

History Comes Alive!

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Tales From the City Archives

All Aboard!

■ The early years of the Southern Pacific Railroad in Los Angeles.

Los Angeles has had the reputation of being one of the most improbable cities in the world. First, before Cityhood in 1850, it was a drop-off point between two missions. Second, there was no major water source other than the Los Angeles River for a City population that grew by leaps and bounds by the end of the 19th and into the early 20th centuries. And, third, a monumental change occurred when the iron horse, the railroads, arrived in Los Angeles and converted a sleepy ranching and agricultural community into a major economic force in the western United States. This happened in 1873, with the arrival of the Southern Pacific Railroad at the edge of the San Pedro Bay.

Prior to the arrival of the Southern Pacific in the Los Angeles area, a pioneer by the name of Phineas Banning (1830-85), known as the Father of the Los Angeles Harbor, lived in Wilmington, named for his hometown in Delaware. Banning, a mover and shaker in 1851, was a Teamster, hauling people and goods to Los Angeles. Later he replaced oxcarts with stagecoaches. In time he also had contracts to supply merchandise and wares to government posts into Arizona.

Banning built the first rail line in Los Angeles with a government subsidy. It ran from the tidewater in San Pedro to Alameda Street near the Plaza called the Los Angeles & San Pedro Railroad (LA&SP). The year was 1869. In time, the Banning innovation became the second extension in California of the nation's Southern Pacific in 1873.

At the same time, in 1869, four major players from northern California had their own focus on railroading, but at a transcontinental level. These four gentlemen were Collis P. Huntington, Henry Huntington's uncle; Charles Crocker; Mark Hopkins; and Leland Stanford. Their interests related linking their newly completed Central Pacific Railroad (CP) from Sacramento to the Union Pacific (UP) in Ogden, Utah. This became a reality when, on May 10, 1869, the striking of the Golden Spike became a monumental event that merged the United States from east to west at Promontory Point, Utah.

It should be noted that these four major brokers were also involved, a year earlier, in purchasing a controlling interest in the Southern Pacific. Supposedly, the only real claims to this event are seen in an 1866 congressional paper authorizing rail construction from San Francisco to the Arizona border, somewhere near Mojave. Southern Pacific

was a subsidiary of the Central Pacific, moving toward transcontinental status with eastern railroads.

Los Angeles did not become involved with the Southern Pacific until 1872. At that time this major railway had extended its Northern Lines from south of San Jose toward the San Joaquin Valley toward the town of Goshen. This became Southern Pacific's land-grant territory from the federal government. This began on December 31, 1869.

Between 1869 and 1872, southern California leaders were fearful that Los Angeles might be overlooked by the major railroads and remain a parochial country town or village. It was decided that a delegation of prominent Californians including former Governor John G. Downey and Los Angeles merchant Harris Newmark meet with then-Southern Pacific President Collis P. Huntington in San Francisco. According to authors Larry Mullaly and Bruce Petty in their publication, *The Southern Pacific in Los Angeles, 1873-1996*, the following is what occurred:

Huntington displayed some engineer's maps ... and showed the railroad, if constructed in Los Angeles at all, would have to enter the city. Huntington had a price. As a condition for coming to Los Angeles, he demanded both a public subsidy and title to the 22-mile-long Los Angeles & San Pedro Railroad — conditions which were begrudgingly accepted by a plurality of City and county voters Nov. 5, 1872.

The results of the election found in the City Council Minutes, volume Eight (8), dated November 7, 1872, showed that 1,051 votes were cast, of which 897 votes were for the transfer of the City Railroad Stock to the SP and 154 votes were against the transfer. At that time, the boundaries for the Council were divided into wards, of which there were three. The first two wards each had three Councilmen, while the third ward had four representatives.

The election also obligated the City and county to pay the Southern Pacific five percent of the entire taxable property of the county, in the form of county bonds. All the above-mentioned stock in the Los Angeles & San Pedro amounted to \$527,730, and 60 acres of land in the City for right of way, depot and workshop grounds were to be transferred to Southern Pacific. In return, the major railroad promised to build 50 miles of new tracks on three new lines out of Los Angeles within fifteen months of the election.

The Southern Pacific began construction in the San Joaquin Valley in 1873, and by 1876 had completed one of its tasks into northern

Los Angeles County. In 1877, the City Council granted certain privileges to the 16-mile-long Los Angeles and Independence Railroad Company (LA&I), originally connecting Los Angeles to Santa Monica and purchased by Southern Pacific. One of the many issues granted by the City to the LA&I was to connect its depot

by right of way on San Pedro Street to the Southern Pacific on Alameda Street at the intersection of First Street. Results would be for passengers and trains to travel from the City to the sea, and to also be part of a future transcontinental line.

