

The Myth & The Reality of the Super-Interurban: The Origin Story – The Chicago & Indiana Air Line Railroad

Dateline – January 17, 1903; Toledo, Ohio:

The plan of the Toledo & Western Railway syndicate for eventually connecting Toledo and Chicago by electric railway has assumed tangible form, through the announcement made by Hon. C. M. Stone, of the successful financing of the Garrett, Auburn & Northern Railway, and the Chicago & Indiana Air Line. These roads are being promoted by interests which are closely allied with the Toledo & Western Railway, and in connection with the Indiana Railway, an independent line will form the desired connection. The lines will cover the territory as follows: Toledo & Western, Toledo to Pioneer; Garrett, Auburn & Northern, Pioneer to Goshen; Indiana Railway, Goshen to South Bend; Chicago & Indiana [Air Line] Railway, South Bend to Chicago. It is announced that contracts for material for both the roads above-mentioned will be placed at once, and that grading will start as soon as the weather permits. The new lines will be built on wide private right of way and will be equipped equal to the well-known high standard of the Toledo & Western Railway. Eventually the lines will be consolidated. The Toledo & Western syndicate is headed by Luther Allen and Judge C.M. Stone, of Cleveland, and F.R. Seagrave and J.R. Seagrave of Toledo.¹

Myth: What became the Chicago, South Shore and South Bend Railroad began as a strictly local venture between Chicago and South Bend.

Reality: What became the Chicago, South Shore and South Bend Railroad began as an electrified regional railroad between Toledo, Ohio, and Chicago, Illinois, with branch lines that were projected to reach Jackson, Michigan, and Fort Wayne, Indiana.

