

Notes from New York's Underground

ROBERT BENDINER

IF NEW YORKERS cared as little about their private as about their public forms of transportation, they would now be driving around in grimy 1925 Hupmobiles, ten persons to a car, expecting momentarily to stall, and resigned to erratic travel as part of the natural order. They do no such thing, of course, turning in their automobiles for new models every two years, as good Americans should. But the subway cars they own in common with their fellows are another matter. I am not technically competent to have an opinion on whether the New York rapid transit system has degenerated from "the safest railway in the world" to merely the luckiest, as critics have suggested, but it requires no technical knowledge to observe that the subways can no longer be relied on to get you to your destination on time, that they run with even less *scheduled* frequency than they did twelve years ago; that they lurch, screech, and jolt; and that their routes are totally bewildering to the hapless stranger, who rarely encounters an official source of help but navigates as best he can on misinformation from his fellow passengers.

Lest this critique seem too subjective, let me hastily set down a few simple but arresting facts:

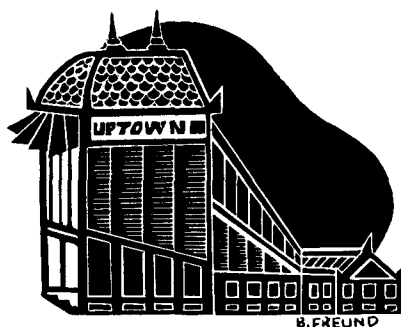
Item: While the London Underground figures on thirty-five years as the life of a car, close to a third of those on the IRT branch of the New York system and nearly half of those on the BMT go back to the era of Woodrow Wilson. Further, on the Myrtle Avenue Elevated line one rides to this day on wooden cars that went into service in 1904, when the mayor was George McClellan, son of the Civil War general, and Robert Wagner was six years short of being born.

Item: This year for the first time an attempt is being made to loosen the crust of dirt, grease, and steel dust from tunnel walls that have

gone a half century without washing, to the detriment of equipment and passengers alike. Last year the exteriors of the cars were washed down for the first time in the subway's history.

Item: In 1959 an average of some sixteen trains a *day* were delayed five minutes or more (shorter inconveniences were not even counted). Delays of half an hour and more occurred 304 times.

Item: Largely as a result of debris and discarded paper on the tracks, there are, according to the Transit Authority, at least three hundred small fires in the subway system every month, the acrid fumes from which occasionally seep into cars, not to mention the customers' lungs. The entire Grand Central area was



turned into a first-aid center on June 7, when several hundred smoke-poisoned passengers had to be led out of the subway along catwalks and through emergency exits.

Item: Trains that ran at intervals of three minutes in 1948 are now scheduled on a headway of five or six. A four-minute wait has lengthened to eight, and a headway of twelve minutes, the maximum in off hours a dozen years ago, has been stretched to twenty and more.

A Passion for Economy

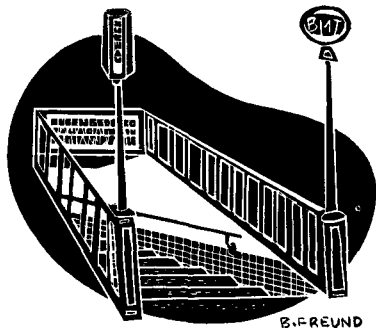
Such data, of course, do not altogether capture the general air of deterioration and ineptness that hangs over the system at its shab-

biest—the fans that fail to cool and the doors that fail to work; the newspapers and candy wrappers that in off hours ripple along the floor of half-empty trains; the perilous gap in some stations between the platform and the cars; the sooty windows through which one peers in vain for a station designation that is not there; the drafty, unguarded, dimly lit platforms and the unspeakable toilets; the wooden roof of the dilapidated Dyre Avenue station blown off in a storm and the honky-tonk fragrance of flyspecked bazaars in the Times Square and Union Square stations. What speaks more eloquently of general decline is the simple fact that while over two billion fares were dropped at the turnstiles in 1947, only 1,324,282,000 were paid in 1959. The number of passengers is back to the level of 1922, when the city was thirty-eight years younger and twenty-eight per cent less populous than it is today.

The impoverishment of New York's rapid transit system (a comparative phrase) has a full quota of explanations. The measure of truth in all of them demands at least passing acknowledgment, though they hardly seem to get to the heart of the matter.

To the sociologist the reason for the difficulty lies in that source of all urban ills, the migration to the suburbs. Those who have to ride the subways to work still do so, the story goes, but women who formerly flocked to midtown Manhattan to shop in the afternoon or to see a matinee now buy at the stores' far-flung branches. And when they do come in for an afternoon on the town, commuter trains bring them directly to the center of the shopping and theater districts.

