

# There Used to be a Station...

## Right Here

Photo courtesy of the Indiana Historical Society

It's a nice hotel – a Hilton – located conveniently by Indianapolis's famed Monument Circle and directly adjacent to the Indiana State Capital. Today, one can scarcely imagine that at that site, for nearly 70 years, stood one of the world's foremost passenger rail terminals, a grand station that served as the hub of the Indiana interurban network that once connected together nearly the entire Hoosier state. There used to be a train station... right here.

Built in 1904 and razed nearly seven decades later, the Indianapolis Traction Terminal included a nine-story office building with a majestic nine-track train shed alongside. Its location – right next to the state capital complex – illustrated the importance of the facility. The Traction Terminal served as the nerve center for an

interurban system that traveled as far as Louisville, Ky., Dayton, Ohio, and Fort Wayne. At its peak, the Traction Terminal hosted more than 500 daily trains and 7 million annual passengers. Thirteen separate lines fed into the facility. Its existence profoundly impacted the growth and development of Indianapolis.

"The interurbans brought people to Indianapolis to shop and to enjoy the advantages of the big city," says rail historian and *RAIL Magazine* contributor William D. Middleton. "The interurban system and terminal made Indianapolis one of the greatest interurban centers in America and gave the city unparalleled advantages as a regional center."

"The Indianapolis newspapers arrived in small towns all around

the state each morning on the interurbans," says Ball State Professor of Urban Planning Francis Parker. "The interurbans – and the Traction Terminal – connected together these small towns with Indianapolis and made a day trip to shop or take in a show in the city possible."

### Linking it all Together

Indianapolis's original streetcars, as was the case with many American cities, were 14-passenger cars pulled along city streets on iron rails by mules. Mulecars, as they were known, represented the first real public transportation in Indianapolis and plied the city's streets until the 1890s, when electric streetcars began to appear. The 40-passenger cars would

hold sway in the city until their demise in the mid-1950s.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, an intercity electric railway network began to form across Indiana, with Indianapolis at its heart. The overall system build-up was swift and its immediate impact dramatic.

“The bulk of the interurban lines serving Indianapolis were constructed between 1900 and 1907,” says Parker. Eventually, the system would total more than 1,800 total miles.

Between 1900 and 1910, the population of Indianapolis grew by 38 percent, an astounding figure due in some measure to the interurbans. This growth led the St. Louis Republic newspaper to editorialize: “Fast interurban trolley lines have made it easy for the people within a circle of 250 miles in diameter to visit Indianapolis. In the streets of this capital, the man from Fort Wayne rubs elbows with the man from Terre Haute; the shopper from Columbus meets her old school friend from Logansport. A trolley map of Indiana looks like the spokes of a wheel whose hub is the city of Indianapolis. The city has grown because it made it easy for its neighbors for a hundred miles around to drop in before dinner by trolley car, and leaving after an early supper, to get home by bed time.”

### **The Indiana Railroad: Rebirth and Resignation**

Peak travel on the Hoosier state’s interurbans – and thus through the Traction Terminal – was between 1907 and 1920. By the end of the 1920s, interurban passenger travel had fallen some 40 percent. Samuel Insull, a Chicagoland utility tycoon (for more on Mr. Insull, see RAIL #18, “Ninety Miles in Ninety Minutes” and RAIL #2, “Insull Powered”) famed for his work with that city’s North Shore and South Shore interurban lines, had launched efforts to consolidate the various lines into a single system as early as 1925. By 1930, he had purchased four of



Photo courtesy of the Indiana Historical Society

In addition to delivering high volumes of passengers to Indianapolis, the Traction Terminal also served as an important destination for mail service in the region (above). Meanwhile, the Terminal offered a range of amenities for its passengers (below), including newstands, food service and waiting areas.



Photo courtesy of the Indiana Historical Society

Indianapolis's principle lines into his new Indiana Railroad. He would soon add the others.

Insull set about rehabilitating and modernizing the interurban network, improving dispatching, upgrading track and purchasing new rolling stock. Running times improved on many of the railroads routes. In 1936, the Indiana Railroad turned a modest profit, but the system's future, by then, was already looking bleak. As the new integrated interurban system emerged, the Indiana economy was working against it.

The depression's onset saw the railroad begin the abandonment of lines. In 1937, tremendous flooding enveloped the Ohio River, interrupting some Indiana Railroad service. The coup de grace for the system was a fatal collision in 1941 on the line between Indianapolis and Columbus.

### A Station Sits Idle

For nearly 20 years the Traction

The Tractiton Terminal's trainshed allowed through service so no turning of trains was necessary.

Terminal and train shed stood virtually silent in the center of Indianapolis. The tracks around the terminal and shed had been paved over for bus service, and the arrival of a new bus station signaled the beginning of the destruction phase of the Terminal. The shed was torn down in 1968, though efforts to preserve it were underway.

"The Lily Foundation was interested in preserving the train shed and moving it to the Indiana Transportation Museum in nearby Noblesville," says Ball State University's Parker. "And they almost saved it, but it ended up being cut up and sold for scrap."

The Traction Terminal building stood another four years after the train shed had been removed. Finally, in 1972, it fell victim to the wrecking ball. What's left of the famed interurban network are vestiges and glimpses.

"A few odds and ends of track remain," says Parker, "as do some restored stations and depots. But because many of the stations were no

more than storefronts, it's often tough to recognize them as stations, per se."

### Once Before, And Now Once More

The Indianapolis Traction Terminal was the nexus of a rail transit network that conected much of Indiana and allowed the city to grow and prosper. The state's nickname – The Crossroads of America – can in many ways be traced to this rail history. But as so often is the case, history may soon repeat itself.

Last summer, a study of Indianapolis recommended a commuter rail line for further study. The line, connecting Noblesville and the city would be ideal, according to the study, for diesel-multiple unit (DMU) service. DMU service would, not surprisingly, look very much like the interurbans of another generation. 



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