

My Grandfather Fought to Save the North Shore Line

By Tom Roadcap

My grandfather, Roy Roadcap, passed away when I was young. Though I have some memories of him, most of what I know about him was passed to me through stories told by my family. In our family, there are a few classic stories about grandpa (whom we called "Pop"), including his fight to prevent the widening of Green Bay Road, his work publishing the *World Airline Record*, and of course, the struggle to save the Chicago North Shore and Milwaukee Railroad.



▲ Pop preparing to speak at the joint hearings before the Illinois and Interstate Commerce Commissions. —Source: unknown newspaper, March 12th 1959

Pop was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana in 1920. He studied journalism at Northwestern University, and after college began working as a financial analyst from an office in downtown Chicago in the Chicago Board of Trade building. His spare time was spent publishing the *World Airline Record*. He flew often for work, and in so doing met my grandmother Florence, a Cincinnati native who at the time was a stewardess at Capital Airlines (now part of United). In 1956, they built a house on South Green Bay Road in Lake Forest, IL. Pop began commuting to work using the North Shore Line, which he rode from the station on the Skokie Valley Line at Sheridan Elms. When in 1958 the Susquehanna Corporation— the owner of

the North Shore Line— announced plans to abandon the railroad, Pop was elected president of the North Shore Commuters' Association (NSCA) charged with saving the line. He led the fight from 1958 until 1963, when the US Supreme Court rejected the NSCA's appeal to reconsider the decision to allow abandonment.

My dad, the youngest of five, was born a year later, 1964. Growing up in Lake Forest, he used the bike paths created along the roadbed of the abandoned railroad to get to and from school everyday. To him, the North Shore Line lived only in these bike paths and in dinner table conversations about the railroad that used to be. Where would he, let alone I (born 30 years later still) learn about the fight Pop led to save this legendary railroad?

Fortunately, my grandma Florence kept a record of the fight from start to finish in a well-organized set of newspaper clippings. Her table of contents and notes on the material therein reveal the attitude in the family at the time. At the beginning, titles and notes are very formal: "Susquehanna Corporation announces

that it wants to sell one of its subsidiaries, the Chicago North Shore and Milwaukee Railroad" or "Commuters hold first successful fund drive." Later notes reveal a sense of cynicism or disappointment, with titles such as "Gloom sets in for commuters. Susquehanna wants its \$21,750,000 tax shelter" or "Milwaukee politicians cause trouble" or "Five-year effort comes to an end."

The petition to abandon the Chicago North Shore and Milwaukee Railway was first filed in June of 1958. The railroad had operated at a loss every year for the past decade and in 1957 reported revenues of \$5.6 million with a net loss of \$418,000. The abandonment of the line would mean the end of service for 14,000 daily riders and the elimination of the jobs of most of the railroad's 823 employees. A few would be retained, said the North Shore Line's president Charles S. Leonard, to manage the liquidation of railroad assets. Leonard was ousted shortly thereafter by J. Patrick Lannan, the head of a group of stockholders trying to take over Susquehanna. During the ensuing shuffle of directors,



▲ NSCA collecting donations on April 8, 1960 at Glenayre Station. —©1960-1961-1962-1963, All rights reserved. Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC

FINISH THE FIGHT!

GIVE NOW TO WIN!

JOIN NORTH SHORE COMMUTERS ASSOCIATION.. *NOW!*

▲ One of the many signs posted by the NSCA in stations and communities along the route.
—*Author's Collection*

Harold G. Mason was promoted from executive Vice President to President of the North Shore Line.

In the meantime, the North Shore Commuters' Association was formed in September 1958 in Highland Park at a meeting of interested parties. A constitution and by-laws were adopted, and Pop was elected president. Lawton Crosby, who would lead several major funding drives, was chosen as membership chairman. Vincent Baldwin acted as a volunteer attorney, and Ben Fillis was publicity chairman. Pop later said of these men, "Without their help, the line would have been abandoned in 1958 instead of 1963."

The NSCA immediately set to work distributing pamphlets and raising funds at stations during the morning rush hour. Posters were also hung in stations and communities along the route. Grandma reports that 380 volunteers at 23 stations signed up 2,000 members during the first fund drive. Funds raised went primarily to hire legal representation and a traffic

expert for the abandonment hearings that were to begin in October before a joint meeting of the Illinois Commerce Commission and the Interstate Commerce Commission.

