



In a beautiful part of southeast Pasadena on Oak Knoll Avenue, northbound wooden cars 975/954 curve past Pinehurst Drive on July 15, 1942.

# RIDING THE PACIFIC ELECTRIC

The nation's largest interurban system got a young Santa Fe fan where he wanted to go

By Stan Kistler • Photos by Harold F. Stewart, from the author's collection

**A**s a youngster growing up in Southern California in the 1940s, I was fascinated, like so many boys my age, with mechanical things, and trains in particular. This meant mainly steam trains, although I did have a passing interest in the electric lines I happened to be exposed to, notably the region's giant Pacific Electric system. The PE was the largest interurban in the U.S., with more

than 1,000 cars operating over 1,000 miles of track on a system that in 1929 boasted 575 route-miles.

My earliest PE recollection dates from 1939, when we were living in Long Beach. We had an apartment on Seventh Street, which had a PE local line. I would surmise from what I learned later that the cars I saw were four-wheel Birneys.

We moved to San Diego in summer 1941. World War II broke out on December 7, and the city bustled with military

activity during the war years. During that time, I rode all over San Diego on the streetcars and buses of the San Diego Electric Railway.

I remember a trip in late 1944 up to Pasadena with my mother and 2-year-old brother. We were headed there for the Christmas holidays with my grandparents and aunts and uncles. We boarded a Santa Fe *San Diegan* so crowded that it was standing-room-only, but my mother was given a seat by a kind Ma-

rine. I stood much of the way. Grandfather had told us he could not drive to Los Angeles Union Station to meet us because of gas rationing, so we were to take “the Red Car,” as the Pacific Electric was universally known to locals.

We walked out of the station and over to the corner of Alameda and Aliso streets to wait for a Pasadena Oak Knoll train, which I recall consisted of two steel cars. On this too, standing-room-only was the order of the day. We arrived at Colorado Street (later Boulevard) and Lake Avenue in Pasadena, where Grandpa met us in his 1939 Dodge.

**I**n spring 1945, we moved from San Diego to Altadena, the town just north of Pasadena below the San Gabriel Mountains. By this time I was in junior high school and had a weekly allowance, and I also worked a few hours on Saturdays at a nearby grocery store. One Sunday that summer, I decided to go into Los Angeles to watch trains at Union Station. This involved a short bus trip from our Altadena home to downtown Pasadena, again at Colorado and Lake, where I boarded an inbound PE Pasadena Oak Knoll Line car.

I boarded the car, one of the steel 1100-class interurbans, in a safety zone on Colorado, and we immediately made the 90-degree turn in mid-street onto South Lake Avenue. I recall the conductor standing on the rear platform holding out a red flag.

When it came time to collect fares, there was a rod just beneath the ceiling that ran the length of the passenger compartment, and with it a cord attached to the fare register located on one of the bulkheads. With it was a large dial with fares marked in 5-cent increments. When the conductor took my fare, he reached up and turned the rod so an arrow pointed at the amount collected (all of 20 cents!); he then pulled the cord once, and the fare was recorded in the register. He pocketed the money, or added it to his coin changer, I assume to be accounted for after his shift ended.

The Oak Knoll Line ran through an area of beautiful homes and past the famous Huntington Hotel on the Pasadena-San Marino border. At Huntington Drive, the line joined the double-track line from Glendora, Azusa, Duarte, Monrovia, and Arcadia and became four tracks. The Oak Knoll cars used the outside tracks to Sierra Vista, at Huntington Drive and Alhambra’s West Main Street. Here they switched to the center tracks



**North of Huntington Drive and seven blocks south of Pinehurst on South Oak Knoll, near Monterey Road in San Marino, older wooden car 1053 helps out during a 1947 rush hour.**

for a fast run into Los Angeles, almost all of it on private right of way. I think we must have gotten up to 50 or 55 mph going through El Sereno and Indian Village before the stop at Valley Junction. Here the Baldwin Park Line, the remnant of electric passenger service on the San Bernardino Line of the Eastern District, came in from the east.

