

The Extraordinary Story of Chicago, Lake Shore and South Bend Railway Car #73

In the spring of 1994, Tom Mendenhall and his sons, Ricky and Vince, set out to remove a house from the corner of Ruth Street and Karwick Road in Michigan City, Indiana. They barely beat the folks from the City inspection department carrying orders for condemnation and demolition. From the street, the house was of no value to anyone except the family of raccoons that had inhabited it in recent years, of no value to the Chicago policeman who once used it as a summer home, or even to the woman who now lived down the street who said that she had been born in it.



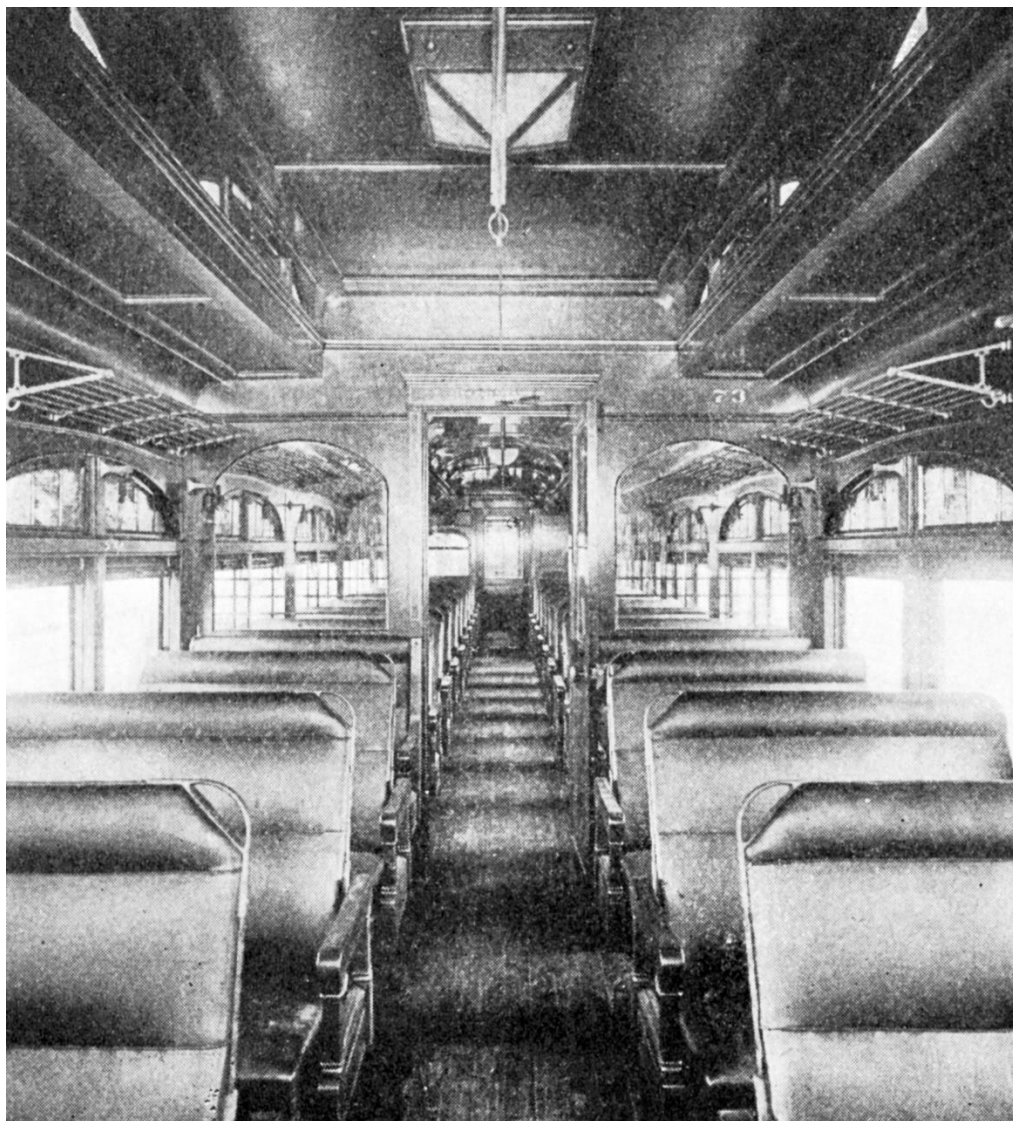
The house at 834 Ruth Street, Michigan City, Indiana, August 1984.

Why this house was at Ruth and Karwick is a story in itself, and why it was worth hauling away for restoration makes this an extraordinary story. Inside the house, was an electric interurban railway car with a history worth telling.

