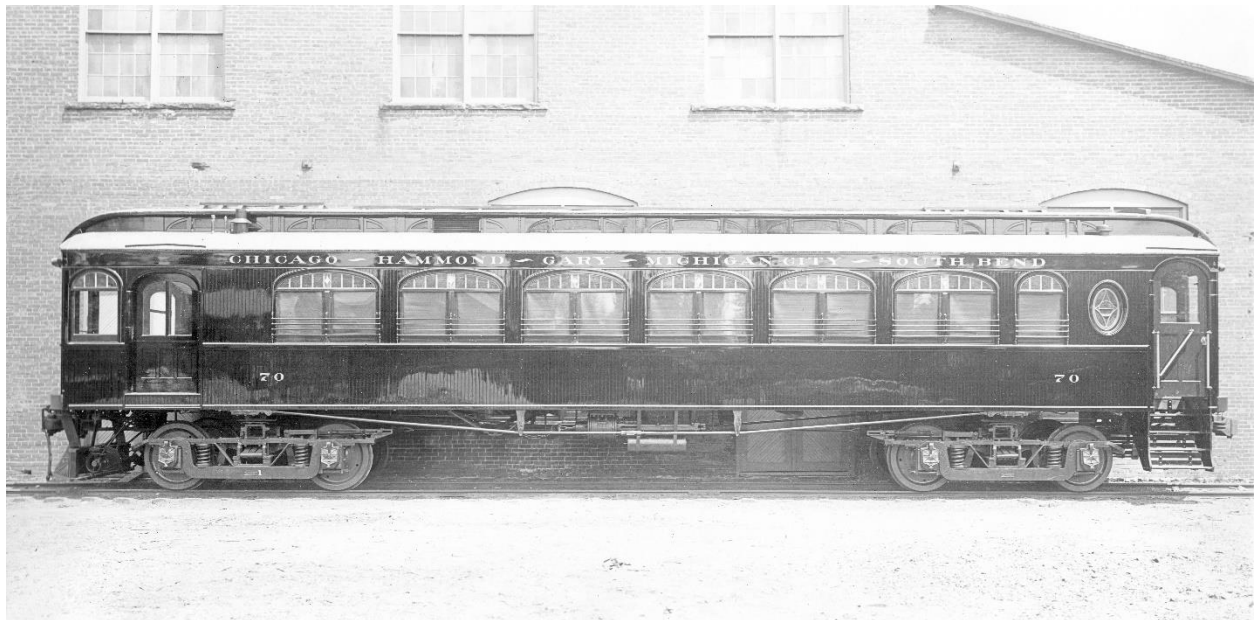


The Myth & The Reality of the Super-Interurban: Merchandise Despatch and Ferry Truck Service

“There are, of course, certain isolated and unusual instances wherein a considerable volume of freight and express business may be done to the advantage of the net revenue of the railway, but in my opinion, the railway in question is not one of them.”

– Frank H. Monks, In the matter of The Chicago, Lake Shore and South Bend Railway – Report to The Cleveland Trust Company, April 1906.¹

When The Chicago, Lake Shore and South Bend Railway (South Shore Lines) was formed in 1906, there was little thought as to freight service of any kind. Any real thought was dissuaded by the project consultant, Frank H. Monks. Monks took a dim view of interurban freight generally. Monks advised that any freight that could be collected would be best handled in cars built for the purpose, and that the passenger cars should be devoted solely to passengers. The only compartments, wrote Monks, should be for the toilet and smokers.² If the South Shore Lines had followed Monks’s recommendations, the new passenger cars would not have had baggage compartments.



South Shore Lines combination coach-baggage car #70 at Niles Car & Manufacturing, 1908. The baggage compartment at the left quickly proved too small; three of the eight combination coach-baggage cars were rebuilt with larger baggage compartments. Photographer Credit: Niles Car & Manufacturing Co., Niles, O.

¹ Frank H. Monks, In the Matter of The Chi., Lake Shore & S. Bend Ry. (Ill. and Ind.), Report to the Cleveland Trust Co., Cleveland, O. 29 (Apr. 1906).

² *Id.* at 29-30.

Fortunately for the future of the South Shore Lines, Monks's recommendations about freight were ignored at the start. Baggage compartments were included in eight of the 33 passenger cars delivered in 1908. An initial attempt at handling Wells Fargo Express in the baggage compartments began in March 1909 but was discontinued by 1912.^{3 4} Milk was handled in baggage compartments as early as 1910; a practice that persevered until 30 September 1928.⁵ The original baggage compartments were soon found to be too small. Beginning in 1909, the baggage compartments of three cars were enlarged and a baggage trailer was purchased. Monks's thinking about freight on the South Shore Lines had proved incorrect.



