

MUSINGS ON MOBILITY

Essays by Michael L. Sena

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MUSINGS ON MOBILITY essays touch on everything associated with why and how people move, the ways they get from where they are to where they want or need to be, and the infrastructure that sometimes enables and sometimes obstructs their movement. The author of these essays was trained and worked as an architect and urban planner, and then changed careers to work with the automotive manufacturing industry and its systems and service suppliers on designing, developing, and putting into use products and services that make driving safer, more secure, and more comfortable.



1948 Hudson Commodore Eight

Digging Deep for Trans(port)ational Experiences

“What you think, you become. What you feel, you attract. What you imagine, you create.” – Buddha.

MEMORIES FORM OUR LIVES. Sometimes the memories are bitter, sometimes they are sweet, and then there are the times when they are a little of both, bittersweet (a word invented just for those occasions). One of my very earliest memories is being in a hammock, swinging back and forth, feeling like I was flying. And then I fell out. I can remember being picked up and crying. The grass that I fell onto was thick, and I wasn't hurt, but I have avoided hammocks ever since. I recently decided it was time for me to come to terms with my deepest transportation-related memories, those that were trans(form)ational. I made that decision because I am in the process of finishing a second book on the subject of driverless mobility, and this one explores all the issues of being a rider in a vehicle that has no driver. New memories would result. I felt it was time to make space in the attic for them.

Grilled cheese sandwiches

This is also a very early memory, and it may have been in connection with the hammock. It was before my mother and father bought their first car, so I was three or four. My dad had owned a car in the late 1930s, before he was drafted into the U.S. Army during World War II. There are plenty of old photographs of him and his brother, three sisters, mother, and father and later my mother visiting Washington, DC, Philadelphia, Brooklyn (where most of his parents' families lived), and the scenic areas around Scranton, PA where he grew up. He must have sold that first car when he was drafted, and he did not buy a new one until I was five, in 1952. So, this is a memory from driving in someone else's car.

The car was a Hudson.¹ It was big enough to carry four adults and two children, me, and my six-year-old sister. We drove to Rochester, New York with one of my father's first cousins who was married to a Scranton policeman. (What was unusual about their marriage at the time was that he was not of Italian-American descent. There were few, if any, Italian-American policemen at that time, but that's another story.) We were visiting my father's and his cousin's great aunt who had married someone who worked for Kodak.

It was a day on a weekend in the middle of the summer. It was hot. I still feel the heat. This was before the New York Thruway was opened, so we drove through Towanda, PA and Elmira, NY. It was a long drive. My mother had packed a coldcut and cheese sandwich

¹ The last Hudson rolled off the assembly line in October 1954. Hudson was closed after it merged with Nash-Kelvinator to form American Motors Corporation.



The hatrack on the Hudson was spacious, like the rest of the car. If you were driving north, that large rear window provided plenty of opportunity for the sun to heat up lunch.



It was a Scranton Transit bus just like this one that I took every day from Hyde Park to Old Forge. This bus, headed for Providence, is shown in central Scranton.

lunch for everyone, and my father's cousin had made a cake and had a thermos of coffee. I don't remember where we stopped, but there was a picnic table. We got out of the car. My mother had put the bag with the sandwiches on the hat rack in the back of the car. I do not know why she put it there and not in the trunk. Maybe she thought the trunk would be too hot. When she took the sandwiches out, the cheese in the sandwiches had melted. I can never see a grilled cheese sandwich to this very day without thinking of those melted cheese sandwiches made by nature's own sun on the hatrack of a classic Hudson car.

The bus driver rules

My second summer job was as a yard boy in a lumberyard between my junior and senior years in high school. I worked there the following summer as well, before I entered college, but this memory is from the first year and from the first week of the first year. The lumberyard was in Old Forge, PA, the Scranton borough where my mother grew up. Today, it features itself as the Pizza Capital of the World, and presidential candidates make an obligatory stop there to be photographed eating a slice of the signature pizzas. Back in 1964, it was a town like most other towns surrounding the City of Scranton, which, back then, was the third largest city in Pennsylvania. It had two lumberyards. Old Forge Lumber, where I worked, was owned by the family who were neighbors and friends of my mother's family. They both built their houses in the neighborhood called The Orchard.

