

**Moonlight in Duneland:
Marketing the South Shore Line in the 1920s**
Stephen G. McShane

MEMO

To: Britton I. Budd

From: Samuel Insull

Date: 1924

I want to take up traction in Northern Indiana. Please investigate and report.¹

With that brief memo, Samuel Insull launched what William D. Middleton has observed as a “massive reconstruction program” that is without parallel in interurban history.² Indeed, the story of the Chicago South Shore and South Bend Railroad, otherwise known as the South Shore Line, is one of the great sagas in the history of the Hoosier State during the 1920s. Later known as “The Little Train That Could,” the South Shore Line continues today as an essential transportation system, linking thousands of Hoosiers with their livelihoods in downtown Chicago.

The South Shore Line’s phenomenal success between 1925 and 1929 was one of those points in time when a number of factors came together in the right place and the right time, not the least of which was its marketing and advertising campaigns. Before examining that “heady time,” it is important to give a brief history of the South Shore Line.

On 2 December 1901 a group led by James B. Hanna incorporated a new interurban, the Chicago and Indiana Air Line Railway. Two years later it implemented service between East Chicago and Indiana Harbor, a distance of 3.4 miles. (The history of East Chicago, which now includes Indiana Harbor, is itself a fascinating one—the two parts of town may as well have been two separate worlds. East Chicago became known as the “Twin City.”)

In 1904 the road’s name changed to the Chicago, Lake Shore and South Bend Railway, as the owners reconfigured the railroad. In 1908 service began between Hammond on the west and South Bend on the east. Finally, limited service to Chicago was inaugurated in 1909. Unfortunately, there was a catch: Chicago-bound passengers had to switch trains at Pullman, and later Kensington, to make the final leg of the journey via the Illinois Central. Limited through-service to Chicago in 1912 helped somewhat, but not enough to make the Lake Shore profitable for most of its life.

There were, however, some bright spots. The Lake Shore Line offered excursion trains and other sorts of leisure travel. The line advertised the Dunes and the amusement park at Michigan City. The Prairie Club of Chicago became a regular user, sponsoring frequent trips to Indiana’s Dune country. In addition, the Lake Shore owned a park at Hudson Lake, with weekend cottages and picnic grounds. In 1910 an eleven-car “picnic train” took fun seekers from Pullman to Hudson Lake. And, of course, the line could count on loyal Irish fans to pack a train for weekend football action at Notre Dame.

In the end, though, ridership on the Chicago Lake Shore and South Bend Railway declined steadily. The growth of the American “Car Culture,” along with the lack of a streamlined connection to Chicago, worked against the railroad. Maintenance on cars, wire systems, and track fell off noticeably in the early 1920s, and it looked like the end of the line had finally come.

And then came that simple memorandum from Insull to Budd in 1924. The next year the

Midland Utilities Company, the umbrella for a number of Insull interests, including the Chicago North Shore and Milwaukee and the Chicago Aurora and Elgin, purchased the Lake Shore and promptly renamed it the Chicago South Shore and South Bend Railroad. Insull recruited Budd, president of the Chicago, North Shore, and Milwaukee, to head up the South Shore Line, and Sam Insull, Jr., became an executive vice president. Together they created “Insull’s Super-Interurban,”³ as Middleton termed it.

During the next two years Midland Utilities poured resources into upgrading the South Shore Line, including:

- new track and roadbed
- new signal system
- new station in South Bend, and upgrades for other stations
- new passenger coaches, with rich mahogany woodwork and mohair velvet seats
- new freight locomotives
- expanded schedules with more trains
- parlor and dining cars

In addition, the company initiated the Shore Line Motor Coach service, connecting railroad passengers with destinations in Michigan and Indiana. The most significant occurrence, however, was an agreement with the Illinois Central for trackage rights to the Randolph Street station in Chicago, giving the South Shore Line direct passenger service to downtown Chicago. Last, but not least, the line began an intense marketing/advertising campaign to boost ridership.

