THE AMERICAN BUS ASSOCIATION: 80 YEARS OF TRADITION

The American Bus Association celebrated 80 years of service to members in 2006. The following summary looks back at the origins of the association and the decades that followed.

The Beginning

March 19, 1926, was the "official birth date" of the association, but organizational efforts began earlier. The year was 1925, and railroad interests were accusing the motorcoach industry of siphoning off passengers. The Supreme Court denied states the right to regulate interstate operations of motor vehicle common carriers, excise taxes on bus operations were an issue, and Congress began its quest to determine what type of regulation the government should have over the fledgling bus and truck industries.

In response, the American Automobile Association established a bus division in February, 1925, under its Commercial Motor Vehicle Department and began pulling together the interests of numerous state associations and groups. Also that year, a group of bus operators who had formed the National Motor Bus Association were asking for the support of state bus associations. In December, the two groups consolidated under the AAA banner, and the bus operators called for the formation of a more formal organization to address legislative concerns.

On March 19, 1926, representatives of member state associations and several prospective members met in the Powhatan Hotel in Washington, D.C., and set up a permanent organization for the AAA Bus Division to be housed in the AAA headquarters building at the corner of 17th St. and Pennsylvania Ave. Arthur M. Hill of Blue & Gray Transit Co., who served as president of the West Virginia Motor Transportation Association, was elected chairman. Hill would go on to serve in that capacity for nearly four decades. John M. Meighan, an AAA manager who was active in bus division activities, was named secretary and charged with running the division's daily operations.

First Decade Saw Changes, Regulation

ABA's first decade of existence after being created as the bus division of the American Automobile Association was shaped by internal and external actions.

As the motor bus industry began to grow, association members saw a need for a reorganization to better reflect the industry goals. At a 1929 meeting, members adopted new bylaws and changed the name to the National Association of Motor Bus Operators, giving it a "more complete identity...as the national vehicle of bus operators." NAMBO still maintained its relationship with AAA, however.

In August of 1935, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Motor Carrier Act which followed nine years of effort by NAMBO representatives and other groups in providing input to the U.S. government on how the industry should be regulated. The law, an amendment of the Interstate Commerce Act, placed the regulation of interstate motor carriers under the Interstate Commerce Commission, the agency that went out of business at the end of 1995.
Rationing and Advertising—NAMBO in the 1940s

The entry of the United States into World War II affected those who stayed home in numerous ways. For the National Association of Motor Bus Operators, rationing replaced regulations as its primary focus. For members, it meant severe restrictions due to rubber rationing. At a time when the Office of Defense Transportation required immediate changes, bans and restrictions, NAMBO became an important conduit for information, using its "Bulletin" to notify members. One early notice banned the use of buses in sightseeing services and limited charter bus service to such essential operations as the transportation of members of the armed services, war workers, and school children.

The war and the limitations it created due to rationing prompted the industry to find ways to inform the public about the new and complicated problems that grew in number, intensity and severity. They also wanted to encourage ridership for both the national good and their own interests. NAMBO executed a four-year, national advertising campaign that appeared in major publications of the day. To pay for the campaign, members contributed to an advertising fund throughout the four years.

Building Interstates-The 1950s Version of the National Highway System

The Highway Act of 1956, signed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower on Aug. 8 of that year, provided $33 billion for highway construction—the beginning of the interstate highway system. It was by far the biggest road building program in the history of the United States, or for that matter, the largest peacetime construction project in memory. The interstate legislation rejuvenated the bus industry which had suffered in the 10 years following World War II. Use of personal automobiles had increased steadily during that period as rationing was no longer a concern. For that reason, passage of the federal legislation was a key issue for the National Association of Motor Bus Operators during the 1950s. At NAMBO's 1956 annual meeting, it was projected that 41,000 miles of super interstate highways would link most state capitals and other major cities from coast to coast by 1968. One of the association's major concerns expressed at that meeting, however, was higher taxes on highway users to pay for mounting construction costs.

