



LOS ANGELES CONSERVANCY KIDS' GUIDE TO

# UNION STATION



## THE YEAR WAS 1915 AND LOS ANGELES NEEDED A NEW TRAIN STATION . . .

In 1915 train stations were among the most important buildings in American cities. Because many people entered and left cities through the stations, they created a first and last impression for visitors. Los Angeles had three smallish train stations, and none of them gave a grand and lasting impression of the growing city. The time had come for Los Angeles to have a single train station as modern and magnificent as the city itself.

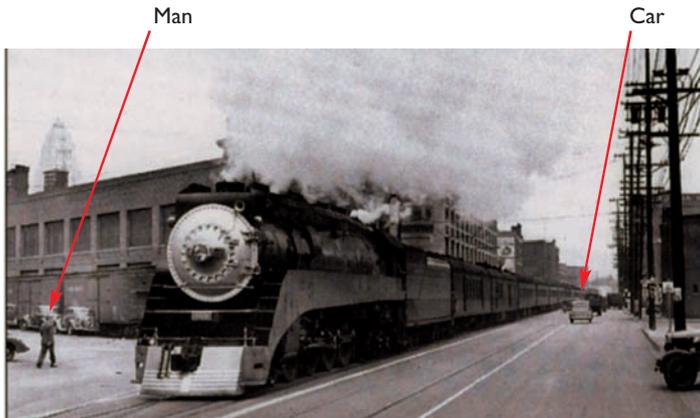
As Los Angeles grew from a small western town into a major city,

the existence of train tracks in the middle of many streets became a danger to its citizens. Large heavy trains required a very long distance to stop. It was a very dangerous situation and there were many accidents.

Union Station got its name because three different railroad companies were housed inside a single building. The city chose the station's location because it was close to El Pueblo, the original heart of the city; the newly built City Hall; and the existing train tracks. Unfortunately, the site wasn't ideal for

everybody. The station was built on land once called Old Chinatown. Many Chinese people lived there because they were not allowed to live in other parts of the city. When construction of the station began, residents were told they had only 45 days to leave their homes and businesses behind. Even though the city needed the station, this was a sad moment in history for these people.

Union Station was designed by a team of architects led by the father-and-son firm of Parkinson & Parkinson. This firm also designed Los Angeles City Hall, Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, and several buildings on the University of Southern California campus. Another very famous architect who worked with the Parkinsons was a woman named Mary Elizabeth Jane Colter. Back then it was rare to be a woman architect. She designed the large restaurant space in Union Station, which is now closed.



A Southern Pacific passenger train arrives in Los Angeles. See how the tracks run right down the middle of Alameda Street. A man and a car are on the street. Imagine how much worse L.A. traffic was when you had to share the road with an enormous steam engine!



These mountains are painted scenery just like you would find on a movie set.

The audience is watching a scene from the *Romance of the Rails*.

[LOS ANGELES UNION STATION OPENED ON MAY 3, 1939.](#) That was probably before your grandparents were born. The celebration lasted for three days, beginning with a parade that was attended by half a million people. The title of the parade was “Railroads Built the Nation.” It featured all the different kinds of transportation that had been used in Los Angeles throughout its history, such as old-fashioned bicycles, stagecoaches, cable cars, horse-drawn and electric trolleys, steam engine locomotives – it even had mules and oxen! A play called *Romance of the Rails* was performed in an outdoor theatre that was set up right on the tracks behind the station. Actors and actresses, dressed in costumes, dramatized the importance of the railroad to the history of Southern California.

You can see a scene from the play in this photo. How many different groups of California pioneers do you see?





Sandmeier Family Collection

The South Patio is planted with rose bushes, pepper trees, olive trees and palm trees, all native plants to Southern California.



Getty Research Institute

The new station was a huge success. It was architecturally beautiful and up to date in every detail of technology and design. Two spacious garden courtyards allowed travelers to rest outside and enjoy Southern California's sunny weather. Plantings of native trees and flowering plants blended so harmoniously with the design of the new building that visitors might have believed that the station had always been there.

