

Roads Were Not Built For Cars

The blog

California Cycleway was scuppered by cars (street-cars, that is, not motor-cars)

by carltonreid / on December 22, 2013 / / posted in 1890s, American roads, Cycleways



The first elevated highway between Pasadena and Los Angeles was an ambitious toll-road built by one of Pasadena's richest residents. In the first year of the 20th Century this grade-separated highway towered over train tracks, road junctions and slow-poke users of the rutted roads beneath. The wooden trestle was billed as a "speedway" and was to provide a flat, fast, scenic route for Pasadena's thousands of cyclists, who could fly fifty feet high over the deepest section of the oak-studded Arroyo Seco river valley. The "ingenious scheme" was to be an uninterrupted "paradise for wheelmen."

The reality for the California Cycle Way turned out to be far different. Only the first mile-and-a-bit was erected, which wasn't long enough to attract paying customers.

Within just months of opening, the cycleway had become

a loss-making stub of a route rather than a profitable commuter cycling road for Pasadena's wealthy cyclists. Had it been built to length the year after it was first proposed, the cycleway could have been profitable and could have become the "splendid nine-mile track" that, in 1901, *Pearson's Magazine*, mistakenly, claimed it was.

Built with pine imported from Oregon, and painted green to be pleasing to the eye, the would-be superhighway had a lot going for it. For a start, it had high society support: it was constructed for a

Roads Were Not Built For Cars

The California Cycle Way was first mooted in 1896. "The idea was originated by Horace Dobbins...who is himself a wheelman," said the *Los Angeles Herald* which reported, in November 1896, that "A Wheelman's Dream May Materialize."

The cycleway was meant to run for nine miles from the upscale Hotel Green in Pasadena down to the centre of Los Angeles. The first one-mile-and-a-quarter opened to great fanfare on New Year's Day, 1900, as part of the route of that year's Tournament of the Roses parade. 350 bicycles, decorated with floral displays, took part in the parade and no doubt many of them were ridden down the wooden track by the 600 cyclists who took part in the cycleway's inaugural ride.

In 1899, *Scientific American* called Dobbins' route an "elaborate wheel way":

Pasadena and Los Angeles...are now connected by three railroads and one electric road. There was, however, no foot road for cyclists. The common wagon roads, with their dust and mud and ruts, had to be followed, which made cycling anything but pleasant. In spite of these drawbacks there was certain amount of bicycle riding between the two cities...there were at least 30,000 wheelmen in Los Angeles County alone. In view of these facts, Mr Horace M Dobbins of Pasadena organized what is known as the 'California Cycleway Company'. The capital was quickly forthcoming, and plans were drawn for an elevated speedway between the sister cities, which is to be exclusively devoted to cyclists...Cyclists will now be permitted to view the beautiful scenery without having to look out for ruts in the road.

Wide enough for four cyclists to ride side by side, with another nine feet available alongside to, one day, surface another lane, the great wooden cycleway made news around the world. In Britain, it featured on the front covers of a number of British national and regional newspapers, including the *Dundee Post* in July 1900. The newspaper's headline called it a "Curious cycleway" but remarked that similar cycleways ought to be constructed for Britain's "vast army of cyclists."

Why should not proper cycleways be built between towns of common interest where the roads are bad or the strain of traffic makes riding a burden? If...local authorities...would take a leaf out of the books of railway companies and construct a proper track they would build up a profitable source of revenue from that vast army of cyclists that increases hugely every year... The experiment has been tried in Southern California...and gives promise of a high degree of success.

Roads Were Not Built For Cars

downtown Los Angeles cost 25 cents, the cycleway cost 10 cents one way and 15 cents for all day use). Dobbins and Huntington's Pacific Electric railroad company would continue to fight over the rights-of-way for the cycleway, long after the cycleway had ceased to exist as a route for cyclists. The California Cycle Way Company secured an injunction against plans for new lines from Pacific Electric and, in turn, Pacific Electric tried to condemn that part of the cycleway which it wanted to cross. It wasn't until November 1902 that the two companies agreed to compromise.

By this time, cycling was very much on the wane in Pasadena and Los Angeles. The future, it seemed, was in fast public transit with the building of streetcar lines the sensible thing for investors to invest in.



