

LOOK BACK AT A CENTURY OF BUS TRANSPORTATION: 1920-1929

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A Fageol Safety Coach operated by White Bus Line is pictured on a snowy day in 1924 at the Hotel Agate Bay in Two Harbors, Minn.

by William A. Luke

This is the third in a 10-part series looking back at bus transportation in the 20th century, with each installment focusing on the highlights of a particular decade. The bus industry took important steps forward in the 1920s. Transcontinental bus service was first offered during the decade. In addition, purpose-built buses were introduced. Comfort, safety and convenience for the passenger were greatly improved.

Brothers Frank R. Fageol and William B. Fageol were the builders of what reportedly was the first purpose-built bus in 1922. Called the Fageol Safety Coach, the bus did not require a truck chassis as in the past, and the body was mounted low on the new bus chassis, resulting in a low center of gravity. It had a capacity of 22 passengers who entered the bus from several doors along the side. The engine was a four-cylinder Hall-Scott.

Many bus companies saw the advantage of the Fageol Safety Coach, and this new bus appeared everywhere, even overseas. Improvements were subsequently made. The size was increased, and passengers entered at one door in front and seats were on either side of the aisle.

The Fageols sold the business to the American Car and Foundry in 1925, and stayed with the company for a short time before starting a new bus building company, the Twin Coach Company, in 1926.

City Transit Buses Evolve

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The Model 40 Twin Coach, introduced in 1926, was a revolutionary city transit bus and was popular in cities coast to coast. This Model 40 was operated for more than 20 years by the Milwaukee Electric Railway and Transport Company.

At that time, the Fageols introduced a revolutionary city transit bus. It had two engines mounted inside the body on either side, each with its own driveline and differential. Waukesha engines were used initially, but Hercules engines later became standard. Passenger capacity was increased, and the entrance door was forward of the front wheels, a first for a bus.

City transit systems at that time were looking for a suitable bus for expansion and to replace streetcars. The timing was right. The Twin Coach was a strong, dependable bus and many were able to remain in service for more than 20 years. The same Twin Coach design was later adapted for trolley coach service as well as for an intercity coach. However, a lightweight streetcar using the same body was not successful.

New Bus Builders Emerge

Many new companies emerged as bus builders. The Eckland Brothers Company of Minneapolis, Minn., which began building buses in 1915, teamed with C.H. Will, a chassis builder. Many Eckland/Will buses were built, especially for Greyhound, in the latter part of the decade. The Eckland/Will team found that by mounting the engine over the front axle, seating capacity could be increased.

In Canada, Eugene Prevost began building buses in 1924 at his furniture shop in Ste. Claire, Quebec. The company is still a leading coach manufacturer today, and has remained in the same location.

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One of the first buses to carry the Greyhound Lines name was this model, built in 1929 with an Eckland body on a Will chassis.

The Flxible Company also began building buses in 1924. Truck and auto makers White, Mack, Studebaker, Pierce Arrow and Graham were some of the manufacturers that entered into the fray. Yellow Coach Manufacturing Co., formed by Fifth Avenue Coach Co.'s John Hertz and John Ritchie, began in 1923.

There was considerable development in the bus operating part of the bus industry in the 1920s. Carl Wickman, who began his bus career in 1914, saw unlimited possibilities for bus transportation. In 1922, he and Orville Caesar, who began the White Bus Company, joined with Wickman to form Northland Transportation Company, a sizable bus system in Minnesota. Their venture was helped by the acquisition of routes north of Minneapolis from Edgar Zelle and his new Jefferson Highway Transportation Company. In addition, capital from the Great Northern Railway was added.

In the meantime, Motor Transit Corporation was formed in 1926. This was an important company because it adopted the Greyhound Lines name in 1929 and became the Greyhound Corporation later. This was the first big bus line consolidation program. Separate companies were brought into the Greyhound organization as divisions, making the transcontinental Greyhound system a reality. A number of the pioneers of Mesaba Transportation Company became important executives of the Greyhound Corporation and its divisions.

Elsewhere, large bus systems were being formed by consolidations, acquisitions and the formation of new routes. These included Florida Motor Lines, Short Line, Jefferson Highway Transportation Company, Adirondack Transit Lines, Interstate Transit Lines, Indian Trails, Blue Ridge Lines, Washington Motor Coach Company, Oklahoma Transportation Co., and many others. Several of the major railroads also invested in long-distance bus services.

Many cities were adding buses to supplement their streetcar lines. What's more, there were some streetcar abandonments taking place, and buses proved to be a flexible and low-cost alternative. Electric trolley buses had been tried in a number of cities, but the first serious introduction of

trolley buses occurred in 1929 in Salt Lake City, Utah, with a fleet of Versare vehicles. A number of small cities began urban bus services.

National parks were benefiting from motorized vehicles. Park areas, such as Yellowstone, Banff and the Grand Canyon area had been operating sightseeing services with horse-drawn carriages for a number of years. Sightseeing buses were becoming very popular in many areas. The Gray Line Sight-Seeing Association was formed.

Milestones: 1920-1929

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Nite coaches were introduced on long-distance routes in 1928 by Pickwick Stages. Pickwick built the interesting double decker, also known as the Duplex Coach, in California.

There were a number of important dates in the century's third decade. The National Association of Motor Bus Operators (known today as the American Bus Association) was formed in 1926. Many states formed state bus associations, and most states had set up regulations for bus companies. City bus operators were members of the American Electric Railway Association, which later became the American Transit Association.

In Canada, many intercity bus companies got their start in the 1920s. These included Colonial Coach Lines, Grey Coach Lines and Western Canadian Greyhound Lines, to name a few.

Sleeper buses were introduced in 1928, and the Houston Electric Company began running express buses in 1925.

The 1920-29 decade was a busy one for the bus industry, and the next decade was to be no exception despite the Great Depression.

William A. Luke, a member of the Bus Business Journal editorial advisory board and executive director and founder of the Buses International Association, has more than 50 years' experience in the bus industry, including publishing and editing an industry trade publication for more than 30 years. Luke was inducted into the American Public Transit Association Hall of Fame last year.

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