INTRODUCTION TO THE RISE AND FALL OF THE TRANSVIAS

(TRAMCARS)

One wonders how many of the tourists wandering into and around the old city, *Casco Viejo*, in Panama City give a thought to the rails that remain, still embedded into the narrow roadways. It is now some 85 years since the city's tram service was "suspended", with nothing to show for their long service except for a few forlorn metal rails.



Tramcar in San Felipe district passing a chivita ("little Chiva")[1]

The service ended at midnight on 31 May 1941. It was one of the few things President Arias Madrid managed to get done during his short presidency, before being deposed later the same year. The reason, or excuse, given for the decision to end the service was the increased motor traffic, private, commercial and military – made worse by the expansion in defences and US military activity and construction.[2] However, there were other reasons, with the public transport business given to three families,[3] to run the small buses known as *chivitas*.[4]



[1] https://www.elistmopty.com/2021/05/el-tranvia-en-su-ruta-por-san-felipe.html

[2] The same reasons for the move to compel traffic to drive on the right-hand side of the road in 1943, see https://raytodd.blog/2026/10/08/panama-in-world-war-2-roads-and-highways/

[3] The Arce, Barletta and Alemán families.

[4] https://www.laestrella.com.pa/vida-y-cultura/hierro-que-vale-oro-ID6599219#google_vignette

THE FIRST STREETCARS

The first service in the city ran from 1893 until sometime after 1899, when the *Thousand Days War* began, bringing chaos and destruction to what was then still of remote province of Colombia. As far as it is known, unlike Colón, Panama City never had a horse-drawn tram service prior to the electric ones.[5]

The introduction of the service was seen as a mark of progress, described as "*both a matter of state, a source of national pride and an object of great expectation and enthusiasm*".[6] The first electric trams had only been invented as recently as 1880, in Germany by Werner Siemens.[7] By the end of the 19th century trams were running in cities of eight Latin American countries, where they serve as a demonstration of these country's modernity and progress.[8]

In 1889, the Colombian Ministry of Public Works awarded a contract to a Colombian company, but when that company failed to fulfil the deal the contract was bought out by foreign investors, who formed the United Electric Tramways Company in London in October 1892. Hence, this first tramcar service was built using British finance, and Siemens electric equipment, and began operations on 1 October 1893 – with six trams (two closed and four open).

Passenger numbers grew over the years, rising from 40,479 in 1893 to over 178,000 in 1896.[9]

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[5] http://www.tramz.com/co/pa/pa.html

[6] *The Ambiguities of Progress: Cultural Appropriation of Electric Trams in the Southern Cone, 1890–1950* by Tomás Errázuriz and Guillermo Giucci.

[7] From 1888, Werner von Siemens, founder of what became Siemens AG. Its predecessor, Siemens & Halske built the first commercially successful electric tramway in Berlin in 1881. Siemens had only presented the world's first electric passenger tram at an exhibition in Berlin in 1880.

[8] *The Ambiguities of Progress: Cultural Appropriation of Electric Trams in the Southern Cone, 1890–1950* by Tomás Errázuriz and Guillermo Giucci.

[9] http://www.tramz.com/co/pa/pa.html

Interestingly, given the later problems with having to force traffic to drive on the right in Panama, this first tram service ran on the left-hand side.[10] While the track gauge is seemingly not confirmed, photographs show standard US-type closed cars in use, and these had side-mounted triangular power collectors (rather than the rooftop collectors which would be more usual). It appears that these collectors were unique to Panama, as Siemens had not yet developed its own rooftop arrangement.[11]

At the time, Ferdinand de Lesseps first attempt to construct a trans-isthmus canal was winding down, but a second effort in 1894 helped boost traffic on the new tramline. However, the subsequent failure of this second attempt adversely affected both the tramcar service and the province's economy as a whole.

