

Aerial Highways

Roadside scholars often cite the Interstate Highway System Act signed by President Eisenhower in 1956 as the transportation tsunami that changed the face of the nation. The legislation had the effect of making iconic, two-lane, transcontinental highways such as Route 66 obsolete. Interstates were a stunning innovation that allowed motorists to comfortably travel faster and farther on new, multilane roads devoid of stop signs or traffic lights. Despite this remarkable driving improvement, some visionaries were already looking down the road entranced with another transportation scheme that was exponentially more sophisticated—and exciting!

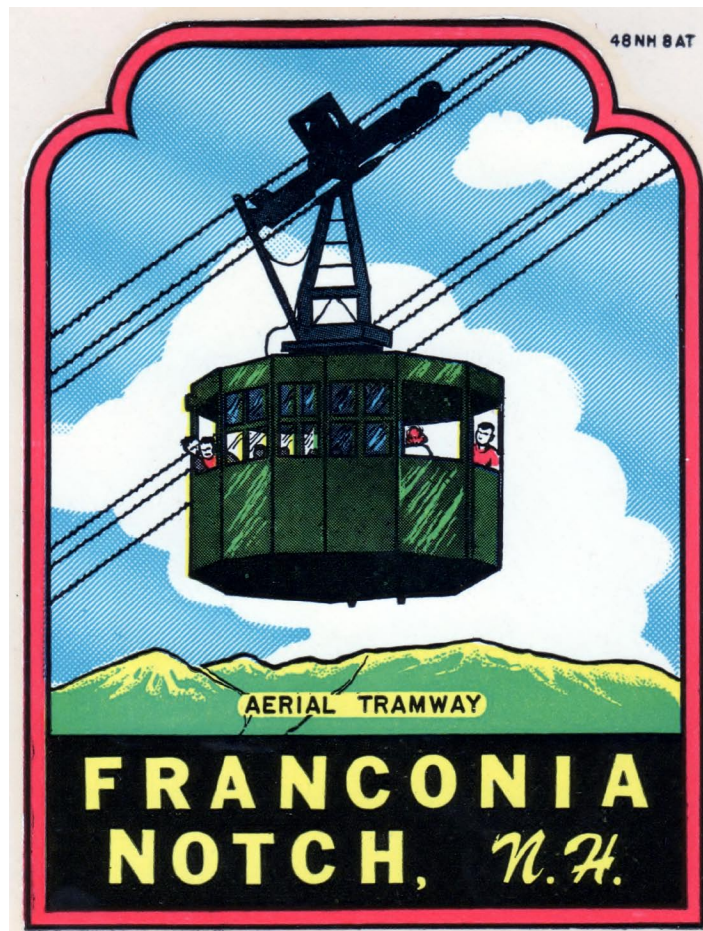
The futuristic “motoring” system that caught the public’s attention is perhaps best exemplified by *The Jetsons*, a cartoon television series that aired for just one season of 24 episodes in 1962 (more shows were produced in 1985-1987). *The Jetsons* made fabulous Space Age technological



advancements such as jetpacks, robot maids, and moving sidewalks seem on the verge of reality. In the series, the Jetson family lives in the Googie-style, Skypad Apartments in Orbit City, where all homes and businesses are raised high into the air on adjustable columns. But the coolest innovation involved vehicles. There are no autos in Orbit City; aerocars that resemble flying saucers with a transparent bubble top were used for travel. These aerocars look much like the U.S. Air Force’s experimental Avro Canada VZ-9 Avrocar produced during the Cold War.

Although aerocars have yet to make freeways obsolete, the Space Age did see a building frenzy in another type of “flying vehicle”—the aerial tramway. Ironically, its invention predates the automobile. There are several types but all use passenger cabins, cars, or chairs connected to cables powered by electrical motors. Technically, aerial tramways shuttle back and forth on a cable while gondola lifts use a continuously circulating cable.

Aerial tramways were first used to haul ore from mines down to mill sites starting in the late 19th century. The technology diffused to transport other natural resources including timber and agricultural products. The first tramway designed for tourists was built in Austria in 1913. In America, the first tourist aerial tramway was built in 1938 near Franconia, New Hampshire, to transport sightseers up Cannon Mountain. On both continents, ski areas soon adopted gondolas to ferry skiers up mountain slopes.



