

# ONCE UPON A TIME IN NORTH PARK SO, WHY DID NORTH PARK GET ALL OF THE GOOD STREETCARS?

BY LARRY HALL

As a kid growing up in East San Diego, it was fun to ride the # 7 streetcars on University Avenue. It was even more fun to ride the “good” # 2 streetcars on 30<sup>th</sup> Street. They were the “streamliners.” They didn’t have such high steps and there wasn’t an air operated step that could scare the daylights out of a little kid and they were quiet and they looked neat. What more could you ask for? Well, you could hope to ride a “streamliner” on the # 7 route on a Sunday when they made the appearance on University Avenue. It just didn’t seem fair that North Park got all the fun and I got scared by the clunky old cars with the noisy steps that might eat you at any time. I guess that made buses a plus for me.

So why did North Park get the good cars? The good cars were officially known as PCC cars. The 30s were a great time for acronyms and PCC stood for Presidents Conference Committee – a group that came up with the ultimate standard design for street cars that were all different (but that is another matter). The San Diego Electric Railway ordered 25 PCC cars in 1936 and three more in 1937. They were numbers 501 through 528, for those who are concerned with such things, and became the pride of the fleet. But, they were different. They were single ended cars, meaning that there was a front and a back and you always went forwards on the road.



*Car # 528 rolls across a bridge in Balboa Park, 1949  
Photo courtesy of Larry Hall*

Previous cars in San Diego had been double ended cars and when you got to the end of the line the motorman simply put up the trolley pole on the new back end of the car, pulled down the pole on what would be the front, flipped the seat backs, went to the front of the car, rang the bell, and went on his way. So the new PCC cars had to be turned around at the end of the route. Even in the 30s and 40s it was a disruption to traffic flow to have to back up a streetcar in an intersection. Can you imagine backing up a streetcar at 30<sup>th</sup> and Adams during rush hour? Well, they tried to do it and it was a problem. They even turned cars at Park and University for a short time on the old # 1 line. But, the public prevailed and a better method was found.

Until May of 1935, the northbound # 2 route ended at 30<sup>th</sup> and University. It was then extended to 30<sup>th</sup> and Adams to tie in with # 11 car, which ran as far as Marlborough. With the advent of the PCC cars it became necessary to deal with the growing traffic congestion in San Diego. In 1942 a loop of track was laid around the block bounded by Madison, Kansas, Adams, and 30<sup>th</sup>. The PCC cars could then go around the loop and head back south on 30<sup>th</sup> Street without disrupting traffic. When they got downtown to the Santa Fe Depot, there was a loop there where they could turn around and head back out Broadway. So all was well for the # 2 line and North Park got the "streamliners" and I continued to get scared on the old cars.

Either someone knew that the old cars scared me or there was a larger economic reason for running PCC cars on the # 7 line on Sundays when auto traffic was light. Remember, businesses were closed on Sunday in those days. With the double ended cars, they would stop at Euclid and University, change the trolley poles, flip the seat backs (which you could hear several blocks away at night), ring the gong, and then rattle back west on University to downtown. In order to use the PCC cars on the # 7 line, a turning wye was constructed at Euclid and University and the cars were turned in traffic to start their return trip. A similar arrangement was constructed at Edgeware Road and Adams Avenue for the # 11 cars.

The career of the PCC cars was limited. Although they carried more passengers, were quieter, featured smooth acceleration and braking, and looked really neat to a little kid, they could not compete with the automobile and buses. Sadly, on April 24, 1949, routes 2, 7, and 11 were discontinued and street cars were not to be seen on San Diego streets until they were reinvented again as the San Diego trolley.

Periodically, the old # 7 line lets us know that it was there. In the westbound lanes of University about 75 feet west of Swift, there is a patch in the street that works loose and exposes a rail of the old line. It has been doing it for years and has been patched many times. Maybe it is just the # 7 line trying to tell us that all of the automobiles aren't necessary if we had just listened to the rails in 1949.

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January 10, 2009



*Car # 408 on University Avenue at Alabama, 1949  
Photo courtesy of Larry Hall*