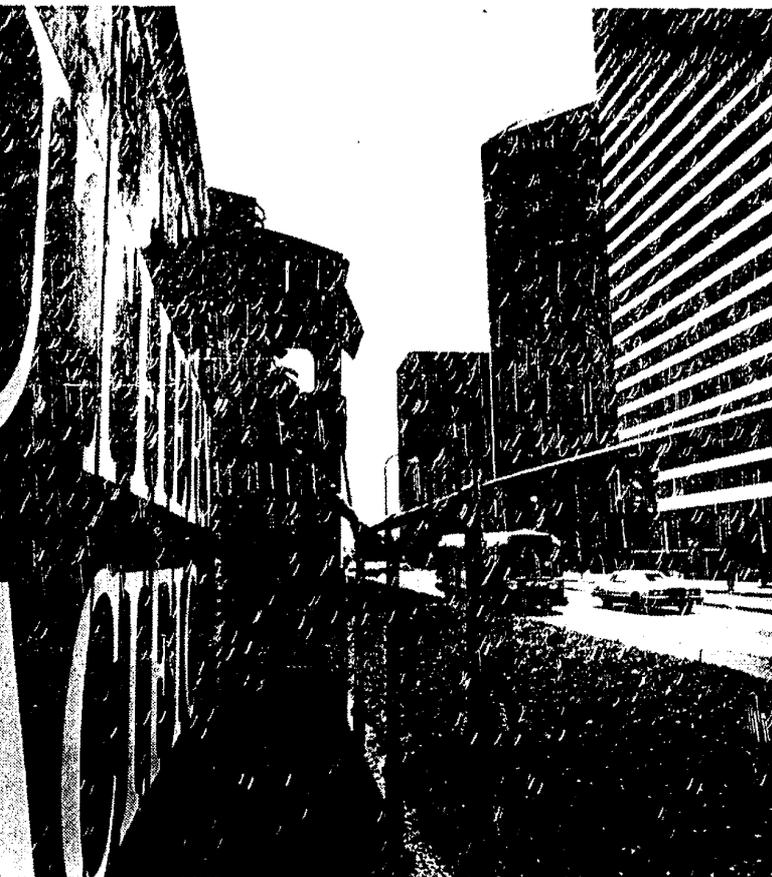


# L.A. by Rail: They Still Give a Toot

ALLAN PARACHINI

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## THE WRONG SIDE OF THE TRACKS

A Southern Pacific freight train bears down on a Rolls-Royce waiting at grade crossing near Rodeo Drive boutiques. Earlier, trainman Bill Lord enjoys view as train, called the Wingfoot, glides past the Century City complex on little-noticed rail siding.

Times photos by Bob Chamberlin



# L.A. by Rail: They Still Give a Toot



**THE FRIENDLY GREETINGS**--School crossing guard and shy young girl wave at crew of

only train still using right-of-way that once served network of Pacific Electric trolley cars.

## Where Red Cars Rolled, a Lonely Freight Works

BY ALLAN PARACHINI

Times Staff Writer

Late morning in Beverly Hills.

The dark blue Rolls-Royce, fresh from stops at the Rodeo Drive boutiques, sits at a traffic light waiting to turn onto Santa Monica Blvd. for the stately jaunt back to Bel-Air.

The driver glances disdainfully at motorists at a nearby Union 76 station. Impatiently, she lets the Rolls creep onto the railroad tracks that run along the boulevard. Who, after all, expects to see a train in Beverly Hills?

Rene LeBlanc has observed this from a block away. He shakes his head and smiles, one hand on the throttle of locomotive 2575 of the Southern Pacific Railroad.

### Rumbling Toward the Rolls

"We've gotten a BMW or two at these crossings," he explains as the switcher engine, pulling three cars and a caboose, rumbles toward the Rolls, whose driver is oblivious to a crossing alarm bell.

"But never one of those."

LeBlanc pushes a button near his left ankle and a loud bell atop the engine starts to clang insistently. He grabs a lever with his left hand and pulls it sharply toward him. A blast from the huge horn rents the air. "BLAAAAAAAAA-AAAAAAP!!!!"

No reaction from the Rolls driver.

LeBlanc, by now a half block away, brakes from 3 miles per hour—his cruising speed in the congested area around Rodeo Drive—almost to a full stop.

