

REMEMBERING THE NORTH



It was a beautiful Sunday morning in spring 1963. As I was leaving church, William E. Helander summoned me. This was extraordinary, as he rarely spoke to such a young member of the congregation. Known as “Judge Helander,” he was actually a hearing examiner for the Illinois Commerce Commission.

A boyhood friend of my paternal grandfather and a pillar of the church, he was about as reserved as a proper gentleman of that day could be.

There were virtually tears in his eyes as he spoke. “Norman, I tried to save the North Shore Railroad; however, those Susquehanna boys simply out-lawyered us. We did not have the resources [at the

Commission] to fight them.”

Why did the Chicago North Shore & Milwaukee create such emotion in people? Even 50 years after its abandonment in January 1963, people speak of the railroad as if it still exists. Youngsters, whose parents were not even born when the road quit, sit at the feet of their grandparents to hear stories about the

SHORE

When the Chicago North Shore & Milwaukee shut down 50 years ago,
America's interurban era truly ended

By Norman Carlson



Two North Shore “Silverliners,” 1920s-vintage cars modernized in the early '50s with new interiors and a livery that simulated stainless-steel fluting, race south toward Racine in 1962. Smoke in the distance is from Wisconsin Electric's Oak Creek power plant on Lake Michigan.

William D. Middleton, Norman Carlson collection

North Shore Line. Perhaps the reason for the response is quite simple. An underdog in its later life, the railroad provided frequent service, low fares, and on-time performance—all of which endeared it to a group of loyal passengers.

Chicago-area rail historian Joe Piersen

hit the nail on the head with one word: *freedom*.

For many young people, the North Shore was the way out of town without Mom and Dad's presence. It was the “school bus” for thousands of kids going to classes from grammar school through

college. Parents put sons and daughters on trains under the watchful eyes of the crews, knowing their children would be delivered safely on the other end of the trip. Domestic help came north. Military recruits went south. The North Shore, more than any other interurban, served



Three Silverliners working as the 4 p.m. train out of Chicago pause at the Racine station in the fading light of February 1, 1959.

Dick Lukin

ever traveled 80 mph?" Most people hadn't, but North Shore passengers did so routinely. Heads-up operation was essential. The crews were friendly, but adhered to the unspoken formula for punctual operations, "Get them off, get them on, get out of town."

Compared to just about everything else, the North Shore was the fastest mode of local transportation in the territory. Before limited-access highways, automobile travel was not competitive. The Milwaukee Road's line was "out in the country," enabling very high speeds but missing the intermediate population centers. The Chicago & North Western's Chicago-Milwaukee passenger line was an attractive alternative, but service was not as frequent as the North Shore's.

For me the North Shore Line's appeal was its diversity. In the 1950s the railroad was a kaleidoscope of equipment: standard green cars, Silverliners, *Electroliners*, steeplecab freight motors (both straight electric



The North Shore terminal at 6th and Michigan in Milwaukee, pictured in January 1960, was the work of architect Arthur U. Gerber, designer of other Prairie Style stations in Kenosha and Mundelein as well as the smaller "Insull Spanish" depots on the Skokie Valley Route.

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millions of servicemen who rode it to escape the rigors of military life. In short, the railroad was "family."

The North Shore was fast, and had the awards to prove it. Sheer speed had a lot to do with it. The road's operating timetables revealed a curious fact. There

were *no* speed limits, only speed restrictions at designated locations. Further, to make the schedules, the motormen often had to push the trains to their limits. This made for an exciting ride. In the 1920s, billboards advertised the service with the suggestive question: "Have you



A two-car train passes the flag stop for the Benedictine Convent of Perpetual Adoration in Mundelein in 1962. For many, the station's name summed up their feelings for the North Shore.

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and battery-electric), and two strange looking eight-axle motors from the Oregon Electric. A close look revealed diversity among the paint schemes; little touches here and there distinguished certain cars from the rest of the fleet.

