

HONOLULU'S FIRST ELECTRIC RAILWAY*

by

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An electric railway that once operated on Pacific Heights in the early 1900's is now history, and only a few living persons remember its operation. A record of this enterprise appeared in Thrum's Annual for 1900, which said of Charles S. Desky and his real estate developments:

The Kaimuki addition and Pacific Heights tracts are attracting a number of selectors, and desirable residences are in course of construction in both of these sections....Main roads and streets have also been constructed, and the Pacific Heights enterprise promises Honolulu its first electric road in the course of a few weeks, to be followed by the construction of an elegant hotel, plans of which are completed.¹

Additional information about the building of the electric railway came in the Hawaiian Gazette of November 13, 1900:

The installation of the Pacific Heights electric railway during the past week deserves more than passing notice. It marks the opening of a new era for Honolulu in more ways than one.

It is the first electric passenger road in Hawaii. As such it is the forerunner of a system which before many months, will stretch out from the City center in every direction....

Mr. Desky is to be congratulated upon the successful inauguration of a large enterprise for one man to undertake to handle. The community should show their appreciation of his pluck by liberally patronizing the road, at the same time they will be getting more than they pay for.

The actual date of the first passenger run of the cars may have been on November 30, 1900, for the Honolulu Advertiser of that day in 1940, quoting from "our files of 40 years ago", said: "Today regular trips will be made over the Pacific Heights electric railway. The fare is five cents each way."

On November 8, 1900, the Pacific Commercial Advertiser reported:

The gong of the electric street car will now be heard regularly on the new Pacific Heights road.

Yesterday Mr. Desky, promoter of Pacific Heights suburb, had the satisfaction of taking a ride in the first electric car to make the trip up and down the track.

The system is the forerunner of a network of electric railroad tracks which will soon traverse many of the most important streets of the city. There was no trouble in making the round trip, either with the cars themselves or in the application of the electric current.

A regular time schedule will be established shortly.

*In a letter to the editor of the HHR dated March 29, 1965, Mr. Jardin says:

"The Jardin family lived in lower Pauoa from 1896 to 1902, when we moved to Upper Nuuanu. The home was probably no more than 50 yards from the powerhouse, and I remember very clearly being aboard on the first passenger run in November, 1900."

And on November 21, 1900, the Advertiser carried a more detailed article on the subject. It began thus: "The Pacific Heights electric railway was running last night and quite a crowd enjoyed the novelty of a ride in the handsome cars...." Mr. Desky was reported as saying that the decision to build an electric railway was the result of economics and an expediency for the residents of the Heights.

The passenger cars had been built by the Holman Car Co. of San Francisco and were equipped with two No. 49 thirty-five-horsepower motors each.

Mr. Desky continued:

On November 7th, a little less than six months after start of construction, the first car was run over the line for a distance of about two miles....About midway on the line we have a turnout, which allows of the passage of cars ascending and descending....

Although the road is still incomplete, the demand for pleasure riding has already taxed the capacity of the cars, and it would appear that at least two or possibly three more would be required to meet the demand upon the road....

The steam power equipment came from the firm of C.C. Moore & Co., San Francisco.

As stated before, the road has not been thrown open to the public, although a great many have availed themselves of the very moderate cost of travel, five cents each way, which low rate of fare, I hope to be able to maintain, so as to make Pacific Heights a popular and attractive place of resort, as well as of residence....

We shall endeavor to run every half hour afternoon and evenings and all day Sunday. The lighting up of the Heights in the evening will indicate that the cars are being operated, and people may ride over the road until 9 o'clock.

The Hawaiian Annual for 1901 gave further information about the venture:

To C.S. Desky belongs the credit of establishing Honolulu's first electric road in connection with his Pacific Heights property.

It is now in successful operation, having a well appointed electric plant, supplying light to his tract and Kaiulani Boulevard. The road will likely be connected later with the Rapid [Transit] system.

This latter concern is progressing, their power house and car shed being in course of construction, with the machinery all on the ground. The laying of street rails began early in November.²

The following year the same publication reported: "Another pleasant drive to a commanding point is around Punchbowl, an extinct volcano some 500 feet high, just back of the city, or, a trip by the electric cars up Pacific Heights slope, between Nuuanu and Pauoa Valleys, to the site of Desky's proposed hotel at an elevation of about 800 feet."³

The power house which provided the electric power for the trolley cars was a substantial structure. It stood at the foot of Pacific Heights Road and junction of Booth Road, where the present mauka section of the overpass of Pali Highway and Pauoa Road is. The power house was on the ewa side of the street, and the car shed (or station) was on the opposite side, adjacent to Booth Road. The two electric trolley cars were of the early Rapid Transit variety, with open sides and running boards. Of approximately 30-passenger capacity, they employed a single operator.