Milk platform at Willis, Indiana, circa 1920. The boys seated on the railing are Carl Edward "Ed" Hedstrom, Jr. on the left and his brother Ken. Ed retired as a South Shore Line motorman in December 1982 soon after the delivery of the third generation of South Shore Line passenger cars. Photographer Credit: Carl Edward Hedstrom, Sr.

³ Highlights of History of the S. Shore Line Transp., Dept., Chi., S. Shore and S. Bend R.R. 6 (1926).

⁴ The Chi., Lake Shore & S. Bend Ry. employee timetable No. 19, June 2, 1912. Wells Fargo Express shipments were omitted from this timetable.

⁵ Chi., S. Shore & S. Bend R.R. employee timetable No. 67, Sept. 30, 1928. Milk trains were omitted from this timetable.

Monks's thinking was not unique – there was little forethought given to freight on the Ohio and Indiana interurbans. But those interurbans that tried it found unexpected success.⁶ Once the interurban's passenger revenues were in decline with the coming of cheap automobiles, freight traffic was the only growth opportunity.

There were several advantages to offering freight service: 1) where permitted, freight trains could operate at night when they would not conflict with passenger trains, 2) since the physical plant had to be in place for passenger service, there was often little or no additional fixed investment needed, and 3) the additional variable cost of freight service was usually small.⁷ Because most interurban cars were combination coach-baggage cars, the obvious first step toward interurban freight service was to initiate that which could be accommodated in the baggage compartments – small less-than-carload (LCL) shipments.



Southern Illinois Railway & Power Company coach-baggage car #56 at Eldorado, Illinois. The carton on the baggage cart at the right is typical of what could be carried in an interurban baggage compartment. Carrying LCL freight added little revenue to a passenger run but did so with virtually no added fixed or variable expense.

⁶ George W. Hilton & John F. Due, *The Electric Interurban Railways in America* 119 (1960).

⁷ *Id.* at 119, 139.

Merchandise Despatch - The Push

In June 1917, the Insull Group's Chicago, North Shore and Milwaukee Railroad (North Shore Line) began to develop LCL freight service under the banner Merchandise Despatch.⁸ The service was begun with three wood passenger cars rebuilt as motorized box cars (box motors). The less-than-carload traffic was geared toward goods and equipment of a few hundred pounds or less, but after 1922 refrigerated meats, dairy, and beer were handled in both iced and mechanical refrigerator cars designed in-house.⁹

Merchandise Despatch service was designed to be fast: many short-haul online deliveries were same-day;¹⁰ four or five hour service was available between Chicago and Milwaukee to handle emergency shipments.¹¹ Deliveries to ports on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan were next day; 48-hour service to points as far east as Detroit, Michigan, was also available.¹²

At the start, North Shore Line Merchandise Despatch service was no panacea. The North Shore Line built eight freight houses in Chicago to accept goods and equipment. In 1927, under an agreement with the Chicago Tunnel Company (CTC), four CTC receiving stations accepted shipments for the North Shore Line.¹³ However, the only freight house that had rail access was at Montrose Avenue; all shipments delivered to the other freight houses were hauled to Montrose by truck for transloading onto Merchandise Despatch rail cars.^{14 15} Further, the North Shore Line offered truck pickup for less-than-carload lots in Chicago and Milwaukee, but was losing 15.6 cents per hundredweight on the truck hauls.¹⁶ Plus, transloading meant double-handling and risk of damage to the goods; loss claims quickly mounted.¹⁷

To avoid transloading the goods into the interurban's own Merchandise Despatch rail cars, the North Shore Line experimented with hauling company-owned highway trailers on flat cars between its namesake cities in 1926. Advertised as Store-to-Door delivery, the North Shore Line accepted goods or equipment at the factory or wholesaler's dock and placed them in North Shore Line highway trailers for delivery to the Montrose Avenue freight house. At Montrose Avenue, the sealed highway trailers were backed-up a ramp onto specially

⁸ Britton I. Budd, *The Possibilities of Interurban Railroads*, 56 Elec. Ry. J. 637, 639-40 (1920).

⁹ Cent. Elec. Railfans' Ass'n, *Interurban to Milwaukee*, 67-8 (1962).

¹⁰ *Id.* at 68.

¹¹ Neil M. Clark, *N. Shore Line Set Out for a Goal – and Made It*, *Forbes*, Oct. 13, 1923, at 47.

¹² Cent. Elec. Railfans' Ass'n, *supra* note 8, at 68.

¹³ *Freight Transfer Facilities Established by N. Shore*, 70 Elec. Ry. J. 1039 (1927).

