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THE WORKS PROGRAM

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--Works Progress Administration--

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WPA AIDS NATION'S DRIVE FOR SAFER HIGHWAYS

Thirty-five hundred people are alive and presumably happy today who, by all statistical standards, should be dead. They were condemned by the usually unimpeachable dictum of a sinister red line that snakes across one of the master charts of the National Safety Council--one that records the tragic waste of life in highway accidents.

Last year 39,500 people met sudden death on the highway. It was the greatest accident record in history. The toll was four-fifths as great as the American losses in the World War. It was comparable to wiping out the entire population of a city the size of Waltham, Massachusetts, or Santa Monica, California.

With such factors as an increase in the number of vehicle miles favoring a continuance of the slaughter this year, the charts predicted that another 17,000 would be killed by the end of June. But when the grim statistics were tallied it was found that the actual number of deaths was some 20 per cent less than expectations. Somewhere along the line Death was cheated of nearly 3,500 of its victims--a sheer dividend for the human race, which, it now appears, may be developing into a trend.

If it is indeed a trend; if the problem of safety on the highways of America is finally yielding to treatment, much of the credit therefor can be laid to the constant hammering of the formula, "E.E.E." into the consciousness of the American public.

"E.E.E." stands for Engineering, Education, Enforcement. It is the working slogan of such organizations as the National Safety Council, the American Automobile Association and countless state and municipal police bodies all over the country. Its meaning, in simple terms, is that, first, streets, roads and driving aids must be made adequate for the traffic burden they bear; that drivers and pedestrians must be awakened to the need for good safety practices, and, lastly, that strict police enforcement must bolster and protect the gains on the engineering and educational fronts.

But it has been an uphill fight. Neither engineering, education nor enforcement has kept pace with the tremendous growth in the use of automobiles in the last ten years. The number of deaths increased 53 per cent between 1927 and 1937 and the dollar loss during the decade is reckoned in the billions. Part of the trouble, at least, experts agree, has been due to the fact that the traffic problem is a comparatively new phenomenon. Techniques for dealing with it have had to be evolved at a painfully slow pace, and the development of those techniques has been a costly process which few communities have been able to afford independently.

Definition of a problem is the first step to solution. The Works Progress Administration has done as much as any agency in the country in discovering what makes a traffic problem. In the last three years it has authorized expenditures aggregating approximately $12,750,000 for traffic studies and surveys in 155 communities. In a majority of cases they were

the first such studies ever made, and where the findings and recommendations were applied, reduced accident rates have followed almost universally.

The city of Columbus, Ohio, is a case in point. When it passed its fortieth consecutive day late in July without a single traffic death, the fact made front page news in cities as far away as Washington. The reason was that Columbus, for whatever else it might be famous, was also noted for the lethal quality of its automobile traffic. Its fatality rate of 31 per 100,000 of population during 1937 was the highest of a group of 23 cities of comparable size throughout the nation. The same situation had existed for years. Sporadic "safe driving" and "save a life" compaigns had had only temporary effects. Stringent driving laws were invoked. New traffic lights and stop signs were scattered freely about the city. Newspapers deplored the situation in their editorial pages. And still increasing numbers of Columbus citizens were mowed down in the streets month after month.

Naturally, then, a six weeks armistice was not only an occasion for public rejoicing but a pretty clear indication that something fundamental had happened to Columbus' traffic situation.

What happened was that, early in 1936, the city sponsored a $68,000 WPA project for an exhaustive study of the local traffic problem. Under the supervision of a member of the city engineering staff, 120 white-collar workers--engineers, draftsmen, tabulators and clerical help--were taken from local relief rolls, thoroughly coached in their respective duties, and put to work probing the most minute activities of Columbus drivers and pedestrians. Professor Roger L. Morrison of the Highway Engineering Transport Department of the University of Michigan was retained by the city as consultant.

