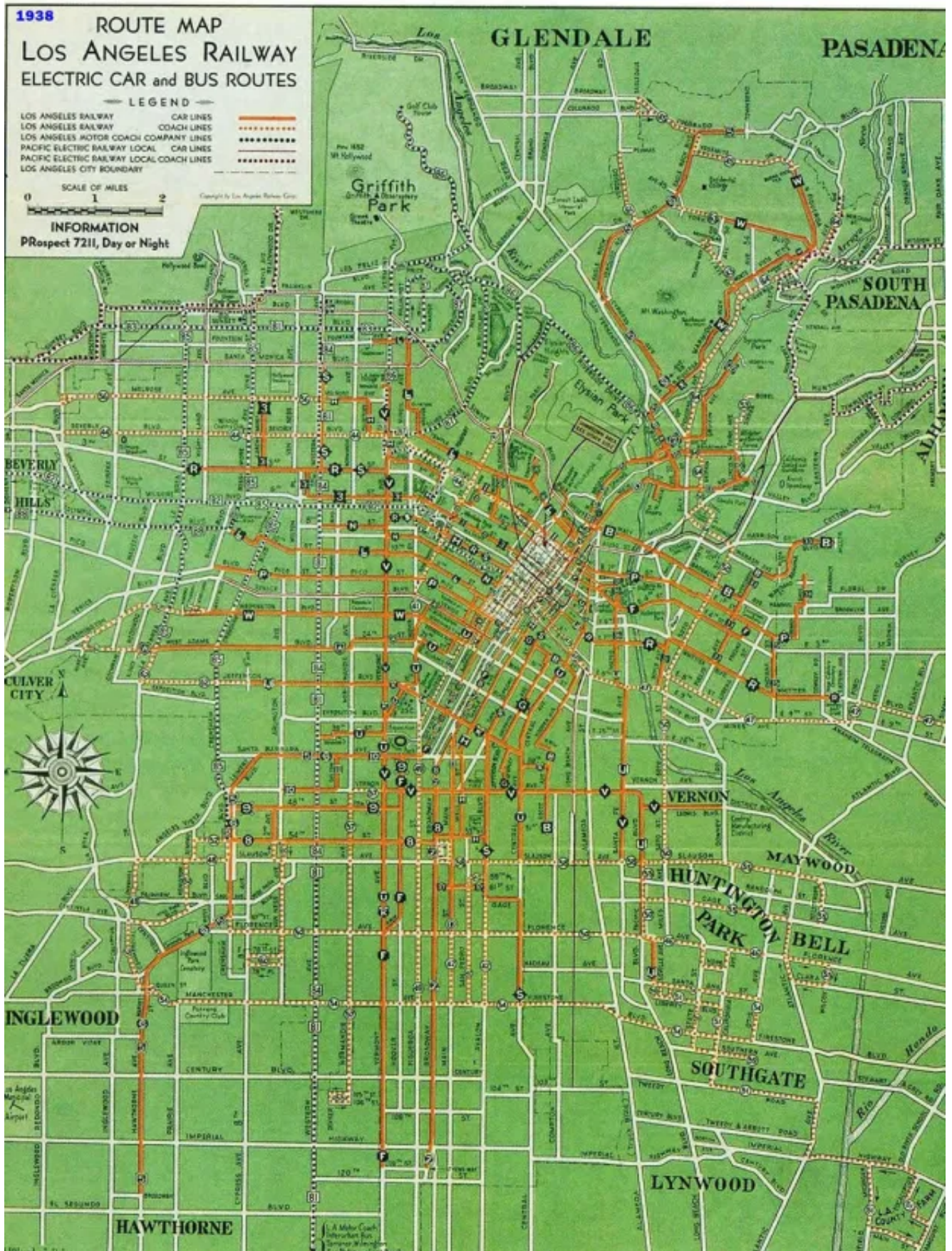
Matthew Barrett, Director of the research library at Metro, shows a vintage map of the bus and trolley lines through Los Angeles on display at the Yellow Car exhibit at Union Station in Los Angeles Monday, November 28, 2022. The exhibit features photos and history of the old transit and bus lines in Los Angeles up until 1963. (Photo by David Crane, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)

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In the waiting area of Los Angeles Union Station in downtown L.A., the new exhibit highlighting the Los Angeles Railway, dubbed LARy, points to a past when streetcars from the late 19th to the mid-20th century filled the core of Los Angeles, taking passengers from as far west as La Brea Avenue, south from Hawthorne and north to Eagle Rock.

When folks from the LA Metro Art Department and the Metro Dorothy Peyton Gray Transportation Library and Archive designed the display, they discovered the exhibit was just as much a beacon for today's modern subways and light-rail lines as it was an homage to a glorious mass transit past.

"When we started looking at the map (of the L.A. Railway Lines circa 1935), it showed how Metro is trying to rebuild parts of the system that used to exist. So we are slowly doing that," said Heidi Zeller, senior manager for Metro's department of Cultural Programming and Communication Arts/Community Enrichment.



Map of the LARy Yellow Car routes, circa 1935 (From the exhibit at LA's Union Station).

Asphalt highways now cover over most of the 642 miles of Yellow Car track that served nearly 256 million riders in its heyday in 1924 — more riders than the Pacific Electric Railway Red Cars that spanned four counties but had just 100 million riders in 1924. Decades later, Yellow Car track became the rights-of-way for modern rail and bus routes in Los Angeles County.



Breaking through a banner, the K Line or Crenshaw Line subway/light rail is officially open in Los Angeles on Friday, Oct. 7, 2022. (Photo by Brittany Murray, Press-Telegram/SCNG)

For example, a portion of the new K Line in South LA, also known as the Crenshaw Line, runs on a section of a Yellow Car route. A bus layover in Hancock Park was once a Yellow Car stop, explained Matthew Barrett, director of the research library and records for LA Metro and creator of the exhibit.