To the crusading press, with an appropriate eye on the immediate, the subway's troubles lie in the Transit Authority's consuming passion for economy, a preoccupation with budget balancing that the *New York Post* describes as a "determination to live by the rules of old-fashioned Republican economics." This view is heartily echoed by the Transport Workers Union, which could hardly be expected to cheer the boast of a recently resigned authority member that "reduction of the work force by 5,000 people [in



three years], as well as the introduction of new work practices, has resulted in an annual saving over \$25,000,000." It is true that the work force was generously padded in the old days when the city directly controlled its transit system—it was a "politician's dream," according to students of the subject—but morale was bound to take a beating when ten-car trains were limited to a single conductor, inspections were reduced to the minimum, and even an automatic windshield wiper on a motorman's cab was treated as a luxury.

The Great Big Nickel

To the political historian, the subways' woes are deeply rooted in the long years when motherhood and the flag combined were less sacred in the city's politics than the five-cent fare. To preserve the world's biggest nickel's worth of transportation, a whole parade of mayors, the great I. A. Guardia included, treated New Yorkers to cheap subway rides while rolling stock went unreplaced, tunnels went unwashed.

Insofar as today's three-man quasi-independent Transit Authority concedes that the subways are open to criticism—the concession is limited—its explanation embraces several of these views, naturally excluding its own parsimony. Some of its personnel are also inclined to assign a certain measure of responsibility to the public itself. "If it weren't for people," I was told anonymously, unofficially, and rather wistfully, "we would have a good subway." The discarded paper that winds up on its underground tracks, an engineer pointed out, is nothing compared to the rubbish that is dumped on tracks of the BMT lines that operate at ground level or through open cuts in parts of Brooklyn. Any

day's cleanup on these stretches is likely to yield a half-dozen old tires, innumerable beer cans, quantities of milk bottles, and the like; and trackwalkers frequently pick up broken television aerials, coat hangers, and even an occasional bed-spring. This debris often causes short circuits or catches the emergency tripper on a car wheel, bringing the train to a devastatingly sudden stop. By way of amusement, juvenile delinquents from time to time tie a rock to the end of a rope and swing it against the window of the motorman's cab, and throughout the system vandals regularly work at breaking electric bulbs when they are not engaged in scrawling graffiti on advertising posters. The severest critics of the authority do not question the fact of all this malicious mischief; they merely wonder why the agency cannot screen the cuts and provide adequate policing.

Beyond responding to such simplicities with the equally simple argument of economy—the authority is obliged by law to keep maintenance costs within revenues—the agency can document its contention that matters have improved considerably since it took over control five years ago. A long-range program of rehabilitation is well launched, with the latest evidence noticeable on the IRT. It has recently assigned 110 new and modern cars to its West Side line, rebuilt stations here and there, put in fluorescent lighting, begun to scrub down tunnel walls, is working on a new express stop at 59th Street and Lexington Avenue, and in general is providing faster and cleaner service. Even the underground crime rate has decreased to the point where the chief of transit police recently claimed that "a woman is safer riding in the subways than she is walking along a dark street"—a modest boast, to be sure, but a straw in the musty wind that blows constantly through the city's underground.

It's Worse Above Ground

If Charles L. Patterson, the authority's chairman, is perhaps overly prudent about money for maintenance, he is forthright and farseeing about the need for replacing capital equipment, a financial responsibility that still rests with the city

government. His request for 1960 was for 540 cars—at \$120,000 apiece—and his plans for 1961-1965 call for 1,620 additional replacements in a fleet that totals some 6,000. "No private business," he rightly points out, "could survive long if it permitted its physical plant and services to deteriorate and its operating costs to rise as a result of insufficient investment and replacement. Yet this is precisely what is happening in New York City, and still there are advocates of greater austerity in capital expenditures."

Mr. Patterson and his two colleagues, Joseph E. O'Grady and Joseph F. Periconi, actually expect to bring the transit system through the current fiscal year with a surplus. The subways, as distinct from the surface lines, will show only a minor deficit compared with last year's, and this without an increase in the fare. They attribute this hopeful augury, in part, to a slight upturn in the number of riders, won back presumably by improved service. But more disinterested sources point to disguised city subsidies to explain the return to budgetary health after decades of deficit and bankruptcy, and are inclined to attribute the slight increase in patronage less to improvements below ground than to the constantly more appalling condition of traffic on the surface.

The truth appears to be that Mr. Patterson's very gradual program of reform, frustrated as it is by repeated failures to get anything like all the capital he wants, shows little prospect of ever catching up with the constantly advancing need. It is believed that his penchant for economy has long since squeezed out the waste in the system and become in itself a bar to the kind of drastic overhauling that is called for. Yet the authority is doomed to pinching pennies and the city is doomed to pinching dollars as long as transportation in all its forms is treated in separate compartments, by separate agencies, and with separate financing, as though they were detergents competing for a market.

