

# *The Ghosts of Alhambra's Railroads*

**By  
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Some of my earliest memories of life are of being taken to the Southern Pacific Railroad Station at Mission Road and Palm Avenue in Alhambra by my father and watching the Sunset Limited make its first stop on its way to New Orleans.



The brightly colored passenger cars were painted red, orange, and black and nicknamed the Daylight Color Scheme since the colors reflected the early morning hues of a sunrise. During my childhood, passenger trains still enjoyed a significant position in transportation and in some respects were magnificent hotels on wheels. Crack passenger trains such as the Sunset Limited had their own magazines. The train's magazine, *Sunset Magazine*, has long outlived the train itself.

"The Alhambra Station was the first and last stop for all Southern Pacific trains to and from New Orleans, Texas, and even Chicago, via El Paso to Los Angeles," said Jim Baker of the Pacific Railroad Society, one of America's largest railroad fan clubs. Baker added that many passengers would use the Alhambra Station to avoid the congestion of the Los Angeles Union Passenger Terminal.

Most Alhambrans know of the railroad tracks, now owned by the Union Pacific, that reside in the train trench along Mission Road and which once served the passenger station at Palm and Mission. But there was a time when Alhambra had a plethora railroad tracks running across its 7.632 square miles.

Alhambra's major streets such as Huntington Drive, Main Street, and Ramona Road had Pacific Electric Red Cars running along them which created an extremely efficient means of mass transit for the city and attested to the strategic location of Alhambra. While the Southern Pacific Railroad had additional lines running through north Alhambra to Duarte and Pasadena.

Although these tracks, along with the Pacific Electric and Southern Pacific, are now long gone, evidence of the city's railroad past is still with us and the ghosts of Alhambra's railroads can be seen.

Huntington Drive is a lovely, wide thoroughfare at Alhambra's northern boundary with San Marino. One reason it is such a pleasant street is its wide median. The median displays lovely trees, nicely watered green grass, and is a favorite with joggers.

There was a time when that center median contained four Pacific Electric standard gauge tracks (four feet, eight and one half inches) which ran to downtown Los Angeles. Tracks from this line branched up Fair Oaks Avenue and Oak Knoll Avenue at junctions to Pasadena. Stops were made at the cross streets of Marengo Avenue, Marguerita Avenue, Fletcher Avenue, Garfield Avenue, and El Molino Avenue / Almansor Street.



East of El Molino the four tracks merged into two tracks and continued out to Glendora. This route was called the Monrovia Line and one of its most popular destinations was the Santa Anita Race Track. The Oak Knoll Junction ran to the base of the mountains and connected to what was referred to as Southern California's "Eighth Wonder of the World", the Mount Low Railway. The Monrovia Line that ran in Huntington's Drive's median was constructed in the early 1900's and the final Red Car ran in September 1951.

The Pacific Electric Railway was a privately owned mass transit system in Southern California that ran from Los Angeles to Orange, San Bernardino, and Riverside counties. It was the largest electric railway system in the world in the 1920's and had additional lines running through Alhambra on Main Street and Ramona Road. The Pacific Electric was the brainchild of Henry Huntington, the nephew of Collis P. Huntington, one of the organizers of the transcontinental railroad.

As a very young child I can recall the Huntington Drive median being just dirt and tan retaining walls running along each side of the median from Garfield to Almansor Street to provide a leveling effect for the old right of way. Later in the 1960's grass and trees were planted.

The ghosts of Alhambra's railroads can be seen at Story Park. Have you ever wondered why Story Park is neatly divided by Woodward Avenue into two sections that slope down to the Alhambra Wash? Where Woodward Avenue now resides, there once was a Southern Pacific Railroad trestle.

The trestle was part of the Southern Pacific Duarte Branch line that served orange groves, Azusa gravel pits, and passengers. As the trestle grew older, the railroad filled in dirt below it to provide support as a cheaper alternative to rebuilding the bridge. Finally when the Duarte Branch was closed in the 1940's, the tracks were removed and Woodward was extended in place of the tracks above Story Park.

Jim Baker of the Pacific Railroad Society pointed out that remnants of the trestle can still be seen. On the dirt path from Woodward Avenue down to the tennis courts at Story Park there is a row of wood columns that belonged to the trestle and that are still visible. These ghosts of the old trestle are cut off and extend approximately twelve inches above ground.



The Duarte Branch left the main line on Mission Road, ran parallel to Electric Avenue, and then along Woodward Avenue toward San Marino. Between Story Place and Almansor Street there is an open space with grass and pine trees which was part of the old right of way. The adjacent alley between Almansor Street and Cordova Street that Woodward leads into has a very gentle curve since it used to accommodate the trains that once ran along it to Duarte.

There are more ghosts of Alhambra's railroad history near Alhambra Park.

In the late 1800's Alhambra had a winery. And it was not just any winery. The winery, known as The San Gabriel Winery, covered more than 800 acres between Alhambra Road and Mission Road and was considered the largest winery in California. The winery also had a narrow gauge (three feet) rail line that served it from the Southern Pacific line along Mission Road in Alhambra and also from Pasadena.

The winery had a short history and lasted barely 20 years, but the track was purchased by the Southern Pacific and converted to standard gauge to allow small freight trains and for a brief period Pacific Electric Red Cars to run from Alhambra to Pasadena via a wandering rail line that ran along Raymond Street and through many Alhambra and South Pasadena backyards up to a station at Colorado Boulevard in Pasadena.

Today the Target stores stands where the winery's main buildings once were. And the open green space to the east side of Raymond Avenue by Alhambra Park that leads into an utility easement north of Alhambra Road is the old Southern Pacific right of way.

At the intersection of Raymond Street and Vine Street the train tracks have been asphalted over, but a close look reveals some pavement has broken away and exposed small portions of the old tracks.



When you drive on the San Bernardino Freeway and see a Metrolink Train running, it is traveling on an old Pacific Electric right of way. This line ran out to Covina and had various junction points where track split to serve additional destinations.

Ramona Road was originally where the 10 Freeway is. The Pacific Electric commuter rail line ran in the middle of the street. When the San Bernardino Freeway was constructed after World War II, Ramona Road was split in to two streets and pushed to each side of the new freeway. The rail line remained, but only for freight service. And to make room for all this, the large front yards of the beautiful craftsman homes on Ramona were acquired through eminent domain.

Alhambra's impressive past can be viewed through the ghosts of its railroad history. And if you know where to look, you can still see some of these ghosts.

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