

I

THE PERILS OF A PARKLESS TOWN

In February 1920 the Los Angeles City Council was about to act on as pressing a matter as it had faced in recent years: traffic congestion. The commercial center was inundated with automobiles to the point that movement through its streets was severely impaired, especially during the late afternoon rush period. The solution the council sought to implement was to ban curbside parking in the core area for most of the day and limit parking time to one hour along surrounding blocks. Proponents of this ordinance charged that while the percentage of the main business district's automobile commuters was small, they created havoc for the great majority of citizens, who still came by streetcar. The ordinance was intended to allow trolleys to move freely again and spur the development of off-street parking facilities for the prosperous minority who drove.¹

The measure passed, but some of its critics remained skeptical about the effects. Among the most vocal opposition came from the *Los Angeles Times*, which forecast in a piece entitled "The Perils of a Parkless Town" that the ordinance would do nothing short of revolutionize the city's growth patterns (figure 1). Many shoppers and workers alike depended upon automobiles. If they were prevented from using their cars, they would take their business elsewhere. The tone was ominous:

Big mercantile establishments, to cater to automobile-using shoppers, banned by the ordinance . . . , are already being arranged for in Hollywood, on Wilshire Boulevard, and other sections outside the no-parking area. The city's old "main business district" will be supplemented . . . by half a dozen smaller but otherwise similar districts in all parts of the city. The "congested area" will become a thing of the past.

VOL. XXXIX.

SUNDAY MORNING, FEBRUARY 29, 1920.

POPULATION 1,170,000 (By the City Director—1919—21,000
By the Federal Census—1919—21,000)

THE PERILS OF A PARKLESS TOWN.

Law Barring Standing Autos on Downtown Streets will Create New Shopping and Theater Districts, Jam Street Cars to Impossible Point and Hurt Trade.

In the view of experts who have made a careful study of the situation, the no-parking ordinance, which will go into effect six weeks hence, will work a revolution in the manner of Los Angeles' growth.

It will inevitably force the creation of new shopping districts outside the present congested area. Big mercantile establishments to cater to automobile-riding shoppers, lured by the ordinance from downtown, are already being arranged for in Hollywood, on Wilshire boulevard and other sections outside the no-parking area. The city's old "main business district" will be supplemented, as in New York, by a host of stores and other enterprises similar districts in all parts of the city. The "congested area" will be relieved of the pressure of traffic which will be sent outside the no-parking area to cater to the automobile crowd, who constantly leave their cars downtown and who will be deterred from doing so by the ordinance. As in the case of stores, these new districts will have the advantage of cheap rents, but will be in no way inferior to the present big downtown shopping centers. The ordinance will also have the effect of creating new shopping districts already in contemplation. In such cases, the ordinance will have the effect of creating new shopping districts already in contemplation. In such cases, the ordinance will have the effect of creating new shopping districts already in contemplation.

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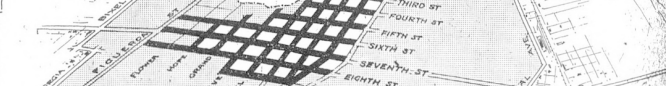
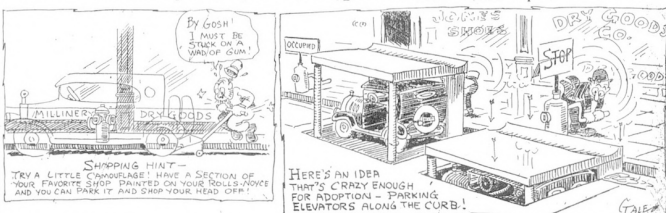
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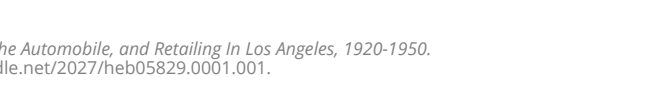
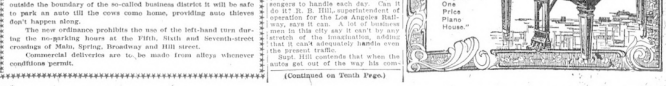
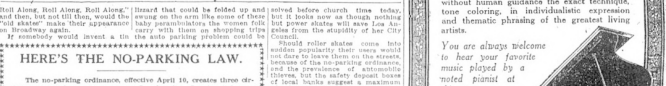
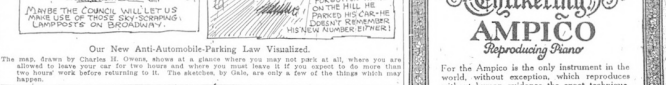
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A Few Little Prophecies for Los Angeles on and After April 10 Next.