In any case, in October 1899, the *Thousand Days War* broke out.[12] This was the latest Colombian civil war, with much of the conflict in its latter stages in the province of Panama,[13] despite its relative remoteness from the rest of the country. Perhaps as many as 180,000 people (up to 3.8% of the entire population of Colombia) were killed during the war (including thousands in Panama), leading to an inevitable detrimental effect on the economies of both Colombia and Panama, social and political repercussions, and, in the isthmus, a US military and naval intervention to safeguard US interests, including the trans-isthmus railway.[14]

It would be 1902 before the war ended and, by the time a streetcar tram network operating in the city was revived Panama had become, in 1903, an independent republic, and the US-controlled Canal Zone created.

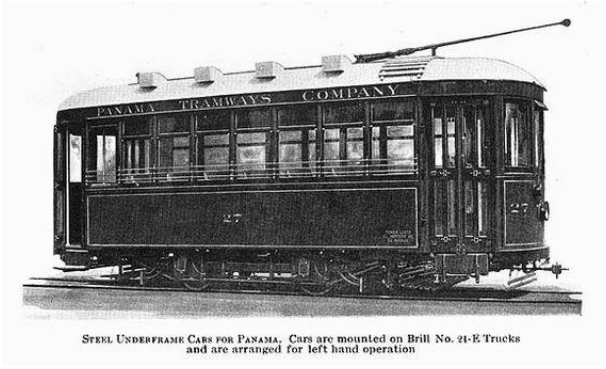
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[10] https://everything.explained.today/Trams_in_Panama/#Ref-1
[11] http://www.tramz.com/co/pa/pa.html
[12] https://everything.explained.today/Thousand_Days%27_War/
[13] Formally the *Departmento del Istmo* – Department of the Isthmus, since 1824.
[14] For more on this Treaty, see https://raytodd.blog/2026/07/04/panama-and-the-treaties/

THE STREETCARS RETURN

The trams returned in August 1913, following an agreement for a service that would run from *San Felipe* and along *Avenida Central*, connected with the new city railway station, and continue to the Tivoli Hotel on Ancon Hill in the Canal Zone. Three other branch lines would run out to the port of Balboa, also within the Canal Zone, to the police station at *Las Sabanas*,[15] and through *Bella Vista* and *Santo Tomás Hospital* (when this was built in 1924) towards *Parque Urracá* on the seafront. The concession agreement called for trams to operate from 0530 to midnight.

The concession included "*the right to build, install and maintain plants for the production of electric current*", and this was to lead to the formation of the Electric Company of Panama in 1916, which would provide electric power service to the city.[16]



Steel Underframe Cars for Panama. Cars are mounted on Brill No. 21-E Trucks and are arranged for left hand operation

Track gauge would be 42 inches (106.68 cm), and the cost of a ticket would be between 5 and 10 cents. Initially, the new company ordered 15 four-wheel closed cars from the Federal Storage Battery Company of New Jersey,[17] as well as seven similar vehicles from J G Brill of Philadelphia.[18]

The Panama Tramways Company was created, under New Jersey law, and signed a contract with R W Hebard & Co for the construction of the network. This latter company

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[15] Where there is now a fire station in *Fernandez de Cordoba*.

[16] The concession included "*the right to build, install and maintain plants for the production of electric current, as well as all other accessories for the conduction of said current, and also has the power to connect its lines with those of the Zone and bring electric current from them*". https://www.laestrella.com.pa/panama/nacional/tranvia-panama-tecnologia-e-industrializacion-LKLE479376

[17] Despite the company's name, these were conventional trams.

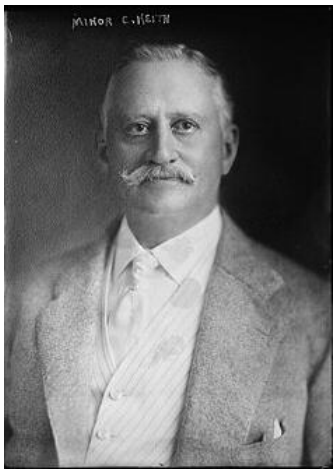
[18] http://www.tramz.com/co/pa/pa.html
Bear in mind that, at the time, Panama had virtually no industrial capacity, not even a cement factory, and hence almost everything required would have to be imported.

was to be a well-known contractor undertaking a number of projects for the Panamanian Government, including the reconstruction of the *Palacio de las Garzas* (the Presidential Palace, literally the "Heron's Palace")[19] in 1922, construction of the Chiriquí railway in 1914, and other buildings in the city of Colón.



