

Collection #
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CHICAGO, SOUTH SHORE & SOUTH BEND RAILROAD COLLECTION, 1906–1989

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COLLECTION INFORMATION

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Visual Materials: 7 posters

COLLECTION 1906–89
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RESTRICTIONS: None

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RELATED Chicago, South Shore & South Bend Railroad Photographs, HOLDINGS: 1926–1986 (P0424); C. Edward Hedstrom Six Decades of Service on the South Shore Line, Oral History Interview, 1990 (BV 2639–2640, CT 0572–0580); Chicago, South Shore and South Bend Railway Records, 1924–1944 (SC 2313, OM 0062)

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HISTORICAL SKETCH

The South Shore Line has had its successes and failures throughout the years and has miraculously survived as the country's last electric interurban railway. The modest beginnings date from 2 December 1901 when the Chicago & Indiana Air Line Railway was incorporated, and from the start the company had big things in mind. The original charter called for construction of a railroad extending all the way from South Bend to East Chicago, Indiana, and before the first local line opened in East Chicago they had secured the necessary franchises for operation through the streets of South Bend, New Carlisle, and Michigan City. By September 1903 the company's two suburban cars covered a distance of less than four miles between East Chicago and Indiana Harbor, Indiana. A 1904 corporate name change, to the Chicago, Lake Shore & South Bend Railway, signaled the owners' intentions for direct service to Chicago as well.

By the fall of 1906 Cleveland financier James B. Hanna, one of the South Shore's promoters and the company's first president, had increased the company's capitalization and obtained the necessary financial backing for construction of new lines between South Bend and Hammond, Indiana. Regular service began September 1908 on the "Hanna Line" between South Bend and Hammond, and within a few months the line stretched into Illinois. The company added carload freight service in 1916 which proved to be somewhat lucrative. But despite the modest growth of its freight business and the success of its excursion traffic, the South Shore's overall traffic remained disappointing.

After 1921 the railway's fortunes began a rapid decline. Passenger traffic had dropped by twenty-five percent and freight carloads by a third. By 1924 the Cleveland Trust Company, which had financed the construction, was eagerly looking for a way out. Even though the South Shore was in bad shape it appeared to represent a worthwhile investment because of its potential for development in both freight and passenger traffic. The next year Samuel Insull, Jr., acting for Midland Utilities Company, the umbrella for a number of Insull interests including the Chicago North Shore & Milwaukee and the Chicago Aurora & Elgin, entered into negotiations, bought the railway, and promptly renamed the line Chicago South Shore & South Bend Railroad.

The new Insull management, with the objective of developing a higher standard of freight and passenger service immediately began a massive reconstruction program of the deteriorated property. Soon after the new management took charge, the South Shore entered the bus business, as much to forestall competition as to develop valuable feeders to its rail service. By the end of 1925 the company was operating 28 more daily trains than the year before and the remarkable growth continued for the next four years.

The late twenties were a time of unparalleled success for the interurban and the effects of the Wall Street crash of 1929 were not immediately felt by the South Shore. Operating results for 1930 were slightly off the record level of 1929, but by 1931 the effects of the depression were felt and cuts in passenger service were ordered. The fortunes of the company continued to deteriorate, and on 30 September 1933 the South Shore entered bankruptcy.

The bleak traffic figures of 1933 were the worst the depression had to offer and by 1937 the gross revenues were back up. By early 1938 a plan of reorganization had been worked out and the bankruptcy had ended. Jay Samuel Hartt, a Chicago consulting engineer and Midland Utilities executive, headed the reorganization and remained president of the South Shore for the next twenty-one years.

With the outbreak of war in December 1941 the heavily industrialized northwestern Indiana region geared up for maximum wartime production and traffic on the South Shore set one record after another. By 1943 passenger traffic had doubled from 1941, and in 1945 the annual passenger volume had passed the six million mark. After the bonanza of high traffic volume of the war years, passenger traffic fell off fairly sharply for the next several years, stabilizing from 1950 onward at an annual level of 4 to 4.5 million — about a million passengers more than the peak years of 1929. The decline in passenger revenues, however, was more than offset by the South Shore's continued growth as a freight carrier, reaching a level of close to \$3.5 million by 1950.

