

# TROLLEY TALE



See photograph / Mitch Tol  
Sacramento's current 18.3-mile light rail line, above, opened in 1987 and cost \$176 million to build.

Old Trolley Line  
Circa 1940

Current Light Rail



## PBS broadcasts a mass transit drama that continues to shape our cities and suburbs

**T**he grand design for our sprawling cities and digged roadways was spawned from simple greed, according to a Public Broadcasting System documentary called "Taken for a Ride."

The film, to be aired on Channel 6 Tuesday at 10 p.m., tells the sordid tale of how General Motors and four other companies conspired after World War II to systematically destroy mass transit in America.

Despite what the company used to proclaim, what was good for General Motors wasn't always good for Americans.

While the film is decidedly one-sided, it's a story Americans should know, because it has had a great deal to do with our daily lives and the shapes of our cities and neighborhood.

The basic facts of the story are not in question. GM was found guilty in 1946, after a federal Justice Department investigation, of violating antitrust laws for "conspiracy to monopolize the local transportation field."

Though corporate executives denied they were doing anything more than trying to sell buses and cars, GM, the world's biggest company, and its



### BY DESIGN

By Gary Delischn

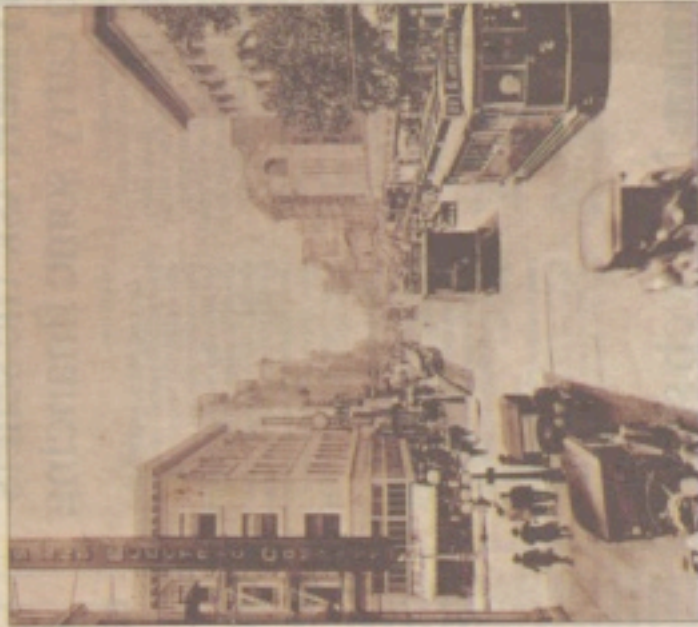
four partners were fined \$5,000 each. We know what has happened since, but it's hardly all the fault of General Motors and the highway lobby, as this film would have us believe.

Mortgage deductions, Americans' postwar yearnings, the GI bill allowing low-interest home loans for millions of men returning from World War II and other factors all played a

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The old Sacramento street car was known as "King of K Streets," carrying thousands of riders in and out of downtown in the 1920s and '30s. Trolleys vanished from Sacramento in 1947. The bottom left photo shows workers digging up the steel bars on which the downtown trolley rode.

21st Ave. To Stockton



Best file photographs



# Transit:

## Big mistakes proved costly

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 huge role in suburbanization and the rise of the automobile.  
 Like most big mistakes, the lessons learned in all of this were costly. The film estimates it would cost \$300 billion to replace all the lines that GM helped kill.

Unfortunately, too, is the fact that cities like Sacramento, Denver, Phoenix and Los Angeles are making big new commitments to light rail now that our sprawling suburban settlement patterns are firmly established. All those cars and highways dispersed us so much that light rail can no longer have the pervasive impact it once did. We're too spread out.

Too bad, "Taken For A Ride" argues quite effectively.

Part of the unfortunate legacy of this automobile culture is we don't understand the degree to which we changed our lives and communities for this type of transportation at the expense of all others," said Martha Olson, a Bay Area historian and documentary filmmaker researcher who worked on the film.

