The Grand Experiment: The Cahuenga Pass Parkway

Below is a brief historical description of our Cahuenga Pass area. This was originally written in response to the development plans that Universal floated in the 1990s. The description focuses around what was originally referred to as the Cahuenga Pass Parkway, whose significance you'll come to appreciate as you read. This was truly part of a grand experiment in urban and transportation planning.

The Early History of the Cahuenga Pass

The area, now referred to as the Cahuenga Pass (the Pass), was originally inhabited by Gabrieliño natives of Shoshonean descent. Specific information about these early residents is scanty, but apparently they had to primary settlements in the general area – that of Kawengna (which supposedly means "little hills") in the approximate site of present-day Hollywood (north of the former towns of Colegrove, South Hollywood and Cahuenga Valley), and that of Toluca (said to mean "fertile valley").

These areas were near the present-day communities of Toluca Lake and North Hollywood (formerly Lankershim) near the Los Angeles River (albeit channelized now), formerly called "Rio de Porciuncula" by the Spanish.

At that time the Pass was apparently little more than a dusty, rough narrow break or natural trail in the hills suitable only for a man on foot, horse- or mule-back.

Spanish Era

When Portola traveled through the Pass in about 1769, that steep narrow footpath was what he and his men found between lovely valleys on either side of the hills. With settlement and colonization by the Spanish, and with the development of a "pueblo" downtown near the site of the former native village of Yangna, travel slowly increased over the Pass out to the "new" Mission San Fernando Rey de España and eventually up the El Camino Réal de Rey to the other Alta California missions.

The early Spanish name for the Pass and the area near it was "El Portozuela." The Pass was also known as "La Nopalera" for the abundant nopal cactus growing there.

This was the "modern" beginning of the Pass' important route connecting urban Los Angeles and the more agrarian/suburban San Fernando Valley.

Nineteenth Century

In 1828 a traveler through the area, a Mr. Alfred Robinson, called "the glen of Cow-wanga an indescribable mountain road" when speaking of the Cahuenga Pass and its ruggedness.

By 1830 the name "Cahuenga" had become associated with the area near the northern side of the mountains. However, it subsequently became applied to the valley south of the hills as well, and later was attached to an area/town referred to as Cahuenga Valley (southeast of Hollywood and Colegrove).

As settlements grew and farms and ranches developed, commerce increased. Sheep and cattle began to be driven across the Pass. By the 1850's ox-carts and mule-teams crossed the hills through the Pass with people and goods, and slowly the roadway was improved and became suitable for wagons.

The Butterfield Overland Mail Company stage first crossed the Pass in 1858 with a contract to transport the U.S. mail from St. Louis to San Francisco by way of Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley. Prior to 1848, individual mail carriers, among them Kit Carson, traveled from U.S. territories down to Monterey. Butterfield started with two coaches per week traveling back and forth in each direction.

The history of the Pass in the 19th century is full of tales of battles fought, hidden gold and treasure, banditos and highwaymen. These stories include men like Pico, Fremont, Vasquez and Murietta, among others. They also include reports of the U.S. Army's Camel Corps experiment during the Civil War where 77 camels and dromedaries, imported from Egypt and Arabia, were tried as a means of transportation (the "Camel Freight Train") through the rugged terrain of the area driven by, among others, a local man known as "Greek George" Caralambo.

By the 1870's there was a Pass Hotel that also served as a toll station and store at the top of the Pass. It was also called "Eight Mile House" because it was 8 miles from downtown Los Angeles. This roadhouse was apparently a rather raunchy restaurant, saloon and gambling parlor, which ultimately fell into decay and was finally torn down in 1920.

Stagecoaches now crossed the Pass as frequently as every other day. As the more inland route through the central valley was considered to be the principal one, the Pass route was referred to as the Coast Route or Coast Highway, but it still retained its importance as the main access to the rapidly growing city of Los Angeles.

Early Twentieth Century

By the end of the 19th century, towns in the San Fernando Valley were flourishing, especially the town of Lankershim (whose name was changed to North Hollywood in 1927), somewhat to the north of the Pass. Dry land farming has given way to sheep ranches, later converted to wheat and chicken farms, which in turn gave way to new subdivisions. Some fruit and nut orchards remained, especially in the area of Toluca.

City fathers in these growing towns recognized the need for more efficient access to Los Angeles and Hollywood/Colegrove. In 1910 excavation began in preparation for bringing Pacific Electric rail cars through the Pass and over the hill. They arrived in 1911 and reduced the trip from Lankershim to Hollywood from what has taken the better part of a day in the 1890's to a mere 45 minutes.

