

# CABLE CARS

## San Francisco's Beloved Thingamabobs

Ever ride a national landmark?

It's being done every day in San Francisco.

The city's right-out-of-the-Smithsonian cable cars were named a national historic landmark in February, 1964 by the U.S. Interior Department's National Park Service. It couldn't have happened to a happier institution.

The only vehicles of their kind in the world today are over a century old. The city celebrated their 100th birthday with a 10-day jubilee in August, 1973.

In September, 1982 it was obliged to put them in mothballs. Engineering studies showed that after 109 years of service the motorless carriages' propulsion system had deteriorated beyond repair. To rebuild it would cost \$60 million and take, at best, 20 months.

When it became known that the cable cars' survival was at stake sympathizers all over the world sent in contributions to save them. San Franciscans raised \$10 million from the private sector to qualify for public funding. The federal government provided \$46.5 millions and the state \$3.6 million.

Residents and commuters paid an additional price: Nearly two years of bone-jarring traffic disruption. In an operation likened to open heart surgery, nine miles and 69 blocks of street were torn up section by section to make way for new cables, tracks, turntables and utility lines. Meanwhile, the "Toonervilles" themselves were renovated.

Finally, in mid-1984, the ordeal was over. Crowds lined the tracks; bands played; helicopters hovered; TV cameras whirred. At noon a thunderous cheer went up as, bells clanging, banners and bunting flying, the jaunty centenarians paraded into another century of service.

Before they could make their comeback, the cable cars' control center at Washington and Mason Streets also had to be rebuilt. The building's circa 1907 red brick walls and distinctive smokestack were preserved, its roof, interior and machinery replaced.

The Cable Car Museum, Powerhouse and Car Barn, as it's officially known, contains the complicated winding gear which plays out and reels in the cable cars' lifelines — 11 miles of wrapped steel "rope" 1 3/8 inches in diameter — at a steady 9 1/2 miles per hour. The barn also houses three vintage cable cars, including the original launched in 1873; scale models of some of the 57 types of cable cars which once operated in the city, and other memorabilia. From its mezzanine gallery, visitors can look down on the great throbbing winders which thread the cable through big figure 8's and back into the system via slack-absorbing tension racks. From a new, glass-enclosed room below decks, they can watch the cable passing through saucer-like sheaves to the streets. Visiting hours are from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily, free.

Forty cable cars are stabled in the barn — 28 of the "single-enders" which ply the two Powell Street routes and 12 of the "double-enders" which serve California Street. The former have one set of grips and are reversed on turntables; the latter have grips fore and aft, permitting them to move in either direction. One token green and cream "single-ender" remains in service. The rest have been repainted burgundy with gold, ivory and blue accents.

At the height of the summer season the cables emanating from the Washington-Mason plant haul up to 26 motorless carriages at one time. The fleet carries 12 1/2 million passengers a year, over 60 percent of whom are tourists. The cars seat 35 and have a capacity of from 70 to 80 — hypothetically, that is, because San Franciscans have long looked upon their uncommon carriers as elastic.

To make a cloud-hopper go, the celestial navigator, or gripman, as he's commonly called, pulls back on a lever which closes a pincer-like "grip" on the endless cable

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*At the foot of San Francisco's Hyde Street, ocean-going liners and tugs pass within a stone's throw of the city's trademark cable cars. The rolling museum piece is bound for its turntable at Victorian Park. The SS Arcadia is bound for her berth at the Embarcadero. In the background is Alcatraz. (photo by Ted Needam courtesy of San Francisco Convention & Visitors Bureau)*

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kept constantly moving in its slot 18 inches below the street. Wherever the car lines cross, the gripman must "drop rope" and coast across; otherwise he'll tie up another line. He also tends the hand brake and foot brake and dings the brass bell. The conductor has to collect fares, make change and issue transfers, usually in sardine-like conditions, and lends a hand with the rear truck brake on the steeper grades. It's strenuous work.

As the operators of the nation's only moving landmarks, cable car gripmen and conductors constitute something of an elite corps among public transit personnel. Seventy-one percent of those who returned after the shutdown are veterans of the system. Quite a few have become local institutions in their own right, demonstrating a flair for showmanship and a special brand of badinage for the out-of-town trade.

To some space age skeptics, 9½ miles and hour may not seem like a breathtaking speed. But anyone who's taken a 90-degree turn or plunged down a near-perpendicular hill at that clip knows it can be positively gasp-provoking. Otherwise, cable car conductors wouldn't feel obliged to holler, "Curve. Hold on!" and "Heeeeere we go!" at nose-dive time.

The grade is 17 percent where the Powell Street cars plummet over the brink of Nob Hill at California Street and even steeper — 21 percent — along the Hyde Street line between Chestnut and Lombard. There's no real cause for trepidation, though. The cable cars have three braking devices, the most conclusive of which drives three pieces of steel into the cable slot and may have to be dislodged by a welding crew if applied.

There's no better way of sampling San Francisco's sweeping vistas than by cable car. The Powell-Mason line leads from the corner of Powell and Market Streets in the heart of the shopping district up over Nob Hill and down again into the colorful hubbub of Fisherman's Wharf. The Powell-Hyde line — the most spectacular from the standpoint of vertical and lateral "zigzags" — runs from the same downtown intersection up over Nob and Russian Hills to its turntable in Victorian Park on the northern waterfront. San Francisco's Maritime Museum, a flotilla of historic exhibition ships and The Cannery and Ghirardelli Square shopping-restaurant complexes are less than a block away. The midtown route, stretching from the foot of California Street in the financial district to Van Ness Avenue, cuts through Chinatown and breasts Nob Hill.

The cable cars are part of the Municipal Railway's 700-mile public transit network. A ride on a rolling museum piece costs \$1. The fare on Muni motorcoaches, trolley buses and LRVs is 60¢. Passengers transferring to a cable car pay a 40¢ supplement. The cables hum from 6 a.m. until 1 a.m.

Mrs. O'Leary's cow is blamed for the Chicago fire of 1871. The sad plight of some overworked horses is said to have inspired the invention of the cable car. The inventor was Andrew S. Hallidie, a London-born engineer and metal rope manufacturer. In 1869 Hallidie reportedly came upon a team of four struggling to haul a heavily-loaded

horsecar up a steep San Francisco street. One horse slipped on the rain-slick cobbles, and the car rolled back, dragging the four beasts behind it. Hallidie vowed to put a stop to this kind of cruelty.

"Hallidie's Folly" made its maiden run four years later at 5 a.m. on August 1, 1873 from the top of Clay Street down Nob Hill's precipitous east side. The town was asleep. But a crowd witnessed the first public descent that afternoon. As one flummoxed onlooker is reputed to have exclaimed, "The damned thing worked!" It worked so well that by 1880 there were eight lines operating along 122 miles of cable in San Francisco, and the quaint contraptions were to be found in many other large cities.

San Francisco's beloved thingamabobs have had their ups and downs, figuratively as well as literally. There have been repeated moves to abolish the cable cars and replace them with more economical motor coaches, each frustrated by an indignant populace. The last major clash with the efficiency experts came in 1947 when a resolute Citizens' Committee was mobilized under the leadership of Mrs. Friedel Klussmann to "Save the Cable Cars" and did.

As substantiated by the system's \$60 million rehabilitation, the toy trams' future is now secure. A proviso guaranteeing perpetuation of the three existing cable car lines was written into the City Charter in 1955. This mandate can be neither revoked nor amended without the approval of a majority of San Francisco's voters.

And who but a Scrooge would ballot to banish them? ■

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