

A LOOK BACK AT A CENTURY OF BUS TRANSPORTATION: 1940-1949

by William A. Luke

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The Alaska Highway, which opened in 1942, had buses operated by the Northwest Service Command. The road presented many challenges, but the buses had an excellent performance record

This is the fifth 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 1940s saw the United States in three distinct eras: pre-war, World War II, and the post-war period. Each era saw changes taking place in the bus industry. Bus transportation gained strong recognition for its important role during the war.

The pre-war period mirrored the previous decade. National City Lines continued to acquire small and medium-sized transit systems, notably in Tampa; Lincoln, Neb., and the Iowa cities of Burlington and Ottumwa.

Several large cities became all-bus locales in the early part of the decade. Houston, Texas, became the largest all-bus city in the United States in 1940. The following year, both Honolulu and Seattle scrapped streetcars and became all-bus cities, but each retained trolley buses. Trolley bus numbers were growing in the United States, and in 1941 there were approximately 3,000 in service.

Two new intercity coaches were introduced early in the decade. They were the 37-passenger Aerocoach, and the Luxury Liner by C.D. Beck & Co.

Going almost unnoticed in 1942 was the 50th anniversary of Banff, Alberta-based Brewster Transport. However, Canada was already at war, and sightseeing services like Brewster had been seriously curtailed.

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Believed to be the first glass-top sightseeing bus was this one built in 1949 by the Western Auto and Truck Body Works in Winnipeg.

Wartime creates special need for buses

The bus industry was prepared and eager to do its part when the United States entered World War II at the end of 1941. The government favored the railroads for moving servicemen and workers, but soon realized that there was an important need for bus transportation throughout the country.

Bus manufacturing was curtailed and plants went into production of military vehicles and equipment. Bus shortages were addressed, and the government allowed a limited number of buses to be built. The buses built at that time were referred to as "ODTs," as the Office of Defense Transportation gave the official authorization. Some trailers were built for carrying passengers, but buses were the main carriers.

Arms plants were built away from metropolitan centers, and buses were contracted to move the workers. City transit was serving the war effort almost beyond its capacity. Buses in Honolulu, for example, carried 38.5 million passengers in 1941. In 1944, the figure was 124.8 million.

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The Flxible Company built a new 37-passenger coach in the late 40s. It was powered with two Chevrolet engines. Only 10 were reported to have been built.

The famous Alaska Highway opened in 1942, and buses played an important part in providing passenger transportation over the highway during the war. Fort Garry Motor Body and Paint Works in Winnipeg, Manitoba, built the first 12 buses for the Alaska Highway service. They were operated by Western Canadian Greyhound Lines under a contract from the United States Army Corps of Engineers, North West Service Command. Ralph Bogan, a chief executive officer from the Greyhound Corporation, was commissioned a colonel with the assignment to operate the bus service.

The buses faced extreme challenges traveling the new Alaska Highway. There were steep hills, muddy tracks, rivers to ford, and winter temperatures as low as -65 degrees Fahrenheit. Yet, the North West Service Command buses traveled more than a million miles in Alaska Highway service without any incidents.

Another important highway, the Pennsylvania Turnpike, opened in the 1940s. It was America's first "superhighway" and allowed Greyhound to trim at least three hours from the non-turnpike schedule after the war.

Bus designers take advantage of wartime

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Greyhound Lines placed an order for 1,500 Silversides buses from GM Truck & Coach Division in 1947.

Apparently, during the war, bus manufacturers devoted considerable thought to post-war bus designs. Immediately after World War II, new bus designs were announced and the buses were in production soon afterward.

In Fort William, Ontario, a war plant was quickly converted in 1945 to build buses. The Canadian counterpart of ACF-Brill Motors in Philadelphia began building intercity and transit buses under the CCF-Brill name. Both CCF-Brill and ACF-Brill produced similar intercity, transit and trolley buses, making some changes from pre-war models.

