

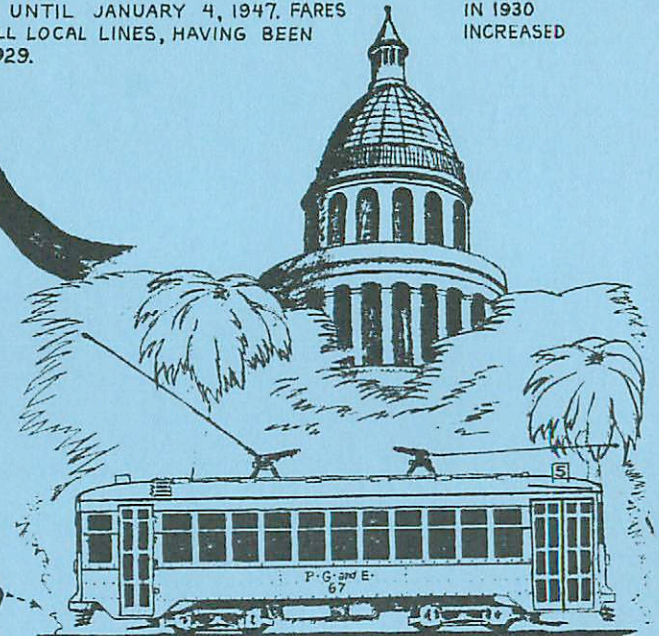
# Sacramento's Streetcars

1930

SACRAMENTO'S TROLLEYS BEGAN SERVICE IN 1890 AND CONTINUED IN OPERATION UNTIL JANUARY 4, 1947. FARES WERE 7¢ ON ALL LOCAL LINES, HAVING BEEN INCREASED FROM 5¢ IN 1929.



THE FIRST TROLLEY CARS, BUILT IN THE 1890'S, WERE VERY SMALL WITH A BUMPY RIDE. MANY OF THEM STARTED OUT AS HORSE-CARS AND WERE CONVERTED TO ELECTRIC OPERATION.



NEWEST CARS IN SACRAMENTO, BUILT BY THE AMERICAN CAR COMPANY IN 1929, SAW MUCH SERVICE ON THE 'J' AND 'P' STREET LINES.



BUILT IN P.G.&E.'S OWN SHOPS AROUND 1905, THESE CARS WERE SEEN ON SACRAMENTO STREETS FOR MANY YEARS.