BASICALLY, the subways are caught in a vicious circle, the contours of which have been permanently fixed by law. After decades of

private ownership modified by bankruptcy, the city took over the lines in 1940 and gave them thirteen years of deterioration tempered by handouts. "During the thirty years in which I have been a resident of the city of New York," said Governor Thomas E. Dewey, "transit has been an abused and shabby political football." Whereupon he turned it into a shiny new political football. With additional municipal taxing powers as bait, he persuaded the city to turn the system over to a Transit Authority, appointed jointly by mayor and governor. The very word "authority" conveyed a sense of independence and efficiency derived from the legend of Robert Moses, who was still widely worshiped at the time, and the move



promised to allow indefinite rises in fare without saddling anyone in elective office with political responsibility.

But the independence was mythical and the scope for efficiency narrow. The authority was given the right to raise fares (except between July 1 and December 31, presumably to avoid political repercussions in an election year) but it was ordered to make them self-sustaining. The costs of maintaining the lines were to come entirely from revenues, with the city putting up capital for equipment, plus a few special items like paying the transit police force and making up the differential on reduced fares for schoolchildren. The authority, which at first consisted of five unpaid members working part-time, had only two choices if it was to meet the legal obligation to operate the subways strictly out of revenue: it could raise fares or it could reduce service. Since it had to look to City Hall for its desperately needed rehabilitation, it was never

in a position to make a decision on fares that would embarrass the municipal powers—and they in turn could no more than ever be expected to relish the possible political consequences of an increase.

Politics aside, the authority was aware that fare boosts have driven passengers away wherever and whenever they have occurred. Theodore W. Kheel, impartial chairman of the transit industry, calls it a "mathematical axiom," proved many times over, that "Use of transit facilities in this country has gone downward in almost direct relationship to higher costs per ride, until now it is less than half of what it was thirteen years ago."

Accordingly, the authority fell back on reduced service. Agents were eliminated by the hundred, obliging travelers without tokens to walk the equivalent of a block in some Independent line stations before they could go through a turnstile and leaving night passengers at the mercy of predators on long, unguarded platforms. Other pinchpenny economies were effected throughout the service, as I have indicated. And, more important, the frequency of trains was sharply reduced. "Certainly we have made service cuts," said Chairman Patterson. "No sane-minded operator would do otherwise. But we have made them because the lines were not patronized sufficiently." And the more cuts that were made, the less the lines were patronized. In spite of the slight upturn currently noted, this would seem to be the logical trend. The city's mass transit lines carry only those who have no alternative while others unnecessarily choke surface traffic in a frantic and doomed effort to get somewhere fast and with a modicum of comfort.

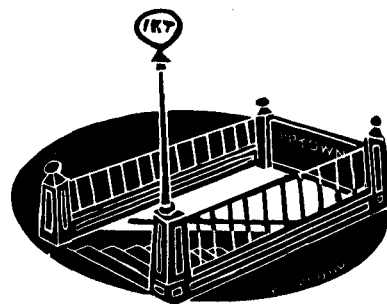
A Unified System

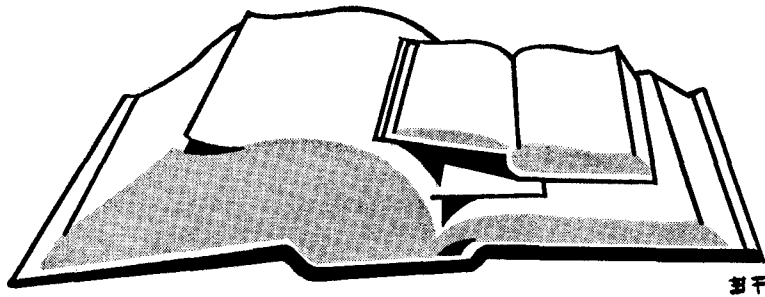
Is there any prospect of breaking through this cycle, of enabling New Yorkers to travel public conveyances in something remotely approaching the style in which they insist on riding in private? To go back to city subsidies—and direct city control—would invite a return to the old-time inefficiency, make the transit lines a lush field of patronage and politics, and simply transfer a nonpaying operation from an agency called an "authority" to an agency called a

"board." The only reasonable hope on the horizon is that those transit and traffic agencies which show a rich return be made to share less of their income with bondholders and more with the general public, to cease amassing a useless fortune and spread the wealth to mass transit lines, which need fiscal nourishment so desperately.

