



Please Don't Snag the Hangers

By Richard R. Gill

Kensington Interlocking, on the Illinois Central, was one of those places where a tower operator could really mess up big. And when you messed up big, there was no doubt that you did it, because there wasn't anyone else around to blame. With one bubblehead move, you could:

- A. Stop the Illinois Central Electric's commuter rush hour;
- B. Delay long-distance passenger trains (including the Panama Limited if you were really unlucky);
- C. Bring 100 cars of coal to a squealing, teeth-rattling, how-will-it-get-started-again-without-breaking-in-two stop;
- D. Force a crew onto their hours-of-service limit; and
- E. Tie up the entire west end of the Chicago South Shore and South Bend Railroad (South Shore). The IC didn't

much care about this particular issue—more about that later. “Messing Up Big” could trigger up to five verbal events:

- a. The operator's outburst, usually “Oh, s__t!”
- b. The Signal Maintainer's fiendish laugh, “Ha, H-A-A-A-H, you really stepped in it this time, buddy boy.”
- c. The phone call from the Chicago Division Dispatcher, and sometimes from the South Shore Dispatcher, too
- d. The phone call from the Load Supervisor (1)
- e. The phone call at home on the next day, from ‘way on high.’ “Mr. Zimmerman wants to know what happened out there last night.” You knew that this one had come down through at least seven layers of managers who couldn't wait to kick it down one more level. There was no level lower than the tower operator. His was truly the bottom.

Oh, how you wanted to curl up and crawl back into the womb.

The mere prospect of single-handedly wreaking all this havoc was enough to give one the howling screams. For me, it was little comfort to know that, if ever I did do it, I wouldn't be the first or the last. This was prominently on my mind, the first time I was called to work at Kensington. It was June 1964, my summer break between college and graduate school, and I had been hired onto the IC's extra board in Chicago.

Breaking In

During the previous week, I had finished “breaking in” at Kensington. Essentially, breaking in meant spending time in the tower and working under the supervision of the regular tower operator, who received an extra five cents per hour for having a trainee in tow. You were “broken-in” i.e. qualified at a tower, upon the earlier of two occurrences:

- The regulars decided you were ready to run the place by yourself. This decision was never put in writing. If a new guy messed up big, nobody wanted to be blamed for having declared him competent to run the tower, or
- You had set foot in the tower more than zero times, you had passed the book of rules, you could read the timetable, you had worked at other towers, and (most importantly) they needed somebody there tomorrow. (This happened, although not very often.)

Actually, the IC had lots of tower operators on the Chicago roster. The problem was that not all of them could, or would even try to qualify at some of the “hard” towers. Kensington, a.k.a. Bumtown among railroad personnel, was one of the hard ones. I had decided to get qualified at all seven tower locations on IC's

(1) The IC Electric system didn't have a dispatcher, as such. The IC dispatchers dealt with road trains. It was the Load Supervisor who was basically in charge of the IC Electric operation on a given trick. The position oversaw the electric power system, served as a call desk for the Chicago tower operators (including towers that had absolutely nothing to do with the electric train system), dealt with track outages, authorized special moves, and served as what today might be called a help desk. If you were really in a bind, the Load Supervisor would get the Trainmaster out in the middle of the night, his pajamas sticking out from below his trousers.



◀ On a hot summer Saturday in July 1953, a twelve-year old Dave Ingles was standing on the Kensington platform with his sister, Janis, awaiting their first ride on the South Shore Line. This photo well illustrates the position of the tower and the “ladder tracks” across the Illinois Central trackage to access the South Shore (technically the Kensington & Eastern in Illinois) and Michigan Central, including the movable point frogs and the access turnouts to and from the mainline passenger tracks of the IC. For the past few decades there has been only one “ladder track” for South Shore passenger and freight trains to use. However, in 2005 plans are being made to restore the second “ladder track” and to install a direct connection from the Kensington & Eastern to Metra Electric track 4 at 113th Street. This will allow South Shore Line trains to avoid the Kensington platform, eliminating some congestion in this area.—John S. Ingles photo, J. David Ingles Collection. (*Classic Trains*, Summer 2005, page 82 has more information on Dave’s trip.)