In the decade following the war the South Shore made improvements to nearly every area of the company. A car lengthening program that had started during the war was continued after it, with cars being rebuilt and modernized with lengthened picture windows, air conditioning, and new seating and interiors. Improvements were being carried out with an upgrade of the freight motive power roster that almost entirely displaced the steeple cab units of the 1920s with a fleet of massive locomotives. Steady improvement to the physical plant continued too with the regular use of welded rail for its normal rail replacement program.

During the mid-1950s the South Shore carried out the greatest single line improvement since the 1920s Insull era — the construction of a five-mile relocation of the railroad's main line in East Chicago, Indiana. At almost the same time the Indiana Toll Road Commission was seeking an economic route through the same area for its east-west toll highway across Northern Indiana. The Commission proposed that they and the South Shore join in joint construction of their two routes utilizing the right-of-way already acquired by the railroad, an arrangement that was to prove mutually advantageous.

Despite the benefits of the newly completed line, which increased the number of on-time trains and decreased running times, the South Shore had some bumpy years in the late 1950s. Due to an upward trend in operating costs and continual declines in passenger traffic, the net income began to drop which led to a deficit of \$84,000 in 1958, and \$175,000 by 1960. New president William P. Coliton set things right in early 1961 by launching a vigorous cost reduction and traffic expansion program. An internal reorganization — dropping unprofitable operations, and switching from railroad operated restaurants to coin concessions — helped to convert the annual loss into a profit.

One source of increasing concern during the early 1960s for the South Shore line was the growing trend toward large scale railroad mergers. Several pending mergers among South Shore connections threatened it with an unfavorable competitive situation. Also, because the South Shore was independent it was unable to guarantee a large car supply to Bethlehem Steel who in turn refused to grant the line access to its Burns Harbor plant so long as it remained an independent road. Early in 1965 the Chesapeake & Ohio, with the South Shore's blessing, applied to the Interstate Commerce Commission for permission to acquire South Shore control. The application was approved, and on 3 January 1967 C&O assumed control of the line, subsequently acquiring ownership of 94 percent of the railroad's outstanding stock shares.

The primary reason for the South Shore's affiliation with a larger carrier was to increase its competitive position for freight traffic in the face of continuing mergers in the East, and to assure a supply of cars that would permit the line to effectively serve the new Bethlehem Steel plant. This was achieved and by the early 1970s South Shore's freight earnings accounted for close to 70 percent of total operating revenues. The losses from passenger traffic continued to mount however, and in 1975 the passenger deficit hit a high of \$2.6 million. Adding more urgency to the situation was the 50-year-old passenger-car fleet, and by 1976 the railroad was ready to end all passenger service.

In March the railroad announced that it would put a million dollars into interim equipment repairs to buy time for a public agency to come up with a new-car program. If this program did not materialize in six months then company president Albert W. Dudley said they would have no choice but to pursue a course of action leading to cessation of all passenger operations. Nothing happened and by the end of 1976 the railroad had filed a petition with the Interstate Commerce Commission to end all passenger operations. The ICC replied in April 1977 that the South Shore should continue running its passenger trains for another ten months, during which time they expected the state of Indiana would have enough time to take steps to save the service. This did the trick and that same month the Indiana General Assembly passed legislation that enabled the four Indiana counties through which the South Shore operated Lake, Porter, LaPorte, and St. Joseph, to form the Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District. The NICTD was the agency through which federal, state, and local funds could be made available to support South Shore passenger service, but they were not given any taxing authority which has become a shortcoming that has handicapped the agency's efforts to rebuild the railroad ever since.