The high water mark in the tourist aerial tram craze in this country was a half-century ago. Prospectors surveyed mountains not for their mineral wealth but for their potential to attract visitors who would pay good money to be magically whisked through the sky to summits with spectacular views and overpriced food and gifts. The Estes Park Aerial Tramway opened in the Colorado Rockies in 1955. El Paso Aerial Tramway, which ferries sightseers to the summit of the Franklin Mountains in west Texas, began in 1960. The Ober Gatlinburg Aerial Tramway started in 1962 in the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee. The Palm Springs Aerial Tramway that carries passengers up Mt. San Jacinto in southern California was finished in 1963. In 1965-66, the Rushmore Aerial Tramway in South Dakota, the Sandia Peak Tramway outside Albuquerque, and the Jackson Hole Aerial Tram in Wyoming all commenced operations.

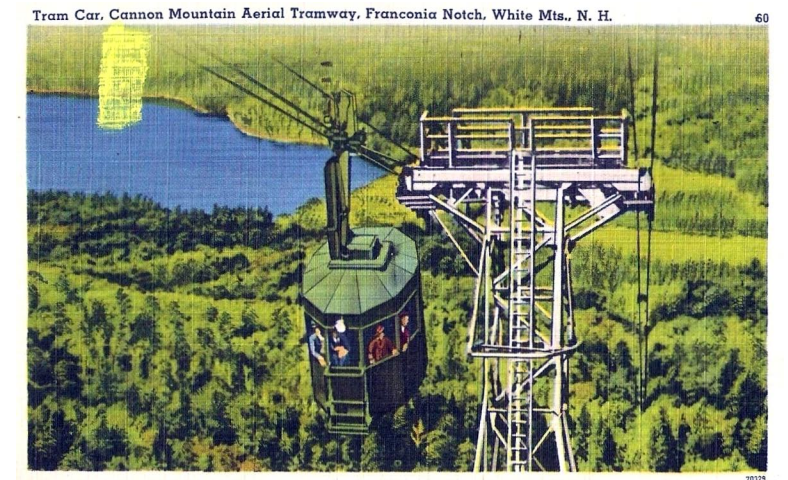
It seemed no mountain summit was safe from the onslaught of tourists gliding through rarified air to enjoy unparalleled views and purchase rubber tomahawks. But in much the same way as Lady Bird Johnson’s Highway Beautification Act of 1965 affected the roadside, changing societal values impacted tramways. Several proposed projects failed to fly during this peak construction era.

In 1959, a plan was floated to construct a tramway within Crater Lake National Park in Oregon that would transport visitors to Wizard Island. The mechanical conveyance was promoted by Oregon Congressman Charles Porter as a means for allowing more people to access the lake from the rim. Porter’s idea came after traveling from Fantasyland to Tomorrowland on Disneyland’s Skyway ride.

The public’s reaction was mixed. Porter’s congressional colleague, Representative Al Ullman whose district encompassed Crater Lake, said, “We don’t want a Coney Island atmosphere in our national parks.” While the legislation that created Crater Lake National Park didn’t specifically ban an aerial tramway,

OPPOSITE: Still from the animated cartoon series, *The Jetsons*; window decal, of Cannon Mountain Aerial Tramway at Franconia Notch, New Hampshire.

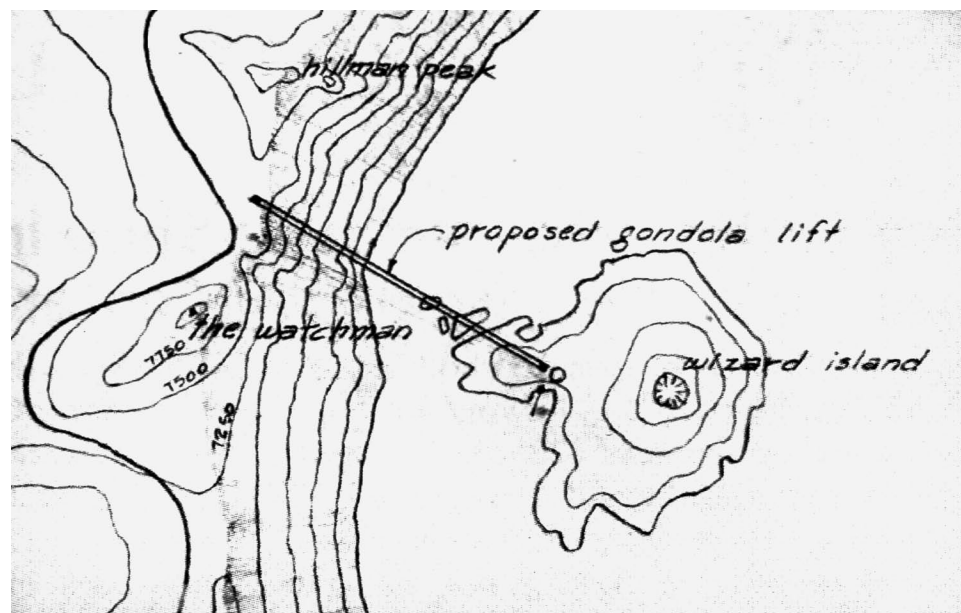
THIS PAGE: Aerial tramway postcards from Franconia Notch, New Hampshire; Arizona Snow Bowl; and Palm Springs, California.



