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Celebrating a Century of Training on the South Shore Line

by Charles McKelvy

Some of you may remember the South Shore Line's very beginning on June 30, 1908 when they began interurban service from South Bend.

I missed it by a few years, so I certainly did not want to miss celebrating the South Shore's centennial in South Bend (and points west) on Saturday, June 28, 2008 as the culmination of the three-day "South Shore Line Centennial Conference" sponsored by the Midwest Railroad Research Center of the Indiana Historical Society.

The conference was held in the Atrium at the South Bend Regional Airport, which is served by the South Shore Line's passenger-carrying successor – Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District, or NICTD. It began June 26 with the unveiling of a poster by Mitchell A. Markovitz commemorating the centennial, and, thanks to FIRST & FASTEST Editor Norman Carlson, we are able to present a facsimile of it here for your appreciation.

Activities continued all day June 27 with presentations on various aspects of South Shore history, and the well-organized and well-attended conference culminated June 28 with a round-trip train ride between South Bend and Michigan City, a tour of the famous Shops, and dining service on the return leg.

Samuel Insull, who bought the electric railroad operating between Chicago and South Bend at foreclosure in 1925, would have loved every golden

moment and milemarker of Saturday, June 28, because it was a day commemorating the trials the South Shore has overcome in its colorful 100 years, and the bright promise both for the NICTD passenger service and for South Shore Freight which is properly known as the Chicago South Shore & South Bend Railroad.

And to truly appreciate the South Shore success story, yours truly got himself out of bed early on a Saturday morning in summer and drove to the South Bend Regional Airport in a driving rain storm and performed the difficult task of actually climbing aboard an air-conditioned NICTD train and riding it through some splendid northwest Indiana farm country to Michigan City in the pleasant company of his former colleague from the storied City News Bureau of Chicago, one Robert Bresse-Rodenkirk. Known to listeners of WBBM-AM radio as Bob Roberts, Bob is a lifelong lover of electric railroads and currently assists Norman Carlson in putting out the aforementioned FIRST & FASTEST magazine on a quarterly basis.



Artist Mitchell A. Markovitz created this poster called "Enduring Tradition" in honor of the South Shore Line's centennial. The work was commissioned by Charles W. Crouse and members of Shore Line Interurban Historical Society. It was unveiled on June 26 as part of the South Shore Line Centennial Conference in South Bend. (see provided art)

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The author (left) and his former colleague from the City News Bureau of Chicago, Robert Bresse-Rodenkirk, enjoy a centennial ride on the historical South Shore Line.

Bob and I settled into a pair of seats on the portside of the train and caught up on our respective careers as the regular revenue train departed promptly at 9 a.m. (EDT) and worked its way through South Bend to the South Shore main for a rapid run to Michigan City with a scheduled stop at Hudson Lake to pick up a goodly number of passengers.

And goodly numbers of passengers was a topic that NICTD's new Chief Operating Officer, Joseph T. "Joe" Black, was eager to discuss with the friends of the South Shore who were riding along that morning.



Joseph T. Black is NICTD's new Chief Operating Officer. He is optimistic about the railroad's future.

"Demand is not going away, and we are positioned well to meet it," Joe Black said. He was particularly pleased to report that NICTD will begin taking delivery of 14 new bilevel cars later this year, and that they will be in revenue service by spring of 2009.

The cars will be assembled in Milwaukee at Super Steel and each has a capacity of 111, as opposed to the 93 passengers that the current cars can carry. When they are ready to roll, the railroad will operate them as two, six-car sets with the remaining two bilevels on reserve. In anticipation of that happy day, NICTD has already "shoehorned" a storage siding for the 14 new cars into its busy yard in Michigan City.



Participants in the South Shore Line Centennial Conference enjoy a day on the property on June 28.

And a tour of that amazing facility was awaiting us as we glided into Carroll Avenue from the east. I had the pleasure to be part of a group led by Rick Humelshein, who is a veteran of the Mechanical Department. He praised the 25 "terminal car men" who work every night to ensure that your morning train is fully serviced and inspected.