Shaded section indicates business district outside the no parking area. Traffic on streets for two hours. Black lines show streets on which no parking will be permitted between 9:30 a. m. and 6:15 p. m.



(Continued on Page 16)

THE REEDCRAFT CO.

Our trade mark guides the way to supreme furniture satisfaction. REEDCRAFT is sold only at our shop, 939 So. Broadway.

After-Inventory Sale

High Shoes, Oxfords and Pumps
For Men, Women and Children at Extreme Reductions

Values \$10.00 to \$18.00
Now \$7.85 to \$12.85

Reductions are up to one-half less than general retail. You are "great" because of our national reputation of extraordinary value.

Men's 4 1/2 to 7 1/2... and 8
Women's 2 1/2 to 4 1/2... and 8.85

VAN DEGRIFT'S

202 SOUTH BROADWAY
224 W. THIRD STREET
719 SOUTH BROADWAY

Handmade and Finest Footwear for Men, Women and Children.

FRANK J. HART SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA MUSIC COMPANY

332-334 SOUTH BROADWAY, LOS ANGELES

Marvelous, Unbelievable!

To put a "hand-played" roll into a player-piano—or a so-called "reproducing piano"—is one thing. It is quite another thing to hear your favorite composition played by your favorite artist on the

Chickering AMPICO

Reproducing Piano

For the Ampico is the only instrument in the world without exception, which reproduces without human guidance the exact technique, tone coloring, in individualistic expression and thematic phrasing of the greatest living artists.

You are always welcome to hear your favorite music played by a noted pianist at this store.

Similarly, a second theater district will arise outside the no-parking area to cater to the matinee crowds, who customarily leave their cars downtown while attending the afternoon show. . . . These new theaters will have the advantage of cheaper sites, but will be in no wise inferior to the present big Broadway [in Los Angeles] playhouses. Such theaters are already in contemplation.²

The enormous investment represented by downtown real estate would, in short, be devastated—a dire prediction at a time when most Angelenos, like other Americans, believed that the very essence of the city in symbol and function was a great center where tall office buildings, stores, hotels, and an array of public facilities offered every conceivable product and service.

Not long after the ordinance took effect that April 10, the *Times*'s unthinkable scenario began to unfold. Street congestion was significantly reduced, but a sharp decline in banking and retail transactions also occurred. Many businessmen feared swift financial ruin, and a mounting sector of the public came to regard the ordinance as a draconian one, perpetrated by the much despised Los Angeles Railway Company to force the use of its streetcars instead of automobiles. An amendment was soon passed on April 29. Curbside parking was reinstated, now with a 45-minute limit, between 10:00 A.M. and 4:00 P.M., banning parked cars only when traffic was at its worst from 4:00 to 6:15 P.M. The *Times* admonished the council for its previous mistakes, declaring that “the only good thing that can be said for the no-parking law is that it served once and for all to demonstrate the extent to which the automobile has become a part of our every day life.” The paper quoted extensively from remarks made by Gilbert Woodill of the Motor Car Dealers Association: “What people seem slow to realize is that anything tending to speed up transportation, business or any other human activity is bound to be accepted and become absolutely essential to everyday life, even before the users themselves realize it.”³

No episode prior to that time had made Angelenos so aware of the degree to which they depended on their cars and the influence this had in shaping their city. Over the following two decades no less than in the post-World War II years, that consciousness became a central factor in the undertakings of business and real estate interests, planners, architects, and the general public in southern California. By the late 1920s, considering the motorist in the development of new areas was so commonplace as to be almost taken for granted. Ten years later, the cumulative result of this work had profoundly affected the configuration and appearance of the metropolitan area. Much of what the *Times* had foreseen in 1920 became a reality, despite the still ubiquitous presence of cars downtown. The core area was by no means “a thing of the past,” but its hegemony over the commercial life of the region was broken. Most specialized goods and services could be found in other parts of the city as well. Symbolically no less than in function the central district ceased to be of central import to the experience of many area residents.

1
“The Perils of a Parkless Town.” (*Los Angeles Times*, 29 February 1920, II-1.)

Los Angeles was hardly unique among American cities in the widespread use of the automobile and in the rapid changes that use fostered. Many other cities experienced the same kind of problems with downtown congestion and rapid dispersal of business.⁴ What distinguished Los Angeles was its newness as a major metropolis. In 1880 it had been a town of about 11,000 people. The speculative real estate boom that occurred over the ensuing decade generated a 351 percent population increase, followed by one of 103 percent during the 1890s. Still, by 1900 Los Angeles had only 102,000 inhabitants, fewer than Kansas City or Denver, less than one-third of San Francisco's, one-fifth of St. Louis's, one-tenth of Philadelphia's. Then the population increased by more than five times during the next twenty years. By 1930 the city reached fifth place among those in the United States, with over 1.2 million residents. Development of the surrounding area, inextricably tied to the city in its identity and economic life, made the figures even more impressive. Los Angeles County had over 936,000 people by 1920, 2,200,000 by 1927. The more than tenfold rise within the county limits during the first three decades of the twentieth century was by far the greatest rate of increase in any major metropolitan area of the United States at that time. In sharp contrast to other places with over one million people—New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Detroit—the shape, character, and routines of Los Angeles were primarily determined by twentieth-century forces, including the automobile.⁵