Early March of 1959 saw "commuter day" at the hearings, during which time officials from affected villages, transportation analysts, and commuters spoke. Pop was the keynote speaker, and the findings he submitted included that the North Shore Line put "95% of its riders closer to

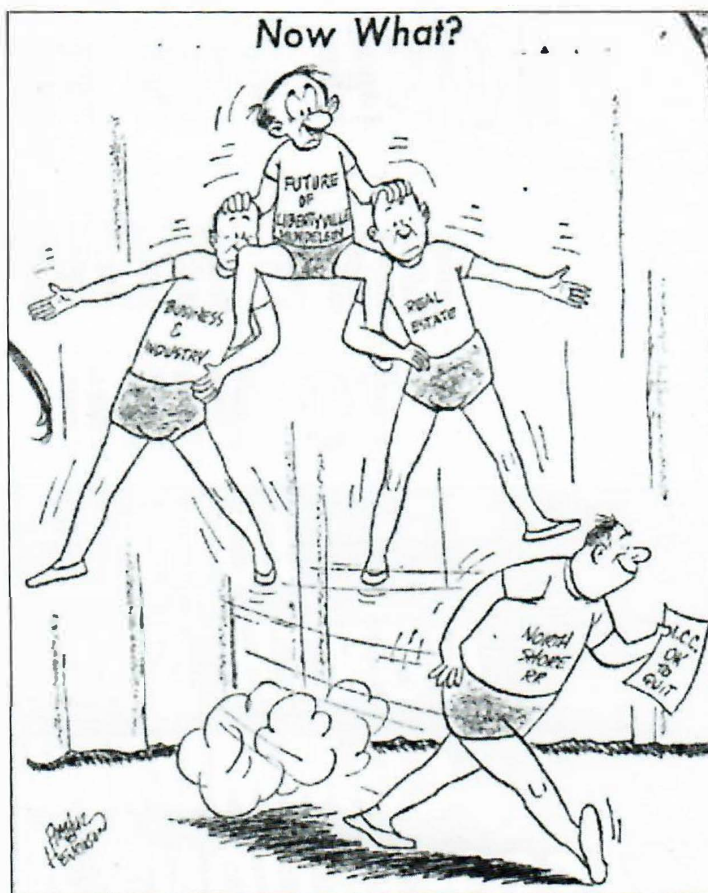
their office than any other service" and that riders would be willing to accept a fare increase despite the premium already paid over other commuter services. Another finding was that riders were clearly loyal: a study showed that when the North Shore Line's Shore Line route through the lake-front suburbs was abandoned, riders switched to the Skokie Valley line rather than the nearer Chicago and Northwestern. The consensus was that the North Shore Line could and should be profitable if managed properly. As attorney Edward Madden had stated earlier, "Fares doubling and traffic tripling in eight years should not add up to an operational deficit."

Meanwhile, Susquehanna was looking for every possible way to use losses to keep earnings free from federal income taxes. The first quarter of 1959 saw net earnings of \$550,096 – more than Susquehanna's entire 1958 earnings. The uptick in earnings was reportedly related to the company's uranium processing and sulfuric acid plants in Wyoming, and Lannan predicted at a press conference that 1959 earnings would be around \$2 million. The Chicago Daily News published a finding from the abandonment hearings that the North Shore Line was worth "\$25 or \$26 million, as depreciated assets" with its salvage value around \$6.2 million, meaning that "the difference of \$19 million could be used as a tax loss to offset income taxes on profits from other companies owned by Susquehanna." Susquehanna also garnered much criticism over the abandonment of the Shore Line route in 1955 and subsequent refusal to sell the route to the state for what critics considered a very generous offer of \$2,200,000.

Later in 1959, protestors and local business groups jammed Chicago hearings before the Illinois Commerce Commission



▲ Joint hearings before the Illinois and Interstate Commerce Commissions, March 1959. —*Source: unknown newspaper, March 12th 1959*



Newspaper cartoonists were quick to point out how public and business interests would suffer as a result of the North Shore Line's abandonment.
 ▲ *Independent-Register*, January 4th, 1962, ► *Unknown paper*, May 24th 1962

on the abandonment, warning of the economic losses that would result from abandonment. Quotes and interviews with Pop updating commuters and interested parties on the status of the case were frequently found in Lake Forest, Mundelein, Libertyville, Waukegan, and other area newspapers. During this time, hearings also occurred in Washington D.C. before the Interstate Commerce Commission—recent changes in federal law made it unclear whether the Illinois Commerce Commission or the Interstate Commerce Commission had the jurisdiction to allow abandonment, and much of the North Shore Line's argument in Washington was dedicated to convincing the Commission that the Illinois Commerce Commission had no jurisdiction over the abandonment.

