

A Short History of the Pacific Electric Railway Company's El Prado Bridge over the Torrance Branch Line

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When Henry Huntington, as first Vice President of the Southern Pacific Railroad in 1900, failed to succeed his late uncle Colis Huntington as President of the SP, he went into direct competition with the SP. Although remaining on SP's Board of Directors, he sold his major holdings of SP stock and founded the Pacific Electric Railway Company.

Emulating his empire-building uncle, Huntington had made wise investments in Southern California land and Los Angeles street railways. He envisioned creating an electric railroad system up and down the coast of California and incorporated **the Pacific Electric Railway Company in 1901**. A number of prominent Los Angeles bankers and landowners were on PE's original Board of Directors including I. W. Hellman, Epes Randolph, John D. Bicknell and J. S. Slason.

Before long Huntington found that one of his financial partners, Hellman, had sold his 45 % interest in the new Pacific Electric Company to the Southern Pacific. Later, in competition for a street railway franchise from the city of Los Angeles, Huntington found a representative of **Southern Pacific's** E. W. Harriman surreptitiously bidding up the franchise price beyond economic reality. Huntington dropped out of the bidding and SP entered the street railway business.

Nonetheless Huntington continued to expand his landholdings, purchasing other local electric railways, and extending the Pacific Electric lines. In direct competition with steam railroads the electric lines were extended to each of the contending Los Angeles seaports; i.e., Alamitos Bay, Newport Beach, San Pedro, Redondo Beach, and Santa Monica. Almost immediately the Pacific Electric was luring passengers away from parallel steam routes due to more frequent service, more local stops and lower fares.

Between 1906 and 1909, Huntington began to lose his hold on LA's street railway systems due to Southern Pacific's aggressive acquisitions of other competing systems. By 1910 the Southern Pacific had gained financial control of the Pacific Electric by purchasing most of its stock. To consolidate all lines of the former Pacific Electric with SP's Los Angeles Inter-Urban Railway, **the Pacific Electric Railway Company was re-incorporated on August 24, 1911**. The articles of incorporation do not mention the Southern Pacific; however, the new Board of Directors was headed by Wm. F. Herrin, a San Francisco resident and Chief Counsel for the Southern Pacific. The consolidation made the PE the largest operator of interurban electric railway passenger service in the world by the 1920s, with 2,160 daily trains over 1,000 miles of track throughout Southern California. According to Spencer Crump's 1962 book "Ride the Big Red Cars" the complete details were never revealed of the profitable deal whereby Huntington yielded his interest in the Pacific Electric to the Southern Pacific.

One of the hallmarks of Huntington's expansion of the Pacific Electric had been partnering with large landholders. On occasion the real estate speculators would pay the cost of rail extensions to improve their property values. An example lies in the partnering of Dominguez Land Company with the Pacific Electric Company in the design and construction of the Torrance Branch line and the **El Prado Bridge** in 1913.

In the early 1900s J. S. Torrance, president of Dominguez Land Co. and other investors had purchased part of a former Spanish land grant and hired famed landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. to design a new planned community that would be named after Torrance. Some of the town's early buildings were designed by the renowned Southern California architect Irving Gill whose **Mission Revival and early Modernist concepts** influenced the El Prado Bridge design.

In 1904 Pacific Electric began service from Los Angeles to San Pedro. The main line ran parallel with Normandie Ave. from Gardena to Gaffey Ave. and terminated in San Pedro. While profits from land sales had provided the initial financial incentive for rail extensions, freight revenues gradually became a more important factor than passenger fares. Conceived and built as an industrial city, Torrance had been chosen by PE as the location of their multi-million dollar car maintenance shops. Also, Torrance was selected by such heavy industries as Union Tool Co, Llewellyn Iron Works (later to become Columbia Steel), and other imposing industrial establishments .