The upstart metropolis's stature stemmed not just from the number of its residents but from dramatic increases in its territory, trade, finance, and manufacture. Completion of the Owens Valley Aqueduct in 1913 ensured an ample water supply for future development, spurring annexation of the San Fernando Valley among other areas.⁶ The land encompassed by the city's corporate limits increased 300 percent during the 1910s, from 89.6 to 363.9 square miles, with another 77.8 square miles added by 1930, making Los Angeles the world's largest city in area. Development spread through incorporated and unincorporated precincts alike to encompass dozens of theretofore isolated settlements, rendering them functionally, perceptually, and often physically parts of a vast whole. These changes did not just emanate from the Los Angeles city center outward. Other communities such as Long Beach, Pasadena, and Glendale also rapidly expanded during the period.⁷

A sharp rise in the region's economic base, especially in manufacture and other forms of production, was a key stimulus both to attracting newcomers and to decentralization. By the early twentieth century, Los Angeles County led the nation in agricultural output; however, the value of manufactured goods remained relatively modest at \$15 million for the city in 1899. A concerted effort to lure industries to the region during the 1910s and 1920s, coupled with the availability of large areas of undeveloped land, abundant natural resources, and nonunion labor, contributed to altering the situation radically. By 1923, the value of manufactured goods was recorded at \$417 million for the city, \$1.2 billion for the metro-

politan area as a whole. Los Angeles ranked as the largest industrial center on the west coast and eighth in the country by the decade's end. Further impetus for industrial development came from improvements in both overland and overseas connections. The Port of Los Angeles, greatly expanded during the early twentieth century, handled almost as much freight as all other west coast ports combined, with gross tonnage transfers exceeded only by those of the Port of New York during the 1920s.⁸ Large-scale industrial expansion, decentralized from the start, coupled with a major port facility situated twenty miles south of downtown, significantly furthered the diffusion of residential growth areas.

Rapid economic development was also an underlying factor in the widespread prosperity enjoyed throughout the metropolitan area, but it was not the only cause. Unlike most large American cities, still filled with contingents of poor, foreign-born immigrants, Los Angeles was comprised overwhelmingly of U.S. natives—85 percent of the white population in 1930.⁹ Furthermore, many people came to the region after acquiring sufficient resources to enjoy the fruits of their labors. The newcomers, emphasized one observer in 1924, “had made their more or less modest stake, [and] sought not opportunity but comfort and health in a mild climate and beautiful surroundings.” Most were not rich; yet, as a journalist quipped, “Los Angeles has small use for poor people.”¹⁰ The idle life of “comfort and health” could breed restlessness. Many gained employment; others started ventures of their own; thousands invested, especially in real estate. The unusual degree of capital and skills that newcomers brought fueled the economy and fostered an optimistic, expansive mood.

A very sizable portion of the newcomers moved from central portions of the country—from northern states such as Ohio, Illinois, and Iowa, and also from southern ones such as Oklahoma and Texas. Equally important was the preponderance of this “middle-aged middle class from the Middle West” with roots in small cities, towns, and rural areas. If financial gain did not initially loom large among their goals, neither did a quest for radical change in their living patterns. The yearning to savor the fast pace, the intrigue, the cultural stimulus, or the diversity associated with most metropolises seemed noticeably less pronounced in Los Angeles. One chronicler noted that while New York held the lure of an escape from a provincial home environment, Los Angeles was often seen as a place to enrich a way of life to which one had become accustomed. The newcomer “arrives there, not out of dissatisfaction with his own, not out of a dominant conviction that he must find a new place on which to scamper untrammelled. . . . He . . . stays . . . because the physical circumstances—the climate principally—permit him to live more fully the life he has always led.” As a result, “the town is merely an overgrown boy, precocious in mechanical bent. It remains a small town in atmosphere, in outlook, in activity, in its very self-consciousness, in all those attributes that give a community character. . . . [It] has become a magnified crossing of Dubuque and Kansas City.” Thus, while one of the largest cities in the nation, Los Angeles was felt to stand quite apart from places such as New York or Chicago.¹¹

