Interstate Public Service—Your Neighborhood Interurban
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The Interstate Public Service family tree actually began in 1890, when the New Albany Highland Railway Company built a tiny, one-and-a-half-mile line from the west end of New Albany some two hundred feet up the hills to the Silver Hills suburb. The line opened 17 May 1892 and is recognized by many as being the first interurban line in Indiana, operating before several other claimants to the title. Too small a line? Not according to the U.S. Census Bureau, which defined an interurban as "a railway having more than half its trackage outside of municipal limits."

In the minds of the general public, however, the 1 January 1900 entry into Indianapolis by the Indianapolis, Greenwood and Franklin Railroad was the first actual interurban service of note. While only a trial run, rolling over an uncompleted roadway, city residents welcomed the first car with open arms, little realizing they were seeing the first of hundreds of thousands of cars that would eventually serve the capital. Regular service between Indianapolis and Greenwood began 16 January.

Service over this line was gradually expanded southward to Franklin on 6 June 1901, and by 1902 the line had captured 98 percent of the total local rail traffic between the two cities. Further extensions were made to Columbus on 19 September 1902 and to Seymour on 21 October 1907.

The company underwent several name changes, to Indianapolis, Columbus and Southern Traction in 1902 and to Interstate Public Service in 1912. It eventually acquired all of the interurban and city railway properties between Indianapolis and Louisville and was finally renamed Public Service Company of Indiana in 1931, under which name it finally abandoned the last section between Indianapolis and Seymour in 1941.

The early Interstate operations were typical Indiana interurban style, using lightweight wooden passenger cars and a few small express or freight motors converted from the early small passenger cars.

As the years passed, however, the company grew into a full-service interurban line, carrying passengers in steel state-of-the-art cars. Dining cars were provided on select runs between the Indianapolis and Louisville terminals, as was overnight sleeper service (one of three interurban sleeper services in the United States).

Express packages and closed pouch mail were carried on most runs, along with considerable loads of newspapers. A first-rate freight service was offered from Indianapolis to points as far away as Atlanta, Detroit, Cleveland, and Buffalo through a multistate network of interurban and steam road connections.

As mentioned above, Interstate operated top of the line equipment. The steel passenger cars, built by Cincinnati Car Company in 1921, were sixty-two feet long and carried fifty-five seated passengers. In accord with practices of the day, they were divided into three compartments—main passenger, smoking, and baggage (the baggage compartments had fold down seats to carry overloads on heavy traffic days). These cars were supplemented by 1907 Niles wooden-passenger motors that were rebuilt into steel forty-seven- passenger trailers.

The first diners were built by American Car and Foundry in Jeffersonville in 1923 and 1924 and seated twenty-six passengers at two- and four-seat tables and individual

armchairs. The diners provided full service, offering coffee, light lunches, and complete dinners at, notably, prices that would break your heart today, such as a small steak for only a dollar and a quarter! A later diner was the rebuilt Winona Service 1910 Jewett. Placed in service in 1926 as the first all-electric interurban diner in the country, the car seated twenty-five.

Obviously, the "crown jewels" of Interstate's passenger service were its sleepers. Beginning in 1924, the twenty, larger than Pullman-sized, berths attracted industry-wide attention and quickly became popular with the traveling public, although there were some questions as to the practicality of a seven-hour, 117-mile trip, even though it did tend to balance expenses of the trip. (As in all traveling, the passenger either liked it or did not.)

While the various Interstate companies offered frequent summer excursions between the Indianapolis and Louisville terminals, from the early 1910s up until the final days of operation, by far the most popular were the "Meet the Boat" trains. Excursion tickets were sold on the 6:00 A.M. local from Seymour, which connected with the 9:00 A.M. steamer out of Louisville for Cincinnati.

The steamer proceeded upstream to Carrollton, Kentucky, where it tied up to the bank, and the passengers transferred to another boat for the return to Louisville. The trips were offered from 1915 until 1918, when the two steamers were destroyed in a massive ice gorge at Cincinnati.

Many cars were chartered to numerous points along the line by such varied groups as high school athletic teams, community baseball clubs and fans, political and business groups, and nature study clubs.

