

Lost LA

Food & Discovery

Photos: When the Metro Orange Line Was Rail

By Nathan Masters

November 1, 2013



History & Society

History

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A Pacific Electric trolley at the North Hollywood Station along the present-day Orange Line right-of-way in 1952. Photo by Alan Weeks, courtesy of the Metro Transportation Library and Archive.

The Metro Orange Line: it's named like a rail line and looks like one on **system maps**, but you won't find tracks along this 18-mile transit corridor through the San Fernando Valley. In fact, **state law** has forbidden aboveground rail transit along this route since 1991 -- the legacy of local homeowners who fought against surface rail in favor of a much more expensive subway. Instead, since 2005 super-long articulated buses have rolled down the Orange Line's dedicated, paved roadway, which now stretches from North Hollywood to Chatsworth.

[**Update, 7/9/14:** Yesterday, Governor Brown signed **AB 577**, which repeals the 23-year-old ban on aboveground rail transit in the San Fernando Valley. Light rail along the Orange Line corridor may now be **legal under state law**, but such a conversion is still not part of **Metro's long range plan**.]

But **change may be arriving soon**. On Oct. 29, the Los Angeles City Council passed a resolution introduced by council member Tom LaBonge calling on the state legislature to repeal the 1991 ban -- a first step toward upgrading the Orange Line's bus rapid transit with the sort of light rail technology used on the Metro Blue, Green, Gold, and Expo lines.

If LaBonge's plan succeeds, the Orange Line will be returning to **its historical roots**. As seen in historical images from the region's photographic archives, for nearly 100 years rail vehicles of one kind or another -- steam locomotives, electric trolleys, diesel trains -- rolled down the Orange Line right-of-way.

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diesel-powered freight trains rumbled down the line. By the time a cash-strapped Southern Pacific sold its Burbank Branch to L.A. County's transportation agency in 1991, the wheat fields had given way to residential neighborhoods and transportation planners looked to the route as the best possible transit corridor for a maturing San Fernando Valley.

The Toluca Flyer, seen here at the Lankershim (North Hollywood) station in 1900, was the Southern Pacific's passenger train along its Burbank Branch. Courtesy of the San Fernando Valley History Digital Library, California State University, Northridge University Library.

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A 1911 view of the present-day Orange Line right-of-way where it crosses Van Nuys Boulevard. Courtesy of the USC Libraries - California Historical Society Collection.

A 1960 view of the northwestern junction between the Southern Pacific's main line and its Burbank Branch, which ran alongside Canoga Avenue. Courtesy of the Photo Collection - Los Angeles Public Library.

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Pacific Electric trolleys near the North Hollywood station along the Burbank Branch. Photo by Alan Weeks, courtesy of the Metro Transportation Library and Archive.

A Pacific Electric car near the Tujunga Wash. A 1938 flood washed out the Pacific Electric's bridge over the wash, forcing it to share tracks with the Southern Pacific until 1952. Photo by Alan Weeks, courtesy of the Metro Transportation Library and Archive.

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Highlights at the Archives Bazaar: 10 Fascinating Southern California Collections and Historical Organizations

Every year, Southern California museums, libraries and archives come together at the annual Archives Bazaar to exhibit historic items and artifacts. Here are 8 collections and historical organizations whose archives tell a fascinating story of L.A.

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The Pirate, the Mailman and the Avocado: The Accidental History of Avocados in California

The history of commercial avocados in California comes from a collection of chance discoveries, Indigenous heritages exploited and improbable survivals that were ultimately hitched to the power of California's industrialized agriculture.

Lost Cemeteries of Early L.A.: The Forgotten Burial Sites of the City's Earliest Settlers

The deaths of early Angelenos didn't always lead to eternal rest. When the first Catholic, Jewish and Protestant cemeteries in Los Angeles were abandoned by 1910, the displaced dead were scattered to other cemeteries — but not all were found and reburied.

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