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A National System of Transportation

A friendly but keen observer from another country, who was making a critical examination of one of our major industries, at a dinner tendered him on the eve of his departure, made what seems to me a very intelligent comment. In this particular line he is outstanding, and the whole purpose of his trip had been to advance the competitive position of himself, his associates and his country, by gaining worth while information. When his turn came to speak he said: "After a most interesting experience, in which I have been taken up into the high places by my friends of this industry, I am left with a warm feeling of appreciation for your many courtesies, and a profound respect for your accomplishments; but in a purely friendly way, while I would not go so far as to say that I see the hand-writing on the wall, I must in all honesty say I do see the wall upon which it is possible to write."

With so big a subject a very large wall would not suffice for even a small portion in any detail. With so profound a subject, one must needs forget too much of the past to suggest any straight and narrow path which we are to follow in the future. No hand-writing on the wall, nor the remembering of such a ponderous title, makes me forget the story of transportation.

Not all the heavy dissertations of experts quoting experts can paint out the picture shining through, of the hazards dared and the romance lived in transportation achievement which vividly outlines the past. The clipper ships, the pony express, the Conestoga wagons, the National Pike, the Oregon Trail, and overlying these the gasoline buggy, the stream-lined train, air service to the Orient, all the fascinating story of the daring, pioneering, individualistic progress in transportation which is the heritage of this country, - itself, in comparison with the old world, relatively new.

So in talking of planning, I wish modestly to speak of certain trends without intending to intimate, and certainly without believing, that there will be a stop to transportation progress. Neither is there any confidence in the willingness of the public to regiment transportation in the sense of undesirable or drastic governmental control. Nothing with the strength of achievement that has been written into the development of transportation in this country, can be so controlled that it becomes static. Like measles it breaks out in many places.

Nearly everyone speaks of coordination of transportation as the solution of our transportation troubles.

Findings are made by many bodies that we are over-stocked with transportation facilities. Such a conclusion is the product of the depression, and it should be pointed out that we find ourselves over-stocked with everything except employment. It is silly to make plans for the future predicated upon current transportation requirements or upon any assumption that existing facilities must be preserved. The story of transportation is a repetition of replacing old facilities and forms with new. Curtailment is being urged now with the same enthusiasm that enlarged facilities will be urged as business gets back to a more normal tempo. Economists recognize two great fundamentals, - supply and demand. Why transportation in a country 3,000 miles long and 1,000 miles wide is not given greater weight is to me incomprehensible.

It is not sufficient to plan the future upon the basis of these two factors, - supply and demand - without giving major weight to transportation. The depression has made us take stock, and has supplied us with both the motive and the leisure to study our whole transportation system.

There is no need to introduce in this short talk controversial questions. Suffice it to say, that much more has been gained than lost by the development of the newer types of air and highway transport which recently have been

added to the older types of rail and water. In the aggregate the public is the gainer. So the problem is to fit together the jigsaw puzzle that is the picture now, not what was the picture some time in the past. There seems to be a most naïve conception of our transportation problem, - that by hook or crook we can turn back the pages of time, and restore through legislation and regulation the situation as it was at some particular time in the past. Only a casual look around indicates the fallacy of such reasoning, and the most reliable prophet for the future is he who predicts constant change and constant progress.

I have faith in the trend toward a more generous, more intelligent cooperation. Here are two examples - the motor industry has turned its house upside down, has advanced its presentation of new models by three months in the hope of making better conditions for labor. How simple this sounds but what a pioneer advance in cooperation between this industry and labor.

Again, through cooperation, between the railways, the State highway departments and the Federal government, we are now engaged upon a program that will wipe out of existence more than two thousand of the most dangerous railway crossings in the nation.

If we look critically at our existing major types of transportation, we find the oldest of all, the waterways, restricted in operation to those water courses which have been developed and are maintained for navigation. Leaving out of consideration seaports, which are of major importance to the transportation facilities of the country, but can not by any stretch of the imagination be considered competitive, except between themselves, we have inland waterways to the extent of 27,000 miles.

The development of inland waterways may be largely a by-product of stream control. The public attitude toward the control of floods and the checking of soil erosion, indicates the probability that stream control will be extended and thus inland waterway facilities may be available to the extent they are found to be practicable for transportation uses.

There are approximately 246,000 miles of steam railways in the United States. There has been concern expressed because of some decrease in this mileage. The Bureau of Public Roads has studied every recent abandonment or proposed abandonment and there is no cause for concern. Rather, the future will see a very much larger curtailment of unprofitable rail mileage.

There are now American operated air transport routes, classified as domestic - 29,000 miles; foreign - 22,000 miles: - a total of 52,000 miles.

In the Federal aid system of highways there are 227,000 miles, but the total public road mileage in the country is 3,099,000 miles.

Each type of transportation is supreme in certain characteristics - each type has its definite handicaps. The only sane motive is to plan transportation based on these favorable and unfavorable characteristics. The Coordinator of Transportation, Mr. Eastman, has in a short time, under extreme pressure, and without much essential data, produced a remarkable series of sound recommendations upon transportation coordination. The National Resources Committee has been giving attention, among other things, through the State Planning Boards, to the planning of transportation. It is disappointing that so many of these State reports are looking backward rather than forward. There must be a recognition that competition is both in the character and in the cost of service.

Recognizing that three million miles of public roads offer a serious problem in basic planning of an adequate highway system in which land use and all the social and

industrial factors common to our population will determine highway necessities, the Secretary of Agriculture has approved a comprehensive highway planning survey in cooperation with the State highway departments. This survey is already definitely programmed in about two-thirds of the States, and when completed will give all the facts upon which to base a master highway plan for the future.

One of the principal objects of this survey is to determine how best to serve the farm population which is not located upon the Federal aid and State systems of highways, so as to bring to the land the utility of an all-year road. It should be honestly recognized that a tremendous amount of the traffic on the highways now is not traffic lost to other agencies but is new business. Mr. Eastman recently estimated there had been created by the development of the motor car and improved highway, more than four times the travel market that had previously existed. This business is highly competitive between communities as well as between facilities.

Recreation has become a major industry. A roadway was opened in the Shenandoah National Park one year ago. The surfacing was not completed until within the past few months. On Sunday, October 20, more than 28,000 people

traveled this new parkway. This was business which did not exist one year ago in that community. How much was wholly new business it is impossible to tell, but here is a recreational area more than 80 miles removed from the nearest large city, and the miles of new travel in Virginia thus generated run into fantastic figures.

Federal legislation has been enacted and the new Motor Carrier Bureau created in the Interstate Commerce Commission to regulate the business of interstate public carriers. It is also charged with the duty of promulgating rules to promote safety on the highways. Nothing that might be said as to planning is more important than to hold up as a great national problem the drastic curtailment of accidents upon our streets and highways. Planning must take into consideration not only physical facilities but their use, which extends to legislation and regulation.

Some of the comprehensive activities in transportation planning have been mentioned here, but these are only a part, and we can expect as wonderful advances in the immediate future as we have had in the past. There is no field which comes more intimately into contact with the life of each one of us, both economic and social. There is no field in which constant research, and widespread, fundamental and continued progress are of greater importance to the country as a whole.