

History of the Electric Railway

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The cost of gas is driving us all insane because we are so dependent on our cars today. But imagine a time when having your own gasoline-powered vehicle was not normal and relying on other means of transportation was a necessity. The coming of an electric railroad running from Hayward to Oakland was a huge step into the modern age. One of the highly anticipated events of the 1890s was the opening of the narrow-gauge electric railroad called the Oakland, San Leandro and Haywards Electric Railway.

A petition for the electric railroad was filed with the county board on September 10, 1890 by Edward O. Webb, William Roberts, A. Jones, Franklin Moss, J.P. Dieves, and S. Huff. It asked for authorization to build an electric railroad line from Oakland to Hayward be granted to Horry W. Meek, C.E. Palmer, W.J. Landers, and E.B. Stone. The cost of the railroad was estimated at \$250,000, which is roughly \$5.7 million today. In July 1891, the board of trade raised a bonus of \$10,000 as a starter for construction of the line. Approval was granted and the new electric railway was on its way.

Construction of the line began in 1891 in Hayward, with Frank M. Leland as constructing engineer and superintendent. Thirty-five pound rails were used and the railroad was narrow gauge, measuring 3 feet, 8 inches wide (standard is 4 feet, 8.5 inches). "Pound" is a railroad term that indicates the weight of rail per yard, and "light rail" refers to anything lighter than 100 pounds.

Six single truck electric cars were ordered from Carter Brothers Car Company in Newark. The cars were painted red and numbered 1 through 6. Shortly after opening the line, nineteen additional cars were ordered. Not long after that, five larger cars were ordered. These were of steam coach roof design and could be converted into open cars during the summer months. This made for a total of thirty cars servicing the line.

Construction moved quickly and took less than ten months to complete. The line started in Hayward near Memorial Park at the Plunge and continued down Hayward County Road (now Mission Boulevard or E. 14th Street) to 13th Avenue in Oakland, a total of 14.3 miles.



Conductors and other employees of the Railway in front of the street cars. In the center of the photo, wearing a bowler hat is Horry Meek, with brother William E. Meek standing on his left. The Meeks were financial backers of the railway.



Opening day of the Oakland, San Leandro and Haywards Electric Railway in front of the Oakes Hotels on May 7, 1892.

On May 7, 1892, the single-track line officially opened and 5 of the 6 cars made the first revenue run. They made stops at the Oaks Hotel in Hayward, the Estudillo Hotel in San Leandro, California Railway crossing, and the 13th Avenue terminus in Oakland. The line featured hourly service during most of the day and half hour trips during peak hours. The fare was only seven cents. A conductor and a motorman operated each car.

In early 1893, the tracks were extended into Downtown Oakland, up Washington Street to First Street. Soon after the extension opened on

March 29, pouch style mail service started on the line. In 1906, one of the larger style cars would be partially rebuilt to serve a new life as the U.S. Mail (Railway Post Office) car and put into service between the Oakland and Hayward post offices.

The new railway encouraged the development of several small towns and the expansion of the Hayward city limits. This led to the development of an alternate line to the San Lorenzo Hotel. Construction began in March, with the junction 2.5 miles south of San Leandro. On May 13, 1893, the line to San Lorenzo officially opened. The San Lorenzo line led to the San Lorenzo Pavilion, where people partied and picnicked on weekends. In all, the Oakland, San Leandro and Haywards Electric Railway totaled 20 miles, including the route to San Lorenzo. This made the line the longest electrically operated railroad in the country at the time.



The San Lorenzo Pavilion, c. 1900.

The year 1896 inaugurated another service – the first “piggyback” freight hauling in the country. Horse-drawn wagons, owned by the railroad, picked up freight in Hayward and San Leandro. Teamsters then unhitched the horses and loaded the wagons aboard flat cars and gave them a fast ride to the Oakland waterfront to be unloaded. The same procedure could be followed on the return trip, but in reverse.



B Street at Mission Blvd. looking west, c. 1920.

In 1906, the narrow gauge was converted to standard gauge, which helped the consolidation of the Oakland Transit Company and the Oakland, San Leandro and Haywards Electric Railway under the name Oakland Traction Company. In 1908, the line was absorbed by Francis

Marian “Borax” Smith’s transportation empire and became an

important link in his efforts to consolidate East Bay Transit. After several more consolidations and reinventions, the Oakland Traction Company line would eventually be known as the Key System.

The end of the line would have to come eventually. The horse car service was discontinued in 1909. The post office began using truck delivery and discontinued the Railway Post Office car in 1923. The San Lorenzo line was abandoned in 1927 due to lack of patronage. There were many cutbacks during the 1930s, which led to cut service to Hayward. On March 10, 1935, the last car left Hayward. By 1946, the Key System was acquired by National City Lines, which was financed by bus and oil interests, leading to the end of all streetcar operations. On November 27th, 1948, the last car servicing the remnant of the original line made its way to retirement.