Finally, with LeBlanc laying a heavy hand on the air horn, the Rolls backs off the tracks like a matron stepping out of the way of a harried plumber. Out on Santa Monica, a Chevrolet's brakes squeal as the driver, staring incredulously at the train, narrowly avoids ramming the rear end of a Mercedes-Benz.

Two trainmen in the cab with LeBlanc start to laugh.

Such is life aboard the Wingfoot.

The Wingfoot?

### The Making of a Train

Railroad lore is replete with the romantic names of trains like the Coast Starlight, the 20th Century Limited and the Super Chief. But here is railway reality—the Wingfoot, ironically named after the trademark of Good-year tires, to whose factory the train used to run.

The day had begun in the predawn darkness for LeBlanc, conductor Ed Chaja and brakemen Bill Lord and Jim Little. By 4:45 a.m., they were running the engine through the tracks of J Yard, a small Southern Pacific switching facility at 25th and Alameda, gathering the seven freight cars that would make up the departing Wingfoot.

The train, which cynics have suggested might be called the "Beverly Hills Very Limited," runs six mornings a

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# Ghost of Red Cars Haunts Rails

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week delivering full cars and removing empties at a dozen stops along 17 miles of track that wind through downtown Los Angeles to Santa Monica, with a spur to Beverly Hills.

Ed Chaja remembers the line from another era. He started in railroading with the old Pacific Electric Railway 28 years ago, in the hour of dusk for the grand old interurban passenger line that once boasted 1,100 miles of track serving 56 cities, and 109 million passengers a year on 5,368 trains a day. Another member of the Wingfoot's crew—on vacation this Friday—worked as a conductor on one of the Big Red Cars.

Chaja and the handful of other former PE employees still active in the Southern Pacific know the Wingfoot's route well. In the PE's heyday, the track the freight travels was part of the Air Line, a swift trolley route that ran all the way to Ocean Park and sprinted the 16.8 miles to Santa Monica in 40 minutes—in 1911.

## Freight Line

By the time Chaja joined the PE organization, the Air Line was being converted to freight.

The Wingfoot's ride past traffic jams and crowded gas stations may be seen as a commentary on Los Angeles' inability or unwillingness to evolve a rapid transit system from the old PE network.

In a way, the Wingfoot has become the most exclusive passenger train ever in service on PE lines. Persons other than train crew members ride only after individual approval by top Southern Pacific executives.

The Wingfoot is the only thing that uses the Air Line now, running from J Yard west, under the Harbor Freeway. The line has its own right-of-way next to Exposition Blvd. and parts of the Santa Monica Freeway.

At Sepulveda Blvd., it turns northwest and runs through West Los Angeles, making its last turn onto the track along Santa Monica Blvd. for the final, slow daily run into Beverly Hills where the Wingfoot delivers carloads of flour and other supplies to the Continental bakery. Along that final stretch, it runs over manicured track bordering Century City.

It crosses dozens of sidestreets and makes swings through traffic on Venice Blvd., drawing stares from lines of rush-hour drivers.

To LeBlanc, Chaja, Little and Lord, it is all routine. The impatient drivers, the accidents and near accidents with careless motorists preoccupy them. There is the need to be constantly alert for the child or motorcycle that will—almost certainly several times in each run—suddenly run around a crossing gate into the path of the engine.

## Ironhorse Irony

They do not, routinely, think about the irony the Wingfoot represents—a working rail line, with one train a day, in gullies next to congested freeways, so close that stalled drivers in rush hour or impatient motorists in gas lines could literally reach out and touch it.

It is 5:50 a.m. when the Wingfoot moves slowly out of J Yard, creaking through the complex of switches that conveys the train along darkened streets to a passage under the Harbor Freeway. It hauls six boxcars and a gondola, but with switching of empty and full cars along the way, the train is never the same length for more than one stop.

LeBlanc "highballs" along the way at 20 miles an hour, the speed limit for the entire Air Line system, which, because of the condition of its track, is now rated for speeds no faster than those permitted in switching yards.

A carload of plywood is pushed onto a factory siding and the Wingfoot impatiently starts up again, driving hard to make the only stop of the day for which it must observe a strict schedule—the 6:30 a.m. delivery of a boxcar to a Thrifty Drug and Discount Store warehouse off Exposition Blvd.