Ten months later, from piles of statistics, tables and spot maps, Professor Morrison compiled his recommendations to the city government. He was able to show which streets bore the heaviest traffic loads and at which hours; where most accidents occurred, and why; where street lighting was inadequate for night driving and how it should be improved; which streets should be designated one-way and where parking restrictions were necessary. He suggested certain changes in the traffic code; the abolition of useless ordinances and the enactment of others, and offered specific suggestions for improving enforcement. To the delight of many average drivers he recommended the removal of "superfluous traffic lights" which, he said, were, "undoubtedly a contributing cause of many accidents."

Backed by an aroused public opinion, the city followed the recommendations closely. A traffic engineering department was set up as a permanent part of the city government and the police traffic patrol was increased from 50 to 70 officers. Other recommendations regarding traffic and driving regulations were put in force. In addition to the auspicious result noted above--40 consecutive death-free days--citizens of Columbus now pridefully point to the fact that fatalities during the first seven months of this year are less than half the number for the same period in 1937. Non-fatal accidents have been reduced from 1,189 to 683 and property damage has been reduced in similar proportion. Columbus believes it is on the way to becoming a model of intelligent traffic control rather than a "horrid example" of its absence.

Such examples can be duplicated many times over in the files of the Traffic Engineer of the WPA in Washington. Of the 155 cities which have sponsored surveys many have seen the results reflected in material decreases in deaths and property damage. Others have overhauled their traffic codes, tightened enforcement, and adopted effective traffic

regulations for the first time in their civic existence. New York City won the National Safety Council award in 1936 largely as a result of the most far-reaching traffic survey ever conducted in its history--a WPA project. Many statewide surveys have been conducted in cooperation with the Bureau of Public Roads for the promotion of safe driving on main highways. Cooperative agreements of this type are now in force in 24 states.

WPA has been similarly active in the strictly engineering phase of the "E.E.E." program. It is not easy to pick out of the staggering totals of miles of highways constructed or repaired, the numbers of bridges, culverts, roadside paths and other appurtenances to the nation's highway system, just what proportion of each has contributed directly to safety. Engineers aver, however, that in the sum total of this work the cause of highway safety has been measurably advanced.

Up to approximately a year ago, for example, WPA workers had built 46,650 miles of new roadways and repaired and improved 158,694. In instances too numerous to mention this involved the positive elimination of such driving hazards as S-curves and hairpin bends, steep grades, obstructions to clear vision such as overhanging banks and clusters of underbrush and trees. Much of the improved mileage, incidentally, included widening, which is definitely related to safety. More than 20,000 miles of road shoulders were improved in addition to the above.

Nineteen thousand new bridges have been built by WPA and more than 18,000 repaired. Here, also, is a definite contribution to safety for in almost every case the new or improved structures were made necessary by the inadequacy of the former ones. And of unquestioned safety value are the more than 1,000 miles of guard rails which protect the unwary against running off curves or over steep embankments.

One of the unhappy paradoxes with which the safety engineer has to cope, however, is that the finest engineering achievements come to naught if drivers and pedestrians do not know how to use them. Every Sunday motorist has seen wrecks piled up alongside perfectly straight stretches of 40-foot superhighways; has shaken his head sadly, and wondered how any one could come a cropper on such seemingly fool-proof roads. The answer usually is poor driving: either inability properly to handle a car, ignorance of safe driving practices, or a callous disregard for the safety of self and others. The remedy is the middle "E" of the safety formula--Education.

Gary, Indiana, has developed a novel means of forcing safety education on those who do not take to it willingly. It has a traffic school to which violators are "sentenced," in addition to the fines and costs assessed for their violations. The "term" lasts for ten weeks, embraces a comprehensive review of the traffic situation in Gary, implemented with a display of realistic photographs of accidents and accident victims, study of the traffic code, and actual driving instruction. Violators sentenced to the school may be cited for contempt of court if they fail to attend, and if they do not make a grade of 75 on their final examination, they must go over the ground again.

Of more than 500 violators who attended the school during its first six months, according to Harold A. Brown, safety director for the Gary police department, there was not a single repeater. And Gary's accident record has improved accordingly.

