

Confessions of a Cab Driver

Number 20, May 16, 1977

Travelling by taxi in the U.S. must be extremely confusing for the foreign traveller. The typical experience for the foreigner is first to arrive in New York City, where taxis charge on the basis of time and distance. Then, after a train ride to Washington, the traveller finds a completely different system--this one based on arbitrary "zones"--that even the natives can't understand. A small computer might help you figure out the correct fare-- if you could read the arcane city "map" affixed to the back of the driver's seat in each cab.

I have long been a heavy user of taxicabs both in America and abroad. At one time I used cabs so extensively in Philadelphia that I became familiar with many of the drivers and some of the management. The Yellow Cab Company even presented me with a doorman's cab whistle.

But my interest in cabs is not only as a user. As a student at Columbia University in New York I helped support myself and my family by moonlighting as a cab driver on nights, weekends, and holidays. I could fill many pages of *Current Contents*<sup>®</sup> with stories from those days, but I'll limit this particular ego-trip to telling only a few.

Since I often brought textbooks and other reading matter with me on the

job, my fellow hackies referred to me as "The Professor." In spite of this dubious distinction, I was welcomed into the "invisible college" of cab drivers located at the Horn & Hardart Automat Cafeteria at 57th Street & 7th Avenue. Seminars were usually held at 3:00 A.M. to discuss such burning topics as the 5th race at Hialeah, Babe Ruth's 1924 batting average,<sup>1</sup> or the up-coming All-Star football game. In those days I was not discussing how to forecast Nobel Prize winners.

The cab companies usually treated drivers like dirt. Thirty years later, the industry's labor practices are only slightly improved. As a part-time driver, one never knew from day to day whether work would be available. Like the stevedores on the New York docks as shown in the movie *On the Waterfront*, cab drivers reported to an evening "shape-up." Cabs would be doled out to part-timers according to the whims of the dispatcher. This frequently involved kickbacks or bribes, at least until one gained steady employment--and acquired a reputation as a hustler. This meant, in those days, that you turned in enough cash to please the boss. Toward the end of a slow shift, some drivers would turn on the meter in their empty cabs just to increase the amount they turned

in, in order to placate the dispatcher. As a consequence, the income from tips was even more significant than passengers could ever realize.

Recently I saw Martin Scorsese's film *Taxi Driver*. You can imagine my surprise at the coincidence when Robert deNiro drove his cab into the very same garage that I had driven into on many a wintry night back in the late forties.

During a blizzard on one of those nights I stopped my cab at the sight of a woman desperately waving at me. When she entered the cab I realized she was having an asthmatic attack and could hardly breathe. Her companion asked me to rush her to Harlem Hospital. So we dashed off down the street. My cab was one of these old pre-war Checkers that had survived World War II. Most of these cabs had exceeded one million miles of use.

As I turned a corner my Checker skidded on the ice and slammed into a parked garbage truck. No one was hurt, but the cab's fender was scratched and dented. Since my passenger was near collapse I decided not to stop and quickly drove on to the hospital's emergency entrance.

When I returned to the garage that night the dispatcher noticed the dent and I was told to file an accident report. I explained why I didn't stop to take the license number of the truck. I was told that it didn't matter if the passenger died--I should have taken the license number of the other vehicle. Someone had to pay for the damage. It didn't take long for them to decide just who that "someone" would be. And I was laid off for a week as a lesson.

I've never quite understood why the taxi industry in the U.S. has re-

mained so archaic. The Yellow Cab Company chain is a small fraction of what could constitute a national system, and we need one. There ought to be federal standards of safety, courtesy, and comfort, if not uniformity of prices and service.

About fifteen years ago I became conscious of the unfortunate lack of taxi service in many rural and suburban communities. At that time I was living in a town where the local commuter railroad was about a 15 minute walk downhill and 30 going up. To this day, it is impossible for anyone, including aged shoppers, to reach the town center by public transportation. This means older people, many of whom cannot afford their own autos, are almost totally dependent on others. Most suburbs and outlying towns could certainly benefit from a local taxi service. What I have in mind is a "shuttle" taxi service of the type common in many countries I have visited, including Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Israel.

One interesting idea was tried in the London suburb of Hampstead Garden, where a dial-a-bus service was put into operation. To summon the dial-a-bus, travellers phoned a control room and a small bus was dispatched to their door. Unfortunately, the system was curtailed after a year of experimental operations because it lost money.<sup>2</sup> The same kind of system was adopted in San Jose, California, but it, too, met an early end--because it was *too* successful. With its fare of only 25 cents it attracted so many passengers that there was a shortage of busses. Instead of a short wait for a bus, passengers often had to wait several hours.

The sorry state of the taxicab industry in the U.S. is part of the overall

failure of mass transportation in American cities. As the use of railroads declined, Americans acquired even more automobiles. Besides causing traffic congestion and pollution, the ubiquitous American car has just about displaced the subway, the bus, and the taxicab as modes of transportation within and around our cities.

Although I don't know the exact figures involved, I suspect that an urban transportation system based on taxicabs and jitney-like small buses might be vastly more efficient than the present chaos of automobiles. Such a system might be worthwhile if it could just reduce the use of private automobiles containing only one person. Reducing the use of large buses, which are particularly inefficient during off-hours, would also be a bonus.

The system ought to allow for several classes of taxi service--anything from a Rolls to a VW. It is ironic that in the U.S.A. cabs are generally so low in quality. In Europe, driver comfort is a primary consideration--hence the use of many luxury cars as taxicabs.

Since operating an automobile is a skill known to most unemployed Americans, we should consider using such persons--as well as senior citizens and young adults who need part-time work--in the capacity of cab and jitney drivers. This kind of "welfare" might provide thousands of jobs while helping to solve the mass transportation problem.

In fact, the city of Los Angeles is now trying something very similar to this proposal.<sup>3</sup> As soon as a new ordinance goes into effect next month, almost anyone will be able to turn his private car into a taxi. What you need to become a taxi operator is the following: a taxi meter, a two-way radio, insurance, membership in one of several radio-dispatching associations, and a \$250 license from the city of Los Angeles. Under the new ordinance, there will be no limit on the number of entrepreneurs who may start a taxi business.

Many cities now have "gypsy" cabs--privately owned cars illegally used as taxis. The franchise system licensed by the city governments limit the number of companies and cabs. According to the gypsies, restricting the supply keeps fares unnecessarily high. It will be interesting to see the result of Los Angeles's application of free-enterprise theory to the cab system.

In spite of my experience, I'm sure that under the right working conditions--including mutual respect and courtesy between employers and drivers--cab driving can be a rewarding experience. For one thing, there is a variety of human contacts, which involve both benefit and risk. In the world of science we are often insulated from the real world that makes our sheltered existence possible. When you drive a cab you meet, as the cliché goes, all kinds.

#### REFERENCES

1. Babe (George Herman) Ruth was the 1924 American Baseball League Batting Champion with an average of .378. In that same year he led the league in home runs with 46.
2. Time's up for dial-a-bus in London. *New Scientist* 69:185, January 1976.
3. Lindsey R. Los Angeles will allow private taxis to operate. *New York Times* April 17, 1977, p. 26.