Interstate conducted a widespread less than carload freight service in conjunction with other traction lines throughout the Midwest, and, through transfers at key points, with many steam railroads. On its own line, the company hauled logs, glucose, livestock, milk cans, manufactured products (including corrugated cartons from Inland Container in Indianapolis to the canning factory at Austin and canned goods out of the cannery), gravel and sand, and automobile parts.

Almost unknown was the Jeffersonville dock complex, which through the years handled varying small loads of freight to and from Ohio River boat traffic. A major expansion of the docks was planned in 1922 to handle continuing loads of barge freight from Pittsburgh and other eastern points to the docks for transshipment. However, the financial costs of the dock rebuilding and expansion along with the costs of the extra cars to handle the expanded service, which were estimated at a million dollars, were too great to overcome, and the plans were abandoned.

Freight customers were also well served with special trains for a number of business and agricultural associations. Notable among the latter was the 1925 "Daisy Sire Special," a four-car train that traveled the line presenting the latest in dairy farm procedures.

Express was a key service. Handled on all cars, small-town merchants could order items from Indianapolis suppliers in the morning and have them on their shelves in the afternoon. In addition, full express cars were run daily between the terminals, as well as special cars for the major express companies.

One of the principal objections to the interurban was the time that it took to travel between terminals. On the 117-mile Indianapolis to Louisville run, for instance, the 1910 schedule called for a running time of exactly four hours. Today this seems excruciatingly

slow, but—compare this time to what could be expected from an automobile traveling the same route over the so-called highways (dirt and gravel) of the time—the average road time of the day would at best be about seven hours. Of course, this assumed the roads would not be too muddy, too rutted, or too snowy to drive over. Not to mention the clouds of dust in the summer.

Over time the main highways were paved, and by the early 1930s autos could make the run in about four hours (if they observed the speed limits). By this time the interurbans had cut their running time to three hours and fifteen minutes.

Still seem slow? The 1933 Electric Traction magazine ranked Interstate (now operated by Indiana Railroad) in the nation's number seven spot with a thirty-nine-mile-per-hour route speed, including stops. On the Interstate line these included a possible seventeen station and 125 flag stops. Obviously, not all of these would be incurred on every run, but they were there, many of them farm driveways that were required to be served by their original land leases to the railway. One can well imagine the frustration felt by the motorman of the big combine when, just after attaining running speed, he was flagged by a white handkerchief waving at an isolated farm crossing. But, when one is operating the neighborhood interurban, one must be neighborly, so cut the power, slam on the brake, and greet the new passengers with a welcoming smile.

Interstate and its predecessor lines promoted safe operating practices from day one. Indianapolis, Columbus and Southern was one of the first interurban lines to require full train order dispatching in 1906; Indianapolis and Louisville provided complete protection by standard crossing signs in 1910; and Interstate operated a systemwide safety car in 1927. However, all of these efforts were not enough. Motorists continued to drive in front of trains (vivid portrayals of the dangers involved failed to discourage this fatal practice), and pedestrians insisted in walking across the tracks in front of oncoming cars. In 1922 Interstate released its first warning poster. While eye catching, to say the least, the company could not accurately determine its effectiveness, and in 1924 it was replaced by a less graphic poster.

Despite the many auto and pedestrian incidents, the company suffered only one accident that involved passenger fatalities. This occurred on the Big Four Bridge between Jeffersonville and Louisville on the snowy night of 14 January 1918, when Dixie Flyer car number 204 crashed into the rear of an overloaded Louisville local number 402, which had slowed down for the descent on the south bridge approach due to poor visibility. The Flyer crushed the local's rear platform, killing 3 passengers and injuring more than 20 others, including several who were thrown to the ground some fifty feet below the bridge. Most of the estimated 150 passengers on the local were workers from the Jeffersonville Quartermaster Depot who were returning home to Louisville.

