

HIGHWAY SAFETY AND THE BUREAU OF PUBLIC ROADS

An interview between Thomas H. MacDonald, Chief of the Bureau of Public Roads, and Morse Salisbury, Acting Director of Information, U. S. Department of Agriculture, broadcast Tuesday, September 27, 1938, during the Department period of the National Farm and Home Hour by a network of 93 stations associated with the National Broadcasting Company.

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MR. WALLACE KADDERLY:

And now Mr. Morse Salisbury will interview Mr. Thomas H. MacDonald, Chief of the Bureau of Public Roads, on the subject of -- highway safety.

MR. MORSE SALISBURY:

It gives me great pleasure indeed to introduce once again to the Farm and Home Program audience Mr. MacDonald, who knows much about the problems connected with safety on the public highways. Mr. MacDonald has been in charge of Federal road building since the time when the Federal-aid highway system was only a plan for the future, and I don't know a man who has done more to convert our horse-and-buggy roads of 25 years ago to the great highway systems of today. And yet -- Well, you tell us, Mr. MacDonald, why our highways are so much more dangerous than they were 20 years ago.

MR. THOMAS H. MacDONALD:

Mr. Salisbury, the highways themselves, although still in need of much further improvement, were never better adapted to safe use than they are today. It is the way they are used that creates most of the problem.

MR. SALISBURY:

You mean drivers are more reckless than they used to be?

MR. MacDONALD:

No, the percentage of reckless drivers is probably less now than ever before, but the danger from reckless or unskilled driving is much more due to the greatly increased use of the highways. This growth in use is astounding - this year 50 million drivers are operating 30 million vehicles more than 200 billion miles. So we must expect accidents, but not nearly so many as we have. It is a matter of major national concern that the number be reduced to the

lowest possible figure.

MR. SALISBURY:

Well, how does the Bureau of Public Roads propose to cut down the number of accidents? I understand the Federal government has no control over the individual driver. Most safety experts seem to think the remedy lies in correcting bad driving habits.

MR. MacDONALD:

The problem is complex and must be attacked on many fronts - We must modernize our highways to make them safe for every reasonable use. Highway engineers know what to do, but the rate of progress will depend largely on the willingness of the public to pay the cost. We are now conducting highway planning surveys in cooperation with 46 State highway departments. An important part of these surveys is to determine exactly the extent to which our highways are below safe standards and the cost of eliminating all seriously dangerous conditions. We will place this information before the public, since it is the public that must decide how much it is ready to pay for highway safety.

MR. SALISBURY:

But how far will this go toward solving the highway safety problem? When all our highways are modernized, you think we can expect a big reduction in accidents?

MR. MacDONALD:

There will be material reduction but our safety studies show definitely that all accidents are due to a combination of causes. We can reduce the number of accidents, and this should by all means be done, if we correct certain highway dangers.

MR. SALISBURY:

You mean if we widen road surfaces -- and so on?

MR. MacDONALD:

Widen road surfaces, increase sight distances, provide foot-paths for pedestrians, eliminate sharp curves, steep grades, narrow bridges, and railroad grade crossings. There are many external elements of danger. For example, particularly in the South and West, live stock permitted to wander at will on the highways is a common hazard. But correcting these dangers of the highways themselves will

not constitute a full and adequate solution of the big problem. We can in a major degree lessen the number of accidents and deaths only by centering the attack on driving habits and a proper selection of drivers. Such an attack, to be fully effective, must employ, in addition to measures of education and persuasion, positive means of stopping the violation of well-known and easily understood rules of safety.

MR. SALISBURY:

What specific program do you recommend, Mr. MacDonald, and what will it involve?

MR. MacDONALD:

With the aid of traffic experts and law enforcement officers, the Bureau has made a careful and detailed study of the safety problem. We have prepared recommendations which, if put into effect by concerted effort of the numerous agencies involved, should greatly reduce the number of accidents. Some of the most urgently needed measures require hardly any expenditure. Others do involve a moderate cost.

MR. SALISBURY:

I've heard of the action program your Bureau proposes, to advance safety on the highways, and in that program, I believe, you place particular emphasis on uniform State motor vehicle traffic laws. Now tell us just how uniform State laws will prevent one automobile from colliding with another.

MR. MacDONALD:

When we talk about uniform laws, we mean uniform and adequate laws. Uniformity is in itself a desirable thing. The motorist should not be confronted with different and many times conflicting rules as he travels from State to State.

MR. SALISBURY:

I agree with you there, all right.

MR. MacDONALD:

But, we have a much more serious reason for urging uniform laws. In some States, drivers are not required to be licensed. Some States have no minimum age limit for drivers, no prohibition against the licensing of habitual drunkards, narcotic addicts, or those afflicted

with mental disability. Some States do not require tests to determine physical fitness to drive. Some State laws do not set forth complete rules of the road.

MR. SALISBURY:

What about the uniform laws prepared by the National Conference on Street and Highway Safety?

