Too Many Cars

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NOT too many years ago, a news magazine writer gave the nation's traffic congestion a baleful stare and wryly pictured the last great traffic jam.

There would be a situation, he conjectured, in which automobiles jammed the streets and highways so thickly that not one could move, whereupon all the drivers abandoned their cars and engineers began building roads right over them.

That writer was more than a humorist. He was almost a prophet.

His jest has almost reached the realm of reason, but his humor is lost on today's driver and possibly on the auto manufacturer. For today's driver, the traffic is nightmarish, and for the manufacturer it poses a threat to business expansion.

Arthur O. Dietz, President of the C.I.T. Financial Corporation, one of the nation's largest auto financing agencies, recently warned that an all-out effort must be made to relieve clotted traffic and to alleviate the parking problem "if the growth of the automobile industry is to continue.

"There is little point in owning a car," he reasoned, "if you have no place to park it . . . or have to circle the block for 30 minutes to find a place."

You don't have to be an astute observer to figure that the more cars produced the more difficult it is to drive and to park.

Last year was the last 12 months of the postwar production boom, with 6.2 million cars off the assembly lines. This year the production goal is over 5 million. While the 1954 figure is lower, estimates say 3 million automobiles will be scrapped. This means that although there will be fewer cars produced this year, there will still be 2 million more of them on the already-inadequate highway system.

Writers and business leaders — and the average motorist — aren't alone in concern over the problem.

President Eisenhower has called our obsolete streets and highways "a real crisis to America." He has observed that "next to the manufacture of the most modern implements of war as a guarantee of peace through strength, a network of modern roads is necessary to defense as it is to our national economy and personal safety."

Increased production of automobiles and pouring them out on highways never meant for such loads forms one of the biggest peacetime problems the nation has ever seen.

The Department of Commerce says that 44% of the major highways in use in 1950 will be worn out by 1960; 70% of the intermediary highways in use in 1950 will be virtually useless by 1960; and all but 10% of the lightly-constructed roads in use in 1950 will be worn out by 1960.

There is little solace in the recent remarks of T. J. Carmichael, former highway commissioner in a Western state,

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production schedules. Right now, these schedules shape up tentatively this way:

First half .... 3.2 million
Second half .... 2.0 million

The dealers are willing to hold still for that first-half schedule, because they can sell that many cars and then some this year without difficulty. But they do not want to see Detroit go overboard in the second half. They would be perfectly happy if Detroit turned out only 1 million — which would mean misery in Detroit (probably about 133,000 idle in addition to the 110,000 now hunting jobs), but a satisfactory scarcity of cars throughout the nation.

If this sounds pretty hard-boiled — the manufacturers perfectly willing to see dealers go broke with immovable inventories if the Detroit headquarters can keep making money, and the salesmen prepared to see factory hands starve rather than produce too many cars — it is because the automobile industry is a pretty hard-boiled business. Six million cars — last year's sales — represent something over 12 billion dollars gross income, and the net profits all along the line are high. People forget all about sweet charity and love-thy-neighbor when they are sitting in on a game with such stakes as these.

But there is a blue patch in the sky not quite as big as a Dutchman's breeches: Detroit, after all, may be whistling in the dark and not really planning as much production as the manufacturers claim. A hint to this effect comes from Pittsburgh, where steelmakers have been complaining ever since the first of the year that except for Ford and General Motors, "Detroit seems to have forgotten there is a steel industry."

Detroit hasn't forgotten, of course. And Detroit knows that the steel industry may have a strike on its hands — and no steel to sell — sometime after July 1.

But there is a blue patch in the sky because Detroit isn't going to produce any 5.2 million cars this year.

If that suspicion is correct, the dealers will have won a bloodless victory — but an important victory nevertheless. ☆☆

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who says the auto industry is contributing mightily to traffic congestion by giving continually increased flexibility in traffic in building cars that will pass other cars faster.

Financier Dietz points out, however, that no matter how much automobiles may improve in design and performance, if they become a burden instead of a comfort, the continued growth of the industry is certain to be retarded.

While the debate rages as to whether production is going beyond road capacity, motor travel is reaching astronomical levels. We have over 50 million private autos and we travel over 50 billion miles a year.

Longer vacations, the increasing number of retired people who have more time to travel and the booming growth of suburbs are only a few reasons why the average car is on the road more.

