

Monrovia and Railroads

The early history of Monrovia is intertwined with the history of railroads during the second half of the last century and the early years of this century. At the conclusion of the Civil War, William N. Monroe, who had served with distinction in the Union Army and who was mustered out with the rank of Major, joined his father-in-law in railroad construction. In time he met Charles Crocker of "Big Four" fame, and came to California to construct segments of the Southern Pacific Railroad. In 1884, after completing another project for the Southern Pacific in Texas, he returned to California and purchased acreage from E.I. "Lucky" Baldwin in what is now Monrovia.

In the meantime, James F. Crank, a Pasadena resident and Los Angeles banker, had organized the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Valley Railroad with the purpose of constructing a railroad from Los Angeles to Pasadena and points east, with an ultimate goal of connecting with a major eastern railroad. The railroad was completed as far as Pasadena by September of 1885 and to Lamanda Park by the following November. In December of that year Crank was joined by E.F. Spence, a Los Angeles banker, and John D. Bicknell, a Los Angeles lawyer, in the purchase of several large parcels of land from "Lucky" Baldwin. In the spring of 1886 these gentlemen, together with W.N. Monroe and IF. Falvey, Baldwin's ranch foreman, pooled their holdings and formed the Monrovia Land and Water Company, which subdivided and placed on the market the new Town of Monrovia, named in honor of W.N. Monroe. Construction of the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Valley Railroad had continued, so Monrovia was served by rail from the time of its founding on May 17, 1886.

Both the Santa Fe and the Southern Pacific Railroads were interested in acquiring Crank's railroad. The Southern Pacific, however, had alienated Crank during the construction of his railroad, and Crank turned a deaf ear to its overtures. He agreed instead to sell to the Santa Fe, who would build west from San Bernardino and connect with Crank's railroad at the San Gabriel River. Construction proceeded rapidly, and the Santa Fe began using the newly completed line May 31, 1887, providing Monrovia with transcontinental rail service for the first time.

Competition between the Southern Pacific and Santa Fe produced a rate war, with fares briefly dipping to \$1.00 for a one-way ticket between Kansas City and Los Angeles. The low rates, coupled with a surge of interest in California, brought thousands of people to Southern California and produced a major land boom that impacted Monrovia as well as dozens of other communities. Even though hard times followed the collapse of the boom, Monrovia, established on a stable foundation, survived.

A major turning point in Monrovia's growth was the arrival of Henry E. Huntington's Pacific Electric Railway. Service from Los Angeles to Monrovia on the "Big Red Cars" began March 1, 1903, and continued for the next forty-eight years. The Monrovia line was extended to Glendora in 1907, and was a major component in the Pacific Electric system, one of the finest interurban systems in the world. The availability of frequent, rapid service into Los Angeles brought many new residents to Monrovia, who lived the good life of working in the city and living in the country.

Today only the Sante Fe depot survives as a reminder of the railroad era in Monrovia's history. With the abandonment of the line from San Bernardino to Los Angeles, a long chapter in Monrovia's history was brought to a close. For everything, though, there is a season. Perhaps the season of rail service will return to Monrovia yet again.

Stephen R. Baker December 12, 1996.