▲ It’s the 1950s and the tower operator has routed this southbound Matteson train onto track 2 at the platform so that it can make its station stop while the three-car South Shore train is clattering across all the special work on its eastbound trip. This was a common move to save time and avoid a dreaded “call-on” signal into track 1. By routing the train into track 2, the tower operator could give a “middle yellow” to this train at the home signal at 113th Street. South of Kensington there was a choice of crossing the train back to track 1 at Blue Island Junction or operating on track 2 to Homewood.—VanDusen-Zillmer photo, M.D. McCarter Collection

Chicago Terminal. For extra board people such as myself, there was more money to be made (and let’s face it, more fun and variety to be enjoyed) by being qualified at as many towers as possible.

What Kensington Did

So where and what was Kensington tower? It was (and still is) at 115th Street and Cottage Grove Avenue, on Chicago’s far South Side. It was unique among IC’s interlockings, in that it handled IC’s electrified suburban main line (they called it “suburban”, not “commuter”), Blue Island Branch suburban trains, Kensington Yard (KYD) access, all of the South Shore’s electric interurban trains, IC and Big Four (New York Central system) intercity passenger trains, a huge number of IC freight trains, and some transfer moves of a local short line, the Chicago West Pullman & Southern. (2)

The South Shore used IC’s electrified suburban main tracks between downtown Chicago and Kensington. Because the South Shore’s electrified double track diverged from the IC suburban tracks at Kensington and crossed the four “diesel” freight and passenger mains on two long ladder tracks, Kensington was the sole interlocking where normal operations required interfacing the primary electric and diesel portions of the railroad.

And, as I was soon to learn, there lay the rub.

(2) Until the 1950s, the Michigan Central passenger trains used the IC between downtown Chicago and Kensington. Their line diverged from the IC at Kensington, using high-speed turnouts onto the South Shore tracks, then immediately diverged from the South Shore. In the 1960’s the divide switch between the Michigan Central and South Shore was still in place, but it had been permanently lined for the South Shore. The points had been spiked into position, and the tower lever controlling it was locked down.

(3) A brief operational delay to the all-Pullman Panama Limited (“Hey, Kensington, Number 5’s by 67th Street”) might prompt a type (c) phone call—see “verbal events” list on page 4—but an explanation would usually suffice. It did not bring about the public stoning that, rumor had it, could await a New York Central operator who was unfortunate enough to have delayed the 20th Century Limited.

(4) Later on, in the early 1970s, I worked in the IC’s suburban service office at Randolph Street Station in downtown Chicago. By then, the 1920s-era suburban fleet was less than dependable, and the new Highliners were just starting to arrive. During this time, I learned that “irate commuter” was not just an expression; it was a separate human subspecies that required extremely careful handling. But that’s a story for a future issue of F&F.

The Southbound South Shore—Clearing It Out

Something like 75% of the train movements at Kensington were on the IC suburban electric. About half of the remainder was IC freight and intercity passenger traffic. To keep the IC suburban trains running, the southward South Shore trains had to be cleared out of the way. To clear them out of the way, they had to cross the diesel tracks. The crossover move was a slow one. Of course, during rush hours, when time mattered most, the long trains made the move even more time-consuming.

At times, getting the South Shore out of the way meant sticking it to a hot freight, the Seminole, the James Whitcomb Riley, the City of Miami, or even the Panama Limited. Management didn’t like this, but even more, they didn’t like the “Irate Commuter” calls that came more dependably than sunrise following a messed-up rush hour. (3) (4)

In any case, because the South Shore ran both upon and crosswise of the IC at Kensington, it was the source of more angst than would be suggested by its relative level of train traffic at that location.

