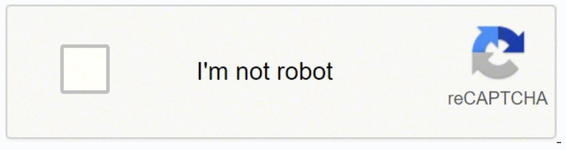
Peter norton fighting traffic



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Home / Archives / Vol. 15 No. 2 (2011) / Book Reviews Alan M. Voorhees Distinguished Lecture Series Technology historian and assistant professor at the University of Virginia, Peter Norton, will present this fall’s Alan M. Voorhees Distinguished Lecture. He is the author of Fighting Traffic: The Dawn of the Motor Age in the American City (MIT Press, 2008), which contends that the motor age came to the city only after a tumultuous struggle involving pedestrians, parents, auto clubs, street railways, and other groups with conflicting perceptions about what streets are for. Flyer| Video Author(s):Norton, Peter D.Reviewer(s):Troesken, Werner Published by EH.NET (August 2008) Peter D. Norton, Fighting Traffic: The Dawn of the Motor Age in the American City. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008. ix + 396 pp. $35 (cloth), ISBN: 978-0-262-14100-0. Reviewed for EH.NET by Werner Troesken, Department of Economics, University of Pittsburgh. Fighting Traffic, by Peter D. Norton, is about defining property rights, specifically the property rights to roads and streets. At the turn of twentieth century, the definition of these rights was hotly contested. Traditional users of streets ? pedestrians, children at play, horse drawn vehicles, and so on ? believed that they owned the streets and had the primary right to use them as they saw fit. Motordom ? automobile owners, retailers, and manufacturers? believed that they too had a legitimate right to use the streets and that the rights and practices of traditional users should not trump the interests of motordom. According to Norton, previous studies have emphasized the political activities of motordom at the expense of understanding the activities of traditional users. Norton seeks to redress this imbalance and bring a multi-interest group perspective to the problem of defining property rights over roads and streets. That there was a conflict between motordom and traditional street users should come as no surprise. According to the Millennial Edition of the Historical Statistics of the United States, between 1909 and 1923, the number of automobiles registered in the U.S. grew by a factor of 43. The same source indicates that the number of traffic fatalities grew by a factor of 16 over the same period. Initially, when pedestrians were killed by motorists those deaths were cast as murder. The presumption was that the child or adult walking in the street had the right to be there; the motorcar was the trespasser. Moreover, the ?overwhelming majority? (p. 29) of accident victims were children and a large proportion of the rest were young women. Cities throughout the country began erecting monuments to memorialize the deaths of innocent children. Norton argues that the deaths of so many women and children gave the traffic safety movement a ?feminine? face. Evidence for this can be seen in the many posters showing mothers grieving over children lost to automobile accidents. Early critics of the automobile attributed accidents to excessive speed, referring to car drivers as ?speed maniacs? or ?speed hogs.? The popular press encouraged such views with editorials and partisan reporting that did not consider the possible role that pedestrians might have played in accidents. Many cities experimented with passing speed limits as low as 8 or 10 miles per hour. Still others launched ill-fated plans to control speeds by installing governors on cars. One problem common in all cities was that of reckless drivers cutting corners. To prevent this, posts were often installed at the center of intersections to prevent drivers from cutting into on-coming traffic to make short turns. Policemen placed at the center of intersections also helped to prevent unsafe turns and speeding, but putting a policeman at every intersection in a city was very expensive and eventually gave rise to cost-saving technologies such as the traffic light. In 1926, a Detroit court convicted a truck driver of manslaughter for killing a pedestrian. After the conviction, the judge in the case called the truck driver ?a disgrace to humanity? (p. 69). This same judge admitted that ?his sympathies were always with the pedestrian? and that motorists who came before him should expect the most severe treatment the law would allow. This judge, and many others, appeared to work from the assumption that city streets were like city parks ? open to all and for whatever activity you wanted so long as you did not impose undue harm on others. Such a vision absolved pedestrians and children at play from any responsibility in traffic accidents. One way motordom tried to combat such views was through the reinvention of the word jaywalking. The first word, ?jay,? referred to a hayseed, someone with little or no knowledge of the city and lacking the sophistication of an urban dweller. According to Norton, one of the most clever anti-jaywalking campaigns was initiated in Detroit in 1922 by the Packard Motor Company. Mimicking the memorials built to remember children killed by cars, Packard built a giant tombstone which ?redirected? the blame for automobile accidents away from car drivers toward pedestrians. The tombstone was marked: ?Erected to the Memory of Mr. J. Walker: He Stepped from the Curb Without Looking? (p. 77). Downtown business interests also played an important role in shaping the regulation of traffic. Large downtown department stores, for example, worked to eliminate on-street parking, while smaller boutique shops wanted to preserve it. Eliminating on-street parking was a means of widening streets and relieving traffic jams without undue expense. Business interests brought a sense of efficiency and cost-effectiveness to the problem of traffic regulation and supported the regulation of streets for many of the same reasons that they supported regulation of public utilities. For a time, Norton explains, traffic engineers conceived of streets as a public utility and natural monopoly that should be regulated by experts. While street railway companies were active lobbyists in all of this, they were often viewed as an antiquated technology with little political power. Partly this resulted from the fact that street railway riders were not especially engaged in the political process. The death knell to the ?city streets as public parks? ideology came in the mid to late 1920s when motordom ?began its quest to reconstruct city traffic problems for the motor age.? This reconstruction involved redefining the traffic control problem not as the result of an excess of cars ? as the traditionalists would have argued ? but as a result of a shortage of city streets. With the help of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and state and local governments ? which saw cars as a valuable source of tax revenue ? motordom was able to secure much of what it wanted: relegating pedestrians to sidewalks and cross walks and much wider streets with faster speed limits. Part of the success motordom realized was the result of their strategy of commodifying streets and recasting the rights of automobile users as a matter of personal freedom. There is today a large literature exploring the social construction of new technologies. Fighting Traffic fits nicely into this literature and should be of broad interest to readers of that literature. Quantitative historians interested in the history of the automobile and economic regulation might also find some material of significance. Werner Troesken is Professor of Economics at the University of Pittsburgh. He is the author of three books. The most recent is The Great Lead Water Pipe Disaster (MIT Press, 2006). Published by EH.Net (August 2008). All EH.Net reviews are archived at . Subject(s):Transport and Distribution, Energy, and Other ServicesGeographic Area(s):North AmericaTime Period(s):20th Century: Pre WWII

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