

THE HIGHWAYS AS AN INTERSTATE PROBLEM

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Whatever may be the outcome of the hearings now being held by the Interstate Commerce Commission on the question of regulating interstate motor bus and motor truck operation, they have at least served to emphasize the remarkable improvement of highway facilities that has occurred in the last ten years.

Ten years ago the regulation of interstate highway traffic if it had occurred to anyone to think of it must have been a purely academic question. There was practically no interstate traffic to regulate. The States in which there was as much as a single improved transstate highway at that time could be counted on the fingers of one hand. They were Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, and Maryland - all Eastern States, and all of that small group in which the movement for better highways had been begun in the nineties.

The remarkable paved highways which now stretch unbroken the entire length of the West Coast through California, Oregon, and Washington were still of the future; and so, also, was the still more remarkable traffic of motor busses, trucks and private motor cars with which these same highways are now crowded.

In sixteen States there were no State highway departments and not the semblance of a plan for the development of through routes across the State; and even of those States in which a recently created State agency was feeling its way toward a more scientific and businesslike administration of State highways there were few in which the conception of a connected State highway system had yet been clearly apprehended.

Today 25 States have continuously improved highways entire across them in at least one direction and 16 of these have completed such transstate arteries in two directions.

It is the primary purpose of the Federal-aid highway legislation to expedite the continuous improvement of such cross-state highways in all States and finally to provide a completely articulated system of main interstate highways for the nation. The goal, as represented by the Federal-aid highway system is clearly defined and progress toward it has proceeded for the last five years at least without deviation. That progress will be continued with a more pronounced singleness of purpose in the future until it shall be possible to travel by highway without obstacle in any direction across all States and throughout the nation.

A recent survey of the status of improvement of the Federal-aid highway system shows that there is one transcontinental road which is now 97 per cent improved. It extends from Washington through St. Louis, Texarkana, and El Paso to San Diego. Of its entire length 93 per cent is surfaced and 4 per cent is graded; and of the surfaced portion more than half is bituminous macadam or better, the remainder gravel. From Washington to St. Louis there is no unimproved section and nearly 96 per cent is surfaced with bituminous macadam or some higher type of pavement. From St. Louis to Texarkana 2 per cent of the distance is unimproved and 63 per cent is improved with a gravel surface, the rest with higher types. From Texarkana to El Paso there are unimproved sections to the amount of 4 per cent of the distance, gravel surfaces 50 per cent and bituminous macadam or better the rest of the way; and from El Paso to San Diego, with the exception of 6 per cent of the distance, the route is surfaced 60 per cent with gravel or equivalent and the remainder with pavements and surfaces of higher types.

This road from Washington to San Diego is more nearly completed than any transcontinental route. Its total length is 3,133 miles and 2,907 miles are surfaced, and 131 miles graded, leaving only 95 miles without improvement.

Of other possible transcontinental routes that which runs from Atlantic City to Astoria is farther along toward complete improvement than any other. Of its 3,240 miles just one-eighth remain without improvement, nearly another eighth is graded and drained and the rest is improved with sand-clay or some higher type of wearing surface.

Among the others east-and-west a route from Norfolk to Los Angeles is 58 per cent improved; and from Chicago to Los Angeles, partly by this same line, is 63 per cent improved. From Boston to Seattle through the northern tier of States the most direct through road is 73 per cent improved and 69 per cent surfaced either with permanent or temporary surfacing.

These are the best routes across the country; and though with one exception none is more than about two-thirds surfaced the present condition is so great an

improvement upon that which existed ten years ago when the Federal-aid road act was passed, or even five years ago when the Federal-aid highway system was adopted, that we may easily claim, without the least braggadocio to have made really remarkable progress. Especially when we remember that this country is 3,000 miles wide, and that we are building north and south as well as east and west.

All this work has been done and we are continuing to work along the same line because we are convinced as a people, and with practical unanimity, of the value or rather the positive necessity of improved highway transport facilities. Highway transport as it is developing means much to the country. It has a field of its own; and it is right that it be wisely regulated from the public standpoint, as much to protect it and assure its complete development within its proper field as to prevent it from unwisely encroaching upon the proper field of the railroads or other carriers.

So far as the movement of passengers and freight over these new highways of ours is a movement in privately owned vehicles operated for purely private and individual benefit, there is no agency of government, either State

Federal, that has the right to say whether the operation shall or shall not be carried on. So long as the owners of motor vehicles are willing to contribute to the cost of constructing and maintaining the roads in fair proportion to the benefits they derive from them - and they do now in most States carry a large part of the burden - they are entitled to operate without let or hindrance. Subject, of course, to such rules as may be necessary for the protection of life and property and the common investment in the highways.

