

CHICAGO, NORTH SHORE AND MILWAUKEE

Jack Benny's Hometown RR

BY RICHARD R. KUNZ

Jack Benny had a great fondness for traveling by rail; virtually every cross-country trip he made in his 60 years in show business was by train at least in part. His affection for train travel became part of his comic persona; two or three times each season in the golden days of radio Jack and the gang would do a program based upon the actual trips back east he made each year.

Remember "Train leaving on Track 5 for Anaheim, Azusa and Cuc--a-monga?" And Frank Nelson as the ticket agent who seemingly enjoyed giving Jack a hard time? Or Sheldon Leonard, the tout, always trying to switch Jack to

another train? Even Rochester, Jack's long-time "valet," made his first appearance on the program on Easter Sunday in 1937 in a one-time role as a Pullman porter on the "Super Chief" Jack and crew were riding back to California.

When Jack left Waukegan in 1912 with pianist Cora Salisbury on his first vaudeville tour, it was by rail, changing in Chicago for another train to Gary and their first performance. Vaudeville in the 'teens and twenties involved a lot of train travel, from elegant limiteds to lowly milk-run locals; by all accounts Jack thrived on it.



AN EARLY POSTCARD of Waukegan looking northward on Genessee Street at Washington. Meyer Kubelsky's saloon occupied one of the storefronts at this corner. (Shore Line Society photo)

Though Jack was born to Emma Kubelsky in Chicago's Mercy Hospital on St. Valentine's Day in 1894, he always considered himself a citizen of Waukegan, popularly known as the Bluff City. His father Meyer had established himself there two years before, opening a genteel "working-man's" saloon at the corner of Genessee and Washington Streets — the city's principle downtown intersection.

Meyer Kubelsky, now a respectable and soild citizen of Bluff City, needed a wife to make his life complete, and in keeping with the custom of the times sought out a marriage broker in Chicago. In due course he was introduced to a beautiful young lady named Emma Sachs. She lived with her family in the Humboldt Park neighborhood of Chicago, and the romance blossomed with their first meeting.

As the family settled into their home on Clayton Street (Jack's sister Florence was born in 1900), Meyer Kubelsky no doubt was aware that the age of electricity was beginning in earnest, and that right outside his saloon an electric railway was being constructed that would grow and prosper for more than sixty years. Given its lower fares and more frequent service than the competing steam railroad, the Chicago & North Western, it seems quite logical that the frugal Kubelsky family would avail themselves of its services many times in the ensuing years.

What evolved into the interurban electric railway ultimately linking Chicago and Milaukee by way of the lakefront towns was incorporated when Jack Benny (he was still Benjamin Kubelsky then) was but two years old. The Bluff City Electric Street Railway was incorporated on July 3, 1896 as a local street car line connecting Waukegan's north and south sides via North, Franklin, County, Clayton and Genessee Streets.

The tiny line prospered and expanded,



JACK BENNY, Age 4

reaching downtown Evanston in 1899 and Milwaukee in 1908. The Waukegan city system that formed the nucleus of the interurban was also enlarged, and a branch was built westward from Lake Bluff to Mundelein in 1905. In 1908 Chicago's 'L' system was extended northward to a direct connection with the interurban line in Evanston.

Business was good in these prewar years, and the wooden electric coaches that were basically overgrown streetcars of the early years began to give way to

JACK BENNY'S HOMETOWN RAILROAD

the first of the steel passenger cars (just as good, if not better, than what the North Western ran) in 1915.

Jack left Waukegan in 1912 (quite possibly on the North Shore Line) to see the world, though his family remained in the Bluff City for many years; his hometown electric line continued to serve its growing territory. The Great War was coming, and the interurban was fortunate in having both an Army camp (today's Fort Sheridan) and a navy base (Great Lakes) directly on line; sailors and soldiers accounted for a substantial portion of the line's revenues.