In October of 1959, Interstate Commerce Commission Examiner Paul C. Albus recommended that the railroad be granted authority to abandon the line. The NSCA filed an exception. That same month, the Illinois Commerce Commission turned down the North Shore Line's petition for abandonment

and asked the railroad to apply for a fare increase. In early 1960, riders asked for a 15% fare hike, which the railroad fought. As one newspaper observed, "The North Shore story has been man bites dog from the beginning: Riders twice forced fare increases upon the reluctant railroad. Employees took a pay cut in hopes the company could get out of the red. Executives testified to a long-range plan to fail and go out of business. Now the railroad spends money to spread the word that its service is lousy, please don't use it."

Depending on the details of the new fare scheme, Pop estimated that the railroad's income would increase by around \$560,000—enough to put operations back in the black. Fares rose in 1960, and in the same month, the Interstate Commerce Commission ordered the railroad to continue to operate for one year. Yet railway losses rose into 1961 as railroad workers were given a pay increase and ridership was lost with the opening of the Northwest (now Kennedy) Expressway. The railroad filed a new petition to abandon service.

In May of 1962, the Interstate Commerce Commission approved the railroad petition to quit, with permission to end operations as soon as June 23. Pop told reporters in response, "If the commission doesn't see it our way, we'll take the matter to the U.S. District Court. We've got to keep that railroad in operation. Thousands of people are dependent on it."

The Illinois Commerce Commission and the NSCA asked for the abandonment date to be delayed so that a possible purchase agreement could be worked out. When the interstate commission obliged, the NSCA set to work raising funds to purchase the railroad. A survey showed that 96% of commuters and employees would be interested in purchasing stock in a new company. The villages and commuters began preparing for the fight. In July of 1962, the North Shore Commuters Railroad Company was organized and directors named (Pop among them). By November, \$750,000 in stock purchase pledges had been received. The North Shore Commuters Railroad Company offered to buy the railroad for \$1.7 million and then \$2.5 million in

January 1963, but neither offer came close to the \$6.2 million salvage value estimated by the railroad or anywhere near the value of the tax shelter Susquehanna would receive from abandonment.