Establishing Uniform Time

In the 1950s, the National Association of Motor Bus Operators sought federal legislative relief for a seemingly minor matter. It was, however, one of those rare issues that transcended the bus industry and the world of transportation—establishing time standards. In 1957, NAMBO President Arthur Hill told annual meeting delegates that the association wanted Congress to pass a uniform daylight saving law within the year. At the time, local areas could set time standards, which led to great confusion. Hill explained the lack of any national standard by noting that while Washington, D.C., was on daylight saving time, Baltimore, Md., only 40 miles away, was on standard time. It took nine years and lots of persuasion from transportation interests, but the law passed as the Uniform Time Act of 1966 and became effective on April 24 of that year. As a result, bus companies could offer passengers consistent arrival and departure information.
The 1960s-A Time of Change

The 1960s brought change to the National Association of Motor Bus Operators as it did to all of North America. First, the "Operators" in the association name became "Owners" in 1960. Personalities who had long been associated with NAMBO stepped down. Gus Koehler retired in 1962 after serving as NAMBO's secretary-manager for 24 years. For more than 40 years, Arthur Hill spoke on behalf of NAMBO, running the association from the beginning in addition to his bus business. He retired as ABA's president in 1965 and kept the title of chairman until his death in 1972.

When Hill stepped down, the board hired Everett Hutchinson, a former commissioner for the Interstate Commerce Commission, as NAMBO's first paid president. He left in 1967 for the number two position at the newly created U.S. Department of Transportation after being appointed by his friend President Lyndon Johnson. On the day the DOT opened for business, Charles A. Webb, another former ICC commissioner, became NAMBO's second full-time paid president. With the establishment of the new federal agency, Webb understood the need to strengthen NAMBO's presence in Washington, D.C., and created a full-time government relations department. One of the department's early successes was Congressional approval of the increase in the maximum width of buses permitted to use the interstate system from 96 to 102 inches.

The 1970s-A New Name and Direction

For the first time, the bus industry reached beyond either a bus owner or ICC commissioner to head its association and in 1976 named Arthur Lewis as president of the National Association of Motor Bus Owners. Lewis had previously been associated with airline and rail interests. Within his first year, he changed the association's name, feeling that NAMBO was too confining. On Sept. 20, 1977, he met with news media at the National Press Club to explain the change to the American Bus Association, saying it was a name that "more fully reflects the comprehensive service performed by the intercity bus industry for the public."

Energy crises in 1973 and 1979, deregulation of the airline industry and the resulting low airfares, the creation of Amtrak, and the decline of bus package express business combined to point bus operators toward increasing the charter and tour segment of the business. As a result, ABA added services to reflect these changes. Among them was the American Bus Marketplace, held for the first time in February 1979 in Orlando, FL. Created as a means for operators to meet with travel and tourism representatives to organize future itineraries, Marketplace drew 350 operators and 400 travel industry suppliers to its inaugural meeting. Another new member benefit appeared in June of the same year—Destinations magazine. Arthur Lewis wrote in the first issue that it was created to "broaden the perspective of each operator member."

The 1980s—Deregulation

ABA activities in the fast-paced 1980s were marked by the deregulation of the industry and a liability insurance crisis in the United States; another fuel shortage; continuing growth of the tour and charter side of the business; and, in 1987, Greyhound and Trailways becoming one company. The association was in the forefront of protecting bus industry interests during deregulation discussions. ABA submitted a proposal to Congress, then promoted passage and constructive implementation of the Bus Regulatory Reform Act of 1982 which scaled down and simplified an accumulation of government regulations dating back nearly 50 years.
A direct result of deregulation was the creation of a new membership category for ABA, the Conference of Motor Coach Tour Organizers, which was open to tour and charter arrangers. The Top 100 Events in North America program appeared for the first time in 1982 to help operators and tour organizers in recognizing industry friendly destinations and events for itinerary planning. And in 1986, another new program, this time with an emphasis on safety, was created—the International Driving Championship, later called the Bus ROADEO as well as the Coach Classic, which recognized the skills of bus drivers.

Having secured exemption in 1978 from the federal fuel tax, through an all-out effort in 1982, ABA won a continuing intercity bus exemption from the additional 5 cents-per-gallon tax imposed. In 1984, when a 6 cents-per-gallon diesel fuel surcharge was imposed, ABA worked to insure that buses paid only 3 cents of it.