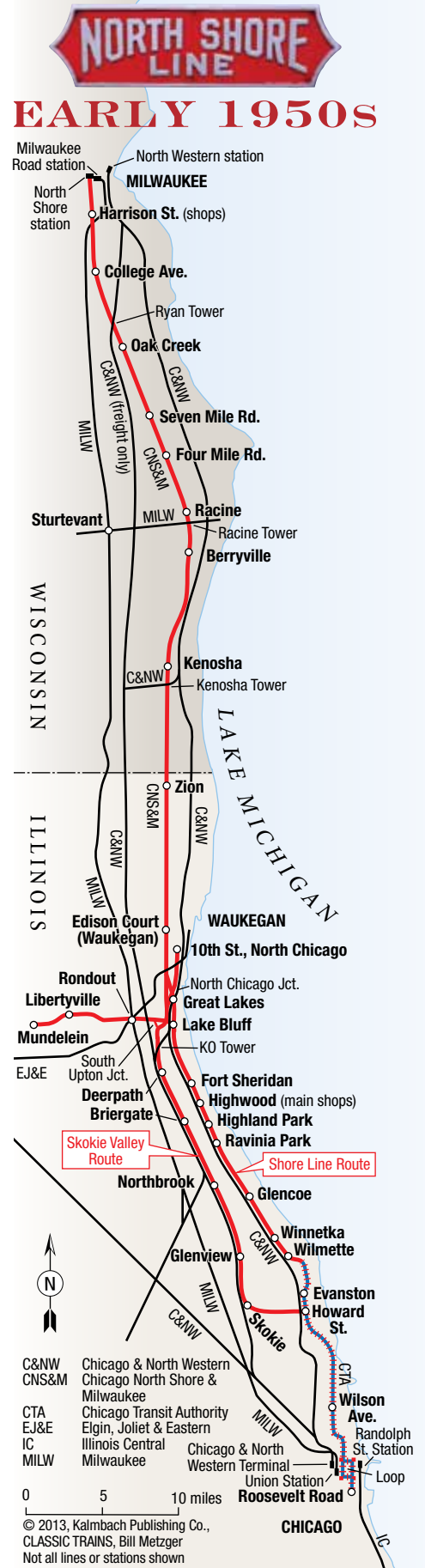
Then there was the physical diversity of the railroad. In Chicago the trains ran on a rapid-transit elevated structure for a dozen miles, drawing power from a third rail. In Milwaukee there were 20 blocks of street-running. In between you plodded along on the Shore Line Route, flew through the Skokie Valley, rode a country trolley between Lake Bluff and Mundelein. There were major cuts, fills, and substantial bridges. The ultimate experience was the true interurban line between Waukegan and Milwaukee. Oh, to only be able to ride again, especially in the "sweet light" of a summer's evening with an adult beverage in hand.

When you left Waukegan on a northbound trip, the world changed. You left behind suburban towns and the Skokie Valley Route's steel-lattice-work-supported compound catenary system. In the country north of Waukegan, direct-suspension trolley wire and wood poles framed the trains as they sped through fertile farmland. Rides were characterized by heavy braking; short dwell times in Zion, Kenosha, and Racine; and rapid acceleration to 80 mph between stations. You were in the hands of the Kenosha, Racine, and Ryan towermen who controlled the manual blocks between their respective towers that also protected crossings with the C&NW and Milwaukee Road. It was a simply thrilling ride!

Another thrill was to sit in the "railfan seat" at the front of the car on the left side. Only the motorman had a better view of the track ahead, and on the *Electroliners* your view was the equal to his. In summer you could ride the standard cars' rear platform, train door open, soaking up the sights, sounds, and smells of traction: ozone from the motors, hot oil from the journals, smoke from the brake shoes, staccato sounds of rail joints, singing trolley wire, the *thump* over road crossings preceded by the melodic multi-tone air horns of the high 700-series cars, the classic pipe whistles of the older cars, or that unforgettable deep monotone of the *Electroliners*.

Many people wonder how the North Shore could run so fast with nothing but trolley poles and, in most places, simple suspension trolley wire. The tongue-in-check response from the railroad was, "Nobody told us we couldn't." In reality it was maintenance, daily maintenance, performed from orange line cars that trundled up and down the tracks, greasing the wire and making constant adjustments to keep the overhead in place.

My first North Shore ride, at age 11 or 12, was memorable on several counts. My Aunt Astrid asked me to accompany her and her choral group to Ravinia Park, the high-class recreation area established on the Shore Line by a CNS&M predecessor. As we boarded the last car of a Ravinia special at North Shore's downtown station on Wabash Avenue, it was clear this would not be just another ride on the "L."





Southbound near Lake Bluff on the Skokie Valley Route, an *Electroliner* dashes through the snow that characterized the next-to-last day of the North Shore: Saturday, January 19, 1963.

Raymond DeGroot

We had the car to ourselves at first, as the rest of the group was boarding at Wilson Avenue. My aunt was the only South Sider in a group that was based in the Ravenswood neighborhood on Chicago's North Side. I assisted the ticket collector in loading the rest of the group, about 50 people in all.

