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LOOK BACK AT A CENTURY OF BUS TRANSPORTATION: 1960-1969

by William A. Luke

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Mercedes-Benz began selling its O302 bus in the United States in 1968. With its large windows, these buses were popular in sightseeing service.

This is the seventh 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 1960s brought a new generation of urban transit to the United States. The federal government recognized the growing problems of the private transit systems in many cities. Reduced ridership--mainly due to competition from the automobile--and decreasing revenues were becoming critical.

When the Housing Act of 1961 was enacted, it authorized \$25 million for mass transportation demonstration projects. Also, mass transportation planning was included and loans for capital improvements were authorized.

Three years later, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Urban Mass Transportation Act of 1964, through which low-interest loans were provided. Capital grants covering up to two-thirds of the cost of facilities and equipment were a new provision enacted by the federal government. The grants or loans were to public organizations, although private enterprise could participate in conjunction with and through the public organizations.

On April 1, 1967, the Department of Transportation (DOT) became a cabinet-level agency of the U.S. government, with Alan Boyd being named the first secretary. In 1968, the Urban Transportation Administration was brought from the Department of Housing and Urban Development into the DOT and became known as the Urban Mass Transportation Administration (UMTA).

Though all the legislation and federal involvement in transportation in the 1960s emphasized help to large cities, particularly those with heavy rail systems, the stage was set for the future for all transportation. This meant considerable support for all urban and rural area bus transportation systems.

Private transit goes into decline

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GMC Truck & Coach division began building transit buses in London, Ont., in 1961. Some of the buses were suburban types with a coach door and high-back seats. Charterways had the first bus of this type.

The decline of transit ridership caused a number of private transit firms to go out of business. New city or regional public transit agencies were started in Miami, St. Louis, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Cincinnati, Providence, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and a few other locations. By the end of the 1960s, private transit continued to operate in a majority of urban areas.

The first busway in the United States opened in 1969 on the Shirley Highway between Springfield, Va., and downtown Washington, D.C. It reduced travel time by half and attracted many commuters. The Northern Virginia Transportation Commission implemented the project.

National City Lines (NCL) had disposed of some of its large-city transit systems, but continued to own bus systems in 21 cities. The management had changed, and the firm moved its headquarters to Tampa, Fla. Around that time, NCL initiated a new management service for newly formed public transit systems, with one of its first contracts being signed with the Miami-Dade Transit Agency in 1961.

The Giacoma brothers, Dominic and Pete, along with Henry DeTournay and A.J. DeMayo, continued in the management of St. Louis-based American Transit Corporation (ATC). In the late 1960s the company owned 38 bus operations, some being transit services, and others specializing in sightseeing, airport service and intercity routes. Later, ATC became active in management services.

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The MCI MC-6 was said to be a bus ahead of its time. It was 102 inches wide and had a V-12 diesel engine. Most of the 100 built were operated by Greyhound in Canada, but some were on select Greyhound routes in the United States.

Another company, American Transportation Enterprises, headed by David Ringo, was a holding corporation of some 18 transit companies in 1967. This firm also saw the advantages of management services, and later became known as ATE Management and Service Corporation.

Education, specifically for bus transportation in the United States and Canada, had been lacking. Indiana University recognized the need and established the Institute for Urban Transportation in 1969. In the Institute's 30 years, many of its graduates have become valuable transit management employees. George Smerk, Ph.D., has directed this important program since its inception.

Intercity bus travel gains favor

The decline of passengers and revenue in the intercity bus industry was not as severe as in city transit. Charter and tour services became more important in the 1960s, as the U.S. population became more mobile. Families were no longer confined to one community and visiting friends and relatives in faraway places became common. Many scenic attractions and historic places became prime destinations of bus travelers. Events such as the 1962 Seattle World's Fair, the 1964-65 New York World's Fair, the 1967 Canadian Centennial Exhibition in Montreal and San Antonio's Hemisfair stimulated bus travel. The opening of Disneyland and other theme parks attracted many bus travelers as well.

Travel was becoming a very competitive business. Railroads and airlines were encouraging leisure travel, but the main competitor was the automobile. Although Greyhound Lines, Trailways companies and a few other bus operators had been selling bus travel for many years, marketing for everyone was becoming a necessity. Also, because some thought the word "bus" had a negative image, the words "motorcoach" or "coach" began to be used more frequently.

During the post-war years, the Greyhound Corporation was changing. The pioneers--Eric Wickman, Orville Caesar, Ralph Bogan and others--had retired, and new management took over the reins. Gerald Trautman became the new president in 1965, following Arthur Genet and Fredrick Ackerman.

The entire bus industry was changing. In addition to its long-distance bus service, Greyhound had been operating profitable suburban services in many areas such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, Detroit, Buffalo, Pittsburgh and others. With the increase in automobiles, plus higher wages for bus drivers even for short commuter days, revenue from suburban services decreased. Greyhound was able to dispose of the Detroit and Seattle suburban services to American Transit Corporation. Public transit agencies were emerging and receiving subsidies. This did not happen immediately in the San Francisco area, and Greyhound was forced to operate that suburban service through the 1960s.

A number of Greyhound's rural intercity routes were turned over to smaller bus companies. These smaller companies were able to operate with lower costs, while Greyhound concentrated mainly on long-distance routes. Further completion of the interstate highway system in the United States helped make bus travel more convenient.

