

Commuter-Style Electric Interurban Railways and Modern Regional Transit: Rise, Fall, and Reuse

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What Was an Interurban?

- The interurban was an adaptation of streetcar technology to connect cities, towns, and farms
- Flourished especially in 1910s and 1920s
- Greatest extent in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and California

Classic Interurbans

- Farm-to-market
- Street running in towns
- Roadside running in countryside
- Hardly any survived Great Depression

Commuter-Style Interurbans

- Most or all of these characteristics:
- Served large cities with strong downtowns
- Speeds, frequencies comparable to electrified commuter services of main line railroads
- Minimal street running, if any, to reach downtown
- Steel-bodied equipment

This classic interurban in Zanesville, Ohio, 1929 and others like it did not survive the Depression.



Columbus, Newark & Zanesville (William Volkmer collection)

ABANDONED INTERURBANS

Chicago, Aurora & Elgin



CA&E, Wheaton, Illinois (Robert Leffingwell collection)

CA&E was upgraded greatly in the 1920s, first by a group led by Dr. Thomas Conway (later worked with the Philadelphia & Western) and then by Chicago electric utility entrepreneur Samuel Insull.

- CA&E linked downtown Chicago with the western suburbs via the 'L' from 1905 to 1953
- Construction of Congress St. Expressway forced CA&E off the 'L'; riders had to transfer and patronage fell drastically
- Passenger service ended in 1957; CTA Congress rapid transit (now Forest Park Blue Line) opened in expressway median, a year too late to save the interurban

ABANDONED INTERURBANS, continued

Milwaukee Electric



Figure 8: Milwaukee's West Side Rapid Transit (photo from The Transport Company web site)

Milwaukee Electric's West Side Rapid Transit was built to railroad standards.

- Regionwide streetcar and interurban company built fast route to take interurbans to west and southwest off of city streets
- Opened in stages between 1926 and 1930
- Abandoned in 1951; inner part of alignment used by Interstate 96 to west of downtown Milwaukee

Illinois Terminal

Commuter-style service on this interurban ran between St. Louis and Alton until 1953



IT, Alton, Ill. (Bill Volkmer collection)



North Side of St. Louis; IT crosses above a city streetcar (William Volkmer collection)

Illinois Terminal built its own downtown terminal, elevated approach (shown here) and bridge across the Mississippi River.

Lackawanna & Wyoming Valley

This anthracite-country interurban in northeastern Pennsylvania linked Scranton and Wilkes-Barre along a railroad-quality alignment; passenger service lasted through 1952.



Lackawanna & Wyoming Valley, Dupont, Pennsylvania, 1951 (Stanford Goodrick photo)

SURVIVING LINES

Chicago, South Shore & South Bend

Another Samuel Insull interurban, the South Shore Line was completely re-equipped in 1926 when the Illinois Central (now Metra Electric) electrified its suburban service.



1920s-era South Shore Line cars at Hegewisch on Chicago's Southeast Side (Joseph Testagrose collection)

- Opened between South Bend and Kensington (for connections downtown via Illinois Central) in 1908
- Bought by Samuel Insull in 1925, completely rebuilt by 1926
- Survived the Depression because it provided freight service in a major industrial area
- Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District (NICTD) created in 1977 to sustain the South Shore Line



Dune Park, Ind., 2009 (Richard J. Aaron photo)

NICTD has bought modern equipment for the South Shore Line: single-deckers mainly in the early 1980s, and double-deckers in 2009.

Philadelphia & Western



King Manor, 1970 (Joseph Testagrose photo)

This suburban rapid transit line with interurban roots was best known for these aerodynamic cars which lasted from 1931 to 1990

- Opened 1907 on excellent private right-of-way with no grade crossings
- Never served Center City Philadelphia; instead change to Market St. Elevated
- Modernized in 1920s and early 1930s; Dr. Thomas Conway, who modernized CA&E in 1920s, ordered emblematic aerodynamic cars
- Acquired by regional agency SEPTA in 1970; reequipped with new cars in 1993-94
- Now known as the Norristown High-Speed Line

SEPTA bought new high-performance cars for the Norristown High-Speed Line



Parkview, 2011 (Richard Panse photo)

PARTIAL SERVICE RESTORATION

Chicago, North Shore & Milwaukee

The North Shore Line's Skokie Valley Route, opened in 1926, looked more like a main line railroad electrification than an interurban



Near Lake Bluff in 1962, the last full year of service (Joseph Testagrose collection)

- Developed in stages; by 1908 linked Evanston and Milwaukee
- Through service to Loop via 'L' started in 1919
- Under Samuel Insull's leadership, built Skokie Valley Route as fast, railroad-quality bypass around slow route through North Shore suburbs
- Abandoned in 1963, but CTA revived innermost portion in 1964 as Skokie Swift (Yellow Line)



Figure 24: A CTA Skokie Swift train at Niles Center Rd. grade crossing in Skokie, 1970, showing a 1926 overhead wire support structure (Joseph Testagrose photo)

The first 5 miles of the Skokie Valley Route is now CTA's Yellow Line

Pacific Electric



The Southern Division main line of this Los Angeles interurban was built largely to railroad standards for fast running

Two trains meet at Compton in 1959 (Ken Harrison photo)

- First of many lines in all directions from downtown Los Angeles opened in 1902 almost due south to Long Beach
- At its peak in 1920s, Pacific Electric was largest interurban system in the US
- Long Beach line was the last one abandoned in 1961
- Reopened in 1990 as light rail, carries about twice the ridership today as it did during WWII

Today's Los Angeles Blue Line light rail largely re-uses Pacific Electric alignment



Figure 28: A Los Angeles Blue Line train runs on the ex-Pacific Electric alignment at Rosa Parks - Imperial in 2008 (Peter Ehrlich photo)

PARTIAL SERVICE RESTORATION, continued

Sacramento Northern

This line, which has been re-used by today's Bay Area Rapid Transit, went through the Oakland, California hills



Montclair, California, in 1940 (Wilbur C. Whitaker photo)

Baltimore & Annapolis



Baltimore light rail, Linthicum Heights, Md., 1989 (J.G. Howes photo)

Today's Baltimore light rail re-uses part of this interurban south of downtown

Washington & Old Dominion



Washington & Old Dominion (Fairfax County, VA Public Library archive)

Today's Washington Metro re-uses a section of this once-leisurely interurban

INTERURBAN COMMUTER LEGACY

- Strong enough to survive the Depression
- Weakened by automobile-oriented suburbanization after World War II, all but two of these operations had been abandoned by 1963
- The tragedy of commuter-style interurbans was that regional and federal aid for transit came too late to save most of these lines
- Although most were business failures, these interurbans served important travel corridors, as shown by the fact that five have had parts of their alignments re-used for modern regional rail transit.
- Several of today's light rail lines have design philosophies resembling these interurbans, with fast trunk lines and slower distribution in downtown areas