“We’ve been able to take advantage of the infrastructure from 100 years ago,” he said on Monday, Nov. 29, while pointing out exhibit highlights.

Metrolink, the commuter/passenger heavy rail system running across six Southern California counties, mostly bought up the old Red Car routes, since these routes took passengers into Balboa Island in Orange County, as well as the Inland Empire counties of Riverside and San Bernardino and the San Gabriel and San Fernando valleys.



A Los Angeles Railway Yellow Car rides southbound at Crenshaw Boulevard at 54th Street in 1954. (Photo by Alan Weeks)

But the LARy system mostly ran in the city center of Los Angeles. Yellow-painted streetcars stopped on every corner, taking city folks shopping, to church and doctor's appointments. One specially designed car carried the bodies of deceased loved ones to LA-area cemeteries, such as the Inglewood Park Cemetery.

Alan Weeks, 90, of Eagle Rock, who has fond memories of riding during World War II, called the system "the work horse" of the two lines. His mother took the family car to her factory job, while his father rode the trolley to his work place at the U.S. Postal Service.

Weeks would then take the trolley to school, Audubon Junior High off Crenshaw Boulevard near Leimert Boulevard and Stocker Street.



Train buff Alan Weeks holds an old Yellow Car sign at his home in Eagle Rock Tuesday, Nov 29, 2022. (Photo by Hans Gutknecht, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)

“When I would get off from school I’d get an ice cream cone,” he said, adding that weekends made for different trips. “My mom took me on the trolley when she would go downtown. I was 8 or 9 years old. We went to Main Street to Bullock’s,” he said.

Weeks, who retired from a career at MTA as a scheduler, remembers getting to know a trolley operator as a young boy because he rode the trolley so often.

“The motorman stopped before he got to Crenshaw Boulevard and said, ‘Don’t get off the car. Stay with me.’ He said: ‘I want you to operate the car for the next block.’ I knew how to do it from watching him. I felt like I was in heaven,” recalled Weeks.

While the Pacific Electric Red Cars are better known, thanks in part to being featured in the 1988 Disney movie “Who Framed Roger Rabbit,” the LARy gets little attention. Barrett said he knows of only two books written about the inner-city L.A. Railway. This is the first exhibit on the L.A. Railway Yellow Cars put on by LA Metro.

“The Yellow Cars are the un-remembered story,” Barrett said. “I felt like it was a story that most people didn’t understand, especially after we were given the urban mythology of the Red Car, I thought this story deserved to be told.”

LARy was launched in 1895, then was bought by rail tycoon Henry E. Huntington in 1898. Huntington and others merged all the smaller rail companies into two operations, the Pacific Electric Railway and LARy. Later, the two systems launched L.A.’s bus system with the first bus service in 1923 on Western Avenue.

The stories put on display are intertwined with a complicated history of what eventually became the world’s largest electric trolley system, and later to become the world’s largest highway system. In 1928, about 50% of Angelenos owned a car, a tipping point in the changeover to automobiles gliding on thousands of miles of concrete highways and freeways.

The Huntington estate sold the lines in 1945. L.A. Transit Lines was bought by the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transit Authority in 1951, a precursor to LA Metro. The transit agency retired the last Red Car and Yellow Car trolley on March 31, 1963. Only buses remained as mass transit until Proposition A was passed in L.A. County, which raised tax revenues for new rail. Prop. A eventually funded the first modern rail, the Blue Line (now the A Line) from L.A. to Long Beach in 1990.

Barrett puts no faith in conspiracy theories, which say the oil companies and tire manufacturers killed the trolley lines.

Some point to the economics of keeping up electric power plants. Others said the automobile became a status symbol of personal wealth.

When a Yellow Car line was installed to serve the Beverly Hills Hotel in 1911, it failed shortly after the hotel opened, Barrett said. “Wealthy people didn’t want to be seen arriving on a train. They wanted to be seen arriving in a car,” he said.

Zeller said car culture grew along with the economic boom of the 1950s. It also fit well with Southern California life. “Our climate was different. You could have your convertible with the top down and your hair flowing in the breeze,” she said.

Even buses grew more popular. The early transit companies launched a double-decker bus that was open on top. Barrett said his grandmother told him she’d take it to the Coconut Grove at the Ambassador Hotel. As the open-air bus approached, she could hear the orchestra playing from her seat.

Aside from being the first rail system in L.A., LARy was also known for hiring women and minority trolley operators — especially during WWII when the men were overseas fighting in the war. One large photo shows the “Motor Manettes” in training to be motor women.

LARy hired the first Black transit operator, Arcola Philpott, who operated a streetcar. Philpott and her husband came here from Chicago. When her husband was drafted, she went to work from 1944-1946, Bartlett said. In those days, the rules said a woman operator had to give up her job when men came back from the war, he added.

“It was a great system, it really was,” said Weeks, who has a collection of photos of nearly every Red Car and Yellow Car that ever ran, including some in the exhibit. He rode one of the last Yellow Cars in 1961, saying the ride felt like a funeral. “It was the end of an era,” he said.

With the funding from three more tax measures approved by L.A. County voters since Prop. A, Metro has completed seven rail lines, along with several bus-rapid-transit systems. The agency is nearly finished with two more, the Regional Connector in Downtown L.A. to Bunker Hill and the extension of the Purple (D Line) to Westwood under Wilshire Boulevard, though both have been fraught with delays. Several more light rail and subway lines are in the planning stages.



“What I find interesting is 100 years later, the areas that worked well for rail then, worked well for rail now,” Barrett said.

The exhibit opened on Nov. 21. It runs through the spring, with no exact end date, Zeller said.

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