



GHOSTS OF THE PACIFIC ELECTRIC

CHARLES FREERICKS/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

TUESDAY MORNING the radio scanner crackles in downtown Los Angeles — “El Segundo Local calling San Gabriel Sub DS” — as the Union Pacific LOW20 job requests permission to enter Metrolink-controlled trackage. Soon, a heavily graffitied GP60 and GP40-2 roll their string of grain hoppers and petroleum tanks on a 17-mile voyage through South LA to the South Bay. The train will pass through some of the most dangerous neighborhoods in America, only to finish its westward run in one of the toniest.

Most of that trek will be along erstwhile Pacific Electric right-of-way, the same route over which freight has been pulled since 1914, when El Segundo (Spanish for “the second”) was established as Standard Oil’s second California refinery.

You may have thought that Pacific Electric was obliterated long ago, but pieces of the mighty Big Red Car empire

still exist. True, most of what was once the largest interurban railroad in America has vanished, yet there are still a surprising number of PE lines in use today. And while the iconic Hollywood Cars no longer roll along Santa Monica Boulevard in Beverly Hills, there are heavily patronized light rail lines to Santa Monica, Long Beach, and other locales that you can ride over PE right-of-way in 2022. There are freight trains of both Union Pacific and Pacific Harbor Line switching PE spurs. And there are Metrolink commuter trains racing on PE tracks. There may no longer be a Pacific Electric, but the energy of Henry Huntington’s electric empire still sizzles in surprising ways.

It was that very energy that built the sprawling greater Los Angeles of today. As the 19th century drew to a close, Huntington began buying disparate electric railroads. He then built additional lines

east, south, and west, to eventually create the largest interurban in the U.S.

At the same time, Huntington bought much of the land around his new rail lines, subdividing it for those looking to live the California dream. By the early 1900s, Pacific Electric reached as far as Redlands and Newport Beach. By 1910, Southern Pacific saw Pacific Electric as a threat and bought out Huntington. One year later, SP merged all the remaining interurban lines in Southern California together, bringing the Big Red Cars to West LA and the San Fernando Valley. By December 1916 (when the author’s great-grandfather opened a drug store called The P.E. Pharmacy in Pacific Electric’s San Bernardino depot), the railroad ran 6,200 electric trains a day over 1,061 miles of right-of-way.

But it wasn’t to last. Less than 40 years later, a good deal of the passenger system had been abandoned in favor of

automobiles and the promise of new free-ways. In 1953, what remained was sold off to Metropolitan Coach Lines, only to be completely abolished when the last Big Red Car revenue run was made on April 9, 1961.

Life After Electric

The always-profitable freight traffic did keep a part of Pacific Electric viable through its absorption into Southern Pacific in 1964. And yet, as industry vanished throughout Southern California, even those once profitable freight lines began to shrivel and rust. The 1970s saw rail service disappear in Hollywood and Beverly Hills, among many other towns. The 1980s saw rail service shutter in Santa Monica and Culver City. The future looked grim.

That was until intermodal came to the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach and light rail and commuter trains came to

the Los Angeles Basin; suddenly, those rusty rails were needed again.

Today, there are approximately 14 Pacific Electric lines in active service (depending on how you count them, and honestly, one could make an argument for there being 10 or 20 just as easily, by using historic delineations instead of the modern-day ones). There are also bits and pieces of additional lines still in use, such as a small section of the Redondo Beach via Gardena Line that exists as a spur into a lumberyard in Gardena, and a small section of the Santa Ana Line that accesses a tank-car customer in Paramount. One could even contend that some of the Metro Rail subway through the Cahuenga Pass follows Pacific Electric right-of-way, as does as the Metro bus rapid transit line’s first few miles west of North Hollywood; for this article, we’ll stick with at-grade or briefly grade-separated rail operations on the

right-of-way. Finally, by these methods, there will be a 15th Pacific Electric line added back soon when the OC Streetcar opens in 2023 utilizing part of the Pacific Electric Santa Ana Line.

Metro Rail

Some of today’s active lines were never abandoned, while others were eradicated for decades but you’d hardly know they were ever gone. If you want to see a PE line in action today and you want to see a lot of trains in a short amount of time, Metro Rail is the place to visit. It’s also where you would see operations most like they would have been had PE survived. Metro’s E Line, which serves the University of Southern California, Culver City, and Santa Monica, runs on what had been a PE freight line, the Santa Monica Air Line. Its eastern terminus is downtown LA at Metro Center, but plans are to connect it to the East LA line (which



OPPOSITE: Union Pacific local LOB86 passes the former Pacific Electric station in downtown Rialto, Calif., on May 16, 2020. Its only customer, a lumber yard, is blocks away. The 1914-era station saw its last passenger in 1947.