The story begins in 1906, when GM, with the help of tire and oil manufacturers, helped create a national subsidiary, National City Lines, that bought up trolley lines all over the country. NCL proceeded to run them into the ground and replace them with GM buses.

At its peak, National City Lines controlled transit systems in 83 cities and the systems soon began to fall apart. Service was cut back. Fares were increased. Ridership declined. The trolley lines became perennial money losers and had to be rescued by local governments or die.

In Sacramento, it was an NCL subsidiary, Pacific City Lines, that bought the trolley company, according to Olson.

In most cases, as in Sacramento, the trolley lines eventually did die. The last car ran in California's capital on Jan. 4, 1947.

The cities were different, but



Trolley cars occasionally to vie with horses in city streets early in the 20th century. Sacramento turned to trolleys to save the trolley lines. The last old cars in California capital city, 1947.

the stories were the same. The trolley lines were replaced by less efficient and slower buses. These pollution-belching behemoths helped clog the streets more rather than run through them on dedicated rights-of-way as the trolleys had done.

GM billboards across America proclaimed its plans for New York: "The motorization of 4th and Madison is the most epochal event in the history of community transportation."

It sure was.

Louis Mumford, the great social critic, who also appears in the documentary, saw things differently. "We've sold our birthright," he once said, "for a sorry mess of motorcars." He, too, was right.

Los Angeles, which today is the quintessential automobile city, had two streetcar lines, including the Pacific Electric Red Cars recalled affectionately a few years ago in the film "Roger Rabbit." The city had 1,000 miles of track that carried people from the beaches to the mountains and downtown.

GM did have a big hand in changing all that, too, as the film reminds us. It was Charles Wilson, after all, a former GM chair-

man, who President Eisenhower appointed defense secretary. The two then pushed the Interstate Highway act through Congress largely on the argument that it was needed for national defense.

Francis DuPont, whose family was GM's largest shareholder, was named chief administrator of federal highways. Billions of dollars in gas taxes went to pay for thousands of miles of new freeway, many ripping the heart out of downtowns once vitally served by mass transit but since left to decline.

This, after all, was the era of roadbuilding and macho gas guzzling, as we're reminded when a narrator recites "Roadbuilders Prayer," penned by powerful highway lobbyists:

*"O almighty God who has given us this earth and has appointed men to have domination over it, who has commanded us to make straight the highways, to lift up the valleys and to make the mountains low, we ask thy blessing. Bless these, our nation's roadbuilders, and their friends."*

But the overall thrust of the film cannot be questioned. For decades, American mass transit was a stepchild that, with rare excep-

tions, received little support.

Bus and trolley lines at the public trough. It took rising of citizens whose neighborhoods were bulldozed to room for new highways to rally mobilize public opinion against giant new roads and to begin supporting transit again, though they are still nowhere near end.

Freeways in Seattle, San Francisco and elsewhere were or killed. Some cities, like land, even tore down roads that blocked water and other important town.

But some things can't be buried.

"The days when we sit at the corner and waited for the bus and chatted with our neighbor maybe walked to the bus stop or walk safely to the bus stop, it's all eroded," said the researcher. "It takes generations for it to happen. It's been a couple of generations since most of us rode public transportation."

Sacramento's first streetcar company, a horse- or mule-drawn line from Front and K Streets to the SVRR Depot at Third and R Streets, was built in 1858 but lasted only three years, destroyed by the 1861 flood. Another streetcar line was impossible until the street-raising project of the 1860s was completed. The first permanent streetcar line, the City Street Railway, was established on August 20, 1870. Sacramento's original streetcars, pulled by mules, provided service from the Central Pacific Passenger Depot to the Union Park racetrack at Twentieth and H Streets. Streetcars made access to hotels, merchants, banks, the state capitol, the railroad depot and other downtown destinations convenient to city dwellers. The California State Fair's racetrack and Grand Pavilion were directly accessible by streetcar, a great convenience to out-of-town visitors. On their way, each state fair visitor passed the hotels, theaters, restaurants and department stores of K Street, a rolling advertisement for Sacramento's commercial district.

