

Transport Central



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CHANGING TIMES AND PHILOSOPHIES

The Editor and I have periodically discussed TC's "raison d'etre", attempting to relate it to past and present publications in our field. Our most recent such conversation stirred memories of the late and lamented Railway Review of the 1957-62 era. Published monthly, this popular newsletter covered street railway and trolley coach news in such depth as has not been seen since (that is, unless you wish to favor TC with such a compliment). The eras and philosophies of R-R and TC might well be compared.

TC has been alternately criticized and complimented for having too little or too much transit, air and railway news coverage in its nearly two years of publication. In the Railway Review era (and R-R was a monthly, it might be well to remember) there were many more U.S. urban transit systems operating streetcars and trolley coaches. In fact, by referring to a file of R-R (or, if you happen to have a good memory) one might be struck by the similarity to TC's train-off listings in the repeated detailings of "overhead" abandonments that were a feature of R-R. The actual "railway" portion of the Railway Review was rather weak, as I recall, since there was little happening on the passenger train front in that era, even though the 1958 ICC Act permitted the carriers to discontinue many secondary local and branch services that had far outlived their usefulness. Airline news obviously did not belong in R-R, even had there been the interest in that mode that exists at present to justify its inclusion.

Now it is 1969. The streetcar is an infinitesimal part of the picture of North American transit; the trolley coach has all but disappeared in the U.S., and even though it is numerically superior to its electric cousins, its overall importance is dwarfed by the rail car. The news of our era, transit-wise, lies in the increasing proliferation of Federal subsidies for new rapid transit services, for new equipment, and for the establishment of public authorities to take over ailing private carriers or to pick up the pieces after those who have departed.

The railroad passenger train on an intercity level (beyond the megalopolis services) is about to join the interurban, stagecoach and steamboat in the museums; TC is noting this trend weekly and quarterly. 1960 marked the introduction of the jet airplane, kicking off a stupendous growth in air travel that has never slowed down. Airlines have become too important in the total picture for TC to ignore, if we are not to crawl back into that proverbial shell. I note there is a new book titled "The Coming Decline of the Automobile Industry" that might indicate another area of coverage for TC, such as auto-off lists, or model discon-

tinuances, or service-station abandonments. For now, the auto industry is adequately covered by the mountains of brochures, books, manuals and magazines that annually stream from Detroit (not to mention the utterances of Ralph Nader). TC feels justified in ignoring this mode of essentially private transportation.

Thus it is that Transport Central weekly publishes transportation news from three arenas wherein reside what I call "people movers": transit, railway and airline carriers. TC is sent to a very special group of subscribers that cannot be characterized as being solely interested in one mode to the exclusion of all others, but who are vitally interested in all phases of the fast-changing world of passenger transportation. Your criticisms and compliments tell us we have succeeded at least in part; your silence gains nothing for anyone.

Paul Weyrich

"C H A L K T A L K"

D. C. Transit owner O. Roy Chalk is for private ownership, but he would cooperate if the government wants to buy his bus system. Chalk is all for private enterprise, and says his company is sound financially, but he wants a subsidy from Congress. Chalk has been saying for nearly two years now that D. C. Transit is for sale, but indicates that, if it is all the same to everybody, he would just as soon hang on to it, providing he can make a little more money.

Thus, the nation's capitol is suffering again from its nearly-perpetual transit "crisis", as the Congress, the city government and local transit bodies study various proposals designed to solve what appears to be the unsolvable.

Washington, which boasts one of the last privately-owned large city transit systems, has a transit history not unlike many American communities. Horse cars began operating in 1862, followed by cable cars and later electric cars. Various smaller companies soon merged into two larger systems, Capital Traction and Washington Railway & Electric Company. In 1933, these two systems merged into the Capital Transit Company, and the route patterns resulting from this merger have survived, almost intact, to this very day.

The North American Company, which owned Capital Transit, was forced to divest itself of its transit holdings by the government, and in 1949 control was sold to Louis Wolfson, a controversial monetary manipulator whose troubles with the government were (and are) never ending (as witness the recent Fortas case).

Wolfson obtained a system which was in excellent condition, but policies instituted under his ownership led to a downgrading of maintenance and service coupled with several fare increases. While the experience in Washington was not untypical of that which was happening throughout the country after World War II, Capital Transit was operating in the shadow of the Congress and the deterioration in service soon led to charges that Wolfson was milking the company, along with demands that his franchise be revoked. A transit strike lasting almost two months in 1955 brought the matter to a head and Congress finally did revoke Wolfson's franchise.

Congress looked long and hard for a new operator that year, and even considered forming a transit authority. The forces of free enterprise triumphed, however, and a syndicate headed by O. Roy Chalk was chosen to run the system. Chalk was the principal office-holder of Trans-Caribbean Airways.

