

An Overview of the History of Transit Policing in Los Angeles

Over the last 120 years of transit evolution, because of the unique nature of the transit systems, and the crimes associated with them, there has been a need for specialized policing of the systems. As time has progressed and with the changing nature of transit, these organizations have grown both in numbers and sophistication. They have ranged from simple operations of a few men, to full-blown police and security agencies operating with multi-million dollar budgets employing hundreds of non-sworn and sworn officers. Of the agencies that have existed, some were peace officers, others were not.

During this evolution, the lines between police and security have been somewhat blurred. Over decades, differing personnel have continued to police in many cases the same transit systems and regardless of status, provided high-quality service to the patrons and employees of the transit systems, and to the public at large. Through the heroic actions of many of these officers, lives were saved, property was protected, and the public was given additional high-quality police and security service. At the time of contact, many people helped may not have even realized the difference between city and county law enforcement and the transit police and security that helped them.

Originally in LA, there were at least two transit police agencies, the Special Agents Departments for the Pacific Electric and Los Angeles Railways. Records show of their existence at least as far back as 1909. Organized Railroad Police Departments were authorized by the California Legislature in 1901. The term "Special Agent" tended to be associated with Western United States Railroad Police Departments of the period. The term "Railroad Detective" tended to be associated with Eastern States Railroad Police Departments. However regardless of semantics, these were usually special officers assigned to the transit systems. These officers were usually compensated by, and worked directly for the early Railroad and Railway Companies. In LA, they were authorized and given peace officer status primarily by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. Both these initial organizations, but particularly the Pacific Electric, were organized as Railroad Police Officers. This would later prove ironic, after the railways were gone, and only bus service existed in Los Angeles after the early 1960's.

LA Railway had Special Agents (peace officers) that worked primarily plainclothes, carried firearms and Sheriff's Stars, and drove code-3 equipped vehicles around LA County. LA Railway also had civilian guards at it's facilities. The Pacific Electric had a unique mix of officers, some authorized by the LA Sheriff's Department, others by the Los Angeles Police Commission. PE's Special Agents (also authorized by the LA Sheriff) functioned as their counterparts at the LA Railway did. The Special Agents themselves were really the work-horse peace officers of both organizations. They not only responded to calls for service and conducted preventative patrols, but also did their own follow-up investigations and detective work. Driving big, fast, unmarked cars, wearing suits with fedora hats, and carrying 'heaters' and badges under their jackets, old photos of these officers conjure up the true romanticism of the legendary 1940's and 1950's Los Angeles.

Evidence also suggests that sometime during approximately the 1930's - 1940's, a Rail Unit of sorts was formed within the Los Angeles Police. This unit's specific mission was to aggressively pursue the crimes such as pickpocketing that were plague to LA's transit systems up until even today. As time went on, this unit within the LAPD eventually evolved into today's bunco-forgery units.

The Special Agents of both Railways continued through until the 1950's, when all private transit companies were assimilated into the then-newly public LAMTA. The Special Agents, guards, and officers of all the previous Special Agents Departments came together to form one large agency, who policed the then-newly *public* transit system. Led by Chief Special Agent Joseph Shafer (formerly of PE, Metropolitan Coach Lines) the Special Agents were comprised of officers and guards of all the prior agencies. Chief Shafer apparently continued many of the same traditions and policies of the predecessor agencies. This can be evidenced by the use of the same rank structure and titles still in use in the 1960's in policing of the RTD's buses, that were used and started by the Pacific Electric at least 50 years prior, with their "Special Agents Department". With the passing of time and legislation, the County and City's ability to authorize peace officers came under scrutiny and this was eventually all but eliminated. With this, the peace-officer Special Agents were stripped of their status and functioned in more of a security capacity.

In the turbulent times of the 1960's and into the 1970's when law enforcement in LA County and City was stretched to it's limits, law enforcement service to the transit systems suffered also. Over time, this became a growing issue and concern not only with the public, but with the Bus Operators union.