When The Chicago, Lake Shore and South Bend Railway had completed its line into Chicago on April 4, 1909, interurban electric railways had already been built all across North America, with the most extensive network having been built in Ohio, Michigan, Indiana and Illinois over the previous fifteen years. What

became the South Shore Line was originally projected to link all of the states in this Central network by building from Toledo, Ohio, through Indiana to Chicago, Illinois, with a branch into Michigan. The electric interurbans were clean, and accelerated quickly to speeds of up to 75 miles per hour.

The railway company not only intended to provide transportation across the Midwest, it planned to sell electricity for residences and businesses. When the power plant for the railway was built in Michigan City, few people living outside of major cities had electricity and many folks were scared of it. To calm peoples fears, electric interurban railcars were decorated as one would a fine living room with beamed ceilings, brass light fixtures, mahogany paneling, leather seating, and oak flooring.



Beamed ceilings, leather seats, mahogany paneling, all sitting on top of 500 hp, capable of 75 mph. This was luxury in 1908. Photographer credit: Niles Car 7 Manufacturing Co., Niles, O.

On the night of 19 June 1909, most of the folks riding in this architectural masterpiece in motion that was car #73 had been to the automobile races in Crown Point, Indiana. Now they were headed for home in the Indiana towns of Porter, Michigan City, Knox, and Mishawaka. Three other folks were headed for Niles, Michigan. Then came the crash.

Westbound car #3 was on time at the hands of motorman Shimmel and conductor Pahl, but eastbound car #73 had gotten its current collection pantagraph tangled up in the trolley wire at Gary and was running late. Motorman Reed and conductor Kinney had been given orders from the dispatcher to wait for car #3 at Wilson siding, but forgot. As a result, twelve people were killed and twenty-five injured. Conductor Kinney was suspected of drinking before going to work that day, but managed to run over a mile to find a phone to call the dispatcher to alert him of the collision. There were no mobile phones, few automobiles. The folks waiting with their horses and buggies for their loved ones at the Portchester stop (which served Porter and Chesterton) likely waited for hours before finding that four of their family members had died in a wreck just four miles away.



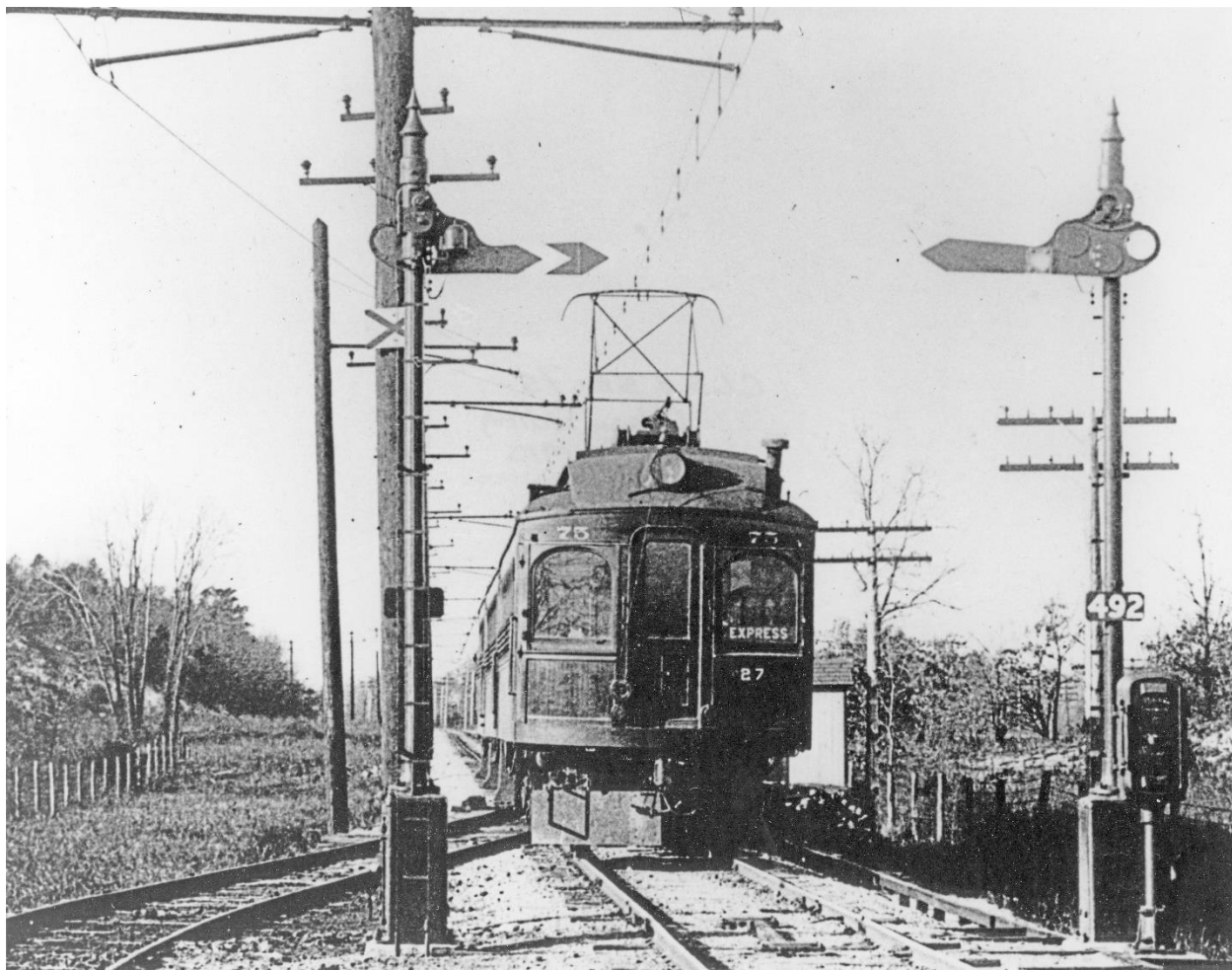
Shadyside, Indiana, on the night of 19 June 1909.