In July 1928 Interstate's Louisville route suffered major readjustments when the Big Four Bridge was closed for rebuilding and strengthening. This meant the main-line service ended in Jeffersonville, with no rail service between Jeffersonville and Louisville. Local passengers had to either take the ferry or the long way around through New Albany into Louisville. There was an alternate main line available, via bus from Sellersburg across the Kentucky and Indiana bridge. This less than satisfactory situation lasted until the rebuilt Big Four Bridge was opened in July 1929.

A second blow to Interstate passenger traffic occurred when the new municipal highway bridge between Jeffersonville and Louisville was completed in 1929. This

shorter and faster route allowed many former Interstate passengers to drive cars or take the bus across the river, and local rail traffic immediately decreased a reported 40 percent. Interstate did receive some compensation, however. Its riverside docks received considerable amounts of cement, sand, and other construction materials that were transferred onto barges and moved out to the new bridge caissons and piers.

The Interstate lines were always susceptible to flooding, from the local ones that hampered the building of the original Indianapolis and Louisville line in 1907 to the worst of them all—the Ohio River valley flood that rampaged the Midwest in 1937.

Heavy rains hit the Jeffersonville and New Albany areas for eleven days beginning 13 January, and by 21 January all cross-river and local railway service had been suspended. By 27 January more than 70 percent of Jeffersonville's and 55 percent of New Albany's incorporated area was under water, when the river reached its highest crest in history. The water then began to slowly recede and by 7 February was back to its normal level. However, rail service was slow to resume, and it was another four to six weeks before normal service was available. Interstate's main-line service was also deluged by numerous washouts as far north as Columbus, and through Indianapolis to Louisville service was not resumed until 22 February.

Along with the rest of the interurban industry, Interstate was hard hit by the triple blows of the 1929 stock market crash, the Great Depression, and the 1935 Public Securities Holding Act. (The act, requiring the separation of utilities and electric railroads, was the death knell for interurbans.) Merged into the Midland United Company, the main line was leased to Indiana Railroad (IRR), which in October 1939 abandoned the Seymour to Louisville section of the line due to insufficient traffic. While possibly not fully recognized at the time, this action effectively condemned the Indianapolis to Seymour stub to a slow, lingering fade into history.

However, IRR continued to operate the Seymour line on a thirty-two trains per day schedule. This operation continued until January 1941, when IRR returned the property to the Public Service Company of Indiana (PSCI), which operated a franchise holding one daily round-trip until a stupidly ironic collision on 8 September 1941 demolished the majority of the line's rolling stock, suspending service permanently. PSCI then bought out of its ninety-nine-year-lease with Indianapolis, Columbus and Southern, and the line was scrapped.

Eight September 1941—the end of the Interstate operation, and effectively the end of the interurban in Indiana—is a date that is still recalled by former passengers, residents in towns along the line, and countless interurban railroad fans as truly a day that will live in infamy.

Which bring us to the giant question—WHAT IF?

—What if Public Service had several other passenger cars available and had been able to continue service?

—What if the line had been able to serve Camp Atterbury—one of the largest military training camps in the country—after it opened just northwest of Edinburgh in 1942?

—What if the line had been able to continue operating after World War II and through the succeeding decades to the present? Could it operate yet today as a suburban light rail?

To quote Maud Muller: “For all sad words, of tongue or pen, The saddest are these—It might have been!”

Surprisingly, the ghost of the old Interstate lingers today. When the Seymour to Louisville stretch was abandoned by IRR in 1929, a new company was incorporated to connect the Louisville Cement Company at Speed with the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad line southwest of Charlestown. This company, the Southern Indiana Railway, bought four pieces of electrical equipment from IRR and began serving the plant on 18 March 1940. Converted to diesel operation in 1947, it continues service today over several miles of the old Interstate right-of-way.

The question is often asked, “Are there any Interstate cars surviving today?” As far as can be determined, the only ones known to still exist are:

—suburban car #263, operating under wire at the California Railroad Museum

—sleeper #167, under restoration in Squamish British Columbia

—steel express motor #425, shortened some fifteen feet and reportedly still operating under diesel power in Ohio

There may possibly be some others, long hidden away and/or converted to other uses, which might show up some day—fans and historians can still hope!