Looking Back: Transportation through the Decades

In celebration of ITE’s 90th Anniversary, throughout 2020 ITE Journal will feature a monthly snapshot of the transportation industry by decade, beginning with the turn of the 20th century through present day. These are the technologies, events, and key players that transformed transportation to bring us where we are today.

**Early 20th Century to the 1930s**

The turn of the century was the dawn of a new era for transportation in North America. The invention of the Ford Model T in 1908 and the first electric traffic signal in 1914 signaled a shift in transportation modes and technologies.

*Fifth Avenue and 50th Street (Rockefeller Plaza is on the left), New York, NY, USA circa 1938.*

**Great Depression August 1929 – March 1933**

The Great Depression hit the United States hard in 1929, dealing a major blow to the transportation industry. Less people could afford cars, the flourishing railroad system suffered, and the construction of roads and bridges was disrupted.

**October 2, 1930 – Founding of ITE**

On this day, 19 transportation professionals gathered at the William Penn Hotel in Pittsburgh, PA, USA to establish a new national organization, one designed to “…advance the profession of traffic engineering, stimulate research on street traffic matters, to encourage and foster traffic engineering education and to establish a clearinghouse for authoritative pronouncements of street travel matters.” At that meeting, ITE was born, then known as the Institute of Traffic Engineers, with Ernest P. Goodrich as the first president.
Traffic Signs and Signals

First Traffic Signs Guidebook – 1927
The American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHO) was founded in December 1914. An AASHO report became the basis for the first traffic signs guidebook, *Manual and Specifications for the Manufacture, Display, and Erection of U.S. Standard Road Markers and Signs*, in 1927. However, this manual addressed only use and design for signs on rural roads.4

Manually Operated Signals
Before electric traffic signals were prominent, equipment to direct traffic had to be operated manually, as pictured above in Washington, D.C. USA.

Early Electric Signals
Many of the early electric traffic signals were mounted to the ground, like this one in Denver, CO, USA located at Speer Blv. and Broadway.

Cover of the first MUTCD, published in 1935.4

Manual on Uniform Control Devices – November 1935
The *Manual on Street Traffic Signs, Signals, and Markings* was published to address urban traffic control devices, but the use of two separate manuals for rural and urban roads proved confusing. AASHO and the National Conference on Street and Highway Safety formed the first Joint Committee on Uniform Traffic Control Devices, and the first edition of the *Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices* (MUTCD) was published.
ITE Presidents – 1930s

The following leaders succeeded ITE’s first president, Ernest P. Goodrich.

Burton W. Marsh
1932–1934

Lewis W. McIntyre
1934–1936

Leslie J. Sorenson
1936–1939

Gas Tax – January 1, 1932
The first U.S. federal gas tax goes into effect at 1 cent per gallon.

New Deal – 1933–1939
America had started to emerge from its financial troubles that wrought turmoil on so many businesses and personal lives. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal funded many of the projects stalled by the Depression, paving the way for a renewal of the transportation industry.

Safety Issues Abound
Safety concerns plagued the transportation scene in the early days of the automobile. More Americans were killed in auto accidents than American soldiers were killed in France during the first few years after World War I, according to The Detroit News. Three-fourths of the deaths were pedestrians. And, as reported in the ITE publication, Pioneers of Transportation, “The explosion of automotive travel on inadequate roads and streets was accompanied by a tragic increase in auto crashes. By 1925, the fatality rate was nearly 18 per 100 million miles of highway travel.”

Bureau of Motor Carriers – January 1, 1936
The Bureau of Motor Carriers was established on this day by the Interstate Commerce Commission to write and enforce truck safety rules. The first federal truck safety rules were issued on December 23, 1936.


Bureau of Motor Carriers – January 1, 1936
The Bureau of Motor Carriers was established on this day by the Interstate Commerce Commission to write and enforce truck safety rules. The first federal truck safety rules were issued on December 23, 1936.