I did not own a car when I was in high school, and my father drove the family car to work. The lumberyard was five miles away, so my commute was on the Scranton Transit bus like the one in the sidebar from a bus stop about a quarter of a mile from our house. I started work at 8 a.m. and usually left my house around seven to catch the 7.30 bus. I was a decent riding companion in the morning, before I had spent the day sweating through unloading bags of cement from boxcars and loading lumber on the truck for deliveries. On the first day, I boarded the bus and was about to put my money in the fare box when the driver told me that I should pay when I got off. Okay, I thought, that's unusual, but I'll do as he said. We got to the Old Forge center stop, where there was a diner and a place for the bus to park. I was not yet at my stop, which was almost at the end of the line. I had walked it many times, and I knew it was fifteen minutes to the Orchard, and another five to the lumberyard.

The bus driver left the bus, taking the fare box with him. I was alone on the bus. He went into the diner, and I could see him sit down. I hadn't paid, so what should I do? Was I going to be late for my first day of work? I knew if he came out in five minutes, I could get off at my stop and maybe make it on time. I waited five minutes. He wasn't eating yet. I got off the bus and walked at a quick pace, partly running. The bus never passed me. I was already sweating when I arrived and told the yard boss what had happened. "That SOB does that all the time," he said.



The next day I was at the bus stop in time for the 7.30 run. I was alone. The bus with the same driver as the day before didn't even slow down. He waved at me angrily and kept on moving. I waited for the 8 o'clock bus and arrived half an hour late. The big boss, Johnny, was outside when I came. I told him what happened. "Take the 8 o'clock bus for the rest of the week and I'll have a talk with the bus company."

The following Monday I was waiting at the bus stop at 7.30. There was another driver. "Should I pay when I get off?" I said. "Pay now. I eat my breakfast before I come to work," he said with a smile. I never found out what happened to the other bus driver. I didn't see him for the rest of the summer. Since then, my automatic trust in bus drivers was forever shaken.

When you know (or think) you need a car

If I wanted an easy journey from home to college, I should have chosen to attend the University of Scranton. They accepted me. I could have taken the bus right across the street from our house. But as the preceding story showed, you can't always be certain the buses are going to take you where and when you want to go. I decided to attend a smallish Ivy League school in the middle of the neighboring state of New Jersey that had an architecture undergraduate major program, which is what I wanted to study, and was a reasonable drive away from my home so my parents could visit over a day, and I could make it home within several hours when we had breaks. Actually, to be honest, I did not think at all about how I was going to get there and back; I believe I assumed that my father would provide the transportation, although I was not chauffeured to school or activities when I was growing up.




A Mertz bus today on Lackawanna Avenue in Scranton, PA on its way to New York City.

My three roommates lived in the suburbs of New York City, so they could take a commuter train into Manhattan, get over to Penn Station, catch a New York-to-Philadelphia main line train, get off at Princeton Junction, take the Dinky² to Princeton, and walk to the dorm. Our freshman year dorm was about a two-minute walk from the station.³ There was still an Erie Lackawanna train running from Scranton to New York during my freshman and sophomore years but it stopped in Hoboken, across the Hudson River from Manhattan. There was a ferry to cross the Hudson to the terminal station at 23rd street. Then it was about a fifteen-minute walk to Penn Station. There was also a Mertz or Greyhound bus from Scranton to the Port Authority terminal, and a direct express bus from there to Princeton. Both the train and bus alternatives were six-plus-hour trips. My choice was to hitchhike from Princeton to Sommerville and then pick up the Mertz bus in Sommerville. It was never more than three hours if—and it was a big IF—I got a

² The Princeton Dinky connects Princeton Junction, a stop on the main line between New York and Philadelphia, to the Town of Princeton and the Princeton University campus. The name, Dinky, was the name of the the small steam-powered car that operated on the line, which began service in May 1865. The line was electrified in 1933, and a new station was opened in 2014 at its current location.

³ The dorm is still there, but the Princeton train station was moved a couple of hundred yards south of its then current location, which had been moved from the center of Princeton in ... But this is, as I said earlier, another story.



ride quickly from Princeton. I don't recall ever being stranded like the time I was hitchhiking in the UK on a Saturday evening just outside of Derby, but that's yet another story.