All of this investment and planning worked. Ridership increased dramatically, from 1.5 million passengers in 1925 to more than 3 million by 1929. It was a super-interurban indeed.

Let’s take a closer look at some of the elements of the marketing campaign during the mid to late 1920s. South Shore Line staffers used techniques learned while upgrading the North Shore Line earlier, including flooding the local newspapers with stories and ads, depicting events and/or destinations via the South Shore Line. The ads emphasized speed and comfort and focused on trips to Chicago as well as trips toward South Bend. There were window displays in stations announcing special events and attractions (especially the Indiana Dunes), billboards and electric signs, and a miniature exhibition of the South Shore Line, accurate to the finest detail.

A monthly magazine called *South Shore Lines* was available in stations, on the trains, and by mail. This publication contained information on services, such as the Shore Line Motor Coach, as well as updates on the railroad’s projects or happenings in the Dunes. The staff also churned out folders, booklets, brochures and films, featuring the South Shore Line’s services and attractions. The Indiana Dunes and the Indiana Dunes State Park were pushed heavily in these publications. The railroad worked with the State of Indiana and the Dunes Purchasing Board to enhance the park. Insull donated \$25,000 to the park and also loaned money for improvements such as a hotel and bathhouse. He even planned a spur line on donated land for the park’s entrance. That line was never built, but it would have followed present-day Indiana Route 49 to the park gates.

The Outing and Recreation Bureau and the Own Your Own Home Bureau department were created to take charge of most of the promotional products for the railroad. The Outing and Recreation Bureau provided information on vacations and resorts and made all the arrangements for clients. The Own Your Own Home Bureau promoted homesites along the South Shore Line (more about that effort in a moment).

The climax of these publicity efforts, however, was the series of colorful posters depicting the “fun-in-the-sun” places along the route, especially the Dunes and the Dunes State

Park. These posters were exhibited in stations and on “L” platforms in Chicago, enticing the viewer to travel to beautiful spots along the South Shore Line. The poster art covered topics such as the four seasons, special events, destinations, Christmas, or general, romantic views of northern Indiana.

In producing our book, *Moonlight in Duneland*, my coeditor, Ron Cohen, and I located thirty-eight original posters. There are probably more out there, since it is estimated that the railroad produced posters on a monthly, or even bimonthly, basis between 1925 and 1929. Indeed, the railroad described its “monthly and bimonthly posters” in its application for the Coffin Medal in 1929. That would mean roughly sixty posters may have been part of the series. We’ll have to keep looking!

I’d like to go into a brief discussion of the power of poster advertising and perhaps surmise why the South Shore Line (and the North Shore Line for that matter) launched this poster series. In the 1920s the poster was seen as a valuable marketing tool, for it “delivers a message at a glance.”⁴ A railroad man explained:

People will read a poster and will even study it carefully and get a lesson from it; folks who would never think of reading a message that is printed briefly, much less even a brief book . . . what they see on the poster gets results—they get a vivid impression.⁵

In the foreword to the 1927 *Annual of Advertising Art*, which included the South Shore Line poster *Homeward Bound*, W. H. Beatty stated:

You are viewing here the best of art used by business. For advertising, as you know, is the principal means whereby business talks to its public. It was business that paid for these pictures while the members and adherents of the Art Directors Club reared and nurtured them into the beauty you see canonized here for the sixth year between the covers of this book. Hence you should expect to find the same flux and movement as you discern in commerce itself. All of which means that advertising art, must be and is lively art, not to be confused with the reposeful static kind of expression that one expects to find in museums pungent with historic camphor. These pictures represent much experimentation and daring, much reaching out for the new, as they should, for they reflect the same churning endlessness that competitive business does, if not for American life itself. Perhaps when a future historian of this American scene has relegated such things as business profits, quotas and earnings to footnotes on the bottom of his page . . . it will be bits of pageantry like this that will appeal to him.⁶

So, poster advertising was accepted as good business practice and perhaps even a legacy for future generations.

