Americans on Their Own

By JOHN CHAMBERLAIN

There is a thing called the National Production Authority that sits in Washington, D. C. Part of the NPA's duties is to ration materials and allocate production to the motor manufacturers of Detroit. The NPA freezes the automobile market in proportion to what it has been in past years, allocating a certain fixed percentage to Ford, to Chrysler, to General Motors, to Henry Kaiser and so on. It issues tickets for metal purchases. Sometimes the tickets for copper don't match up with the tickets for steel or aluminum; sometimes there is more steel available at the mills for cars than there are tickets with which to command its uses. The net result of all this is an extremely inefficient cartelization of the automobile industry: no one individual company has the freedom to compete with other companies for a bigger percentage of the market, and no one company is forced by competitive circumstances to cut costs, or to improve the sales department, or to lower prices. The odd thing about it is that the cartelization is forced by the very same government that pays its minions to enforce the Sherman Anti-trust Act. It is all done in the name of a "police action" that is not, of course, a war. But it does not noticeably enable us either to fight or to win the police action. Motor men have told George Koether, the transportation editor of *Look*, that NPA could be scrapped tomorrow without the loss of a single tank or gun for Korea. In other words, we could fight the police action just as efficiently and still permit competition in automobiles to become the norm in Detroit.

During the past fortnight I have been reading and feasting my eyes on a book called *"Popular Mechanics'* Picture History of American Transportation," edited by Edward L. Throm (Simon and Schuster, $5). The National Production Authority does not figure in its lavish pages. Nobody told Donald McKay how many clipper ships he might design for the China trade. Nobody set any limits to the amount of time and energy J. Frank Duryea and his brother Charles might divert from their bicycle and toolmaking businesses to tinker with a horseless carriage in Springfield, Mass., back in 1893. (That was a depression year, incidentally, and "planning" was even then the Marxist prescription for ridding the world of depressions.) No NPA was there to freeze the proportions of the automobile market in 1903, the year in which a monkey-wrench mechanic named Henry Ford borrowed $28,000 from thirteen different men to start the Ford Motor Company. (If there had been an NPA around in those days, how could the Ford Motor Company ever have cut itself a slice of the automobile business that was to produce and market 15,000,000 Model T's before the last "tin lizzie" rolled off the line on May 26, 1927?)

The government did, of course, figure somewhat in the development of transportation in America. It helped with tax-supported roads. It made rights of way available to the railroads. It offered mail contracts to aviation lines and subsidies to ship companies. But this type of government aid was, so to speak, open-ended: it set no limits to the enterpriser who fared forth to invent, to improve, to change or to market wheeled or flying vehicles. Always, during the development of the United States into a continent-wide free trade area, the questing individual, trying to improve his own mobility, or his own profit margin, put the lash to the back of government. The development of the macadam highway came *after*, not before, the experimentation of such motor men as Ransom E. Olds and Roy Chapin and Henry Ford and the Messrs. Harley and Davidson of motorcycle fame. The interest of the armed forces in the idea of a war plane came *after*, not before, the Wright brothers had flown their first piano-wire crate at Kitty Hawk. And the railroads were manifestly the product of restless, profit-hungry men whose "selfishness" enabled the population of Kansas City to jump from 3000 in 1870 to 37,000 in 1890. In that same span of time Denver leaped from 5000 to 107,000, and Omaha went from 16,000 to 140,000—a curious by-product of railroad competition that has never been equalled in the "public be pleased" epoch of the Interstate Commerce Commission.

Anybody with merely one good eye and half a cerebellum should be able to deduce from *"Popular Mechanics'* Picture History of American Transportation" that if NPA "planning" had been the dominant idea in America from the beginning, the Conestoga wagons would never have rolled through the Alleghenies, the flatboatmen would never have taken bacon and hams down the Mississippi to New Orleans, Mark Twain would never have been a river pilot, George Westinghouse would never have invented the airbrake, the Wright brothers would never have had the free loan of Judge Huffman's Ohio pasture in which to fiddle with gliding problems, and Henry Ford would never have escaped from the farm or the Detroit Electric Company to become a motor racing fiend. To project the point about Ford back into a century of American time, if a free lance gunmaker named Eli Whitney had not been around in New Haven, Conn., to compete with government-owned arsenals in 1800, the very idea of mass production of standardized parts would hardly have come into being. As told in "The World of Eli Whitney," by Jeannette Mirsky and Allen Nevins (Macmillan, $5.75), the lineage of mass production of interchangeable parts goes this way: Eli Whitney devised it, the Colt arms people picked it up from Whitney, and a man named Henry M. Leland, who had worked for Colt, took the basic notions of mass precision-machine work over from the gun industry to the Cadillac Motor Company. In 1906 Leland transported three Cadillacs to London, disassembled them, scrambled their parts, and then constructed three new automobiles. Henry Ford became Leland's "most distinguished disciple." And all of this happened in this precise way because the Yankee mechanic Eli Whitney had not been subjected in 1800 to any National Production Authority's bureaucratic ideas about allocating materials or energy to the then-existing gun industry.