What I remember most about the ride from Sommerville to Scranton is that I was usually standing until we got to Stroudsburg and and the town of Mount Pocono because the bus filled up in New York City and the first passengers began to disembark in these towns. The Martz drivers should not have stopped for me, but they always did. I usually fell asleep wrapped around the pole at the back exit. It was some time during the first half of my junior year that I decided I needed a car. I probably could have gotten through the last two years of my undergraduate studies with the occasional bus trip home to Scranton, but there was no bus or train service from Princeton to Basking Ridge, NJ, and driving was the cheapest way to get to Pittsburgh, PA. These places were the home and college locations of my new girlfriend. When I think about how that relationship progressed and ended (four years of long-distance dating, marriage, and divorce after three years), I probably should have held off buying a car.

How I got to be chauffeured in a Rolls-Royce in Ireland

My first trip abroad was in the summer of 1971. I was in my second year of graduate school studying architecture and urban planning. My two areas of interest and research were new towns and educational facilities. Great Britain was still developing new towns, and a large number of new university facilities had been completed in the UK in the late 1960s that were highly praised in the architectural press. I was working for a local Princeton architect during that summer, and he agreed to pay for my air fare in return for extending my work into the school year. I found a charter group of students who were going to tour the British Isles for three weeks, and I tagged along. I left them at Heathrow Airport and rejoined them three weeks later at Prestwick Airport in Ayr, Scotland.

I had made a trip plan of the places I wanted to visit and the time I could spend in each place so that I would arrive at Prestwick on the morning of the 12th of July. I had made no reservations for transportation or accommodation for those three weeks. I had never been in the UK, nor anywhere else in Europe,⁴ but I decided that the least expensive way to travel was my old standby in the U.S.: hitchhiking. Something told me that I needed to look like someone British drivers would be willing to pick up, so rather than carrying a backpack, I bought a small suitcase, something like one of today's carry-on bags, and a pack frame with shoulder straps. This was before rollers on luggage. I could set it down on the side of the road as a suitcase, and I could put it on my back to lug it around to the places I would visit. My traveling outfit was a blue blazer and chino pants. My [little GB On \\$5 A Day](#) told me that I could easily find youth hostels and bed and breakfasts just about

⁴ I learned on this first trip to the British Isles that the people who lived there did not consider themselves to be Europeans or their country to be a physical part of Europe. They referred to the land across the English Channel as "The Continent".



This was not the exact Rolls-Royce Phantom I that I rode in with Lady Valentine and her son, but it is identical to that one.

anywhere, and it was right. I spent three days touring around London while staying in a youth hostel in the shadows of St. Paul's Cathedral, where my reserve pair of shoes were stolen. Then off I went, taking a bus to the northwestern edge of London to stick out my thumb.

My first destination had nothing to do with my stated purpose for my trip. It was Dublin, Ireland. The sister of one of my good friends was working for the summer at Casteltown House, an estate with one of the most important Palladian houses in Ireland. Desmond Guinness, besides being a descendent of the founder of Guinness Brewery, was an author of architectural history and the founder of the Irish Georgian Society. I went there to see the house and attend a lecture at the IGS. In the late afternoon of my second day at Casteltown, a caravan of a dozen-or-so chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royces left the estate for the IGS Dublin. I was directed to a 1927 Phantom I. Inside the car were Lady Valentine, an elegant elderly woman dressed in an evening gown, and her son, dressed in a tuxedo. I wore my blue blazer, chino pants, a club tie, and the new (very inexpensive) pair of shoes which I bought before leaving London to replace the ones that had been stolen. The ride into Dublin and the ride back remain my only two times I have ridden in a chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce. I recall that Lady Valentine and her son treated the young graduate student kindly. From that time on, I never felt uncomfortable at all in the company of very important people.

I have always kept at least one woolen blanket in my cars

Once upon a time, I owned a U.S. Postal Service mail delivery vehicle. I bought it off the Postal Service used car lot in Boston for a few hundred dollars in late 1976 after being car-less and, while not penniless, short on cash for almost two years. I tired of bumming rides and renting cars, so I decided to buy the cheapest car I could find. The Postal Service Jeep DJ fit the bill to a T. Up until 1970, the Jeep DJ was made by Kaiser Jeep, which was the result of the 1953 merger between Kaiser Motors and Willys-Overland. Willys had made the iconic WWII Jeep, which my father drove as a radio technician doubling as a chauffeur for the brass. Willys was renamed Kaiser Jeep in 1963, which was then purchased in 1970 by American Motors Corporation (AMC). AMC created a wholly owned subsidiary called Jeep Corporation that built the DJ and other Jeep vehicles. In 1987, Chrysler Corporation acquired AMC and continued to produce Jeep-branded vehicles.



My DJ was Army green and left-hand drive, but everything else was the same.