"We do a full mechanical inspection of every car every night," Rick Humelshein said. "It is required by the Federal Railroad Administration before we turn them loose in the morning." He added that the railroad's licensed engineers are able to make all needed repairs on the premises and that through their ingenuity and hard work, the railroad is able to put most of its 68 cars in service every weekday morning. And, with gas prices going the way they are, the railroad is finding that it has to put more cars into use on weekends too.



Mechanical Department Trainer Rick Humelshein explains what it takes to keep your morning train running.

“These guys do any amazing job of keeping the fleet on the road,” Rick Humelshein said. “They won’t let anything stop them. We have a great Mechanical Department. It’s one of the best in the industry. And we are self-sufficient, which means we can rebuild or get it back in running order ourselves. We do it every day.”



Machinist Greg Brosser has 25 years of faithful service to the South Shore under his belt.



The Mechanical Department services everything at Shops, including the wheels.



The yard engine awaits its next assignment at Shops.

And to prolong the life of its current fleet of cars that first arrived in 1982, NICTD created a “mid-life shop” in 1997 to give its cars another 20 years of service by completely rebuilding them. The process takes about 18 to 20 weeks and even includes new green and blue upholstery for the seats. Surely, you have already enjoyed riding in one of the refurbished cars and probably wondered if it was brand-new.

Almost.

And we’re almost out of space here, so we would like to conclude this celebration of the South Shore’s centennial with a trackside interview on June 28 with veteran railroad consultant and South Shore historian Norman Carlson. “We were well prepared, and it was worth their time to come and join us,” he said, noting that participants got to hear from the people who were involved in the creation of NICTD and of South Shore Freight, and how they came about.

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Norman Carlson is bullish on the South Shore – both NICTD passenger service and South Shore Freight. He is President of the South Shore Line Interurban Historical Society and editor of the quarterly magazine FIRST & FASTEST.

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Currently, Carlson said, NICTD and South Shore Freight “are enjoying the longest period of sustained economic growth of this railroad in its 100 years of existence.” He projected an increase in off-peak patronage on NICTD trains and on all commuter railroads in the Chicago area. “The non-traditional rush business is growing exponentially.”

And, he added, continually rising gas prices are fueling “phenomenal growth in mid-day riding, particularly on weekdays. Last week on this property, on a typical weekday, they had 15,000 people. They had 17,000 on Friday, and 8,500 on Saturday, and 5,600 on Sunday. I can remember when it was good when you had 5,600 on a weekday.

“And today they are expecting 10,000 to use the trains to get into Chicago for the baseball game, Taste of Chicago, and concerts and what have you. And there were a number of passengers getting on in South Bend this morning who weren’t going to any of the events. Even if we have a moderation in gas prices, a lot of these people are going to continue to use the train, because they find it a lot less stressful than driving.”



Chicago South Shore & South Bend Railroad Company President Henry B. Lampe explains the workings of South Shore Freight to conference participants.



South Shore Freight continues to use cabooses for safety reasons due to the amount of switching. Caboose 004 was reconditioned and repainted late 2007 and has been dubbed “The Pumpkin” because of its bright orange color.



Participants in the South Shore Line Centennial Conference board at Michigan City for the return ride to South Bend.

Carlson would like to see commuter railroads provide computer access for their riders, and he said NICTD’s 14 new bilevel cars “can’t get here soon enough.”

Norman Carlson said his personal wish for NICTD is “that there be more funds available in the relatively near future, so they can get more cars, because I think they’re going to need them.”

And for more of Norman Carlson’s learned thoughts about our favorite railroad, you might care to join the Shore Line Interurban Historical Society and receive FIRST & FASTEST. Contact them in care of: info@shore-line.org or by writing: Shore Line, P.O. Box 425, Lake Forest, IL 60045-0425.



They stand together, the South Shore Freight known as the Chicago South Shore & South Bend Railroad and Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District or NICTD.