Wolfson paid Chalk \$13.5 million for the system, a figure that amounted to about \$10 million less than the book value of the property. Under the terms of the agreement, Chalk was only required to pay half a million in cash, and he was subsequently able to pay off the remaining \$13 million in a little more than four years entirely from system earnings.

The franchise awarded Chalk required conversion of the large and completely modernized streetcar fleet by 1963. The franchise runs for 20 years and thus expires, unless revoked, in 1976.

Chalk was able to profit by the conversion of the trolleys, despite the huge expenditures required to purchase buses. The conversion, which was completed in January of 1962, made surplus a great deal of property such as car barns. Some of these properties have been transferred from D. C. Transit and have, in effect, become separate corporations such as "M Street Estates" and "Georgia Avenue Estates". The book value of these properties was far below the fair market value, and in the event of sale of D. C. Transit to either another private operator or the government, it is highly unlikely that they would be included.

D. C. Transit, as it was renamed by Chalk, enjoyed much prosperity in the first ten years of its existence. The boom came to an end in 1966, however, partly because of increased labor costs and partly because of the problem of escalating crime within the city.

Finally, the great civil disturbances of 1968 literally knocked the bottom out from under the company. Night-time riding has almost disappeared, and weekend patronage has declined tremendously. Washington has heavy rush hour loads even today, but outside of those peak periods riding is hardly able to justify service. Fare increases (after two hikes last year the tariff is now 30¢, and there are proposals to raise it again) have further cut ridership, and a series of several hundred bus robberies which resulted in the Exact Fare system (the first such use of the concept in the country) also dented patronage.

All in all, however, D. C. Transit is in excellent physical shape. While maintenance in the past two years has again declined, only some 200 units of the 1200 coach fleet predate 1956. Most of the newer coaches are air-conditioned.

D. C. Transit also owns about 85% of the stock of the suburban WV&M Coach Company (the Arnold Lines). It operates some 200 buses, of which 130 are modern units, with the remainder being ancient Whites and some newer Brills used as rush hour trippers. WV&M never has been in excellent financial shape and the situation at present is no better. Because of a recent fare increase most riders now pay 50¢ on rather short trips.

The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Commission (as distinguished from the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority) is charged with the regulation of the area's bus carriers. WMATC has been an extremely weak authority and as a result the system is little different now than it was in the 1930's. There are more shuttles and feeders here than in any non-rapid transit U. S. system. Some operate only one round trip a day—if the driver shows up.

Exactly what will happen is uncertain. Because of D. C. and WV&M operations into Maryland and Virginia an interstate compact would be necessary with public ownership, not easy to achieve. If Chalk's franchise is revoked, getting another private operator would also not be easy. Perhaps a publicly-owned and privately-managed system might be instituted. Most observers believe the "crisis" will not be solved in 1969, leaving a solution next year not only desirable but imperative.

NEWSFRONT

METROPOLITAN REPORT -- Political horse-trading is playing a large role in the future of transit in Chicago. That bill to provide the CTA with the proceeds of a 2¢ per gallon gas tax (it would also benefit the Illinois operations of Bi-State Transit in the St. Louis area) has been revived in the state legislature, and stands a good chance of passage. It was rescued for limbo as a part of a deal to assure passage of Governor Ogilvie's 3% (it was cut from 4% by opposition within his own Republican party) state income tax. The Democratic minority within the legislature (controlled by Mayor Daley) had threatened to block passage of the revenue measure if their bills didn't pass; the CTA aid legislation was one of them. Chairman Dement of the CTA board had warned of another fare increase (which would be the third within eighteen months) if financial assistance from the state legislature was not forthcoming. Since the fare is at the 40¢ level already, any additional hike would put transit well out of the reach of those people who need it most.

SURPRISE! -- The other, much-less-well-known bill in the legislature designed to aid the Chicago system was found to be a little broader than than its backers had let on. The measure was ostensibly designed to provide for a special tax district within the city to raise funds for the construction of the two downtown subways (one to replace the Loop "L", and a shuttle collector-distributor to link the CBD with McCormick Place and the Gold Coast area on the Near North Side along Michigan Avenue.). A close perusal of the bill proved that a strict interpretation of its wording would give the city power to do almost anything it desired with respect to passenger transportation facilities, short of purchasing the Queen Elizabeth 2 from Cunard to operate on the Chicago River. One of the possibilities that raised the most hackles was that the city, if the bill as written were passed, could proceed with the construction of the controversial airport in Lake Michigan, an eventuality that the Governor would not be terribly happy to see. Needless to say, the bill (which is said to have a better-than-even chance of passage) will be amended to remove the carte blanche authority granted the city before it is allowed to proceed any further on its legislative itinerary.