A 1950s local newspaper report reminisced "Many Pasadena old-timers have happy memories of moonlight rides up and down that historic strip...the Cycleway was Pasadena's pride and joy."

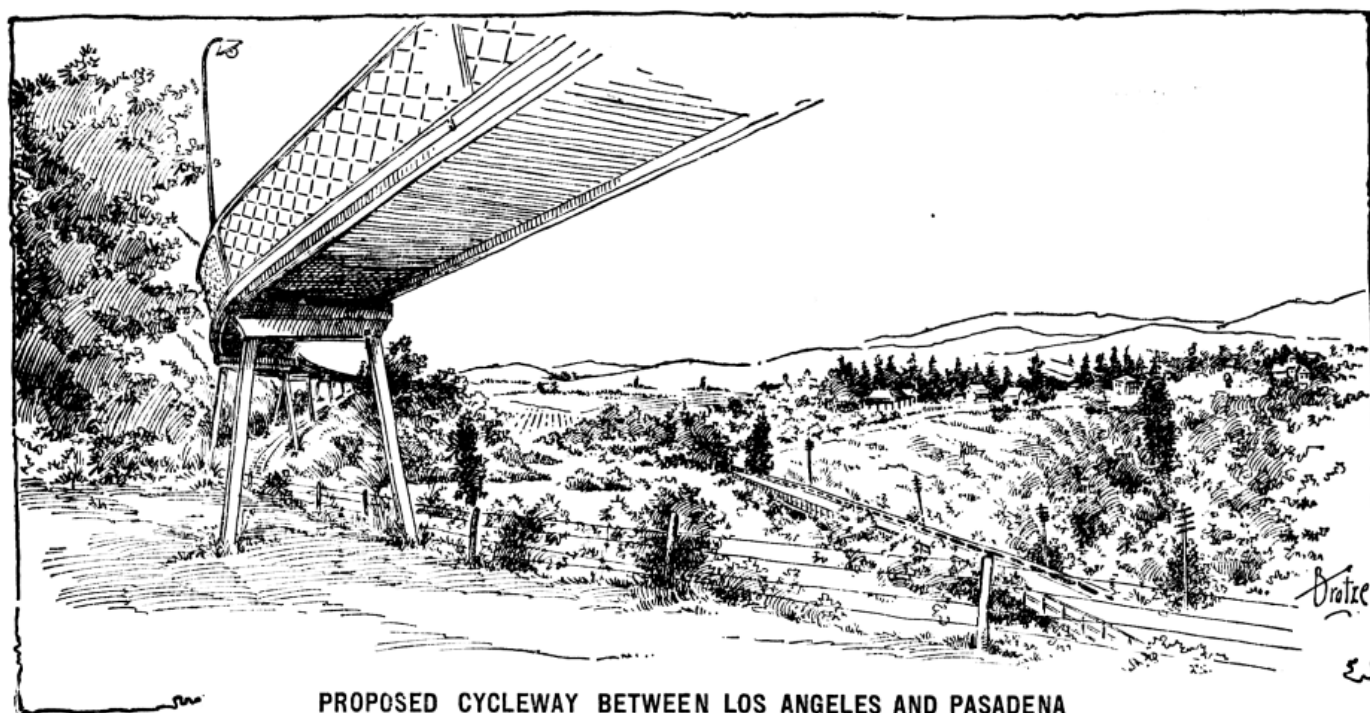
Pride and joy it may have been but, as a usable route, it was a short lived one. By August 1900 a local newspaper reported the "Cycleway will do no more work now..."

Because the truncated cycleway wasn't terribly long, didn't go where people wanted to go, and didn't have enough entry and exit points, it was of little practical use, and hence not used and not profitable. A built-to-length cycleway would have an income of approximately \$20,000 a month "if half of the wheelmen in two

Roads Were Not Built For Cars

Los Angeles Herald, in 1898 the city's 9000 residents owned 4000 bicycles, with the Los Angeles area having "fully forty thousand bicycles." Pasadena's many cyclists shunned the cycleway because its enforced short length made it more of a fairground attraction for hotel guests rather than a transportation option for locals.