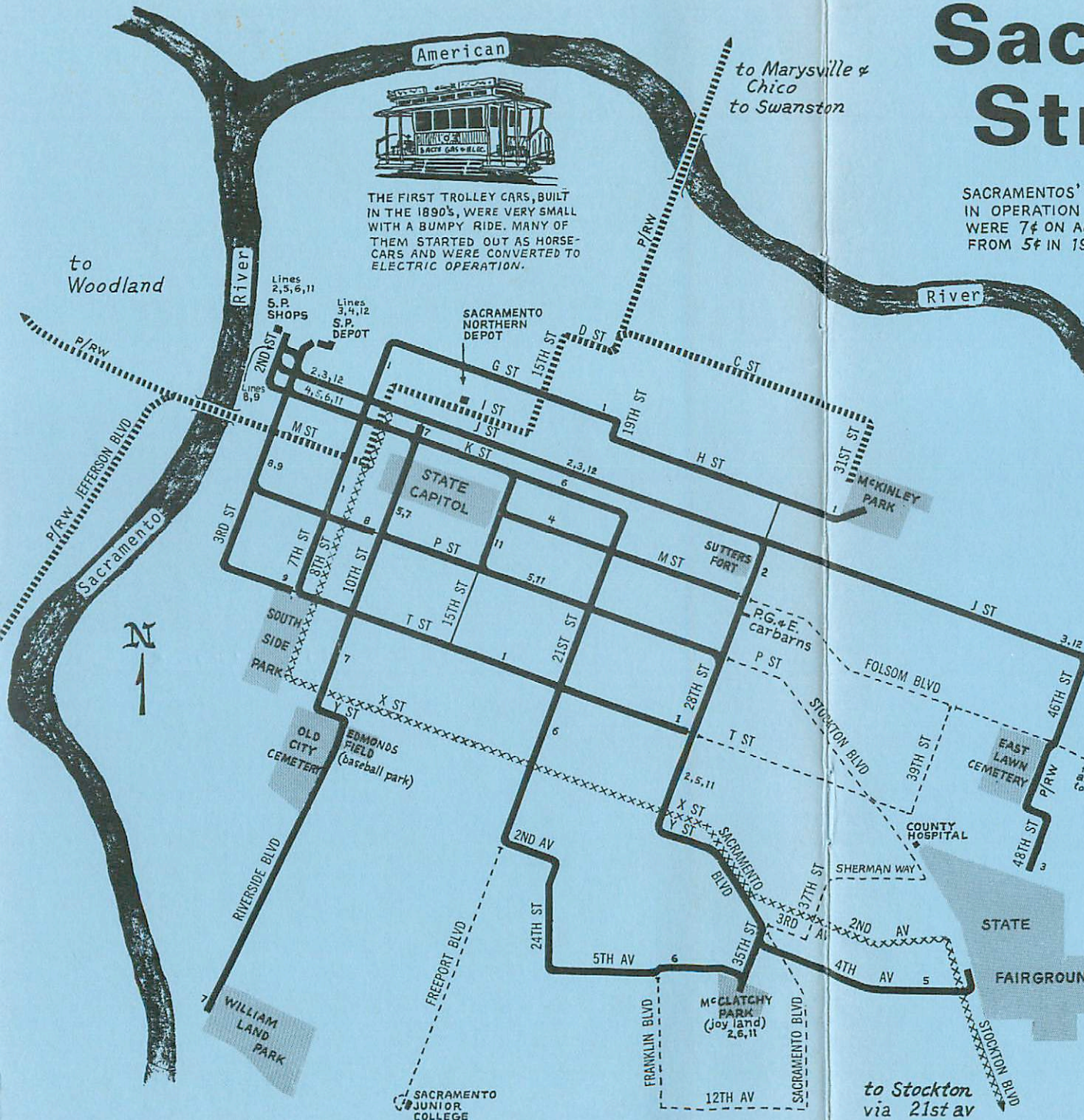


THE LITTLE BIRNEY CARS, BUILT IN 1918, RAN ON THE 'C' STREET LINE UNTIL 1946.

## LEGEND

Pacific Gas & Electric trolleys 3 (route no.)  
 Sacramento Northern Rwy. buses  
 Central Calif. Traction Co. xxxxxxxxxxxx

1 MILE



to Stockton via 21st av

# **Sacramento's Streetcars**

Richard Rodda

**Sacramento County Historical Society**

*Golden Notes.*  
Volume 33, Number 1. Spring, 1987.  
Sacramento County Historical Society  
P.O. Box 1175  
Sacramento, CA 95806  
Fred Gunsky and Mary Griffith, editors.

Cover map and illustrations courtesy of Robert W. Blymer.  
Photographs courtesy of Richard Rodda.

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*Golden Notes* is a quarterly published by the Sacramento County Historical Society since 1954 for the purpose of preserving the historical heritage of Sacramento County and promoting public awareness of local history.

We invite manuscripts about the people, institutions, and events of the Sacramento region throughout its history. For further information, write to: The Editors, *Golden Notes*, 7058 San Jacinto Court, Citrus Heights, CA 95621.

## **Sacramento's Streetcars**

As Sacramento prepares to inaugurate its Light Rail transit system, nostalgia captures the thoughts of many who remember the good old days of the trolley. At one time the city had fifteen streetcar lines. Even today you will hear old-timers remark: "We had a good system in place; we never should have abandoned it." But progress and aggressive competition by General Motors and other bus manufacturers dictated during the 40s that buses were cheaper and more efficient than electric streetcars. So Sacramento phased out its network. The last car returned to the barn at 28th and N Streets January 4, 1947.

