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L.A.'s First Freeways

By Nathan Masters

August 15, 2012

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History & Society

History

Perceptions may be changing with the gradual return to Los Angeles of fixed rail transit, but from today's vantage point, the city's freeways almost seem like an inevitable feature of the landscape. As "Saturday Night Live" **recently parodied**, for many of us freeways are the region's primary geographical reference points. They **delineate boundaries** between neighborhoods, **threaten to cripple regional transportation** when they close, and -- as commentators from Joan Didion to Steve Martin have observed -- possess mythic significance.

But there was a time when, far from being a defining characteristic of the city's landscape, freeways were merely an experimental impulse of traffic engineers.

In the 1930s, L.A.'s transportation planners and engineers were mired in a stalemate with the city's automotive traffic. Based on the recommendations of Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., Harland Bartholomew, and Charles Henry Cheney in their 1924 "Major Traffic Street Plan" -- **available online through the Metro Transportation Library and Archive** -- the city had already widened and extended key thoroughfares, essentially overlaying a system of modern arterial boulevards atop the city's original ad hoc network of automobile roads. But as David Brodsky recounts in his 1981 paean, "**L.A. Freeway: An Appreciative Essay**," the city's growing population and strong attachment to the motorcar, combined with the long decline of the interurban and urban trolley systems, rendered each major road-building initiative obsolete by the time it was completed.

Traffic engineers tried to break the impasse by introducing a radical new concept: roads

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Almon and his staff found guidance in several sources. Parkways and proto freeways in New York, Detroit, and Chicago provided examples of basic freeway design elements in use, and Olmsted, Bartholomew, and Cheney had included an appendix that proposed grade-separation as a solution to traffic congestion in their 1924 report.

The Automobile Club of Southern California was also at work on **its landmark 1937 "Traffic Survey,"** which recommended an extensive system of what, before the term "freeway" had gained circulation, it called motorways. As the Auto Club envisioned them, these motorways featured cloverleaf interchanges, on-ramps and off-ramps, and wide rights-of-way in rural and suburban areas. Through business districts, the report called for elevated highways to tunnel straight through special-purpose "motorway buildings."

Artist's rendering of a motorway through a residential district. From the Automobile Club of Southern California's Traffic Survey, 1937. Courtesy of the Metro Transportation Library and Archive.

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Artist's rendering of a motorway through a business district, showing a proposal for special-purpose motorway buildings. From the Automobile Club of Southern California's Traffic Survey, 1937. Courtesy of the Metro Transportation Library and Archive.

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The 1924 Major Traffic Street Plan proposed a parkway along the Arroyo Seco and included an appendix on grade-separation. Courtesy of Metro Transportation Library and Archive.

On November 12, 1933, the city announced its first major effort to implement these new ideas in highway design. The Arroyo Seco Parkway is usually credited as L.A.'s first freeway, but **a four-mile stretch of Ramona Boulevard might deserve that distinction instead**. Built between 1933 and 1935 at a cost of \$877,000, the highway linked downtown Los Angeles to the communities of the southern San Gabriel Valley. It offered all the features of a modern freeway except -- at first -- a center divider. Nine bridges carried cross-traffic safely over the roadway, and along much of the stretch driveways to adjacent properties were prohibited. (Technically, a freeway is a highway to which abutting owners have no right of access.)

The roadway, dubbed the "Air Line route," was seen as a major achievement in traffic design.

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But the Air Line's poor safety record tarnished enthusiasm for the roadway, which opened on April 20, 1935. With no center divider, the freeway recorded 77 injuries in its first 40 months. In response, the city added a steel center guardrail that featured black-and-white striping, reflective paneling, and blinking amber lights placed at 100-foot intervals.

1935 view of the Ramona Boulevard freeway approaching the Los Angeles County General Hospital. Courtesy of the Title Insurance and Trust / C.C. Pierce Photography Collection, USC Libraries.

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The Ramona Boulevard freeway route passes underneath State Street near Boyle Heights.
Courtesy of the California Historical Society Collection, USC Libraries.