It was always a relief to see the southbound South Shore trains get clear of the ladder tracks. As already mentioned, there was just

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the need to get them off of IC's mains. Let's call that Reason No. 1 for feeling blessed relief. Reason No. 2 was that it was not absolutely certain that South Shore trains would make it all the way across. The South Shore's old orange cars rattled and clanked going over the frogs. It sounded like metal parts were falling onto the tracks. Further, their pantographs flopped around a lot and occasionally sprang free of the wire. BOI-OY-OY-OING! OH GOD. PLEASE DON'T SNAG THE HANGERS.

Compounding the problem, the suburban Kensington station, into which fed the four-track IC suburban main, Blue Island Branch, and South Shore, was a single island platform with one track on each side. This track configuration was an open invitation to a mile-long commuter railroad traffic jam. During the rush, things either ran very well, or they degenerated while your life flashed in front of you. Sometimes you saw it coming, but like the coyote holding the stick of dynamite, you couldn't do anything about it.

Bottom Yellow

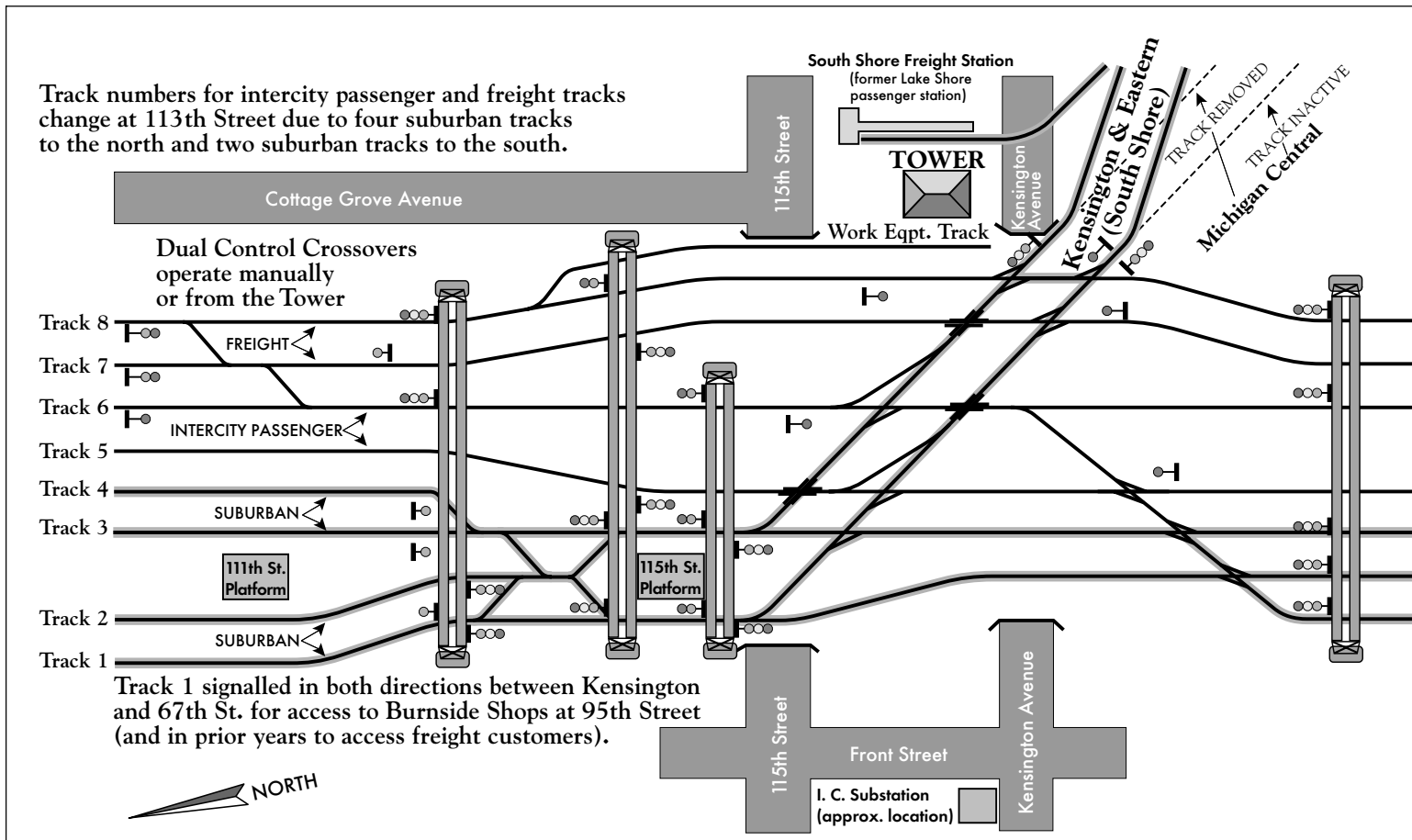
Then there was the dreaded "call-on" signal. This was a red-over-yellow, or red-over-red-over yellow. Unlike other interlocking signal indications, it did not convey information about routing. It simply told the engineer that there was some track lineup that would not derail the train, so it was safe to come ahead slowly, being alert to stop short of an obstruction such as another train. (5) The call-on was useful for berthing two trains on the same