Shortly we were passing PE’s Macy Street shops, where the Northern District cars were maintained. I got off at the foot of the Aliso Street bridge over the Los Angeles River (today near where the San Bernardino Freeway crosses) and walked back along the road below the bridge to the Santa Fe tracks. From there it was a short hike north along the right of way to Mission Tower, the big junction northeast of Union Station where all the passenger lines came together. I spent that afternoon, and many more thereafter, just watching the railroad activity around the tower, but it was the PE that got me there and back. I think it cost me all of 60 cents for each of those afternoons of great train-watching—and that included a 5-cent Coke!

On one of those Sunday outings, I remember that the car I rode in from Pasadena was one of the older “ten-hundred class” wooden cars. Sitting in the rear, I would watch the front end twist and sway on some of the curves. The ten-hundreds, which had been around since 1913, worked valiantly through World War II but soon would be retired.

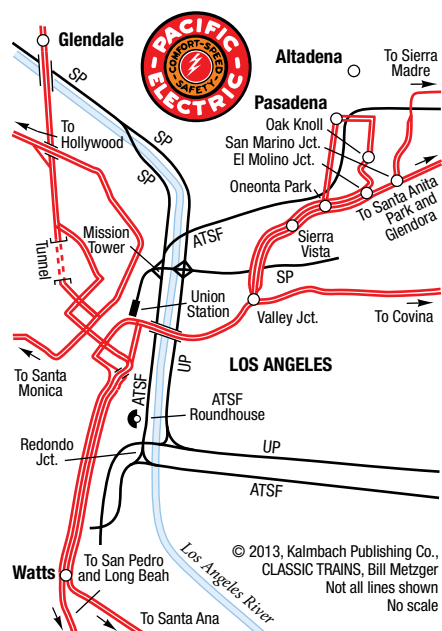
**A**fter the war ended in August 1945, I became more informed about trains and started photographing them in Pasadena. It was there where I met some serious railfans who had been in the hobby since the 1930s. I made my first trip to Cajon Pass

on V-J Day in the company of one of them, Don Yeager. I came to be indebted to friends who had cars to get around to the area’s great photo spots; otherwise, the Pacific Electric usually got me where I needed to go.

I started making Sunday trips to the Santa Fe roundhouse at Redondo Junction in L.A. Here again, the PE was my main mode of transportation, giving me a connection to the Los Angeles Transit Lines “J” car that ran on Santa Fe Avenue and got me close to the roundhouse.

In early 1946, we moved to East Pasadena, a few blocks from the PE Sierra Madre line. My railfan friends had suggested that I could do even more engine picture-taking at San Bernardino because the Santa Fe had major shops there, and Union Pacific also ran steam

## WHERE STAN RODE





dead locomotives awaited scrapping. The westbound *Grand Canyon* left San Bernardino at 3:55 p.m., and I returned to Pasadena by the reverse of my morning route after a good day of picture-taking.

**J**anuary 1, 1947, was an especially busy day for the Pacific Electric. What with the annual Tournament of Roses parade in Pasadena and the racetrack specials from Los Angeles to the Santa Anita track in Arcadia, PE's Northern District was inundated with cars from other parts of the system. Some friends and I took up residence at Oneonta Park for most of the day, watching the parade—the electric one, not the one with the floral floats. Oneonta Park, at the foot of Fair Oaks Avenue in South Pasadena where it met Huntington Drive, was where the double-track Pasadena Short Line entered the four-track main line.

All day long, three-car trains paraded past us, hauling thousands of people to and from the Rose parade and Santa Anita. We watched 950-class wooden cars from the Western District, 1200-class steel cars from the Eastern District, 300- and 400-class “blimps” from the Southern District, and the 600-class center-entrance suburban cars. The blimps were former Northwestern Pacific and Interurban Electric Railway cars from Northern California that PE acquired during the war. On this day, I saw the largest assortment of PE cars I would ever see at once.

Still without my own auto, I continued to take the PE to the many locations in Southern California where I could photograph the steam roads. But the automobile and the new “freeways” were taking their toll on PE passenger volume. Motor vehicles clogged streets where the PE ran, causing its schedules to be lengthened. Maintenance-of-way budgets were slashed.

The Northern District that had served Pasadena so well for so many years was changing in 1950. I was working for a photo lab on Colorado Street where the daily passage of the Oak Knoll Line cars vibrated our basement lab as they passed. It was just one of those daily occurrences that I never really thought about . . . until Pacific Electric announced it would end service on this line on October 8, 1950. It was time to take some action, and to at least get some pictures on the last day.