LEFT: Metro Rail runs frequent service on the “E” Line (formerly the Expo Line). A set of Kinki Sharyo P3010 cars heads through a cut in Rancho Park, a few miles into its run from Santa Monica to downtown Los Angeles over the erstwhile PE Santa Monica Air Line on November 24, 2019.

BELOW: One of the most unusual examples of surviving PE lines is a section of Metrolink’s San Gabriel Sub that runs down the middle of Interstate 10 (San Bernardino Freeway) east of Los Angeles. On September 16, 2007, a weekend San Bernardino train catches the drivers’ attention.



does not run on PE track) when the Regional Connector is complete. Trains run as frequently as every 12 minutes and bring passengers four blocks away from the Pacific Ocean. While the rolling stock is generally the ubiquitous Kinki Sharyo P3010s, corrugated Breda P2550s have been testing in anticipation of the tie-in with East LA.

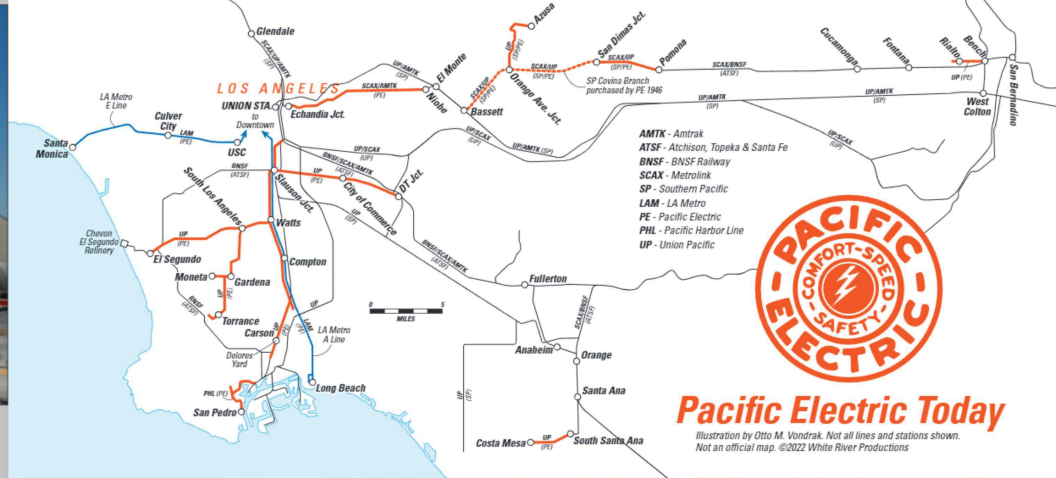
Metro Rail's A Line, which serves Watts and Long Beach, holds some interesting distinctions. It was the very last Pacific Electric line to see passenger trains in 1990. And it is the most heavily patronized light rail line in the country. Equipment is mostly P3010s, with some Siemens P2000s. The line has a restored PE freight station in Watts, passes near the Watts Towers, and serves downtown Long Beach. Plans are to connect this line to the line through Pasadena and Montclair (also not on PE trackage) once



ABOVE RIGHT: When Metro Rail needed a route to the popular beach and commercial center of Santa Monica, the only PE right-of-way intact (of the three that once reached the town) was the mostly freight Airline. An inbound Metro passes a reminder of the line's freight history in Santa Monica on August 13, 2016.

RIGHT: Some of the most distinctive locations to shoot on the old PE are in downtown Torrance, where UP's LOW10 still services USG a couple times a week. On March 18, 2022, the local with its pulls is about to head under the iconic Torrance Viaduct.

BELOW: As so much of Pacific Electric has been torn up, the lines that do exist often have to access "steam railroad" lines over much more modern infrastructure. The UP LOB86 comes around the big curve that takes it from the original San Bernardino Line onto Union Pacific's Mojave Sub on May 16, 2020.



miles). After the SP running, PE rail is regained at Bassett (what was also the SP Covina Branch) and then maintained to CP Cambridge in Pomona, for another seventeen miles, before trains head onto the former Santa Fe.

Union Pacific

The San Gabriel Sub sees some freight service as the Union Pacific San Gabriel Switcher (LOS27) runs out of City of Industry Yard on weekday mornings and is generally found at Bassett working a number of industries there. It can go as far as Pomona (usually on a Tuesday or Thursday) if there is work. Two additional former Pacific Electric lines are owned by Metrolink but only see Union Pacific locals. These are the Azusa Industrial Lead in Irwindale and Azusa, and the Rialto Subdivision in Rialto.