Off we went, passing "L" trains with abandon to Evanston and Wilmette. Our majestic interurban train ruled the world of those slower, all-stops rapid transit trains. We crossed over the North Shore Channel on a big steel bridge, descended to grade level, crossed a few streets, and slowly turned a corner. What in the



world were we doing in the middle of a street? This was not like the South Chicago Branch of the Illinois Central, which ran in a center reservation flanked by traffic lanes; we were competing with automobiles, trundling along at the mandated 15 mph, slowing down for cross streets. Such indignity!

After a few stops at major stations and a fast run through the Winnetka grade separation, we arrived at Ravinia Park



Moments into its 1-hour 53-minute trip to Chicago on September 13, 1953, one of CNS&M's two *Electroliner* trains crosses the 6th Street viaduct in Milwaukee.

Raymond DeGroote



An *Electroliner* appears to have a healthy load of passengers aboard as it flies toward Chicago near Oak Creek, Wis., in May 1954.

George Krambles; Krambles-Peterson Archive

and pulled into the sidetrack. Off the train behind the ticket collector I positioned myself to assist the choral members coming down the vestibule steps and assembling in a group. With everyone accounted for, Aunt Astrid put her arm through my crooked arm and off we

headed for our concert seats.

So what was so unusual about this? I was the only person who could see. My aunt and the entire choral group were blind. The sight of a boy leading the group through Ravinia's grounds was a "show-stopper" for a number of people!

Coming back on the train, with everyone safely on board, I thought my duty was complete. The appeal of the open vestibule was calling, and I went back to enjoy the ride. Well, Aunt Astrid could not see, but boy, could she hear! The silence caused by my absence resulted in her marching down the aisle of the car, as if she had full vision, and hauling me back to my seat with a stern admonition.

Dad was not a railfan, but somehow he learned of the Central Electric Railfans' Association fantrip on July 24, 1955—the last full day of operation on the Shore Line Route. That was the first fantrip for many of us. It was a melancholy day, yet the railroad pretty much gave us the run of the place. Lunch was at Highwood Shops, but crawling through the yards looking at all the stored equipment that had seen better days was a bit of a downer.

The photo stop at North Chicago Junction resulted in my first look at a North Shore freight train. The stop at the Illinois Electric Railway Museum at North Chicago was a real eye-opener. Those guys were actually preserving the stuff that was rapidly disappearing. (Since 1964, the renamed Illinois Railway Museum has occupied a large tract at Union, Ill., and now holds some 375 pieces of equipment, including 17 from CNS&M.)

Then there was the photo stop at Ravinia Park in the setting sun. I got back on the train with a lump in my throat. Tomorrow this would be gone. How could a piece of the North Shore go away? What else would disappear into history?

Thank God, the Skokie Valley Route remained. If you were going to ride that line to Milwaukee, you might as well do it on an *Electroliner*, and that's what I did on my first trip all the way north. Anxiously waiting for the train to pull into the Roosevelt Road station, I eyed the crowd for a competitor for the left-front "railfan" seat. The seat was open—it was going to be a great ride.

The Loop looked different from the front seat of a *Liner*. You could look nearly straight down at the track. And it was quiet, an eerie silence compared to the familiar sounds of the standard equipment. The ride on the "L" north of

NORTH SHORE LINE TIMELINE

1895



Bluff City Electric Street Railway Co. begins operations in Waukegan and North Chicago; goal is Lake Bluff

1898

BCESR reorganized as Chicago & Milwaukee Electric Railway Co.

1898

C&MER operating Waukegan–Highland Park, 13 miles

1899

C&MER extended south to Evanston, where Chicago-bound passengers transfer to Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul steam trains

1902

C&MER reorganized as Chicago & Milwaukee Electric Railroad (C&M); reconstruction and improvement of entire 25-mile line begun

1903

C&M opens Lake Bluff–Libertyville branch; extended to Mundelein 1905

1904

C&M opens Ravinia Park; begins work on new Lake Bluff–Milwaukee line

1905–06

C&M reaches Kenosha and Racine

1907

Financial panic slows work on Milwaukee line, forces C&M into bankruptcy

1908

Northwestern Elevated Railroad extended to Evanston, transfer point for C&M passengers to/from Chicago

1908

Line to Milwaukee opens October 31

1895 photo: Krambles-Peterson Archive



Seen from the front of a northbound train, a train to Chicago passes KO Tower in Lake Forest, where the Skokie Valley Route crossed a C&NW line, on February 23, 1959.

Dick Lukin



The Central Electric Railfans Association chartered a three-car train to mark the last day of service on the Shore Line Route on Sunday, July 24, 1955. Early in the evening, the special paused for photos at Ravinia Park. For those who rode, it was a fun day, tinged with sadness.

