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Arthur J. Leahey

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OBSERVATIONS ON THE PROBLEM OF TRAFFIC CONTROL

Arthur J. Leahey

Lieut. Arthur J. Leahey, Director of the Traffic Division of the Syracuse (N. Y.) Police Department, is well qualified through training and experience to discuss the problem of Traffic Control. Since joining the Syracuse department, Lieut. Leahey has attended the Six-County Police School at Hobart College, Northwestern University Traffic Institute, the School of Police Administration at Syracuse University, and a number of shorter police training sources. His early introduction to traffic problems was as Special Investigator for the Accident Division. Two years ago he was placed in charge of the Traffic Division. In many ways Syracuse is typical of other cities of comparable size, and the problems of which Lt. Leahey writes are to be found in some form in every Traffic Control program.—EDITOR.

Subjectively traffic control is something constantly confronting the experts with a problem which apparently never seems any nearer solution; objectively it is something the experts are constantly striving to attain. The two words—Traffic Control—do not seem to click too much when mentioned casually a hundred times a day by those engaged in this activity, but when one stops to analyze what those two words mean he must realize they denote perfection. When one has traffic control he no longer has any problem, but there is not a city in the country today which can boast of this Utopian condition.

Every city, of course, has problems peculiar to that particular community, and it has been often shown what may be feasible in one city may be way out of line in another. Primarily, the topography of a city has a great deal to do with efficient traffic control. This, of course, is true in all cities which have not kept pace with the motor car down through the years. Great strides have been made in some communities in street layout, in signal timing, in off-street parking, and other elements of traffic control, but the great majority of cities were built long before anyone dreamed that automobiles would soon be killing 35,000 to 40,000 people each year.

To illustrate the problem of topography consider an example in Syracuse. One block on the main street is 265 feet in length, the next 529 feet long, and the third is 934 feet in length with the fourth dropping back to approximately 500 feet. It is also interesting to note that on a principal street parallel to and one block from the main street the block which should be 934 feet in length as on the main street is but 526 feet in length due to one of two streets which cut through the business area at an angle. At present city officials are seriously considering closing up one entire block of one of these angle streets to provide off-street parking facilities. The importance of such a move

is clearly indicated by the fact that this street under consideration is a through thoroughfare, one of the main arteries to Albany and the east. From an engineering viewpoint, and perhaps so far as general traffic movement is concerned, this plan will aid police for it will mean the elimination of two three-point intersections occasioned by the angle thoroughfare.

This is merely an example of how the general topography of a city can be altered not only to provide better parking conditions in the business area, but also safer traffic movement. However, most cities would find it difficult and quite expensive to change street direction, to widen narrow thoroughfares, to go through condemnation proceedings to eliminate unsightly property on the business fringe, or perhaps to eliminate a fountain or statue of some famous individual, the scrapping of which might easily facilitate traffic and reduce accidents.

One-way streets are common in most of our cities today; but it was not until 1946 that the Syracuse department experimented with this form of traffic movement when two principal streets, one parallel to the main street on the east, the other on the west, were designated one-way thoroughfares. After a year and one-half of such operation traffic has speeded up to some extent on these streets despite the fact the city fathers ordained that traffic in these streets move directly opposite to the manner advocated by police and the traffic engineer. Though it must be admitted the plan has facilitated traffic movement the latter group believes that a much better job could have been done if the direction had been reversed on these streets. It is a certain fact that if city officials relied more upon those in charge of traffic to solve traffic problems rather than upon the word of someone who knows absolutely nothing about conditions, or upon the insistence of pressure groups, then traffic control in many communities might show far better results.

Similarly, there are the arm chair experts who through personal communications, telephone calls, and letters to the editors of the newspapers are constantly trying to advise the police on how to combat traffic ills. The majority of these traffic-minded folks have not much of an idea what goes on behind the scenes yet they are ever ready to prod and needle the police because one night, in the rush hour, they were stuck in one block for three changes of the traffic signal. All this despite the fact that they could have gone home an entirely different route which would have taken them off the main street blocks before the traffic jam.

This fault of unnecessary congestion is a matter of education

—wide, extensive education—through press and radio. It is perhaps true in most cities today that a high percentage of the motorists, who use the main streets of the business sections and have no business there, could very well use another route to and from work. The other route may be a trifle longer; but it would take them home and to work more rapidly and avoid not only the congestion in the business area, but also that feeling of irritation which prompts so many accidents.

That this education can be accomplished was evidenced by the fact that the Syracuse police used the newspaper and the five radio stations prior to last Memorial Day parade, and again for a few days before the Freedom Train Day parade, advising the people of Syracuse and Onondaga County that no parking would be allowed on the line of march. There was not a car on the line of march during the Memorial Day parade, and only four machines had to be towed away during the Freedom Day parade. This is good evidence that a proper educational program can aid in traffic control. The same rule might be applied in getting the people to use a different route to and from work. Even the manufacturing plants and large stores in conjunction with police might be persuaded to devise some manner for their employees to move as rapidly as possible from their place of employment and avoid congested areas.

