

Not-So-Rapid Transit: The Early Santa Cruz Streetcars

by Douglas F. Young

Today, Santa Cruz County residents face traffic problems complicated by a mushrooming population, a shrinking highway budget, and an occasional earthquake-shattered bridge.

Every environmental crisis or increase in the price of gasoline prompts renewed cries for improved public transit. A century ago, more likely sources for citizens' complaints

might have been street sweepers who weren't keeping up with the horses, an increase in the price of oats, or a rain-storm that turned the roads into rivers of mud.

But the hoped-for solution, then as now, was the same: an efficient, reliable transportation system.

Public transportation began in early Santa Cruz County with horse-drawn cars running on iron rails through



Streetcars were once a common sight along the Santa Cruz coastline.

photo courtesy of Santa Cruz Public Library

the dusty streets of the city and out to the nearby villages. Horsecar service started in 1876 with the Pacific Avenue line that ran from the center of the city down to the wharf.

Other streetcar companies operated throughout the city, including Fred Swanton's Santa Cruz, Park and Capitola Railway, incorporated by the man who conceived the Boardwalk and Casino.

Another company ran its cars up the hill and out Mission Street to the ocean cliffs.

Still, William Ely exemplified the early California entrepreneurs. He had driven a

horse and buggy across the plains from Illinois, settling in Santa Cruz, and incorporated his Santa Cruz Street Railway in the beginning of the last decade of the 1800s.

In its earliest incarnation, Ely's railroad consisted of horsedrawn cars carrying passengers on their business and pleasure excursions through the streets of Santa Cruz in the 1890s.

The line began at the car barns on Front Street, headed across the covered bridge spanning the San Lorenzo River, then up the hill and

The little cars then turned down Cayuga Street toward the bay, crossed Seabright Avenue, and headed toward the end of the line at Twin Lakes.

By the turn of the century, William Ely's Santa Cruz Street Railway had evolved into the Santa Cruz, Capitola and Watsonville Railroad. It served as a connector between the separate little villages of Seabright, Twin Lakes, Live Oak and Opal on its regular run from Santa Cruz to Capitola.

Today, when the winter storms have battered the beach at Twin Lakes, the shifting tide might reveal a line of pilings jutting from the sand. Ninety years ago the pilings were the supports for a new railroad trestle on the water's very edge.

Every day, Ely's narrow gauge locomotive steamed eastward across the trestle, turning north between the willow trees that lined 12th Avenue, on the way to the end of the line near the Esplanade in Capitola.

Ely was a successful property owner and entrepreneur, but he never got around to completing the tracks to the south-county destination promised by the name of his Santa Cruz, Capitola and

Watsonville Railroad. For the past 25 years, plans to bring devices out of the closet and make them



Once vital forms of transportation, streetcars were later abandoned.

closer to Watsonville than the village at Camp Capitola. Apparently it was cheaper and easier just to paint the name "Watsonville" on the side of the locomotive than it was to lay tracks all the way to the southern end of the county. When Ely's competitors electrified their streetcars with

a tangle of overhanging cables and trusses, Ely wouldn't be outdone. He sent off to the Baldwin works in Philadelphia, and ordered a little coal-burning steam locomotive for his railroad. The locomotive was named, in a characteristic stroke of modesty "The William Ely."

But the local citizens complained about the noisy, smoky little locomotive clanging and belching through the city streets, so in 1895 the county supervisors gave Ely the choice of limiting his excursions to twice daily, or giving up the locomotive altogether. He kept the locomotive.

By 1904, Ely's Santa Cruz, Capitola and Watsonville line, along with most of the existing street cars and local railroads in Santa Cruz, had been consolidated into the Union Traction Company.

By the time the Great War broke out, nearly all of the horsecar tracks had been dug up or paved over.

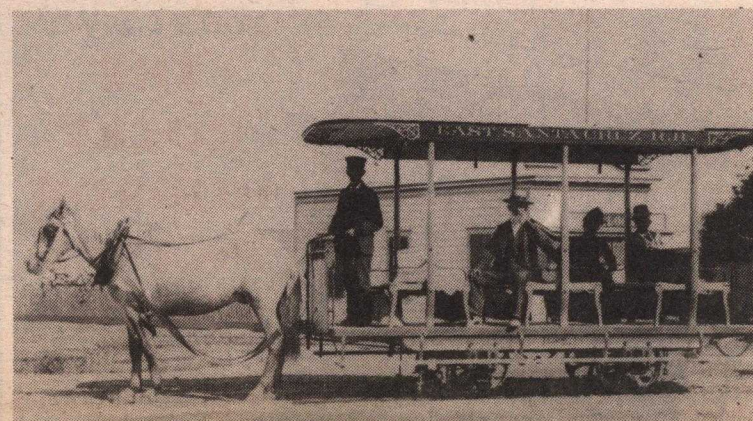
The public transportation needs of the city were served for two more decades by the efficient but colorless electrified streetcars, which in turn were eclipsed in the 1930s by California's passion for the automobile.

The covered bridge that carried Soquel Avenue over the San Lorenzo River was torn down in 1921. And, by that time, all traces of William Ely's rapid transit system had

disappeared or been buried. Although old fashioned buggies will always be a memory, one can still picture the first days of Ely's horsedrawn railroad cars, carrying women to and from the market as it ran along Cayuga Street.

Following a pair of iron rails traversing the center of the broad unpaved street, the shiny enameled canopy of the cars glistening in the sun probably seemed more the future for local commuters than the horseless carriages that occasionally would pass to the side.

And, now 100 years later, as oil prices soar and air pollution settles over most cities, Ely's idea of getting about along rails may seem more like a glimpse of the future than the past. □



One of the charming old horse-drawn streetcars.

photo courtesy of Santa Cruz Public Library