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Resources

[Safety](#)[Pressroom](#) (web)[Ask the CEO](#)[CEO Forum](#)[Employee Recognition](#)[Employee Activities](#)[Metro Projects](#)[Facts at a Glance](#)
(web)[Archives](#)[Events Calendar](#)[Research Center/
Library](#)[Metro Classifieds](#)[Bazaar](#)

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Aerial view of South Park Shops circa 1930s. The Los Angeles Transit Lines consolidated the facility in 1946. The brick car houses were eventually torn down.

South Park Shops Turn 100

By Matt Barrett and Jim Walker

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(March 17, 2006) Metro's South Park Shops celebrate 100 years of service this year. The facility was built by Los Angeles Railway and has served its successors (Los Angeles Transit Lines, Los Angeles MTA, SCRTD and LACMTA) ever since. The nine-acre site is located between 54th and 55th, Avalon and San Pedro, in south Los Angeles.

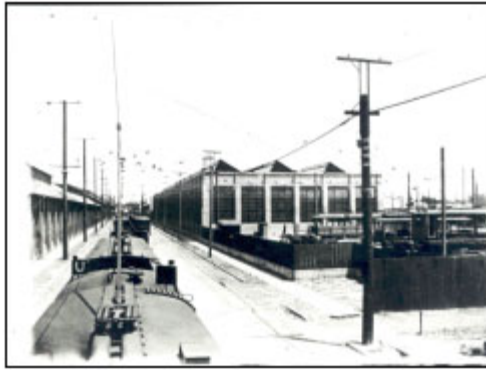
Los Angeles Railway was the original mass transit system within urban Los Angeles, the grandfather of today's bus system. It's fleet of 742 yellow and green streetcars running on 400 miles of track were the local compliment to long distance interurban routes of Pacific Electric's Red Cars.

At the turn of century it shared shop facilities with Pacific Electric at 7th and Alameda, but both LARY and PE were growing and both needed their own central heavy-maintenance facility to build, rebuild and service its streetcars.

When Los Angeles Railway bought the land that would later become South Park Shops in 1901, several buildings had to be cleared away, one was described as a "flophouse full of fleas", the other a brothel described as "not fit for any gentleman even of the lowest status."

Copies of the lands deeds, undersigned by Huntington himself, are contained in the MTA History Archives. Construction began in late 1903 and was completed in 1906 at a cost of \$300,000.

The facility originally included a blacksmith shop, machine shop, carpentry shop, upholstery shop, electrical and motor repair shop, oil house, general repair shop, 36-track paint shop and storeroom. A transfer table made track connections.



South Park Shops circa 1920s. Looking east from San Pedro St. Streetcars were manufactured there and the fleet was serviced in the facility's shops.

In 1922 a body shop with 21 tracks was built. All heavy streetcar work was centralized at South Park: wreck repair, major overhauls, repainting, rebuilding, traction motor work, truck rebuilding, wiring and control overhauling. Each division was supplied from the main storeroom at South Park.

In addition to servicing Los Angeles Railway's fleet of some 675 streetcars, the facility also manufactured over 60 streetcars from the ground up and had planned to construct many more. The shops handled a great deal of manufacturing and fabricating jobs.

All of this capability was put in place because Los Angeles Railway officials, who included Henry E. Huntington, believed they could do just a good a job at far less cost, and not be subject to someone else delivery schedule.

Los Angeles Transit Lines took over in 1944.

Los Angeles Railway was sold to Los Angeles Transit Lines in 1944. In 1946, the new company decided South Park was too big and the older part seen at the right in the photo above, was consolidated with the newer facility.

The large lot was sold off and eventually its brick car houses were torn down. A great deal of machinery, dies, patterns and tools were scrapped or sold as Los Angeles Transit Lines began using outside suppliers.

Los Angeles Railway's track miles peaked around 1925, and ridership peaked during WWII due to tire shortages and gas rationing.

Making the switch from streetcars to freeways

By 1955, however, the streetcar era was waning; General Motors had perfected the 45-seat diesel motorbus, while a booming economy fueled demand for more automobiles and freeways.

After obtaining the facility in its purchase of Los Angeles Transit Lines, it was refurbished by the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transit Authority (1958-1964) to accommodate buses and by 1963, the overhead wires were removed, rails paved over, the transfer table removed and its pit filled in and paved.

South Park functioned as the Southern California Rapid Transit District (1964-1993) Central Maintenance Facility for its fleet of 2,400 diesel, gas and propane buses, as well as many other non-revenue vehicles.

A new state of the art central maintenance facility, now known as the

Regional Rebuild Center, was opened by SCRTD on July 24, 1987. Since 1987, South Park Shops has housed the sign shop, stops and zones, storage, and surplus property sales.

Metro is currently talking with the City of Los Angeles about the possible sale of South Park. The more than nine acre site would become an urban wetlands park, helping Los Angeles improve its ratio of public parks to population. The park will also include an urban runoff recycling and treatment facility providing clean water to help sustain the wetlands park.

South Park Shops played a historic role in both organized labor and civil rights history in Los Angeles

Prior to the election of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932, Los Angeles prided itself on being an open shop city and labor unions were small.

Over the years there had been some strikes that ended with strikers being discharged.

During the Great Depression and the adoption of the National Industrial Recovery Act, labor unions became prominent and Los Angeles Railway finally, after another strike and some violence, relented on its opposition.

Maintenance workers voted to be represented by the Amalgamated Transit Union, and its first contract was signed in 1937 between Los Angeles Railway Corporation and the Transportation Union of California, Local #2. ATU continues to represent mechanics and maintenance workers today.

That first ATU contract resides in the Dorothy Peyton Gray Transportation Library and Archive.

During WWII, Los Angeles Railway was hesitant about implementing President Roosevelt's Executive Order 8802 of 1941 that banned racial discrimination in war related industries, which included the nation's transit systems carrying workers to critical manufacturing jobs.

Reverend Clayton Russell's Victory Committee used the power of radio and war bond rallies to get the support of the Los Angeles community in pressuring Los Angeles Railway to hire blacks as motormen and conductors.

In January 1943, Los Angeles Railway promised Los Angeles Mayor Bowron and the Victory Committee that not only would it hire African-Americans as motormen and conductors, but twenty five black employees would be promoted from menial jobs to mechanics.

Within a few months, a reaction developed on the part of white employees and a sit down protest against the promotions of black employees was staged at South Park.

At first Los Angeles Railway gave in and demoted those twenty five employees back to their original titles, but the President's War Manpower Commission, the NAACP, Mayor Bowron, the AFL and CIO intervened and Los Angeles Railway rescinded the demotions.

Workplace equality had a rocky start.

Sources:

- *Interurbans*, Special No. 11
- *The Yellow Cars of Los Angeles* by Jim Walker
- *The Development of Leadership and Organization Building in the Black Community of Los Angeles from 1900 through World War II* by Frederick Anderson