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How Public Transit Helped the 1932 Olympics Move Around Los Angeles

By Robert Petersen

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L.A.'s Olympic Aspirations

Energy

History



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The recent announcement that Los Angeles will host the 2028 Summer Olympics has put a spotlight on the city’s public transportation system. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Metro) even issued a map showing what the rail system will look like at the time of the games. In fact, in the debate over whether to host the 2024 or 2028 games, some argued that the later date was preferable because it would allow more time to complete proposed transit projects, such as the LAX People Mover. Of course, adding a million or so visitors to a city of 4 million people (and a county of 10 million) raises the specter of a transportation nightmare. But this concern was also present back in 1932, when a much smaller Los Angeles hosted its first Olympic Games.

The Summer Games of the Tenth Olympiad were held in Los Angeles from July 30 through Aug. 14, 1932, in the midst of the Great Depression. The privilege of hosting the games was given to the upstart city because it was the only city that submitted a bid. Nevertheless, the opportunity to host the games presented an opportunity for the little known city to shine on an international stage.

In 1932, as it did in the 1984, Los Angeles relied mostly on pre-existing facilities to house the various sporting events. In fact, only the swimming and rowing events necessitated the construction of new structures. The opening and closing ceremonies and track and field events were held at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, which was referred to as Olympic Stadium. Weightlifting, wrestling and boxing events were held at the Olympic Auditorium. Fencing was held at the State Armory of the 160th Infantry near the Coliseum. Equestrian Events were held at the Riviera Country Club. Cycling events were held at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena. And shooting events were held at the Los Angeles Police Department Pistol Range in Elysian Park.

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How Public Transit Helped the 1932 Olympics Move...

Lost LA

Food & Discovery

Admission pass for "Olympic Stadium," as the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum was known during the 1932 summer games, courtesy of the Occidental College Library.

The Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum hosts the opening ceremonies for 1932 Summer Olympics. Photo courtesy of the Dick Whittington Photography Collection, USC Libraries.

While the events were spread out around the city, the athletes were housed at two locations. All of the male athletes were housed in the Olympic Village in Baldwin Hills. The location was chosen after thermometers placed at various places throughout the city revealed the site to be ten degrees cooler than any other spot tested (officials were concerned that visiting athletes might find Southern California summers too hot). The female athletes, which constituted less than 10% of the total athletes, were housed at the Chapman Park Hotel on Wilshire Boulevard. According to the Organizing Committee, “feminine needs could be more completely met in some permanent type of residence.”

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How Public Transit Helped the 1932 Olympics Move...

[Lost LA](#)

[Food & Discovery](#)

~~with a service station and repair facilities. The flow of buses carrying athletes in and out~~
of the Village attracted thousands of interested spectators, especially in the early morning hours when the buses came and went at an average of one every minute. The number of spectators became so large that a regular bus line was created to transport spectators between downtown and the Village. By the end of the games, the buses for athletes and officials had covered a total of 83,360 miles and carried more than 68,000 passengers, all without causing a single event to be delayed.

Olympians arrive at the Baldwin Hills Olympic Village by way of a bus. Photo courtesy of the Security Pacific National Bank Collection – Los Angeles Public Library.

Traffic during the games was a significant concern for the city. The Organizing



How Public Transit Helped the 1932 Olympics Move...

Lost LA

Food & Discovery

accommodate this personnel need, the chief of police made an appeal to his officers to work 12-hour days instead of the usual eight and to postpone vacations. Because of these concessions, the LAPD was able to assign approximately 650 officers to Olympic traffic duty each day. To make up the difference, the Organizing Committee employed approximately 150 college students to assist the officers with traffic control.

Pursuant to the Traffic Plan, the principal streets leading to the Coliseum from downtown were made one-way for traffic going to the stadium before events and for traffic leaving the stadium after. All counter-traffic was diverted away from the immediate area. No parking was permitted on the main streets leading to the Coliseum and left hand turns were restricted.

During the Opening Ceremonies, hundreds of official cars and the 68 buses carrying nearly 2,000 athletes were able to travel in dedicated lanes, without stopping, through the dense traffic created by the 105,600 spectators going to the stadium. The running time of the buses from Olympic Village to the Colosseum averaged 10-12 minutes. The Olympic Committee happily noted that “not a single accident of any kind was reported involving any athlete or official” and that “traffic accidents actually decreased during this period in spite of the increased traffic caused by the Games.”

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How Public Transit Helped the 1932 Olympics Move...

Lost LA

Food & Discovery

1935 map of the Los Angeles Railway system, courtesy of the Metro Transportation Library and Archive.

Spectators wanting to attend Olympic events had a variety of public transportation options available to them. In fact, the official program of events urged the public to “travel via the Big Red Cars” of Pacific Electric Railway to enjoy “no traffic worries, nor parking nuisances or fees [and] money saving fares.” Luckily, many of the events were located along pre-existing transit lines. Multiple streetcar and bus lines ran by the Coliseum, including Los Angeles Railway electric streetcar lines on Vermont and Santa Barbara (now Martin Luther King). Pacific Electric streetcar lines took passengers down Sunset Boulevard and up Echo Park Avenue to Elysian Park where they could walk to the LAPD Pistol Range. A Pacific Electric bus line was available to take passengers to the Rose Bowl in Pasadena to watch the cycling events. Angelenos could take a Pacific Electric streetcar to Long Beach to watch the rowing events. And the Olympic Auditorium, which housed the boxing and wrestling events, was located along a Los Angeles Railway streetcar line that ran along Grand Avenue.

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How Public Transit Helped the 1932 Olympics Move...

[Lost LA](#)

[Food & Discovery](#)

Four years later, this 1936 Los Angeles Railway pass highlighted the American Olympic Track and Field Team tryouts at the Coliseum. Courtesy of the Wally G. Shidler Historical Collection of Southern California Ephemera.

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Lost LA

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Lost LA

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L.A.'s Little Manila district (around what is now Little Tokyo) bustled in the 1920s and 1930s and was a hub for Filipinos who began migrating in large numbers to Los Angeles in the early 20th century, until it was erased by redevelopment.

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Lost LA

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