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'Roping the Wild Jitney': the jitney bus craze and the rise of urban autobus systems

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Abstract

During the economic downturn of 1914, some Los Angeles motorists down on their luck began giving rides at a nickel, or 'jitney', per trip and tended to shadow streetcar routes. After some national press attention, this practice became a craze that swept the nation in early 1915. As the jitney experience blossomed into demands for more reliable autobus systems, urbanites began to consider the possibilities of motorized public transit, though they were divided by class and neighbourhood. Suburbanites, however, demanded that cities retool around their automobiles. This article examines the jitney phenomenon as it emerged across the USA, which although handled locally and over varying lengths of time, did lead to a distinct national shift in urban politics

and planning. It is argued that the jitney bus was not merely a transition point between rail service and the private automobile. Its real meaning lies in a political shift away from attempts by city dwellers to reform the streetcar trusts, for years a doomed struggle, and toward achieving municipally-owned mass transit through a new technology that was not as expensive or inflexible as rail. Few were satisfied with the jitney when experimentation with it waned in much of the country as quickly as it had appeared. The automobile was not inherently a democratic technology, but the divisive politics it inspired within and between classes in city and suburb developed a tense compromise between private individual and public mass transit that is still a central debate in the nation's cities.

Notes

1. The title of this article is a quote from *Sunset* (July 3, 1915) 3.
2. *Chicago Evening Post* (February 9, 1915) 6.
3. D. F. Davis, *Competition's moment: the jitney-bus and corporate capitalism in the Canadian city, 1914-29*. *Urban History Review* 18 (October 1989) 103.
4. B. A. Brownell, *The notorious jitney and the urban transportation crisis in Birmingham in the 1920's*. *The Alabama Review* 25 (April 1972) 105-18; F. Dressman, 'Yes, we have no jitneys!': transportation issues in Houston's Black community, 1914-1924. *The Houston Review* 9, 2 (1987) 69-81.
5. C. A. Schwantes, *The West adapts the automobile: technology, unemployment, and the jitney phenomenon of 1914-1917*. *Western Historical Quarterly* 16 (July 1985) 307-26.
6. D. F. Davis, *The North American response to the jitney bus*. *The Canadian Review of American Studies* 21 (Winter 1990) 333-57.
7. R. D. Eckert and G. W. Hilton, *The jitneys*. *The Journal of Law and Economics* 15 (October 1972) 323.
8. D. F. Davis, op. cit. [3].

9. P. Barrett, *The automobile and urban transit: the formation of public policy in Chicago, 1900–1930*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983, pp. 6–8, 178.
10. J. R. Barrett, *Work and community in the jungle: Chicago's packinghouse workers, 1894–1922*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987, p. 67.
11. G. Leidenberger, *Working-class Progressivism and the politics of transportation in Chicago, 1895–1907*. PhD dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1995, pp. 9–10.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
13. J. R. Barrett, *op. cit.* [[10](#)], p. 105.
14. G. Leidenberger, *op. cit.* [[11](#)], p. 11.
15. L. Cohen, *Making a new deal: industrial workers in Chicago, 1919–1939*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 34.
16. P. Barrett, *op. cit.* [[9](#)], p. 108.
17. G. Leidenberger, *op. cit.* [[11](#)], pp. 14–18.
18. Room and board expenses from 1909 University of Chicago study on Packingtown quoted in J. R. Barrett, *op. cit.* [[10](#)], p. 72
19. P. Barrett, *op. cit.* [[9](#)], p. 110.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 111, 117.
21. *Chicago Evening Post* (January 27, 1915) 2.
22. *Chicago Evening Post* (January 29, 1915) 1.
23. *Chicago Evening Post* (January 26, 1915) 3.
24. P. Barrett, *op. cit.* [[9](#)], p. 11; *Chicago Evening Post* (January 25, 1915) 1.
25. Such complaints are rife in P. Barrett, *ibid.*, Chapter 4 and pp. 16–17; G. Leidenberger, *op. cit.* [[11](#)], pp. 33–7.
26. *Automobile Topics* (February 13, 1915) 40.

