

States of the Union

A WORLD WITHOUT WHEELS

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

One of the characteristics that distinguishes rural transit from urban transit is the fact that most of its ridership is not choosing between cars and transit; it is choosing between transit and isolation."

—DAVID RAPHAEL, Executive Director, Community Transportation Association of America

Solitude vivifies; isolation kills."

—A FRENCH SAYING

WHAT THIS COUNTRY needs is a Rural Transportation Administration, an RTA that could do for mobility what the Rural Electrification Administration (REA) has done for electricity—bring it cheaply and efficiently to stranded rural residents.

That the blessing of mobility has grown increasingly scarce in rural areas cannot be disputed. Millions of small-town residents are either too poor to own a car or too old to drive one. They live in a world without wheels.

Public transit service between towns, meanwhile, continues to dwindle. This is chiefly a result of Federal deregulation of the bus and airline industries, but

it is a consequence as well of the year-long labor dispute at Greyhound.

Deregulation of the bus industry occurred in 1982. By 1986, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 4,500 small communities had seen their bus service eliminated or reduced. In all, the decade saw more than 2,000 communities abandoned by either Greyhound or Trailways. In some instances entire regions were left out in the cold.

The strike has caused additional grief. Using it as an excuse to shut down unprofitable routes, Greyhound's management has halted service to still more communities across the land. A company spokesman recently conceded that it may never run buses again to thousands of small towns that have already been cut off from intercity public transportation by the strike.

Greyhound's wholesale pullout from small towns amounts to a virtual betrayal of its rural customers. Only three years ago it took over the bankrupt Trailways Corporation, its only national competitor, with promises to the Interstate Commerce Commission that the new monopoly would not endanger rural service.

"The bus is back," Greyhound's

chairman, Fred Currey, assured an audience of small-town transit advocates at a 1988 meeting. "We think the rural markets are of the most importance to us. Many of our passengers have either a rural origin or a rural destination, or both."

For a brief honeymoon period the company kept its word. It established the Rural Connection, a system whereby small-community transit groups, many of them nonprofits, carried passengers in vans to Greyhound city terminals. The idea was for Greyhound to reimburse the van lines for their feeder services.

By last February, the Rural Connection had 69 groups serving 750 towns in 16 states. But the strike has left the Connection badly frayed. Having swallowed Trailways, Greyhound now has itself filed for bankruptcy, leaving creditors slowly twisting in the wind. In many cases Greyhound has stopped reimbursing its feeder partners. It is said to owe small-town van lines thousands of dollars for unpaid services.

All of the above, unfortunately, has a familiar ring. Rural residents have been there before. In Europe they call it "desertification"—the abandonment of public services in small towns and hamlets. In the United States we just call it isolation. Either way, it's a constant rural headache. Over the generations policymakers have tried numerous routes to relief but have found no reliable remedy.

At one point it was widely assumed that establishing Rural Free Delivery (RFD), with its new network of rural roads, would pierce the agrarian cocoon. Highways! thundered Theodore Roosevelt's Commission on Country Life back in 1910. "The demand for good highways is general among the farmers of the entire United States."

But the road to rural deliverance, it turned out, would have to be paved with more than macadam. Indeed, it soon became clear that there was also such a thing as *electronic* isolation. As late as 1935, according to Marquis Childs in *The Farmer Takes a Hand*, fewer than 10 per cent of the farmers in America had electrical power; and those few

were paying outrageously high rates for it.

The problem was that most private utilities deemed it unprofitable to put up power lines in sparsely settled areas. They had imposed a virtual quarantine upon rural communities. Some of the utility executives may have been embarrassed by the impasse, yet not embarrassed enough to change their ways. "This is indeed an unusual situation," said the president of the Wisconsin Power Company. "The farmer, a user of power, is trying to force the utility, a seller of power, to sell him the product it has for sale."

In the midst of the Great Depression, the New Deal took the market into its

ing for granted. Thus, as in the case of RFD and the highways, it was public subsidy rather than private enterprise that connected rural America to urban America.

For a time it appeared that the new cooperatives had at last exorcised the demon of rural isolation. As Childs has noted, "Millions of farm boys will never know what it is like to bump their heads on a stable beam in pitch-darkness, and millions of farm girls will never know the experience of bending over an old-fashioned zinc-covered washboard." The co-ops not only lit up the lives of rural citizens, but via radio and television they linked those lives to the rest of the planet. In effect, the new power lines ex-

sines and golf carts to carry him around, not to mention his well-appointed new jet plane, seems as indifferent to rural immobility as he is to many other domestic miseries.

As for Congress, it has hardly begun to stir. Last spring the lawmakers gave short shrift to a Senate bill known as the "Rural Bus Services Act," designed to encourage states to set up more intertown bus service. It died in committee, apparently without discussion or regret.

"There's really no constituency for that kind of legislation," says Sheryl Washington, an aide to Senator J.J. Exon (D., Neb.), the bill's original sponsor. "We never hear from anyone except the lobbyists. I guess the riders are not writers."

Senator Exon has asked the Government Accounting Office (GAO) to take a critical look at rural transportation. He wants to know what went wrong and what can be done to fix it. The GAO has promised to study the matter. In theory, it could recommend the establishment of a Rural Transportation Administration, a lending agency that might finally lead to the formation of rural transit co-ops throughout the land. In practice, it is not likely to do anything of the kind; its suggestions are almost certain to be restricted to the nonspending variety.

One suspects that the age of political miracles, of instant radical remedies, has receded into the mists. In today's market-crazed climate, the New Deal and the Fair Deal, and yes, the New Frontier too, are polities as remote and as unrepeatable as Solon's Athens. Certainly the time seems past when a President could light up millions of benighted lives with a single stroke of the pen.

Still and all, a GAO study can do no harm. It could even give some exactitude to a definition of our troubles, by spotlighting the places where rural isolation has taken over. The knowledge might at least provide some small consolation to small-town citizens. For as the fellow said, "When you're alone in your boat, it's always comforting to see the lights of the other boats bobbing nearby."



own hands. It invented the REA. Franklin D. Roosevelt signed an Executive Order establishing the Rural Electrification Administration on May 11, 1935. At first the agency's instructions were broad and unspecific—simply to "initiate a program to generate, transmit, and to distribute electricity in rural areas."

Later, with Congress' advice and consent, REA became a lending agency. It supplied low-interest loans to electric power and telephone cooperatives being organized by farmers in every state. The idea of electric co-ops was the modern equivalent of the quilting bee or the barn-raising. It worked remarkably well. There are 1,000 electric cooperatives today, and they supply electricity to 95 per cent of the country's rural residents, nearly all of whom take the bless-

ended around the world, even into outer space.

Now we have this latest plague, what some commentators speak of as "transit deprivation." Its underlying cause is strikingly reminiscent of the one that created a rural electricity shortage two generations ago—namely, laissez-faire paralysis, an inability on the part of private enterprise to get the job done.

Only this time, alas, there are no REAs to come to the rescue. Not yet, anyway. The Urban Mass Transit Administration, which funnels transportation dollars to states and towns, contributes just \$1 for each rural resident, as opposed to \$28 per city dweller. And President George Bush, who has plenty of limou-