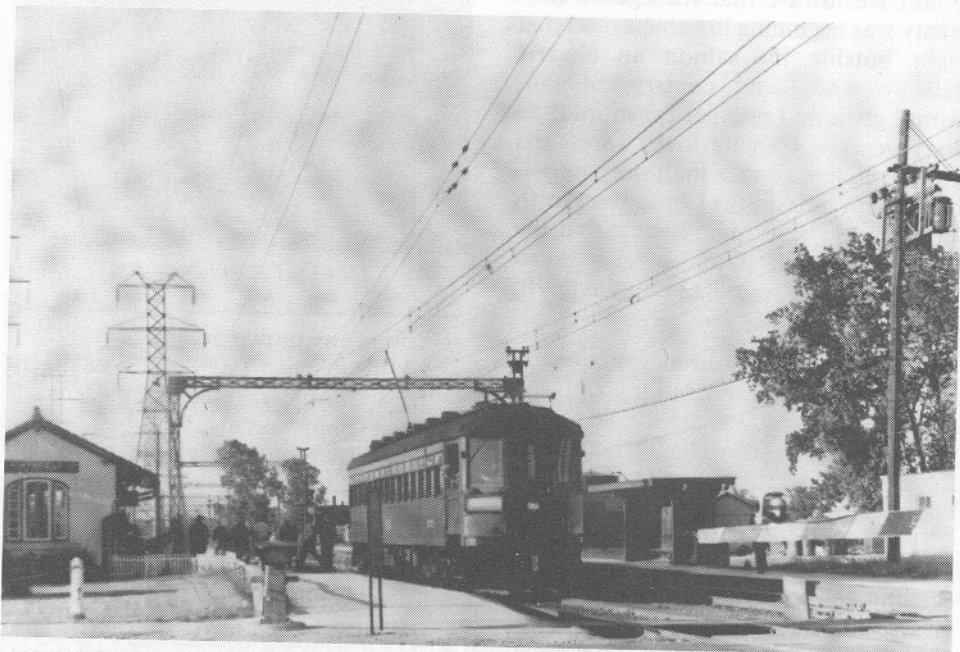
And, when Jack joined the Navy in 1917 (the family was living at 224 South Genesee Street by then, with the electric line right out front), he was stationed for a time at Great Lakes. No doubt he often took the opportunity to pay his family a visit by streetcar, liberty time permitting.

The electric railway had been re-

christened with the name it would bear for the rest of its life — Chicago North Shore & Milwaukee — and successfully negotiated for the right to run its trains from Evanston directly to the Loop via the tracks of the elevated line. The first downtown service began in 1919, and the North Shore Line took its place as a full partner in the bid to attract riders travelling between Chicago and Milwaukee.

The towns along the lake through which Jack and members of his family had traveled on many occasions — Jack himself to Chicago for violin lessons on a regular basis — were growing with the postwar boom. Ridership on the North Shore continued to increase, and the railroad, now under the stewardship of utilities magnate Samuel Insull, sought a way to speed up its long-distance trains that ran all the way from Chicago to Milwaukee.

The answer was found in a right-of-



LIGHT TRAFFIC often called for the use of a single car, as here at Northfield on the Skokie Valley Route. (John T. Beuttas photo)



SKOKIE VALLEY ROUTE was a high-speed rail line that enabled the North Shore to lop precious minutes off its schedules — but the Edens Expressway overhead presages the end for this fine railway. (John T. Beuttas photo)

way several miles west of the lake in the Skokie Valley. The new line turned west at Howard Street, then north just west of Cicero Avenue (today's Skokie Highway), permitting a high-speed run through the prairies to what is now Illinois Highway 176 (Rockland Road). Trains turned back east along a part of the branch line from Mundelein to Lake Bluff and rejoined the older route at North Chicago Junction just south of 22nd Street.

Chicago 'L' service stopping at seven stations along the new route was opened to Dempster Street in 1925, and the full "Skokie Valley Route" (complete with stations in an "Insull Spanish" motif placed at spots likely to attract future residents) was ready for business a year later. The addition to the North Shore system of the new high-speed bypass route came not a moment too soon, for the Eucharistic Congress of the Roman Catholic Church's Chicago Diocese held near Mundelein in September required

every car the North Shore and 'L' could muster; well over 200,000 pilgrims were carried in a 20-hour period on the principal day of the event.

