

automobiles, that these highways, presently being supplemented by an interstate system, reach more places than the railroads, and that any city of any size has many which form junctions within its borders. But these vehicles which travel on the highways are an increasing source of trouble themselves. They pollute the air; they converge on the cities at certain hours of the day constricting movement and raising tempers; parking places for them become ever more costly and difficult to find. Trucks increase in number and size on the highways, vying with automobiles for travel space and increasing the peril of travel. The carnage on the highways is so great that anyone sensitive to the propaganda about it must set out even on a vacation trip in an automobile with considerable apprehension.

If that portion of the freight now carried on trains should suddenly be shifted to the highways, the pace of traffic would be drastically slowed and much that now moves that way could hardly find a place. We are already experiencing the impact on highways of the shift of passenger traffic from trains to private cars, for the most part; what it would be like when freight should be as preponderantly shifted to the highways as are the passengers can only be left to

the imagination. As things stand, many cities probably could not survive such a shift; many of them are already marginal as places to live, and transport is one of the major reasons. This is why the railroads remain an essential method of transport for America. Yet, the long-term trend in a shift away from them is now well established.

Deterioration in Quantity and Quality of Service

Why should this be? To the casual observer or unwitting customer it often appears that the railroads are their own worst enemies, that the management and personnel are directly to blame. Those who use the railroads frequently get the impression that the roads are determined to be rid of them. This is most noticeably the case with passengers, but users of freight service of certain kinds may get a similar impression. Anyone who has ridden the trains often in the last decade or so probably has his own list of complaints. The list will most likely include such items as reluctant ticket sellers, difficulties in acquiring information, late departures of trains, late arrivals, surly employees, inconvenient schedules, dilapidated equipment, long walks to cars past a long line of cars for mail and parcels, lackluster sur-

roundings from beginning to end of journey, and so on.

Stories abound of horrendous treatment of passengers by the railroads. The present writer has seen a restroom in a passenger station to which entry could be gained only by dropping a coin in a slot, has heard a porter utter such streams of profanity about the difficulty of getting a woman's luggage from one train to another that she offered to carry it herself to shut him up, has had his rest disturbed by noisy "dead-head" railroad employees on several occasions, and has seen any number of waiting rooms sufficiently gloomy to discourage all but the most intrepid traveler by rail.

Some of these might be only individual instances of poor service which can happen in any undertaking. But there is much testimony that they are of a kind that occurs all too frequently on the railroads. One writer notes that "except for a few crack transcontinental and other trains, the quality of service rendered has deteriorated compared with prewar [World War II] years. . . . Trains are frequently late; coach equipment is often old and sometimes dirty and poorly ventilated and heated. Many prewar standards of courtesy have gone, even in parlor and sleeping cars. . . .

On some of the best coach routes, the railroads use obsolete passenger train cars and treat customers as though the carriers were doing travelers a favor to transport them."³ Another says, "The public sees the railroads as old fashioned . . . , and as common carriers who hate passengers."⁴

Suicidal Practices

It certainly looks as if the railroads were trying to commit suicide. They have low advertising budgets compared with other businesses; the uniforms of their personnel appear to date back to the beginnings; their passenger stations frequently appear to be a combination of late Victorian grandeur gone squalid and early government housing projects; their freight stations are often a poor imitation of a down-at-the-heels hardware store. The following are instances of how railroads have alienated passengers:

Take, for example, the process of calling on the telephone for some scrap of information about a passenger train. . . . Some railroad clerks are evidently instructed to take their phone from its cradle, or hook, and then to forget it. . . . Other railroad clerks, themselves impervious to

³ James C. Nelson, *Railroad Transportation and Public Policy* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1959), p. 321.

⁴ Stover, *op. cit.*, p. 251.