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LOOK BACK AT A CENTURY OF BUS TRANSPORTATION: 1950-1959

by William A. Luke

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The prototype Western Flyer Canuck was first built by the Western Auto & Truck Body Works in Winnipeg in 1955.

This is the sixth 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.

In the 1950s, transit systems were busy acquiring new buses to replace the ones that worked hard during the war, many cities were discontinuing streetcars and replacing them with buses, and intercity bus companies were also replacing older buses.

The first significant date in the decade was October 1950, when the large Port Authority Bus Terminal was opened in New York City. Commuter buses from New Jersey found the new terminal a great convenience to their customers. Intercity companies also used the terminal, but Greyhound elected to continue to use its own terminals in Manhattan.

One of the nation's most historic events involved the bus industry. It was on Dec. 1, 1955 that Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white person on a transit bus in Montgomery, Ala., an act that helped launch the civil rights movement. Previously, blacks were required to occupy seats in the rear of buses in the South, and never in front of a white person riding a bus. Such seating on buses, as well as other forms of segregation, eventually came to an end, with Parks' refusal to give up her seat on that Montgomery bus playing a major role.

Bus building starts strongly but later fades

At the beginning of the decade bus manufacturing was moving along quite well, with a number of companies vying for customers. General Motors had successfully developed a diesel engine, and almost every bus sold by GM's Truck & Coach Division had the GM diesel engine. Other bus manufacturers, which used gasoline engines in the vehicles they produced, found it difficult to compete, and by 1953 the Twin Coach Company and ACF Brill closed their doors. Also, White Motor Co. discontinued bus production. Intercity buses built by Aerocoach, Beck, Fitzjohn and others were discontinued as well. Even trolley bus production slowed.

GM Truck & Coach Division also introduced air suspension on both intercity and city buses in 1952. At the same time, a new intercity bus model, the PD 4104, made its debut.

Greyhound and many other intercity bus companies, large and small, added the PD 4104 to their fleets.

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The GM PD 4104 was a new designed intercity coach introduced in 1952. A new air suspension system gave the coach a much-improved ride. Indian Trails of Michigan had several of these new coaches in its fleet.

For a number of years, Trailways companies used ACF-Brill coaches as their flagship models. ACF-Brill intercity coaches had an under-floor gasoline engine, and although diesel power was made available, the coach had other disadvantages. ACF-Brill coaches were not up to the post-war trends. For a short time, Trailways companies looked to the Flexible Corporation, and a new, larger coach was made available. However, this vehicle also didn't seem to be the answer to Trailways for its post-war flagship coach.

Greyhound launches its signature coach

In 1953, Greyhound Lines introduced the Scenicruiser. It was a 40-foot-long bus with tandem rear axles, two diesel engines, a deck-and-a-half style body and a lavatory. This coach was designed jointly by Greyhound and GM, and 1,001 Scenicruisers were exclusively built for Greyhound. This bus had passenger appeal and it helped Greyhound in the post-war years. Later, the two diesel engines were replaced by a single V-8 diesel engine.

The Greyhound Corporation added more divisions, consolidated others, and acquired a number of smaller bus companies. Two important companies bought under the Greyhound organization were the Washington Motor Coach Company and North Coast Lines in the Northwest. The two companies became known as Northwest Greyhound Lines. Interstate Transit Lines, which also used the names Chicago & Northwestern Stages and Union Pacific Stages, was added, adopting the name Overland Greyhound Lines.

In the meantime, the National Trailways System added more companies, and in 1956 there were 44 carriers with the Trailways name, including the large Continental Trailways system. Continental had previously done some consolidating and brought in a number of other Trailways companies under the Continental banner.

However, Trailways did not have a bus to compete with the Greyhound Scenicruiser. The search for the right bus took Continental Trailways officials to Europe, where they approached the Karl Kässbohrer bus building firm in Ulm, Germany. In 1956, that company produced a new 40-foot, three-axle coach named the Golden Eagle for Continental Trailways. Two years later, four articulated Golden Eagle vehicles were acquired. Continental found the Eagle-style coaches to be a good fit and standardized on them. Continental eventually set up a plant in Belgium for the Eagle-style coaches and the newer ones were referred to as Silver Eagles.

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The giant Port Authority Bus Terminal opened in New York City in 1950.

Automobile era brings competition for bus operators

Intercity bus companies saw a decrease in passenger totals as automobile production reached all-time highs in the post-war years, resulting in people using their new automobiles for traveling instead of using public transportation. To gain additional revenue, increased emphasis was given to charter and tour services. Tours were pre-planned and packaged for individuals. Most small and medium-sized bus companies hinged their survival on this type of business. Large companies including Greyhound and Trailways also benefited by doing more charter and tour business. Carrying packages also helped intercity bus companies.