Throughout the history of the various transit organizations, street robberies had been one of the most common of crimes occurring on and effecting the transit systems. This was a daily threat and worry for the operators. During this and previous eras within the transit systems evolution, operators themselves were required to carry money on their persons to make change for the patrons paying their fares. Because of this, they also became ready targets for the dregs of society. These robberies had become almost routine by the 1960's, and were a cause of fear and trepidation for the bus and train operators. Robberies at knife-point and sometimes, at gunpoint, were becoming alarmingly commonplace. But although operators had been robbed, assaulted, or otherwise hurt, none had ever been killed. Unfortunately, by the late 1960's, that was about to make a dramatic and tragic change.

Starting with the murder of bus operator John Hartzel at 51st and Broadway on January 10, 1967 during a robbery, operators were not just concerned for their safety, but were outraged and demanding better police service and protection. However, at that time, the Special Agents charged with their protection, had been whittled away over the years, both in budget, numbers of officers, and in status, having been stripped of peace officer status in the late 1950's. By this time, the "Special Agents" of the RTD, having been stripped of peace officer status only a decade or so earlier, struggled to combat the rampant crime problems plaguing the transit systems. Chief Joe Shafer was still the Chief Special Agent, and led his small contingent of Special Agents, including the likes of Special Agents Dick Kelso, Bob Mann (who's son would later become the Marshal for Los Angeles), Ron Delgadillo (who incidentally, as of this writing is still working transit duties for the LAPD), and a handful of others, in trying to keep crime in check. This was to be a very difficult battle that they fought during the late 1960's into the mid 1970's, having no peace officer status, and only a shoe-string budget, while trying to protect literally hundreds of thousands of operators and passengers across five counties on a daily basis.

The bus operators and their union were not blind to this, and continued to demand for better security and police protection. Operators took the lead in making changes in policies. In a movement lead by primarily by Mr. Cue White, an RTD bus operator, the district, after many years, finally went away from operators carrying money and went to an "exact fare" system for payment. Other changes in policy were fueled by the operator's outrage over the years, including for a period, operators carrying mace, and the equipping of RTD buses with 8 MM cameras. By the mid-1970's massive protests were also staged by the operators, demanding better police protection. This in turn lead to the then-SCRTD to request legislation by the state, that they be authorized to have peace officers of their own to police the transit systems. A similar movement by Los Angeles' San Francisco counterpart, the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) occurred during about the same period.

The legislature granted this and initially under 830.4 PC (later to be relocated to 830.33 PC) the RTD formed their own police department in 1978. Captain Jim Burgess of the Alhambra Police Department came onboard to transition the security force of the RTD into a Police Department. Initially just a tiny department of a few officers, many of it's ranks coming from the predecessor transit Special Agents and Security, it slowly grew in strength and scope of mission. The "Transit Public Safety Department" was the name given the new transit police, during their shift from Special Agents. At that time, the Public Safety members were wearing tan uniforms, with a brown shoulder patch, which was reflective of the uniforms popular with many of the smaller police agencies of the era.

In this transition period, some officers were sent to the academy, and others were waiting for their chance, or had been and were functioning as police officers in the field. For many of the RTD's personnel that had been employed (in some cases for many years), this meant going to the Rio Hondo Police Academy in their 40's and having to get through with other recruits younger than in some cases, than their own children. A daunting task to say the least. Not long after the last department personnel going for peace officer status had completed the academy, the department's name was changed to the "RTD Transit Police Department".

