

American Society of Civil Engineers, San Diego Section
Historic Civil Engineering Landmark
SAN DIEGO ELECTRIC RAILWAY



Story and Photos by Phil Kern



During the Great Land Boom of the 1880s, many railroad and street car companies sprang up in San Diego to move people and goods around town, there was even a cable car system for a short time. These companies just as quickly disappeared when the boom was over, with San Diego's population declining from over 40,000 to about 16,000 in just a few years.

John D. Spreckels was there to pick up the pieces of these bankrupt rail companies,

and expand his original investment into one of the premier light rail networks of the period. Sugar millionaire Spreckels first visited San Diego in July 1887 to replenish supplies on his yacht, and made his first investments in the area during that time. By 1888 he already controlled interests in a local coal franchise, real estate, ice manufacturing, water supply, hotel operations, ferry and rail companies. The latter included the *Coronado Beach Railroad*. Spreckels later made Coronado his permanent home after the chaos of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake.

In November 1891, the *San Diego Electric Railway Company* was incorporated. Spreckels main partners were, as in many of his ventures, his brother Adolf B. Spreckels and Elisha S. Babcock, developer of Coronado. By January 1892 SDE Ry. Co. had acquired the 8-1/2 miles of track and other assets of the horse-drawn and now bankrupt *San Diego Street Car Company*, in addition to trackage for several other defunct railroads, and began converting them to electric power. The street car network at that time extended from the Coronado ferry landing, to Logan Heights on the south, Golden Hill on the east and Laurel Street on the north.

Rail operations centered around the powerhouse, car house and shops building located at the northwest corner of Arctic St. (now Kettner Blvd.) and E Street. Power was generated by three coal-fired boilers driving a 300 hp Risdon-Corliss steam engine turning two 100 kW DC generators. The car house had room for 22 cars, principally open platform, wood bodied, single truck, 15 hp versions built by J.G. Brill Co.



Into the 1900s, J.D. and his partners continued to invest, expand and upgrade the system, the Coronado service being upgraded along with the San Diego lines. "Investment" in this case typically included eliminating the competition and acquiring their rail assets at a hefty discount at receivers' auctions, and sometimes including developable land concessions. One potential competitor even had to buy their electricity from Spreckel's companies just to operate.

By the end of World War I in 1919 the San Diego Electric Railway system extended from National City to Old Town, and from the Hotel del Coronado via the ferry to the eastern city limits (at that time roughly where Interstate 805 is today) and was continuing to be expanded towards Mission Beach, Ocean Beach, La Jolla and Point Loma. It also served Balboa Park, site of the 1915 Panama-California Exposition. During this period SDERy. Co. was building their own "California" design car bodies at their shops, and they also constructed a completely new powerplant with new boilers totaling 800 hp and featuring new 550V DC motor-generator sets with 2,150 hp. On New Year's Day 1921, the entire generating plant was sold to San Diego Consolidated



Gas & Electric Company and SDERC purchased their power from then on. The shell of this building survives today at the southwest corner of Kettner & Broadway. A new car house was also constructed between Imperial Avenue and L Street, it has long been demolished but the site still serves transit purposes as MTS' downtown bus yard. A second 100 car barn was also constructed on Adams Avenue at Florida Street to serve the northern reaches of track.

John Diedrich Spreckels passed on June 7, 1926, the value of his holdings in San Diego at the time was estimated at \$25 million. His son Claus had been appointed VP and GM of the street car and ferry companies in 1922, and J.D.'s other financial interests had included the Mission Beach Plunge, the San Diego Union, San Diego Tribune, North Island, Southern California Mountain Water Company, San Diego and Arizona Railroad and, of course, the Spreckels Building and Theatre on Broadway. Claus was sent packing shortly after J.D.'s death by other financial partners and thus began the long slow decline of the Spreckels empire, and along with it the trolley system. Ridership fell off during the Depression, buses started replacing trolleys, more people had private automobiles and the street car lines were abandoned and paved over as the customer base evaporated. May 31st, 1947 was the last day of operation for the SDERy. Co. as the Public Utilities Commission had approved a complete conversion to buses, and the sale of the company's remaining assets in March 1948 closed the book completely. A modern version of the San Diego Trolley was later constructed and returned to service in 1981 between San Diego and San Ysidro by the San Diego Metropolitan Transit Development Board (now SDMTS).