The five-mile-long Azusa Lead is the last new line built by Pacific Electric. It was constructed in the 1950s when most of the Monrovia-Glendora Line was being abandoned. The line leaves the San Gabriel Sub at Orange Avenue Junction, east of the Baldwin Park station, and

Metrolink
If you prefer your commuters in diesel-hauled trains, then Metrolink's San Gabriel Sub your spot. Not surprisingly (as the major suburbs were built around the PE) this is Metrolink's most patronized line (and is called the San Bernardino Line in their customer-facing materials). The line is cobbled together from two stretches of PE, the Southern Pacific Sunset Route, an SP branch line, and the Santa Fe's Second District.

ABOVE RIGHT: For a time, Amtrak was a regular tenant on the former PE in the San Bernardino Freeway median, but that came to an end 20 years ago. Amtrak occasionally uses the line for detours, as a late-arriving Southwest Chief did on October 16, 2016.

the Regional Connector is finished. The central section of the line runs parallel to the Union Pacific Wilmington Sub, as both railroads use the right-of-way of the original PE Long Beach Line.

heads north, passing a Pabst brewery where it rejoins the last small remnant of the Monrovia-Glendora Line in Azusa. It is serviced by the nighttime Baldwin Park Local (LO549).

The Rialto Sub, which at two-and-a-half miles is even shorter, actually has a much grander history. Like the San Gabriel Sub, it was once a part of the San Bernardino Line and, despite its minute length, still hosts a trackside depot (converted to a restaurant), the only one remaining that you can easily include in a photograph with a passing freight. Sadly, there is only one customer left on this line — a lumberyard — and it appears to be going out of business. If so, that would be the end of service to Rialto.

Moving on to the PE trackage that passed through the corporate progression of Pacific Electric to Southern Pacific to Union Pacific, the smallest segment that still sees service today is a piece of the Santa Ana Industrial Lead between South Santa Ana and Costa Mesa. This was once the Santa Ana to Huntington Beach Line, one of the earliest PE lines to lose passenger service back in 1922. UP's Costa Mesa Local (LOA32) runs here out of Anaheim early on Monday and Wednesday mornings, accessing the branch off trackage rights from Metrolink's Orange Sub.

The sporadically used La Habra Sub is all that remains of PE's Whittier Line. Prior to the building of the Alameda Corridor, this line saw a number of through freights, but now it's relegated to the storage of empty well cars. The branch runs from DT Junction in Santa Fe Springs to Slauson Junction in South LA. Catching a train on it requires luck, which is a shame, as it runs through neat downtown areas and has a real Pacific Electric feel to it.

Looking at a map, the Brea Chem Industrial Lead appears to be the eastern extension of the La Habra Sub in Santa Fe Springs. That's because a tiny bit of it is on the Whittier Line, but most of this branch is actually the La Habra-Fullerton-Yorba Linda Line (which would have gone from President Richard Nixon's hometown to his college back when he was a student at Whittier). Union Pacific serves this line Sunday

ABOVE RIGHT: One of UP's most active customers on former PE lines is Crenshaw Lumber in Gardena. On March 18, 2022, the local switches the lumberyard on what was once a PE line to Redondo Beach, but that now stub ends in the yard.

RIGHT: The LOW20 El Segundo Local generally runs with four-axle power. But on June 25, 2018, it ran with larger road units as it nears Wise Transfer, where it will cross over a BNSF line that also serves the Chevron refinery, before dropping its loads.

through Thursday with the Valla Local (LOA36R). This job must cross the busy BNSF main to receive new cars and drop its pulls in Los Nietos. There is a PE substation visible at the junction where the Whittier Line once continued east.

That brings us back to the heaviest-used ex-PE line, Union Pacific's Wilmington Sub that runs from Nadeau in South LA to CP Alameda on the Compton/Carson border. If it's a Tuesday through Saturday morning, we will find the El Segundo Local (LOW20) once again, although it is not the only train to use the former four-track main that was the Long Beach Line. As mentioned earlier, the line is split between Metro Rail and Union Pacific, with two main tracks for light rail, one siding, and one main that is used by as-needed well-car moves, two Union Pacific locals, and the Robertson's-Ready-Mix Rock Train. The El

Segundo, which services Grain Craft, is the only job that works any industry on the line. All three scheduled trains, however, head west onto what crews refer to as "The Branch," at Watts, where the El Segundo and Torrance Industrial Leads split off. These include the LOW20, the Torrance Local (LOW10), and the Robertson's-Ready-Mix Rock Train (RW-CWC).