Many officers within it's ranks also included bus operators themselves (and in fact, it was a requirement for many years that to even apply as a full-time Special Agent or Transit Police Officer required a minimum of two years of operating a bus to know the locations, routes, etc.). Many of the early RTD police were also officers from other agencies that worked as part-time officers for the RTD and helped establish the department. This was a program started in 1980, and which ran until the mid-1980's, where officers from other agencies would work for the RTD police, in their own uniform (CHP, LAPD, LASD, etc.), along with regular transit police officers. By the mid-1980's the RTD police had evolved into badge-and-gun toting police officers, wearing navy blue uniforms, and driving marked black-and-white patrol vehicles. As time progressed, the Transit Police continued to grow in size and scope of mission. They increased their ranks over time, and policed the buses of the RTD and it's properties.

On a daily basis, officers from uniformed patrol would respond to calls onboard RTD buses and later the Blue Line train after it opened. In the event of an arrest, an officer would take the prisoner to the nearest primary jurisdiction police station or LAPD Division, and would book the prisoner, property, and complete any reports as if the transit police officer was an officer from that jurisdiction. Plainclothes officers would do the same, and work throughout the transit systems as well. Transit Police officers working as investigators, would then file the cases with the local D.A.'s office, or coordinate with the local detectives who would do it instead.

As the Department grew and more personnel were available for specialty assignments, numerous special programs sprang up within the Department. These units had specific missions to combat crime problems particular to the transit system. Some of the Department's more successful programs included both the Graffiti Habitual Offender Suppression Team (GHOST), to combat rampant vandalism on the RTD's buses, and the Miracle On Broadway footbeat detail (MOB) which specifically targeted transit crime in the downtown LA area. In the latter portion of the 1980's the Department saw a new Chief. Chief Sharon Papa was appointed as the Department's new Chief when Chief Burgess left for promotion at another agency.

By the late 1980's, a new challenge was approaching on the horizon for the Transit Police. With the coming return of rail service in LA County in the early 1990's lead to new responsibilities and challenges for the then-RTD Transit Police. In 1993, when the SCRTD and LACTC were merged together, the RTD Police came along, and became the MTA Police with the creation of the new public entity. By this time, the MTA Police was an organization comprised of several hundred including sworn and civilian staff. They drove marked units and wore the same uniforms and carried the same equipment as the LAPD. A fully functional department, complete with administrative, investigative, and patrol functions, the Transit Police had been slated to grow to over 1,000 officers by the year 2000. By the mid to late 1990's, the Transit Police had grown by leaps and bounds. At one point, numbering over 400 police officers, and with approximately four dozen civilian support staff, the Transit Police had grown both in numbers and in sophistication.

Rank structure included A Chief of Police (Sharon Papa), four Captains (Conte, Eutsey, Schick, and Dacus), approximately a half dozen lieutenants, followed by sergeants, then senior officers (2-striper rank), and finally by police officers. Transit Police handled all of the MTA bus lines throughout five counties, along with three rail systems (Metro Red Line, Blue Line, and Green Line). Headquartered out of Downtown Los Angeles, at the main station at Washington/ Figueroa, the Transit Police also had substations throughout the county. El Monte Terminal in the City of El Monte had its own satellite station. The "Delta" or Transit Oriented Police Detail (TOPS) was stationed out of the Old South Park Shops (Location 14 at Avalon/ 54th). The Valley Units had a substation in one of the Valley MTA Divisions. Miracle On Broadway, the downtown footbeat unit, had their own substation as well, initially located at 313 W. 3rd Street, later to be relocated to Spring/ 3rd. The Green Line and Blue Line units were stationed out of the MTA's Central Control Facility (CCF, now called "Rail Operations Control", Location 60, at Imperial/ Wilmington, just outside of Watts in Willowbrook). Transit Police headquarters, along with the Red Line section of the Rail Bureau would later be consolidated at the then-new MTA Gateway Headquarters building.

During about this same time period, the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department was also contracted to perform police service for the Metrolink heavy rail commuter trains that transported people in and out of LA from surrounding counties. The Los Angeles Sheriff's Department also had a short-lived Blue Line unit which patrolled the Blue Line after it opened for the first two years. The Transit Police then were awarded the contract and took over policing all MTA bus and rail lines. Small transit units also sprang up within some of the LA county municipal law enforcement agencies also, including transit units within cities such as Long Beach.