MR. MacDONALD:

These laws are recommended for adoption by every State. They offer easy and complete correction of a very confused situation.

MR. SALISBURY:

Mr. MacDonald, what about the accident-prone driver, and the youthful driver who's inclined to take too many risks? They're responsible for quite a percentage of our accidents. Have you figured out a way of getting them off the road?

MR. MacDONALD:

If they pass the regular physical and mental tests, there is, as yet, no satisfactory means of identifying the accident-prone drivers before they have accidents, but it is quite possible to detect many reckless drivers before they cause a serious accident. There is no excuse for permitting any drivers to continue to have a succession of accidents. Every State should exercise complete and final authority over the issuance and revocation of drivers' licenses. For serious offenses, such as manslaughter, driving under the influence of intoxicants, failure to stop after an accident, and reckless driving, it should be mandatory upon the State licensing authority to revoke the driver's license. The power to revoke licenses for the worst offenses and suspend them for less serious ones is the most effective weapon of society in attacking this problem.

MR. SALISBURY:

Do you think larger patrol forces would help to reduce accidents?

MR. MacDONALD:

The most complete code of motor vehicle laws is of little avail unless there is proper enforcement. In most States the highway patrol force is wholly inadequate in numbers, and too much burdened with other duties to patrol effectively the large mileage of highways.

MR. SALISBURY:

I understand that a number of States now require periodic inspection of motor vehicles. Do you consider such inspection important in the safety program?

MR. MacDONALD:

Yes, I do. But less than half the States now have periodic inspection of motor vehicles. Those States that have adopted the plan report a definite improvement in the mechanical condition of vehicles in use. After a few inspections, there is a marked drop in the number of inadequate brakes, poorly adjusted headlights, and important mechanical defects. The old cars that should be junked, disappear with the first inspection.

MR. SALISBURY:

The benefits of compulsory inspection seem to be rather obvious. What other remedies for traffic dangers do you suggest?

MR. MacDONALD:

We need to know more accurately just how many accidents we have, where they occur, and what causes them. We need such information before we can decide on the proper corrective measures to be applied, and where to place the greatest emphasis. Knowing the number of people killed and injured in a State is useful as a measure of the loss from accidents, but we cannot apply remedies intelligently unless we know the relative importance of each of the many causes of accidents. Such information can be obtained only by requiring those involved in accidents of any consequence to report the fact to a State agency and by skilled investigation of a large number of accidents. Determining the causes of accidents appears to be a simple matter, but experience shows that reports by trained investigators are necessary if we are to have correct information. The Bureau of Public Roads and the numerous agencies in the safety field agree that every State should collect and compile accurate information according to a uniform plan. We do not have now a national system of reporting even fatal accidents that approaches adequacy. In fact, right now the statistics are misleading.

MR. SALISBURY:

Of course, such information wouldn't produce an immediate effect in saving lives on the highway, but I can see it's needed, if we're really serious about reducing the accident toll. Most people want to stop slaughter on the highways at once, and their first thought is to

put on a safety campaign. But sometimes I wonder just how much these campaigns contribute toward a permanent solution.

MR. MacDONALD:

They are worth while, Mr. Salisbury. Publicity on correct driving practices, and vitalizing the consequences of violation of traffic rules are certainly worth while. Education in highway safety is a definite part of the safety program. I believe that one of the greatest hopes for improved safety conditions lies in implanting correct thinking and habits in those passing through the public schools. Nearly all schools give some instruction in safety. Many high schools now give driver training courses. A widespread program of public education, and specialized training of traffic officers and engineers, is now under way. This program is sponsored by national organizations, with funds provided by the Automotive Safety Foundation. We must both continue and improve such educational work. At the same time, we must remember that educational work and safety campaigns, no matter how intensive, do not stop the worst traffic offenders. To reach them we must modernize our laws and provide adequate enforcement organizations. Experts in every line of activity related to highway traffic are agreed on the things that should be done. But standing in the way, is public inertia. Help us overcome that, Mr. Salisbury, and you'll have comparative safety on the public highways.

MR. SALISBURY:

I'll do my best, Mr. MacDonald. And thank you very much for the report you have given us today. Josephine Hemphill, of our Information Service, is particularly interested in this problem of highway safety, and she may be calling on you for more information in a few weeks.

MR. MacDONALD:

Good. We'll help her all we can. You have seen our new bulletin, on "Highway Accidents."

MR. SALISBURY:

Yes, and I'm going to suggest that civic-minded citizens, interested in "Highway Accidents, Their Causes, and Recommendations for Their Prevention," write to the Department of Agriculture for a copy of this new publication from the Bureau of Public Roads. And thank you again, Mr. MacDonald.

MR. KADDERLY:

Farm and Home friends, you have heard Mr. Thomas H. MacDonald, Chief of the Bureau of Public Roads, and Mr. Morse Salisbury, discussing "Safety on the Public Highways." For copies of the Bulletin they mentioned, send your name and address to the Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C., and ask for "Highway Accidents."