

# Palm Springs Aerial Tramway was audacious project

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*"Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood and probably themselves will not be realized. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work."*  
—Daniel Hudson Burnham (1846-1912)

Daniel Burnham knew what he was talking about as the architect of the 1893 Columbian Exposition for which he conjured up an entire city, complete with roadways, lakes, bridges, parks and enormous buildings for the world's fair. Few projects ever thought as big.

Half a continent and half a century away, in 1930s California, the publisher of the Desert Sun newspaper Francis Crocker—exceedingly parched during the heat of the day on a road trip to Banning—looked up at the peak of Mount San Jacinto and wished he could be transported from the harsh desert up to the cool snow.

It gave him an idea.

The engineering feat required by Crocker's imagination was unprecedented in its scope and daring: a funicular from the valley floor to the mountaintop. It was no little plan.

Due to the intervening depression and the world war, the idea languished. It was an enormous undertaking, an unlikely project, literally aiming high. But Crocker had worked on the Hoover Dam, so he understood big projects and asked his friend Earl Coffman, of the famed Desert Inn to help.

Coffman's grandmother, Nellie, had gazed down from that same mountaintop in 1908 and decided to make her way to the tiny village of Palm Springs.

The funicular, or Tramway, as Crocker and Coffman called it, would allow visitors to have the same view Nellie had enjoyed of the outstretched valley below without the trouble of hiking from Idyllwild.

The idea captured Coffman's imagination and stirred his blood.

For the ensuing two decades, Coffman worked tirelessly on the tram. He



**Former Governor Pat Brown and wife Bernice were in the tramcar at the ribbon-cutting for the Aerial Tramway.** PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

arranged for the financing with a bond. He and Crocker pressed prominent local citizens, from Warren Pinney to George Wheeler, into service; they elected erstwhile mayor of Palm Springs Phil Boyd, to the State Assembly to help pass the required legislation. Governors who were not enamored with this big plan twice vetoed the bill that would have created the necessary entity.

Finally, in 1945, new legislation authorized the Tramway and Governor Earl Warren signed the measure creating the Mount San Jacinto Winter Park Authority. Edmund "Pat" Brown was an important proponent. Coffman was named the Authority's first chairman and Crocker was named the first secretary.

By 1950, the many technicalities and

complexities of building a link between the valley floor and the top of the mountain were being solved. Funds for the construction were raised by the sale of \$8.15 million in private revenue bonds. (No public funds were used for either the construction or operation of the Tramway. The 35-year bonds were successfully paid off in 1996.) Culver and Sallie Stevens Nichols donated the land for the Valley Station, parking lots and the first tower.

Every bit of architectural prowess the little town of Palm Springs had to offer was enlisted. Albert Frey, Robson Chambers, John Porter Clark and Stewart Williams all contributed, producing stunning midcentury buildings for the stations between which the tramcars would travel.

Construction began in 1960. Helicopters were required due to the steep and inaccessible terrain. Don Landells led the team that carried men and material up the Chino Canyon escarpment. Equipment was disassembled and airlifted piece-by-piece, then reassembled on the mountain. Six pilots flew three helicopters in six-hour shifts for a two-year period, slinging their payloads up the mountain.

Thirty-five full-time construction workers lived in prefabricated houses at the site. They commuted to the job by helicopter on Monday mornings and returned to the valley floor on Friday evenings. The Tramway would eventually be designated a civil engineering landmark for this remarkable feat of aeronautic ingenuity.

The original, official souvenir guide to the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway was called Tramway-Land. In its opening pages, Pat Brown, now governor of California, proudly greeted visitors with a letter that quoted an inscribed plaque on one of the State's capitol buildings: "Send me men to match my mountains."

In June 1963, two such men, the resident engineer and general foreman of the project took the first trial ride on the completed Tramway. Dignitaries would follow that September after the requisite ceremony and speeches.

Francis Crocker died in 1997 after many such trips up the mountain in his realized dream. Decades before, he looked up with hope and determination at the snow-covered peak of the mountain, made no little plan and matched it.

On Thursday, Jan. 23, after obligatory cocktails at 5 p.m., an exhaustive history of the Tramway: the visionaries who conceived it, the architects behind its design and workers who realized it, its importance to Palm Springs today and plans for tomorrow, will be explored in depth at The Palm Springs Cultural Center.

Tickets are available at [pshistoricalsociety.org](http://pshistoricalsociety.org). The presentation will include a restored film about the development and construction of the Tramway.