¹⁴ *Motor Truck Haulage in Chi.*, 58 Elec. Ry. J. 133-5 (1921).

¹⁵ A.H. Gossard, *Rail-Truck Service of Two Electric Lines*, 91 No. 2 Ry. Age 45, 59 (1931).

¹⁶ *Door-to-Door Without Transfer*, 22 Elec. Traction 596 (1926).

¹⁷ *Standardizing Practices in Handling Merchandise Traffic*, 57 Elec. Ry. J. 396 (1921).

constructed flat cars that locked the trailers in place for the rail ride to Milwaukee. At Harrison Street in Milwaukee, the trailers were pulled off the flat cars and delivered to the consignees. Southbound service from Milwaukee reversed the procedure. The North Shore Line's "Ferry Truck" service and technology for locking their company-owned highway trailers to a flat car was the world's first.^{18 19 20}



First-of-its-kind flat car for handling highway trailers, 12 June 1926. The first flat cars built for the North Shore Line could hold two highway trailers; later flat cars built for the North Shore Line and South Shore Line held three. Piggybacked loads were not new – it was an ancient concept thought to have been used in the Roman Empire.²¹ What was new was the use of locking mechanical devices to lash highway trailers to the flat car deck. The car shown, North Shore Line #1501, had appliances typical of interurbans including tapered ends and radial couplers to negotiate sharp curves.

With the success of the initial Ferry Truck operation, a fleet of special Ferry Truck flat cars and highway trailers was ordered. The push for Ferry Truck service

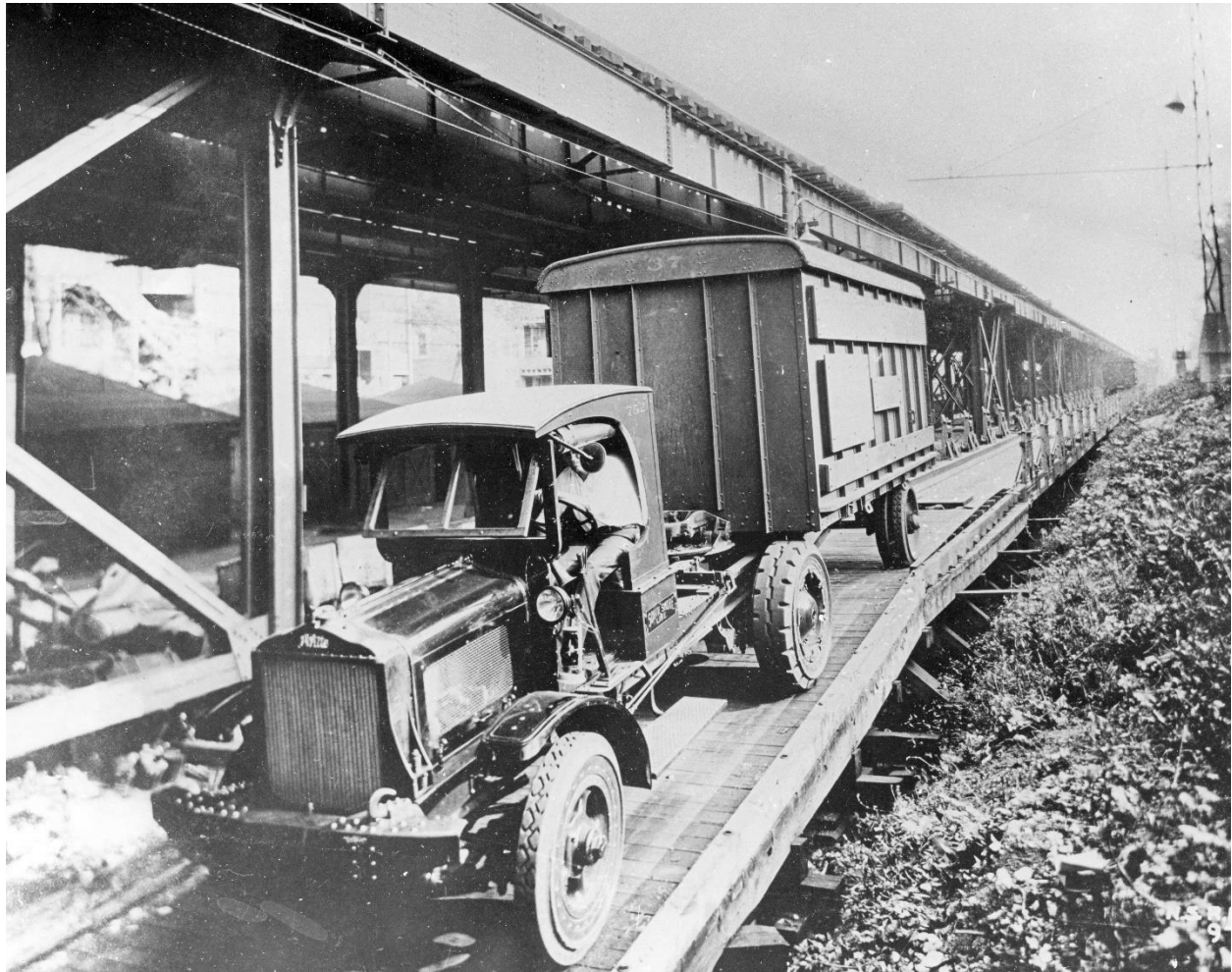
¹⁸ Hilton & Due, *supra* note 6, at 336.