There are such agencies, and as it happens they are just the ones that have been strangling the city with automobiles, surely the least efficient and economical way to transport large numbers of people short of bringing them to town on horseback. These are the Port of New York Authority and the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, both of which pile up huge surpluses each year and reinvest substantial chunks of them in new bridges, tunnels, and other facilities. "Quite ironically," says Mr. Kheel in making this very point, these facilities "mainly aid and encourage the flow of additional automobiles into the city, thereby further undermining mass transit and clogging up our city streets."

IT IS NOT through any fault in the laws that created them that these rich authorities devote themselves to serving their bondholders handsomely and piling up equities in a growing network of projects while the Transit Authority is left to scrounge for dollars like a landlady in an actors' boardinghouse. They need only to be brought into line, and that idea is being more and more widely talked about. But such a step implies balance, which in turn implies planning. And at those lofty heights where the Port Authority's Austin Tobin and the Triborough Authority's Robert Moses have their being, "planning" is still a suspicious word, much used by dreamers and demagogues.





The Paperback Title Fight

MALCOLM COWLEY

IN THE ACCEPTED language of the trade, publishers don't publish books; what each of them does is to "bring out a list," which usually consists of "these outstanding titles." "Outstanding" means "salable, we hope," and a title might be defined as almost anything in words or pictures, except a magazine, that is printed, bound in cloth or paper, and offered for separate purchase. Even a magazine becomes a title if it is issued as part of a paperback series and sold chiefly in bookstores. Most of the exciting departures in publishing during the last few years, especially in the paperback field, have been due to a frantic search for titles, titles, any sort of title that will sell.

Consider the special plight of the paperback publishers. Last year they issued 1,912 titles, and this year's production is certain to be larger. They have learned from experience, however, that only certain types of books can be profitably sold as paperbacks. Where are they going to find the right titles to increase their flourishing volume of business?

THE BACK LISTS of hard-cover publishers have always been their principal field for exploration, but now the field is being crisscrossed with fences. Most of the big hard-cover houses have decided that their back lists—consisting of all the titles issued in previous seasons—are among their most valuable prop-

erties and that the best way to exploit them is by issuing their own soft-cover reprints. Doubleday, Knopf, Viking, Harcourt, Random, Oxford, Macmillan, Harper, McGraw-Hill, and many others—even that archconservative of the publishing trade, Charles Scribner's Sons—are now putting the best of their back-list items into paper. When an independent paperback publisher approaches them for titles, he is usually offered only the second choices at best. Often he gets a flat refusal.

Of course there are many houses, including the smaller and newer ones, that are willing to release any title for a consideration. This takes the form of an advance against paperback royalties that might range from \$1,000 to \$200,000. The latter figure, a record, was paid for reprint rights to the Grace Metalious sequel and stinker, *Return to Peyton Place*. Paperback publishers wail about the prices set on such "premium books," but what really disturbs them is that only a small proportion of the ten thousand new hard-cover titles issued each year—perhaps one out of twenty—is suitable for paperback distribution. The supply of back-list items, now greatly diminished, was never enough to meet the demand.

Another field that paperback publishers explore for titles is the enormous accumulation of out-of-copyright books. The difficulty is that only a few thousand of these

have any appeal to the new generation of readers. Among reprints of standard authors, the competition has become ruinous. There are now, for example, five separate paperback editions of *The Scarlet Letter* and at least four of Henry James's *The Ambassadors* (Anchor, Dell, Signet Classics, and Fawcett Premier). There are more than thirty paperback editions of other works by James, with two or three new ones added every season to compete with the rest.

SINCE present-day titles are becoming harder to find and those of the past have been thoroughly pawed over, it is clear that paperback publishers will be forced to gamble on the future. In other words, they will have to engage in some sort of original publishing, and that is what most of them have done already. On a recent Anchor list, six out of eleven titles were "originals," as the trade calls them. Arthur Cohen, the enterprising head of Meridian Books, says that his house has signed contracts for 120 paperbacks to appear within the next two years, and that eighty or ninety of these will be originals.

Here the difficulty is that paperback publishers are essentially packagers and distributors, not literary pioneers. Almost all their best-selling titles are those for which there is already a public demand, one created by trade publishers, book clubs, reviewers, enthusiastic booksellers, and successful movies. Operating on a small margin of profit, the paperback houses can't afford to take many risks or do much advertising in book-review sections. Of course those sections are never affected by financial considerations, never, but somehow they give vastly more space to advertised trade books than they give to paperbacks. Originals in a paperback series have to be the sort of book that can get along without advance promotion or front-page reviews. They are most likely to succeed if they aren't painfully original, that is, if they meet some existing taste or move in some established groove.

AT THIS STAGE I have to explain, as everyone makes a point of doing, that there are two different types of paperbacks. There is the mass-market