

History & Society

Riding the Big Red Car: Work, Leisure, and Community in Multiethnic L.A.

By Ryan Reft

December 12, 2014



Energy

History

By Ryan Reft

December 12, 2014



Energy

History



Pacific Electric car through Redondo Beach, 1939 | Photo: [Metro Library and Archive/Creative Commons](#)

A subway to the sea, new mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, told reporters in 2005, "would be the most utilized subway in the nation, maybe the world." According to a Los Angeles Times survey at the time, voters identified transportation related issues as their primary concern outside of education; for both issues, nearly a quarter of the electorate demanded improvement.¹

Yet, such promises often take time to develop and implement. Nearly ten years later, this past November officials finally broke ground on the Metro Purple Line Extension. The groundbreaking ceremony at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art drew rail proponents, elected officials, and transit administrators who all expressed hope that the 3.9 mile, \$2.8 billion first leg of the subway line would mark a resurgence in Los Angeles' "transportation renaissance." "This is a historic day for the Westside, which has not been served by rail transit since the Pacific Red Cars," declared Zev Yaroslavsky, L.A. County Supervisor and long time subway opponent turned proponent.

And yet, upon completion the Purple Line will still terminate miles from the ocean. The Expo Line light rail, which in some parts runs parallel to the proposed Purple Line, will instead be finished by 2016, once again allowing **riders to take rail to the Pacific**, from as far as the communities in the Inland Empire, when all proposed lines are completed. For those that still remain skeptical about Los Angeles transit, a look at the history of the

[Shows](#) [Arts & Culture](#) [News & Community](#) [Food & Discovery](#)

The Big Red Cars ran all over the Los Angeles area -- literally all over," Reyner Bannam wrote in 1971.² In fact, according to historians George Hilton and John Due, the Los Angeles system ranked as "the largest intercity electronic railway system in the U.S."³ Perhaps even more impressively, the Pacific Electric (P.E.), sometimes referred in shorthand as the Red Car system, covered 25 percent more mileage than today's New York City subway: 1,100 miles for the former, and 842 for the latter.⁴

As numerous scholars have pointed out, much of metropolitan Los Angeles' spatial layout in the early decades of the twentieth century had been influenced by the

interurban railway lines. Various streetcar lines emerged in the late 1800s serving numerous cities, but in 1901 Henry Huntington consolidated them into the Pacific Electric Railway (P.E.).⁵ In 1911, the "Great Merger" followed, in which Southern Pacific bought out numerous smaller lines and organized them into the famed "Red Car" system. Huntington remained the head of the Los Angeles Railway, frequently referred to as the Yellow Cars.

Huntington built and consolidated the system in order to facilitate interest in his burgeoning land empire. "It would never do for an electric line to wait until the demand for it came," he told journalists in 1904. In the end, the P.E. interurban system helped to consolidate L.A.'s twentieth century power structure, as historian Mike Davis rued in the 1990s: "the windfall profits of these operations welded the ruling class together and capitalized lineages of power ... that remain in place today."⁶ However, while the system helped to secure power and wealth for regional elites, it also expanded employment, housing, and leisure opportunities for working class Angelenoes of all ethnicities and races. While the Yellow Cars actually averaged greater ridership numbers due to the fact they serviced more densely populated working class neighborhoods in and around Central L.A. like Echo Park and Boyle Heights, the **combined streetcar system** gave all Angelenoes greater access to the region's cultural attractions whether in the city's core or its burgeoning suburban areas. Streetcars helped to secure power and wealth for regional elites, but they also expanded employment, housing, and leisure opportunities for working class Angelenoes of all ethnicities and races.

Shows Arts & Culture News & Community Food & Discovery

Riding the Big Red Car: Work, Leisure, and Community in Multi...

History & Society

Pacific Electric No. 220 in Long Beach | Photo: [Metro Library and Archive/Creative Commons](#)

Building Interracial and Interethnic L.A.