► On Sunday morning August 17, 1941, John Humiston was sitting in the front seat of Illinois Central motorcar 130, running as train 14, The Illini, making its last trip in that service from Champaign, Illinois to Chicago. Suburban passengers could transfer from Blue Island trains and Kensington trains making local stops north of Kensington to Matteson trains, as well as connecting to Blue Island shuttle trains. With South Shore trains in the mix, there were times when the activity on the suburban tracks was intense.—John F. Humiston photo, Norman Carlson Collection

track at the platform. However, the call-on also had to be routinely used for other moves. This was because the wayside signals could not produce enough route-specific color light combinations for that highly complex interlocking. If a given move did not have a

(5) I am using the term "engineer", rather than "motorman". On the IC, the term "motorman" was regarded as offensive to the men who worked at the controls of the electric trains. In general, the suburban service engineers were qualified to work on road service engines and worked from the same seniority roster as the other engineers. Sometimes they would "bump" or "get bumped" into and out of road service. Especially offensive to them were the station platform signs that read, "This station is a flag stop. Please stand in view of motorman."





specific associated color light combination, it got the call-on.

I really got nervous when using the call-on that was required for the southward move from Track 2 at the platform to the South Shore main. Especially at night, when the switch points were hard to see, the engineer had to go on faith that the tower operator

knew what he was doing. If a wrong lineup was discovered too late, all sorts of horrible things could happen. A train might:

(a) have to clear the plant, reverse direction, and try once again;

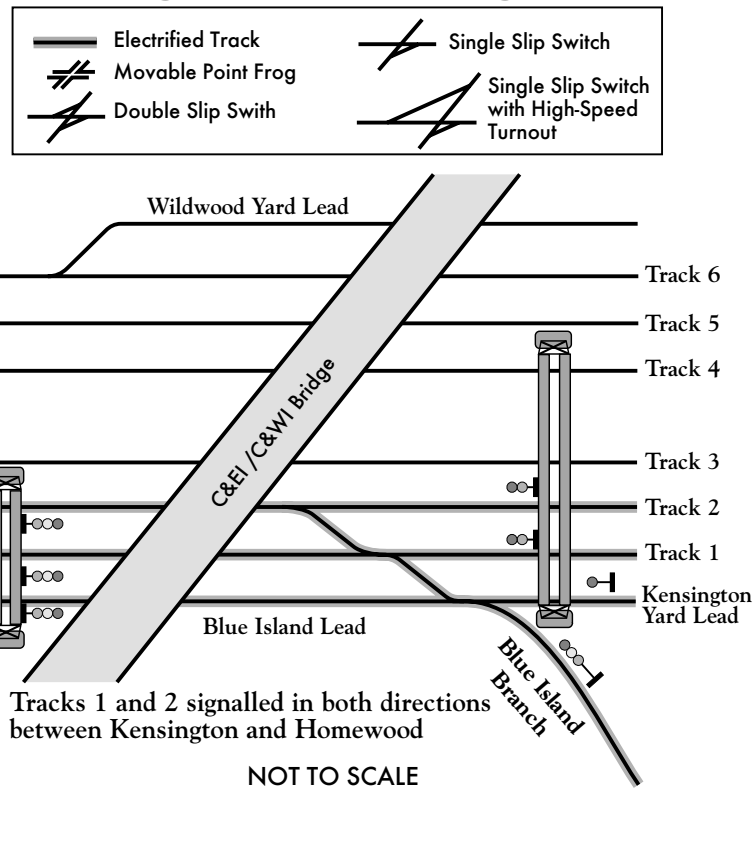
(b) make a brick-wall stop and wait while you called and confessed to the Load Supervisor and got permission to cut the lock and open the Emergency Box. This set all signals red and bypassed the safeguards of the interlocking, but allowed you to throw a switch with a train on the same track circuit (making sure, of course, that the train wasn't actually sitting on the switch you were throwing).

