

Preface

The preservation and interpretation of the interurban railway story in America has had a tough go of it for many decades. Economists George Woodman Hilton and John Fitzgerald Due noted the dilemma in the preface to their seminal work on the story, *The Electric Interurban Railways in America*. Their comment is still true today: “The interurbans have received much less attention than their significance in American economic history warrants.”

Recognizing the lapse seen by Hilton & Due, the National Park Service (NPS) made a significant effort to remedy the problem. After the near loss of the last interurban to a discontinuance of service petition in 1976, the National Park Service (NPS) offered to assist the Indiana State Historic Preservation Officer (ISHPO) in seeking a determination of the eligibility for listing that last interurban, the Chicago, South Shore and South Bend Railroad (South Shore Line), on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). The effort did not go well. Precedents suggested otherwise.

NPS had successfully worked with the transit agency in New Orleans, Louisiana, to list the last conventional streetcars in the United States on the NRHP. In San Francisco, California, NPS and the municipal railway there listed the last cable railway in North America. In Colorado and New Mexico, the bi-state agency created under a compact enacted by Congress listed the last steam railroad in America on the NRHP after the completion of a study by NPS.

But in 1982, the SHPOs in Indiana and Illinois rejected the application to list America’s last electric interurban, the South Shore Line. The SHPOs determined that the South Shore Line and the people involved in the railroad were found to be not significant. Nothing in the literature suggested otherwise.

Undaunted, NPS tried a different approach by acquiring nineteen of the South Shore Line’s 1920s vintage railcars. Other entities acquired another eight railcars to be used in the several proposals that were put forward for their reuse. The results were no better and perhaps worse. Planning for what to do with the railcars was left to folks who did not understand the significance of the South Shore Line story and did not comprehend the difficult politics in Northwest Indiana. But the significance of the story is undiminished, and the physical assets remain.

The Prior Renditions of the South Shore Line Narrative Fail to Make Clear the Significant Stories of America’s Last Electric Interurban

If there is a quintessential problem with many railroad histories, it is failure to communicate to the reader that thread of the story that is of historic significance in the American experience. But two quintessential American narratives can be found here in the story of America’s Last Electric Interurban – Racism and Greed.

Racism and Greed are woven into the fabric of story of the South Shore Line. From the Northern Jim Crow segregation aboard the trains to the scams run by one of the early promoters, these stories are significant and worth retelling in the context of the social fabric that surrounded the actors who walked across the stage of the South Shore Line play. Other actors on the stage did what the law required of them, both for good and bad. Here, I hope to remedy these literary shortfalls.

Another problem that evolved in the telling of the South Shore Line story is a misunderstanding of the nature of the South Shore Line passenger cars. Because some authors insisted that they are not interurban cars at all, but rather some steam railroad variant, listing the South Shore Line passenger cars themselves on the NRHP has been a challenge no less daunting than listing the entire railroad. Having the South Shore Line story well interpreted, and the passenger cars of America's last electric interurban listed on the NRHP are worthwhile endeavors important to understanding America's social and cultural history.

I do not intend that this effort would be a complete history of the South Shore Line – much of the trivia has been covered by other authors and many know that portion of the story too well. But because forty-five years of research has taught me that there are many significant holes in the South Shore Line narrative that need to be filled, I offer this work.

Bob Harris, Mesa County, Colorado. 22 February 2023.