

San Diego's Cable Cars

One of the great needs of San Diego for some time past has been a system of cable street railroads. This improved method of covering long distances in cities has become very popular in all of the metropolises of the country, and it has been one great improvement in which San Diego was deficient.

--San Diego Union, June 9, 1889

Urban public transportation in the late 1800s meant streetcars: not the "time-honored horse car" or experimental electric lines but "grip cars" pulled smoothly through city streets by a continuous iron cable. San Francisco had mastered the cable technology in the 1870s. Other growing west coast cities followed: Seattle, Portland, Oakland, and Los Angeles.

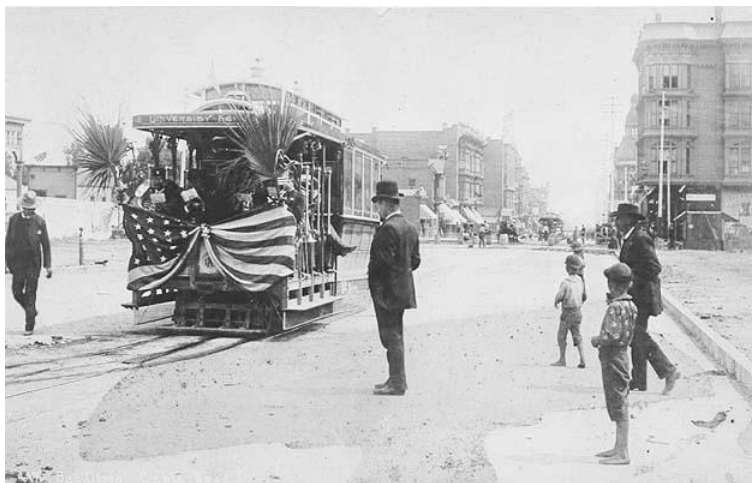
In the summer of 1889, San Diegans eagerly waited for the construction of their own modern cable car railway. Investors, led by bankers D. D. Dare and J. W. Collins, pooled their money for startup costs. "Within one year," prophesied the *Union*, streetcars will cover "the main business portion of the city, passing by some of the finest suburban residences here, and giving direct and easy communication with the heart of the city . . . The citizen residing on University Heights will be whirled down to his place of business by a commodious car, propelled by a steam cable."

The San Diego Cable Railway Company was incorporated in July 1889. Dare and Collins were elected President and Treasurer, respectively. City Alderman John C. Fisher was Vice-President and General Manager. The Chief Engineer, tasked with building the railway, was Frank Van Vleck, who had gained experience working on the Los Angeles Cable Railroad.

Van Vleck planned a five-mile route that ran from the foot of 6th Street, to C, then up the hill on 4th Street to University Avenue, where it turned east for several blocks before continuing north on what became Park Blvd. and Adams Avenue, ending at the "Bluffs" over Mission Valley. The route was designed to take advantage of potential real estate sales in the barren, undeveloped stretches along upper 6th and the heights above Mission Valley.

"Dirt flew" in August when a crew of 200 men began excavating the four-foot wide trench to hold the tracks and cable. The steel rails, weighing 30 pounds per yard, rested on an iron frame, or "yoke," set in concrete. The 1 1/8 inch, iron-strand cable ran through an underground conduit centered between the tracks. As the line nearly completion, a team of twenty horses pulled 50,000 feet of cable through the conduit.

To save money the line was built as a single-track, meaning cable cars moved north and south on the same rails. Sidings allowed cars to pass in opposite directions and turntables at the ends of the line let the cars turn around. A power plant at 4th and Spruce generated the steam to turn massive winding wheels for pulling the cable.



Opening day, June 7, 1890.

After “innumerable and vexatious delays,” the railway opened on June 7, 1890. A day of congratulatory speeches and festivities heralded the inauguration. Governor Robert Waterman and other dignitaries took rides in streetcars decorated with flags and flowers. Renowned horticulturist Kate Sessions was said to be the first paying passenger.

The streetcar line ran with twelve “combination” cars—one half closed the other open — similar to San Francisco’s Powell Street cable cars. San Diego’s “gorgeous palaces on wheels” boasted stained glass clerestory windows, coal-oil lighting, and surfaces of nickel-plate and hardwood. A novel innovation was electric stop-bells powered by batteries beneath the seats. Cars were named—not numbered—to highlight San Diego communities: *El Escondido*, *El Cajon*, *La Jolla*, *Point Loma*, *San Ysidora*.

The attendants wore gray uniforms and caps, with gold buttons for the conductors and silver for the gripmen. For pay of eighteen cents an hour, they alternated a “short day” of 5:30 a.m. to 3:15 p.m. with a “long day” of 5:30 a.m. to 11 p.m. with one hour off for lunch. The crews were responsible for buying their own uniforms (about \$20) and cleaning their own streetcars.

The cable cars were popular, particularly on weekends. For a fare of one nickel riders traveled at eight to ten miles an hour from downtown to uptown in University Heights in as little as ten minutes. Trailers were sometimes attached to the cars to accommodate large crowds. A popular attraction for families was The Bluffs on northern end of the line. Later known as Mission Cliff Gardens, the park featured six acres of terraced walks and gardens on the canyon rim overlooking Mission Valley. There were band concerts, dances, and traveling shows from a pavilion stage.

But for all its popularity, the system lost money for the Cable Company. Installation of the line had been costly and ongoing operating costs strained the cash flow. Brakes needed servicing weekly; the cable grips had to be replaced every three weeks. The company was also forced to pay for expensive street paving in roadway that was only dirt when the tracks were laid.

A banking scandal precipitated the end. In November 1891 the California National Bank closed its doors. The bank’s president, J. W. Collins, was arrested for embezzlement while D. D. Dare fled to Europe. The two men had been principal backers of the Cable Company and with their bank gone, the company went into receivership.

For the next several months court-appointed receivers managed the railway, which limped along running fewer cars to save money. A broken cable closed a portion of the line in late summer. New cable was ordered but with no money to install it the company chose to shutdown forever on October 15, 1892.

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