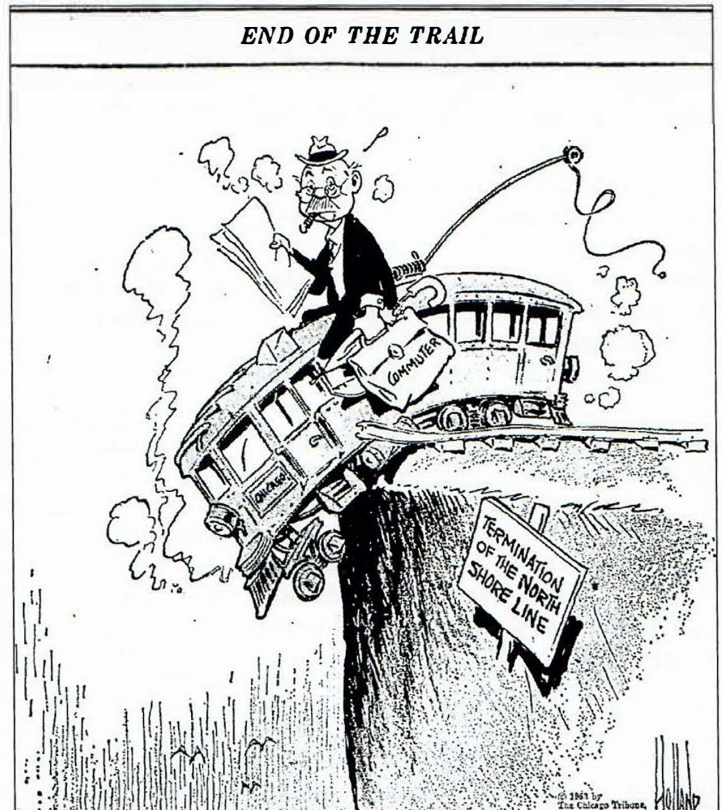
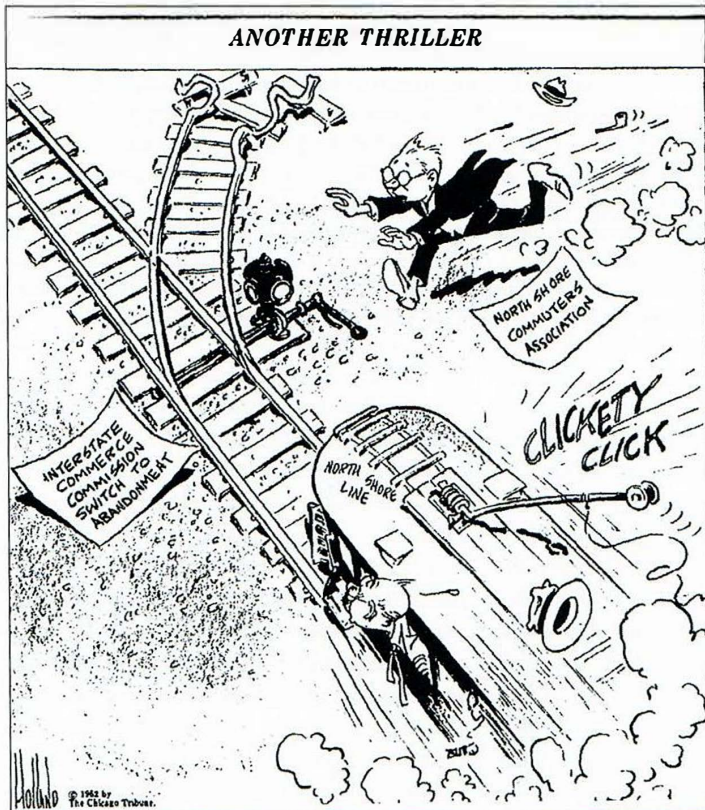
At the same time, the legal battle to save the railroad went on. In October 1962, the Interstate Commerce Commission again ruled the railroad had the right to quit. The Illinois attorney general and the NSCA took the case to U.S. District Court, which found in December that the railroad had the right to quit. The date for abandonment was set for January 21, 1963. Pop and the NSCA appealed to the Supreme Court, which in May 1963 rejected the appeal and affirmed the Interstate Commerce Commission's right to approve abandonment. Appeals had also been made to President Kennedy, who

at the time was working to free railroads from Interstate Commerce Commission rate regulation and also had recently appointed a colleague of his brother to the commission. Kennedy was no help in pushing the sale through or preventing the abandonment, however, and Pop would subsequently blame Kennedy for failing to help save the railroad.

The fight was over. Grandma collected all of the newspaper clippings and photos from the five-year fight, compiled them into a neat 92-page document complete with table of contents and timeline, Xeroxed several copies for her progeny, and donated the originals to the Lake Forest Historical Society. The last section of newspaper clippings records events related to the liquidation of the North Shore Line, from May 1963 onwards.

Grandma titled it "Dividing up the spoils."

In February 1988, shortly after the 25th anniversary of the North Shore Line's abandonment, Dennis Byrne wrote a commentary in the Chicago Sun-Times about the sad fate of the North Shore Line and Pop's fight to save it. Byrne wrote, "Mr. Roadcap and the others helped create a determination among many government officials and riders that never again should such a valuable asset be stolen from the community... When Mr. Roadcap wonders what he accomplished, he should think about this: without his efforts, there would have been little outrage, and no RTA. Without the RTA, no commuter railroad, no suburban bus line and only a few high-density CTA train and bus routes would have survived. We all owe you thanks, Mr. Roadcap."



EVERYBODY...

1. Get in the FIGHT
2. Help save your R R
3. CARRY YOUR SHARE

...Contribute NOW
...Contribute MORE



◀ NSCA, and perhaps Pop himself, were portrayed trying to rush to the rescue of the North Shore Line in this October 22, 1962, cartoon.

▲ Then portrayed on a last ride in a January 19, 1963 cartoon. —Cartoons ©1960-1961-1962-1963, All rights reserved. Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC

◀ Roy Roadcap in 1960. —Author's Collection

◀ Another of the many signs posted by the NSCA in stations and communities along the route. —Author's Collection