

The Awfulness of the Omnibus

By 1850 Broadway was so crowded with these vehicles, operated by several rival companies, that the later notorious Jacob Sharp began his fight for a surface railroad in that thoroughfare. It took him thirty-five years to get it, the franchise having been granted in August 1884 by the "boodle" aldermen. According to figures compiled by Sharp in one of his campaigns for a franchise, about 230 omnibuses passed Chambers street going up Broadway and 240 down each hour. For thirteen hours his count, taken in August 1852, showed that 3,035 omnibuses and 4,719 other vehicles passed up, and 3,162 omnibuses and 4,723 other vehicles passed down Broadway at this point. This meant an omnibus service at thirteen seconds' headway.

By the year 1864 conditions had become intolerable. Broadway became unsafe for pedestrians, and we are told that the rivalry between omnibus drivers was so great that they recklessly drove over men, women and children in their haste to beat their nearest competitors to waiting passengers. In the rush hours the omnibuses were so crowded that passengers had to hang on to straps, as they were forced to do in the more crowded street cars. As omnibus fares were ten and the street car fares six cents, the latter carried by far the greater number of passengers. The newspapers of the period denounced the conditions and scored omnibus and car companies. Reckless driving, and crowded omnibuses were not the only grievances. The drivers were accused of swearing at passengers and giving them bad money or tickets in change. In its issue of October 2, 1864 the New York Herald savagely attacked the omnibus nuisance, and called upon the capitalists of the city to establish cab lines to relieve the suffering citizens. Here is a quotation from that editorial:

"Modern martyrdom may be succinctly defined as riding in a New York omnibus. The discomforts, inconveniences and annoyances of a trip in one of these vehicles are almost intolerable. From the beginning to the end of the journey a constant quarrel is progressing. The driver quarrels with the passengers, and the passengers quarrel with the driver. There are quarrels about getting out and quarrels about getting in. There are quarrels about change and quarrels about the ticket swindle. The driver swears at the passengers and the passengers harangue the driver through the strap-hole-a position in which even Demosthenes could not be eloquent. Respectable clergymen in white chokers are obliged to listen to loud oaths. Ladies are disgusted, frightened and insulted. Children are alarmed and lift up their voices and weep. Indignant gentlemen rise to remonstrate with the irate Jehu and are suddenly bumped back into their seats, twice as indignant as before, besides being involved in supplementary quarrels with those other passengers upon whose corns they have accidentally trodden. Thus the omnibus rolls along, a perfect Bedlam on wheels.

"It is in vain those who are obliged to ride seek for relief in a city railway car. The cars are quieter than the omnibuses, but much more crowded. People are packed into them like sardines in a box, with perspiration for oil. The seats being more than filled, the passengers are placed in rows down the middle, where they hang on by the straps, like smoked hams in a corner grocery. To enter or exit is exceedingly difficult. Silks and broadcloth are ruined in the attempt. As in the omnibuses pickpockets take advantage of the confusion to ply their vocation. Handkerchiefs, pocketbooks, watches and breastpins disappear most mysteriously. The foul, close, heated air is poisonous. A healthy person cannot ride a dozen blocks without a headache. For these reasons most ladies and gentlemen prefer to ride in the stages, which cannot be crowded so outrageously, and which are pretty decently ventilated by the cracks in the window frames. The omnibus fare is nearly double the car fare, however, and so the majority of the people are compelled to ride in the cars, although they lose in health what they save in money. But it must be evident to everybody that neither the cars nor the stages supply accommodations enough for the public, and that such accommodations as they do supply are not of the right

sort. Both the cars and the omnibuses might be very comfortable and convenient if they were better managed, but something more is needed to supply the popular and increasing demand for city conveyances. "

A very convincing argument for rapid transit, but the writer concludes his editorial by urging the establishment of a cheap cab system. This is proof that the rapid transit issue was not a burning one in October, 1864. Forty years later the papers were writing the same kind of editorials, but in place of calling for a cab system they were hammering the Rapid Transit Commission for not providing more subways. The disgraceful conditions on the omnibus lines above described, it seems evident, were promoted rather than alleviated by competition, for in those days Broadway was filled with rival omnibus lines. Is there not a lesson in this now for city authorities in considering the grant of motor 'bus franchises to several competing companies?

James Blaine Walker. *Fifty years of rapid transit, 1864-1917*, (New York City : Law Printing Co., 1918), 6-8.