Had the full nine miles been built in 1897 or 1898 the cycleway might have been a success. It would have been the quickest, slickest way to get from upper Pasadena to downtown Los Angeles (on rental, one-way bikes, if need be). Dobbins also imagined it would be used at the weekend as a fast, flat way of getting from downtown Los Angeles to the foothills of the Sierra Madre and San Gabriel mountains.



The plans for the cycleway had been ambitious. The idea was for it to be grade-separated, to fly over the rutted dirt roads of the city and to soar over the Arroyo Seco river. Its incandescent lamps, at fifty feet intervals, would make the snaking cycleway visible at night down in Los Angeles. There were also plans for the cycleway to snake past a lavish casino to be built in the Moorish style, complete with "a Swiss dairy...for the refreshment of the thirsty." Neither the casino, nor the Swiss dairy, ever got off the drawing board.

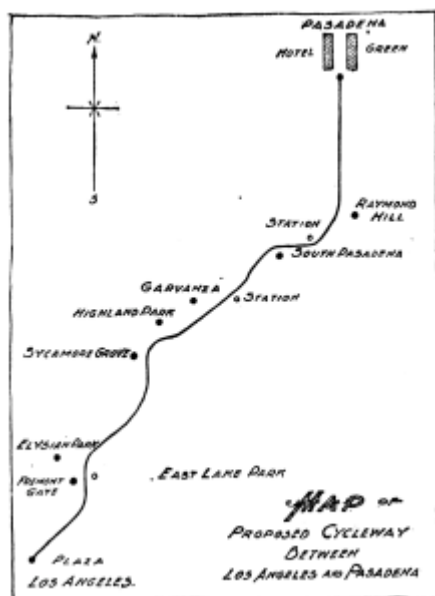
The cycleway's shortcomings would have been painfully obvious to Dobbins. Originally from Philadelphia and moneyed thanks to having a rich father (Richard Dobbins constructed the buildings for Philadelphia's 1876 Centennial celebrations), Dobbins had holidayed in Pasadena with his parents since 1888. The family later moved to Pasadena, and Dobbins Jnr bought real estate, some of which he developed and profited

Roads Were Not Built For Cars

Pasadena's Valley Hunt Club was founded by Eastern and Mid-Western wealthy industrialists who, in 1890, created the soon-to-be world famous Tournament of Roses parade, still America's premier New Year's day celebration. Dobbins was a Valley Hunt Club member, and was one of the directors of the committee which organised parades in the 1890s.

In 1895 Dobbins and his wife bought one of the mansions on Orange Grove Boulevard, Pasadena's "Millionaire's Row." At this prestigious address he would have rubbed shoulders with brewing magnate Adolphus Busch, David and Mary Gamble of Proctor & Gamble fame (and fortune), and chewing gum king William Wrigley Jr.

Dobbins had begun acquiring the rights-of-way down the Arroyo Seco valley at the height of the bicycling boom in 1896. He incorporated the California Cycle Way Company on August 23rd 1897. The company prospectus said the route would be open to "bicycles or other horseless vehicles." (Motor bicycles, rather than motor cars).



Dobbins was company president and majority stockholder. Other investors included Henry Markham, who had been governor of California two years previously; Ed Braley, owner of Pasadena's biggest and oldest bike shop, the Braley Bicycle Emporium (it's now a Scientology church); and 'Professor' Thaddeus Lowe, a Civil War balloonist who, in 1891, had helped create the Pasadena and Mount Wilson Railway Company which ran a seriously steep incline railway to the top of Mount Wilson.

From 1900 to 1901, Dobbins was chairman of Pasadena's City Board of Supervisors (precursor to the City Council, and hence mayor in all but name) but despite this leading role, and earlier elevated positions in the city's administration, he had been originally unable to secure permission for his cycleway during the first year of his company's incorporation. It took another city vote in 1898 before he got the required licence, a costly delay. Erection of the superstructure didn't start until November 1899. The Patton and Davies Lumber Company of Pasadena supplied the Oregon pine, and builders erected the one and a quarter mile stretch of cycleway in just three months (grading cuts through the foothills had taken place in the two years beforehand).[16] On the first day of construction, the *Pasadena Daily Evening Star* said the "first section" of the cycleway would be "rushed to completion."