Today the streetcar, better known as a Light Rail Vehicle, is making a comeback. San Diego, Long Beach, San Francisco, San Jose, Portland, Oregon, Pittsburgh, and Buffalo are among other cities with Light Rail systems recently completed or under construction. In March the first half of Sacramento's 18.3 mile Light Rail line begins service, carrying passengers from Watt Avenue along the I-80 corridor to Arden Way, Del Paso Boulevard, 12th Street, and finally to the downtown K Street Mall. In September, service will be extended from downtown to R Street, to

Folsom Boulevard and a terminal at Butterfield Way.<sup>1</sup>

Let's take a look at what Sacramento gave up 40 years ago. Public transportation began in Sacramento in 1858 when the first horse-drawn carriages carried passengers from 3rd and R to 2nd and K. The first horsecar line on tracks was opened to the public in 1861. Electric streetcars appeared in 1890, when the Sacramento Electric Power and Light Company strung wires overhead to supply steam-generated electricity to its streetcars. In 1895, the system was converted to hydroelectric power when the new Folsom power plant began delivering electricity to the city. The Pacific Gas & Electric Company took over the system in 1906.

PG&E operated eleven lines out of its carbarns at 28th and N, now the home of Regional Transit buses. At the height of its operation, local lines were numbered as follows:

1--A U-shaped line from McKinley Park to the downtown area and out T Street to 28th.

2--J Street line from downtown to James McClatchy Park via 28th Street.

3--J Street to East Sacramento. The old No. 3 streetcar line on J Street carried passengers to and from East Sacramento. It offered service every ten minutes throughout the day and every five minutes during rush hours. It was one of the most heavily patronized lines, just as it remains today with its bus lines of the No. 30 series.

4--M Street line from downtown to 28th & Capitol Avenue.

5--P Street line, downtown to old State Fairgrounds on Stockton Boulevard via 28th Street and Oak Park.

6--21st Street line, downtown to James McClatchy Park via K, 21st, 5th Avenue.

7--10th Street line to William Land Park via 10th Street and Riverside Boulevard.

8--From 2nd and I Streets to 10th and P Streets.

9--Second and I to 7th and T Streets.

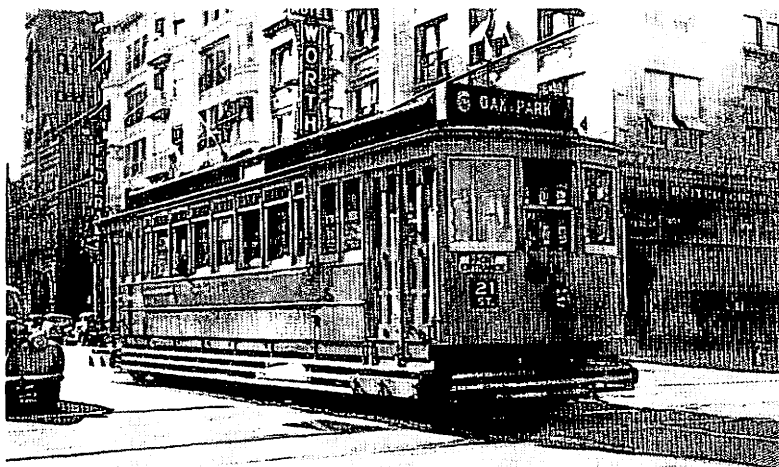
11--P Street line to Oak Park.

12--J Street line from SP Depot via J Street to 46th Street.

For some reason there was no line designated as No. 10.

In the mid-1920s there were eighty-three cars on the PG&E roster. The No. 5 line was the longest, 4.84 miles from the downtown terminal to the fairground. The shortest, barely more than a mile, was the No. 8 line from 2nd and I to 3rd and I, to P Street, to 10th Street.

There also were two independent companies.



This "California"-type car, built in Sacramento's 28th St. shops between 1902 and 1909, was rebuilt for one-man operation in the mid-1920s.