The El Segundo Industrial Lead is Pacific Electric's El Segundo Line, and although the spur into downtown El Segundo that served a neat passenger station is long gone, the branch's main purpose has never changed — serving the oil refinery on the beach in El Segundo.

All trains on the El Segundo Industrial Lead run through some of the most down-at-the-heels neighborhoods in the LA Basin. With locomotives that can be among UP's least maintained (there



ABOVE: One of the hardest operations to shoot on former PE rails is the Savage/Chevron switcher. Generally nocturnal, it crosses over the Pacific Coast Highway in El Segundo between 7:45 and perhaps 10:00PM most days. Catching a double-header of both its units this day was the rarest of rare on July 1, 2021.

LEFT: Street running was a hallmark of many Pacific Electric sections. While most are gone, a small stretch still exists in downtown Gardena, where a LOW10 leans into the curve to regain private right-of-way on March 18, 2022.

BELOW LEFT: Torrance is known for its landmark railroad viaduct, which was built to service a long-gone steel plant. Trains would head under the viaduct and then through a couple of switchbacks to pass back up over the structure. A delivery for USG passes beneath the viaduct on December 17, 2017.

vestiges. First, the track runs down the middle of two different streets. Second, they pass under a railroad viaduct, which once was PE's access to a steel mill. Third, the PE station is still there and near the tracks. Unfortunately, vegetation and the angle make it really impossible to get a decent image of the station and a passing train together.

Of course, we left our friends on the El Segundo Local (LOW20) at South LA. Heading back to them, they run west all the way toward the beach, passing Elon Musk's Space X campus in Hawthorne before arriving at Wise Transfer Yard east of the refinery. Having traveled through the depths of LA poverty, the train is now in another world. It is on the Manhattan Beach border, surrounded by expensive restaurants and stores. The crew does its switching, sometimes beside a BNSF crew (who have their own yard a few hundred feet away, also serving Chevron), and head back.

The Chevron Refinery itself used to be switched by Pacific Electric with electric center cabs, but is served today by Savage, a private contractor. The track between the Union Pacific yard and the refinery is still ex-Pacific Electric (and thus included here) and the Savage switcher comes out almost every night to work the yard. The refinery has a rebuilt

have been reports of rust holes in the cab floors) and exteriors that are canvases for urban taggers (to the point you can't even tell what anyone was trying to paint on them anymore), crews must be aware of large homeless encampments that can pop up on the tracks, as well as nearly daily incidents of abandoned stolen vehicles on the track. At the same time, the regular railroad concerns of grades that they may or may not have the power to make, and locked customer gates that may or may not be manned, are always an issue. Years ago, the conductor on the Torrance Local once came up to the author and asked, "Why are you taking pictures of the 'Death Train?'"

And still, these trains run, and run well, due to the commitment of the crews who are truly amazing and who know this territory incredibly well and who, through it all, make sure the customers are served and the railroading is done

despite what has happened to the right-of-way and the power.

Only three miles west on the El Segundo Industrial Lead is the junction of South LA where the Torrance Industrial Lead heads south. This is one of two existing lines made from pieces of the old San Pedro via Torrance Line. Both the Torrance Local and the Robertson's-Ready-Mix take this line and their main customers are actually next door to each other in Gardena, where a Conoco refinery is neighbor to the Robertson's plant. While the Rock Train only serves the one customer, on most days the local will continue farther south, both to work the remnant of the Redondo via Gardena Line and, if there is a need, USG in downtown Torrance. Passing through downtown Gardena, trains do about half a block of pure street running. And, if you luck out to see them in downtown Torrance, there are a number of amazing PE

RIGHT: Although the gensets have been gone for a couple of years, they did make many of the former PE lines unique during their 10-year run. On December 5, 2011, LOA32 (Costa Mesa Local) passes the abandoned Greenville Bean Growers plant in Santa Ana.

BELOW RIGHT: ConocoPhillips and Robertson's-Ready-Mix have side-by-side operations in Gardena. LOW10 switches ConocoPhillips with an ex-Southern Pacific GP40-2 on January 3, 2021. The large aggregate loader is part of Robertson's.

ex-Canadian National GP9 and a two-engine NRE genset; the genset is the standard power. They usually come across Pacific Coast Highway between 7:45PM and 10:00PM, and can go either to UP or BNSF first, then work the other, but operations are completely on an as-needed basis.