The powers that be decided that Southern Pacific should move north to San Francisco through the Mojave Desert. In 1876, the burgeoning San Fernando Valley was being advertised as a mecca for new landowners. Plots of land for homeowners were selling between \$10 and \$25 each. Farmland was selling between \$5 and \$40 an acre. The railroad was the conduit to bring future buyers to the "land of plenty." After Southern Pacific built its tunnel to the Valley, farmland rose to \$150 an acre. The San Fernando Tunnel was considered at the time a monumental design.

Newspapers hailed the San Fernando Tunnel as one of the majestic feats built in the United States in the 19th century. The 6,976-foot-long tunnel was begun in January 1875, with a construction force of 1500 men, mainly Chinese. The mile long tunnel near Newhall was excavated below San Fernando Pass. Problems of safety arose because of issues relating to the caving-in of the soft geologic formation. Nevertheless, tracks were laid and the tunnel, which still exists, was completed in August 1876. Within a month, the Southern Pacific rails were joined from Los Angeles to northern California.

Beginning in 1881, Southern Pacific began running the Sunset Limited from San Francisco through Los Angeles to New Orleans. It was considered a modern, comfortable "Pullman Palace." This was the third new line Collis Huntington promised as part of the negotiations with the City and county of Los Angeles back in 1873. In time, Southern Pacific built another more deluxe passenger train called the Golden State Limited in 1903. This line traveled from Los Angeles to Chicago.

An integral part of railroad systems are the depots. Los Angeles acquired its first depot in 1869, when Phineas Banning built the depot for his LA&SP. By 1874, the Southern Pacific used that facility for freight and passengers until 1876. The location was at Commercial and Alameda Streets, two blocks south of the present Union Station. Another depot, the original Los Angeles Junction, was built by the Southern Pacific on San Fernando Street in 1876, later to become a depot-hotel from 1882 to

1902. The LA&I depot acquired by the Southern Pacific in 1877 on San Pedro Street was closed, but continued as a commuter stop until 1889. There was one more early station, the Arcade Depot built in 1889, near First and Alameda Streets, on what was originally an orange grove.

Major changes for the Southern Pacific came with the 20th century. This railroad was then the largest transportation system in the world. There was close to 10,000 miles of railroad track and 16,000 miles of water lines, an instrumental necessity for the growth and development of its operation and developing communities along the way.

Also, in August 1900, Collis Huntington, one of the original railroad barons, died. Within a year, a monumental change occurred for the Southern Pacific. Control of Southern Pacific passed into the hands of Edward H. Harriman, a New York financier, railroad magnate and father of the great 20th-century financier and politician W. Averell Harriman. At that time Harriman also owned the Union Pacific, the Illinois Central and the Oregon Trunk Line railroads. The Southern Pacific was now the consummate railroad because of the Harriman acumen and money to improve its operations and facilities. The Southern Pacific remained the most vigorous iron horse in the Los Angeles area over the Santa Fe and the Union Pacific until 1996. But that would be a continuing story for another time unless there is interest in reading the above-mentioned book, *The Southern Pacific in Los Angeles, 1873-1996*.



The Board of Harbor Commissioners was created Dec. 9, 1907, marking the founding of the Port of Los Angeles.

Did You Know is provided by Larry Williams, Bureau of Contract Administration.



The first Special Fast Fruit train, June 24, 1886, chartered by W.R. Strong & Co. and Edwin T. Earl, Fruit Packers and Shippers. The train was heading east with the season's first citrus crops. Photo courtesy the Donald Duke Collection of the Los Angeles Railroad Historical Foundation, and Joe Lesser.



The Southern Pacific River Station Yard in 1890, with lots of freight cars and a whole lineup of cabooses. Photo courtesy the Donald Duke Collection of the Los Angeles Railroad Historical Foundation, and Joe Lesser.



The San Fernando Tunnel, 1876; 6,976 feet long, it was excavated and dug by mostly Chinese. At Lang, a short distance north on the mainline, is a special commemorative marker noting the participation of the Chinese. Photo courtesy the Donald Duke Collection of the Los Angeles Railroad Historical Foundation, and Joe Lesser.



Southern Pacific shop grounds during a working strike in 1894 — Lots of SP Locomotives lined up. Photo courtesy the Gerald M. Best Collection and the Donald Duke Collection of the Los Angeles Railroad Historical Foundation, and Joe Lesser.