After the Thrifty stop, LeBlanc retraces his steps to the Interstate Restaurant Supply Co., 901 E. 31st St. As casually as a driver would park a car, LeBlanc cranks the handbrake on the locomotive, padlocks the cab door and the crew adjourns to Interstate's employee cafeteria for breakfast.

The meal is completed in an hour and the Wingfoot starts up again. As LeBlanc throttles the short train down a straightaway, it is brakeman Lord who breaks the monotony.

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**CAREFUL CROSSING-** Southern Pacific engineer Rene LeBlanc eases Wingfoot's loco-

motive across busy street during rush-hour jam near the Exhibition Blvd. right-of-way.

Times photo by Bob Chamberlin

hallmark of the Red Cars in their final years. The overstuffed coach seats are still surprisingly comfortable, with ample leg room.

Up in the cab, Webber has persuaded Car 498 to start down the track, with two blasts of its little horn. Acceleration is slow and the 55-mile-per-hour top speed is just a memory.

There is a brief burst of speed on the straightaway, but

Webber brakes for the end of the track. The air hisses and the brake shoes grab. Webber apologizes for the roughness of the stop. "It's me," he says of his amateur motorman's technique. "It's not the car."

The old Orange Empire trolley tour never came

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## Ghost of Red Cars Haunts Rails

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"When you get up just past that cream-colored building, stop," he instructs the engineer. LeBlanc, who is not the Wingfoot's regular engineer, is a little puzzled because he sees no apparent reason to halt. But he complies.

"This is a daily ritual," Lord explains. "Blow the whistle." More curious, LeBlanc lets go a blast on the air horn. Across a parking lot, a man emerges from a back door of the Kelly Paper Co. and waves in the general direction of the train. Lord waves back enthusiastically.

"That's my son," he explains. "He manages that place. OK, let's get moving." LeBlanc pulls back on the throttle.

Ahead of them lies Home Junction, where the Air Line track splits. The Wingfoot will travel past the junction, all the way to Santa Monica, to drop one car, reverse itself and then make the big, sweeping turn north toward Beverly Hills, onto a spur formally called the Hollywood Branch, even though the tracks that went from Beverly Hills to Hollywood were torn up in 1972.

All along the route, for thousands of drivers and commuters, the morning rush hour, and the search for gasoline, continues. Aboard the Wingfoot, traveling the Air Line, all that is forgotten.

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In the 1920s and '30s, when the Pacific Electric Railway's interurban lines stretched more than 1,100 miles through Southern California, a top attraction was a 175-mile sightseeing trip through the Orange Empire—the expanse of citrus groves in San Bernardino and Riverside counties.

It left Los Angeles, according to a brochure from the period, every Wednesday and Sunday at 9 a.m., sharp.

Both appropriately and ironically, it is in the Orange Empire that the largest fleet of rapid transit cars left in Southern California today lives on in largely decaying obscurity.

The fleet, which includes 12 PE cars (a mixed bag of short-haul trolleys and big interurbans) and 12 cars that belonged to the old Los Angeles Metropolitan Transit Authority, survives on the grounds of the Orange Empire Railway Museum, in Perris, 17 miles south of Riverside.

Several thousand visitors make the trip to the museum every year, where they can ride one of the six PE cars—including car No. 498, one of the biggest of the Big Red Cars PE ever operated, and which has been completely re-

stored—still capable of moving.

The run, a 1½-mile spin up track on what used to be a Santa Fe Railway right-of-way, is scarcely long enough to let the big interurbans get up to cruising speed before air-braking to a lumbering stop.

It is not without a sense of irony that Joe Webber, an official of the all-volunteer Orange Empire Museum staff, noted one recent day that the gasoline scare has cut the number of visitors almost to nothing.

"Every weekend, they come down here and they walk around here asking one another, 'Why didn't we keep what we had?'" Webber observed. "Hell, in the teens, '20s and '30s, you could get most places in these Red Cars faster than you can drive it today."

The old PE schedules, preserved in the popular 1977 trolley history "Ride the Big Red Cars" by Spencer Crump, prove out Webber's argument.

Along the Air Line to Santa Monica—the same track over which Southern Pacific Railroad's daily freight train, the Wingfoot, rumbles slowly in the early morning—PE Red Cars made the run from 6th and Main St. to Santa Monica in 40 minutes.