ANOTHER "SURPRISE" -- On Thursday, Chicago newspapers reported that the city's Department of Public Works has quit pinpointing dates when the two new median strip rapid transit lines will be opened. The word now (after a profusion of various dates beginning last Christmas when it was assured operations would begin) is "late this summer". Actually, as TC has reported since earlier this year, it might be a great deal later than that. Now that certain land acquisition problems have been solved, and construction is proceeding more or less on schedule (albeit a delayed one), the biggest stumbling block to early service inauguration is the serious slowdown in obtaining the 150 new cars from Budd necessary to provide that service. The first unit was originally scheduled to be in Chicago last October 29 (strangely enough, just before the election); it will now possibly arrive at the end of this month, in time for the Institute for Rapid Transit confab. Then, at the rate of some 20 to 30 arrivals per month, it will be well into the winter before the entire order is delivered. Of course, the diversion of traffic from the existing North-South line to the Ryan line will release some equipment for use on the Ryan route, but it will still be past Labor Day before enough cars will be available to inaugurate runs to 95th Street. When there will be enough cars to provide service on the Kennedy line is another story again, but both lines should begin operation this year.

MORE METRO NEWS -- Vancouver's CAMBIE-FRASER trolley coach line will be extended to serve a junior college and new apartment complexes (about 15 blocks) this fall....40 trolley coaches idled by the conversions of the SALTER, MCGREGOR and STAFFORD-ACADEMY lines in Winnipeg have been sold to Lowell Bearing of Chicago for resale. Only 71 units are still in service on the ELLICE-ST. MARY'S and CORYDON-NORTH MAIN routes....A diesel fuel shortage as the result of a strike has led to the reinstatement of trolley coach service on the TENTH-HASTINGS line in Vancouver, converted to motor bus operation (but not dewatered) last fall. BC Hydro now has only 3 spare trolley coaches during rush hours....AB&W Transit of suburban Washington has raised its fare 5¢ May 24; exact fare will come soon. ...The Newark City Subway will close down December 31 if aid from the New Jersey legislature is not received before then....The Long Beach (Calif.) Public Transportation Company now has multi-lingual "bus bunnies"....The Rock Island has been granted a fare increase on its Chicago suburban services....West Bay area voters have endorsed the bus-only plan (TC 7 Mar 69) for the area south of San Francisco....Muni's management has recommended that its five streetcar lines be retained in any proposed transit system for San Francisco....Dot Doles: To Fort Wayne, for 40 new air-conditioned buses; to Salt Lake City for a study to explore the feasibility of a transportation center for intra- and intercity buses, trains and airlines; to the Watts area of Los Angeles for a demand-responsive (dial-a-bus) service using Ford Econoline equipment; to Cleveland to develop an inner city transportation system.

RAILROAD DIGEST -- Kansas City Southern has reapplied to the ICC to discontinue its last passenger train, #1-2, the Southern Belle, Kansas City-New Orleans, effective July 3....The United Transportation Union through a persistent series of actual or threatened strikes has just about signed up all of the Class I U.S. roads over the issue of an added man on each freight train crew; the UTU has even broken down a 5-carrier united front by signing up the IC and L&N, and is presently working on C&NW and NP, two of the last holdouts....The Soviet Union is constructing a new electric-powered passenger train capable of 120 mph speeds that will be computer controlled for emergency situations; the train is expected to begin service between Moscow and Leningrad next year....Declining patronage on C&NW's bi-level trains between Chicago and Green Bay has allowed the carrier to re-equip a third round-trip with the surplus high-occupancy cars (#121, the 400 Streamliner and #206, the Green Bay 400)....Norfolk & Western has closed its Delmar Boulevard suburban station in St. Louis.... The ICC has allowed Erie-Lackawanna to discontinue 10-15, Hoboken-Buffalo following a report that Greyhound has agreed to provide special bus service for a group of handicapped children who relied on the train for weekly visits to Buffalo.

ONCE OVER QUICKLY -- All of the fixtures of Chicago's famed Union Station have now been sold; the concourse area is to be the site of a new office building....A Gulf & Western subsidiary has just about won a contract to construct a hotel in the parking lot at O'Hare field. Not so surprisingly, the lawyers for the hotel firm include Mayor Daley's son, Michael; the mayor himself recommended approval of the proposed lease of city property last week in an action that was quietly pushed through the normally somnolent City Council. The hotel, with 688 rooms, will be in between the new control tower and a new multi-level parking garage, in an area once-reserved for the terminal station of the rapid transit extension to the field....Boeing's 747 made a successful flight to Paris for the International Air Show....The CAB has again postponed the Hawaii route awards....Chicago's lake airport (if built) will cost \$2.2 billion, according to Northwestern University professor Stanley Berge.