

LOOK BACK AT A CENTURY OF BUS TRANSPORTATION 1930-1939

by William A. Luke

Many art-deco style bus terminals were built by Greyhound in the 1930s. One was this terminal in Minneapolis, built in 1937 for a half-million dollars. Parked outside is a Greyhound Yellow Coach Model 743, at right.

This is the fourth 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 decade of the 1930s was a very active time for the bus industry despite the depression, which gripped the world.

Prior to 1930, bus transportation was unimportant in city transportation. The streetcar continued to be dominant, even in smaller cities. Buses were operating in most cities, but in a secondary role.

Electric power companies operated many city transit systems. These companies easily supplied electrical power to streetcars. However, streetcars in service were wearing out, and replacement was costly. An alternative--the electric trolley bus--began operating in many cities.

In the early 1930s, the federal government concluded that power companies should not be in the transportation business. Consequently, they were told to divest their transportation business, a development that resulted in big changes for city transport.

Entrepreneurs Step Up

Believed to be the first low-floor bus was this Model 23R Twin Coach, operated by the Winnipeg (Manitoba) Electric Co. The low floor was achieved by having the engine mounted directly over the rear wheels. Many cities in the U.S. and Canada operated this popular bus.

Recognizing an opportunity was E. Roy Fitzgerald, who, along with his brothers, began acquiring city transport systems in medium-sized locales. This was one of the largest consolidating moves in bus transportation. National City Lines was the name of Fitzgerald's company. By 1936, 17 city bus systems in five states carried the National City Lines name. A five-cent fare was charged and was widely publicized. National City Lines also built modern bus garages in most cities. Pacific City Lines, which had close relations with NCL and had Fitzgerald on its board, was formed in 1938. It later became wholly owned by NCL.

Another consolidation movement began when the Giacoma brothers, Dominic and Pete, along with Henry DeTournay, began acquiring transport systems. The

company grew and later became American Transit Corporation. Several other holding companies were formed to operate urban transit. Also, the first large city in the U.S. to become an all-bus city was San Antonio in 1932.

There were many developments in the intercity bus business. Consolidation was very evident as Greyhound added many divisions, and became a true nationwide bus system. World's fairs in Chicago in 1933 and New York in 1938 stimulated bus travel. Greyhound did considerable advertising and had promotional fares to the Chicago fair as low as \$49 from anywhere. Greyhound also had the contract to provide bus service at both the Chicago and New York fairs. Special futuristic buses were used.

Greyhound had an ambitious bus terminal building program in the 1930s. The distinctive art-deco styling was identified everywhere. Greyhound also began Post House restaurants, situating them in various smaller communities that were convenient meal-stop locations.

Another transcontinental bus operation was begun in 1935 when five large bus companies organized the National Trailways Bus System. It was not a consolidation, but an organization of independent member bus companies. Marketing, common bus terminals, through buses and close cooperation were the objective. At the end of the decade there were 37 members.

A significant milestone occurred in 1935 when the federal government enacted the Motor Carrier Act, which brought about regulation of interstate bus companies. Its purpose was to regulate the entry routes, and merger and financial transactions of for-hire motor carriers. The regulation came under the jurisdiction of the Interstate Commerce Commission.

Buses Continue Their Evolution

Greyhound had this special trailer bus, designed by James J. St. Croix, to operate a contract for transportation on the Chicago World's Fair site in 1933-1934.

There was also considerable activity in the design and manufacture of buses. Yellow Coach introduced a transversal engine in city buses, increasing passenger capacity. Mack also did the same. Under-floor engines were also used in some buses, particularly ACF and White models. The White 780 series city bus had a powerful 12-cylinder, under-floor engine. Yellow Coach built new double-deck city buses for New York's Fifth Avenue Coach Company and the Chicago Motor Coach Company. Single-deck buses were in use elsewhere.

A few other interesting buses were introduced in the decade. The Twin Coach Company built an articulated bus, but it was ahead of its time, and only one was reported to have been built. Twin Coach also produced what is believed to be the

first low-floor bus. It had the engine at the rear over the back wheels, eliminating the need of an elevated floor over the driveline.

Ford Motor Company had been producing chassis for buses for a number of years. In 1939, Ford built a rear-engined transit bus. Several thousand were built in subsequent years, and they appeared in most cities, large and small. Detroit was said to have 1,000 of these small buses.

Greyhound Lines, with the cooperation of Yellow Coach, produced the Model 719 bus in 1936. Features included high-level design, under-floor baggage compartments and a rear engine. The coach was mainly for Greyhound, but several other companies were allowed to acquire this coach and its successor, the Model 743. Toward the end of the decade Greyhound introduced the "Silversides" coach.

Two Canadian manufacturers got their start in the 1930s in Winnipeg. Western Auto and Truck Body Works began in 1930, and today it is known as New Flyer Industries. Fort Garry Motor Body and Paint Works, founded in 1932, is known today as Motor Coach Industries.

A number of intercity coach manufacturers were building intercity buses in the 1930s. A noteworthy small bus of the time was the Flexible Clipper.

Technology, Infrastructure Make Strides

Chicago Motor Coach Company and Fifth Avenue Coach Company in New York City received new-generation double deck buses (Models 720 and 735) from the Yellow Coach Company in 1936.

Not only was the design of buses significant during the decade, new technologies were also making important breakthroughs. The diesel engine was one of the major developments for buses. Cummins Engine Company produced the first diesel engines in the early part of the decade. In 1932 Cummins re-powered two buses, and these two buses were thought to be the first diesel-powered buses in the United States. General Motors Corporation introduced its first diesel engine in the latter part of the 1930s. By decade's end, the diesel became the primary engine in most Yellow Coach city and intercity buses.

Improvements were also achieved in transmissions, with some semi-automatic models being introduced. Air conditioning was featured in buses in the mid-1930s by Carrier. By the end of the decade, most large intercity buses were air conditioned. Reclining seats in intercity buses had also become standard.

New highways, bridges and tunnels were being built, allowing both city and intercity bus operations to enhance their services. A few new bridges of the

decade were the George Washington Bridge in 1931, the San Francisco Bay Bridge in 1936 and the Golden Gate Bridge in 1937.

The 1930s were exciting years for the bus industry, opening up the growth and acceptance of bus travel for the future.

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