The trip to Beverly Hills in the old days was 32 minutes from downtown. San Bernardino was just over an hour and a half.

While rail travel to Beverly Hills is now so unusual that the mere sight of a train is enough to send brakes screeching and cars crashing into one another, Pacific Electric went from downtown Los Angeles to Beverly Hills on two different lines. Trains ran every 30 minutes.

Webber turns on the power to the overhead trolley wire and lets No. 498's power pole touch the overhead. Instantly, a compressor switches on, pumping up air lines for the brakes.

Car 498 is what the PE called a Bay Area Blimp. It and dozens of cars like it—the ones with the familiar round windows that also led them to be called "owl cars"—were first used in commuter service in San Francisco and brought to Los Angeles in the 1930s.

Sitting on the track in Perris, it is parked next to an older, circa 1923, PE trolley car from the old Hollywood line. Car 498 is decked out in a fresh coat of PE's red, orange and silver colors.

Car 498 still has the tiger-striped upholstery that was a

# RIGHT-OF-WAY

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anywhere near Perris, which was more than 15 miles from the closest PE track. But Perris is still rural enough that the orange groves in the countryside around it are largely intact. The railway museum, in the middle of a field, looks very much like the territory must have looked when the Orange Empire tour was one of Southern California's most popular attractions.

Twenty-one years ago, a few dozen trolley enthusiasts founded the museum. They laid the straightaway, where Car 498 and two or three other PE cars run, still on the verge of extinction, by hand.

The museum's collection is a mixed fleet of railroad and trolley equipment. Included is a funeral car used on Los Angeles area interurban lines until 1939.

Webber walks slowly through two car barns the museum maintains. Several old Red Cars sit rotting, perhaps too badly deteriorated ever to be restored. There is a short little Birney car, once the most common type. The museum also has preserved one of PE's old electric freight locomotives and a special car that was used to apply grease to the overhead trolley wires to keep them free running.

The vehicle, an ancient converted flat car, is still used by the museum for its original purpose.

On a strip of track outside one of the car barns, two other Hollywood cars sit with peeling paint. Behind them is what was once a plush, private car built for use by top PE executives. It boasted rich wood paneling and Pullman-style sleeping berths.

"From what we understand, it was used as someone's home for a while and then, for a while after that, as a chicken coop," Webber said. "By the time we get 'em, they've usually been through quite a bit."

The museum, Webber and Orange Empire caretaker Millie Harsh remind visitors, is open every day of the year except Thanksgiving and Christmas, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

On the weekends, the trolleys run from 11 to 5. There is a book and souvenir store and cold drinks are available. Admission is free, but the museum encourages donations. The telephone number, for information on these last remaining Red Car departures, is (714) 657-2605.

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The observation that the Pacific Electric Railway trolley lines should never have been abandoned—and the sugges-

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# L.A. RED CARS

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tion that they reemerge as part of any new rapid transit system for Los Angeles—have been part of nearly every transit planning study done here for the last 20 years.

Supervisor Baxter Ward still believes that the PE system—or what's left of it—could spark to life again and, in his eighth-floor office suite in the Hall of Administration, has kept two aides busy on transit planning for several years.

Inevitably, whenever plans for rail transit systems have been unveiled—and the occasions have been many and varied since the late 1960s—in Los Angeles, most of the headlines about them are prompted by proposed use of freeway medians for exotic monorails or train cars like those in use on the San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit system.

Ward's attention has been focusing more and more exclusively on the PE system which, despite decades of being chopped up, paved over and built on, is still surprisingly intact. True, much of it might have to be elevated above street level to avoid fatal recurrence of the conflicts with automobiles that killed the Big Red Cars in the first place. The last of them left service in the late 1950s.

## Map of the System

"In terms of land cost, and what would have to be bought up to make the PE system workable (again), we're talking about pennies," said Douglas Ring, one of Ward's aides.

Most of the PE right-of-way is now owned by Southern Pacific Railroad and Ring said the existing system would eventually have to be acquired by some public agency—perhaps through condemnation. The process, certain to be fought hard by the railroad, could take several years.

Ward likes to show visitors maps of the PE system from 1925 and 1975—a comparison that shows clearly that the most important components of the system remain, with track and roadbed removed.