Not everyone found such an atmosphere agreeable. By the 1920s numerous critics caricatured Los Angeles as a haven for farmers and boosters, a place possessing no semblance of sophisticated culture. One of the best-known accounts of the period was written by Morrow Mayo, whose acerbic prose surely delighted eastern urbanites. Mayo cast Los Angeles as an artificial city which has been pumped up under forced draught, inflated like a balloon, stuffed with rural humanity like a goose with corn. . . . It has never imparted an urban character to its incoming population for the simple reason that it has never had an urban character to impart. On the other hand, the place has retained the manners, culture, and general outlook of a huge country village . . . of a million population, a remarkable sociological phenomenon; and that is precisely what Los Angeles is.¹²

To some observers, attitude was as much a problem as size. One account showed no mercy:

The new Greece has its own established values. What it reads in Mr. Coolidge's column is Wisdom. What it sees in the spectacular super-production is Art. The combination of these is Culture.

The new Greece is an amalgam of the Middle West and the movies—each, whether we like it or not, a dominant element in contemporary American life.¹³

Many writers admitted that “of all American cities [Los Angeles] is the easiest to poke fun at.” Yet even some of those who scorned its cultural aspirations could admit that “Los Angeles is the most ‘American’ city.” Whatever the subject of disdain, it probably could be applied to much of the nation. One observer saw virtue in Los Angeles as “the great American mirror,” asserting that “as New York is the melting-pot for the peoples of Europe, so Los Angeles is the melting-pot for the peoples of the United States.” The city “is unique by virtue of her very universality, of the fact that she is typical of us all. Nothing is so rare as a perfect type.” That type was filled with contradictions:

Its mushroom growth, its sprawling hugeness, its madcap speed, its splurge of lights and noise and color and money; and, against all this boisterous crudity, the amazing contrast of its cultured charm, its mature discrimination, its intellectual activities—this is sprung from American soil, and could come from no other. If we are a nation of extremes, Los Angeles is an extreme among us.¹⁴

By the 1920s Los Angeles was at once typical and atypical. Like any other city, it had no shortage of prosaic people bent on pursuing limited, predictable routines. It had eccentrics and banal figures, who captured more than their share of the limelight in the press. But the incessant typecasting belied the city's complex nature and, most importantly, the dynamics that made it far more than an inflated town. Southern California proved fertile ground for many persons capable of distinguished achievement—from the business figures whose cumulative endeavors became a major force in the national economy to professionals who gave Los Angeles national and international renown in fields as varied as film, architecture, and women's apparel. Even critics who assailed the local tendency to conform often focused on aspects of the city's life and landscape that resisted conformity. Angelenos in fact wanted their city to be like and unlike others at the same time.

The interplay of opposites was evident in many components of the urban fabric. The city's basic development patterns derived from well-established models, yet the scale, the combination, and an array of unconventional departures yielded results that made Los Angeles seem unique. The product often was heralded as preferable to the norm elsewhere, and often, too, had a significant influence on national practices.

SETTLEMENT

Perceived and actual differences played a major role in attracting newcomers. Accounts depicting the region as an Eden—salubrious in climate, lush in vegetation, abundant in space, dramatic in scenery, absent the crowding, the filth, the slums, the poverty, the corrupt politics, the crime associated with large American cities—had proliferated for decades. The selling of southern California as a superior place became a standard practice during the boom of the 1880s. Half a century later, the promoters' hyperbole was so integral to how visitors and residents alike viewed the region that it was widely assumed to be a self-evident truth: here even a person of modest means could settle in agreeable surroundings—very likely a house with a yard and garden—partake in an outdoor life amid almost perpetual sunshine, and still have all the amenities of a city. For many, Los Angeles was the essence of the American dream.

In southern California the dream was realized on a large scale. Carey McWilliams, outspoken in deriding what he considered the prevailing parochial aura, nonetheless saw merit in Los Angeles as the least cityfied of American cities—a place that was “neither city nor country, but everywhere a mixture of both.”¹⁵ What made the region so unusual in this respect was not the particulars of its urban form but the extent of low-density settlement. Newcomers could tour the metropolitan area for days and see the freestanding house as the predominant residential type. Ample space existed in which to build more. In 1930 over 50 percent of the lots in the county remained vacant, and vast acreage had yet to be platted. The opportunities for development seemed limitless. The ways in which this space was used reflected both the prosperity of the populace and the time in which expansion took place. Occurring at a rate experienced decades earlier by most large cities, Los Angeles's growth during the early twentieth century was shaped by new forms of transportation. Widespread use of the streetcar beginning in the 1880s, then of the automobile beginning in the 1910s, induced low-density development. As a result, the number of persons per square mile was markedly smaller than in other places of equivalent size.¹⁶