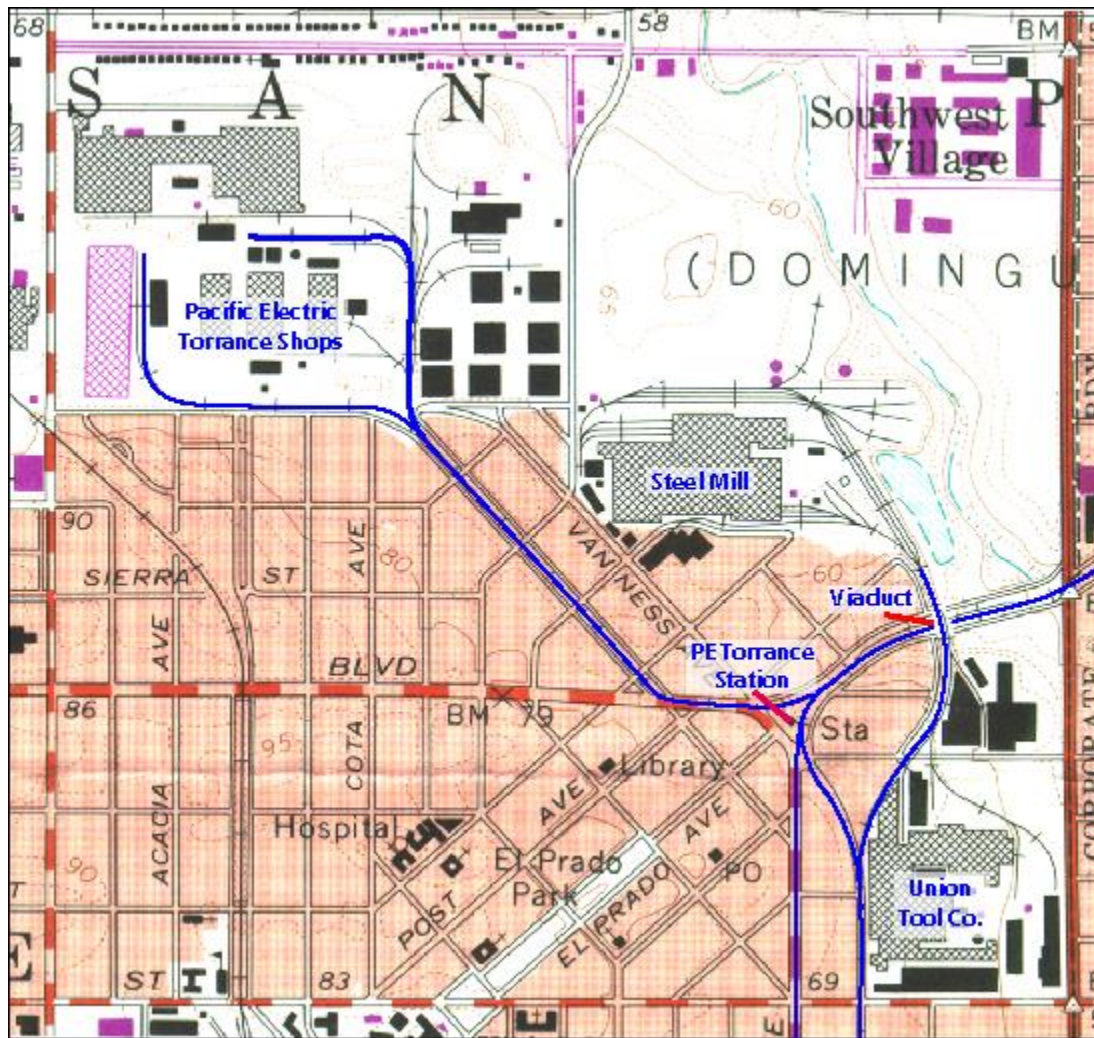
In 1912 the PE opened a branch through Torrance from the San Pedro main line, running west in PE's private right of way dividing Torrance Blvd., then south along Cabrillo Street before returning to the San Pedro main line.



Testimony to the sparse population of the area at that time, is that a substantial *part* (of ridership on the branch line) was a large number of Pacific Electric employees riding PE's daily special train from Los Angeles to work at the Torrance shops.

Spur tracks extending into plants, such as the Union Tool Company, brought lucrative freight billings to PE. The Columbia Steel Mill was located topographically such that freight service could best be accommodated by extending a spur from Union Tool northerly over the east/west Torrance local line. **Simply building a spur off the Torrance line would have resulted in too steep a climb to the steel mill.**

the result is the Gill-inspired, El Prado bridge commissioned by the Dominguez Land Company; a multi-arch structure spanning the double-tracked Torrance branch as well as the Torrance Boulevard couplet.



This is **the only place on the Pacific Electric** where a bridge was built to cross over railroad itself. Structural design of the El Prado Bridge was by Ralph Bennett, PE of the Dominguez Land Company and approved by George W. Pillsbury, Chief Engineer of the Pacific Electric Railway Co. Red Car passenger service to Torrance ended in 1940; however the PE continued to use the route for freight service until dissolution of the company in 1964. The PE shops were demolished in the 1970s and tracks were removed south of Torrance Blvd. The Southern Pacific took over freight service with diesel-electric motive power for freight service after the all-electric freight engines were retired. After the 1996 consolidation of SP with the Union Pacific Railroad the Torrance line was re-ballasted and re-railed with welded rail to serve the US Gypsum Co. plant where the line ends adjacent the former PE Shops.



Though trackage, turnouts and remnants of a switch remain on the top deck of the El Prado Bridge, it is no longer in use. The steel mills have been demolished to make way for the national headquarters of American Honda Motor Company which has no rail access. There is no chance of the bridge returning to service, since the right-of-way at either end has been redeveloped. Nevertheless, the Pacific Electric Railway Company's El Prado Bridge has become a symbol of the city as part of the Torrance Police Department's logo as of January 1, 2000.



The city of Torrance as part of a centennial recognition of the 1913 El Prado Bridge construction awarded a construction contract entitled Pacific Electric Railroad Bridge Rehabilitation and Beautification in October 2012, anticipating completion in 2013. The rehabilitation project was designed by Krakower Associates for the City of Torrance...and approved by City Engineer Toufic J. Semaan, PE.