The pedestrian problem will perhaps always be present though many cities have made remarkable strides in combating this important part of traffic control. This writer is not too familiar with the records of those cities where pedestrian violation tickets are issued, but it seems that such a law would have to be enforced rigorously to be effective. There is no reason why cities in New York State should not enforce this rule for it is a part of the Vehicle and Traffic Law of the state, but it appears that not too many cities have followed it.

The most difficult part of such an enforcement program would rest upon the police officer who managed to halt one of a dozen persons crossing against a red light, giving the one a ticket as the other offenders continued on. This act, it seems, would be bound to cause just as much resentment as the singling out of one of three motorists who passed a red light, giving the one a summons and passing up the other two. Pedestrian enforcement is really a delicate phase of the problem, and it does not appear that any city has sufficient personnel to make it 100 percent effective.

To combat the pedestrian problem in Syracuse the police use a sound car daily, not only in the business area, but in all

sections of the city, and are seriously considering putting out a second one. This method does work wonders in the business section for no one cares to be embarrassed in front of others, and the man at the microphone does make it embarrassing in a courteous manner no matter what violation the pedestrian may be committing. The effectiveness of this car cannot be overestimated for not only is it used for pedestrian control, but it is invaluable in breaking up double parking, is used at school crossings, and also for general patrol work. One word of caution from the man at the microphone on a slippery or snowy day, and motorists who may be trodding upon the accelerator too heavily for the weather conditions automatically slow up. The men in this car also issue many violation tickets each day.

Syracuse's growth in population, as in all major cities, has greatly increased the traffic control problem. Today's population of some 300,000 in Onondaga County with approximately 225,000 in Syracuse is an increase of 15,000 in the city over the prewar period. There are approximately 93,000 vehicles registered in the county, the great majority owned by city residents, and of course, thousands of the county residents either work in the city or shop there each day. Thus, it is not hard to visualize, if one is traffic minded, just what this number of vehicles means when thrown into a three-street business district, each street less than three-quarters of a mile in length. In addition it must be remembered that Syracuse is on the main east-west U. S. and New York State highways which greatly augments the traffic problem most of the year.

One of the vital problems in Syracuse, and it is perhaps true in many cities, are details—details which take traffic men away from their principal task of enforcement. For example, on funeral details alone approximately 20 to 25 full eight-hour days a month are lost, time which should be devoted to the curbing of reckless driving and the prevention of accidents. Some cities have special groups of men who handle such details, and police are not called upon to care for funerals, but of course there are other details, various sports events which continue all year around, weddings, dog shows, musicals, escorts of prominent persons, and many, many others too numerous to mention. If the time spent on these details could be devoted to traffic law enforcement certainly the tempo of selective enforcement could be stepped up considerably.

In any program of traffic control there always will be complaints from the business man who claims the police are going

to put him out of business whenever a change is made. Syracuse experienced that when the one-way streets were placed in operation and even had a committee of merchants sign a petition to forestall this move. The program was inaugurated, however, and none of them have gone out of business in the past 18 months, nor is it likely they will in the near future.

For several years the Syracuse police have advocated no parking in the main business section, but of course, this idea has always been rigorously opposed. This zone is now metered, but anyone familiar with traffic knows the parking meter is definitely not the answer to the congestion or free movement phases of the problem. The meter is a source of revenue, that is true, but street parking is merely dead storage. The only sensible way to look at this is to decide which is best—the movement of perhaps 1,000 cars an hour through an extra lane of traffic, or dead storage in the form of parked cars. Surely, the primary function of traffic is its movement, safely and expeditiously.

Recognition of those engaged in traffic work, right down to the man on the street, must come if the problems arising daily in traffic control are to have expert attention and sound analysis, with corrective principles applied. It is this writer's opinion that when officials who make the laws in our cities rely implicitly on those engaged in handling traffic to say when a stop sign should be placed, or a traffic signal installed rather than listen to the complaints of a ward leader whose only knowledge of traffic is that it moves—then true progress will have been made.

When this is accomplished; when there are wider streets and overhead thoroughways; when people can be convinced to stay off those congested streets where they have no immediate business; when the complaints of the few are no longer listened to while alleviating the problems of the many; when non-essential details are abolished; when procrastinating is ceased and there is action instead; and when every department has sufficient traffic personnel to man all divisions of service, then the ultimate objective—Traffic Control—may be a bit closer.

In addition the traffic specialist realizes how difficult existing conditions are at present and also what is bound to happen a few years from now. One cannot go on in traffic looking at time as a geologist does. It is the way he uses the hours that counts. There is needed constructive thought and speedy action—now—not the mere words of planners.