The freestanding, single-family house dominated the landscape of Los Angeles as it did no other American metropolis, continuing a pattern established well before 1900 when the community functioned more as a seasonal retreat.¹⁷ By 1930, single-family residences comprised 93 percent of the city's residential buildings, almost twice that in Chicago and sur-

passing those found in Philadelphia and Washington. Well under half as many families lived in apartment buildings as in houses despite the substantial increase in multiple-unit construction during the 1920s. At the decade's end, single-family houses stood on more than 60 percent of all occupied lots within the city limits.¹⁸

Equally important to the character of the area's residential districts was the sense of openness they imparted. Attached dwellings were almost nonexistent. Many houses were low in mass, containing one or one and a half stories. Yards tended to be more generously dimensioned than those common to large eastern or midwestern cities; so were setbacks. Lots with a 40 to 50-foot frontage and a 130 to 150-foot depth were the norm in many parts of the city. Except in a few concentrated areas, apartment buildings were modest in scale and scattered intermittently, even along arterial routes, rather than forming the dense corridors characteristic of numerous major urban areas of the period. Many had a few units on two levels set off by a sizable yard on at least one side. The ambience projected by these tracts was much like that of a small city or town in one of the central states whence so many newcomers came—no doubt a key reason Los Angeles was so stereotyped by outsiders. The vastness far more than the character of its domestic territory differentiated Los Angeles from communities in the heartland (figure 2).¹⁹

Among the most striking contrasts between residential areas of Los Angeles and those of most other large cities was afforded by the tracts of workers' housing developed to serve the large, decentralized industrial districts, begun after the first world war, that lay to the east and south of the city center. In communities such as South Gate, Maywood, Belvedere,



WHERE WILL THE WORKERS LIVE?

LOS ANGELES is fast becoming an industrial metropolis. During the present year more than sixty industries a month have come. Eighth city of the nation today in value of manufactured products, Los Angeles ten years from today will be third...according to accepted authorities. Hundreds of thousands of workers with their families will make their homes here.

Where will these workers live? The factories are coming to the East Side. Will the workers live there, or will they live in the residential districts of the West Side?

Even should they wish to live on the West Side, it would be utterly impracticable for them to do so. It is ten miles from the Union Pacific and Central Manufacturing Districts to suitable and uncrowded residential areas on the other side of town. This is too far for a worker to go by street car every morning and every evening of the year.

If he tries to go by automobile, he will have to traverse the business section of downtown Los Angeles where traffic conditions are becoming worse every day. During the congested morning and evening rush, it would take at least an hour—probably more—to make the trip from the factory to any appropriate residential district on the West Side.

Under these conditions, it is reasonable to conclude that the bulk of these workers will live on the East Side—as close to their places of employment as they can find desirable homesites. There they will not have to spend time and money traveling back and forth. There they can enjoy their leisure hours happily at home.

By all odds, the most desirable living place on the East Side from the standpoint of general accessibility, beauty of locality, nearness to the industrial districts and advanced modern development is

Montebello Park

J. B. RANSOM ORGANIZATION • NATIONAL CITY BANK BUILDING, LOS ANGELES • Phone TRinity 9391

2
Residential area, Hollywood district, Los Angeles, looking southeast from Rosemore and Rosewood avenues. Photo C. C. Pierce, ca. late 1920s. (California Historical Society Collection, Department of Special Collections, University of Southern California.)

3
“Where Will the Workers Live?” Montebello Park advertisement. (*Los Angeles Times*, 24 May 1925, V-4.)

and Montebello, the freestanding house set in a verdant yard along a quiet street, rather than the tenement or flat, became the standard. Realtors promoted the difference strenuously and sometimes with élan (figure 3). Yet the idyllic image advertised often did not stray far from the actuality. A significant portion of the skilled blue-collar populace could live much like their white-collar counterparts—more modestly but otherwise in the same mode, partaking of a spacious environment, tied to municipal services, often agreeably removed from the workplace, commuting by streetcar or by automobile.²⁰

Patterns of residential development and automobile use acquired a symbiotic relationship by the early 1920s. As Los Angeles grew into a major city, maintaining a high percentage of single-family houses and modestly scaled neighborhoods necessitated a reliance on cars for routine transportation. Southern Californians' early acceptance of motor vehicles gave impetus to yet further decentralization. As the automobile began to play an integral role in people's lives, real estate interests were forced to make hard decisions in meeting the appetite for buildable land. The region's municipal and intercity streetcar systems had created the initial matrix for de-



centralization between the 1880s and 1910s by extending over much of the Los Angeles basin. The size of this network now led to its obsolescence as the primary carrier. Streetcar line construction incurred so great a debt by 1914 that scant capital could be raised either for expanding lines or for building new ones.²¹ Limited funds, combined with what seemed to be unending operational problems, fueled public dislike for the Los Angeles Municipal Railway in particular. During the 1920s many Angelenos came to see mass transit as a nuisance more than a transportation lifeline. The *Times* and other influential organs repeatedly cast streetcars as relics whose demise would not be mourned (figure 4).²²