I found a DJ that was left-hand drive and not painted red, white, and blue (it was Army green). It was missing a passenger seat, and the driver's seat had no head rest or seat belt. I knew what I had to do. I had been there before. When I was five years old, my parents bought their first car. It was a black, 1951 Chevrolet two-door coupe. My father brought it home on a Saturday morning, and my sister and I were ready to take our places in the back, but there was no back seat. "We'll fix that right away," said my father, and off we went, my sister and I sitting on the bench seat in the front next



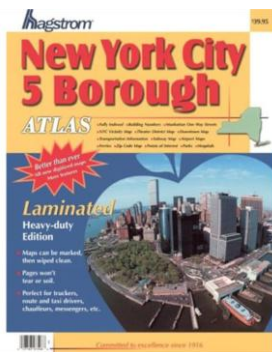
to Dad. There were no seat belts back then. We headed to the nearby junkyard. It didn't take very long to find a back seat that fit the car. We drove with the seat directly to my father's good friend's auto repair station, and by the time we returned home, just in time for dinner, our new family car, the first of four that we would have before my sister and I had our own automotive lives, was ready to take us anywhere. My clearest and fondest memory of riding in our first car is bundling under the blanket on cold nights driving home from my grandparents' home on The Orchard (remember, from the lumberyard story). By the time we reached home after the five-mile journey, the car's heater had warmed up the car, and, reluctantly, we got out from under the blanket and rushed into the warm house.

Back to 1976. With my newly acquired DJ, I went to one of the automobile junkyards in Cambridge and bought two new bucket seats with built-in headrests for the DJ. If my memory serves me correctly, they installed the seats right there in the junkyard. There was no back seat in the DJ, but the cargo space was large enough for weekend gear and two sets of cross-country skis. The heater worked, but I kept a few neatly folded woolen blankets in the back, just in case. Once, I rolled the DJ into a snowbank in New Hampshire while on the way to a mountain top ski trail and needed help from a farmer with his tractor to pull me out, but no one was injured. A year after I bought it, I sold the DJ to someone else who was cash strapped. I bought a two-toned (orange and white), four-door 1977 AMC Jeep Cherokee, my cash-strapped days behind me. I moved my two heavy, plaid woolen blankets that I bought at L.L.Bean from the little Jeep to the big Jeep and have continued to do that to this very day.



Don't tell taxi drivers where to drive

It was in the second half of the 1980s, before integrated and portable navigation systems. Paper maps still reigned supreme. I was consulting to Hagstrom Map Company, which had its headquarters in the New York City Borough of Queens. I flew from Boston Logan to La Guardia for a meeting with the CEO, hopped in a cab, gave the driver the address, and sat back to enjoy the urban scenery. It was a mild, cloudy spring day. I had made this trip half a dozen times before, so I was familiar with the route. After I realized that we were in unfamiliar territory, I took out the Hagstrom New York City 5 Borough Atlas I was carrying and found where we were. We were in the general vicinity of the office but were heading away from it.



"I think the office is to the left," I said to the taxi driver. "I have a map. Do you want to use it?"

"I don't like maps," he said. "I don't use maps."

"I can give you directions," I said.

He stopped the car. We were in a low-rise industrial area. "Get out! Get out of the car. I'm not taking you anywhere."

I remember thinking: “Should argue with him, demand that he take me to the address or at least to where I could get another taxi?” He didn’t look like a person to argue with. I got out of the cab and he drove away.

All I was carrying was my briefcase, but it was heavy, full of Hagstrom samples. I was wearing a suit and tie and definitely did not look like I belonged where I was. At least it wasn’t raining. I got my bearings by looking at the map, and figured I was about half a mile away from the office. I started walking. I hadn’t been walking more than five minutes when a taxi pulled up to the curb next to me. No, it wasn’t the taxi driver who had taken me from the airport and had a change of heart. It was just another taxi driver looking for a fare. “Do you need a ride?” he asked.

“Yes, I could use one,” I answered. “It’s not far from here, but I’ll give you a good tip.”

“Hop in,” he said, and he delivered me right to the entrance of Hagstrom with no further ado. From that time on, I have never offered to give a taxi driver help with navigation. It is definitely not worth the aggravation.

