

Program: Indianapolis Traction Terminal 1904-1972: The 8th Wonder of the World

Speaker: Roger Robison, MD, FACP, FACR, Scientech Club member

Introduced by: Roger Robison

Attendance: 136

Guests: Fletcher Graham, Marine Harcourt, Dan Hinel, Bob Hooker, Bill Merrill, Alan Prisk, Dan Russell, John Sasens, Randy Trowbridge, Jessica Williams

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Mass public transportation was being developed in the mid to late 1800s across the American and European landscape and took several forms. By early 20th century, “traction” was taking place and served as a light rail mode of transportation. Electric trams first appeared in 1884 in Germany. At the turn of the century, about 40% were steam, 40% were electric and 20% petrol. The electric cars were both AC and DC in the US.

Streetcars first appeared in the US and Indianapolis in late 1890s. The Indianapolis “Inter-urban” connected to several neighboring cities, with 12 different lines converging in Indianapolis. This expansion required building the Indianapolis Traction Terminal in 1904. This terminal was downtown Indianapolis and was bordered by Illinois, Capitol, Ohio and Market streets. Currently, this is the site of the Hilton Hotel.

In the US, there were 18,000 miles of traction track in the early 1900s, covering 36 or the 46 states. The Midwest states had the most, with Indiana having 1800 miles, Ohio having 2800 miles, and 22 states having less than 500 miles. However, due to the location and the layout of track in Indiana, Indianapolis was the largest traction facility in the Midwest, and probably the world at the time.

This Indianapolis center came as seven rail companies combined efforts, including: [Indiana Traction](#), [Indianapolis and Eastern Railway](#), [Indianapolis and Cincinnati Traction](#), Indianapolis, Columbus and Southern Traction, Indianapolis and Martinsville Rapid Transit, [Indianapolis Coal Traction](#), and the [Indianapolis and Northwestern Traction](#). The terminal facility was designed by D.H. Burnham and Company from Chicago and had nine tracks, a two story terminal section, and five stories of offices. Associated with the facility were freight, retail, tracks, and a hotel. Of note were two eagle statues, that are the only parts of the facility known to exist today, now located at the Indianapolis City Hall.

The various traction companies across the country made little money. With the changing dependence on petrol cars and WW1, the light railroads across the country were having economic problems surviving. Within a couple of years following the Great Depression in 1929, economics caused most to collapse. During this period, Sam Insull, an English educated gentleman, bought out and merged several of the traction companies at a low cost. He also used his interest in electric power generating to keep costs down and to keep the railroads running. He merged many of the lines to form the Indiana Railroad in July 1930. This extended the life of many traction lines. Four traction companies persisted in Indiana including the South Shore Line’s commuter and heavy rail service, which continues to this day.

The Indiana Railroad had problems with FDR and the federal government regarding their operation. The government felt a public utility was screwing the public and the government could operate the rail line better. Although the government lost the legal battle in the courts, Sam Insull and the Indiana Railroad could not survive and by 1937, their operation had closed. In 1937, the facility became a bus terminal and remained so until 1968, when the building was torn down and replaced by a Hilton Hotel. Roof girders from the terminal were moved to Noblesville, primarily paid for by the Ruth Lilly

Foundation, where it was hoped they would be used to reconstruct the facility. However, after some evaluation of the cost and the effort of the city of Noblesville to move the railroad items out of the city, the girders were sold for scrap.

Much of the history of the railroad was detailed by Dr. Howard Blackford. He was a founding member of the Kentucky Railway Museum and the Illinois Railway Museum. He created the Indiana Transportation Museum in Noblesville (now moved to Logansport), where railroad models of all types are on display.

It seems that in the 21st century, we are again looking toward traction for transportation, and in some instances, replacing petroleum based transportation options. Only a few light rail operations continue today and include those in San Francisco, the South Shore Line in northern Indiana and Chicago, New Orleans, and Seattle, among others.



Dr. Roger Robison