

States of the Union

SIC PARATRANSIT GLORIA OMNIBUS

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



IN 1914 a former iron-mine worker named Carl Erie Wickman went into the bus business. He had sunk all his savings into a Hupmobile agency in Hibbing, Minnesota, and when he could find no takers for the lone Hupmobile in his dealership window he made a bus out of it.

Wickman squeezed 10 seats into the seven-seat touring car and began making hourly trips from a saloon in Hibbing to the firehouse in a town named Alice, four miles away. A one-way trip cost 15 cents; a round-tripper, 25 cents. By 1925

Wickman's tiny caterpillar of a company had turned into a butterfly, and new owners called it the Greyhound Lines.

The word "bus" comes from the Latin *omnibus*, which can mean "for everyone." In its formative years Greyhound lived up to that classical definition, dispatching buses to all corners of the land and traveling America's remotest byways as well as its busiest highways. The logic of the marketplace back then demanded universality, making it unlikely that rural Americans would miss the bus.

But after World War II the country's commercial bus lines began to abandon small communities. Instead of beefing up its busing efforts, Greyhound bought out Armour (in 1962) and became a leading producer of hot dogs, bacon and canned meats. A few years ago the company even escaped its original cocoon: it canceled all service to Hibbing and the rest of the Iron Range.

Rural residents are familiar with the consequences of this nationwide exodus: immobility, isolation, costly dependence on automobiles. The burden falls most heavily on those approximately 5 million rural citizens who are either too old or too poor to drive a car. For want of wheels they have become reluctant shut-ins. It is a rural form of house arrest.

That is the bad news and it is part and parcel of an overall small-town decline that scholars have been predicting for half a century. Here is one characteristic prophecy expressed in the mid-'60s by two sociologists, William Simon and John H. Gagnon, in an essay titled "The Decline and Fall of the Small Town":

"The land and the economy of the United States will not support as many small towns as they did before. It is very difficult not to see the future as a long, drawn-out struggle for community survival, lasting for half a century, in which some battles may be won but the war will be lost.... A future in which most such small towns will become isolated or decayed, in which the local amenities must deteriorate, and in which will finally be left only the aged, the inept, the very young...."

Our national policies, by and large, have made such predictions self-fulfilling, with cities getting the lion's share of Federal assistance. Indeed, subsidy patterns have grown so disproportionate that many towns now think it tantamount to civic doom if they are officially deemed less than "metropolitan." Rapid City, South Dakota, is a melancholy case in point. When 1980 Census totals consigned Rapid City to a status below that of a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), the town's leaders paid for a new census and urged the citizenry to "Make Rapid City Count for More."

The stakes were not paltry. Without a metropolitan rating Rapid City would lose Federal community development block grants, Medicare reimbursements (the formulas for rural hospitals are lower), and a dozen or so other subsidies.

"There's something almost magical about an MSA designation," commented Van A. Lindquist, the executive director of a local planning organization. Calvin L. Beale, the dean of rural demographers at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, recently underscored the point. "I've never seen a central city," he said, "that didn't want to be known as metropolitan."

For thousands of villages, of course, that status is neither attainable nor desirable. It is probably just as well that the village residents do not commonly read the speeches of demographers or the studies of social scientists. They thus have no way of knowing they are doomed, and at times their ignorance—innocence may be a better word—permits achievements that more sophisticated citizens might never attempt.

Which brings us to the good news—for a whole new transportation enterprise seems to be taking hold in our small towns. It is called "paratransit," or "specialized transportation," and it is characteristically rural in both structure and philosophy. According to *Rural Transportation Reporter*, a Washington-based newsletter, paratransit operators have materialized wherever Greyhound has left the driving to them. Examples can be found in some 5,000 small communities, where approximately 23,000 vans and minibuses have taken the place of Greyhound's or Trailways' leviathans.

Not surprisingly, paratransit people have to be ready to shift gears more quickly and frequently than their urban mass-transit counterparts. Their schedules are elastic, their itineraries inventive, and their routes both circuitous and far-flung. The passengers who ride these hybrid vehicles—part buses, part taxis—are generally the ones in greatest need of transportation: Head Start children, Medicaid patients, the elderly, the handicapped, and the house-bound.

Because many paratransit programs rely on Federal support, Congress has lately shown an interest in their progress. In May, rural transportation took center stage at hearings conducted by the oversight subcommittee of the House Public Works and Transportation Committee. The occasion was not without bitterness: Earlier, the Reagan Administration had recommended deletion from next year's budget of virtually all rural paratransit projects. To add to the drama, the hearings were chaired by James Oberstar (D-Minn.), who represented the very district Greyhound had started in.

"The marketplace is not going to provide this kind of rural service," Oberstar told me in an interview following the hearings. "Rural transportation today is in exactly the same position that rural electrification was in 50 years ago. Private enterprise can't do it without government help."

Oberstar stopped short, though, of calling for creation of a transportation agency similar to the Rural Electrification Administration (REA) the New Deal organized in 1935, which eventually electrified 97 per cent of the nation's farms. The politics of the '80s do not suggest such sweeping innovations. Indeed, Federal assistance to rural paratransit has hardly been bountiful.

Some dollars, about \$100 million annually, have trickled down from an unlikely source, the Urban Mass Transit Administration, but that total comprises less than 3 per cent of UMTA's \$4.1 billion yearly budget. An additional \$900 million flow from different agencies within the Department of Health and Human Services. Most rural transportation programs draw sustenance from all these sputtering spigots as well as from a variety of state and local subsidies and charitable agencies.

THE COMPLICATED patchwork of contracts, every one with its own peculiar mission and set of rules, has led to king-size administrative headaches, as testimony at the hearings demonstrated. Linda Flinchbaugh, who heads the York Transportation Club in Pennsylvania, described a bu-

reaucratic nightmare that appeared to typify many others. In a single year, she said, "I prepared two budgets, attended a score of contract meetings, prepared statistics to meet 30 funding guidelines, and met with at least 25 monitors and evaluators. I calculated that 50 per cent of my time ... was spent in servicing the idiosyncrasies of each contract."

Still, the time spent and the aggravation endured have their rewards. Oberstar read into the record excerpts from some of the 1,000 letters people in his district had written to Congress, hoping to rescue their local transportation project—Arrowhead Transit Service—from the Federal axe. Not all the letters displayed a mastery of syntax, but most would get high marks for eloquence.

A woman who identified herself as "Gladys" wrote: "I have heard the news that there is talk of discontinuing the local buses in rural areas. That would be a poor thing to do.... Many, like me, cannot walk far because of their age (80 years) or their health condition. Please. People who have never lived in rural areas do not realize what a bus means...."

Someone from International Falls credited Arrowhead Transit with preventing her and her neighbors from becoming "woebegone, whining Senior Citizens." "With the very inexpensive bus service," she explained, "and our great driver, Mr. Fleming, we can easily manage to get around. After all, we are the Survivors!"

From Gnesen Township came this testimonial: "Our rural bus service has opened a whole new world for our handicapped people, who now get out at least once a week for medical appointments, shopping or just to socialize with friends."

It was clear from the letters that rural buses often mean more than transportation: They seem to provide all-too-rare life-sustaining and social opportunities for the solitary and unattended. The late newspaper commentator Simeon Strunsky was a quintessential New Yorker, but he could have had small towns in mind when he remarked that "People who want to understand democracy should spend less time in the library with Aristotle and more time on buses...."