Ward also is pressing a related lawsuit against Southern Pacific to try to force the railroad to offer, or at least permit, commuter service along its main freight line from Los Angeles to Oxnard. That right-of-way is not part of the PE holdings.

What Ward sees in the PE map is a network of commuter lines that, for comparatively little money and in a relatively short time, could be made available for commuter service using updated interurban trolleys.

## Almost-Instant Commuter Line

For instance, the PE line Southern Pacific still uses for freight service to Beverly Hills, Santa Monica and Culver City could almost instantly become a commuter line, he believes. A trackless stretch of PE right-of-way that is now abandoned could be converted to a train line serving Chatsworth, Canoga Park, Reseda, Tarzana, Encino, Van Nuys, Burbank and Glendale. Another line could run to Santa Ana, through Watts, Bellflower and Garden Grove.

"There are still problems with this," Ward said. "In some cities, local governments have taken it over and paved it or made it into bike paths or whatever.

"But it is possible to piece together a reasonable right of way of great significance for (large) parts of Los Angeles County, though not all of it.

"In some cases, it's just a matter of laying new track."

Ward said cuts in passenger train service by Amtrak could also make available existing rail line from Union Station to San Bernardino at the same time the PE system was being reclaimed.

"What a helluva thing if that (could be arranged) for commuters," he said.

None of this, of course, is new. Ward and Mayor Tom Bradley proposed recycling the PE right-of-way to Canoga Park as recently as 1975. A larger transit plan proposed by Ward was defeated by voters in 1976.

All Ward can do is hope that the 1979 gasoline scare may change minds among Southern California voters.

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Ironically, while talk of transit lines on freeway medians has overshadowed more modest proposals to reuse the PE, even a cursory reading of the history of the Big Red Cars shows such visionary thinking is, like every other rapid transit idea proposed for Southern California, about 40 years old.

PE ran Red Cars on the median of the old Caluenga Pass Freeway into the San Fernando Valley in the late 1940s. PE argued in 1938 that the interurban cars from Los Angeles to Hollywood on the two tracks on the median could handle twice as many passengers as the eight lanes then used by cars.

The Red Car company proposed expanded median service on what would later become the Hollywood Freeway, saying it could cost about \$20 million to incorporate rail lines in the middle of the road. The highway builders wouldn't go for it.

Then, as now, the public was unconvinced. Ward hopes that situation will change.

"It isn't a case of hope," he said. "I think the decision must rest with the people. It is up to them."

A man Baxter Ward has never met was standing along the old PE tracks in Beverly Hills. He is Darold Burleigh, a signal repairman for Southern Pacific now, but a railroadman who started out on the old PE passenger lines, including the Air Line.

Burleigh has both a practical and sentimental outlook. As a lifelong railroad worker, he thinks the Red Cars were a resource Southern California foolishly wasted. Practically, Burleigh sees no hope of the Red Cars—or whatever

their modern counterparts would come to be called—returning. He said:

"Old Baxter Ward is trying hard, but they (the Red Cars and the transit system they represent) are gone.

"People don't want to pay for it."

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Back on the Wingfoot, the train crew is telling war stories about the confrontations the train has had with trucks, automobiles and pedestrians. In the talk, there is the flavor of a problem the old PE system never completely solved—how to keep the interurbans from colliding with automobiles.

Every railroad has this problem, but for city lines like the old PE track the Wingfoot travels today the danger is more acute.

"You should have been with us last Thursday," says Wingfoot brakeman Bill Lord.

"We demolished a truck in Culver City and almost killed two women in Beverly Hills.

"People just don't look.

"Can you imagine driving a Rolls-Royce out onto the railroad tracks, with the red lights flashing on the crossing signal, to see if a train's coming?"

Lord's tone of voice had an incredulous quality to it. But less than a half hour after he made that remark, a Rolls-Royce did exactly that in Beverly Hills.

Ahead of the Wingfoot, two or three young boys dart out onto the track. One of them puts something down on top of the rail. "That's a penny, I guess," says engineer Rene LeBlanc. "That notion that a penny will derail us, it's just a myth."

"Yeah, well, wait until we get to Beverly Hills," Lord retorts. "Out there, the kids put quarters down on the track."