

12 BIRMINGHAM ELECTRIC CO.

“The Last Hurrah for Birmingham’s Streetcars”



↑ TIMELESS BEAUTY – The automobiles and trucks in this late-1940’s photo clearly have styling from a bygone era, but PCC #801 still looks sleek and streamlined despite the passage of over half a century. No. 801 was operating on Route #27 as an “Ensley Express,” so it would have run non-stop from downtown to Bush Boulevard. (Barney L. Stone photo, Krambles-Peterson Archive)

A casual observer quite reasonably might assume that it was all downhill for Birmingham’s streetcars from V-J Day in the summer of 1945 to the last run from Ensley to the car barn in the spring of 1953. In reality, however, the years immediately after World War II were fascinating and even exciting for local trolley buffs. Depending on how one counted the short-turn routes on the longer car lines like #1 South Bessemer, Birmingham Electric Company (“Birmingham Electric”) emerged from the war with about 23 primary streetcar routes. Birmingham Electric’s Transportation Department understandably had enjoyed record passenger counts during the war, but its yearly passenger count didn’t reach its all time high of 93 million passengers until 1948.

Birmingham Electric was focused on the future, and it laid out a comprehensive modernization plan in an effort to compete effectively in the post-war era. To be sure, the modernization plan did not bode well for the old streetcars in the Birmingham

fleet. Among other things, it called for purchasing 148 trackless trolleys plus some new buses. The new equipment would be used to replace the city’s old buses and to convert all but a handful of the longest streetcar routes.

Here’s the exciting part of the modernization plan. For the long streetcar lines that were going to be retained, Birmingham Electric would purchase 48 of the streamlined Presidents’ Conference Committee (“PCC”) streetcars from Pullman-Standard’s Osgood-Bradley plant. It’s fascinating to note that each of the sleek and efficient new PCC’s cost Birmingham Electric a mere \$25,000! The modernization plan also called for upgrading the streetcar lines that would be retained for future operations with the PCC’s. The timetable for the modernization plan called for the improvements to be implemented by 1948 and for all non-PCC streetcar operations to cease.

On September 1, 1946, #19 Idlewild became the first post-war conversion from streetcars to buses. In November of 1946,