27. Chicago Evening Post (June 14, 1915) 1.
28. The Survey (June 26, 1915) 280.
29. Chicago Evening Post (June 14, 1915) 1, 2.
30. The Survey (June 26, 1915) 280
31. Chicago Evening Post (June 14, 1915) 1.
32. Chicago Evening Post (June 15, 1915) 2.
33. Chicago Evening Post (June 15, 1915) 3.
34. Chicago Evening Post (June 15, 1915) 8, 9.
35. Chicago Evening Post (June 16, 1915) 2.
36. Chicago Evening Post (June 15, 1915) 3.
37. Automobile Topics (February 27, 1915) 183.
38. C. McShane, *Down the asphalt path: the automobile and the American city*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, pp. 128, 130.
39. The Independent (May 1, 1916) 180; *ibid.*, pp. 133–5; J. J. Flink, *The automobile age*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1988, pp. 33, 134.
40. S. L. Bottles, *Los Angeles and the automobile: the making of the modern city*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, pp. 54–6, 15, 79–80; C. McShane, *op. cit.* [[38](#)], p. 199.
41. Automobile Topics (February 20, 1915) 122; (April 24, 1915) 900; (March 13, 1915) 385; (April 3, 1915) 642; (April 17, 1915) 805; (October 23, 1915) 830.
42. Automobile Topics (April 17, 1915) 804; (April 24, 1915) 900; (August 7, 1915) 1111; (May 1, 1915) 999; (May 29, 1915) 213.
43. R. D. Eckert and G. W. Hilton, *op. cit.* [[7](#)], pp. 297–9, 303; Automobile Topics (April 17, 1915) 801; (May 1, 1915) 998.
44. Automobile Topics (March 27, 1915) 554; (April 17, 1915) 805; (May 1, 1915) 999; R. D. Eckert and G. W. Hilton, *op. cit.* [[7](#)], p. 307.

45. R. D. Eckert and G. W. Hilton, op. cit. [7], pp. 303, 325.
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47. *Automobile Topics* (February 13, 1915) 41; *The Jitney Bus* (May 1915) 40; *Automobile Topics* (February 27, 1915) 191; (March 6, 1915) 276; F. Dressman, op. cit. [4], pp. 69, 75–7, 79–81.
48. *Automobile Topics* (February 13, 1915) 40; (February 27, 1915) 191; (August 21, 1915) 120; (March 6, 1915) 276.
49. *Proceedings of the American Electric Railway Association* (1915) 125–7.
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51. W. J. Locke, The jitney bus and its future. *National Municipal Review* (October 1915) 610.
52. *The Independent* (May 31, 1915) 356; *Automobile Topics* (February 13, 1915) 40.
53. *The Annalist* (April 12, 1915) 352. For insurance bond and operation licence costs see A. L. Bostwick, The regulation of the jitney bus: a discussion of city ordinances. *St Louis Public Library Monthly Bulletins*, July 1915; *Automobile Topics* (February 13, 1915) 40; (February 20, 1915) 122; (March 13, 1915) 384; (March 6, 1915) 276.
54. *Automobile Topics* (March 6, 1915) 276; (March 20, 1915) 472; (April 24, 1915) 900; F. Dressman, op. cit. [4], p. 79.
55. *The Jitney Bus* (April 1915) 7–8. For the trend toward advocating larger buses see (June 1915) 76 and (July 1915) 93. For studies of local East Coast bus networks see *Motor Bus* (October 1915) 189–92 [Plainfield, NJ], (February 1916) 316–20 [Atlantic City], (March 1916) 349–51 and (April 1916) 381–4 [New Rochelle, NY], (March 1916) 353–7 [Providence]. On zone systems see *The Jitney Bus* (August 1915) 125–6 and on transfers see *Motor Bus* (September 1915) 173–4; (November 1915) 235–6; (January 1916) 285; (April 1916) 392.
56. *Automobile Topics* (February 27, 1915) 191; (March 6, 1915) 276; (April 3, 1915)

57. R. D. Johnston, *The radical middle class: populist democracy and the question of capitalism in Progressive Era Portland, Oregon*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003, p. 104.
58. *Automobile Topics* (April 24, 1915) 900; (March 27, 1915) 554.
59. *Automobile Topics* (April 3, 1915) 643; (August 21, 1915) 120; (March 20, 1915) 472; *The World's Work* (April 1915) 619; *Automobile Topics* (September 18, 1915) 438.
60. *Automobile Topics* (March 27, 1915) 554; (June 26, 1915) 557; (July 10, 1915) 758; (July 17, 1915) 828.
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62. V. Scharff, *Taking the wheel: women and the coming of the motor age*. New York: Free Press, 1991, pp. 73–7; *Ladies' Home Journal* (March 1917) 32; (July 1915) 11.
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64. *Automobile Topics* (February 27, 1915) 191; (February 13, 1915) 40; (June 19, 1915) 484; (March 13, 1915) 384; (May 8, 1915) 1084; *Chicago Evening Post* (March 1, 1915) 4.
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66. P. Barrett, *op. cit.* [[9](#)], p. 175; *The Jitney Bus* (May 1915) 48; *Motor Bus* (December 1915) 260.
67. *Chicago Evening Post*, (March 10, 1915) 4.
68. *Chicago Evening Post* (March 17 1915) 3.
69. *Automobile Topics* (February 27 1915) 186.
70. *Chicago Evening Post* (February 16 1915) 2.
71. P. Barrett, *op. cit.* [[9](#)], p. 175.
72. *Motor Bus* (March 1916) 370
73. *Bus Transportation* (September 1922) 477, 473; 1915 elevated train figures from *The Survey* (June 26, 1915) 280 and 1922 elevated figures from *Bus Transportation*

(September 1922) 477.

74. P. Barrett, op. cit. [9], pp. 173–7

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Additional information

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