Before World War I, real estate development was closely tied to the streetcar in Los Angeles no less than in other cities; yet by the decade's end, many of the choicest locations, convenient to streetcar lines, had been consumed. To meet the swelling demand for housing during the 1920s, two basic options were available. Established areas could be more densely developed, but the cost would be high and the process difficult, especially as most of the building stock was of recent vintage. The results

would destroy the openness that made the region so appealing and would rely on a disliked mode of transportation. The other choice was to continue to build at a low density by breaking the bond between land subdivision and rail transit. Scores of developers did just that by the early 1920s, opening tracts distant from existing streetcar lines.²³ The abundance of vacant land combined with the soaring market afforded ample temptation to initiate such projects, despite the risks. The proliferation of these tracts indicated that a substantial number of people were in fact willing to drive on a daily basis.

AUTOMOBILES

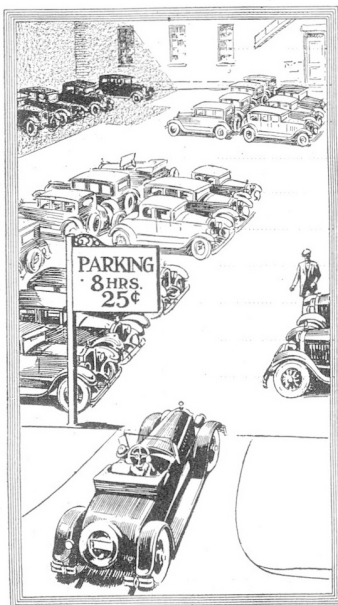
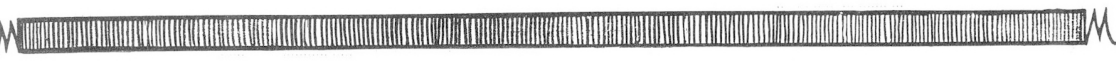
"The automobile," proclaimed one local car dealer in 1921, "is 10 per cent pleasure, 90 per cent utility and 100 per cent necessity." His perspective, while clearly biased, was not much of an exaggeration. Growth in car ownership ranked among the most striking of many such trends in Los Angeles. Countywide, automobile registrations soared from about 16,000 in 1910 to 110,000 in 1918; by 1923 they had increased by another 300 percent to 430,000; and several years later more cars were registered in the county than in any one of thirty-nine states. One car existed for every 8.2 Angelenos in 1915 (compared with one for every 61 Chicagoans and one for 43.1 people nationwide). By 1920 the ratio stood at one for every 3.6 Angelenos (versus 30 Chicagoans or 13.1 people nationwide), an average

4

"More Rerouting," editorial cartoon by Gale. (*Los Angeles Times*, 11 May 1920, II-1.)

5

"Madam—how do YOU get around?" advertisement for *Los Angeles Times* want ads. (*Los Angeles Times*, 8 May 1928, I-14.) Copyright 1928, Los Angeles Times. Reprinted by permission.



Madam—how do YOU get around?

Nine-thirty in the morning. The family car somewhere downtown. A day's round of marketing, social duties, club meetings . . . What a comfort--what economy--to have a car for yourself! And why not? Excellent used cars, ideal for women drivers, are offered by local dealers at prices and terms that enable any average family to enjoy two cars instead of one. And Times Want Ads show you the choicest, selected offerings. Dealers advertising in *The Times* welcome feminine car buyers. You are assured considerate service, help in making a wise selection--and you will be given courteous demonstrations without being urged to buy. Study the used car columns in today's *Times*--if hubby cannot go with you, go by yourself and ask for a demonstration of any car advertised in

- Times Want Ads
World's Greatest Want Ad Service



that was maintained with minor variations throughout the decade.²⁴ Thus the two-car family became a common feature of the region shortly after World War I. A budding used-car market was bolstered by married women constrained by family budgets yet determined to have a car of their own (figure 5).²⁵ The practice of wage earners driving to work while their spouses drove to conduct errands and other everyday pursuits was not unusual. Everyone drove for pleasure as well. The habits of retired newcomers were vividly portrayed in one period account:

After almost a lifetime of gruelling hardship and toil they have enough to live in what they deem luxury for the remainder of their days, and they are making the most of it. They drive, drive, drive in lusty holiday fury—to the beach, to Hollywood, to anywhere or nowhere, as a carousel ceaselessly circles. They fill the streets, gaping at the sights; they “eat out,” an unspeakable luxury to the women after years of making pies and “baking hens” for the harvest crew; they rush for every sensational amusement, whether it be the pre-view of a hair-raising film, Peaches Browning in vaudeville, Aimee Semple McPherson’s Sunday service, or the Ostrich farm. . . . The incessant craze for driving seems to epitomize the whole psychological situation.²⁶

