Introduction

The Late Motor Age: A Defining Decade

TWO DAYS AFTER May Day 1991, I began this odyssey into the auto age. Getting around on four wheels wasn't what it used to be, and, in the aftermath of what some were calling "the first petroleum war" in the Persian Gulf, Congress was debating whether to continue to make the world safe for America's major oil consumer, the automobile, or to adopt a new highway bill. With two-thirds of the nation driving through congested "carburbs," the system of moving Americans was clearly askew. Would the federal government continue covering the nation with asphalt or legislate a fresh approach? Would Washington still advance the policies that had produced dependence on the motor vehicle and assaulted the landscape and cityscape, the environment, and the quality of life, or would it tame the car?

And so, in order to gauge the late auto age, I decided to graph its extremes. On one side stood the advocates of "de-vehicularization," as the anti-auto activists had begun to call their goal, and on the other were the movers for more roads, more cars, more auto dependency. To see them, I would brave the separate worlds of foot power and horsepower: the road worriers versus the road warriors.

By a happy coincidence of events the polarities of what I would come to call the "asphalt nation" were holding conferences only days and miles apart. On May 3 and 4, the advocates for an auto-free America were meeting in Greenwich Village: on May 5 and 6, their adversaries, the traffic engineers, were assembling in Secaucus, New Jersey. In their own words, on their own turfs, each side would diagram the extremes of our motoring nation as it prepared to enter a new century.

The meetings couldn't have been staged in more appropriate locales. The car busters were gathering for the two days of their Auto-Free Cities assembly at Manhattan's New York University near Washington Square. A walk or train ride away from the most densely

settled, well-railed pedestrian neighborhood in the United States, they were launching their joint crusade to curb the car. With equal symbolism, the Institute of Transportation Engineers, dedicated to molding the infrastructure of the motor vehicle, would gather a day later in the wasteland of Secaucus, New Jersey, a sprawling, auto-only, in accessible landscape.

Weeks after the nation's battle for the Middle East oil wells had ended in 1991 ("oil for the headlights of America," one commentator noted), mere months before highway legislation would hit Congress, the pedestrian-firsters and the highway-firsters would offer contrasting viewpoints. I would see the black and white of life on wheels: how the two ends of the spectrum would solve the congestion and chaos of motorized America. On the one hand, grassroots activists and advocates would argue that the car was the villain of the environmental age, the heavy in an era of anomie and isolation. On the other, the hard hat traffic bureaucrats, ready to pave their grandmothers to get home for Thanksgiving dinner, would argue for more asphalt.

My first stop, then, was with the anti-auto evangelists. In the academic environs of New York University's auditorium, they gathered for the First International Conference for Auto-Free Cities. The four hundred or so speakers and listeners had been summoned by Transportation Alternatives, a feisty group best known in the limited history of the anti-auto movement for their civil disobedience in stopping traffic on the Queensboro Bridge in protest of its closing to bicyclers and walkers. The "QB6" (Queensboro Six), *Newsday* had labeled the protestors. They succeeded. The bridge remained open for bicyclers and walkers.

Bearing the label "humanpower advocates," brandishing "Touch the Earth: Walk" buttons, and carrying bumper stickers for every environmental cause under the ozone, the conferencegoers were a legion. Passionate walkers, hardy bikers, and urban and environmental vigilantes disembarked from the dingy subway stops nearby and walked or parked their bikes outside the conference headquarters at 100 Washington Square East. How many had come without "benefit of car," a moderator asked. Three hundred hands shot up.

So it went throughout the day in the corridors and classrooms

where the costumes of "radicalism" underscored the politics of the "radicalism" of scrapping the car. The footgear was a catalog of Birkenstock sandals, rainbow-colored sneakers, and trim boots. The rumpled assemblyman Jerry Nadler pounded the table before an audience that ranged from a toddler wearing a mini–bike helmet and T-shirt stamped "One Less Car" to adults in academic tweeds and jeans.

A hapless janitor had pulled down the shades on our surroundings in the columned auditorium. No matter. Within minutes, the energy savers were there, switching off the lights and pulling open the draperies. Daylight flooded the room as the listeners nodded in unison at warnings on the state of the planet ("all the indicators of the world's health are dim," said Lester Brown of Worldwatch Institute), and cheered the closing of Manhattan's last GM dealership.

"Cars are filthy abominations," said Toronto bike activist Anne Hansen. Applause.

"Monstrous, dangerous, obtrusive," she went on. Applause.

"Abusive." Applause.

"Did I come to the right conference?" she asked with a laugh.

You bet she did.

Two days later, imbued with their anti-auto fervor and loaded with their pamphlets on every environmental cause on the planet, I headed to the engineers' conference.