Tram Car, Cannon Mountain Aerial Tramway, Franconia Notch, White Mts., N. H.

60





ABOVE: Three advertising materials for Palm Springs Aerial Tramway and a map showing proposed Wizard Island Aerial Tramway at Crater Lake National Park.

the National Park Service was also opposed to the project, citing management decrees that the area should be left unimpaired for future generations. Discussion of the Wizard Island tramway ended when Porter lost his House seat in 1960.

Tramways were also considered for Phoenix, Arizona, as a way to boost tourism. One proposed conveyance would have brought visitors to a restaurant to be built atop Camelback Mountain. However, the tramway's embarkation point was to be in front of Bill O'Brien's house. Not happy about the potential impacts to his neighborhood, the wealthy businessman formed a partnership with his friend, Russell Jackson, and purchased 56 acres on Camelback Mountain in 1967. They donated 26 acres around the summit to the city for use as a preserve, ending the possibility of any structures above 1,800 feet on the mountain.

Another proposed aerial tramway would have toed passengers to an envisioned visitor's center atop Shaw Butte in the North Phoenix Mountains. In the late 1950s, mechanical whiz Richard Barker, who had operated businesses repairing everything from televisions to airplanes, built a structure on a small, flat area just below the summit of Shaw Butte. The building initially served as the Barker's home and later, the Cloud Nine Restaurant.

Barker ferried passengers up to the restaurant by the carload along a steep, nail-biting road he had carved out of the hill with liberal amounts of dynamite. He also constructed two towers on the butte that were rumored to be support structures for an aerial tramway that would transport customers up to the restaurant. One of the support structures still stands near the base of the mountain at 15th Avenue. The tower's size makes it appear more likely it was designed to haul restaurant supplies rather than customers. The restaurant was destroyed by fire in 1964, but its foundation remains a popular hiking destination. It's not uncommon to find yoga practitioners unrolling their mats on its smooth concrete floor to exercise, inspired by the impressive vista.

Although the lure of an aerial tramway as a centerpiece of a tourist complex has waned, its days may not be over. In Arizona, the Navajo Nation has dramatic plans to attract tourists to the Grand Canyon at a remote location 30 miles west-northwest of Tuba City. The tribe recently proposed a new resort hotel, shops, and cultural center called Grand Canyon

Escalade at the undeveloped East Rim just northeast of the national park. An aerial tramway would ferry visitors from cliff tops down to a restaurant and amphitheater along the Colorado River near its confluence with the Little Colorado River.

Although the tribe has signed a nonbinding agreement with a local developer, Confluence Partners, L.L.C., whether the \$120 million project will ever be built depends on negotiations among the Navajos themselves, the Hopi Tribe who consider the river confluence a sacred location, and the National Park Service. An estimated \$70 million a year in revenue and 2,000 new jobs is projected. The economic benefits of the project, however, will be weighed against losing the irreplaceable ambiance of the last undeveloped portion of the Grand Canyon. "It's not Disneyland," a Grand Canyon river guide was quoted as saying about the development proposal. "It's one of the seven natural wonders of the world. To mar that somehow with such commercialism would just seem contrary to what the value



RIGHT: Support structure for proposed aerial tramway to the Cloud Nine Restaurant in Phoenix, Arizona.

of the Grand Canyon is.”
Even most commercial archeologists would concur that not every mountain—or chasm—is best served by an aerial tramway. There are plenty of existing trams on which to defy gravity, flying through the air on a cable-driven apparatus. Besides, it’s not the Space Age anymore. These days, rather than whisking people up to amazing vistas, cable connections of a different variety are much more likely to allow people • vicarious access to incredible landscapes via Google Earth.



BELOW: Artist’s drawing of proposed Grand Canyon Escalade.
RIGHT: Match cover from the Sandia Peak Aerial Tramway, Albuquerque, New Mexico.



Charles “Chuck” Biddle has been contributing his photos to the SCA *Journal* since 1999. He is foremost an artist that works in colored pencil to capture the vivid signs of mid-20th century America. Many of his photos that he works from are art in their own right. We thank Chuck for his generosity in sharing Chuck’s Corner and hope to continue seeing his work in museums and other publications.



Chuck's Corner

Featuring photos from the collection of artist and photographer Chuck Biddle.

Blue Flame Restaurant, 360 Route 51 South, Jefferson Hills, Pennsylvania, opened 1956.

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