Now, what about the artists producing these delightful (but practical) works of art? A number of art schools in Chicago offered poster design, including the School of the Art Institute, so a pool of local talent existed to create these posters, as well as those of the North Shore Line and the Chicago Elevated Series. Some owned their own studios, such as Oscar Rabe Hanson, who had three posters accepted for the Sixth Annual Exhibition of Advertising Art—and his *Homeward Bound* (see illustrations) won awards from the Art Directors Club and Barron Collier.

Leslie Darrel Ragan produced a number of South Shore Line posters (see illustrations). He was born in Woodbine, Iowa, in 1897 and began his art education at the Cummings School of

Art in Des Moines and also studied at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago. He had a studio in Chicago and taught at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts and the art institute for several years before moving on to New York, California, and Europe. In 1927 and 1928 he created at least six South Shore Line posters, and later he produced more than one hundred posters for the New York Central Railroad. Until his death in 1972, he continued his prolific career with other rail companies, including the Norfolk & Western and the Budd Company.

German-born Otto Brennemann, with a background in automotive design, became a technical draftsman while serving in the German Army during World War I. After the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, he became commander of an armored car column and advanced into Ukraine, remaining on Russian soil until the war's end. Unable to return to Germany because of continued fighting with the Communist government, his men were finally rescued, only to find themselves held captive by the Turkish government for another three months. Back in Germany, he resumed his commercial art until he immigrated to the United States. At first he worked on the art staff of *Popular Mechanics*, but soon he began to concentrate on poster design. Asked about the future of American poster art, he remarked:

It is progressing at a rapid rate, although sometimes I wish that the American people might show more discrimination in the qualities of the arts and appreciate rather the original thought of an artistic creation than merely its superficial exterior. The cultivation of this appreciation being largely a matter of sufficient leisure and study, it may not be reasonably expected yet.⁷

These artists, as well as others, received commissions for artwork that did its job, enticing the populace to ride the South Shore Line to frolic among the flora, fauna, and beaches of Indiana's Duneland. But, was that all they were supposed to do?

Bob Harris, an expert on the South Shore Line, in his essay, "Not Just Selling Railroad Tickets: The Role of the South Shore Line Poster Art in the Development of Northwest Indiana,"⁸ argues that the South Shore posters had, in fact, two purposes:

1. Get people on the train for recreation, that is, increase ridership revenue.
2. Use that interest in the Dunes to stimulate sales of Duneland property to those fun seekers and turn them into commuters, that is, daily riders of the South Shore Line.

Harris cites several things to boost his argument, causing me to believe he's on the right track (sorry for the pun):

C. H. Jones, the South Shore Line's general manager, said in 1927 that the South Shore Line sought to "create business where it did not exist by selling the territory served to those living outside of it."⁹ It could be that Jones was talking about ridership, yet the possibility exists he meant it literally.

The Fred'k H. Bartlett Realty Company suburban developments east of the Dunes State Park—Beverly Shores and others—provided the perfect opportunity for potential home buyers seeking a residence in the beautiful Duneland. And, as Harris points out, the South Shore's Own Your Own Home Bureau was there to assist those prospective home buyers.

As mentioned earlier, the South Shore Line probably produced up to sixty posters during the 1920s. The North Shore Line had several posters selling the idea of buying a home in the

north suburbs of Chicago (see illustration). The South Shore Line could have had some similar posters, perhaps among those that have not been recovered yet. The “Homeward Bound” via South Shore Line poster may have supported the Own Your Own Home Bureau, planting thoughts in the minds of viewers that a home in northwest Indiana might indeed be an attractive idea.