The Gary traffic school is a project of the WPA Adult Education Division. Its counterpart may be found in many other cities where there is a serious determination to improve traffic conditions. Such schools usually are set up, either on a municipal or statewide basis, in cooperation

with police or safety departments. Quarters, instruction material, and supervision are furnished by the sponsors, while teachers are carefully chosen from WPA education projects. Instruction courses usually are modeled after those offered by the American Automobile Association, and this agency, as well as the National Safety Council, frequently cooperates closely with the projects. In most localities there is an enthusiastic public support for the traffic schools, and not infrequently civic clubs have contributed one or more second-hand automobiles for actual driving instruction.

Pennsylvania has taken to the scheme with avidity. Twelve schools are already in operation and plans call for at least 60 by the end of the year. The one at Darby has been in operation for two years and already has "graduated" more than 600 drivers. The schools recently have been integrated with a statewide safety campaign sponsored by the State Motor Police Commissioner, who expects the result to be the saving of 1,000 lives this year on Pennsylvania highways.

When the traffic school in Philadelphia was opened in May, a columnist in one of the evening papers observed: "Many thought when the first experimental classes were opened that the enrollment would be insufficient to make the instruction worthwhile, but instead the demand has been such that in some places enrollment is being booked for weeks ahead."

Recently plans were announced for the construction of a $42,000 driving range as a WPA project in Philadelphia to be used as a facility of the traffic school.

The United States has paid dearly for its soubriquet, "a nation on wheels." Its most recent bill, in 1937, according to the National Safety Council, was 39,500 deaths, 1,360,000 personal injuries, and an

economic loss estimated at $1,700,000,000. Apparently the American public is unwilling to sacrifice the pleasure and utility of the automobile to escape the penalties involved. Hence, some measures are indicated whereby we can have our cake and eat it too, without too serious consequences to our health and happiness. The way to that compromise lies unquestionably in the continued application of the "E.E.E." formula. And in that application, certainly as far as engineering and education are concerned, the WPA has taken a leading part.

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HIGHWAY SAFETY

The following photographs are available without cost. Please order by number from the Press Section.

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6008-C Congested intersection at 51st. St. and South Parkway, Chicago, after improvement by WPA. This formerly was one of the most hazardous traffic spots in the city

1683-C)
1684-C) Before and after views of the intersection at 57th. St. and Leif Erickson Drive, Chicago, showing the changes made by WPA to relieve a particularly bad traffic hazard.

12585-C Typical road improvement made by WPA workers. This scene is in Wisconsin.

12583-C A score of people were killed and many others injured at Pelky's Curve, on Route 213, near Bellaire, Ohio, because of the poor visibility. WPA workmen have improved the spot as here shown by the removal of a building and cutting back the bank.

16479-C This bridge on a main highway out of Amarillo, Texas, was widened from 20 to 40 feet by WPA workmen as a safety measure.

16481-C The principal highway between Huntington and Bluefield, W. Va., formerly crossed the main line of the Norfolk and Western Railroad at the spot where the photographer who took this picture stood -- 50 feet from the mouth of the tunnel. A serious traffic hazard has been removed through the construction of the overpass shown above, a WPA project.

16480-C Part of a safe driving campaign conducted by the WPA in Tacoma, Washington.

16482-C Commissioner Percy W. Foote of the Pennsylvania Motor Police takes one of the safe driving tests provided by the WPA Traffic School in Philadelphia. (Photo by courtesy of Philadelphia Inquirer).

15816-D A WPA worker tests a "student" driver's reaction time in the Traffic School at Seattle, Washington.

1855-C Trucks being checked by WPA safety workers for weight, breaking time, etc., on the streets of Evansville, Indiana.

14336 Part of the safe driving campaign conducted by WPA in North Carolina consist in explaining traffic rules to drivers. It is estimated that there are over 3,000 drivers in the state who can neither read nor write and hence cannot interpret roadside signs.

5303 WPA workers paint safety zones and traffic lanes on the streets of Omaha.

9407-C Guard rails and painted traffic lanes are an important adjunct to safe driving in mountainous country. The scene above is typical of work done by the WPA to promote highway safety in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania.

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