By the mid-1990's though, there had already been a great deal of discussion between both the larger law enforcement agencies and the MTA about merging the responsibilities and personnel of the MTA Police into the LASD and the LAPD. There were a number of reasons why this came about. First, was officer dissatisfaction on the part of some of the Transit Police, many of whom felt that they were looked upon by both their peers and the public as "second class officers". Second, was the larger agencies eyeing both the savings from reduction of duplication of work. Third and lastly the advantages and income of for the larger agencies to provide contract policing during fiscally lean times.

The MTA, which had become a very controversial public entity within just the first few years of it's existence, was certainly not to be let off easy in the press or media on the issue of policing or any other for that matter. Many political battles were waged in the LA City Hall, the MTA Board Room, the LA County Supervisors Hall, and in the

Los Angeles Times over how the plan would come about. In the end, the Transit Police (and some members of the other agencies) were put through the political "ringer". After numerous delays and changes, the merger occurred in November of 1997. The first half of the transit police broke away to the LA Sheriff on November 2nd, 1997. The LAPD side went over on November 23rd 1997. The security component of the MTA police broke away, and remained with the MTA.

One thing that would probably occur to the casual observer would be that if there had been so many re-organizations over the years that there would have been a nearly complete turnover every few years of transit police. This was actually the opposite. As an interesting side note, many of the officers of the early transit police organizations were to remain in the same capacities and simply moved from one agency to another during the various re-organizations and name changes.

Essentially, although some came and went, there was a core group of officers and guards (about three dozen) that were present for at least 2-3 of the separately renamed transit companies and public entities. There are even some officers both currently working for today's MTA and LAPD/ LASD transit units that in fact started over 20 years ago performing many of the same duties and patrolling the same systems. As an extension of this, there is also a direct lineage that can be traced directly from today's MTA Security and modern day LAPD and LASD transit units to the Special Agents Departments of the LA Railways and Pacific Electric Railways, in the early 1900's.

In essence, the same departments that existed back then, though the organization's have been re-organized, and the names have changed, have been in continuous operation since that time (in many cases with the same core group of personnel, transitioning from one organization to another).

After about two years time passed from the time of the merger of the Transit Police into the Los Angeles Police and Sheriff's Departments, things have settled out between both agencies, and with the officers that had merged into both. The current policing of LA's transit systems works in this manner. The LAPD and LASD formed what came to be known as the "Transit Policing Partnership". Today's Transit Policing Partnership encompasses police service on many levels.

The LASD Transit Services Bureau provides law enforcement service to the buses running in County areas, and polices the Metro Blue Line and Green Line systems. The LASD maintains administrative offices in the MTA Gateway Building, and has a patrol station located at the Imperial/ Wilmington MTA Rail Operations Center.

The Los Angeles Police Transit Group is comprised of three components. Transit Rail Division polices the Metro Red Line Subway. Transit Bus Division polices buses running through LA City. Transit Services Section provides administrative support and investigative follow-up. Transit Bus Division is based out of the MTA Regional Rebuild Center at Cesar Chavez/ Vignes. Transit Rail Division and Transit Services, along with Administration are based out of the MTA Gateway Building.

As time has passed, many of the proposed benefits of this merger have been realized, and although what the future has in store remains to be seen, there are high hopes for the newest members and units with the Los Angeles Police and Los Angeles Sheriff's Departments.

Although the names of the agencies may have changed, along with the particular shape of the badges, or the colors of the uniforms, the basic mission of the Special Agents, Transit Police, and now LAPD Transit Group, LASD. Transit Services Bureau, and MTA Security has remained the same, and unchanged, for nearly 100 years...

...And that is this:

"...the provision of both protection and service to the patrons and employees of Los Angeles' transit system and with the physical security of the properties themselves..."