Phobias are in the mind, but they control the feet

During a short period at the beginning of my working life, I refused to step onto an airplane. I had recently returned to the United States after living and working in London for the year after I finished my graduate studies. I had flown many times since I boarded a plane at Scranton’s Avoca Airport the age of seventeen, ten years prior to the onset of my phobia, including two trips across the Atlantic and back. I had flown in a small plane on two occasions, even having the chance to take over the controls, which I had really enjoyed. I do not know what triggered my anxiety, and it would not have been a major problem if I had not just accepted a job working at an architectural company that required me to travel from Boston to Washington, DC every two weeks.

My boss, who was one of the owners of the company, was understanding at first. He okayed my travel by train. The Metroliner had started an overnight service, and I could leave from South Station at 10 p.m., arrive at Union Station in DC at 8 a.m., and walk over the hill to the Forrestal Building to meet with our client, the U.S. Coast Guard. My meetings were finished by noon, and I could be back home in Cambridge by the early evening. If the meetings dragged on into the afternoon, I could take the overnight train back to Boston and take a trolley from South Station to my office in time for the start of work.

The problem started when my boss wanted me to take on one assignment in Atlanta and another in Phoenix. He offered me two choices: Let him help me cure my phobia, or hand in my resignation. The cure was flying with him to DC because he said that if I was able to fly into National Airport, I would never have a problem flying into any other airport. I do not recall anything before



An Amtrak Metroliner passes a Penn Central train at Elizabeth, N.J., on December 22, 1974. The lead Metroliner car is sporting the Metroliner variant of Amtrak’s Phase I paint scheme, which featured bright red, white and blue color panels on the cab ends.



we were seated on the plane. He was at the window and I was next to the aisle. Before we took off, he told me that he had been a navigator in the U.S. Air Force during the last years of World War II. He knew how airplanes worked, and he knew what caused them to fall out of the sky without the help of enemy fire. It rarely happened. It was much more likely to have an accident in a car or in the home. Planes can fly on one engine, and even if all the engines conk out, planes can still land safely if there is a large enough open field within reach. I white-knuckled the landing, we had our meeting, and we boarded the plane for the flight home.



Washington National Airport is now known as Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport.

“You will see now why I said that National is the worst airport,” he said. We took off, and then the plane made a heavily banked turn to the left almost as soon as we lifted off from the runway. “This is how airplanes lose power, when their engines stall because they don’t have enough airspeed.” The banking ended, the plane continued to climb, and we arrived back in Boston. “I’ll give you one more tip. Every time you are about to get on a plane, think about whether you have something you absolutely have to do before you die. If you do, stay on the ground and get it done. You’ll find that you only have to do that once.”

He was right. I’ve flown several million miles since then. When I am not operating in totally automatic mode, simply passing through all the motions necessary to take a flight, I think about our flight together and his advice. It applies to more than flying: don’t leave important things undone.

On second thought

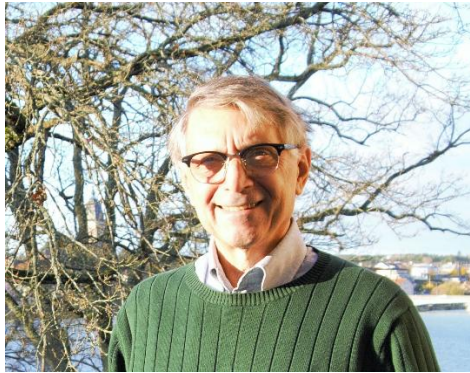
After writing these musings, I had second thoughts about my decision to pull my old memories out of storage and take them to the dump. I’ll be leaving them in their place in the attic, just to be on the safe side. I’ll just squeeze them a bit more tightly together. As my mother used to say when unexpected guests arrived, there’s always room for one more at the table.



About Michael L. Sena

Through my writing, speaking and client work, I have attempted to bring clarity to an often-opaque world of highly automated and connected vehicles. I have not just studied the technologies and analyzed the services. I have developed and implemented them and have worked to shape visions and followed through to delivering them. What drives me—why do what I do—is my desire to move the industry forward: to see accident statistics fall because of safety improvements related to advanced driver assistance systems; to see congestion on all roads reduced because of better traffic information and improved route selection; to see global emissions from transport eliminated because of designing the most fuel-efficient vehicles; and to see everyone who needs a ride get one.

I put vehicles into their context. It is not just roads; it is communities, large and small. Vehicles are tools, and people use these tools to make their lives and the lives of their family members easier, more enjoyable, and safer. Businesses and services use these tools to deliver what people need. Transport is intertwined with the environment in which it operates, and the two must be developed in concert.



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