

# The tramways of colonial Sài Gòn

AS EVER-INCREASING LEVELS OF TRAFFIC CONGESTION AND AIR POLLUTION TURN MANY OF HỒ CHÍ MINH CITY'S ROAD JUNCTIONS INTO CHOKING BOTTLENECKS, HOPES ARE PINNED ON PLANS TO CONSTRUCT A NEW URBAN RAILWAY NETWORK IN THE SOUTHERN METROPOLIS. YET URBAN RAILWAYS ARE HARDLY A NEW CONCEPT IN THIS CITY, WHICH WAS ONCE HOME TO ONE OF SOUTHEAST ASIA'S LARGEST URBAN TRAMWAY NETWORKS.



A CFTI TRAIN LEAVES GARE BOULEVARD CHARNER (NGUYỄN HUỆ) FOR ĐA KAO AND GÒ VẤP IN 1905

Opened on 27 December 1881, the Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn "high road" tramway was the first mechanised rail-guided transportation system in French Indochina. Built and operated by the *Société générale des tramways à vapeur de Cochinchine* (SGTVC) with the government taking a percentage of profits, the line was powered by steam traction running on 1m gauge track.

Starting at the junction of rue d'Adran (Hồ Tùng Mậu) and quai de l'arroyo-Chinois (Võ Văn Kiệt), the 5.1km line followed the Bến Nghé canal westward for 0.75km before turning north across

the Marais Borese swamp and following the route haute to Chợ Lớn.

Operating from 5am to 10.50pm daily, the new line proved an immediate success with the public, prompting SGTVC in 1888 to draw up a proposal for a second steam-hauled Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn tramway following the *route basse* ("low road") along the north bank of the Bến Nghé canal. However, this was rejected by the authorities on the grounds that a steam tramway would be too large for the narrow canalside route.

Enter the enterprising Monsieur E Ferret, who in July 1889 was granted a concession to build and operate a horse-drawn tramway along the *route basse*, running on



THE CFTI TRAMWAY STATION AT GIA ĐỊNH (BÀ CHIỂU MARKET), PICTURED BEFORE ELECTRIFICATION

0.6m-gauge Decauville track. Later the same year, he also acquired a second concession to extend this line from Sài Gòn to Gò Vấp. Much to SGTVC's annoyance, when Ferret brazenly submitted a





A CFTI ELECTRIC TRAM HEADS OVER THE PONT DES MALABARS ON THE CFTI SÀI GÒN - CHỢ LỚN "LOW ROAD" TRAMWAY IN THE EARLY 1930s

request in January 1891 to replace horses with steam traction on both lines, the colonial authorities gave their approval. In the same month, Ferret set up the *Compagnie française des tramways de l'Indochine* (CFTI) to build and operate the two lines.

Opened on 14 July 1891, the 6.3km Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn "low road" tramway ran from place Rigault de Genouilly (Mê Linh square) to the Signal Mast and then followed the arroyo Chinois (Bến Nghé canal) all the way to Chợ Lớn.

However, the lightweight track and rolling stock were quickly beset by technical problems, obliging Ferret to close and completely rebuild the line in 1894-1895. It reopened on 1 June 1895 with a new Sài Gòn tramway terminus on boulevard Charner (Nguyễn Huệ) and on 8 November 1895 the company also inaugurated the Sài Gòn-Đa Kao section of its 7.4km Gò Vấp extension. However, by this time CFTI's finances were in a parlous state and in March 1896 the company was declared bankrupt.

Luckily for Ferret, he had friends in high

places. In December 1896, noting that the company's financial problems were not of its own making, the Colonial Council approved a generous refinancing arrangement. The subsequent settlement permitted the CFTI not only to complete the Gò Vấp extension (opened 7 September 1897), but also to build an additional 1km passenger spur from Đa Kao to the Kiêu Bridge and a 4.5km industrial spur into Gia Định.