John F. Humiston, Richard Humiston collection

Wilson Avenue was majestic. Despite a 45-mph speed restriction, we were doing closer to 60.

Leaving Howard Street, it was like we had been freed. The motorman put the controller into the corner as we roared through the cut in Evanston and climbed

the hill to cross the North Shore Channel. We crossed that bridge as if we were flying. Down the hill we screamed, past the Chicago Transit Authority's Skokie Shops, before a heavy service application to raise the trolley poles as the third rail ended. We drifted a short distance until

we rounded the Oakton Street curve, and then the controller was back in the corner.

Raising the poles at 35 to 40 mph was another amazing feature of the North Shore. Imagine being the conductor on a cold night, leaning back and looking up with snow or rain in your face. I leaped at the opportunity to do it, and, to my amazement, hit the wire on the first try. Then I asked myself, "What were you thinking? Your butt is on a single safety chain, you are holding the rope in one hand and a grab iron with the other. If you slip, it's curtains." Once was enough for me, but I never lost my respect for the crews who did this on a daily basis.

The landscape was nondescript in the Skokie Valley corridor as you charged north with that deep monotone horn challenging anyone or anything that might get in your way. Soon the motorman was pinching down to cross the North Western at KO Tower, glide through South Upton Junction, and clatter through Green Bay Junction. A few



Illustrative of the operating handicaps that prevented fast running on the Shore Line Route, a two-car train for Chicago rumbles down Greenleaf Avenue in Wilmette on August 29, 1954.

Raymond DeGroot



Inexplicably, the lightly patronized Lake Bluff-Mundelein shuttle trains hung on until the end. On May 26, 1956, car 722 stands beyond the Shore Line and C&NW bridges in Lake Bluff.

Raymond DeGroot

blasts on the horn curving across Scranton Avenue, and then the controller was back “on the brass” to dash through Great Lakes with a virtual emergency brake application down the hill in a cloud of brake smoke into the North Chicago Junction station. You were there for only seconds. Then it was off in a burst of speed to Waukegan.

The *Electroliner* ride to and from Milwaukee was a virtuoso performance staged 10 times each day under the direction of some of the most experienced trainmen on the railroad. They even managed to traverse the streets of Milwaukee with a dignity not achieved by trains of standard cars.

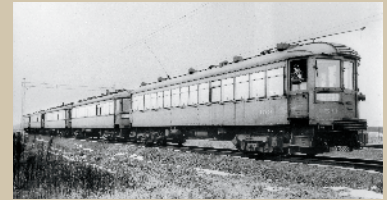
To enjoy an evening’s ride and recreate the dining-car experience, some of us would charter car 415, the standard car that provided tavern-lounge service when one of the *Electroliners* was held out for maintenance. We would have this car placed in the 6 p.m. *Milwaukee Limited*. Dinner would consist of, naturally, an Electroburger, and copious amounts of liquid refreshment. In an era when the drinking age in Illinois was 21 but only 18 in Wisconsin, it seemed that North Shore trains were always in Wisconsin when we were aboard.

Typically we would get off the train at Harrison Street, the south end of the

1911

Great Lakes Naval Training Station opens north of Lake Bluff

1915



C&M receives first steel cars

1916

Utilities magnate Samuel Insull incorporates Chicago North Shore & Milwaukee Railroad (NSL) to acquire assets of C&ME

1919

NSL trains begin running to Chicago’s Loop on Northwestern Elevated

1920

NSL opens new station buildings in Chicago and Milwaukee

1922

Service begins to 63rd Street, Chicago, over South Side Elevated Railroad; later discontinued

1923

NSL carries more than 16 million riders (vs. less than 7 million in 1915)

1924

Work begins on Evanston-North Chicago Skokie Valley Route

1926

Skokie Valley Route completed, enabling 2-hour 5-minute Chicago-Milwaukee schedules

1926

NSL begins “ferry truck” operations, the first integrated trailer-on-flatcar service on any U.S. railroad

1927

NSL wins *Electric Traction* magazine’s interurban speed trophy; awarded trophy permanently in 1933



1932

Revenues less than half 1929 levels; NSL enters bankruptcy in the collapse of the Insull utilities empire

1915: CNS&M; 1927: Ed Wojtas



Sailors from the Great Lakes Naval Training Center accounted for much CNS&M traffic, as this 1959 scene at North Chicago Junction attests.