Greyhound diversifies

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Electric trolley buses were built in 1969 by Flyer Industries. The Toronto Transit Commission took delivery of the prototype and placed orders for a fleet of the new buses.

It was during the 1960s that the Greyhound Corporation diversified into industries that were not all transportation related. The companies acquired by Greyhound in the 1960s involved aircraft and freight car leasing, computers, insurance, custom brokering and catering.

The Greyhound Corporation also invested in bus manufacturing. Through Greyhound Lines of Canada, Motor Coach Industries (MCI) of Winnipeg became fully owned in 1961. At the time, the model MC-4 was being built in Winnipeg. In April 1962, MCI opened an assembly plant across the U.S. border in Pembina, N.D., 68 miles south of Winnipeg. Bus body shells from Winnipeg were trucked to Pembina for final assembly. Then in 1963, MCI buses were built for Greyhound Lines in the United States. The new model MC-5 was also offered for sale to all bus companies. Colorado Motorway of Denver was one of the first companies outside of Greyhound in the United States to buy MCI buses.

The 1960s proved to be a busy decade for MCI. The MC-6 bus developed for Greyhound had a V-12 diesel engine and was 40 feet long and 102 inches wide. The MC-6 first saw service in 1969 on Greyhound Lines of Canada routes. The 102-inch width was not legal in the United States at that time, although some states gave permission for wider intercity buses, and the MC-6 was used on some routes. The MC-6 had limited production because it turned out to be ahead of its time.

The MC-7, MCI's first 40-foot bus, came into production in 1968. Greyhound added many MC-7s to its fleet, which at that time totaled 5,000 buses, mainly MCIs and GMs. Many other companies in the U.S. and Canada also bought MC-7s.

GMC Truck & Coach Division was in full production of the New Look city bus at the beginning of the decade. GM was also actively building intercity buses. The PD 4106--a modified version of the PD 4104--came in 1961, followed by the PD 4107, an interesting design with step-up seating in the front. A larger 40-foot GM intercity coach was introduced in 1968. Known as the PD 4903, it had three axles, one of which was retractable.

Other companies survive, prosper

Almost all buses sold in the United States were diesel powered, and with few exceptions the engines were produced by General Motors. The name of the GM diesel division was changed to Detroit Diesel Division in 1965. General Motors had acquired the Allison division, which built transmissions for buses, back in 1929.

The Flixible Company survived the turbulent 1950s when many bus manufacturers went out of business. Mack Trucks did manage to build a limited number of buses until 1960, but then discontinued bus building. Nevertheless,

Flxible introduced a "new-look" transit bus with a GM diesel power plant in 1961. The new Flxible was acquired by many transit systems, including the Chicago Transit Authority.

Mercedes-Benz of Germany began selling its O302 bus in the United States in 1968. The O302 had experienced great success in Europe, prompting several U.S. sightseeing companies to add the O302 to their fleets.

General Motors also began building non-air-conditioned transit buses in London, Ont., in 1961. Can Car was winding down and discontinuing bus manufacturing in 1962, after trying a new TD51 transit bus. The timing was right for the move by General Motors.

Considerable changes took place at Prevost Car, Inc. with its new management at the Sainte-Claire, Que., factory. The Panoramique coach was introduced in 1962, followed by the Champion in 1967. In 1968, Prevost entered the U.S. market.

Another Canadian bus manufacturer also made changes during the 1960s. Western Flyer in Winnipeg was acquired in 1963 by A.J. Thiessen, an owner of several Manitoba bus companies. The Canuck 500 and Canuck 600 intercity buses were manufactured by his company. Western Flyer also commenced building its Series 700 transit buses in 1968, and in 1969 built its first Series 700 trolley bus. Toronto Transit Commission became the first to acquire this new-model trolley bus.

Events shape Canada's bus industry

There was also considerable activity in long-distance bus service within Canada during the 1960s. In 1965, Greyhound Lines of Canada purchased Brewster Transport, the Gray Line sightseeing company in the Canadian Rockies, ending 73 years of ownership by the Brewster family. Also, Greyhound Lines of Canada arranged for the purchase of Canadian Coachways, a large bus operation in Alberta, British Columbia and Yukon. This added 6,700 route miles to Greyhound Lines of Canada's network. The Canadian Transport Commission approved the purchase the following year.

In the Toronto area, GO (Government of Ontario) Transit was organized in 1967. It was a system of commuter routes serving the Toronto Metropolitan area. In addition to operating a large fleet of bus commuter service, commuter trains served some routes.

Late in 1968, the Canadian National Railways discontinued its train service across Newfoundland. The Railway then substituted the service with a fleet of 16 new Prevost buses on the new Newfoundland section of the Trans-Canada Highway. The buses took 14 1/2 hours, compared to 22 hours for the train.

Other newsmakers

Although Greyhound seemed to capture most of the news in the 1960s in the United States, there was other activity in the intercity bus arena.

Jefferson Transportation Company merged with Crown Coach Company in 1968.

Transcontinental Bus System, better known as Continental Trailways, continued to acquire bus companies, adding Edwards Lakes to Sea Stages, Southern Stages and Atlantic Stages in the late 1960s. In 1969, the corporate name became TCO Industries and merged with Holiday Inns.

The 1960s presented considerable activity not only in bus manufacturing, but also in the transit and intercity operating segments. It can be said that transit in the United States was rescued from its near-certain demise in this decade when the federal government began offering financial support.

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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