(c) run out from under the wires. The signal system recognized only track lineups; it did not care that a train might need a 1500-volt power source above the track.

The lever combination for this move was something that I memorized and recited to myself at least weekly: 27-29-35-37-39. Like my Army serial number, I will never forget it. I will also never forget the reassurance of moving South Shore trains through Track 1 at the platform, so they could get the route-specific bottom green.

Actually, I never caused (a) or (c), above, but I did do a (b) one night on the graveyard trick. Once everything was straightened out following the (b) incident, the South Shore engineer called me from a trackside phone (no radio in those days) and said, "Ok, lad, check your switches and we'll try again, ok?" "Lad?" How humiliating. At least he didn't yell. And the Load Supervisor, who had seen it all before, had a good laugh. Better still, since it happened while the world slept, nothing else got delayed. Consequently, verbal events (b), (c) and (e) —see list on page 4— were avoided, and my call to the Load Supervisor preempted event (d). However, I do seem to recall that event (a) was rather loud and squeaky.

Kensington Interlocking circa 1964



Text and map information was provided by Richard R. Gill, the map was produced by Jack Sowchin, and captions written by Norman Carlson. Photographers are as noted—all of whom have a special interest in the South Shore and Illinois Central; a fun project for all concerned. Tickets from the Norman Carlson Collection were collected by Allan C. Williams.

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► Car 108 leads a train into Track 2 at the Kensington platform. The usually high extension of the pantograph is evidence of the overhead wire clearance that the IC desired above its mainline tracks and gives an indication of why there was concern that a train could “grab” a hanger and pull the wire down. With that amount of pantograph extension and a train rocking across the special work, it is easier for the pantograph to come out from under the wire, extend to full height and “reach back,” grabbing the wires and pulling them down.

▼ Contributing to the problem of wire pull-downs were the long stretches of simple catenary between the bridges, instead of the compound catenary used elsewhere on the Illinois Central and South Shore. The difference in the wire construction is noticeable in the photo. Note also that a short stretch of Track 8, normally the northbound freight main, is electrified so the South Shore trains can move from one “ladder track” to another, a move that was done very gingerly in practice to avoid “grabbing a hanger.” Michigan Central freight trains used these tracks as well to access their road.—Two VanDusen Zillmer photos, circa 1950, from the M. D. McCarter Collection



The Northbound South Shore — Letting It In/Keeping It Out

Although the South Shore was a tenant on the IC, its southward trains received a modicum of preferential treatment, if only to get them out of the way. It was in the northward direction that the difference between tenant and owner was truly revealed. This is the part, mentioned earlier, about the IC not caring a whole lot about the South Shore's delays—provided those delays didn't affect the IC. Coming north (or west according to the South Shore), the South Shore trains were basically regarded as non-entities by the IC until they actually entered IC-controlled track. That meant that northbound South Shores could be held off the IC at the Kensington home signal for almost any length of time without penalty to IC operations.