Mr. Desky was a vigorous and energetic man who early envisioned a spur of the road across the Nuuanu Stream, down to the junction of Nuuanu and Bates Streets. Records at the Archives of Hawaii dated March 20, 1901, give the legal opinion of the then attorney general, E.P. Dole, to Governor Sanford B. Dole, relative to the

application of Charles S. Desky for permission to cross certain public lands for the purpose of connecting his electric railway with Nuuanu Street. The application was "...to purchase or lease a strip of land about 840 feet in length and 30 feet in width, beginning upon Nuuanu Street, near the terminal of the Hawaiian Tramways line, and extending to the Nuuanu Stream, along the lines indicated..." The opinion of the attorney general concludes: "I think it might be wise, if it is practicable, to seek a decision of the Supreme Court rather than to rely solely upon the opinion of the Attorney General."

Construction of the spur had a double purpose--first, as a convenience for the residents of Pacific Heights, and second, to attract more passengers for the scenic ride. In time the addition, 840 feet long, was built. It started a short distance above the power house, crossed the Nuuanu Stream and came down to Nuuanu Street opposite Bates Street. Before long a dance pavilion was put up at the top of the Heights; here dancing was held twice weekly, usually on Wednesday and Saturday nights. The eves of recognized holidays were also dance nights.

This article would be incomplete did it not include mention of Charles W. Booth, who at one time was the owner of nearly all of Pauoa Valley and Pacific Heights. Mr. Booth contributed much to the legend of Pacific Heights and Desky's electric railway. He built a lovely mansion on the Heights. It was later destroyed by fire, but was rebuilt, and Booth continued to live there. The Advertiser of July 26, 1910, carried an obituary noting that Charles W. Booth, born in Hawaii, had died suddenly at his Pacific Heights home the day before.

And on October 1, 1924, the Honolulu Advertiser printed this short account of the passing of Mr. Desky in San Francisco:

Charles S. Desky, once prominently identified with real estate in Honolulu, who built the Progress Block and other buildings, was found dead in his bed in a hotel opposite the Stewart Hotel, San Francisco, about a week ago....

Desky left here about seven or eight years ago after a residence of more than a quarter of a century....

He purchased Pacific Heights from the late Charles W. Booth, laid it out into building lots and built an electric railway up the slopes to the site he proposed for a modern hotel.

The railway was a tourist attraction. On steamer days the cars were always loaded with sightseers. The road, however, fell into disuse and finally was taken out.

The exact date of the shut-down of operation of the electric railway appears to have been unrecorded. No official paper can be found other than this small item obtained from the Hawaii Department of Regulatory Agencies: "It was a very old partnership known as the Pacific Heights Electric Railway Co., Ltd. The corporation was formed on January 4, 1902, and was dissolved on December 15, 1915, for non-filing of corporation reports." The few people who still remember the operation of the electric railway say it was discontinued toward the latter part of 1906.

It is the general belief that the trolley cars of Honolulu Rapid Transit ran before those of Mr. Desky, but official records show that the Pacific Heights cars were in operation on November 21, 1900, while the first Rapid Transit trolley made its initial run on Hotel Street on Saturday, August 31, 1901.

During the early boom of Pacific Heights and the electric railway, someone perpetrated a hoax on the public that added further excitement. Several gallons of black, crude oil had been spread around the base of a rock cropping in a slight depression to give it the appearance of an oil field. Word then got out that OIL had been discovered on the Heights, and literally thousands from all parts of Honolulu came to see.

As in many hoaxes, the disappointed victims were ashamed to admit their gullibility and so encouraged others to visit the spectacle. It was several weeks before the joke died down, and even then only a few would confess that the affair was a fraud.

The reader may wonder what Pacific Heights looked like before Mr. Desky started building his electric railway. That part of the slope toward the city was gentle, with many patches of guava trees, kalu bushes and stands of cactus (panini). There were no large or tall trees up to the summit until where the kukui nut, ohia and koa trees started along the ridge to the Ko'olau range.

Cutting of Kaiulani Drive (also called Kaiulani Boulevard) but now known as Pacific Heights Road, was a manual pick-and-shovel operation as power shovels, bulldozers and other modern road equipment had not yet been designed. Blasting with dynamite was the order of the day, and the pick-and-shovel crew did the rest, even loading the horse-drawn trucks and dump carts. Steam rollers were coal-burning but quite efficient.

With the gradual building of residences on the Heights, it was natural to have trees--mostly ornamental and wind breakers. Most of the pine trees along the slope toward Nuuanu Valley came some years before the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930's, but the latter helped in the reforestation of that part of the Heights as we see it today.

It is almost impossible to pinpoint the former locations of the power house, the Booth residence and the dance pavilion, since almost the entire Heights has been built up as Mr. Desky envisioned it--a residential district of scenic loveliness. The short drive up the slopes of the site of Hawaii's first electric railway will be a rewarding experience for anyone who is interested in the history and beauty of Honolulu.

NOTES

1. "Retrospect for 1899," p. 160. The proposed hotel did not materialize, however.
2. "Retrospect for 1900," p. 176. What is now Pacific Heights Road was originally called Kaiulani Drive, and was a little over two miles long.
3. "Information for Tourists and Others," Hawaiian Annual, 1902, p. 173.