¹⁹ Gorman Bennett, *Less-Than-Carload-Lot Freight Service Rich in Tips for New Business*, *The Highball*, Jan.-Feb. 1929 at 4.

²⁰ N. Shore Line Uses New Equipment for Dispatch Freight, 68 *Elec. Ry. J.* 892 (1926).

²¹ John H. White, Jr., *The American Railroad Freight Car*, 390-3 (1993).

was the necessity of profit maximization; the technology was designed to make LCL service profitable.



North Shore Line Ferry Truck trailer loaded with goods from the Chicago warehouse of Sears, Roebuck & Company being backed onto flat cars at the Montrose ramp, 2 September 1927. Sears shipped 750,000 lbs. of merchandise by Ferry Truck from Chicago for the opening of their new store in Milwaukee in the fall of 1927.²² Brand-new South Shore Line tractor #751 had yet to be placed in service in Indiana.

By 1928, the North Shore Line Merchandise Despatch fleet had grown to forty-four box motors, fourteen flat cars, and sixty-four highway trailers.^{23 24} The Insull Group envisioned a similar service for the Chicago to South Bend corridor. The South Shore Line intended to convert three wood passenger cars of predecessor South Shore Lines into Merchandise Despatch cars as the Insull Group had initially done with three wood passenger cars on the North Shore Line, but only one such

²² *Large Shipment by Flatcar-Trailer Equipment Arouses Keen Interest*, *The Highball*, Nov. 1927, at 7.

²³ *Central Elec. Railfans' Ass'n*, *supra* note 6, at 80-2.

²⁴ Edward M. DeRouin, *North Shore Line: Interurban Freight*, 14, 17 (2005).

conversion was carried out.²⁵ South Shore Line Ferry Truck service was announced in December 1927.²⁶ A small fleet of six flat cars similar to those of the North Shore Line were delivered to the South Shore Line in 1927 along with three highway tractors and eighteen highway trailers.



Promotional image of a South Shore Line Trailmobile highway trailer, circa 1927. Identical trailers were built for the Insull Group's North Shore Line and the Chicago, Aurora and Elgin railroads. Photographer Credit: The Trailmobile Co.