Along with these new electrified cars, the nearby steep and winding two-lane roadway through the Pass was paved and improved.

About the time that streetcars started crossing the Pass, a new industry began to take root in the Valley — moving pictures. In 1912 Carl Laemmle and his Universal Film Manufacturing Company moved north from Hollywood and started leasing, and subsequently buying, former ranch property near the Valley mouth of the Cahuenga Pass along the newly illuminated Lankershim Boulevard. Laemmle's property was bordered by the Los Angeles River on the north, and a road alternately called Dark Canyon Road, Pass Avenue, or Hollywood Way (later to be finally named Barham Road/-Boulevard after Richard Barham, a prominent citizen and publisher of the *Evening Herald).*

In 1913 a crucial event occurred – William Mulholland opened the Owens Valley Aqueduct. The Aqueduct finally made plentiful supplies of water available to the San Fernando Valley and Los Angeles. With the water came limitless growth possibilities for the entire region.

By 1920 Los Angeles was already the tenth largest city in the United States. The areas on both sides of the Pass were growing and prospering, and by 1922, twenty-five streetcars and 17,000 automobiles were crossing the Pass every day.

The new Hollywood elite started building homes and country retreats in the hills of Hollywood overlooking the Cahuenga Pass. Frederick W. Blanchard, a local patron of the arts, had two mansions on a large estate on Cahuenga Avenue at Pass Avenue/Dark Canyon Road adjacent to the Universal property. In 1923 Blanchard sold part of the property for subdivision into the area still referred to as Hollywood Manor. He did this at about the same time that the Weid Canyon (now Lake Hollywood) Reservoir was being proposed.

Planning and Growth in the 'Twenties

In 1924, in response to extremely troublesome and congested traffic in downtown Los Angeles, the firm of Olmstead Bartholomew & Cheney presented the *"Major Traffic Street Plan"* for Los Angeles to the Committee on Los Angeles Plan of Major Highways and the Traffic Commission of the City and County of Los Angeles.

This plan proposed the opening, expansion and widening of streets throughout the area as well as other measures to improve traffic flow. The plan's suggestions for the Pass included the widening of Cahuenga Pass Road "to an 8-lane thoroughfare and the grades made easy for trucking, with a minimum width between curbs of not less than 74 feet." This plan was adopted by the voters of Los Angeles on November 4, 1924.

In 1925 the *"Report and Recommendations on a Comprehensive Rapid Transit Plan for the City and the County of Los Angeles"* was published by the firm of Kelker, De Leuw & Company of Chicago. R.F. Kelker and Charles De Leuw had been hired in 1924 by the City and County to devise a plan for rapid transit development in Los Angeles.

The report was designed to serve a Los Angeles of the future with a population of three million people. It addressed issues of traffic congestion and the role of public transportation in the growth of the region. It proposed the integration of rapid transit (high-speed express trains for freight as well as people), interurbans (high-speed trains to outlying centers), street railway lines (streetcars, like those of the Pacific Electric and Los Angeles Railway, which would provide service throughout the city and serve as feeder lines to the trains), motor bus lines (which would not only supplement the local feeder lines, but also provide extensions into sparsely populated areas away from street car spurs), with the already increasingly popular private automobile.

The report also suggested subways or elevated rail lines as a means of eliminating the conflict between streetcars and automobiles. The elevated lines were controversial because of the public's concerns over light, noise, dirt and what we now call visual blight. The subways and elevated tracks were problematic also because of the costs involved and the difficulties in financing them.

The report favored these different means of public transportation over the private automobile as the solution to future congestion and growth in the region, and recognized the need for public underwriting, subsidization by automobile riders, as well as bond issues and taxation to support and sustain the system. Initially public support favored the report; however, it became inextricably intertwined with a decade-old dispute over the construction, by the steam railroad lines, of a union station adjacent to the Plaza.

The railroads had successfully fought the proposal of a jointly shared station, which would allow access to other rail lines not already serving the City of Los Angeles. Instead they offered to build separate Santa Fe and Southern Pacific/Union Pacific terminals with elevated feeder lines and Pacific Electric car connections. Ultimately it came down to a referendum on whether the public wanted a combined union station near the Plaza, or whether they should place their trust in the rail lines to actually build the separate terminals and elevated tracks (which would remove crowded, infrequent trolleys from city streets and relieve central business district traffic congestion).