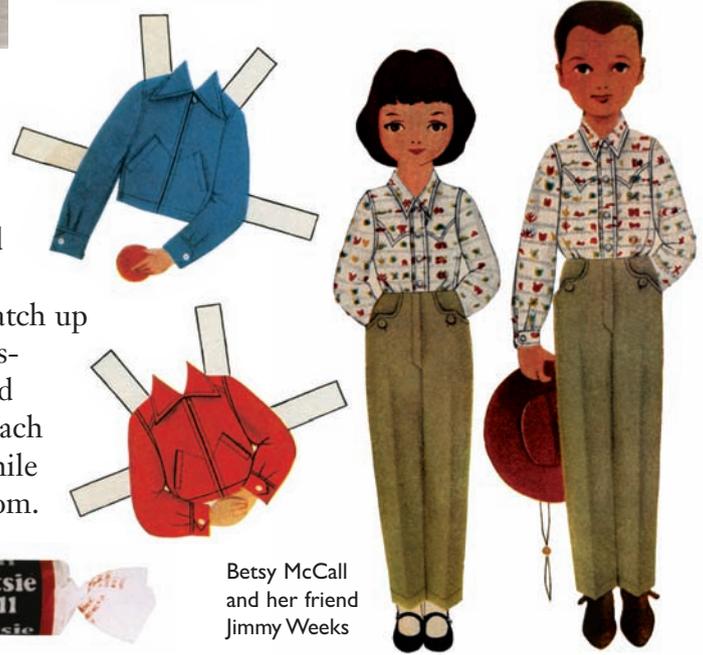




In the 1940s and 1950s, Union Station was very crowded! This was especially true during World War II (1941–45), when the station was filled with traveling soldiers, sailors, and their families. With so many people coming through the station every day, Union Station was like a small city, with lots of special rooms and spaces to make travel easier and more comfortable. It had restaurants, a post office, a barbershop, and even a jail! Parents could catch up on the latest news by purchasing the *Los Angeles Times* at the newsstand. Kids could buy candy and copies of their favorite books and magazines: *Nancy Drew*, the *Lone Ranger*, or *McCall's* magazine. Each issue of *McCall's* had a new Betsy McCall paper doll to cut out while waiting in the large comfortable chairs in the station's waiting room.



Pasadena Museum of History



Betsy McCall and her friend Jimmy Weeks



Tootsie Roll Industries, Inc.

Throughout the station you will find decorative tiles that are typical of Spanish and Southwestern architecture. The colors used in the tiles vary, but mostly they reflect our natural environment: orange for the sun, beige and light yellow for an arid or desert landscape, brilliant blue for the sky, gray-green for native plants, all contrasted against a dark brown-black. The shapes also make you think about images found in the Southwest: mountains, mesas, clouds, lightning, water, animals, fish, wildflowers, and the sun, moon, and stars. What do you see in these tiles? Use your imagination!

### ACTIVITY

Cut nine six-inch squares from paper or buy a package of origami paper (6 x 6 inches). Draw and color patterns on each square using colors and shapes similar to the examples to the right. Arrange the squares in a block of three squares by three squares. Move them around to make different patterns. How many different patterns can you make?



## ACTIVITY

When children traveled by train they were given a special menu in the dining car or at the station's restaurants with meals like this one.



## RAILROAD DINING CAR FRENCH TOAST

*Makes 3 servings, 2 pieces each serving*

### INGREDIENTS

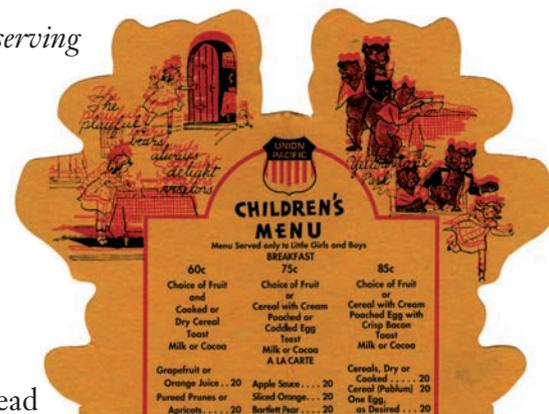
5 eggs  
1 cup half & half  
1/4 teaspoon salt  
1 loaf unsliced bread  
Powdered sugar  
Butter or shortening

Cut a firm unsliced loaf of bread into 1-inch slices. Trim off crusts and cut slices diagonally in half. Combine eggs, half & half, and salt, and beat until well blended. Arrange triangles of bread in a large shallow bowl and pour the egg batter over them. Allow bread to sit in batter until the batter has soaked through the bread.

**You will need the help of an adult to finish.** Preheat oven to 325°. Heat a large frying pan on the stove at medium heat. Add a small amount of butter or shortening. When it has melted, arrange toast triangles in pan and fry until golden brown. Turn and fry opposite sides. Remove toast from the pan and place on a cookie sheet. Bake toast in preheated oven for about ten minutes or until it puffs up.

Arrange two toast triangles on each of three plates and dust with powdered sugar. Serve immediately with applesauce, currant jelly, honey, or maple syrup.

**Note:** One of the secrets of making good French toast is to use bread that is at least three days old.





Seaver Center for Western History Research, Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History



Check out our Kids Page at [www.laconservancy.org/kids](http://www.laconservancy.org/kids) for more guides and activities about Los Angeles and our incredible history. Drop in regularly for new and upcoming youth and family programs!

The Los Angeles Conservancy regularly offers group and family tours of Union Station. For reservations, please call us at (213) 623-2489.

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