Installed in 1938, the guardrail successfully reduced injuries on Ramona Boulevard seemed to allay concerns about the freeway's safety, for Los Angeles soon launched two more major freeway construction projects.

Built at a cost of \$1.5 million and partly financed by the federal Public Works Administration (PWA), the two-mile Cahuenga Pass Freeway eliminated a notorious bottleneck at the place where one of the state's first highways -- **El Camino Real** -- crossed the Santa Monica Mountains. The freeway replaced a narrow, winding road between Hollywood and the San Fernando Valley with an eight-lane superhighway. A pair of Pacific Electric rails ran down the freeway's center divider.

The first mile of the freeway opened on June 15, 1940. California Governor Culbert Olson and Los Angeles Mayor Fletcher Bowron presided over a star-studded dedication ceremony that recalled the freeway's historical precursors with a procession of horses, stagecoaches, and antique automobiles.

The state later removed the Pacific Electric tracks and incorporated the Cahuenga Pass Freeway into the longer Hollywood (US-101) Freeway.

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The tunnel in the right foreground is an example of the grade-separation used in the Cahuenga Pass Freeway. Since closed, it once extended Highland Blvd. to the north, under the freeway. Courtesy of the Automobile Club of Southern California Archives.

Postcard showing the Cahuenga Pass Freeway in 1947. Courtesy of the Werner Von Boltensern Postcard Collection, Department of Archives and Special Collections, Loyola Marymount University Library.

Ramona Boulevard and the Cahuenga Pass Freeway may have preceded it, but the Arroyo Seco Parkway was the most impressive of L.A.'s early superhighways. The \$6

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Its extensive landscaping and meandering path preserved elements of the parkway concept, but its banked curves and signs directing slower traffic to the right lane signaled that a new breed of highway had arrived. The first Highland Park segment opened on July 20, 1940, with no posted speed limit. Motorcycle officers, instructed only to prevent "reckless driving," told the Times that the highway "may actually prove too fast for older machines not made for sustained high speed."

Built with funding from the state, the city of Los Angeles, the Depression-era PWA and Works Progress Administration, and gasoline taxes from Los Angeles and South Pasadena, the new freeway originally extended from Glenarm Street in Pasadena to the Figueroa Street Tunnels; its southern terminus would not reach downtown L.A. for several years.

After less than three years of construction, the Arroyo Seco officially opened on December 30, 1940 -- just in time for Pasadena's Tournament of Roses festivities. Rose Queen Sally Stanton joined public officials in dedicating the parkway, which Governor Olson praised for providing "easy, nerve-free comfort and safety."

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Opening ceremony for the Arroyo Seco Parkway on December 30, 1940. Rose Queen Sally Stanton was joined by Governor Culbert Olson. Courtesy of the Herald-Examiner Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

The first Highland Park segment of the Arroyo Seco Parkway on its opening day, July 20, 1940. Courtesy of the Herald-Examiner Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

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The Arroyo Seco Parkway after its completion in 1940. Courtesy of the Automobile Club of Southern California Archives.

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1940 postcard of the Arroyo Seco Parkway. Courtesy of the Werner Von Boltzenstern Postcard Collection, Department of Archives and Special Collections, Loyola Marymount University Library.

The Ramona Boulevard proto-freeway, meanwhile, was widened and partially rebuilt in the early 1940s as the Ramona Freeway. Motorists still follow its path today when they approach downtown L.A. on the San Bernardino (I-10) Freeway.

Though feted by movie stars and hailed as marvels of modern engineering, L.A.'s first freeways remained isolated, experimental stretches of highway for many years. Financial constraints were the culprit. A major source of funding dried up in 1943, when both federal agencies that funded the Cahuenga Pass and Arroyo Seco Projects were dissolved. With neither the state nor local municipalities willing to shoulder the costs of building a regional freeway system, new construction almost ground to a halt.

Finally, in 1947, the California passed the Collier-Burns Highway Act. The legislation introduced a 1.5 cent statewide fuel tax for new highway construction, ushering in the era of massive freeway construction and permanently altering the Southern California landscape.

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