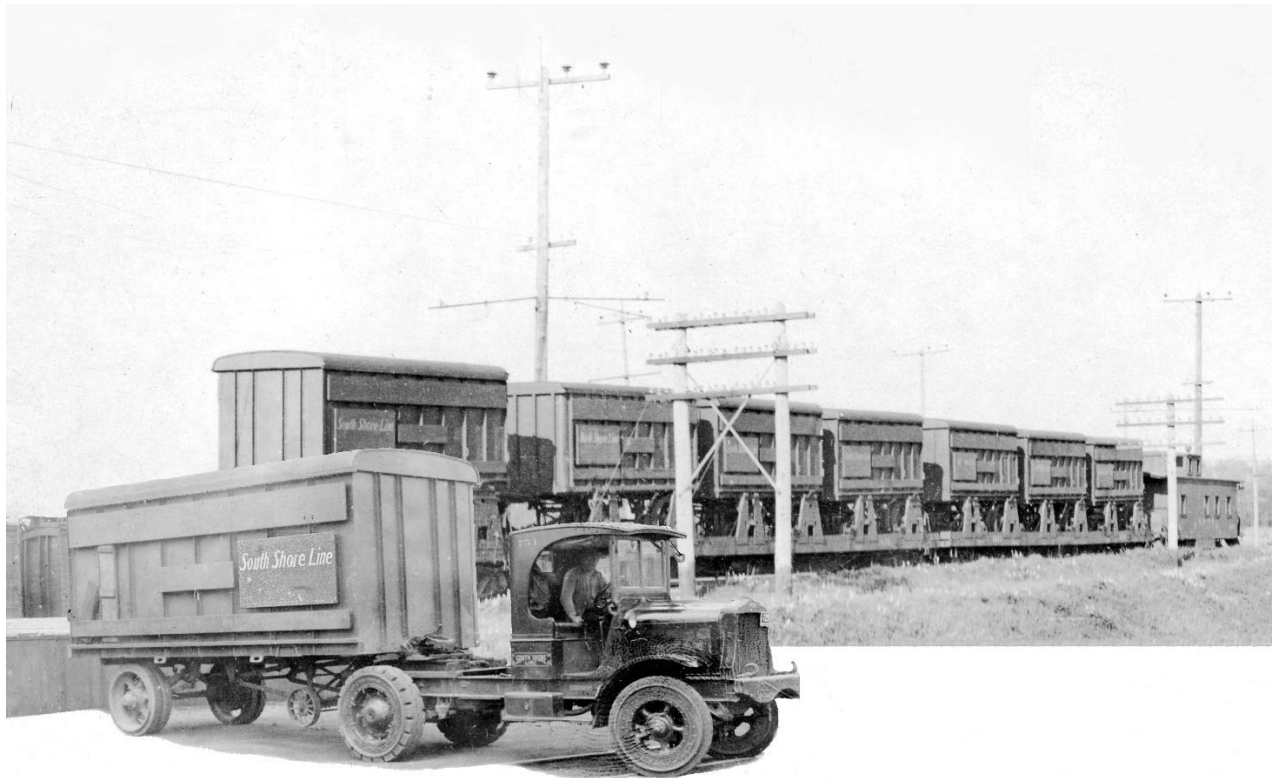
Despite the announced coming of Ferry Truck service to the South Shore Line, the formal startup was delayed. During the early autumn of 1927, at least one of the South Shore Line tractors was assigned to the North Shore Line ramp at Montrose Avenue in Chicago to assist in loading trailers for Sears, Roebuck & Company there.

By 1929, some version of the Ferry Truck service was likely available to customers on the South Side of Chicago and in Northern Indiana. There is a photograph of South Shore Line Ferry Truck trailers on board a South Shore Line freight train and a narrative describing the less-than-carload service in the 1929 annual report, but the term Ferry Truck was not used in the description or the

²⁵ Chi., S. Shore & S. Bend Railroad, AFE No. 262, Nov. 27, 1926.

²⁶ *A Tractor-Trailer Combination Poses*, The Pantagraph, Dec. 1927, at 3.

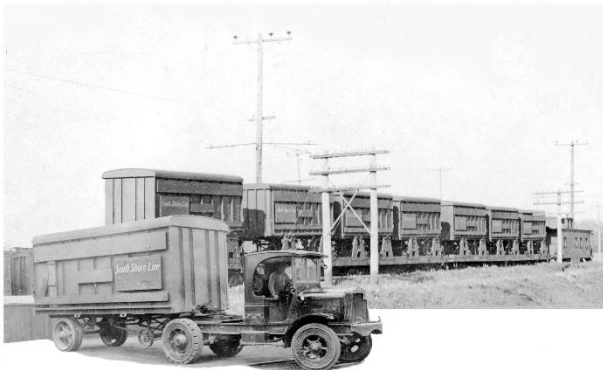
photo caption. A March 1931 article in the company magazine, *The Pantagraph*, details the start of the new Ferry Truck service on 16 February of that year coincident with the opening of the new South Bend freight terminal.²⁷ South Shore Line advertising also announced the Ferry Truck service start-up date as 16 February 1931.



This composite image was used to promote the new Ferry Truck Service on the South Shore Line in 1931.

²⁷ *Ferry Truck Service Started*, *The Pantagraph*, Mar. 1931, at 1, 3.

New Ferry Truck Service



via SOUTH SHORE LINE

Effective February 16, 1931, the CSS&SB Railroad will inaugurate Ferry truck service by rail between Chicago and Clearing, Illinois (on the west), and South Bend, Mishawaka and Notre Dame, Indiana (on the east).

Ferry trucks which are tractor-drawn trailers will be spotted at consignor's plant, and following morning delivery made at consignee's plant.

The following attractive rates, including pick-up and delivery, will apply:

40c	per cwt.	minimum weight	6000 lbs.	per truck
30c	"	"	"	10000
25c	"	"	"	15000
20c	"	"	"	20000
15c	"	"	"	20000

NOTE: The 15c rate applies only when either pick-up or delivery (not both) service is required.