The Central California Traction Company (CCT) ran its single line from 8th and K Streets to Colonial Heights by way of 8th, X, Sacramento Boulevard, 2nd Avenue, and Stockton Boulevard.

The Northern Electric--later Sacramento Northern (SN)--had several lines. The SN lines were the C Street service, downtown to McKinley Park via C Street; the Elverta line, a commuter service to Rio Linda, Elverta, etc.; the Swanston line from downtown to the old Swanston meat packing plant (near what is now Cal Expo) and a line from downtown to West Sacramento via the old M Street Bridge.

Sixty-two streetcars were built in Sacramento's 28th Street shops between 1902 and 1909. They were yellow, wooden-framed, three-compartment, "California"-type cars. The enclosed center section of each car had 12 wooden cross seats. Open sections at each end of the car had wooden benches facing outward. The cars were equipped with rope brakes, requiring the motorman to use muscle power to slow down or stop the car. In the mid-1920s these cars were rebuilt for one-man operation and air brakes were substituted for the rope brakes.

Thirty-four of the cars were used on the local lines and the remaining twenty-eight were sold to other California street railways. The largest outside order was for fifteen cars for the San Jose and Santa Clara County Railway. Other cars joined streetcar service in Palo Alto, Santa Cruz, and Bakersfield. In 1914 PG&E began buying its cars from the American Car Company of St. Louis, one of the largest builders of streetcars in the nation.

In the early years of streetcar service, all cars

were manned by a motorman and a conductor. The conductor collected the fares and issued transfers. Fares were five cents until the early thirties, when they were increased to seven cents or four tokens for a quarter. Free transfers were the rule. The conductor rang fares up by pulling a cord connected with a cash-register-type machine at the end of the car. He also signaled the motorman with another cord--one bell to stop and two bells to proceed.

In 1916, when PG&E purchased the small "Birney" cars (seating thirty-four passengers as against forty-four for the larger cars) and put them on the 10th Street line, the company began converting all cars to one-man operation. All sorts of accidents were predicted by those who demanded both a motorman and a conductor on all cars. When one-man operation took over, the motorman--just as the bus driver does today--had to police the fare box and issue transfers. The job was simplified somewhat by the installation of fare boxes to collect coins from passengers. Another change for the one-man era was the installation of buzzers at each window so departing passengers could signal the motorman to stop at the next corner.

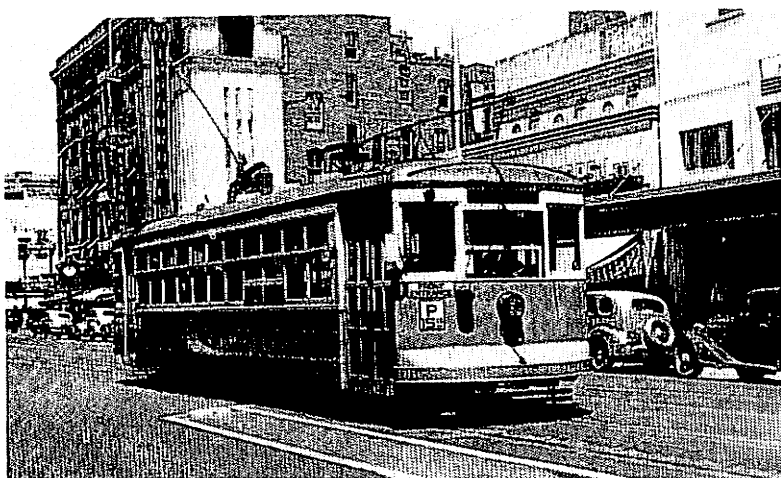
The last new cars purchased for the Sacramento system were manufactured in 1929. They had leather-upholstered seats, automatic rear-exit doors and offered a smoother and quieter ride than some of the ancient yellow wooden cars of the other routes. They were assigned to the P Street and J Street lines, which seemed to be the heaviest traveled. Incidentally, the twelve cars of 1929 were known as the "Christmas cars." They were delivered in the last months of the year and



each car when placed in service carried signs reading: "PG&E's Christmas present to Sacramento."

