

Key System's prescient but flawed Bridge Units

From its opening in 1903, the San Francisco, Oakland & San Jose Consolidated Railway used "Key Route" as a slogan. A 1912 merger of that East Bay interurban operation with local streetcar lines produced the San Francisco-Oakland Terminal Railways, which modified the moniker to *Key System*. Reorganization as Key System Transit Co. in 1924 made the name official. At its peak, the Key's empire spanned from Richmond south through Berkeley, Emeryville, and Oakland to Melrose, all funneling to a mile-long pier that led to a nine-track, three-slip ferry terminal on the bay. The Key's ferry fleet was idled in January 1939 with the opening of the Bridge Railway on the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge, enabling Key trains to run directly to a new terminal in San Francisco. (Trains of SP's Interurban Electric Railway and the Sacramento Northern also used the bridge before those services quit in 1941.) For the new transbay operations, Key System devised a plan to dismantle most of its existing, outdated cars and reuse

their components in a fleet of modern articulated units. Though not the first examples of the configuration, the Bridge Units foreshadowed the three-truck, two-carbody design so common on light-rail systems today. The Bridge fleet totaled 88 units, built in the Key's own shops and by St. Louis Car Co. and Bethlehem Steel's Wilmington, Del., plant. Alas, the Bridge Units suffered all their lives from insufficient power (only two trucks had motors, which were obsolete) and inadequate ventilation (windows were fixed, and there was no air conditioning). Bus-oriented National City Lines bought the Key in 1946, and rail operations ended April 20, 1958. At right, Bridge Unit 105 brings up the rear of an outbound E Line train on Claremont Avenue at Webster Street in South Berkeley in September 1952. Out at the end of the E Line in the same month (lower right), No. 118 heads west at the Claremont Hotel. Below, No. 134 works a San Francisco-bound A Line run on Oakland's 12th Street at Lake Merritt on September 14, 1949.



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