Dick Lukin



Motor 456 (left), one of a pair set up to work from overhead trolley or battery power, switches an industrial spur near Briergate. Three of NSL's four steeple-cab "pups" roll coal hoppers south at Deerpath in June 1951. Two 8-axle motors rounded out the road's 1950s locomotive roster.

Left, Joe Piersen; right, H. M. Stange, Krambles-Peterson Archive

Milwaukee street trackage, where we had 11 minutes to restock before the day's last southbound *Electroliner* was due. This became a mandatory process after a *Liner's* "well ran dry" on one trip. Fifth and Harrison was an interesting intersection. Taverns were on two of the corners, with the North Shore's Milwaukee

shops and a truck terminal occupying the other two. (CNS&M's main shops were at Highwood, on the Shore Line Route.)

The North Shore Line would operate any fantrip you desired, even if it was a single car. There were all sorts of combinations of destinations, including trips on the CTA's South Side "L" and up to

Linden Avenue in Wilmette, which was served only by CTA trains after the Shore Line was abandoned.

On one single-car trip, the trainmaster was at the controller. He pulled into the 16th Street team track to allow a limited train to pass us. In doing so, he inadvertently ran the car into a dead sec-



On the west side of Chicago's Loop, an inbound North Shore train approaches the Quincy & Wells elevated station on June 13, 1962. In the distance—and also approaching—is a CTA "L" train, both Loop tracks being operated in a one-way, counterclockwise pattern at the time.

Raymond DeGroot

tion of wire. Our conductor lit a fusee and flagged down the limited, whose crew delivered some priceless "advice." The limited changed ends, backed off the main and onto the team track, pulled our car under live wire, and continued north. The trolley-pole choreography required for this maneuver was incredible.

My final North Shore ride was in August 1962, just before I left for college. It was a blistering hot day. A friend and I left a southbound train at Scranton Avenue (Lake Bluff) to walk almost 2 miles west on Rockland Road to catch a Mundelein local at Knollwood. We were very thirsty. It seemed like forever for the local—and its on-board water cooler—to arrive. The objective of the trip was a last ride on the Lake Bluff-Mundelein local. There was usually no one else on these runs but the crew; why these shuttles hung on until the end is a real mystery.

Sunday, January 20, 1963, was a bitterly cold, clear day that followed the snowstorms of the 19th. It was the final day of service on the North Shore Line. What was impossible in the minds of many had occurred. The Road of Service had ceased to serve!

In his book *North Shore: America's Fastest Interurban*, noted traction historian William D. Middleton summed up the place of the railroad this way:

In the world of electric traction there was nothing quite like the Chicago North Shore & Milwaukee Railroad. Born as a modest Waukegan trolley

line in the early 1890s, the North Shore Line reached maturity during the Roaring Twenties under the guiding hand of Chicago utility tycoon Samuel Insull who, in a remarkable decade of reconstruction and expansion, transformed the North Shore into one of the finest examples of the electric interurban railway in America. Indeed, if any interurban could have been called the "standard interurban" in the same sense that the Pennsylvania Railroad once called itself the "standard railroad of the world," it would have been Sam Insull's North Shore Line.

Middleton went on to observe in the book that, with the arrival in Milwaukee of the last train in the wee hours of January 21, 1963, "America's interurban era was truly over." A few other interurbans survived years and even decades longer—some still do, notably the Chicago South Shore & South Bend (also part of Insull's empire, albeit with many characteristics of a steam road)—but the North Shore had been the ultimate interurban.

Fifty years later, the North Shore remains in the minds of many people who have little interest in railroads generally, and for whom the North Shore's place in interurban history means little. For them it represented freedom from the restrictions of home and/or the military, as travel on it was evidence that you really had grown up. The Chicago North Shore & Milwaukee was not just a railroad; it was an integral part of life. **■**

1938

51-day strike shuts down NSL, prompts consideration of total abandonment

1940

Grade separation of 4 miles of Shore Line Route through Winnetka

1941

Electroliners enter service

1945

28 million passengers carried (vs. 10 million in 1940)

1946

NSL emerges from bankruptcy

1947

Waukegan and North Chicago local streetcar service ends; LCL and ferry truck service ends

1948

Three-month strike shuts down NSL

1949

Dining-car service ends except for sandwiches and drinks on *Electroliners*

1951

NSL Milwaukee streetcar service ends

1953

NSL becomes a subsidiary of a newly incorporated holding company later named Susquehanna Corp.

1955

Shore Line passenger service ends, line abandoned south of Highwood

1958

Citing 10 years of operating losses, NSL files for complete abandonment; annual ridership 4 million

1963



Abandonment approved, last trains arrive at terminals early on January 21

1963: Milwaukee Sentinel