Last year, 63% of all workers commuted in their cars and 85% of commuters who traveled more than 10 miles depended on passenger cars for transportation.

The frustration of driving to work through crawling traffic and then facing the problem of parking a car is convincing many owners that an automobile is strictly a luxury. As the problem thickens, it can obviously develop into a deterrent to future car purchasers.

If a faltering traffic system and multiplying auto production make driving an inconvenience, public indignation will begin to exercise its own production controls on the automotive industry.

Maybe that control was in evidence in the closing quarter of last year. December 31 found about 400,000 new cars left on showroom floors or in storage. It could have been over-production. It could have been a poor anticipation of demand on the part of dealers. It also could have been a too fat quota from the factory.

The retiring president of one of the largest auto parts organizations in the country, Charles A. Klaus, left this warning when he stepped out:

"Unless the nation's overcrowded highway system is immeasurably improved by 1960, motortists will have to change their cars into motels for weekend travel.

"Unless we are going to make cars into motels, so weekenders can sleep and eat as they inch along enjoying road signs and each other's exhaust fumes, a lot will have to be done."

The urban migration has had two im-
has increased the amount of travel and
portant effects on auto travel. First, it encouraged auto buying. Secondly, it has put a tremendous strain on roads never intended for such loads.

Many a farmer's corn field is now a housing development, but his farm-to-market road has seen little change. Injection of safety measures — traffic signals and stop signs — may make the old road safer. But now it may take a driver with 225 horsepower under his hood longer to make the trip into town than it took the farmer with one horsepower in front of his corn wagon.

The drawn out auto trek to town is just the beginning. When the motorist gets there, he parks his car a long walk from where he's going or he pays for all-day parking if he's lucky enough to find a lot without a 'lot-full' sign. Or, again, he may be one of the estimated 20% of drivers who park illegally.

In Washington, D. C. recently, police finally caught up with a doctor after impounding his illegally-parked car. He paid $250 for 25 long-overdue parking tickets. You can find parallels in any city in the country.

In many cases of illegal parking, the driver merely weighs the cost of parking and the inconvenience and loss of time required to find a legal parking place against the nominal fine levied if he's caught illegally parked and decides in favor of a little minor law-breaking.

Plans have been advanced in many over-crowded cities to hand the parking problem to private operators. Essentially, the idea is to provide accelerated income tax amortization for necessary parking lots and garages. Speeded-up tax treatment would make parking facilities a paying business and it would encourage a rapid increase in such facilities.

Increased tax amortization simply allows the builder and operator of a parking lot to get back his original investment quicker. This is accomplished by allowing him to set aside a larger amount of tax-free money during the first years of operation.

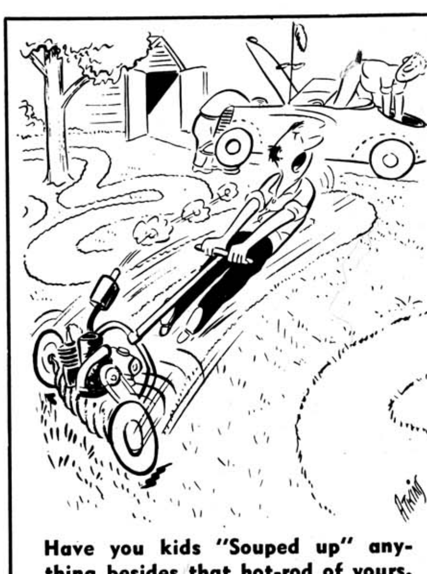
On a short term basis, this plan might reduce slightly the amount of taxes collected, but on the long term, it could be instrumental in preserving the income of city business areas.

Of far more importance, any practical plan to alleviate the parking problem will be largely responsible for preventing automobile production from reaching a saturation point.

It is a too-well-known fact that while private money could be the solution to the parking problem, it will have to be public funds to solve the highway situation.

In 1952 the Department of Commerce estimated that it would require 6 billion dollars to keep existing highways in safe condition during 1953. Last year we spent 5.2 billion for new roads and repairs on the old ones.

K. A. Stone of General Motors has said that the inadequacy of highways stems not from lack of engineering competence, but from lack of funds. There's no gainsaying that all the engineering competence which goes into today's automobile cannot increase its efficiency if there isn't someplace for it to go in the manner for which it was built. ☆☆



Have you kids "Souped up" anything besides that hot-rod of yours.