

The Conductor's Watch

An Anecdote on the Reign, Reputation, and Rightness of Samuel Insull

By Larry Lavery

Introduction: A Confrontation on the Libertyville Platform

On a crisp morning in the mid-1920s, on a train platform in Libertyville, Illinois, a routine moment of waiting became the stage for a clash of wills that would resonate for decades. Charles A. Walton, Jr., a conductor for the Chicago North Shore and Milwaukee Railroad, stood by his train, a man steeped in the steam-road tradition where the conductor was “omnipotent on his train,” his authority superseded only by the dispatcher’s orders. His world was governed by the precise, inviolable schedule of the operating time-card, which he considered his “Bible.”

This established order was about to be challenged by a small, thickset man with an imperious air and a soft-spoken English accent: Samuel Insull, the “old man” himself, the magnate who owned the railroad and a vast utility empire besides. The confrontation over a departure perceived to be two minutes late, Insull’s unshakeable faith in the infallibility of his personal watch, and his direct order to leave “Now!” set in motion a small drama that perfectly encapsulated the larger story of its main actor.

It was an incident that revealed the core dualities of a man who was at once a meticulous builder and an autocratic ruler, a champion of public service and a master of self-interest, a celebrated titan and a reviled villain, but at its deepest level also demonstrated a capacity for grace from the “old man” that was hard learned from many lessons in which he himself was denied grace and instead had to fight.

This entire episode, and the nuanced perspective it provides, comes to light through a correspondence from 1957 between the retired conductor, Walton, and the historian Forrest McDonald, who was then researching what would become the definitive biography of Insull. The exchange not only preserves a priceless, ground-level view of Insull’s personality but also illuminates a key moment in the practice of historical inquiry. It showcases

a shift away from simple “great man” historical themes toward a more comprehensive and nuanced explanation that recognizes the value of an ordinary worker’s experience in understanding the totality of a corporate icon.

McDonald’s plan, as he reveals in his reply to Walton, intended to “reconstruct a day in the life of S.I.” by incorporating the many perspectives of individuals with whom SI interacted on an ordinary day in Insull’s world.

The following letters, transcribed in full, form the foundational evidence for this article.

The Walton-McDonald Correspondence

Letter 1: Charles A. Walton, Jr. to Forrest McDonald, March 6, 1957

Dear Mr. McDonald:

Be it on your own Head! Encouraging a garrulous ex-railroader to reminisce is leading with the chin.

The incident was of no great moment but to a working-stiff of mild radical tendencies it was indicative of how the big ones can be big.

I was “made on steam” and came to the North Shore Line soon after the Insull acquisition & reorganization when they started to operate on standard book-of-rules. My steam road training was in the tradition that the conductor was omnipotent on his train & that only despatchers’ train orders superseded his authority. And of course the operating time-card was his Bible.

At Libertyville one morning in the mid-twenties, as conductor of a Loop-bound train we stood waiting for timecard departure perhaps 4 or 5 minutes away. Old Sam from his car stalked—rather stumped—to my train & boarded my coach. To my “Good Morning Mr. Insull!” I got only a grunt. He had only been in the coach seconds when he bobbed back to the platform, watch in hand demanding to know what I was waiting for.

“Time Card leaving time, Mr. Insull.” Insull responded; “We’re almost two minutes past leaving time now!” Then ensued a few seconds of argument when I was assured that

HIS watch had been correct to the second for decades, my explanation of the dispatcher, towermen, and myself being in split second harmony was ignored & I got from him the direct order to leave “Now!”

Here was flaunting of basic railroading but—well Mr. Insull was V.I.P. & against my judgement we went. With the operation of a skillful motorman we dragged a bit & got to Niles Center (Now Skokie) exactly on time.

Mr. I left my train in The Loop with a scowl & my adrenalins probably occasioned the return scowl he got. The next portion of the routine run called for a Shore Line trip and at Highwood yard an extra-conductor was waiting to relieve me when I got off to make a routine call to the dispatcher. “Report to the superintendent!”

By this time my temper was seething & I regretted the control I had maintained at Libertyville. A poker faced interrogation from the Supt., “You & Mr. Insull have some words at Libertyville this morning?” My truculent but factual statement probably advertised my frame-of-mind.

Then the poker-face cracked to a half smile, “Mr. Insull called early this morning—requested you be called to this office & his apologies tendered. He stopped at a jeweler in the Loop after leaving the train & the infallible watch was 4 or 5 minutes fast. Give me your time slip for the day, I’ll o.k. it—That’s all you can go home.”