Numerous factors contributed to southern California’s national leadership in automobile use. The prosperity enjoyed by the established and incoming populace alike was a central cause. Many newcomers had already acquired the automotive habit in their towns and rural areas of former residence, where routine driving was easier than in cities. The move to Los Angeles after World War I was frequently accomplished by car, constituting what Carey McWilliams described as “the first migration of the automobile age.”²⁷ Climate further encouraged use. At a time when many cars were still open to the elements, mild weather the year round was conducive to ongoing rather than seasonal driving. The array of places one could reach without difficulty further shaped motoring patterns. Miles of wide, straight boulevards were being extended like a sectional grid, more or less concurrently with new development. During the 1920s, the Los Angeles street network was considered among the best in the United States. Aggressive public works campaigns greatly added to the infrastructure; 300 to 500 miles’ worth of street improvements annually was not unusual. By 1927, the city engineering department proclaimed that, if laid end to end, improved streets would reach Chicago.²⁸ As a result, motorists traversed distances in the metropolitan area with relative ease as long as they avoided the city center. The eleven-mile drive, for example, from the Silver Lake district, four miles north of downtown, to Westwood, near Santa Monica, could be accomplished without hurrying in about thirty minutes—less time than is now required with the freeway system.²⁹ Whether for business or pleasure, such areawide trips became commonplace.

The direct correlation between driving habits and urban form was recognized locally at an early date. Gordon Whitnall, director of the Los Angeles City Planning Department and an advocate of decentralization, stressed to members of the Municipal League in 1927 that the impact of driving was already widespread. The advent of the automobile occurred

when cities [in southern California] also were new . . . before [they] became stereotyped. Cities began to grow with the automobile. Instead of the automobile conforming . . . to the limitations of the cities, the cities began to conform . . . to the necessities and services of the automobile. That is the BIG thing that has happened here in the Southland. It has just begun.

Here for the first time in history, the efficient travel radius of the individual has been stretched. . . . So prevalent is the use of the motor vehicle here that it might almost be said that Southern Californians have added wheels to their anatomy . . . that our population has become FLUID.³⁰

Well before that time, local realtors began to view the automobile not just as an agent in broadening the geographic limits of development but as an index to the most preferable forms of development in new and old areas alike. In 1922, a member of the real estate community observed: “Economists agree that there is perhaps no better indicator of the purchasing power . . . and . . . the wealth of the community, than the number of automobiles.”³¹

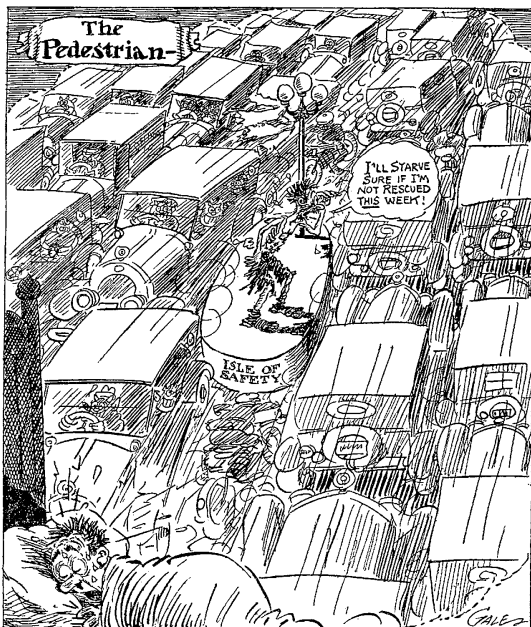
The proliferation of cars exacted a toll as well. Pedestrians downtown had to battle a seemingly endless stream of automobiles and trucks as well as electric rail cars. Since car tracks lay in the middle of the street, passengers were forced to scurry across one or more lanes of moving vehicles to get to the curb (figure 6). At a time when traffic controls were new in the city center and almost nonexistent elsewhere, pedestrians in outlying areas also found the new torrent of automobiles unpleasant and sometimes dangerous (figure 7).

Motorists, too, encountered frustrations. No matter how extensive, street improvements never seemed to keep pace with demand. The long distances many motorists drove to work imposed burdens on the city’s thoroughfares during peak commuting periods. A large share of public

6
“Popular Nightmares, No. 1,” editorial cartoon by Gale. (*Los Angeles Times*, 26 January 1924, I-1.)

7
“The Pedestrian’s Nightmare,” editorial cartoon. (*Hollywood Daily Citizen*, 11 August 1927, 12.)