For many working and middle class peoples, the P.E. promised opportunities that had previously eluded them. The ultimate effect of these lines was "decentralized urbanization," which many Los Angeles Progressive reformers welcomed in pursuit of the suburban ideal they touted. Fearing the corrupting influence of America's eastern cities, Los Angeles suburban environs represented the best form of community. Streetcar lines democratized suburban living for working class Angelenos of all races, enabling "a vast influx of newcomers to combine the opportunities of urban life with a small town sense of space and continuity," notes cultural historian Eric Avila.⁷

For working class Angelenos of the 1920s and 1930s, the P.E. served as a critical factor in accessing the city's spaces of leisure. The community of Watts, then working class and multiracial, sat at the center of the action. "[A] key junction and interchange between the long distance trunk routes, the interurbans and streetrailways," observed Banham, "[i]t is doubtful if any part of Greater Los Angeles, even downtown, was so well connected to so many places..."⁸ By 1910, Watts' nearly 2,000 residents hailed from Germany, Scotland, Mexico, Italy, Greece, Japan, and included blacks from the American South.⁹ Many African Americans working for Southern Pacific, 3,000 by the 1942, settled in Watts. Even as the P.E. struggled in the 1930s and 40s, Watts retained its diversity, in large part

[Shows](#) [Arts & Culture](#) [News & Community](#) [Food & Discovery](#)

Riding the Big Red Car: Work, Leisure, and Community in Multi...

History & Society

we'd go to the dances there in Los Angeles. Musician Cecil "Big Jay" McNeely, a saxophonist who plied his trade along 1930s Central Avenue, remembered years later, "[We] had the 'big red' that would go out to Pasadena, big red to San Pedro, big red to Long Beach. They ran so fast, so it didn't take you any time to get there."¹¹ When jazz musicians Charles Mingus and Buddy Colette rode the car from Watts to Los Angeles, impromptu jam sessions erupted on more than a few occasions. "Mingus would always take the cover off his bass and urge Buddy to Jam with him during the ride," remembered musician Red Callendar, in Avila's book. "Instead of being bothered, the passengers loved it."¹²

The "V" line from Watts enabled the jazz and blues clubs on Central Avenue to thrive, as the P.E. drew a diverse clientele from different parts of the city. "At a time when racially exclusionary policies prevented blacks from entering clubs on the west side like the Swanee Inn on Westwood Boulevard," writes George Lipsitz, "Central Avenue became one of the few areas where whites and blacks could mix socially."¹³

A man waiting to board a waiting Pacific Electric car at the Watts station circa 1940s | Security Pacific National Bank Collection. Los Angeles Public Library

[Shows](#) [Arts & Culture](#) [News & Community](#) [Food & Discovery](#)

Riding the Big Red Car: Work, Leisure, and Community in Multi...

History & Society

them, disturbed them. Indeed, early procures from interurban lines promoted their access for working families to Southern California's regional attractions. Venice, Santa Monica, and Huntington Beach all benefited as the P.E. facilitated the growth of the SoCal coast. Real estate interests advertised the P.E.'s. "Balloon Route," its name derived from the shape it traced along its path going downtown to beach towns and back again, for its access to beachside leisure. Advertisements trumpeted Venice as "'the Coney Island of the West,' Redondo Beach as the 'happy medium for the masses and attractions,' and Huntington Beach as the 'rendez-vous for little families,'" notes Avila.

The P.E. opened up the beaches of the Pacific to countless numbers of L.A. residents. Though not from Watts, the city's first black librarian Miriam Matthews shared memories in 2007 about Santa Monica's Inkwell, a popular beach destination for L.A.'s African American community. "You would take the Red Car down ... and spend a day on the beautiful beach or rent a room if you desired," she recalled.¹⁴

Still, leisure spaces, like those of the East Coast's Coney Island, where men and women of various ethnicities could frolic and cavort, shocked Progressive reformers. Progressive friendly newspapers like *The Los Angeles Record* voiced such fears. In a 1912 article, the newspaper described the streetcars as "[a] section of Hades in Los Angeles" where "[i]nside the air was a pestilence ... heavy with disease." Streetcars, the columnist lamented, "forced people into still closer, still indecent, still more immoral contact ... Was all this an oriental prison? Was in it some hall devoted to the pleasures of the habitués of vice?" The paper answered its own question. "No, gentle reader, it was only the result of public stupidity and apathy. It was a Los Angeles streetcar ..."

