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

Adam Hodges

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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.

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## Notes

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8. D. F. Davis, op. cit. [[3](#)].
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10. J. R. Barrett, *Work and community in the jungle: Chicago's packinghouse workers, 1894-1922*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987, p. 67.
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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.
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34. Chicago Evening Post (June 15, 1915) 8, 9.
35. Chicago Evening Post (June 16, 1915) 2.
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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.
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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.
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58. Automobile Topics (April 24, 1915) 900; (March 27, 1915) 554.

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## Additional information

### Notes on contributors

Adam Hodges

\*Adam Hodges holds a BSc (Econ.) in Government and History from the London School of Economics and Political Science and a PhD in History from the University of Illinois. He is currently an Assistant Professor teaching twentieth-century US history at the University of Houston – Clear Lake and is completing a book manuscript titled World War I and Urban Order: The Local Class Politics of National Mobilization

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