Flagmen, who have played an integral role in railroading, seldom were needed on streetcar lines. The big exception in Sacramento occurred on the P Street line during Labor Day weekend at the State Fair. The P Street car (No. 5) used a single track on 4th Avenue from 35th Street to Stockton Boulevard. The cars ran at frequent intervals and usually were jammed with riders. It was necessary to station flagmen at certain locations. They waved red or white flags, telling the streetcar motorman he could enter (white flag) or must wait (red flag) for clearance before proceeding on the single track.

The closest Sacramento came to a four-track thoroughfare was the three parallel tracks on Sacramento Boulevard in Oak Park. The PG&E



One of the modern, lightweight, "Christmas cars," which were purchased by PG&E in 1929, travels east on K Street.

cars used a double-track system. The Colonial Heights line of the Traction Company used the third track on Sacramento Boulevard.<sup>2</sup>

The roster of retired crew members who operated Sacramento streetcars is now very small. Eldred Abbott, 73, is among the survivors. He started his career as a motorman on the Sacramento Northern's streetcar line in Chico in 1936. During World War II he was transferred to Sacramento, taking an assignment on the C Street line. Most of the cars on the line at this time were single truck "Birneys". "They were light and they rocked and jumped up and down," recalled Abbott. "There were no heaters and we had a time keeping warm in the winter. In the summer we had no air conditioning."

Abbott said during the war business was good, since the line served the almond growers plant, the old C Street cannery of the California Packing Corporation and other establishments with many employees. "We used to pack 'em in those small cars," he said. "There was standing room only, most of the time."

Martin V. Barri, 69, a native of Ferndale, took a job with McClellan Air Force Base during World War II. After the war he signed on with PG&E as a streetcar motorman in Sacramento. He recalls that the pay was 65 cents an hour and no overtime. Yet on many occasions he had to take "the first car out of the barn at 5 o'clock in the morning" and sometimes remain on duty until 1:30 a.m. the next day.

Sacramento streetcars, like those of many cities of the old streetcar era, were rather noisy. The Light Rail cars, in their test runs, move swiftly and smoothly and with a much lower

sound level than that of the old-fashioned streetcars. On a personal note, I used to live in the Curtis Oaks area. At night, while in bed, I could hear that outbound 21st Street car rattle and roar all the way from the time it crossed 21st and Broadway. Being a rail fan, I never complained. It was music to my ears.

In the 1920s and before, when autos were comparatively scarce, it was a custom to take the streetcar to the ballgame, and PG&E added extra cars to its 10th Street line during the baseball season. Sacramento's Buffalo Park at Riverside Boulevard and Y Street (now Broadway)<sup>3</sup> had a double track spur beside it, where the streetcars were parked during the game, ready to take the fans downtown after the last out. The 10th Street line was popular for other reasons during the summer. Riverside Baths, the city's largest indoor swimming pool, was located at the end of the line, across the street from William Land Park. Many families used the trolley to take them to and from the Baths.

A loyal streetcar rider in earlier days was the late Superior Court Judge Peter J. Shields. He lived at 23rd and T Streets. The old T Street car (No. 1) provided door-to-door service. He climbed aboard a few steps from his home and rode to 7th and I Streets, where the old County Courthouse stood.

The end of streetcar service was a foregone conclusion when, on October 31, 1943, PG&E sold its transportation system to Pacific City Lines, part of the National City Lines combine. This doomed the streetcars. National City Lines was primarily a bus marketing operation and made its reputation and profits by converting its

acquisitions to bus travel. The sale included 27.4 miles of track, 33 streetcars, 60 buses and the barns and shops, for a sale price of \$450,000. By this time some of the lines had already been discontinued in favor of buses. In 1944 City Lines acquired the California Central Traction Colonial Heights line and the Sacramento Northern C Street line as well.<sup>4</sup>

On the day of final service only two streetcar lines were left--No. 5 (P Street) and No. 6 (21st Street).<sup>5</sup> There was no special fanfare; the cars just rode into oblivion with a few rail fans on hand for the last ride. It was an occasion for R. T. Butler, a motorman for 43 years, to announce his retirement.

