

General Motors and Mass Transit . . . Again

by Brian Cudahy

I suppose it could be regarded as a mark of the maturity mass transportation has achieved as a serious subject for scholars to probe and investigate that we can afford, from time to time, to delve into such a topic as whether the decline of electric streetcars in America—and, therefore, a purported decline of mass transportation itself—was an event that was carefully and purposefully orchestrated in the executive suites of the General Motors Corporation. Event, indeed; some call it an out-and-out conspiracy.

Transportation Quarterly recently published an article by Cliff Slater, wherein a considerable body of documentation is presented to the effect that neutral economic forces, not schemeful human beings, were the primary agents for the decline of streetcars in America and their replacement by motor buses. Mr. Slater also explains in detail the nature and kind of antitrust violations GM admitted to committing, and shows why none of this adds up to an anti-transit conspiracy.

Mr. Slater's article has elicited a spirited response from Christopher Zearfoss, the assistant deputy mayor for transit policy in the city of Philadelphia, that attempts to rebut much of what the article puts forth.

While I disagree with Mr. Zearfoss and his attempt to resurrect the conspiracy theory, I am not totally satisfied

with Mr. Slater's arguments that the shift from streetcars to buses can be explained in economic terms alone. There is also the murky, messy, oftentimes illogical, and usually hard-to-quantify arena called "public policy." Because street railways operated in a nether world that was subject to all kinds of political whims and fancies, and the industry from its earliest days was never a pristine example of unfettered free enterprise responding to market forces and market forces alone, one can neither fully nor completely explain the decline of streetcars and their replacement by motor buses in economic terms, I would suggest.

The conspiracy theory posits that GM's entire approach was based on a consciously understood realization that motor buses were so vastly inferior to trolley cars that substituting the former for the latter would quickly result in the decline of mass transportation itself and the conversion of bus riders to drivers (and owners) of Pontiacs, Chevrolets, Buicks, and Oldsmobiles. The product line of motor buses that was designed, built, marketed, and sold by GM's Truck and Coach Division, in other words, was from the very outset nothing but a temporary placeholder until trolley riders were eventually put behind the wheels of their own automobiles. Following, of course, a brief and designedly unsatisfactory interval as

riders aboard GM-built buses.

Anyone who accepts the burden of proof and attempts to refute such a contention has started down a slippery slope from which there is no hope of recovery. Not to substitute personal experience for statistical analysis, but I *was there* when a lot of this happened. I remember when 30-year-old trolley cars with straight-back wooden benches were replaced by brand new motor buses with nicely upholstered seats. I remember, too, when you no longer had to take your life in your hands to walk through lanes of moving traffic to board a streetcar, but could actually stand on the curb and wait for the bus to come to you. These are but two characteristics of the motor buses that replaced streetcars, the very same streetcars whose inherent superiority as a mode of urban transport conspiracy theorists regard as totally self-evident.

Let me also assert a point of personal privilege, though: I shed tears when the Nostrand Avenue Line and the Flatbush Avenue Line in Brooklyn were converted from trolley car to bus in early 1951. And my tears were all the more bitter when I realized the new buses provided a better quality service than the older streetcars they replaced.

Mr. Slater raises the question of public policy and the role it played in corporate decisions to replace trolley cars with buses, but he contends it often hindered the motorization of trolley lines. Absent foot-dragging by local politicians, he claims, the shift would have taken place even earlier. While his perspective is not without merit, I would suggest there were also cases when it was public officials who actively fostered the shift. They honestly believed motor buses were a better

form of public transport in mixed traffic along busy streets, one that allowed automobiles and trucks to make more efficient use of such thoroughfares and mitigate the kind of traffic congestion that electric-powered streetcars were frequently seen as fostering.

From a contemporary perspective, it may be possible to fault some of these public policies and decisions and suggest that certain streetcar lines that were motorized in the 1940s and the 1950s could well have been converted instead into what we today call "light rail transit." This would have required, of course, the investment of significant amounts of money to acquire and build reserved rights-of-way, to upgrade electrical distribution systems, to buy new rolling stock, and so forth. It was the absence of this investment capital from either public or private sources, however—and not a conspiracy to destroy mass transit—that made motor buses the more desirable option.

The ordinary, street-running trolley car, though, was a form of transport that was doomed once motor buses powered by diesel engines and driven by hydraulic transmissions came on the market. As Mr. Slater notes, if we examine post-war developments in many countries where GM exercised no dominance whatsoever, the very same shift took place. In July 1952, for example, London Transport retired the last of its electric-powered tramcars and replaced them with motor buses.

Arguments advanced in the Zearfoss paper about cross-subsidization of roadways and highways have merit, but they are quite beside the point; they neither support nor disprove the conspiracy theory. Mr. Zearfoss also advances a number of