CHICAGO SOUTH SHORE AND SOUTH BEND RAILROAD

Traffic Department

Wm. Peterson, T. M.
72 W. Adams St.,
Chicago
Phone: State 0517

A. W. Oberfell, G. F. A.
1600 W. Washington Ave.,
South Bend, Indiana
Phone 2-5764

The Trucking Industry – The Pull

During 1930, two trucking companies coordinated their services with the North Shore Line in Chicago and Milwaukee. Organized on 9 May 1931 as the North Shore Forwarding Company, the trucking companies used the existing North Shore Line Ferry Truck trailers to consolidate small loads in the terminal cities.²⁸ On 24 April 1931, a group of trucking firms formed the Shore Line Forwarding & Distributing Company (Shore Line) to coordinate their services with the South Shore Line.²⁹

Headquartered in Hammond, Shore Line consolidated LCL freight from consignors in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio. Shore Line's operation was distinct from the earlier Ferry Truck operation: goods and equipment were carried in common carrier trailers owned by outside trucking companies. To accommodate the common carrier trailers, South Shore Line shop employees developed a means of locking them to the floors of drop end gondola cars, the first devices of their kind in the world.^{30 31}

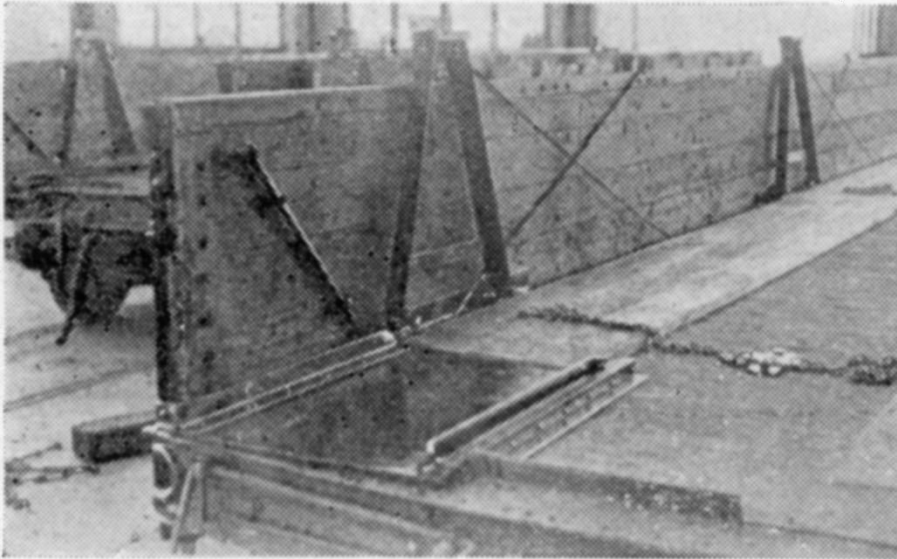
²⁸ *Ferry Trucks Build Up Freight*, 27 Elec. Traction 69, 70 (1931).

²⁹ Off. of the Sec'y of St., St. of Ind., *Articles of Incorporation*, Shore Line Forwarding and Distributing Company, Inc., Apr. 24, 1931.

³⁰ *Locks Trailers*, The Pantagraph, May 1931, at 6.

³¹ *Rail Truck Service of Two Electric Lines*, 91 No. 2 Ry. Age 45, 59 (1931).

Locks Trailers



South Shore Line Shopmen in Michigan City developed the first means of attaching common-carrier highway trailers to railcars. Published in The Pantagraph, May 1931.

Interior of gondola used in carrying trailers between South Shore Line freight terminals. A special device for holding the trailers in place and a runway to guide the wheels of the trailer in loading and unloading are shown. These were developed by shops employes in Michigan City.

The Insull Group's Midland United Company (Midland) was the holding company for all their Indiana operating companies. Through its subsidiaries, Midland provided electric power, street lighting, water, ice, gas, steam heat, rail, and bus service across much of the Hoosier State as well as in contiguous territories of the states of Illinois, Michigan, and Ohio. Midland's Central Indiana electric utilities also retailed household appliances.³²

To enter the trucking field in Indiana, Midland formed its own company, Coordinated Transport Inc., to take control of Shore Line. Coordinated contracted with outside trucking companies – three in Indiana, one in Michigan, and two in

³² *Midland United Co., A Review of the Co., Its Subsidiaries & Their Services*, 9-10, 22 (1929).

Illinois – for consignor pickup and consignee delivery. Coordinated’s rail-highway Ferry Truck service via the South Shore Line was inaugurated on 1 February 1932.³³ The North Shore Line’s common carrier Ferry Truck service was not far behind.

