

Public Transportation Is Vanishing

IF it is too far to walk or ride a bicycle and you don't have a car to drive, you might not be able to go before long.

Trains don't take you anywhere. Bus services are being reduced so that many towns don't have any. Airlines are going bankrupt. Huge freight trucks are crowding the highways.

It was only about 150 years ago that the first passenger trains began running in the United States. Their terrific speeds of 30 or 40 mph so far outdistanced stage coaches that it seemed they never would become obsolete.

That idea prevailed until Congress enacted laws giving labor unions special advantages in negotiating contracts for wages and working conditions. Railroad owners had found hauling freight was more profitable than hauling people. Freight did not demand rigid schedules, smooth roadbeds, stations and polite personnel.

The combination of factors made passenger trains vulnerable to competition from buses when they hit

the highways, and even more so when airlines began offering free meals on most flights.

Intercity buses usually were operated by small companies with only a few vehicles at first. It now seems unbelievable that in the 1920s Red Ball and other buslines offered door-to-door service.

Many bus routes went over graveled or dirt roads and flat tires or engine troubles en route were not uncommon. But buses didn't have to wait for tracks to be laid, as trains did.

After World War II, the large number of skilled pilots and airplane mechanics available made it easier for fledgling airlines to expand to all major cities here and around the world. DC-3s and other refurbished warplanes were converted to airline service. In today's high-flying jets, we tend to forget the rough flights, airsickness and long delays of earlier times.

Then labor unions demanded more and more until air fares were pushed to the limits. Costs of new equipment and fuel have brought

some major airlines to bankruptcy.

Good management calls for a fair division of profits, but when owners retain too much, workers may be cheated. When unions demand too much, owners are deprived. When both insist on too much, costs go out of sight and the business may fall apart.

This has happened with railroads, with numerous bus lines, with the automobile industry, and now it is happening with airlines.

Socialized countries "solve" such problems by having government take over the troubled industries and soaking taxpayers for whatever the bureaucrats find necessary to keep things moving.

That isn't the way things ought to be done in a free country. Public transportation sometimes may have to be operated as a monopoly, but this becomes an unfair monopoly if laws make it possible for any part of the industry to exploit others.

That is the present situation. Therefore, the road to reliable transportation at reasonable prices is a foggy trip.