The rest of Union Pacific's remaining Pacific Electric operations are concentrated around Dolores Yard in Carson. First is the Del Amo Industrial Lead, which is also a part of the former Long Beach Line and also follows Metro Rail. This is a short two-mile-long branch, the main purpose of which is to access the Reyes Spur in Compton. Although the track is owned by Union Pacific, the Reyes Switcher is a Pacific Harbor Line job that runs in the late afternoon, generally shoving from PHL tracks, through Dolores Yard, and then pulling down the Del Amo Lead.

The Dolores Industrial Lead is PE's San Pedro via Dominguez Line over which Big Red Cars once brought travelers to Catalina-bound steamships. This short industrial branch is used quite a bit today for engine hosting by Union Pacific crews and by Pacific Harbor Line dock jobs.

Finally, there is Dolores Yard itself. The first thing one notices about Dolores Yard is that it is rather thin for a major freight yard. That is because it was built in available space during World War II. After the war, it became a main yard for Southern Pacific and later Union Pacific, eventually being converted into a support yard for the new nearby intermodal facility, which it still serves today. The yard is mostly switched by UP crews, but Union Pacific dock jobs run by Pacific Harbor Line can also be seen.

Pacific Harbor Line

Pacific Harbor Line is the successor of Harbor Belt Line, which was operated by Pacific Electric but owned by the city of Los Angeles. Although massive new building for intermodal expansion has eradicated much of the harbor area from decades ago, one clear connection that can be made between Pacific Harbor Line today and Pacific Electric is that PHL's West Basin Lead is the southern end of PE's San Pedro via Dominguez line.



The West Basin Lead runs from near the Transfer Junction (near Trapac) to just below Vincent Thomas Bridge. This line is quite busy with a Phillips 66 refinery and two major intermodal facilities on it, as well as access to the Gaffey Street Lead. The now-abandoned end of this line, as recently as five years ago, used to feature Big Red Car replicas that ran from the World Cruise Center down to the Ports O'Call Village. Sadly, a "temporary service suspension" is looking more and more permanent as new construction has made no accommodation for the tracks to be replaced.

Another connection to the PE past is the Gaffey Street Lead, which, in this world of Pacific Electric lines being rebuilt to run passenger trains, is the only PE line that had been abandoned and then rebuilt to run freight trains. It is another remnant of the San Pedro via Torrance line and it is used daily by both

the PHL 7AM Switcher and/or other local jobs to work Rancho LPG, which can receive multiple switches. The Gaffey Street Lead runs from a junction off the West Basin Lead near Channel Street in San Pedro up to just north of Westmont along Gaffey.

Catching the Action

Railfanning these lines varies drastically from fish-in-a-barrel easy to nearly impossible. If you're a light rail transit fan, there are many opportunities along both the Metro A and E Lines — some highlights being the Watts station, a telephoto view capturing the iconic Los Angeles City Hall, the street running in downtown Long Beach, the cement plant on 19th in Santa Monica, the USC campus, and the footbridge in Rancho Park.

Probably the best Metrolink shot is from the footbridge at Margherita Avenue in Alhambra in the morning



(although any of the footbridges along the freeway that runs between CSLA and El Monte are great). The one must-do shot of a local freight on Metrolink tracks would be the Saturday lunchtime local passing the Rialto depot.

As far as the Union Pacific-owned lines, the shots you really want are the Torrance Local or Robertson's-Ready-Mix unloading in Gardena at Rosecrans; the Torrance Local street running in downtown Gardena; and if you luck out, coming under the viaduct in downtown Torrance. Mondays and Thursdays seem to be more likely days for that, but it's all as-needed running.

Shooting the Savage switcher coming out of the Chevron refinery requires you be here in June or July. It can take going there two or three days in a row since, while they do come out at 7:45 or 8:00PM, there's no guarantee. You have to just keep trying until you get them.

Sixty years after the Big Red Cars stopped rolling through the streets of Los Angeles, there's a lot of action on former Pacific Electric lines still out there for the dedicated railfan to discover. 📷

TOP LEFT: Pacific Harbor Line YPSW05 (AmeriGas Switcher) prepares to shove up the Gaffey Street Lead in Wilmington on April 22, 2018. This is the same line (now severed in the middle) on which the UP LOW10 Torrance Local runs on the northern end.

LEFT: PHL YPSW05 returns down the Gaffey Street Lead after working AmeriGas on April 22, 2018. The location here is San Pedro, and this track was previously torn out, then restored for the AmeriGas customer.

BELOW: Union Pacific LOW10 does its best to represent the interurban heritage of these tracks, heading through the short stretch of street running in Gardena on August 27, 2019.