As Jack Benny settled into his routine of vaudeville and later radio and screen appearances, so did the North Shore Line, now armed with two steel arteries (the new Skokie Valley Route and the older Shore Line Route), get down to business hauling millions of commuters and long-distance riders each year. Many interurban electric railways went under during the Depression, but the North Shore soldiered on, bolstered by revenues from military personnel as well as civilians.

Though financially troubled by the hard economic times of the 1930s, the railway was able to proceed with plans to further modernize its fleet of cars through the purchase of two streamlined, articulated Electroliners in 1941. Each four-section train was 155 feet long, and seated 146; both had a tavern-

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lounge compartment where light meals and drinks were served. They went into service in February 1941 on a five-trips-each-way-each-day basis between Chicago and Milwaukee, taking just under two hours to complete a one-way run — and were an instantaneous success.

As Jack Benny and members of his entourage were entertaining military personnel all around the world, Waukegan's own electric line was coping with the needs of an inflated wartime economy. Military personnel had first priority, of course, when it came to passenger service, but many a civilian trip was also taken in an era when gasoline and tires were rationed, straining North Shore's resources almost to the breaking point.

When the war was over, it seemed as if every returning veteran's dream was an automobile and a house in the suburbs. The addition of suburban sprawl to the traditional American urban/rural mix came virtually overnight, and it was to wreak havoc on many passenger railways — North Shore was no exception. The freeway era was also beginning, and what better realization of the American dream than a daily drive from the suburbs in a shiny new car to that job in the city.

Passenger revenues began to plummet, and in 1955 the curtain was rung down on the old Shore Line — that busy route along the lake that once carried businessmen from the suburbs to their offices in the city, and their maids from their homes in the city to the suburbs. The Skokie Valley Route remained in service for a few more years — with the Electroliners zipping to and from on their daily runs between the Windy and Beer Cities — but the transformation of

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Skokie Highway and U.S. 41 into a four-lane artery linking the same points eventually turned the trick.

Early in the morning of January 22, 1963 — one of the coldest days on record — the last North Shore train tied up at Roosevelt Road in Chicago and the rails were silent. It had been a good 67 years, by and large, and the railroad went out proud.

Although the North Shore Line has been gone for almost thirty years, there are many traces of the "Road of Service," as it liked to call itself. The Shore Line Route right of way is visible at many points along the North Western Railway to Waukegan, which it paralleled from Wilmette north; most portions are now a hiking/bicycling path. Ravinia Park, which the railway once owned (it was an amusement park then) is still in business, and the Skokie Valley Route's path can be traced by the high-tension towers now occupying the right-of-way along U.S. 41.

On April 20, 1964 the Chicago Transit Authority began "Skokie Swift" rail service along the line from Howard to Dempster, and there are active plans to extend the Swift both north to Lake-Cook Road, and southward from Oakton Street to a connection with the O'Hare rapid transit line near Montrose. Old North Shore cars are operating at several trolley museums around the country, and one of the Electroliners had been beautifully restored to its 1941 appearance for service on the trolley line of the Illinois Railway Museum in Union in McHenry County.

And what of Jack Benny? There is no real evidence that he ever rode the Electroliner, although he no doubt saw one or the other on his many trips to Waukegan over the years. He most certainly was a patron of the electric railway early on; at one time, bored with school, he and a cousin ran away to

Milwaukee and had to wire home for train fare to return. I'd like to think Meyer Kubelsky sprung for the cheaper North Shore ticket.

Jack was going to Central High School (now gone) at the time. He never graduated, but was a voluminous reader later in life. Probably the proudest moment in his life was the dedication of Jack Benny Junior High School in Waukegan. Ironically, the school building abuts the North Shore right-of-way on Montesano Avenue. One can imagine even now a generation of schoolboys equally unconvinced of the merits of geometry looking out the window over the abandoned line and dreaming of what once was. ■

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SNOW played an important role in the North Shore's fortunes every winter — but the trains almost always got through, as here along the Shore Line Route in Highland Park in February, 1949. (C.A. Brown/SLIHS Collection photo)