A Panama City tram in the early years of the 20th century on the edge of the Bella Vista sector

As with the earlier tram network, the first attempt to establish a new one also got off to a false start. In October 1906, the new Panamanian Government had let a new contract to a Henry T Cook, but that first attempt failed after Cook was unable to obtain financing and the contract was taken up in May 1911 by Minor Cooper Keith,[20] a US citizen and founder of the United Fruit Company,[21] and he formed a new company - the Panama Tramways Company, incorporated in New Jersey – in November 1911. Work began the following year, and the new line opened on 1 August 1913.[22]



Minor Cooper Keith in 1917

[19] The building being so named for the herons that were kept in the courtyard, introduced by President Porras during the reconstruction. Herons are still there, though one is now unable to wander past to see them, thanks to the increased security around the building.

[20] https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/keith-minor-cooper-1848-1929

[21] Which had considerable interests in Panama, growing bananas, and was heavily involved in rail enterprises elsewhere in Central America. Keith had begun growing bananas in Costa Rica, originally to help subsidise a railway he was building there (it was completed in 1890). He and a partner formed United Fruit in 1899, and it had made him a multimillionaire by the time he stepped away in 1912. He also planned a 800-mile (1,287 km) rail line from Guatemala to the Panama Canal, but died in 1929 before it could be realised. In the 1890s, he had built a tramway in San José, capital of Costa Rica. http://www.tramz.com/cr/cr.html
See also https://raytodd.blog/2025/10/11/panama-and-the-united-fruit-company/

[22] The official opening was held on 27 September, when members of the Municipal Council, some officials and prominent businessmen were carried on a special trip and then taken to a nearby beach resort.

The new service also required a licence from the US Government as it operated into and in the Canal Zone, and this meant payment 1% of gross revenues to both the city authorities and the US Government.

The company was reorganised in 1914 as the Panama Electric Company, and was then acquired by a subsidiary of the US giant, General Electric in September 1917.[23]



A Panama City tram in 1914

The new streetcars, like those of the earlier network, had their entrance doors on the left.



Trams in Panama City c.1920

In 1920, as the tram line intersected on Central Avenue with the railway line entering the city, a level crossing was constructed at the site of the former Calidonia Bridge.[24]

[23] The Electric Bond and Share Company (Ebasco).

[24] The bridge had been built around 1880 and connected the poor neighbourhood of Calidonia with the rest of the city, which were separated by the rail line. In *The Thousand Days War*, in 1900, one of that war's main battles took place on and around the bridge, with hundreds killed. In 1906, the Panama Railroad Company replaced the original wooden bridge with a paved, cement bridge.

In 1922, it was reported by a US directory that the Panama City tram network used the "*22 motor passenger cars, 2 trail freight cars and 2 motor service cars*" on 10.6 miles (17 km) of track. In 1940, another publication from Britain mentioned 20 trams and 11.2 miles (18 km) of track. Also by 1940, there was considerably more road traffic,[25] and increased competition from the small buses (known as *chivas*).





In the 1930s, as the numbers of cars and other motor vehicles grew, there were calls to end the tram service, it being claimed that it was these that caused traffic problems and accidents, particularly in the narrow streets of the older parts of the city. In June 1937, for example, the newspaper *Mercurio* said that a bus service would be a more practical form of public transport.[26] From the 1920s, the trams had competition from buses, but some lines extended even though others closed.