In subsequent years, Ferret succeeded in reversing his company's fortunes, turning it into a highly profitable operation which left SGTVC struggling to compete. Indeed, so remarkable was the CFTI's financial turnaround that between 1899 and 1906 it was able to embark on a costly regauging of its entire network from 0.6m to 1m, and also to build an 800m slip road linking its Gò Vấp tramway station with the newly-built Sài Gòn-Nha Trang railway line. This not only improved the ride quality for passengers but also opened the door to potentially lucrative collaboration with the new 1m-gauge colonial railway network then being developed by Chemins de fer de l'Indochine (CFI).

Further expansion followed, with the opening of a 13.1km tramway line from Gò Vấp to Hóc Môn on 1 May 1904 and a 10.6km line from Gò Vấp to Lái Thiêu on 29 January 1913.

By this time, the tide of global opinion was turning against the use of heavy, dirty and potentially dangerous steam engines on city streets and in 1912 CFTI secured permission to convert its entire tramway network to electric operation. Electrification of the Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn "low road" tramway was completed as early as 1913, but the conversion of other parts of the network was placed on hold while the company sought permission to reroute its Sài Gòn-Đa Kao tramway line through the city centre to serve the new Sài Gòn railway station, the Halles centrales (Bến Thành Market) and the Municipal Theatre. In the event, the subsequent war in Europe and its aftermath obliged CFTI to shelve the entire project until 1923, when the first electric tram finally reached Gò Vấp.

While CFTI went from strength to strength, the old Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn "high road" tramway went into slow decline. After the demise of SGTVC in 1911, the line was taken over by CFI, which ran it at a loss until 1925. In that year CFTI cannily offered to take over and rebuild the line at its own expense – in exchange for a 30-year contract extension for all of its operations! Thus, in 1928, was the pioneering line reborn as a 5.9km double-track electric tramway connecting the two cities via the newly opened boulevard Gallieni (Trần Hưng Đạo). With the inauguration of the Gallieni line in 1928, CFTI's monopoly of the Sài Gòn tramway network was complete.

Further northward expansion also took place during this period, with the opening in October 1927 of an 11.4km extension from Lái Thiêu to Thủ Dầu Một. Two years later, the CFTI electrified its Gò Vấp-Lái Thiêu-Thủ Dầu Một and Gò Vấp-Hóc Môn lines and extended the Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn "low road" tramway as far as the new Bình Tây Market.

The final phase of growth for CFTI took the form of a lucrative collaboration with the *Compagnie des voies ferrées de Loc Ninh et du centre Indochinois* (CVFLNCI), which was set up to build a new railway line to transport rubber from the plantations of Lộc Ninh and Hớn Quản to Sài Gòn. By agreement between the two companies, the CVFLNCI line terminated at Bến Đồng



A "HIGH ROAD" TRAMWAY SERVICE WAITING TO DEPART FROM CHỢ LỚN IN 1905

Số (Bến Cát) and the CFTI tramway was extended north from Thủ Dầu Một to connect with it. While this arrangement saved CVFLNCI the cost of extending its line further south, it left the company dangerously dependent on CFTI to access Sài Gòn.

When the Lộc Ninh line opened in 1933, CFTI claimed a substantial access fee equivalent to 50 percent of receipts from all CVFLNCI freight services using CFTI tramway lines and also secured the concession to run all passenger services between Sài Gòn and Lộc Ninh on CVFLNCI's behalf. Although the colonial authorities renegotiated the terms of the CVFLNCI's line access agreement with the CFTI when the Lộc Ninh line reverted to government control in 1936, the CFTI continued to operate passenger services from Sài Gòn to Lộc Ninh via Thủ Dầu Một until 1947.

With the completion of the Thủ Dầu Một-Bến Đồng Sở extension, the CFTI tramway system in and around Sài Gòn reached its peak of over 87km in length. The concession of 1933 to run passenger services on the Bến Đồng Sở-Lộc Ninh branch added a further 69km to its operational network.

