

The Irony of the Cable Cars of San Francisco & America's Last Electric Interurban Railway

The preservation of America's last cable cars and America's last interurban electric railway are a study in contrasts, a coincidence of timing, and an example worth considering.

In 1979, San Francisco politicians believed it could not do without the last cable car railway in America. San Franciscans launched an effort to put their National Register transportation property in good shape with a thorough overhaul. San Francisco Mayor Diane Feinstein saw that emergency repairs were made, and funds for a complete overhaul were secured from the federal treasury. Pre-pandemic, six million people rode the San Francisco Cable Cars each year, nearly all of them tourists.



Tourist Mecca: A San Francisco Cable Car at Powell & Market on the turntable. (Photographer credit: Lisa Gardner Harris).

By 1979, the South Shore Line had become an unintentional museum. Tourists from around the globe descended on Northwest Indiana to ride the vintage South Shore Line cars with their mahogany interiors, soft incandescent lighting, and brass fixtures. This grabbed the attention of the National Park Service staff at the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore (INDU; now Indiana Dunes National Park). The INDU staff joined with the comptroller of the City of Michigan City to study how the vintage South Shore Line cars could boost tourism in Lake, Porter, and La Porte counties. The formal recommendation was a Dunes Shuttle linking Michigan City with Mt. Baldy at the eastern end of INDU.¹



Fully restored Chicago, South Shore and South Bend Railroad car #33. This was the first of four car restorations begun for a project desired by the Northwest Indiana community, funded several times, and discarded because of the poor political environment there. (Photographer credit: John P. Hankey).

INDU staff determined that formal recognition of the significance of the South Shore Line would benefit the effort. The best recognition of this historic significance was a listing in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). Listing the South Shore Line in the NRHP was expected to benefit Northwest Indiana tourism in the manner in which San Francisco and New Orleans had both benefited from the listings of their respective historic railways. The first step the INDU staff took was to announce that it would assist the Indiana State Historic

¹ Dr. A. David Greenberg, Indiana Coastal Zone Management Program Demonstration: Michigan City Development Plan 84 (1980).

Preservation Officer (ISHPO) in determining whether the South Shore Line was eligible for listing in the NRHP. But the act of seeking a determination of eligibility of the South Shore Line failed as the ISHPO disagreed with the drafter's case for significance. Recent conversations with the ISHPO staff have resolved many of these differences; work by SSLMP staff is ongoing as we seek a determination of eligibility for the South Shore Line cars that are stored at the SSLMP Michigan City property.

Metra, NICTD, and their Communities Stand to Gain by Emulating San Francisco and New Orleans

Brand awareness is an essential tool for both Chicago's Metra and the Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District (NICTD) to highlight their respective services and grow their next generation of riders. An effective way to accomplish brand awareness is to create "the best toddler play date in town" through legacy transit operations.

The most well-known legacy transit operations are at San Francisco and New Orleans, but many other transit agencies came to recognize the link between old trains and young children decades ago. One of the best examples is the New York City Metropolitan Transit Authority's (MTA) New York Transit Museum, a self-supporting division of the MTA operated since 1976. The New York Transit Museum is an educational and entertainment venue visited by over 500,000 tourists and students each year. Young children of all ages love the MTA's holiday-themed vintage train rides. The New York Transit Museum has their own YouTube channel featuring videos about their [educational programs](#) and [Holiday Heritage trains](#).

There are now many means that transit agencies, railroads, and their communities use to showcase their rail transit history and to grow the awareness of transit in their communities. Although the following list is not all-inclusive, these transit agencies have built awareness of their community's railroads and their agency's legacies:

Motion Pictures:

- [New York City Transit Museum](https://www.nytransitmuseum.org/) - <https://www.nytransitmuseum.org/>
Bridge of Spies (2015) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mBBuzHrZBro>
- [Chicago Transit Authority](https://www.transitchicago.com/film/) - <https://www.transitchicago.com/film/>
Public Enemies (2009) - <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x540hmv>
- [Friends of the 261](https://261.com/) - <https://261.com/>
Public Enemies (2009) - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ee92mDZu_PI

