RIDING HIGH TODAY

Boats discovered America; horses and wagons explored it; railroads expanded it; cars and planes dominate it; now further technology promises to preserve it. In short, the development of America has been one long ride.

America has a unique history. As an infantile nation, in relation to countries who relied on Napoleons, King Henrys and shogunates to shape their pasts, America can not boast of a similar "rich and ancient culture." Indeed, few parallels can be drawn between America and world history because America has an unprecedented history—a rapidly evolving history that has been shaped, not by centuries of dictators and reforms, but by ever-progressive developments in transportation. Transportation and America are synonymous. In the past two centuries, especially, America's economic, geographic, and social growth have been in an intricate relationship with the growth of transportation. Because of this interdependence, the impact of transportation on America today cannot be truly assessed without examining the past.

In the early 1800s Americans were beginning to realize just how important transportation was going to be in shaping the progress of the country. Steps were taken to take advantage of the vast resources of the nation. New roads were constructed and old dirt roads were recovered with hard surfaces. Both the introduction of the steamboat and the canal boom transformed many early American cities into major commercial centers that have become today's metropolises. All these improvements in transportation directly stimulated America's economy by expanding each region's market. But the West was calling for settlers, and America needed better land transportation in order to expand.

The savior came as the railroad. Railroads continued to stimulate industrial growth and agricultural demand, but more importantly, they were the major factors in permeating the western frontier. On May 10, 1869 America was symbolically united when the last spike of the first transcontinental railroad was driven at Prominatory Point, Utah, emphasizing the growing interdependence of transportation and America.
At the turn of the century, the growth of industrial cities presented new challenges that would be met by further developments in transportation. To cope with the expansion, cities were finding technological improvements in urban transportation. Bridges were constructed, roads were paved, elevated electric railways and subways were built, and the electric trolley emerged. These electric trolleys, with their abilities to transport people quickly and inexpensively, helped turn cities into "streetcar suburbs," precursors of today's ever-expanding suburbia. Also, the trolleys introduced the first form of true "mass transit" that is becoming an important transportation alternative in today's congested cities.

By World War II, electric trolleys achieved their highest level of proficiency, but the influence of the automobile was beginning to be felt by America. In 1901, when the car was yet in its infancy and still out of reach of most Americans, Mercedes Benz company predicted that the worldwide demand for cars would be one million—maximum. By 1915 that marker was surpassed; and today, the number in the United States alone is over 180 million. The introduction of the automobile into the American way of life came leisurely. Up until World War II, cars were only a recreational toy for many Americans, but even then the new mobility began to decentralize populations and to set the stage for America's most recent period in history—the era in which America has become almost frighteningly governed by its ability to stay on the move.

The Era of Personal Mobility. Car culture. Golden Age of the Automobile. Whatever the term used to describe America's obsession with the automobile, the bare fact remains that the car is a seemingly indispensable appendage of American life. The flexibility of the car made it more suitable for today's on-the-go lifestyle than any other form of transportation. At the forefront of the sudden shift in transportation was the Interstate Highway Act of 1956. The subsequent network of roads constructed fathered an irreversible change in America's economy, geography, and culture. Wherever roads led, development followed. And on the bumpers of America's vehicles, the products of this new era—drive-thru restaurants, service stations, and motels—tagged along for the ride.

The thirst for movement, in a country where cars are multiplying twice as fast as drivers, was not quenched even by the automobile, though. For more speed and increasingly better economy, Americans headed for the airports—at the astounding rate of over one million passengers each day and counting!

But even as Americans chug and fly merrily along, modern challenges need to be confronted. Both interstates and airstrips are aging, and concern is mounting for air congestion and for many Americans' daily terror—gridlock. In addition, in this era of periodic fuel shortages and environmental exploitation, America's reliance on cars and planes does not add up to long-term sense. Once again, the time has come for transportation developments to further evolve America.

The importance of transportation in America today, then, is to respect the history of the country by remaining open to new and better trends in transportation. Just as America allowed itself to be shaped by the railroads, the trolleys, and the automobiles, the future should be given the open road to test new developments in transportation. Magnetic levitation trains,
automated highways, and high-speed, low-flying planes are all being explored as alternatives. But improvement does not have to rely on science fiction dreams. To conserve the trends that now exist, steps can be taken: commuting to reduce the number of gas-guzzling cars that tie up roads; developing punctual, direct airline services; turning to mass transit as a more environmentally sound alternative to travel; and rediscovering the oldest forms of transportation—walking and bicycling.

Indeed, America can boast of an exceptional history. No other nation has evolved so closely, to become knit so tightly, with transportation. The seeds of modern America were essentially planted with transportation and nurtured by interdependent developments. Today, blossoming in a uniquely inter-twined relationship with transportation, America can proudly and eagerly anticipate the future.

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