

Editor's Note: This section of "Ideas in Motion" includes a response to the article "GM and the Demise of Streetcars" by Cliff Slater, which appeared in the Summer 1997 issue of *Transportation Quarterly*, and subsequent responses by Christopher Zearfoss, Brian Cudahy, and Peter Cole which appeared in the Winter 1998 section of "Ideas in Motion."

General Motors and the Demise of Streetcars: A Comment

by George W. Hilton

Cliff Slater's "General Motors and the Demise of Streetcars" seems to me an excellent retrospective evaluation of the misrepresentations in the Snell report. He provides a sound historical perspective on the decline of the streetcar by emphasizing the jitney episode of 1915. Essentially, the results were in on the streetcar with that episode, although public policy managed to prolong the demise for several decades. The jitneys were mainly Model-T Fords used as common carriers in what was a competitive market in urban passenger transport. They operated demand responsively without a fixed route, essentially a mixture of what modern buses and taxicabs do. They did drive the street railways out of business in some small cities—Newburg, New York; Bay City, Michigan; Everett, Washington—and on the basis of the havoc they wrought against the street railway industry as a whole, could probably have driven the rest out by the mid-1920s.

The jitneymen were moving from Model-Ts to larger specialized vehicles more suitable to the service. The suppression of the jitneys had two major consequences. First, the conversion to buses was made not to a competitive industry, but within the traditional city-wide monopolies, using fixed routes, regulated flat fares, citywide transfers, and vehicles of about the size of streetcars. Second, an automobile had to be used as a private carrier, not a common carrier. The combination produced a quality of public transport so low that virtually everyone had an incentive to turn away from it. But as they did so, they provided a grossly excessive number of automobiles with a low rate of occupancy—especially in home-to-work trips.

My only hostile criticism of Slater's article is that it gives the reader the impression that the street railway industry accepted its decline more supinely than it did. In particular, its innovation of the PCC (President's Conference Committee) car in the mid-

1930s probably gave the streetcar one or two decades more life than it could have had otherwise. Christopher Zearfoss' article takes a more accurate view of the PCC. The experience of the communist countries was a demonstration of what a superb innovation the PCC was. As I have argued elsewhere, a planned society is a poor milieu for innovation; in fact, it surprises me how little the communist countries innovated over the course of their history. A planning body searches for the best existing technology and adopts it. In the case of the street railways, this was the PCC, and it spread throughout the Soviet Union and the East European countries, surviving to and beyond the collapse of communism.

Chicago's experience seems to me a

better demonstration than either New York or Los Angeles, which Slater uses. Chicago Surface Lines at the end of World War II had equipped its long-distance line with PCCs and gave every impression of intending to remain a street railway. When the system was taken over by the Chicago Transit Authority in 1947, its administrators decided to convert the entire street railway system, mainly using *Flxible*TM buses. It should be stressed that the most important lines were operated with the best technology that the street railways had ever found. The PCCs were scrapped, however salvaging the trucks, doors, and minor parts as components for rapid transit vehicles. The conversion was made by a public body, and General Motors had nothing to do with it.

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