Aside from transporting state fair visitors, Sacramento's mule-drawn streetcars allowed the young city's middle-class to live in comfortable residential neighborhoods and commute to work downtown. As the waterfront became louder, smokier and more crowded, the streetcar was a welcomed convenience. Neighborhoods located along the new streetcar lines quickly sprouted Italianate and Queen Anne houses where Sacramento's clerks, managers and artisans lived. Pleasure parks like East Park and Richmond Grove drew visitors to relax away from the heart of downtown. Streetcar mules were originally stabled at Tenth and K Streets, later going farther east to Twentieth and K Streets.

Real estate developers used streetcars to draw customers to former farmland. Most routes had one end in a suburban neighborhood and the other end on K Street. In 1887, real estate developer Edwin K Alsip, whose office was at 1015 K Street, purchased and subdivided a small ranch southeast of Sacramento and ran his Central Street Railway from downtown to his new development, creating the Oak Park suburb. The line also served the adjacent suburb of Highland Park, a name strategically chosen due to the site's location on high ground above flood level. Suburban neighborhoods were not viable without a downtown to provide jobs and a transportation system to move commuters back and forth.

Mule-powered cars were not without their problems; they were slow, put a cruel strain on the animals and emitted inevitable exhaust. Central Street Railway briefly experimented with battery-powered electric streetcars in 1888 before switching to electric trolleys in 1890, powered by a coal-fired steam engine connected to an electric dynamo. The electric streetcar lessened the burdens of both the draft mule and the street sweeper.

#### Raising K



Mule-drawn streetcars at Eighth and K Streets on Sacramento's newly raised streets, circa 1870. Author's collection.

Taken from book *Sacramento K Street* by William Burg, published by History Press.

### Transportation To CB Broadway

Most of the students who went to Christian Brothers on Broadway walked to school, rode a bicycle or took the street car. Very few had an auto. The street cars were replaced by buses by 1947.

Those who lived in East Sacramento took the #3 street car and transferred to the # 6 street car at 21st Street, which went by the school. Those who lived downtown or in the north part of Sacramento took the #6 street car which started at the Southern Pacific Station, down K street, right on 21st Street past CB to Oak Park.

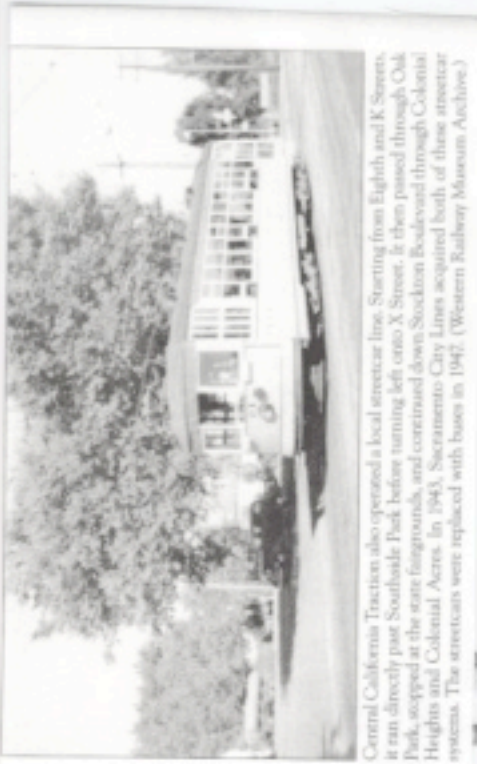
The Traction street car started at 8th and K Sts, turned on X Street past CB at 21st Street, and continued on to the old Fair Grounds. The enclosed map will show more street car routes. See attached pictures of street cars #6, #3 and Traction.











Central California Traction also operated a local streetcar line. Starting from Eighth and K Streets, it ran directly past Southlake Park before turning left onto X Street. It then passed through Oak Park, stopped at the state fairgrounds, and continued down Stockton Boulevard through Colonial Heights and Colonial Acres. In 1943, Sacramento City Lines acquired both of these streetcar systems. The streetcars were replaced with buses in 1947. (Western Railway Museum Archive.)