Its site was a barren auto-bred wasteland. In the highway-wrapped environs of a Howard Johnson Executive Suites Hotel in Secaucus, New Jersey, sat the highway builders—with "their hearts in asphalt," as the conference organizer for the American Society of Civil Engineers and the Institute of Transportation Engineers put it.

The contrast between the two conferences was marked in every aspect. The anti-auto warriors had been replaced by an army of the auto age's status quo. No straphangers here. The Secaucus conferees came by internal combustion engine to discuss such topics as "Implementing Regional Mobility Solutions." They passed the placeless corporate boxes along Secaucus's highway, and many got lost en

route. They looked out the hotel's front door on roads and parking lots as gray as the Executive Suites's gray garage, gray sidewalks, gray blank walls. Secaucus was the quintessence of nowhere and as far from its old landscape, the so-called Meadowlands, as bulldozers could make it. The land beneath the barren tundra of buildings and lonely parking lots possessed only enough link with nature to flood the new highway on wet days and make the route to the Newark airport an obstacle course.

From the stolid old New York University classrooms to the thin faux decor of the Howard Johnson restaurant was contrast indeed. The differences in the details of the conferences were equally striking. The anti-auto militants had lunched in Greenwich Village's Indian, Arab, or Greek cafés. They crashed overnight in friends' book-lined apartments lulled by the clamor of a Lower Manhattan Saturday night that didn't change decibel level as it slid into a raucous Sunday morning.

But it was eerie as a graveyard in auto-choked Secaucus. The administrators at the Secaucus sessions sat in the windowless world of the highway mall. They looked out their sealed windows at a glass box building poised on stilts above parked cars hard by the sign "Mill Creek Mall" (a body of water buried in the dozen or so lanes of traffic circling the hotel), then nodded off to sleep tranquilized by the white noise of the ten rooftop air conditioners and the whir of passing traffic.

Where the hard-pressed auto-free attendees had been asked to pay $35 or more if they were "doing all right financially" but not to worry if they couldn't ("This system is based on trust. . . . No one is turned away."), their opposites were well subsidized indeed. The members of the American Society of Civil Engineers and the Institute of Transportation Engineers handed institutionally stamped checks for their registrations, their spacious rooms, and notebooks smelling fresh as the first day of school.

But stop. The contrasts somehow began to seem too sharp, too forced, too simple. For, in the opening minutes, my script shredded as the first speaker, a man with enough graphics to map a NASA liftoff, launched the proceedings before the experts. His suit was gray, his accent moderate, his manner textbook professional. But his message

did not come from the other end of the spectrum of the highway age at all. Word for word, syllable for syllable, it carried the import of the auto-free activists—and the same evangelical tone. Comments on congestion, concern with the way of life and the stress of the late auto age marked the speeches.

Card-carrying members of the transportation bureaucracy they might be, an audience of partisans to asphalt. Yet one thing was clear from their comments: the consensus of support for the auto age was fraying. The sentiments from either end of the transportation compass were so similar that, in the aftermath of the conference, my notes and quotes were almost indistinguishable. "What used to be rush hour traffic has become all day," I read. "I don't think our auto-controlled society has reached the ultimate in evolution." "A penny from the gas tax would get you a billion dollars a year; two would get you two."

But who had said what? Which advocate, pro or con, had uttered this or that? I could scarcely assign authorship: some anti-auto David? some former prohighway Goliath? "Crisis proportions . . . more cars than people . . . our roads did not come with instructions for how to work. . . ." Such criticism was scattered throughout my notes, and the attribution was sometimes uneasy, sometimes startling. "One of our states has completely disappeared," a confessed hardtopper quoted Russell Baker on the tarmac-ing of Florida.

Certainly, the transportation folks' hearts—and history—were in asphalt. But their solutions were in biking, in car pooling, in mass transit, in walking, and, to my delight, in an "incomparably thrilling land use revolution" that would end sprawl in favor of walkable, transit-based planning. "Balanced transportation" was the mantra: the need to balance the equation between the automobile and other modes of movement. Later, I would learn to question the conviction of their phrases. Notwithstanding, it was clear that the professionals were looking for what they called a "three-legged stool": the highway, public transit, land use. The balance was off, the stool was tilting, and, alike, these experts knew that the first leg—the highway—had been jacked so high that it had tipped the structure. Those most involved in moving the nation toward a new millennium were not convinced that we could do so by the motor vehicle. Not con-

vinced at all. They were voicing a common concern and a common dislike of the way our driver-obsessed nation worked. It was a measure, but only one, of the growing distress of those who understood that the nation was reaching the end of that last frontier.

