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From the Archives of the Dorothy Peyton Gray Transportation Library: In honor of both Black History month of February and Women's History month of March, Library Administrator Matthew Barrett and Archivist Jim Walker of the Dorothy Peyton Gray Transportation Library went digging through the archives searching for the names and photos of Los Angeles' first women and African American bus and rail operators. "We felt it was important to recall the part our own local history played in the national workplace and civil rights movements," said Barrett. ([Sources](#)) If you have more to add to this material, or have photos, facts, or family histories to share, please contact Matthew Barrett or Jim Walker in the Dorothy Peyton Gray Library and Archives.

[Part II:](#) The first African-American Motormen. PLUS! The first African-American Motorman was a woman!



Chief Instructor Elrod in 1942 with Motormanettes Irene Stevens, Helen Blevins, Lorena Weaver, Joan English and others.

A Piece of History of Transit in Los Angeles: First Women Operators were called *Motormanettes*

- aka: *Conductorettes*, *Coachettes* and *Driverettes*

By MATTHEW BARRETT

(March 23, 2005) The first reported instance of a woman working on Los Angeles streetcars occurred during World War I, in May of 1918. She was recruited from the Los Angeles Railway's office help. She worked as a conductor collecting fares and making change.

At that time, both a motorman and a conductor staffed streetcars. The experiment of a female conductor was short-lived. Privately run electric railway companies across the country adopted "only as a last resort" or "emergency only" policies when it came to hiring women.

The Amalgamated Association of Street and Electric Railway Employees of America openly stated that "it wasn't time yet" and "streetcars were no place for women." However, union policy noted that if it did become necessary to hire women to replace men drafted into the military, women working on streetcars must have exactly the same entitlements, pay and treatment as the men they replaced.

Women on board

It took until World War II for the door that opened just a crack in 1918 to finally open wide. Beginning in September 1942, the privately owned and operated Los Angeles Railway (1911-1945) began hiring women as streetcar and bus operators on a trial basis.

The test turned out to be so successful that they soon hired over 300 women as Motormen, Conductors and Coach Operators to replace men drafted during World War II.

They were called Motormanettes, Conductorettes, Coachettes and Driverettes. The employment requirements: age 21-40, weight 120-140, and height 5'3"-5'10."

Initially, women worked out of just one division. Since women hadn't previously been a regular part of the operating division workforce, restroom facilities were not adequate.



Motormanette Joan English in 1942.



Circa 1942 - Bertha Durborrow, flier and member of the

Women can drive!

With the success women showed as operators, the situation was quickly remedied. They were trained and evaluated exactly the same as the men they replaced, and California State law was subsequently changed to eliminate certain employment restrictions on women.

Los Angeles Railway was the lead transit agency that hired women as motormen. San Diego Electric Railway followed soon

Forth Fighter Command, Army Air Force, said driving a bus is much harder than flying a plane because you have to depend on the other fellow's tactics. Coming to a stop on a bus has the same feeling as when coming to a landing in a plane.

after as did other transit properties across the country.

They had all been waiting to see how

successful the Los Angeles Railway experiment would be.

C.E. Morgan, manager of Los Angeles Railway operations in 1942, was quoted as saying: "We've been really amazed to see how well most women work into the mechanical phases of the job. Some of them actually master the (streetcar) controls faster than do men. They operate smoothly and, in most cases, they're very good from a safety standpoint."

Celebrity status

Women operators were featured as interview guests on Hollywood based radio programs with Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra and other radio entertainers. Performing what had been traditionally men's jobs was a novelty; many also saw working women as good for the country's wartime morale.

The first women hired by Los Angeles Railway were Helen Blevins, Lorena Weaver, Frances Tigert and Irene Stevens. *Two Bells*, the Los Angeles Railway employee magazine, saluted them in 1943 on their one-year anniversary as "pioneers in a brand new field" for women.

A group of Motormanettes pose for this publicity photo in 1943.



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