Mack Trucks and White Motor Company brought out newly designed transit buses, which were slightly different from pre-war models.

General Motors had a major interest in Yellow Coach, and in 1943 a minority interest was purchased. Yellow Coach became a wholly owned division, and adopted a new name-GM Truck & Coach Division. General Motors did not make major changes in the city buses Yellow had built before the war. However, sales of GM city buses were excellent in the post-war years. Most were sold with diesel engines.

Twin Coach Company, however, made major changes in its buses. Not only was the appearance of its buses much different than its pre-war models, but they had an under-floor gasoline engine and torsilastic suspension. In addition, a 58-passenger articulated model was marketed. The standard-model Twin Coaches sold very well in many U.S. and Canadian cities. Even Lucerne, Switzerland, acquired new Twin Coaches. Some were also delivered to cities in Holland and Turkey.

New-bus market prospers

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The Marmon Herrington Company, a new bus manufacturer in 1945, built many trolley buses in the post-war years. This is one built for the San Francisco Municipal Railway.

In 1948, the Omaha & Council Bluffs Street Railway ordered its first articulated Twin Coach. Nine more were delivered later. These were the only Model 58-D Twin Coaches sold.

Trolley buses continued to be popular. Between 1945 and 1949, more than 4,000 were built for cities in the United States and Canada. A newcomer in the production of trolley buses, the Marmon Herrington Company, entered the market.

Marmon Herrington also entered the small-bus business, acquiring the small-bus unit of Ford, which had designed a new vehicle. Transit Bus Co. was also new in the market, using bodies built by Union City Body Company, which had built the pre-war Ford Transit bodies. Another new bus manufacturer, the Southern Coach Co., came on the scene at the same time.

In 1947, Greyhound Lines placed a \$37 million order for 1,500 Silversides diesel coaches from GM Truck & Coach Division. Many other intercity companies bought General Motors coaches.

Trailways companies ordered a new post-war coach, the IC-41, from ACF-Brill Motors. These coaches had Hall-Scott under-floor gasoline engines. Some Greyhound divisions acquired ACF-Brill coaches; however, some Trailways companies bought GM coaches.

Aerocoach, Beck, Fitzjohn and Flxible were among several other builders of post-war intercity coaches. Flxible introduced a 37-passenger model, using two Chevrolet engines. Reportedly, only 10 were built, because a fire at the factory destroyed the manufacturing equipment. That ended the production of the new bus.

In Canada, the Fort Garry Motor Body and Paint Works became Motor Coach Industries (MCI). The post-war MCI coach was the Courier 100.

Bus industry begins its evolution

A number of events took place in the immediate post-war years. One-room rural schoolhouses were disappearing, creating big growth for the school bus industry. For safety, all school buses were beginning to adopt a bright yellow-orange color.

The Airport Ground Transportation Association was founded in 1946. Two years later, Allison Transmission Division of General Motors introduced the Power Shift transmission.

The bus industry began to see the growth of charter, tour, and sightseeing business following the war. Winnipeg-based Western Auto & Truck Body Works was said to have produced the first glass-top sightseeing buses.

Kaiser Industries built a single coach. It was a luxury-articulated model, operated by Santa Fe Trailways. Kenworth continued building intercity buses and some transit and trolley buses.

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Many Trailways companies chose the ACF-Brill IC-47 bus for most transcontinental and other long-distance routes in the post-war era.

National City Lines began investing in larger city bus systems. St. Louis was first. Later, Baltimore Transit, Los Angeles Transit and the Key System of California had NCL people in their management and ownership.

Saskatchewan's socialist government "provincialized" bus transportation in the province in 1946. All bus routes except Greyhound transcontinental routes were acquired, and Saskatchewan Transportation Company was launched. A fleet of CCF-Brill and Western Flyer coaches was purchased.

As the first half of the 20th Century ended, the bus industry had become recognized as an important part of the transportation networks of the U.S. and Canada. Cities were finding buses to be the urban transit vehicle of the future.

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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