

# The Battle of Adams Avenue

*The City of San Diego today took steps to force the San Diego Electric Railway company to continue railway service on Adams Ave. "War to the limit" on the illegal and unlawful methods of the street car company, which on Saturday night started to tear up its tracks in defiance of the law, was declared at the city hall.*

--San Diego Sun, August 28, 1922.

In the early 1900s public transportation along San Diego streets belonged exclusively to the San Diego Electric Railway Company. The transit monopoly of John D. Spreckels grew with the city and by the 1920s it operated nearly 100 streetcars along 22 miles of city streets.

There was little government oversight for the railway but the City Charter did offer one seemingly innocuous clause that would prove troublesome. The law required the company to maintain the pavement between the track rails and for two feet on either side. Keeping the streets smooth and free of potholes was the responsibility of the railway company, wherever its streetcars ran.

In the early years the streetcars had the roads to themselves. Automobiles were rare and horse-drawn vehicles avoided the tracks for their own safety. But soon cars were everywhere, increasing the wear on city streets. Miles of deteriorated pavement became dangerous for vehicles to negotiate.

The road conditions were particularly bad on Adams Avenue where the tracks ran from Park Blvd. to 44<sup>th</sup> Street. "The street is in very poor condition . . . I drove over it a few days ago," Mayor John L. Bacon admitted in a meeting with residents of Normal Heights. "Did you drive over it last winter when it was wet?" a man wanted to know. "My car isn't a submarine," he replied.



Fifth and Broadway, 1915

The public demanded the Spreckels franchise live up to its responsibility to fix the streets. The company pleaded poverty, and then reluctantly agreed to patch pavement. The repaired streets turned out to be mostly downtown, on roadway fronting Spreckels-owned buildings on Broadway. The residents along Adams Avenue fumed.

The City Council decided to investigate the finances of the railway company and its ability to meet its franchise obligations. Their report came out in March 1922 and San Diego's three major newspapers reported the result. The Spreckels-owned *Union* and *Tribune* newspapers acknowledged the company was a money-maker but noted the recommendation that the company be released from its obligation to repair streets.

The *Sun*, however--owned by Spreckels' rival E. W. Scripps--argued the report showed something else: greed and a corporate culture that shunned civic responsibility. "The paving controversy has been largely a blind, used to cover up the real secret," the *Sun* reported. "The company has been mismanaged, and 'bled' while its tracks were pounded to pieces by cars too heavy for them, and no money was held back to replace these same tracks."

With public opinion running against the Electric Railway, the company then aggravated hard feelings by requesting an additional streetcar franchise to run on Sixteenth Street between Market and Broadway. Downtown interests opposed the line, fearing it would draw business away from prosperous Fifth Street. An election to settle the issue was called for October 10.

As the election neared, the City Council solicited bids to fully pave Adams Avenue, from Park Blvd. to the city limits. Predictably, the streetcar company protested, claiming that the Adams Avenue line could not be successfully operated if they were required to pay for paving. General Manager Claus Spreckels followed the claim with a warning: "if the Company is required to pay . . . the line will be abandoned and the track torn up."



Claus Spreckels

Shortly after midnight on Saturday, August 26, streetcar work crews began arriving by automobile on Adams Ave. Working by the headlights of their cars, the workmen began dismantling the streetcar line.

Startled residents of Normal Heights--"clad in night clothes and wonderment"--watched as workers "armed with huge 'jacks,' shovels and pick-axes, started working feverishly, tearing up the streetcar tracks, lifting them bodily from the ground and twisting them into snaky, bumpy piles of uselessness."

For one resident, it was too much. Walter Church, of 2886 Adams Ave., jumped in his car and drove it on to the tracks in front of his house. Waving a revolver, Church ordered the workers "to get back and stay back" or he would shoot.

Church was joined by scores of other angry residents, carrying flashlights and lanterns. Someone telephoned Mayor Bacon. The mayor and city attorney Shelley Higgins soon arrived along with the police.

The public cheered as the railway's chief engineer, Hugo Kuehmsted, was arrested for directing demolition without a permit. With their foreman gone, the workers departed, leaving sections of track in ruins.

The next day, in an open letter published in the *Union*, Claus Spreckels explained: "because the city council has failed to co-operate with the officials of the San Diego Electric Street Railway. . . I ordered the abandonment of the Adams Avenue line and the removal of the tracks from that street."

In an extraordinary Sunday emergency meeting of a livid City Council, jitney buses were approved to carry passengers across the disrupted area of track. The councilmen also appealed to the State Railroad Commission, which ordered the railway to restore streetcar service on Adams Ave. The tracks were repaired and streetcar service resumed.

Spreckels did win a face-saving victory at the polls on October 10. By a margin of 71 votes, the new franchise for Sixteenth Street was approved.

The paving question remained but eventually a compromise was reached. The company agreed to lay a solid foundation under the tracks, which the city paved over. Growth for the San Diego Electric Railway Company resumed and eventually their streetcars ran on over 160 miles of greater San Diego. Competition from automobiles would ultimately kill the streetcars, which stopped running in 1949.

---

Originally published as “Fight over rail-track care was a bumpy ride,” by Richard Crawford, in the San Diego *Union-Tribune*, May 14, 2009.