

The Pacific Electric Railway in Orange County

For more than 40 years, the Pacific Electric Railway played an important role in the development of Orange County. Any number of our local communities owe their founding, growth, or incorporation to the “Big Red Cars.”

It was in 1901 that Henry E. Huntington started the Pacific Electric Railway Company. It was Huntington, you know, who started the Huntington Library and Gardens in San Marino. His goal was to tie together all of Southern California under a single, electric trolley system. The Southern Pacific Railroad could see the benefits of a unified transportation system, moving both passengers and freight, and within a few years had managed to buy up a major interest in the Pacific Electric Co.

In 1902 the PE built their first interurban line from Los Angeles to Long Beach.

The PE also bought out existing streetcar systems. Their first purchase in Orange County was in 1901, when they acquired the old Santa Ana & Orange Motor Co., which ran a steam-powered car that the old timers used to call the “Peanut Roaster,” or the “Orange Dummy.”

There were three main Pacific Electric lines, and several branch lines that served Orange County, providing both passenger and freight service.

The first to be built was the Newport-Balboa line that ran down the coast from Long Beach. The trains reached Huntington Beach via Seal Beach in 1904, and the tracks were extended to Newport Beach in 1905, and finally to Balboa in 1906.

The Newport-Balboa line is a pretty good example of how the coming of the PE had a big impact on the communities along the way.

Seal Beach – originally known as Bay City – was laid out in 1903, about the time construction began. Sunset Beach was laid out soon after the tracks opened.

Balboa was laid out in anticipation of the coming of the Big Red Cars, and Newport Beach incorporated just a year after the PE arrived.

But the obvious one, of course, is Huntington Beach. There was already a townsite there called Pacific City, but it hadn't gotten very far. Then in 1903, while the Newport-Balboa line was still in the planning stages, Henry Huntington and his partners bought out Pacific City and renamed it Huntington Beach. There's the old story about the little girl from Huntington Park, who got on the Huntington streetcar with her mother and rode down to Huntington Beach, and walked out to the end of the Huntington Beach pier. “Mama,” she said, “does Mr. Huntington own the ocean, too?”

The one loser was Corona del Mar. The PE had originally planned to continue on down the coast towards San Diego, and Corona del Mar would have been right on the tracks – but that extension was never built, and it was years before the townsite started to grow.

The PE began reducing service on the Newport-Balboa line in the 1940s, and the last passenger run was in 1950.

The next Pacific Electric line in Orange County was the Santa Ana Line, which left the Long Beach Line at Watts, and angled right across the center of the county down to Fourth Street. It opened for service in 1905, and Santa Ana held a big parade to celebrate.

Again, community development followed the tracks. Both Cypress and Benedict (later renamed Stanton) were laid out in 1905, and Garden Grove got a big boost from the new line. Here in Santa Ana, several new subdivisions were laid out on the west side of town shortly after the PE arrived.

From Santa Ana, a branch line served Orange via Main Street, La Veta Avenue, and Glassell Street. Passenger service to Orange continued until 1930, when the PE replaced the streetcars with their own line of buses, the Motor Transit Co.

There was also another branch line that went south and west from Santa Ana to serve the farming communities around Greenville and Talbert, before turning south to connect with the coast line at Huntington Beach. Opened in 1909, the Santa Ana-Huntington Beach line carried more freight traffic than passengers, and passenger service was finally abandoned in 1922.

Passenger service on the main line to Santa Ana continued until 1950. That marked the end of the Big Red Cars in Orange County.

Finally there was the La Habra-Yorba Linda line, which branched off in Whittier. It was built in stages, first to La Habra in 1908, then to Brea in 1909, and finally to Yorba Linda in 1910. All three of those communities got a boost from the red car.

As in Newport Beach, plans were made to extend the line on out the Santa Ana Canyon to connect with the PE's inland routes to Riverside and Pomona. But it was never built. For years the tracks ended south of Yorba Linda at a station called Stern.

There was also a branch line, running south across the Bastanchury Ranch to serve Fullerton. It was opened in 1917. Passenger service on the La Habra- Yorba Linda line and the Fullerton branch continued until 1938.

The Pacific Electric reached its peak in the 1920s, when they had more than 1,000 miles of track spread across Southern California. It provided fast, inexpensive, *moderately* comfortable service to hundreds of communities.

Now you'll sometimes hear that there was a conspiracy by the auto industry to put the Pacific Electric out of business. And it's true that one of the big auto manufacturers was trying to buy up streetcar lines – but that really doesn't have anything to do with the PE.

The fact is that by the late 1920s, the PE was already beginning to abandon passenger service on some of its lines, as ridership declined. In some cases, they replaced the Big Red Cars with their own bus line – the Motor Transit Company.

Then came the Depression, and World War II, and while ridership increased, there wasn't much money to upgrade or even maintain the cars or the track. By the 1940s, the PE was in pretty rough shape.

One by one, the unprofitable lines were closed. The few remaining lines were eventually sold off. The PE sold the last of its passenger lines in 1953. The original Long Beach line survived the longest. The Big Red Cars made their last passenger run there in 1961. And you'll notice that this was basically the same route at today's Blue Line – the first modern light rail line built in Southern California in 1990.

Rail transportation has played a major role in the development of Southern California since the 1870s, but in many ways, the Pacific Electric had the broadest impact of any railroad companies. They tied so much of Southern California together under a single system, and served many smaller communities that the national railroads never served. And certainly the Big Red Cars bring back fond memories for many people, throughout Southern California, and here in Orange County.