The 1930s marked the coming of age of the motor bus, and as city roads were upgraded, trams were increasingly depicted as noisy, old-fashioned and dangerous to other road users, precipitating a steady decline in passenger numbers. Bus design had improved significantly, offering faster and smoother travel as well as greater operational flexibility and profitability. Against this background, the CFTI shrewdly diversified its operations to ensure that it controlled the greater part of the city's bus services. By the late 1940s it had over 100 buses serving all of the key routes in and around Sài Gòn and Chợ Lớn.

The Sài Gòn tramway network suffered serious damage during the Allied aerial bombing of 1943-1945 and the subsequent August Revolution of 1945. Although repairs were carried out quickly, the deteriorating security situation outside the city centre hampered



CFTI'S GARE BOULEVARD CHARNER TERMINUS (NGUYỄN HUỆ) PICTURED IN 1905

the reinstatement of both tram and bus services, denying CFTI vital revenue and compromising the company's financial situation. The company asked for a revision of its contractual terms, but this was refused.

In subsequent years CFTI found itself locked in confrontation with the authorities. The dispute began in 1948 when it cancelled train services to and from Lộc Ninh on security grounds, prompting the authorities to take over the running of the Gò Vấp-Bến Đồng Sở tramway line and build armoured trains in order to ensure the safe passage of rubber to Sài Gòn docks. However, on 6 November 1949 the Việt Minh blew up the Lái Thiêu bridge, completely severing the rail-tramway link between Lộc Ninh and Sài Gòn. Instead of replacing the bridge, and without compensating CFTI, the authorities built a new 5.5km link line connecting Lái Thiêu directly with their main-line station of Di An on the east bank of the Sài Gòn River. This opened on 7 August 1950, restoring the vital freight connection between Lộc Ninh and Sài Gòn docks without recourse to the tramway network.

In subsequent years CFTI was pressured by the authorities into closing its tramway lines and replacing them with bus services. The "low-road" tramway ceased operations on 6 July 1950, the Galliéni boulevard line on 11 June 1953, the Sài Gòn-Gò Vấp line on 1 September 1953 and the Gò Vấp-Hóc Môn line in late 1954.

Thereafter the relationship between CFTI and the authorities continued to deteriorate and finally, on 10 November 1956, the Ministry of Public Works terminated the company's franchise. CFTI was paid an indemnity of 2.5 million piastres and all of its vehicles, equipment, buildings and employees were transferred to the gov-

ernment. At this time, a Ministry official declared that "the operation of electric trams in the cities of Sài Gòn-Chợ Lớn is not suited to the current circulation [of traffic]; they will be abolished permanently and replaced by buses."

One fragment of the Sài Gòn tramway network survived for a further decade. After taking over the Gò Vấp-Bến Đồng Sở tramway line in 1948, CFTI's successor in the south, *Hỏa xa Việt Nam* (HXVN), continued to run local freight trains south of Lái Thiêu Bridge. After 1952, most of the freight being moved was destined for army installations in the Gò Vấp-Hạnh Thông Tây area. In 1960-1961 the Lái Thiêu Bridge was belatedly rebuilt, and at its grand opening in September 1961 it was announced that rails had been relaid on the bridge "for ease of restoring the tram line, if necessary." However, the day of the tram was over and those new rails would never be used.

Unlike in Hà Nội, where electric trams soldiered on until as late as 1989, it is now nearly 60 years since the Sài Gòn tramway network was deemed surplus to requirements. In some countries of the world, old tramway systems like that of Sài Gòn have survived and still operate today much as they did when they were first built over a century ago. In others, new modern tramway systems have been created which run along public streets as well as on segregated sections of track. However, in Việt Nam, with its more relaxed sense of road discipline, plans for new urban railway systems in both Hồ Chí Minh City and Hà Nội have thus far focused on a combination of underground and overhead light railways – which wisely keep running track at arm's length from the "chaos" on the streets.

TIM DOLING