That choice, fed by a long-standing distrust by the commuting public of the various rail companies, eventually resulted in the approval of a Plaza-adjacent union station and the Kelker and De Leuw report being viewed with disfavor (by association), and ultimately, largely set aside. The public's concerns were not unfounded, as they had experienced a long history of broken promises by the rail and traction companies over inadequate service. In disgust, the public had had virtually no choice but to turn to their private automobiles to commute to the downtown business district.

Unfortunately, however, their rejection of the Kelker and De Leuw proposal delayed the construction of major rapid transit routes in Los Angeles for decades, and maintained the reliance and focus on the private automobile.

On July 1, 1926, constructed according to the Olmsted, Bartholomew & Cheney *Street Plan* recommendations, the newly improved roadway over Cahuenga Pass was completed. It was financed, for the first time, with county gas tax funds at a cost of $500,000.

Construction in the area boomed. 1927 brought plans for a new Central Motion Picture District bordering the Pass to the northwest to be called Studio City. The first phase of the project was the construction of a new studio by Mack Sennett at the northeast corner of Ventura Highway and Prospect Street (now Ventura and Laurel Canyon Boulevard). Developments like Oak Crest sprung up in the hills, and almost everywhere farmlands and orchards were being transformed into new homes and offices.

Planning and Growth in the 'Thirties

In 1937, the Southern California Automobile Club published their *"Traffic Survey, Los Angeles Metropolitan Area,"* in which an elaborate system of new "motorways" was proposed to provide a network of uninterrupted high-speed roadways without stoplights for the area for the "exclusive use of motor vehicles." All crossings of these motorways were to be on separate grades.

The Survey was based on extensive studies of existing traffic patterns in the metropolitan area, and reflected the influence of the existing steam and rail lines in its proposed routes and pattern. It recommended wide landscape parkway buffers in residential areas, as well as cloverleaf intersections, on- and off-ramps, grade separations, and "motorway buildings," which, among other services, would provide space for parking.

It also suggested keeping the shoulders of the motorway free from development or commercial enterprises, which might slow the flow of traffic. While it proposed a motorway through the Cahuenga Pass among other suggestions, it neglected to recommend serious alternatives to restructure existing congestion downtown.

March of 1938 brought heavy rains and floods. The Los Angeles River and Tujunga Wash became raging torrents overflowing their banks and claiming many lives. Martial law was declared in the area. Many of the bridges over the River in the San Fernando Valley were washed away, and local authorities and the Federal Works Project Administration began planning and designing replacements for them.

1938 also marked the organization of the Citizens' Transportation Survey Committee by Los Angeles City Engineer Lloyd Aldrich. The Committee was underwritten with funds from the Works Project Administration as well as the downtown business community.

The group conducted a new series of traffic surveys. These surveys, in addition to the 1937 Automobile Club's *Survey*, several Regional Planning Commission reports and other City documents, became the basis for *" Transit Program for the Los Angeles Metropolitan Region"* issued in 1939 by the City of Los Angeles Engineering Transportation Board. Given the reports on which the *Transit Program* was based and their focus on existing prevailing traffic patterns, "express highways" were deemed the solution to current traffic congestion problems.

The *Transit Program* addressed issues of engineering details, rights-of-way, financing and policy, and also recommended the immediate construction of priority routes, among them the Hollywood Parkway of which the Cahuenga Pass Parkway was a part. Even by that time, the Cahuenga Pass had become a congested traffic bottleneck in its role as principal route from the Valley to the downtown central business district.

Construction of the Cahuenga Pass Parkway

As recommended by the Automobile Club's *Survey* and the Survey Committee's *Transit Program* — as well as in response to the devastation caused by the floods of 1938 — the design and construction of the Cahuenga Pass Parkway was finally undertaken.

The Parkway was designed by a team of engineers under the direction of Merrill Butler, Deputy Engineer in charge of design, and Los Angeles City Engineer Lloyd Aldrich. Their charge was to build motorways for safety and convenience. Butler's team had also designed the Arroyo Seco Freeway/Parkway, the first freeway or parkway in California. Here in the Pass, they were able to incorporate the lessons that they had learned in their earlier work.

They saw to it that the topography was widened to allow for four twelve-foot lanes of vehicular traffic in each direction. Existing Pacific Electric tracks were regraded, moved and straightened. The tracks were relocated to run down the center of the overall roadway with pedestrian access via tunnels from newly built adjacent service roads. Generous landscape strips between on- and off-ramps were provided along the sides of the roadways.