New highway building was a boon to long-distance bus travel. The Ohio Turnpike, which connected with the Pennsylvania Turnpike, opened in 1952. This was followed by the opening of the Indiana Turnpike and other limited-access highways. On June 29, 1956, President Dwight Eisenhower signed the Federal Aid Highway Act, which launched the construction of the nation's Interstate Highway system. This, of course, would greatly benefit long-distance bus companies. Bus travel was now even able to compete with the schedules of many train services. Urban transit systems were also helped because the new highways, which entered metropolitan centers, opened up new opportunities for express bus services to suburban areas.

City bus services were affected to a greater degree by the loss of passengers to increased automobile usage. This was partially the reason why many of the city-bus builders ceased production of their vehicles. Many city transit systems, which heretofore operated streetcars, continued to be all-bus companies, as trolley bus production was hit even harder. Production of new trolley buses totaled just 224 in 1952 and, except in 1955 when 43 were built, no more were built during the remainder of the decade. Nineteen U.S. cities ended trolley bus operations by 1959, while trolley bus services continued in 14 Canadian cities.

At the time, most city transit systems were privately owned, with some exceptions. However, public ownership of transit systems in Seattle, San Francisco and Detroit existed for some time. The Chicago Transit Authority was formed after the war, and in 1952 it acquired the Chicago Motor Coach Company, which dated back to 1917.

Canadian bus manufacturers managed to survive the 1950s. Winnipeg-based Western Auto & Truck Body Works had been continuing to build the front-engined Flyer, but in 1955 a new rear-engined bus called the Canuck was built.

In 1958, Greyhound Lines of Canada purchased the remaining shares of Motor Coach Industries Limited (MCI), also based in Winnipeg, after acquiring slightly more than half of the shares 10 years earlier. The company was building the rear-engined Courier model for Greyhound, as well as for other Canadian bus companies. In 1959, the new Challenger model was launched by MCI.

A change in ownership of the Quebec company building Prevost buses happened in 1957, and a new name, Prevost Car, Inc., was chosen. Both city and intercity buses were being built, but the new company concentrated on highway coaches.

General Motors had a large market in Canada, and both intercity and transit buses were being added to the fleets of Canadian intercity companies and city transit systems.

Canadian Car and Foundry continued to produce transit buses and intercity coaches through the decade at its Fort William (now Thunder Bay), Ontario plant. In 1950, British AEC diesel engines were successfully used in the transit buses. The name for the buses was changed in 1956 from CCF-Brill to CanCar.

Continual large demand for school buses existed in both the United States and Canada. Although there were several firms building school buses, Blue Bird Corporation in Fort Valley, Ga., was one of the largest. In 1952 Blue Bird began building both the chassis and body for school buses, calling the new bus the All American. Most school bus manufacturers continued building only school bus bodies on special chassis from other manufacturers.

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Motor Coach Industries Ltd. in Winnipeg, Manitoba, was building the Courier model coach in the early 1950s. Rocky Mountain Tours in the Canadian Rockies operated a glass-top sightseeing model, the Courier Skyview.

Antitrust charges make headlines

National City Lines (NCL) and several of its suppliers had become involved in antitrust violations soon after the war. The charges involved exclusive supply contracts to companies having investments in NCL. General Motors Truck & Coach Division, Mack Trucks, Firestone Tire & Rubber Co. and other NCL investors were among these suppliers. Although actions began in 1946, it wasn't until 1954 that NCL signed a consent decree. NCL agreed to purchase supplies on a competitive bid basis. In the meantime, suppliers discontinued their NCL investments.

General Motors Truck & Coach Division became involved in another bus industry antitrust complaint in 1956. The charge was that the company had gained a monopoly in bus manufacturing. The GM diesel engine was in most GM transit buses and intercity coaches, and was the main reason for the monopoly complaint. Other manufacturers were not able to purchase the popular GM diesel engine for their buses, and other diesel engine manufacturers did not seem to have engines that would meet bus requirements. In 1958, however, GM began offering its diesel engine to other bus manufacturers. But by that time most bus manufacturers were out of business, with one exception being the Flexible Corporation, which was given the opportunity to acquire GM diesel engines. GM later signed a consent decree allowing any manufacturer to buy engines and components for their buses from General Motors.

The 1950s climaxed with GM Truck & Coach Division's introduction of the "New Look" transit bus line in 1959. The buses were 53- and 45-passenger models. Representing a radical change in transit bus design, the "New Look" buses had large side windows and a large, interesting front windshield. Of course, the proven GM diesel engine, angle drive and air suspension were integral parts of the new buses. Air conditioning was also made available. The "New Look" bus was well accepted, and cities everywhere began placing orders.

The decade saw many changes in all segments of the bus industry. Only a small number of bus manufacturers remained. The automobile was being acquired by more and more people, and ridership on buses diminished. Bus companies tried to expand their scope of service, and city transit systems tried--without much success--to sell the public on transit.

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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