Despite all of the efforts to expand the Ferry Truck service on the North Shore Line, LCL traffic carried in trailers on flat cars was less than half of that carried in conventional box motors.³⁴ In an effort to expand the Ferry Truck service, the North Shore Line developed its own locking device to accommodate common carrier trucks and trailers between Chicago and Milwaukee.³⁵ Harold A. Otis of the North Shore Line mechanical department was awarded three U.S. patents for his work.³⁶ Common carrier Ferry Truck service began on the North Shore Line on 1 April 1932.

The joint efforts of the North Shore Line and South Shore Line to create their Ferry Truck services were foundational and significant. The significance of handling common-carrier freight trailers by interurban railroad was not lost on the leading men in the trucking industry. In Chicago, the leading man in the trucking industry was Jack Keeshin.

John Lewis “Jack” Keeshin was the son of Jewish immigrants from Ireland. Jack Keeshin was in trouble throughout his school age years, largely for his involvement in fights. After attending and getting kicked out of three grammar schools, Keeshin went on to repeat the feat at three Chicago high schools in his freshman year: Lane, Crane, and Medill. At the age of 13, Keeshin was kicked out of Medill for allegedly helping a young lady cheat on an oral exam in physiology class. Keeshin alleged that he was not paying attention to the young lady because he was busy compiling Chicago White Sox batting averages.^{37 38}

Either way, that was Jack Keeshin’s last day in school. But rather than run home, Keeshin headed for the nearest railroad and the first freight out of town. For two years, Keeshin alternated between riding the rails, living with distant relatives and family friends, and short-term work at the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe as well as the Chicago and North Western railroads.³⁹ Keeshin became fascinated with the “click-click” of the railroad.⁴⁰

³³ *Coordinated Transport Serves 23 More Towns in Ind. and Mich.*, The Pantagraph, Feb. 1932, at 1.

³⁴ *N. Shore Line Defends Vigorously its Truck Service*, 76 Transit J. 41, 47 (1932).

³⁵ Josephine Ayre, *History and Regulation of Trailer-on-Flatcar Movement*, Transp. Res. Bd., <https://onlinepubs.trb.org/Onlinepubs/hrr/1967/153/153-001.pdf>, last visited Oct. 21, 2021.

³⁶ Transportation Means, U.S. Patents No. 2,001,935, 2,023,971, and 2,023,972 (all filed June 10, 1931).

³⁷ John Lewis Keeshin, *No Fears, Hidden Tears*, 8-10 (1983).

³⁸ *Trailers on Trains*, Time Magazine, Sept. 2, 1935, at 44.

³⁹ *Freight by Highway*, Fortune, Feb. 1936, at 46, 50.

⁴⁰ Keeshin, *supra* note 37, at 11.

Another attempt at finding an identity led Keeshin to enlist in the Navy underage and under an assumed name. Once caught, Keeshin found himself under naval arrest and in confinement. In later years it occurred to Keeshin that his dad must have bailed him out through a family friend, as the son was placed in the custody of the father. Fresh out of the Naval brig, Jack Keeshin plotted his future: he wanted to buy a railroad.⁴¹ But Keeshin was willing to get any start he could in the world of transportation. Keeshin's dad, Abe, wanted Jack to go back to school. At fifteen years old, Jack had bigger ideas.

Jack wondered if his dad would grant him a loan so that he could get a start in the transportation business with two horses and a wagon. Abe obliged. As the son's drayage concern grew into a trucking firm serving Northern Indiana and Northern Illinois, Keeshin did not forget his fascination with the "click-click" of the rails.⁴² In life, all Keeshin needed was a means of scratching his railroad itch. In the trucking business, Keeshin needed to avoid the expense of "risk, responsibility, road taxes, and wear and tear on [his] equipment."⁴³

Keeshin was no stranger to Samuel Insull.⁴⁴ And Sam Insull was no stranger to Keeshin.⁴⁵ During 1935, Insull suggested to an old friend that Jack Keeshin was a "hot shot" and that he should consider buying up Keeshin Motor Express Company (KMX). The friend, John Daniel Hertz, was a transportation hot shot himself. Hertz had started Chicago's Yellow Cab, Chicago Motor Coach, and Hertz Drive-Ur-Self companies.

As Keeshin was the leader in the trucking field and familiar with Sam Insull, it is hard to imagine a scenario where Keeshin was unaware of the Insull Group's ventures into truck-and-rail coordinated transportation. Keeshin was familiar enough with the Insull truck-and-rail coordinated transportation model so that Keeshin announced his own nearly identical service on the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad (Rock Island) in 1934. Under the joint Rock Island-Keeshin piggyback service, truck trailers were hauled by railroad flat car from Chicago to the Mississippi River Quad Cities as well as Peoria, Illinois. This was the first-of-its-kind trailer-on-flat car (TOFC) piggyback service in steam railroading.⁴⁶

To Jack Keeshin, the worst roads were in Indiana, but the worst highway regulations and use taxes were in Wisconsin.⁴⁷ Keeshin was also peeved by the

⁴¹ *Freight by Highway*, *supra* note 39, at 127.