Though the system had enabled working men and women to enjoy the "the healthful benefits of the suburbs and sunshine," Progressive reformers stood aghast at the intermixing of race, class, and gender that occurred on any streetcar on a daily basis. Fact is, when it came to race and ethnicity Progressives simply were not very Progressive.¹⁵

Shows Arts & Culture News & Community Food & Discovery

Riding the Big Red Car: Work, Leisure, and Community in Multi...

History & Society

Two PE Trains Pass ca. 1940s | Photo: [Metro Library and Archive/Creative Commons](#) **Suburbanization and the Decline of the P.E.**

Though the P.E. managed to stay in the black financially during the war years, its seams had more than begun to show. In the 1941, the Works Progress Administration described service as "incredibly slow and antiquated" and the cars as "cumbersome, old fashioned trolleys" that rattled through L.A.'s streets. By the late 1940s, things had only gotten worse. "People are jammed and packed [in the streetcars], there is little standing room, the exits are hard to get to," noted one frequent rider. One L.A. official called them "wheeled slums."¹⁶ General Motors officials referred to them as "mongrel vehicles."¹⁷

While Los Angeles County's levels of car ownership boomed during these years, many black and Latino residents found purchasing a car beyond their means. Public transit continued to represent the best option for getting around the city. Despite questionable conditions and reliability, many blacks, Latinos, and whites in places like Watts and South Central continued to utilize the P.E. until its ultimate demise in 1961.¹⁸ When the P.E. ended service from Watts and Vernon to San Pedro and Long Beach in 1948, angry residents organized the Watts Citizens Welfare League in protest. P.E. officials reinstated the routes, but as Josh Sides notes, "the incident foreshadowed the ultimate defunction of the P.E."¹⁹

The dearth of transportation options did not go unnoticed. The Los Angeles Public Board of Utilities granted dozens of new, smaller bus companies contracts to meet demand. However, many were fly by night affairs. Bus shelters were rarely provided; routes lacked consistency and seemed to have been planned half-hazardly; no set schedule for arrivals and departures existed. Employment options for African Americans, already limited,

[Shows](#) [Arts & Culture](#) [News & Community](#) [Food & Discovery](#)

Riding the Big Red Car: Work, Leisure, and Community in Multi...

History & Society

1970s, Walter Ingalls, head of the Los Angeles County Transportation Commission (LACTC), described the city's bus system as "uncoordinated" and "underfunded."²² By the 1990s, the Bus Rider's Union (BRU) had formed to fight for better bus service and to protest fare hikes, thereby representing lower income workers, particularly those of color. BRU however, decried new rail transit proposals as fundamentally "racist" for favoring middle and upper class white communities and depriving the bus system of funding.²³

Clearly, the P.E.'s decline impacted Angelenoes unevenly. Working class and minority communities suffered. "The demise of the [Red and Yellow Car systems] ... had dire consequences for communities such as Watts and Boyle Heights, which became isolated centers of racialized poverty in the subsequent age of the freeway," concludes Avila. Banham, writing decades earlier, agreed. "And with the beginning of the sixties, and the passing away of the last P.E. connections, no place was more strategically ill-placed for anything, as the freeways with their different priorities threaded across the plains and left Watts on one side."²⁴ The highways that followed preyed upon these communities, as they sliced up multiracial and multiethnic Los Angeles into segregated communities, "wreaking havoc on the city's heterosocial spaces."²⁵

It wasn't until the 1990 opening of the Long Beach or Blue Line light rail, the first rail line completed since the P.E.'s closure, that a direct public transit connection between Watts and other communities like Long Beach was reestablished. Almost 25 years later, the Blue Line stands as the most used light rail in the nation.²⁶

In the end the P.E.'s denouement, written largely by forces more powerful than it, represented the sunset of multiracial Los Angeles to be replaced by a carcentric future that disaggregated and reorganized the city's populations into ever more racially and ethnically uniform neighborhoods. While building public transit today remains a complex process, here's to hoping that whenever they do finish the "subway to sea," it might once again serve all Angelenos and lead to greater access to the work, leisure, and community in the city.