There is still another implied moral to the story told in *"Popular Mechanics'* Picture History of American Transportation." This moral jumps out at the reader from page 171, where it is said that the "autobat," or the "autopher," or the "self-motor" (early names for the automobile), was supported in the earliest years by "wealthy sportsmen" and by "monkey-wrench engineers who made their own cars." In other words, a few rich people and a few uncoerced people are needed to bring a new industry into being and through its formative stages. If there aren't some people around with a surplusage of income to "waste," there is little likelihood of experimentation in new and "unnecessary" fields. And if certain bold individuals aren't free to "waste" their time in fooling with non-planned gadgets and devices, nothing new would survive the "get a horse" derision which always greets the "crackpot" or the madman who would disturb the status quo.

The Last Rebellion

Strange Empire: A Narrative of the Northwest, by Joseph Kinsey Howard. New York: Morrow. $6.00

Among the obituaries that appeared when Joseph Kinsey Howard died in Montana in August 1951, at the age of forty-five, some came close to elegy. "Joe Howard was our conscience," A. B. Guthrie mourned. "For tens of thousands he was 'Mr. Montana,'" said the *Minneapolis Star*. "A great loss to the budding literature of the Northwest," added the *New York Times* and repeated its regret week by week. In a foreword to "Strange Empire," Howard's last book, which he had all but finished before he died, Bernard DeVoto writes that Joseph Howard "came closer to being the spokesman of the West than any other writer has ever been."

It is almost surprising that "Strange Empire" should not show discrepancies between the legendary being that Howard has tended to become and his achievement. But the book proves the praises no misfit. Howard's sympathy for the underdog and courage to crusade, his feeling for the West, his gift as a writer all work successfully here, along with qualities as a researcher and historian that seem to have reached full growth.

The choice of subject was an original and a bold one, for Louis Riel, who tried and failed to build the "strange empire," was an obscure French-Indian "halfbreed" or Métis, born in 1844 in Rupert's Land in Canada, a man with a mind more or less clouded at times, who led two small-scale rebellions against the Canadian government in 1869-70 and 1885 and ended on the gallows. Howard was immersed in the theme over a long period. He wrote his publishers in 1943, when he was getting the manuscript of his first book, "Montana, High, Wide, and Handsome," ready for the printer:

> The questions about Louis Riel and his Métis "nation" amused me because that's my next book and the one I've been wanting to write and have been gathering material for for several years. But it's too long a story to put in this book parenthetically; I don't know just how we'll work it. Louis Riel led the last rebellion on this continent against modern mechanized civilization and his 120-150 breeds did stand off a Canadian army for four days after licking the Mounties and Canadian troops in four previous battles. He was a religious mystic, trained for the priesthood, and one of the most fascinating characters I ever heard of—about an eighth or sixteenth Indian blood. For a while, after fleeing Canada when he staged his first rebellion in 1870, he taught school at a mission 25 miles from here [Great Falls, Mont.]. Veterans of his campaign are still living—that's the 1885 campaign, of course—in this vicinity. He was licked by an American engineer of Jim Hill who pushed through the C.P.R. railroad before anybody believed it could be done; and by the Gatling gun—the first use of a machine gun on this continent. It was handled (the gun) incidentally by a glorified Connecticut salesman named Lieutenant Howard, U. S. army, and no kin of mine, I hope. Principal cause of the two wars was the Canadians' insistence on surveying the breeds' lands rectangularly, American style, instead of on water fronts, French style; the breeds were right, as we found out in drought years.

Louis Riel is an odd hero: an unsure youth who gave audience in black frock coat and trousers, silk cravat and moccasins, and dreamed Messianic dreams that his followers but partially understood. He gave his people a faith and leadership, yet held them back from fighting when they had well begun and when nothing was to be gained by restraint. He chose hanging in preference to being judged insane; and certainty about his mental state was not achieved even by Howard.

But the scope of the volume is

Lest You Forget

SOME RECENT BOOKS FOR LIBERTARIANS

Brain-Washing in Red China, by Edward Hunter (Vanguard)

One Is a Crowd, by Frank Chodorov (Devin-Adair)

The American Twenties, by John K. Hutchens (Lippincott)

The Enemy Within, by Father Raymond de Jaegher and Irene Kuhn (Doubleday)

Planning for Freedom, by Ludwig von Mises (Libertarian Press)