

LOS ANGELES

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EXPO LINE

LIGHT RAIL

Travel the path of the Expo Line predecessor that ran from 1908 to 1953

The Pacific Electric Air Line, aka the Red Cars, blazed a trail the Expo Line picked up

By **Bianca Barragan** | Updated Jun 8, 2018, 9:47am PDT



Photo dated ca. 1940. Via Metro Transportation Library and Archive [Flickr](#).

When the [Expo Line's](#) made its way [into downtown Santa Monica](#) in 2015, it marked the first time a passenger train ran through the city in more than 60 years.

Before the Expo Line (which runs from Downtown through Culver City), the last trains to pull into Santa Monica were Pacific Electric Red Cars—specifically, the Pacific Electric Air Line. The rails the Air Line ran on had been used early in LA's history by a more traditional rail line, the kind traveled by steam engines, and linked the waterfront at Santa Monica to Downtown LA.

In 1908, that railroad was overtaken by Pacific Electric's passenger trolley cars, [says KCET](#). As with the Expo now, the idea of the Air Line then was to service the Westside, including Culver City, Palms, and Santa Monica.

Because of its roots as a railway for big steam engines, the Air Line's path was different than other trolley cars, with the luxury of not having to share the road quite as much (many old photos show the route passing behind houses and through fields).

It also made fewer stops than other lines and passed through through less busy, more empty-field parts of town. The effect was a shorter trip, like an express bus between Downtown and Santa Monica.

The route, while faster, was also an obstacle to its own success. Other trolleys traveled through busy sections of town, places where people actually wanted to hop on and off. Also, the Air Line's rails reportedly made for a really bumpy ride.

Eventually service was reduced: “Red cars initially whisked passengers away every hour, but by 1924 service diminished to one car per day.” Not a great way to keep ridership up.

In 1953, service on the line was stopped completely. In a September 30, 1953 *Los Angeles Times* article lamenting the literal end of the line, long-running columnist Bill Henry explained that in those final days, the Air Line's riders were like a little community.

One clubby little band of passengers has stuck with the Airline, riding it into work in the morning and back home in the evening and the demise of the line seems like the passing of an old friend to them. After today, Motorman Lane will no longer toot his whistle for "regulars" who lingered too long over their coffee... It was a handy little trip if you happened to be able to fit yourself to its schedule...

Below, photos from the Metro Transportation Library and Archive's [flickr page](#) give glimpses into what a ride on the now-vanished Air Line might have been like.



Los Angeles Santa Monica Air Line. | [Metro Library and Archive](#)/Creative Commons



Eastbound at USC in 1953. | [Metro Library and Archive](#)/Creative Commons



Air Line at Motor Avenue. | [Metro Library and Archive](#)/Creative Commons



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A Red Car moving past Venice and Robertson. | [Metro Library and Archive](#)/Creative Commons



Lookins east at the old Palms station. | [Metro Library and Archive](#)/Creative Commons



Just west of Palms. | [Metro Library and Archive](#)/Creative Commons



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