Roads Were Not Built For Cars

hotel read "Automobiles are positively not allowed on these grounds."

Another sign outside the hotel pointed the way to the Dobbins' Cycleway, which is how the route was known locally. To the outside world it was the Great California Cycleway and it was claimed to be a rip-roaring success. In September 1901 the mass-circulation *Pearson's Magazine* devoted three pages to the cycleway.

"On this splendid track cyclists may now enjoy the very poetry of wheeling," rhapsodied T.D. Denham.

At Pasadena they may mount their cycles and sail down to Los Angeles without so much as touching the pedals, even though the gradient is extremely slight. The way lies for the most part along the east bank of the Arroyo Seco, giving a fine view of this wooded stream, and skirting the foot of the neighboring oak-covered hills. The surface is perfectly free from all dust and mud, and nervous cyclists find the track safer than the widest roads, for there are no horses to avoid, no trains or trolley-cars, no stray dogs or wandering children.

Denham claimed that "industrial activity will be so quickened [by this splendid track] that the country will enjoy such prosperity as it has never known."

His article stated that the California Cycleway was nine miles long, as did most of the other press reports about the structure. Given that the cycleway had closed for business a year before, it's rather strange *Pearson's Magazine* printed such a misleading piece (the magazine also reported as fact the supposed existence of the casino and the Swiss dairy).

Pearson's wasn't totally wrong: the cycleway did exist in September 1901 and it was probably still used (the moonlight trips mentioned by the 1950s newspaper article may have been illicit rides, and dangerous, too: "A Mexican boy took hold of a live electric wire on the cycleway and received a shock which made him unconscious," reported the *Herald* in 1906).

Roads Were Not Built For Cars



In March 1901 a local newspaper reported that the cycleway was “to come down from Central Park tract” and that Dobbins “agrees to turn his franchise back to the city free of cost-to be paid only what that section of the structure cost.”

In October 1900 Dobbins told the *Los Angeles Times*: “I have concluded that we are a little ahead of time on this cycleway. Wheelmen have not evidenced enough interest in it...”

There are photos of the cycleway still standing in 1905 although by 1906 a newspaper said it was “an eyesore to some people.” The following year the *Los Angeles Herald* said the “old wooden trestle” was “objectionable” and that Dobbins had applied for it to be pulled down. Permission wasn’t granted because the city council believed Dobbins “desires to use the old right of way for other purposes.” He did: he wanted to build a rail road.

Roads Were Not Built For Cars

governor Culbert L. Olson declared it to be the “first freeway in the West.”

The 45-mph Parkway used short stretches of the route of the former cycleway. Today, there’s a modern bike-way that follows some of the flood control channels down the Arroyo Seco and this bike-way also uses a few short stretches of the Dobbins’ Cycleway route.

In 1958, Pasadena mayor Harrison R Baker said Dobbins was “way out in front of all of us” in dreaming up what would become, in part, the main asphalt route between Pasadena and Los Angeles.

An urban myth has since grown up around the California Cycleway. Newspapers and blogs claim the cycleway was killed off by the motor car. “The horseless carriage...caused the demise of the bikeway,” wrote the Public Information Officer for the City of Pasadena on her 2009 blog. In 2005, a feature for the *Pasadena Star News* claimed “Automobiles spelled doom for the cycleway.”

Numerous online mentions of the cycleway have trotted out the same angle. In January 2014, the architecture correspondent for *The Guardian* even claimed the structure, abandoned in 1900, was “destroyed by the rise of the Model T Ford,” a car not introduced until 1908.

There’s no proof the advent of the automobile had anything whatsoever to do with the financial collapse of the cycleway. In 1900, motor cars were still fresh on the scene and very few people thought they had a certain future, and certainly not an all-dominant future. It took another fifteen years before automobiles started to dominate in the Los Angeles area. In the eight-years from 1914-1922 the number of vehicle registrations in Los Angeles County quadrupled to 172,313. Yet until well into the 1920s, Pasadena was not as auto-centric as Los Angeles, and even Los Angeles still had an efficient public transit network in the 1920s and into the 1930s.