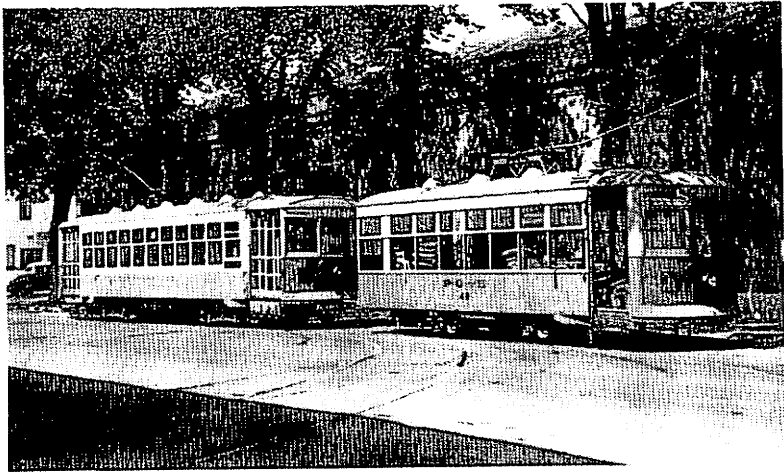
One of the last recorded streetcar operations was over the California Central Traction-Sacramento Northern freight trackage on June 3, 1951, by a group of rail fans who used a former Saskatoon (Saskatchewan) trolley, acquired for a museum. A few years later the two freight lines converted to diesel power and tore out all trolley wires.

Today there are only a few reminders of streetcars, such as ridges in some streets, including Stockton Boulevard, showing where tracks once existed. The most visible piece of evidence, however, is a "diamond" or "frog" at 3rd and R Streets. A "diamond" is a device in the track arrangement permitting a rail to cross an intersecting rail. This particular diamond enabled the cars of the old 3rd and T Street (No. 9) line to cross the Southern Pacific spur serving industrial and commercial customers along R Street.

Most of the old Sacramento trolleys were

scrapped. Some were purchased and converted into homes. One of the modern lightweight cars acquired in 1929 serves as a popular dining room for the Fish Emporium restaurant now at 2310 Fair Oaks Boulevard. Car No. 62 of Sacramento Northern's C Street line still is operating as a tourist attraction at the California Railway Museum at Rio Vista Junction. Once lovingly called a "dinkey" by its patrons, this is one of the last of the thousands of "Birney" cars mass-produced between 1916 and 1921 and operated with one man as both motorman and conductor. The museum also has one of the "California"-type Sacramento streetcars on display, but it is not in operating condition.<sup>6</sup>

National City Lines was never able to make a success of the bus system it created after killing off the streetcars. The City of Sacramento acquired the bus system--now Regional Transit--in 1955. Patronage has grown, along with a startling growth of the community itself, in recent years. The population of the city has increased from 105,958 (US Census) in 1940 to 275,741 in 1980. The county population jumped from 158,999 in 1940 to 783,481 in 1980. These increases are reflected in the number of transit lines serving the city and its suburbs, compared with the number in the 1940s, when streetcars gave way to buses only. Today Regional Transit operates more than eighty bus routes with service extending to Davis, Woodland, Roseville, Citrus Heights and Elk Grove. At the peak of streetcar service there were fifteen lines, with only one or two extending beyond the city limits. There also were a few feeder bus lines connecting with streetcar lines in those days. One of the ironies in the comparisons is that PG&E



The 1929 "Christmas" car (left) and the smaller 1916 "Birney" car (right) each had a one-man crew. The motorman also policed the farebox.

carried fifteen million passengers a year in the early 1920s. Today, with all its routes, RT has an annual patronage of thirteen to fourteen million.