In 1979 the NICTD developed a program whose principal component was a completely new third generation of modern cars for the passenger service. During the five-year period between then and when the new cars could enter service the South Shore continued a program of structural reinforcement for the old cars, and made improvements to electrical and braking systems to improve their resistance to severe winter-weather conditions. In addition to the purchase of new cars, the NICTD's capital improvement program included major upgrades to the railroad's power supply and equipment maintenance capacity. All these improvements paid off and by 1983, as the railroad completed its transition to the new passenger fleet, traffic was back up to 2.5 million annual riders, its highest level since 1970.

Looking for ways to insure the South Shore's passenger service the NICTD began to consider outright ownership of the railroad which offered the possibility of offsetting the passenger-service deficit with profits from freight operation. Early in 1984 the Indiana General Assembly passed legislation that would permit NICTD to acquire ownership of the railroad. Their hopes were dashed, however, in September 1984 when the C&O sold the railroad to the Venango River Corporation, a group of five Illinois and Indiana businessmen. This new arrangement started out promising with the NICTD signing a purchase-of-service contract with Venango River, the owners aggressively seeking to recapture some of the local and overhead freight traffic the railroad had lost, and talk of extending westward to tap new freight connections at Chicago.

Things turned sour in May 1987 when Venango River tried to expand their railroad empire with the purchase of 631 miles of line from the Illinois Central Gulf, which essentially represented the former Chicago & Alton. The price for the new line was too high and the revenues too low, and by April 1988 the line had filed for bankruptcy and was eventually sold off. Things were not going well for the South Shore either. The railroad had loaned \$4 million to the line before it went bankrupt, and freight service proved to not be as profitable as expected. By the end of 1988 the cash short South Shore had defaulted on principal and interest payments, and Citicorp, its principal creditor, called in its loan and took over management of the line. Venango put the South Shore up for sale, and in April 1989 filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection.

As it turned out, Venango's bankruptcy gave NICTD another chance to acquire the South Shore, and a new era began on 1 January 1990. The investment-banking firm Anacostia & Pacific Company paid to take over the railroad from Venango in a complex financial arrangement. The deal provided that NICTD would eventually acquire ownership of all the railroad's Indiana trackage and facilities. While the South Shore ownership was going through these turbulent times, NICTD and other public agencies continued a program of capital improvements for passenger service.

Since its near demise in the late 1970s, the South Shore has been transformed into a modern, efficient commuter rail line, carrying an average of 12,000 passengers each weekday to their jobs in Chicago. The public awareness of the

railroad's unique historical status as the country's last electric interurban has grown, and the South Shore's future seems secure.

Sources:

Middleton, William D. *South Shore: the last interurban*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, c1999. (General Collection TF725.C55 M53 1999)

Moonlight in Duneland: the illustrated story of the Chicago South Shore and South Bend Railroad. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, c1998. (General Collection Folio HE2791.C6849 M66 1998)

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The collection has been separated into five series with the papers in each series being arranged by topic and then chronologically.

Series 1: Operating Papers, 1906–1989 consists of papers relating to the day-to-day functions of the South Shore. It includes correspondence between employees, maps of routes, articles and clippings about the railroad, employee service records cards from 1937–57, passenger and freight tariffs, and accident reports among other records.

Series 2: Board Meetings, 1939–1987 consists of the minutes and supporting papers from board of directors and stockholders meeting. There are also proceedings of the annual shareholders meetings from the early 1960s and 1970s.

Series 3: Financial Papers, 1909–1987 consists of papers relating to financial matters at South Shore. It includes annual reports from 1925–72, accounts paid records cards from 1909–24, and papers regarding investments made by the South Shore.

Series 4: Interstate Commerce Commission Filings, 1923–1988 consists of the agreements and petitions filed by the South Shore to the ICC. There is also correspondence regarding some of the filings, testimonies from South Shore employees, ICC finance dockets, and Venango River Company filings.

Series 5: Posters, 1925 consists of seven posters used in publicity efforts for the line during the late 1920s. A series of colorful posters was produced depicting places along the route, especially the Dunes and the Dune State Park. They were exhibited in stations and on “L” platforms in Chicago, enticing the viewers to travel to beautiful spots along the South Shore Line. The poster art covered topics such as the four seasons, football games, destinations, and general views of northern Indiana.

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