⁴² Keeshin, *supra* note 37, at 11.

⁴³ *Id.* at 41.

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 31.

⁴⁵ *Freight by Highway*, *supra* note 39, at 52.

⁴⁶ *New Idea in Truck Transportation Being Tried Out at Chicago*, *The Chicago Packer*, June 16, 1934, at 2.

⁴⁷ Keeshin, *supra* note 37, at 19, 36.

State of Wisconsin's lack of reciprocity with other states requiring separate licensing.⁴⁸ Keeshin's needed a means of avoiding Wisconsin.

On 7 July 1936, Keeshin began avoiding Wisconsin on the Chicago to Minneapolis and St. Paul run by establishing piggyback service on the Chicago Great Western Railway (CGW) on a rail route that passed through Illinois, Iowa, and Minnesota. On CGW, piggybacking was called Truck Ferry Service.⁴⁹ Just over three months later, Keeshin started ramping his trailers onto the North Shore Line Ferry Truck trains to avoid hauling them 37 miles over the highways of the Badger State.⁵⁰

The TOFC revolution had come full circle for Jack Keeshin. The interurban Ferry Truck services pioneered and perfected by the North Shore Line and South Shore Line that likely inspired Keeshin's first steam railroad TOFC venture were carrying Keeshin's own highway trailers from Chicago to Milwaukee.



Keeshin Motor Express Company trailers aboard North Shore Line flat cars at the Montrose ramp, Chicago. Keeshin Motor Express was a pioneering trucking company in its use of railroad piggyback services. The technologies developed by the interurbans of the Insull Group made Keeshin's transition from driver-operated hauls to more economic steam railroad piggyback hauls possible.

⁴⁸ *Id.* at 36.

⁴⁹ *C.G.W. Begins Truck Ferry Service*, 101 Ry. Age 292 (1936).

⁵⁰ *Keeshin in Hook-Up with N. Shore Line*, 101 Ry. Age 571 (1936).



Always the brawler, Jack Keeshin (right) is led out of the grand jury room to be placed under arrest for slugging John J. Gottlieb, a rival truck transportation executive; 15 January 1942. Photographer Credit: Acme Newspictures.

The North Shore Line continued its Ferry Truck service through World War II, but soon faced external pressures from the highway interests at the War's end. The combination of forces against the Ferry Truck service included improvements to parallel U.S. Highway 41 made before and during the War, the end of gasoline and rubber rationing at the War's end, and pressure from the Brotherhood of Teamsters as the labor force expanded when the G.I.s returned to the home front. Taken together, these forces brought the end of the North Shore Line Ferry Truck service on 30 April 1947.^{51 52}

⁵¹ Hilton & Due, *supra* note 6, at 135.

⁵² Chi., N. Shore & Milwaukee Ry. Co., *1947 Report for the Year 5* (1948).

The end date of the South Shore Line Ferry Truck service is unclear. The Ferry Truck highway trailers were retired in 1939 along with highway tractor #751.⁵³ The two remaining highway tractors were retired in 1945.⁵⁴ The six special flat cars had their trailer supports removed and their floors leveled in 1938 for use in general freight service.⁵⁵ The one-time special flat cars remained in freight and work train service until retired; the first in 1964, the last in 1988.

The one South Shore Line Merchandise Despatch box motor was retired at the end of 1937. The South Shore Line continued to carry LCL freight in its baggage trailers and the baggage compartments in combination coach-baggage cars under the name Fast Emergency Package Service until all LCL tariffs were cancelled in 1976.



Emergency packages needing fast service were most often Chicago newspapers headed to homes and businesses in Northern Indiana. John Holmes is loading the news at Randolph Street Station in Chicago on the morning of 26 March 1974. Photographer Credit: Carl Edward Hedstrom, Jr.

⁵³ Chi., S. Shore & S. Bend R.R. Equipment Ledger at 262-3.

⁵⁴ *Id.* at 263.

⁵⁵ Chi., S. Shore & S. Bend R.R. AFE #483, July 11, 1938.



News carriers converge at the Michigan City Shops for their early morning ritual, January 1970.

Seven decades after Frank H. Monks predicted that the South Shore Lines was not a railroad that would carry a considerable volume of freight and express business, LCL freight on the South Shore Line finally came to an end. Carload freight service continues.



South Shore Line baggage compartment, 24 January 1976, seventy years after the railway's consultant recommended against them.