The relatively small part of the movement which constitutes, in effect, a common-carrier service, it is right to regulate as other common carriers are regulated under our laws to serve the public convenience. Within many of the States this small part of the passenger movement and still smaller part of the commodity movement is already so regulated by the public service commission. It is necessary and proper that such regulation be extended to cover uniformly the still smaller part of both movements which crosses State lines.

In adopting such regulations with respect to highway transport whether within or between the States the sole

motive should be the common protection of the interests of the public and the carrier. The interests of other carriers except as they are held in common with the public are not for consideration. The highway common carriers offer a public service. Whether or not they shall be permitted to operate and perform that service must depend upon whether in the long run and all things considered their service is in the public interest. They must not be permitted to force the discontinuance of needed railroad service; and per contra the railroads should not be permitted to prevent the public from enjoying an economic service of which the highway carriers are capable.

There are certain statements frequently made with reference to highway transport which have recently become important because of their possible bearing on the outcome of the Interstate Commerce Commission hearings. Among these are the statements that the motor trucks are pounding our highways to pieces; that the motor vehicles enjoy a subsidy by virtue of a practically free use of highways built by the public; that the motor bus and truck

are dangerously diverting traffic from the railroads; and that the rail carriers who thus find their business taken from them in good weather are forced to serve in bad weather when the highway carriers are unable to move.

The Bureau of Public Roads has made an earnest effort to ascertain whether there are facts which support these statements. We are convinced from what we have found, and we have delved more deeply I believe than many of those who make the above statements, that they are not correct in their implication that organized highway and railroad transport are mutually exclusive. We are convinced that there is a proper field for each and that the so-called competition between railways and highways now existing is largely the transfer of specific services from one to the other which is bound to occur when a new carrier offers its services. That, at least, is our conclusion. Perhaps it is incorrect, but, at any rate, it is based upon facts which we have determined by careful investigation; and these facts have been presented in the hearings now in progress. It is highly desirable that all those who have knowledge of definite information in relation to the above statements shall also place it at the disposal of the commission.

Whether there is to be regulation of the highway common carrier is not now in question. The necessity of such regulation may be assumed; and what is under consideration in the commission's hearings is the question as to whether that regulation shall be exercised by a Federal body, at least with respect to interstate operation, or by State bodies, and also the question of the desirable extent and object of such regulation. These questions must be answered in the light of the true interests of the public at large, and if the evidence of the public wishes and interests is adequately presented we may safely conclude that they will be so answered.

There is one other matter occupying at present a considerable amount of attention which has an important bearing upon the value of the service rendered by our growing highway system, and which also involves certain interstate questions. That is the tendency to build toll bridges.

So far as the Federal Government is concerned its position in regard to this method of financing bridge construction is clear. The Government will not participate in the construction of any bridge upon which tolls are to be collected; nor will it take part in any highway project including such a bridge or having such a bridge as one of

its termini. That is the law.

At the same time it is necessary to recognize that certain major stream crossings imperatively required will be long delayed unless resort is had to the toll method of financing, because of the lack of local funds in sufficient amount. There can be no need for the employment of such a method for financing the cost of the smaller bridges on the Federal aid system. With the Federal Government standing ready to pay a full half of the cost of such bridges and the other half well within the local means there is no necessity for the creation of a toll barrier.

In the case of the large and expensive bridges, however, even the Federal aid may not make possible the financing of the construction with the regular public revenue. In such cases the imposition of tolls is a tolerable measure; but it is far better that the tolls shall be collected by an agency of government than by a private corporation, and it is certainly desirable that they shall be collected only until the cost of the structure shall have been defrayed.

Practically all large bridges lie on the most important State and interstate routes. They would not be built otherwise. The public attitude toward bridges differs widely in the several States. In some States the public is favorable; in others it is willing to tolerate the collection of tolls for a period sufficient to repay the cost of the bridge; in other States the people are unwilling to adopt the method of toll collection at all and have willingly taxed themselves to build and maintain large bridges entirely free of tolls.

Recently there have come to notice several projects in which it is proposed to build toll bridges in one State which will be largely used by the citizens of an adjoining State in which the public has manifested strong disapproval of toll bridges and has submitted to taxation for the erection of its own large bridges which are used freely by citizens of all States. Here, it would seem, is an interstate question of a new order for which there is no law or guiding principle. It arises by virtue of the growing interstate significance of State highways and highway transport. It is perhaps the forerunner of many similar questions which will arise in the future, and for which there must ultimately be some adequate answer.

My purpose in what I have written above has been to show that the time has arrived when we must once more revise our conception of the character and purpose of the highways. We have barely accustomed ourselves to thinking of them as the arteries of a State. Already we must enlarge that conception to take in the prospect of a national system. In consonance with this enlarged conception we must be prepared to revise the provisions that have been made for the construction and maintenance of the highways and the control and regulation of their use by traffic. The economic procession toward this end is compelling. It demands harmonious interstate action either by the States in mutual agreement or by the intervention of the Federal Government. It rests with the States to decide which course shall be pursued.