That summer of 1991, with the supposed last yards of the thirty-five-year-old interstate highway system in place and new legislation working its way through Congress, the question was even more visibly on the agenda. In Washington legislators were questioning our nation's auto dependency as a new highway bill started to roll through Congress. New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan was proclaiming that "we've laid enough concrete." His words hit the news wires. Others shared his certainty that the interstate system was done. Quite done. "Suppose they said that 'we have won' and quit," one supporter of the highway bill, now known as the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA), said borrowing the exit line offered by Senator George Aiken of Vermont to end the Vietnam War.

As the new year approached, the House and Senate passed the act, authorizing it with $151 billion. Congress's twelve-figure budget, for six years, was flexible. It would allow the states to use money not only for highways but for mass transit and other ways of moving America away from the four-wheeled vehicle as well. It was populist and planning oriented enough to insist that transportation systems must have community approval. It would encourage walking, bicycling, and transit taking to get us out of the car trap. In short, Congress seemed willing to let Americans explore a new way home.

But would they? Would—will—we?

This book addresses these questions. Part I, "Car Glut," begins where the anti-auto advocates did, showing how deeply enmeshed we are in the car culture. Part II, "Car Tracks," a history, traces the car from Henry Ford's mass-produced Model T in 1908 to the present to depict how this happened. It explores how a benign technology to mobilize Americans would transform a human-scaled landscape into the kingdom of the car. Part III, "Car Free," takes its

lessons into the future. It offers solutions, some new, some traditional, to show how we can relieve this dependence and destruction and secure human and global well-being.

It is this book's conviction that we can find, create, and revive the remedies, and that planning solutions depend, in the end, on land use solutions—on mobility based on human movement and transportation beyond the private automobile. Above all, the book is written with the conviction that we must and can end a late auto age in which every transportation decision is a highway-based, driving-first decision. It is written with the hope that human will and political action can become the engine to find ways to reduce the sway of the internal combustion machine.

Asphalt Nation argues that in the better part of the century since the Model T set the nation on wheels and in the forty-one years since the Interstate Highway Act of 1956 sprawled a vast network of highways across the continent, the nation has reached motorized stasis. Our transportation is a tangle, our lives and landscape strangled by the umbilical cord of the car. As we enter a new century, our vaunted mobility is, in fact, obstructed by a car culture in which every attempt to move is fraught with wasted motion, wasted time, wasted surroundings, wasted money.

Looking at the long trail of that history, I believe that we are approaching the closing of a frontier. It is an ending and a dawning as marked as the one that Frederick Jackson Turner made the cornerstone of a self-appraisal and shift in the American consciousness at the turn of the last century. In his seminal essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," Turner expanded the 1890 report of the superintendent of the Bureau of the Census "that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line" to establish a theory for the future. Turner's document recorded the end of the colonization of the great West. Movement, once "the distinguishing feature of American life," had defined the American character on an ever advancing frontier, he wrote. "This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnishes the forces dominating American character." An age ended. An era of regrets ensued, as Americans looked back to their founding myths and saw a

lost epoch. They pined for "the glory of movement, glory of change," contemporary historian William Cronon once observed.

Turner's emphasis on America's "advance"—its inexorable sense of movement and dominion over an environment deemed a commodity—characterizes how the motor vehicle ravished our continent thereafter. Today, however, more than one hundred years after Turner, the aggressive movement across the continent seems to be coming to a halt. Escape has become a wasteful and unsound exercise. The old consciousness is waning and with it confidence in our car-bound destiny. We are at the opening of a new frontier as well as a new century. *Asphalt Nation* maintains that, for all its pledges, the promise of the motorcar has been superseded by its problems, that we have reached the end of the age of the automobile viewed as an unredeemed good.

These, then, are the last days of a defining decade and century. They are the beginning of a millennium that will either transform the freewheeling, consumptive automobile and stop the asphalting of America—or propel us down a ruinous path. As in Turner's view, a route is closed, but new routes opened. There are negative implications to the closure. And yet, calling a halt to the notion of an endless frontier marks a more positive endorsement—the cultivation of a landscape that values place more than passage, that restrains auto mobility in the name of human mobility, that re-thinks the way we live.

In the annals of history, many recognize that we have moved as far as we can go on untamed wheels. A nation in gridlock from its auto-bred lifestyle, an environment choking from its auto exhausts, a landscape sacked by its highways has distressed Americans so much that even this go-for-it nation is posting "No Growth" signs on development from shore to shore. All of these dead ends make this a time for larger considerations. The future of our motorized culture needs change. It is the hope of this book not only to explore the origins and direction of that change but, above all, to instill an enthusiasm for creating a human and humane frontier in a new century.