The funding for the Parkway was a cooperative venture, financed jointly by the federal government's Project Works Administration (PWA), the State of California and the City of Los Angeles. The PWA provided a grant to the City of 45% of the project, the balance of which was paid for by gas tax and other monies.

A major challenge for the contractors of the Parkway was to keep it open during construction. This was no small feat as the road through the Pass was currently carrying between 45,000 and 50,000 per day. There was also a time factor — PWA's funding was set to expire on July 1, 1940.

Because of that deadline, the project was divided into two phases: the first extended from south of the Hollywood Bowl near the intersection of Highland Avenue and Cahuenga Boulevard, north to about Hollycrest; and the second from there (specifically 440 feet south of the Mulholland Highway Bridge) to 940 feet north of Barham Boulevard.

The first portion of the Cahuenga Pass Parkway was completed on schedule and dedicated on June 15, 1940, two weeks before the original PWA deadline. Not only did it include the roadway and rail tracks, but also the Mulholland Highway Bridge, Pilgrimage Play Bridge, adjacent service roads, wooden guard rails, pedestrian tunnels (which provided safe, grade-separated access to the trains), and a vehicular tunnel under the roadway. This vehicular tunnel gave drivers the choice of either going south on Cahuenga Boulevard under Highland Avenue or of going south on Highland Avenue on grade.

The Hollywood Chamber of Commerce arranged a grand opening ceremony complete with state, local and federal officials as well as celebrities. The Works Project Administration's was extended for an additional six months to complete the balance of the construction of the Parkway, the bridges over it, the retaining walls and on- and off-ramps which were all parts of it.

The second section opened in December of 1940 and extended to just north of Barham Road/-Boulevard (formerly Dark Canyon Road, Pass Avenue or Hollywood Way). This second phase also included the construction of the Barham Bridge, the on- and off-ramps to and from it, as well as large sections of retaining walls adjacent to it. The total cost of the project was approximately $1.7 million.

It is this approximately three-mile-long portion of roadway and the three bridges (Pilgrimage, Mulholland and Barham) over it, as well as the remaining pedestrian tunnels, service roads, landscaping and guard rails that are of concern for this nomination.

An undated reference of this period in the Index to the Minutes of the Los Angeles City Council, as well as various articles of the day, refer to an agreement between the State of California and the City of Los Angeles for State Highway #2 to run between Whitley Terrace and Vineland Avenue. The section of road addressed in this nomination was a part of that State Highway #2.

The last portion, from beyond Barham to Vineland, although originally conceived by Lloyd Aldrich in the 1939 *Transit Program*, was not undertaken until 1957.

Present Condition of the Cahuenga Pass Parkway

In spite of the fact that the on- and off-ramps of the former Cahuenga Pass Parkway have been modified by Caltrans since their original construction, the bridges have remained virtually intact.

Although the detailing, methods of construction and structure of the three bridges are similar, and all manifest the WPA-Heroic Streamline Moderne design influences, each has a slightly different appearance.

The Pilgrimage Bridge is the low, arched one; the Mulholland Bridge tall and vertical; and the Barham bridge wide and workman-like. These differences are most apparent in their streetlight/-luminaire designs, which are unique to each of these three bridges. However, they all share similar simple decorative concrete railings and a late Thirties sense of monumentality and civic presence.

Apart from the WPA-Public Moderne detailing of these three reinforced concrete bridges, their retaining walls, their on- and off-ramps, distinctive light standards and other details, this portion of roadway, bridges and tunnels, once known as the Cahuenga Pass Parkway, is significant because it represents the exploration of an effective transportation prototype in the history of the State of California.

In the same place where Gabrieliño natives and Spanish padres once walked is a roadway which was an experimental community planning model for an integrated transit system — Pacific Electric rail car running efficiently alongside private automobile. These bridges, walls, ramps, guard rails and tunnels represent an example of the late 1930's civic social aspirations and grandeur.

This place of partnership between car and train operated effectively, side by side, under December of 1952, when the Pacific Electric Red Cars were taken out of operation. In 1957 and 1958, the Pacific Electric tracks were removed from the center of the roadway and the area formerly occupied by the rail tracks became two more lanes given over to the increasingly popular and dominant private automobile.

At the same time, the stairways from the Barham Bridge down to the tracks were also removed. Also in 1957 the remaining leg of the original State Highway #2 was extended to Vineland Avenue in preparation for the construction of the Ventura Freeway (Parkway).