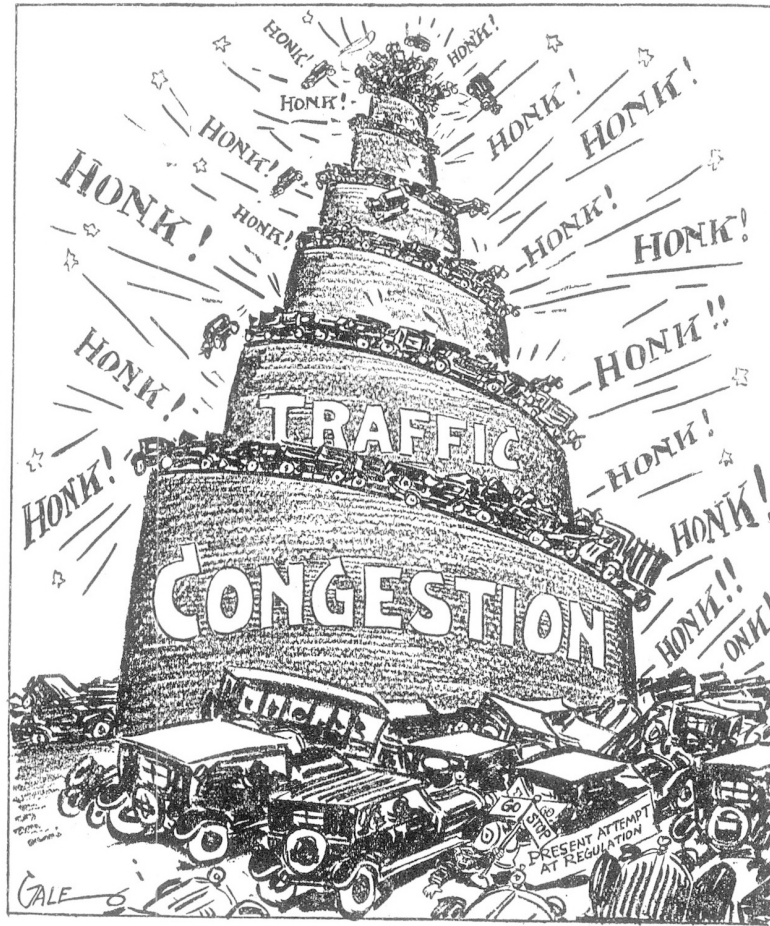
Popular Nightmares - - - - - No. 1



The Modern Tower of Babel

AUTOMOBILES

16



8

"The Modern Tower of Babel," editorial cartoon by Gale. (*Los Angeles Times*, 13 December 1923, II-1.)

works allocations went to straightening, widening, realigning, and creating new streets as well as to constructing bridges and tunnels—all to foster access to downtown. Still, the volume of traffic mounted at a formidable rate. In 1920, an estimated 22,000 cars entered the city center and its immediate environs between six in the morning and eight in the evening on a given work day. Four years later, well over ten times that number entered the business district during a twenty-four-hour period—fully three quarters of the total number of cars then registered in Los Angeles County. The number of persons commuting by automobile was almost as great as that using public transportation.³² For adults, most of whom remembered cities without cars and for whom streets with only a few cars at any time of day remained a recent memory, traffic conditions assumed an apocalyptic aura (figure 8). Most of Los Angeles was a motorist's paradise, but downtown the perils were real and abundant.

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Longstreth, Richard W. *City Center to Regional Mall: Architecture, the Automobile, and Retailing In Los Angeles, 1920-1950*. E-book, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1998, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb05829.0001.001>. Downloaded on behalf of 3.145.15.148

II

THE PROBLEM SOLVED

The growth of traffic problems associated with downtown Los Angeles during the 1920s was a source of widespread concern. Despite the enormous territorial spread of the metropolitan area, despite the diffuse, low-density character of residential development, despite the fact that outside chroniclers scarcely took notice, the city structure retained strong centralized characteristics. Downtown continued as the focus of major business activities, except in the industrial sphere, and attracted by far the greatest flow of vehicles. No other part of the metropolis began to challenge this hegemony until the decade's end, and even then few business leaders could envision a time when downtown's dominance might cease.

Automobile trips to and from downtown Los Angeles became so numerous in the decade after World War I in part because of the exponential increase of motorists who used their cars to commute, but also because the district grew at an even faster pace. The 1920s comprised the most intense period of the downtown's development, rendering it one of the largest in the nation. At the same time, the structure remained that of the typical large, centralized city, forming an intensely used, compact area, little of which was given to ground-level circulation. As more automobiles entered the city center, space for them came at an ever greater premium.

"The problem solved" was one of many entrepreneurial claims made during the 1920s regarding the mounting perils of a parkless town. In this case, the purported solution was to build a series of immense office