There were no block signals. It was critical on single-track interurbans where operating speeds of 75 miles per hour were common to receive and remember

train orders; passing an assigned meeting point almost always resulted in tragedy. The Chicago, Lake Shore and South Bend wreck was not the first or the last of its kind.

Near Mattoon, Illinois, eighteen people were killed in 1907, and it was the second fatal wreck on the line in a year. During just one week in mid-September, 1910, three head-on wrecks occurred in Indiana killing a total of forty-nine passengers and crew members. Less than a month later, thirty-seven people were killed in a head-on collision between interurban cars at Staunton, Illinois. Head-on collisions had become the most common of interurban disasters all across the country.

The Indiana Railroad Commission found that all the crews in the Indiana cases had ignored their train orders, and all the conductors were found to be incompetent, having been fired from previous railroad jobs or that they simply had too little interurban railway operating experience. In the case of the Chicago, Lake Shore and South Bend wreck, the commission found that to have employed conductor Kinney, who had been discharged for drinking on duty at the Wabash Railroad was “the worst kind of railroading we have ever known, and it may be compared to shooting a gun into a crowd of people.” The commission soon ordered all the interurbans in the state to install block signals where safety demanded it. Which should have been just about everywhere. By 1913, signals appeared on The Chicago, Lake Shore and South Bend from the Illinois/Indiana state line to South Bend.



Block signals installed at Wilson, Indiana, on The Chicago, Lake Shore, and South Bend Railway circa 1913.

The Shadyside wreck should have been the end of the story of car #73. But it was not.

With the kind of damage sustained by car #73, it really would have been expected to be scrapped. Nearly half the car was scraped off above the underframe by the force of car #3. But the railway thought that for about \$7,000 the car could be rebuilt in its own shops in a few weeks. New cars cost \$22,000 at the time, and the railway was nearly broke even before the lawyers filed their briefs. And so car #73, having been largely turned into kindling wood in the most common of interurban wrecks had the most unusual happen, it was rebuilt.

In the interest of safety, in the 1920s many interurbans purchased steel cars that would perform better in the event of a crash. Wooden interurban cars that survived long enough were then demoted to work service, carrying laborers and their tools to job sites on the railway. After having been rebuilt a second time in

1927, car #73 soon became work car #1126, work service being the most common of uses for elderly wood railcars.



Chicago, South Shore and South Bend Railroad car #1126, South Bend, Indiana, September 1935.

By 1928, the interurban railway industry had begun a severe decline that only accelerated with the coming of the Great Depression. As folks lost their homes, they needed cheap housing. All manner of railcars became available cheaply as the railroads down-sized their operations. Ancient wood interurban cars with their fine paneling and beamed ceilings were especially prized and very cheap. The railways took everything metal off of the cars, and the happy home owner hauled the car away to a cleared lot. And so it was for #1126 that this most common last use for a wooden interurban car was its fate as it headed off to Ruth and Karwick.

Transit agencies, municipalities, and park and recreation commissions around the United States and Canada have been pulling these historical relics from houses for several decades now. Some have been restored to operate in transit service in places all across the continent from Vancouver, British Columbia, to Tampa, Florida, and many places in between. Others are displayed along trails built on interurban rights-of-way long abandoned.

But none of the preserved cars has the extraordinary, yet most common history of Chicago, Lake Shore and South Bend #73: It tells the history of the interurban industry, having been in the most common interurban wreck, having

been rebuilt in the most common manner as a work car, and finally salvaged for the most common Depression-era use as a house. It is also a story about the changing landscape of American technological innovation in mobility and communication from the time of the horse and buggy, before electricity was universal in American homes and businesses, and long before mobile communication.

Car #73 is part of the history of progress in America. Come and celebrate it with us.



In 2022, car #73 is nearing its 114th birthday in fresh paint. This paint scheme celebrates car #73's original colors from 1908.