I went downtown early that morning before I was due in at work. I walked down to Colorado and Fair Oaks and

**A rare snowfall has blanketed Pasadena and surrounding communities on January 11, 1949, as Pasadena-Oak Knoll car 1111 crosses Old Mill Road, inbound toward Los Angeles.**



**At Sierra Vista, car 410 leads a three-car Rose Parade Special back toward Los Angeles on January 1, 1951. These cars were seldom seen on Pacific Electric's Northern District except on New Year's Day. At right, a Watts-Sierra Vista local car has just arrived at the terminal.**

helpers through there toward Cajon Pass. One of the best ways for me to get to “San Berdoo” and back was how I first did so one day in fall 1946. I walked the few blocks from my home to Colorado Street and Sierra Madre Boulevard to catch an inbound Sierra Madre shuttle car to San Marino. There I caught an inbound Azusa/Glendora car to L.A. Union Station, and from there I had a memorable ride east on the *Grand Canyon Limited* behind one of Santa Fe's 2900-class 4-8-4s.

The train left Los Angeles about 9 a.m., arriving in San Bernardino at 10:45. This gave me about five hours to roam around the yards and roundhouse area, as well as the “boneyard” where



**Last Day: On September 19, 1951, the finale of electric operation on the Monrovia-Glendora Line, an operator poses with car 744 at San Marino. The slower, two-man suburban cars replaced 1100s in the line's last year.**



On October 8, 1950, the last day for the Oak Knoll line, I was out for photos and hustled down the sidewalk on Colorado Street to make this shot—a special favorite—of car 1125 waiting at the crossing as Santa Fe's L.A.-bound *Super Chief* slows for its Pasadena station stop.

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made a picture of an outbound “eleven hundred” making the turn onto Colorado, then began walking the block and a half east to where Santa Fe’s Second District, the main passenger-train route, crossed Colorado and the Oak Knoll Line tracks. As I was about a half block away, the crossing bells started ringing and the gates began to come down. An Oak Knoll car was stopped behind the gate as the westbound *Super Chief* passed, slowing for the Pasadena station a few blocks south. I had the camera ready and recorded an image of the trains [above]. The photo is one I have always cherished. (You’ll note that the other photos illustrating this tale were taken by the late Harold Stewart. He was a 61-year veteran of employment by Pacific Electric and successors

Southern Pacific and Union Pacific who, beginning in the early 1930s, became the ultimate photographer historian of the system—see “Harold Stewart and the Pacific Electric” in Spring 2008 CLASSIC TRAINS. Harold retired in 2002 and died in 2005.)

The Sierra Madre Line also was abandoned on that day, and the Pasadena Short Line was converted to one-man cars of the 5050 class (formerly the 600-class, two-man suburban cars). The 50 “eleven hundreds” were put up for sale and soon went south to Argentina. The Monrovia–Azusa–Glendora Line survived for another year, but was taken over by the two-man suburban cars of the 700 series until it, too, was abandoned, in September 1951.

I remember one trip I made to San Bernardino that year. It was about a mile walk from our East Pasadena home in the Chapman Woods area down to Rosemead Boulevard and Huntington Drive. There I

caught an inbound Monrovia car to Valley Junction, where I had to transfer to a PE bus for the rest of my trip to San Bernardino. Electric passenger service on the San Bernardino Line had been discontinued many years before. Pacific Electric’s buses were built by White, and while they had comfortable long-distance seats, the fumes from the under-floor engines were pretty bad, at least on that trip.

I finally was able to buy a used automobile in late 1951, and with my own “wheels,” my days of riding the PE were pretty much over. I watched from the sidelines as the Pacific Electric of my youth faded away, with the sale to Metropolitan Coach Lines of the remaining passenger operations in 1953, and the final runs of the Long Beach and Watts lines in 1961 by the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transit Authority.

Now, more than a half century later, Los Angeles and its suburbs are covered by miles and miles of new passenger rail lines—light rail, subways, and a commuter rail system on former “steam road” tracks. Back then, I never would have dreamed it to be possible. ■