That’s a very small matter to be remembered all these years. But in the down-fall of the dynasty when he was being harried in & out of Greece (wasn’t it?) & The Midwest Utility holders were imprecating violently, it kept me in the sympathetic minority. So that’s it for what it’s worth.

Other oddments that might interest you or amuse, occur to me as I write—more or less connected with the old gent—but of no value that’s apparent to the writer. The Skokie Valley Line, built under his administration, was his pride & joy. We used to snicker when he’d stand on the front platform of Loop bound trains & beam at the smooth operation over the “L” structure. The “L” tower men at Niles Center would spot him there & pass the word along to the towermen Howard St.,





▲ Samuel Insull's trip was a 2 ½-mile drive north on Milwaukee Avenue from his mansion to the North Shore station shown here on May 27, 1962.—
Joe Pierson photo

Wilson Ave., etc. at intervals to the Loop. To the utter disruption of Evanston, Wilson Ave., Ravenswood “L” trains, HIS train would be bypassed around everything—leaving “L” traincrews & “L” commuters very unhappy. Our operating timecard was not effective on the “L” right-of-way & a 5 or 7 minute early arrival in the Loop gratified him no end.

An apocryphal story went the rounds about that time that was amazing. Under his administration & reportedly direct from him came a policy new to passenger railroading, both juice & steam. *Super-courtesy to the Passenger* was the word & they meant it. I guess it paid off in revenue and in claim dept. outlay, but it was a hard lesson for old-timers & I learned the hard way. When some exhibitionist offered me an inadequate, incorrect, or even no fare at all & wanted to know what I was going to do about it, I knew what to do & did it. After serving quite a few suspensions that of course entailed loss of income, I began to learn & could even take obscene insult in my stride & ignore them for the trip. The policy was innovated on the “big 3” Aurora Elgin, North Shore, South Shore, and even the short-lived Kankakee Elect. line.

The story was born then & quickly passed across the country! A passenger trainman left one of the Insull Lines & sought & secured employment on a Western Line. Breaking in as a student in the traditional manner he followed the conductor through the train to learn fares, rates, etc. Somewhere in the coach between the student & his mentor a sleepy lout got both legs out across the aisle & the student

stumbled over them. “I beg your pardon, sir” from the student. But the old conductor was furious. “Tell that _ _ _ s. _ b. to take his _ _ _ legs out of the aisle! You are NOT working for Insull, now!”

Well—WE thought it was funny, anyhow. The two Chicago books in prospect sound attractive and a must. The last issue of RAILROAD had a fine illustrated article on the present So. Shore Line that might interest you.

Regards C. A. Walton, Jr.

Letter 2: Forrest McDonald to Charles A. Walton, Jr., March 19, 1957

Dear Mr. Walton:

Thank you very much for your letter of March 7. I found the information both amusing and informative.

Since you have so generously volunteered your “services,” as it were, it may be that I shall call on you later for something else, if you are willing. When I get this far along in the research, I plan to attempt to reconstruct a day in the life of S.I., probably one in 1927. One of the most amazing things about the guy is that he managed to get through each day, with the multitude of affairs that he bossed, without becoming hopelessly confused. I think it is possible, and it will certainly be valuable if I can do it (both from the point of view of reaching an understanding of his operations and as a literary device in writing about him). I shall have to choose a day very carefully, one for which there are ample records of what he did, and one which is more or less representative. I shall also want to branch out from him, to pick up the scores of people who were doing

one thing or another to make his companies go. I visualize it as tracing him through the day, hour by hour, first showing what S.I. himself did that hour, then taking the reader out to see, for example, an engineer building a dam in Wisconsin, a security salesman pushing stock in Kentucky, a conductor on the North Shore line, brother Martin in a conference with bankers, a transmission line crew at work in New Hampshire, etc. etc. etc. You can imagine how effective this will be if it is done right. And it is on this that I may write you for information later.

Meantime, thanks again, and best wishes,
Very truly yours,
Forrest McDonald

The anecdote of the conductor’s watch is more than the “small matter” Walton claimed it to be. It is a perfect encapsulation of Samuel Insull’s entire career. It reveals the core dualities of his character and his empire: the autocratic, detail-obsessed manager who demanded absolute adherence to his own time, yet the principled man who would formally apologize for his error; the builder of a high-speed, modern railroad who would disrupt his own system for personal convenience; the innovator of “super-courtesy” who was also the architect of a financial structure so perilous it would collapse and make him a national villain. Walton’s journey from resentment to “sympathetic son” mirrors the public’s own complex relationship with a man who was both a titan of industry and, ultimately, the face of the Great Depression.