The principal reason public transit patronage did not grow, of course, is the automobile. California had 2.8 million automobiles registered in 1946, the year before Sacramento's streetcars were eliminated. Registrations reached 22 million in the 1980s. RT officials give an additional reason--the improvement of the road system with freeways, express highways and wider thoroughfares generally. What may lie ahead, however, is gridlock for Sacramento highways, a condition that has made traffic so unbearable in some major centers that drivers are shifting to public transportation for home to office

travel. Reductions in the price of gasoline also have kept motorists in their cars for commute travel.

If Light Rail has the same experience here that it has had in San Diego, Portland, and San Francisco, Regional Transit will have no fears for its future.

## NOTES

1. When service begins in September on the Folsom corridor segment, Sacramento's Light Rail trains will use the right-of-way of California's first railroad. On August 9, 1855, the ceremonial spike was driven for the start of the Sacramento Valley Railroad, first passenger steam railroad west of the Rockies. The tracks were laid on R Street from a terminal at 3rd and R, and completed to Folsom by February, 1856. This was seven years before ground was broken, also in Sacramento, for the Central Pacific Railroad. That line later became famous when the golden spike was driven in 1869 linking it with Union Pacific at Promontory, Utah, and forming the nation's first transcontinental rail line. Light Rail will use R Street from 21st Street eastward to the old city limits and then continue along a Folsom Boulevard corridor to Butterfield Way. Southern Pacific, which eventually absorbed the Sacramento Valley Railroad, still operates the line along Folsom Boulevard as a freight carrier. Light Rail tracks parallel the SP tracks in the corridor, on a right-of-way acquired through negotiations with SP.

2. San Francisco at one time had four tracks on Market Street for streetcars. Today the remaining streetcar lines use the subway under Market Street. New Orleans had four tracks on its famous Canal Street, which today has no streetcars.

3. Buffalo Park later became Moreing Field, Doubleday Park, Cardinal Field, and finally Edmonds Field. This was the home of the



Sacramento Solons of the Pacific Coast Baseball League.

4. Today the RT buses of the 50 series and 60 series serve these routes.

5. During the thirties and forties the streetcar service ended in most cities throughout the nation. But there are a few cities that never abandoned them totally. They include San Francisco (five lines of its huge network remain), Boston, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Newark, Cleveland, and New Orleans. The last-named city has its St. Charles Street line, which has become popular with tourists. Newark runs its streetcars in a subway. Some of Philadelphia's streetcars come into the business district by subway, as do some in Boston.

6. Several old trolleys of the San Francisco Bay area are also on display. The museum, officially the Bay Area Electric Railroad Association, Western Railway Museum, is on State Route 12 midway between Fairfield and Rio Vista. It has 35 cars in running order. Hours are noon to 5 p.m. Saturdays, Sundays and holidays.

## About the Author

Richard Rodda, a Sacramento native, became fascinated with streetcars and trains at an early age. In 1916, his father built a home in Colonial Heights, then out in the country. The California Central Traction Company's new Colonial Heights line was the family's sole means of transportation, since they did not acquire an automobile until 1927.

Rodda was educated at Sacramento High School, Sacramento Junior College (now Sacramento City College), and Stanford University. During his forty-three years with the Sacramento *Bee*, he covered many railroad stories, as well as California state politics. He retired as political editor for McClatchy Newspapers in 1976.

This article was prepared from Mr. Rodda's own extensive files. Numerous articles about Sacramento's streetcar systems have appeared in rail periodicals available at the California State Railroad Museum Library and other libraries. While there are no books specifically on the Sacramento system, the following titles on Bay Area transit systems may be of interest: Robert D. Ford's *Red Trains in the East Bay*; Anthony Perles' *The People's Railway*; Charles Smallwood's *The White Front Cars of San Francisco*; Paul C. Trimble's *Interurban Railways of the Bay Area*; and Jim Walker's *Key System Album*.

Publication of this issue of  
**Golden Notes**  
is made possible by a grant from



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