- Illinois Railway Museum - <https://www.irm.org/>
A League of Their Own (1992) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZihpHXsGLE>
Groundhog Day (1993) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GncQtURdcE4>
- Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Museum – <http://www.borail.org/>
Wild Wild West (1999) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=It89i3W-v4s>
- Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad (owned by the states of Colorado and New Mexico) – <https://cumbrestoltec.com/>
Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lsc-9TWWA2U>

Television:

- New Orleans Regional Transit Authority - <http://www.norta.com/Getting-Around/Our-Streetcars>
Your Honor (2020)

Music Videos:

- Tennessee Valley Railroad Museum - <https://www.tvrail.com/>
Long Black Train (2005) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PyRZTAmcW7c>

These are just a few of the state, transit, and nonprofit agencies that have been involved in motion picture, television, and music video work. One of the film and television coordinating agencies is FMW Solutions. Kelly Lynch created the special projects division to coordinate rail and studio work.

<https://www.fmwsolutions.com/movie-trains>

Franchising:

- Thomas the Tank Engine - <https://www.ticketwebdowt.com/>
- Polar Express - <https://www.raileventsinc.com/polar-express-train-ride/>

Model Shoots:

- Bonton Model Shoot - <https://261.com/2013/09/01/bonton-model-shoot/>

Dinner Trains:

- Tennessee Valley Railroad Museum - <https://www.tvrail.com/train-rides/dinner-on-the-diner/>

- East Troy Electric Railroad - <https://www.easttroyrr.org/dinner-trains.html>

Wine Trains:

- Napa Wine Train - https://www.winetrain.com/our-tours/?gclid=CjwKCAjwzruGBhBAEiwAUqMR8Bi9Vot9Rsm1eq0ShzBRrM23KngHIS_7U31sZq_OGW5ubvEgg4I5zxoC0-EQAvD_BwE

Bed & Breakfast Trains:

- Wisconsin Great Northern Railroad - <https://spoonertrainride.com/activities/bed-and-breakfast-train/>

Holiday Theme Trains:

- New York City Transit Authority Holiday Nostalgia Train - <https://www.nytransitmuseum.org/holidaysathome/>
- Colebrookdale Railroad Fireworks Express (owned by the Berks County Redevelopment Authority) - <https://www.colebrookdalerrailroad.com/excursions/railroad-excursions/>
- Chehalis-Centralia Railroad & Museum Valentine's Day Train - <https://steamtrainride.com/about-our-history/>

Another avenue transit agencies employ to enhance their brand and culture awareness is to run legacy fleets in regular service:

- Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority
- Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority
- Hillsborough Area Regional Transit Authority (Tampa, Florida)
- Memphis Area Transit Authority
- Rock Region Metro (Little Rock, Arkansas)
- Dallas Area Rapid Transit (through the funding of the McKinney Avenue Trolley)
- New Orleans Regional Transit Authority
- El Paso Streetcar
- Kenosha Area Transit
- San Francisco MUNI
- San Diego Metropolitan Transit System

Other North American rail transit agencies maintain legacy vehicles for charters and special events. Notable special events in the Midwest attract as many as two million visitors to a single ten-day festival. The following transit agencies operate legacy vehicles for special events:

- Toronto Transit Commission
- New York City Transit Authority
- Chicago Transit Authority
- Sacramento Regional Transit
- Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority

Another rail transit agency partners with a legacy rail service and special event operator:

- Trinity Metro

Other transportation marketers understand these concepts well. Tools for marketing automobiles include auto shows, NASCAR events, tie-ins with film and other festivals. The aviation industry hosts air shows with vintage planes and fly-ins such as the air show at Oshkosh, Wisconsin. These events are key drivers of tourism in the communities that they touch.

The 21st century will provide us with many exciting and significant challenges. Our most personal challenges will be in our communities as we work to keep our legacies from extinguishing. This will require us to keep our generations connected—from Great-grandparents to grandparents to parents to kids as we keep our past connected with today and leap into the future. Keeping our South Shore Line legacy alive with the Museum Project and connected to the double track to the future, is symbolic of keeping our generations connected with the bonds that hold the culture of our communities strong and enduring.



Nearing a century of service to the Big Easy, New Orleans Regional Transit Authority streetcar #930 still rolls past Antebellum mansions and Tulane University on St. Charles Avenue. Mardi Gras is but once a year, but the Streetcar Named Desire entertains tourists every day. (Photographer credit: Bob Harris).