Roads Were Not Built For Cars



Ironically, there's a photograph from 1900 showing Dobbins on the cycleway in his steam-powered Locomobile motor car. He told the *Los Angeles Times* "we will lie still for a time and use [the cycleway] for automobile service" but this would have been 14 years too early and it would have also needed a great deal of modification: motor cars would have been unable to get past the toll booths or turn around at the other end of the cycleway. A one and a quarter mile pleasure track for automobiles would have been just as pointless as a one and a quarter mile hotel-to-hotel cycleway.

As part of a deal, Dobbins transferred ownership of some of the cycleway's rights-of-way to the City of Pasadena in August 1902, in return for adjoining rights of way, yet there were no plans, at that time, to turn any of these rights-of-way into a prototype freeway. All eyes – including Dobbins' – were on turning the route into a railroad. In 1909 Dobbins incorporated the Rapid Transit Company in order to create a fast streetcar line into Los Angeles. Fifteen investors in the California Cycleway Company were given stock in the new company and Dobbins was made president.

Via newspaper reports, he told Pasadena residents:

The Pasadena Rapid Transit railroad to Los Angeles will be built, and it is my honest belief that this road will be built and the cars running between Pasadena and Los Angeles inside of eighteen months. [By road, Dobbins means rail-road; and by car, Dobbins means trolley-car]. The right of way is ours absolutely. We own every inch of it. [This is probably fanciful; Dobbins may have owned 224 separate tracts of land that made up the route's right-of-way but just one missing link can scupper a proposed route, and it's likely Dobbins couldn't guarantee every

Roads Were Not Built For Cars

The Rapid Transit Company's one-stop streetcar line to Los Angeles – like the full length of the earlier cycleway – stayed a dream. In 1917 the City of Pasadena bought out Dobbins' interest in the Arroyo Seco route, and parts of his company's rights-of-way became roads, including residential roads, back alleys, and stretches of the Arroyo Seco Parkway.

Dobbins lived in Pasadena until his death, in 1962, at the ripe old age of 94. No doubt he drove along the Arroyo Seco Parkway a great many times and it's not too fanciful to imagine he drove along it with an intimate and ironic appreciation of what it could have been.

If the California Cycleway had been built to plan in 1897 it may have had a successful life but it would have still been a brief one: the automobile may not have killed Dobbins' dream in 1900 – that bubble was burst by the streetcar and the waning popularity of cycling – but the Southern Californian love of motor cars would have killed off a nine-mile cycleway soon enough.

+++++

In the **Roads Were Not Built For Cars** book, due in Spring next year (do sign up for updates in the box on the right) this article will be fully-referenced and will also include hi-res pix, with use granted from the Pasadena Museum of History.

In the meantime, here's the full 1901 article from *Pearson's Magazine*:

California's Great Cycle-Way

How Los Angeles and Pasadena are Connected by a Magnificent Elevated Cycle-track, Nine Miles in Length, Entirely Devoted to Wheeling, Running through Some of the Most Beautiful Country in the States, and Forming One of the Most Perfect Cycle-ways in the World.

The South Californian towns, Los Angeles and Pasadena, are now connected by the strangest and most interesting of links – a magnificent, elevated cycle-way, with a smooth surface of wood, running for nine miles through beautiful country, flanked by green hills, and affording views at every point of the snow-clad Sierras.

On this splendid track cyclists may now enjoy the very poetry of wheeling. At Pasadena they may mount their cycles and sail down to Los Angeles without so much as touching the pedals, even though the gradient is extremely slight. The way lies for the most part along the east bank of the Arroyo Seco, giving a fine view

Roads Were Not Built For Cars

Southern California – with her delightful climate and beautiful country, verdant and radiant with wild flowers in the midst of winter – should be a cyclists' paradise. There is only this drawback – a really good cycling road cannot be found in all the country! Where a good road is most needed it is least in evidence – between the towns that are now linked by the sky cycle-way.