In the mid-80s, ABA successfully sought hearings in both the U.S. Senate and House and appealed to governors on behalf of the industry when bus and travel industry members were threatened with higher rates or cancellation of commercial liability insurance policies.

The association's leadership went through changes as well. Following Arthur Lewis' retirement as president in 1982, Norman Sherlock moved up from executive vice president to the top spot. George T. Snyder Jr., a bus industry professional with 30 years at Greyhound, joined ABA in 1988 and took over association management in 1989, first as executive vice president and later as president and CEO.

The 1990s—Partnerships and the Future

The 1991 Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act, known as ISTEA, redefined the roles of all modes of surface transportation. As part of that redefinition, ABA has worked actively to facilitate partnerships for bus and rail. ISTEA's upcoming reauthorization will be a focal point for the future as ABA fights for a stronger voice in transportation planning.

ABA served as an important bridge during the transition period during ISTEA’s implementation, protecting members' interests as 60 years of regulation under the now-defunct Interstate Commerce Commission is reformed and regulatory functions are moved to new entities within the U.S. Department of Transportation. And, ABA is working with groups in Canada and Mexico on cross-border issues related to the North American Free Trade Agreement as well as safety regulations.

New programs established at the beginning of the decade were the Golden Wrench Award for mechanics and the Certified Travel Industry Specialist continuing education program, the first university-administered certification program in the group travel industry. In 1992, ABA took advantage of the positive attention motorcoach travel received during the presidential campaign by creating a nationwide marketing program for members, concentrated during inaugural week. In January of 1994, the National Bus Traffic Association, the intercity bus industry clearinghouse, moved its offices from Chicago into ABA’s. George T. Snyder Jr., ABA president and CEO, became NBTA's president as well.
In 1993, ABA moved to a new office building in Washington D.C. that incorporated the restored Greyhound bus terminal as its lobby. Arthur Hill, the long-time president of ABA predecessor NAMBO, was on hand for the opening of the building in 1939.

With the death in November 1995 of George Snyder, Susan Perry, senior vice-president of government relations, became interim manager. On July 8, 1996, the board of directors named Peter J. Pantuso, an executive with the Rubber Manufacturers Association and with extensive experience in association management, as president and CEO.

In 1998, a new transportation authorization legislation, TEA-21, provided more than $220 billion in federal funding for highways and transit providers including the private intercity bus industry over a six year timetable. ABA worked to ensure that the interests of private motorcoach industry companies were protected during this implementation period, and that the newly established federal entities such as the Office of Motor Carriers were well acquainted with ABA member companies and motorcoach operations. ABA mobilized the Bus Industry Safety Council for the purpose of providing a professional forum for industry discourse on best practices and compliance issues, but also so that federal agencies could seek feedback and interaction directly from industry safety experts.

The 2000s—Reauthorization and New Beginnings

The turn of a new decade saw increased regulatory involvement from ABA as the regulations related to requiring accessibility accommodations on motorcoaches for passengers with disabilities were phased into implementation. Hours of service limitations were applied to the motorcoach industry, as driver fatigue and vehicle maintenance programs became a primary focus of highway safety programs funded under TEA-21.

ABA stayed in step with the technology revolution at the turn of the millennium and utilized several technological innovations to speed communications with its members, through its website www.buses.org, its blog, as well as its electronic bulletins, “Fast Facts”, “Digest”, “The Report” and “ABA Insider”.

In 2005, a new transportation authorization bill was signed into law. Known as SAFETEA-LU, the highway system was infused with over $286 billion in new federal funding. As the motorcoach industry makes its way through the latest implementation stage of a landmark federal funding program, ABA stands as its advocate and stalwart partner, just as it has for the past 80 years.

Reauthorization contained landmark provisions, regulations and programs that allowed for:

Fuel Tax Exemption: Partial exemption of $0.17 per gallon.
Transit Competition: Implement charter bus rule to protect private operators from subsidized transit agencies.
ADA Grant Program: $47 million over 5 years to help meet federal mandates and improve accessibility.
Rural and Intercity Grant Program: $87 million per year to help meet rural intercity transportation needs.
Axle weight exemption: Full exemption of motorcoaches from state axle weight limitations.