

Making Connections: The Long-Distance Bus Industry in the USA. By Margaret Walsh. xvii + 245 pp. Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations, tables. Cloth, \$74.95. ISBN 0-754-60207-9.

Reviewed by Owen D. Gutfreund

Making Connections is a collection of seven previously published journal articles, two new essays, and an introduction, all by Margaret Walsh. The articles arose from a research project that had begun as a history of the Greyhound Corporation. However, after the company denied Walsh access to company records, she was faced with an uneven and incomplete body of material that supported a series of discreet essays instead of the originally conceived corporate history. While they therefore do not constitute a single analytical or narrative work, taken together, these essays serve as an excellent introduction to the history of the American intercity bus industry, from its formative years at the beginning of the twentieth century up to deregulation in the early eighties. As could be expected from this type of collection, some portions of the history receive scant coverage, while others are described repeatedly. In particular, there is detailed and repetitive treatment of the period from 1920 to 1940, while the postwar years are given far less attention. Regardless, Walsh should be complimented for the general cohesion of the collection, which fills an otherwise vacant niche in transportation history.

Walsh starts the book with three “big-picture” articles: an introduction, which summarizes the remaining chapters, and two broad essays describing the overall historical trajectory of the bus industry, first from its infancy through the Depression, and then from World War II to deregulation. This is followed by three detailed case studies from the interwar period and four narrower pieces that focus on federal regulation, the use of advertising by the bus industry, women’s roles in the business, and the photodocumentation of buses during the forties.

The bus industry was originally a product of entrepreneurial experimentation in the taxi industry, starting with elongated taxis that would pick up multiple passengers along their route, followed soon by a series of innovations that included fixed routes with designated stops and published schedules. Between 1910 and 1920, many American cities saw their taxi depots converted into bus depots, and by the 1920s there were numerous bus companies operating vehicles that accommodated fifty passengers in relative comfort.

As with many other new industries, widespread experimentation and growth produced business failures alongside booming successes, followed by mergers and other forms of industrial consolidation. The Depression accelerated this trend, with more than a thousand bus companies

going under. Even the big consolidated bus companies had to recapitalize and reorganize their finances. At this point, amid industrywide difficulties, the federal government stepped in with the Federal Motor Carriers Act of 1935, which was designed to stabilize the largest surviving bus companies by protecting their intercity and long-distance routes while regulating fares. Smaller carriers and start-ups were effectively limited to local lines.

Prior to the Depression, buses were generally viewed as a modern and convenient form of transportation. However, by the end of World War II, public perceptions had changed dramatically. During the economic difficulties of the thirties and the war-related rationing regime of the early forties, many Americans were forced to ride buses. Unfortunately, these same conditions made it difficult for the bus companies to provide decent service. Old buses were difficult to replace and repair, first because of funding constraints and later because of military manufacturing priorities dictated by the wartime command economy. To make matters worse, immediately after the end of the war, the industry got bogged down in a series of regulatory hearings challenging recent rate hikes. As a result, with uncertain revenues, bus companies were still slow to shore up their disreputable fleets. The industry never really recovered from this midcentury setback. By the time they were ready to compete, it was too late. The public had learned to avoid bus transport whenever possible, a strategy that became more viable as the economy boomed in the fifties and increasing numbers of American families owned at least one car. Then air travel became an alternative to long-distance bus trips starting in the 1960s, and the 1970s saw the energy crisis and renewed government support for long-distance rail transport with the formation of AMTRAK.

By the end of this extended period of duress, the industry was dominated by only two national carriers, Greyhound and Trailways, alongside a host of smaller regional companies. The Greyhound Corporation, itself the main focus of one of the case studies in the latter half of the book, had been formed when groundbreaking transit companies based in California and Minnesota merged with a dozen other regional carriers on the eve of the Depression in 1929. The new company that emerged served forty-one states and was exactly the type of bus company that the 1935 federal regulation was designed to protect.

Two of Walsh's other case studies focus on smaller bus companies. One, the Red Ball Transportation Company, operated in Iowa and was started by Helen Schulz. This chapter, which describes Schulz's experience as a female entrepreneur in the 1920s, ends with the merger of Red Ball and a larger rival in 1929. The acquiring company, Edgar Zelle's Jefferson Highway Transportation Company, is the other company that Walsh examines in detail.

The final three chapters, while still about the bus industry, seem tangential—interesting but disconnected. One examines the industry’s advertising practices and strategies in the post-1935 regulated business environment. Another, which is almost an aside, details female involvement in bus companies, from low-level positions like phone operators and stenographers to clerks and middle-level managers and even in rare instances as executives, like Helen Schulz. The third appended chapter details the photographic work of Esther Bublely, who recorded the industry in the 1940s, working first for the federal government and later for the Standard Oil Company.

As a collection of essays, *Making Connections* is thoroughly researched, and it covers an overlooked, largely undocumented portion of American history. As a single work, however, it is missing connective tissue and lacks an overarching argument or interpretive structure to provide cohesion. Even some of the individual essays lack a clear thesis. Also, the entire work is devoid of adequate reference to related historical developments. In particular, I was surprised by the lack of reference to the bus industry’s dependence on the growth of the government-funded highway system and the importance of the decline of rail transport. Nevertheless, these are exactly the types of pitfalls that are, to some extent, unavoidable for a book of this type. Walsh has succeeded in bringing to light, and making widely available, material that will be of interest to business historians and transportation historians alike. Furthermore, she has presented the material in a well-organized, accessible, and easy-to-read package.

Owen D. Gutfreund is assistant professor of history and urban studies at Barnard College, where he also is director of the Barnard and Columbia programs in urban studies. He is the author of a forthcoming book on the growth of sprawl in the United States throughout the twentieth century as a consequence of federal and state highway policies (2003). At present, he is working on a history of public investment in major league sports stadiums, arenas, and franchises, and on a study of airport expansions and their historical effect on neighboring cities.