When it came to sticking it to the South Shore, the IC wasn't arbitrary, but as a veteran operator advised me during my break-in period, “Blood is thicker than water.” Keep your own management happy, or at least not too unhappy. So, when a South Shore dispatcher would dutifully call to let Kensington know that a westbound had departed Hammond, about twelve minutes before arrival at Kensington, our response would be “ok”, but perhaps with a barely perceptible tinge of “like I really care.”

Actually, most South Shores came and went without delay, but only the bravest among us would line them up (clear them to enter the interlocking) when they left Hammond. I didn't really have the stomach for it. Who knew what might come on the IC in those twelve minutes? If I did give them an early lineup, I would pace like a convict awaiting execution. Mostly, South Shores weren't lined up northbound until they came around the bend, a few hun-



▲ Dick Gill recalls the “peril” that would descend upon an operator-leverman who dare delay an Illinois Central train, especially the Panama Limited, because of a “lowly Gary train,” that “streetcar operation” from Indiana. (All South Shore trains on the IC were “Gary trains.”) Disdain is a totally inadequate word to describe the feeling toward that “foreign road.” Your editor knows from personal experience the grief that comes with delaying “the Panama” when he had to put a great big red board (signal) in her face at Bradley Avenue in Champaign, one day in 1964. But that is another story. In the days before “performance measures” became a standard term in business management, Wayne A. Johnston, the legendary president of the Illinois Central, created one. If the Panama Limited was not on time and no one informed him or another officer of the railroad ahead of the delay, you were simply not in command of your railroad. It was the perfect measurement! While the train was in progress, it was a “process measurement” and, when the train arrived at its final terminal or left your division, it was an “output measurement.” The effectiveness of this single measure, which everyone clearly understood, was that it drove performance on the entire railroad. It set the “tone from the top” which is the critical attribute in the internal control procedures for a business. The Panama Limited, train number 5, engine 4001 is passing the 107th Street suburban station approaching Kensington on Saturday, June 8, 1946. ▶ The Michigan Central and Big Four segments of the New York Central System accessed Chicago over the Illinois Central from Kensington and Kankakee, respectively. At Kensington for a very short distance the Michigan Central trains were on the Kensington & Eastern. This accounts for the reverse curve in the K&E tracks just east of the IC. At 5:00 p.m. on Saturday, May 28, 1949, train number 355, The Michigan, led by Class J-3 Hudson engine 5434, is braking for the Kensington interlocking after a fast run from Detroit. The K&E is in the background.—Two John F. Humiston photos, Norman Carlson Collection



dred yards from the home signal. At that point, an annunciator in the tower would sound, with a tone akin to a loose guitar string. Whereas the annunciator for the northbound IC passenger main was a loud “Hey, I’m here” bell, the South Shore one carried all the authority of a beagle scratching on the kitchen door. (6)

Reality Check

So, where did the South Shore fit in the daily contest at Bumtown? Let’s just say that they were let out and they were allowed in, but Kensington Interlocking was definitely the IC’s property. Even plain old bituminous coal could trump the South Shore.

When a loaded coal train from Southern Illinois was in the neighborhood, the South Shore got it worst—First Class passenger train or not.

The northbound IC mains were on an ascending grade on the approach to Kensington, and it was considered bad practice to stop loaded coal trains. There was that break-in-two problem when getting restarted. A northbound South Shore might have to cool its heels for 20 or 30 minutes, so the lowly coal could see green all the way. The IC knew where its bread was buttered. As another of my operator-mentors told me, “You don’t want to stop 10,000 tons of coal for a &%\$*# streetcar.”

6 The only certainty was that, whatever you did with a South Shore train, somebody wouldn’t like it. Once, when I decided to sneak a northbound South Shore across, the IC’s northbound Daylight streamliner from St. Louis decided to hit the bell. My blood ran cold (well, not really). The South Shore got across without stopping the Daylight, but the Daylight’s engineer apparently didn’t like the yellow signal staring at him, down around the C&EI bridge. As he went by the tower, I couldn’t hear what he was yelling at me, but I could see it.