1

[Shows](#) [Arts & Culture](#) [News & Community](#) [Food & Discovery](#)

Riding the Big Red Car: Work, Leisure, and Community in Multi...

History & Society

NYC's Subway Today," Huffington Post, January 31, 2013,
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/31/pacific-electric-red-car-la-mileage-photo-video_n_2577346.html

⁵ Robert Gottlieb, *Reinventing Los Angeles: Nature and Community in the Global City*, (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 2007), 177.

⁶ Mike Davis, *City of Quartz, Excavating the Future of Los Angeles*, (New York: Verso, 1990), 113-114.

⁷ Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 188

⁸ Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, 155.

⁹ Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*, 189.

¹⁰ Emily Straus, *Death of Suburban Dream: Race and Schools in Compton, CA*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 53.

¹¹ Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*, 189.

¹² *Ibid*, 191.

¹³ George Lipsitz, "Learning from Los Angeles: Another One Rides the Bus," *American Quarterly*, 56.3 (Sept. 2004): 523.

¹⁴ Deborah Schoch, "Erasing a line in the sand," *Los Angeles Times*, March 19, 2007

¹⁵ Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*, 190.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 194.

¹⁷ Robert Gottlieb, *Reinventing Los Angeles: Nature and Community in the Global City*, (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 2007), 182.

¹⁸ Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*, 194.

¹⁹ Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 113-114.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 114.

²¹ Elkind, *Railtown: The Fight for the Los Angeles Metro Rail and the Future of the City*, 6.

²² *Ibid.*, 36.

²³ Lipsitz, "Learning from Los Angeles: Another One Rides the Bus," 525-526; Elkind, *The Fight for the Los Angeles Metro Rail and the Future of the City*, 158-160.

²⁴ Banham, *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies*, 155.

²⁵ Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*, 208.

²⁶ Elkind, *Railtown: The Fight for the Los Angeles Metro Rail and the Future of the City*, 217.

[Shows](#) [Arts & Culture](#) [News & Community](#) [Food & Discovery](#)

Riding the Big Red Car: Work, Leisure, and Community in Multi...

History & Society

Remembering Mike Davis: How His Curiosity for Los Angeles Changed The Way We See Our City

Authors, former students, colleagues and friends reflect on the legacy, impact and generous spirit of the late Mike Davis — a social historian and professor emeritus whose writings and teachings on power and social class in Los Angeles inspired and guided an entire generation of L.A. and urban historians.

[Shows](#) [Arts & Culture](#) [News & Community](#) [Food & Discovery](#)

Riding the Big Red Car: Work, Leisure, and Community in Multi...

History & Society

Big Oil Companies Are Selling Their Wells. Some Worry Taxpayers Will Pay to Clean Them Up.

Shell and ExxonMobil are selling their California wells despite oil selling at high prices. Experts say one reason is looming liability for environmental cleanup.

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.

[Shows](#) [Arts & Culture](#) [News & Community](#) [Food & Discovery](#)

Riding the Big Red Car: Work, Leisure, and Community in Multi...

History & Society

Explore

Arts & Culture

News & Community

Food & Discovery

Shows

About

About KCET

Cinema Series

Press Room

Events

Careers

Contact Us

Support KCET

Donate

Membership

Planned Giving

Other Ways to Give

Corporate Support

Connect with Our Team

Our Channels

KCET



Link™

Get the App



Follow Us

Shows

Arts & Culture

News & Community

Food & Discovery

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#)

© 2022 - Public Media Group of Southern California