

# 120 Years of Transit in Eureka

*In Eureka, civic pride and public transit go way back* by Mark Myslin

The year is 1888, and Eureka is booming. Timber and fishing are at their peak, the Carson Mansion is newly built, and the current civic craze is public transit.

When City Ordinance No. 111 created the Eureka Street Railway in 1888, one local newspaper exclaimed “it won’t be long ere we may ride about town in true metropolitan fashion.” Within months, six horse-drawn railcars shipped in from San Francisco were traversing 3.5 miles of track that linked the downtown waterfront, Myrtle Grove Cemetery, and South Park on Broadway. The fare was 5¢. Eureka welcomed their first transit system as, in the excited words of one newspaper, “the harbinger of a new era of prosperity.”

The Eureka Street Railway, 1890:	
Miles of track:	3.5
Railcars:	6
Horses:	25
Fare:	5¢
Ridership:	98,620
Revenue:	\$5181
Expenses:	\$5300
Eureka population:	4858

## Technology rolls on

By 1903, however, Eureka was ready for something more cutting-edge: an electric streetcar system. The city council awarded the franchise for the Humboldt Transit Company to railroad man and copper mine owner George Henderson (familiar-sounding last name, anyone?). The first six red and gold ‘California-style’ streetcars from San Francisco arrived at the wharf at the foot of C Street in 1903, and service began on September 15. That night, 150 prominent Eureka residents gathered at the Hotel Vance to celebrate their latest bundle of civic joy—a sleek and attractive transit system.

Streetcars ran every ten minutes from 6:30 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. Service expanded constantly, with new lines to Sequoia Park, the Eureka Foundry at the foot

of T Street, and the wharf near the end of Whipple Street (today W. 14<sup>th</sup> Street). This was also the site of Humboldt Transit’s own steam power plant. By 1915, nineteen streetcars were running on five routes and there was a brand-new car barn at Harris and J Streets.

## Voters to the rescue

World War I spelled trouble for the transit company, however. Higher oil prices drove the fare to 6¢ in 1918, but there were more dire issues: the company had been operating at a loss for several years and still owed thousands of dollars on bonds and in unpaid interest. Two options existed: sell to the city or scrap the railway. In a special election in 1921, Eureka saved their transit system by voting 2514 to 446 to authorize the city to purchase it for \$130,000.

So began the era of the Eureka Municipal Railway. The city rebuilt most of its streetcars during the 1920s, and—continuing Eureka’s long-standing view of its transit system as a way to show off—renumbered the streetcars non-consecutively to give the impression that there were more than there really were.

## The car spells the end

But motorized transportation was on the rise. In 1938, Broadway was repaved without streetcar tracks, prompting the city to buy two buses to replace streetcars on that line. One by one, the other streetcar lines were abandoned and the tracks removed. Due mostly to the personal automobile’s spreading popularity, the railway was losing between \$10,000 and \$20,000 every year, and in 1939 the city council voted to replace it with a bus system. On February 24, 1940, the last day of rail service, a group of tragically overzealous Eureka residents set fire to Car No. 18 at 5<sup>th</sup> and F Streets, which actually scorched several buildings before firefighters arrived. Within two months, all of the rails had been removed and the car barn had been demolished.

In the opinion of a 1964 railroad magazine,

Eureka’s street railways had served the community well—except, of course, for the occasional derailment, collision, or streetcar going off the end of the track “with the help of the kids greasing the rails.”

## Next stop: the future

For half a century before the rise of the car, public transit in Eureka was an expression of civic pride and cutting-edge modernity. As the personal automobile became mainstream, enthusiasm for transit languished here and across the nation. But in 2008, interest in public transportation is on the rise as gas prices soar, climate change concerns intensify, and parking and traffic frustrations mount. New tools and strategies promise a future of convenient, efficient public transportation: bus rapid transit, onboard wireless Internet, and user-friendly trip planners like Google Transit are just a few. A majority of people here have seen car-free transportation as attractive and futuristic before—and many are again coming to see it that way.

*Humboldt native Mark Myslin (www.markmyslin.com) is a second-year Linguistics major at UCSB. He uses Santa Barbara’s amazing network of bike paths every day and enjoys an inexplicable, lifelong obsession with transit buses. Every time Mark visits Humboldt, he takes a day-long excursion on Redwood Transit to check up on one of his favorite transit systems.*



**1888:** Eureka Street Railroad Co. begins horsecar service

**1903:** Humboldt Transit Co. begins running electric streetcars

**1921:** Voters transfer operations to Eureka Municipal Railway

**1940:** Rail service replaced by Eureka City Lines buses

**1961:** Bus service, renamed Eureka Transit Lines, ends

**1972:** Jitney service taken over by private Bishop's Transit Service

**1976:** Newly-formed Humboldt Transit Authority begins Eureka Transit Service

**1979:** ETS operating three routes at a 25¢ fare

**1986:** First heavy-duty transit buses for ETS

**1998:** Visitors' Bus runs in regular service

**2007:** Hybrid buses, Google Transit, Jack Pass