The Panama Electric Company continued to operate the network until its contract was annulled by the Arias Madrid government in 1941. Referred to in official documents as

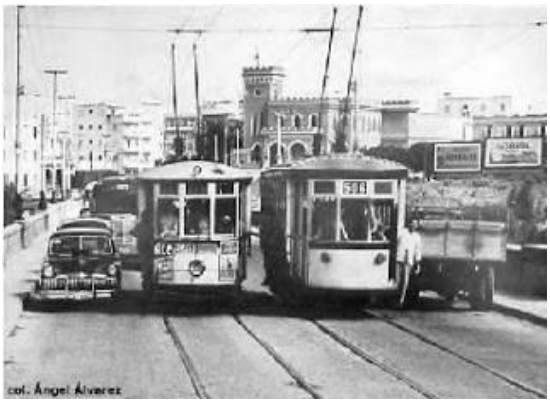
[25] According to Ángel Rubio in his book, *Panama City*, by 1929 there were 6,886 motor vehicles registered in Panama, by 1935 there were 9,212, and by 1940 15,381 were registered. The increase continued, reaching 19,909 in 1949.
https://www.laestrella.com.pa/nacional/210123/automovil-transformaciones-llegada-panama-siglo

[26] https://vae.up.ac.pa/espaciospublicos/imagenes/2_Expansion_de_la_ciudad_Barrios_Calles/224.pdf

a “suspension”, the tram service was to end by 1 June 1941, with all land, structures and properties reverting to the government. The company would be responsible for removing all rails that they are not set into the pavement or cement (which would be the responsibility of the Panamanian Government), all poles and wiring etc were to be removed within six months. The company received $15,000 in compensation for the cancellation of the contract.[27]

The company did retain the right to have and use a plot of land adjacent to the power plant located on Central Avenue, but had to waive the right to make any subsequent claims against the government.

On 8 May 1941, a mock “burial” was organised by a group of students at *Plaza de Arango*, and this was attended by the district’s mayor and other officials, including some National Assembly deputies. The “cortege” then walked to Santa Ana Park, where a tram was found and some of the demonstrators boarded – the tram being decorated with posters and black ribbon. After this, the procession moved on to the *Plaza Cinquo de Mayo*, where it was accompanied by the sound of Chopin’s funeral march and the ringing of bells. After moving on into Central Avenue, it being late by now, the procession dissolved.



It is reported that the sudden ending of the tram service caused chaos, as it seems the authorities and bus operators had not made sufficient preparation in anticipation of the need for some sort of alternative transport arrangements.[28] As late as August 1942, there were still talks of improving the bus services.

[27] On of the sticking points was compensation for accrued pay and benefits for the company’s staff. A sign of the times, with a government with nationalist policies hostile to the country’s population of West Indian origin were discussions on payment for “repatriating West Indian employees” who would be laid off.

[28] http://www.alonsoroy.com/era/era10.html

WHAT ABOUT COLÓN?

The country's second city never did get an electric tram service. It had had a horse-drawn tramway, and in the early years of the 20th century an attempt was made to have a more modern system in its place. In 1910, a concession was granted for a battery-operated tram system,[29] and work began in May 1913 but this was seemingly suspended in 1914 and never completed, despite some 1.86 miles (3 km) of track having been laid.[30]

THE 21ST CENTURY

In 2000, transit officials in Panama City engaged a French consultancy to examine the feasibility of having a light railway system running through the city. However, in 2010, it was announced that a metro train system - underground in the city centre – would be constructed instead. This opened in 2014, and was subsequently extended with a second line, a branch direct to the country's main international airport and, in the 2020s, a further line to extend (via a tunnel under the Canal) into the dormitory towns of Panama Oeste.[31] In 1916, the *McGraw Directory of Electric Railways* confirmed the suspension citing financing difficulties and economic changes in the region.[32]

Ray Todd
Panama City
Republic of Panama
5 November 2026

The census of 1940 had shown the city with a population of 111,800, swollen by incomers from within and without Panama for the construction and defence projects then in full swing – the 1930 population had been just 74,400.

[29] The municipal council granted a 50-year franchise to a Dr Antonio Papi Aizpuru, which he assigned to the Colón Electric Tramway Company. The plan was for the system to be completed within a year, with a 1.8 mile (3 km) loop, with branches to the railway station and other possible extensions.

[30] https://everything.explained.today/Trams_in_Panama/#Ref-1

[31] https://everything.explained.today/Trams_in_Panama/#Ref-1

[32] https://grokipedia.com/page/trams_in_panama



https://www.reddit.com/r/TransportePanama/