Harris’s thesis is also helpful to explain the production of several of the South Shore Line’s “Workshop of America” posters (see illustrations). The purpose of these posters was probably twofold:

1. The posters sought to celebrate the industrial might of northwest Indiana. At this time in America, industrial strength was seen as a “good thing.” The more smoke (as portrayed in *The Workshop of America* poster), the healthier the economy, including plenty of jobs.
2. Advertising the Calumet Region to Chicago businessmen as a place to do business, perhaps even to build a manufacturing plant. In addition, these particular posters could have sought to boost freight traffic on the South Shore Line, another goal of the Insull companies.

There is no doubt that the South Shore Line worked with local chambers of commerce along the route to boost industrial development. The railroad said as much in its application for the 1929 Coffin Medal:

The South Shore Line has carried on a progressive program, in co-operation with Chambers of Commerce of the cities along its line, to stimulate industrial activity and passenger traffic. It has investigated and analyzed the nearby natural resources, and constant encouragement given industries has resulted in the location of fifteen new factories along its line, all of which are served by its side tracks.¹⁰

We’ll just have to discover some of those long-lost posters to confirm the theory that the South Shore Line sold more than “railroad tickets” as it developed the Insull Empire. Unfortunately, that empire crumbled with the deepening of the Great Depression. No more posters, or much of any of the elements of the booming marketing campaign, survived that economic downturn. There is, however, a rather touching footnote to the poster story.

When *Moonlight in Duneland* hit bookstore shelves in October 1998, it received a huge wave of publicity, including a number of newspaper stories. One of those articles appearing in the 18 January 1999 issue of the *Chicago Sun-Times* was read by the niece of a woman living in Evanston, Illinois. I received a telephone call from the niece with a delightful bit of information. Her Aunt Audrey, it seemed, told wonderful stories of her career as a model and dancer during the 1920s. One of Audrey’s modeling sessions occurred on a Lake Michigan beach in 1925, when artist Hazel Brown Urgelles produced Audrey’s likeness in the painting used for the South Shore Line’s famous poster entitled, “The Dunes Beaches” (see illustration). One of the many mysteries surrounding the poster series centered upon that “Girl on the Beach.” For years people wondered about her, as she gazed at the viewer with that warm smile and a twinkle in her eye. Who was she? Did she live in the Dunes? Was she even a real person or just an image from a talented artist’s mind?

At last, we think we found her. In the 1920s nineteen-year-old Audrey Howland agreed

to pose for the painting. She and Urgelles found a spot in the Dunes on a bright, sunny day. Audrey brought home two things from that session: a check for twenty-five dollars and a sunburn.

The years passed and Audrey married, raised a family, and forgot about the poster. In the 1970s, however, her daughter saw a reproduction of the poster in an Evanston art store window and noticed a striking resemblance to her mother. At age ninety-two, Audrey confirmed that she indeed was the girl on the beach. Jim Gordon, a local journalist for the *Gary Post-Tribune*, visited Audrey when he heard about her, looked through Audrey's photo album from the 1920s, and agreed she was probably the poster girl. So, the next time you view that poster, be sure to say hello to Audrey. You will almost hear her respond as you look into those captivating eyes.

1. Norman Carlson, ed., *Chicago South Shore & South Bend Railroad: How the Medal Was Won*, Bulletin 124, Central Electric Railfans' Association, 1985), 7.
2. William D. Middleton, *South Shore: The Last Interurban*, 2d rev. ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 39.
3. *Ibid.*, 37.
4. Ronald D. Cohen and Stephen G. McShane, eds., *Moonlight in Duneland: The Illustrated Story of the Chicago South Shore and South Bend Railroad* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 2.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, 2–3.
7. *Ibid.*, 3.
8. Bob Harris, "Not Just Selling Tickets: The Role of the South Shore Line Poster Art in the Development of Northwest Indiana," in Cohen and McShane, eds., *Moonlight in Duneland*, 21–25.
9. *Ibid.*, 21.
10. Carlson, ed., *Chicago South Shore & South Bend Railroad*, 152.