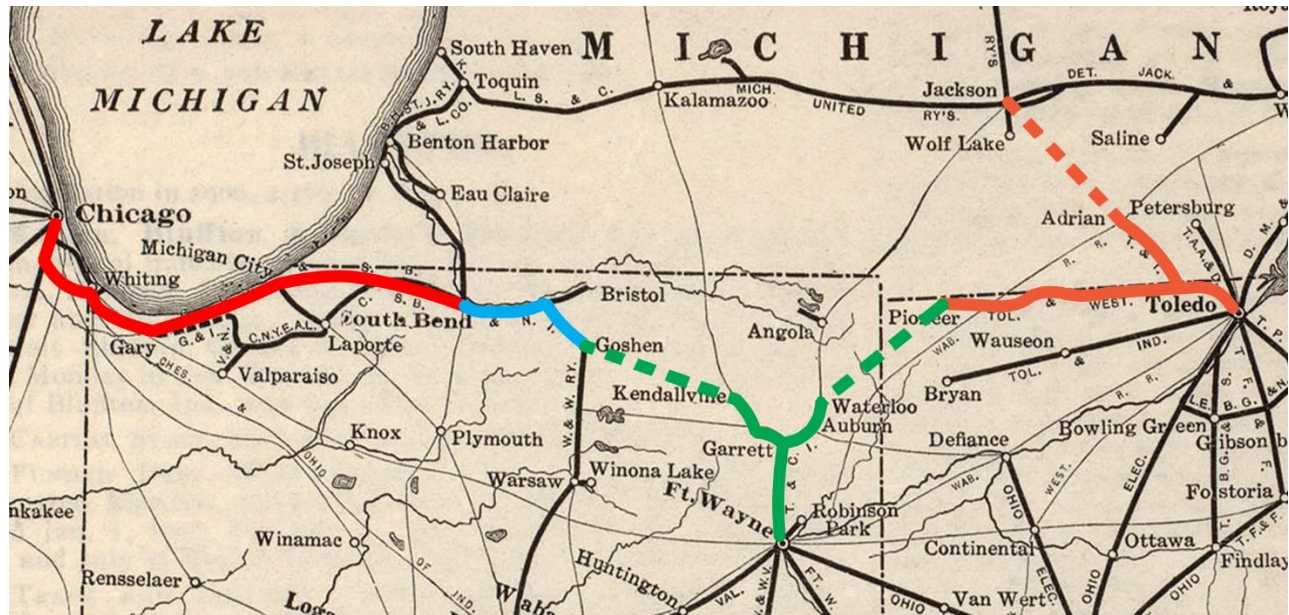
DISCUSSION

The earliest predecessor of the South Shore Line was the Chicago & Indiana Air Line Railway. At its formation on November 30, 1901, it was controlled by Frank and James Seagrave, brothers living in Toledo, Ohio, who had envisioned an electrically operated freight and passenger railroad from Toledo to Chicago, Illinois. The Seagrave brothers had completed their Toledo and Western Railroad mainline across the former Black Swamp from Toledo to Pioneer, Ohio, in an area that otherwise had no direct rail service to Toledo. A branch was constructed from Sylvania, Ohio, to Adrian, Michigan.² The Seagrave brothers anticipated that they would build west to Goshen, Indiana, where they would obtain trackage rights from

¹ From Toledo to Chicago, 21 St. Ry. J. 132 (1903).

² George S. Davis, *The Interurban Electric Railways of Ohio*, 18 St. Ry. J. 107, 113 (1901).

the Indiana Electric Railroad Company (later the Chicago, South Bend and Northern Indiana; successor company to America's first commercial electric trolley line) to South Bend where it would connect with the Seagrave's Chicago & Indiana Air Line for Chicago.³



- Chicago and Indiana Air Line Railway
- Indiana Railway (Trackage Rights)
- Garrett, Auburn and Northern Railway
- Toledo and Western Railway

The full extent of the Seagraves's ambitions are shown above. Dashes indicate lines that the Seagrave brothers projected but were never built by them or their successors in interest.

³ From Toledo to Chicago, *supra* note 1, at 132.



The South Shore Line owes its origin story – and its longevity – to the business model of James and Frank Seagrave of Toledo. The Seagraves’ intended their Toledo to Chicago electric railroad to handle freight from the start. Toledo and Western box motor #75.

Financing to complete the railroad was announced on January 17, 1903.⁴ Property acquisition and engineering from South Bend west to the St. Joseph – LaPorte county line was completed within the year.⁵ The Seagrave brothers also obtained franchises for operation in the streets of South Bend, New Carlisle, and Michigan City. The Seagrave brothers began street railway operations at East Chicago during September, 1903.⁶ Grading for the railroad was begun in St. Joseph County during 1903, but the Rich Man’s Panic put an end to the work and apparently the Seagrave brother’s interest in the company.⁷

The historical significance of the Seagrave brother’s endeavor was that they envisioned a business model for a regional high-speed electrified railroad handling

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ The Chicago, Lake Shore and South Bend Railway Company Right-of-Way Maps, 1911 (showing parcels with transaction dates).

⁶ William D. Middleton, *South Shore: The Last Interurban* 10 (1st ed. 1970).

⁷ Profile - Chicago, Lake Shore & South Bend Railway – South Bend to Hammond (showing dates of engineering and grading, but the overall date of this antique document is not legible).

freight and passengers at a time when no such business model existed. In 1901, interurbans were nearly uniformly local or short line railroads exclusively serving passengers. Economic historians George Hilton and John Due noted in their history of the interurbans that the Seagrave brother's effort was probably the first.⁸ But for the Panic of 1903, the Seagraves' would have likely completed what is recognized today as a regional high-speed electrified railroad from Toledo to Chicago. The business model of regional electrified high-speed rail for passengers is still relevant as it is seen in the current public sector project in California (California High-Speed Rail), as well as in the private sector project in Texas (Texas Central Railway).



The Toledo and Western Railway had its own freight cars built for steam railroad interchange, many dedicated to serving the agricultural businesses that developed in Northwest Ohio after the Black Swamp was drained in the 1850s. The Toledo and Western was the only railway that crossed the former swamplands from east to west giving it a virtual monopoly on hauling its farm products to Toledo. Toledo and Western Stock car #301.

⁸ Hilton & Due, *The Electric Interurban Railways in America*, 264 (1960).

CONCLUSION

As the promoters of the Chicago and Indiana Air Line Railway as a division of a regional electrified high-speed railroad link between Toledo and Chicago, the Seagraves' primary ambition was larger than the typical Indiana interurban that the South Shore Line is thought to have been when its story originated. The South Shore Line's historians need to look east to Northwest Ohio to find the origin story of America's last electric interurban.



The Black Swamp was thinly populated; passenger traffic on the Toledo and Western Railway was never heavy. Car #7 at Morenci, Michigan.