A conservative estimate places the number of cyclists in the two towns, including visitors, at 30,000. As a sign of the enthusiasm that exists for wheeling, it is stated that no fewer than 5,000 inventors of cycles are numbered in the populations. On Sundays, enthusiastic cyclists often swarm over the apologies for roads between the towns. They bravely face the sand and the dust and the steep hills that they have to combat.

There is a difference of some 600ft. in the elevations of the larger city and of its suburb; but this does not deter the enthusiasts, although the twenty mile ride from one town to the other and back is no mean feat of endurance. At present, not only is there no good cycling road, but there is little chance of one being constructed, owing to the number of railway tracks that would have to be crossed.

What a boon, therefore, is the new cycle-way to these beautiful Californian cities! It is thought that in five years' time, industrial activity will be so quickened that the country will enjoy such prosperity as it has never known. Wheelmen increase and multiply every season. Motor cycles are fast coming in. The day is at hand when the motor-cyclist will be able to buy for a few cents enough compressed air to propel his machine for twenty miles at top speed. That in Pasadena, Queen of the Cities, and in Los Angeles, her metropolis, there will be 100,000 cyclists and 10,000 motor-cyclists in a few years, is a moderate computation. It is well that they will not have to trundle over the old, ruddy *adobe* roads.

The inventor and promoter of the great cycle-way scheme is a wealthy Pasadena resident, Mr. Horace Dobbins, while the vice-president of the Cycle-way Company is an ex-Governor of the State, Mr. H.H. Markham. When the first bill for the cycle-way was brought before the Legislature it was vetoed – the scheme was thought chimerical. In 1897, however, the proposition was officially sanctioned, and although no one but its daring originator had any faith in it at first, gradually public support was gained. In spite of all difficulties and opposition, the cycle-way at length became a fact, and is now, perhaps, one of the most noteworthy institutions in Southern California.

The long track that winds like a great green snake through the hills between the two towns is built almost entirely of wood, and is strong enough to bear a service of trolley-cars. Throughout the entire distance from the center of one city to the center of the other it has an uninterrupted right of way, passing over roads, streets, railway tracks, gullies and ravines. At its highest point, the elevation of the track is about fifty

Roads Were Not Built For Cars

At present, the cycle-way is wide enough to allow four cyclists to ride abreast, but its width may be doubled presently. As it is, cycles and motor-cycles alone are allowed on the road, but when the track is widened, motor cars may be permitted the privilege of running over its beautiful surface.

From the engineer's point of view, the road is a triumph. No fewer than 1,250,000 feet of best Oregon pine were used in its construction. The wood is painted dark green. At night, the cycle-way looks like a gleaming serpent, for it is brightly lit with incandescent lights.

The cycle-track has pretty terminal stations and a Casino. The stations are little buildings of Moorish design, where cycles and motors may be hired and repaired and housed. The Casino sits on one of the loftiest hills in a beautiful tract of country that has been christened Merlemount Park, and which is now laid out as a peaceful retreat for the weary townsman. You look out from the crown of the hill over a superb view – the grand Sierra Madres overshadow the beautiful San Gabriel Valley; Mount San Jacinto and Mount San Bernardino, rising 9000 feet and 11,000 feet, stand sentinel over the rich land of orange and olive; the blue Pacific waters glisten to the South; and far out to sea your eye can discern the island of Santa Catalina. All the important fruit trees in the world grow in the gardens below you.

In the Casino buildings are cafés and restaurants, reception-rooms, and luxurious waiting-rooms, and a Swiss dairy, complete in all its fittings, for the refreshment of the thirsty. At night there are gay lights and bright music.

The entrance toll to the cycle-way is only ten cents. This allows a cyclist or a motor-cyclist to ride up and down the track all day, if he should so please, and to enjoy the benefits of the park, and other attractions.

++++

By T. D. Denham, Pearson's Magazine, September 1901

Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

Comment

Roads Were Not Built For Cars

Name *

Email *

Website

Save my name, email, and website in this browser for the next time I comment.

Post Comment

Roads Were Not Built For Cars 2015 | All rights reserved.

Words and pix on this site are mine, all mine. [Privacy](#), and [terms and conditions](#). |

Carlton Reid. Tel: 44 191 2652062 [Contact me by email](#).