

BAR BULLETIN



"Justice... Professionalism... Service... Since 1886"

THE
Summer Reading Issue

Volume 29 • Issue 12 • \$2.00
August 2011

The Battle for City Streets

***Fighting Traffic:
The Dawn of the Motor Age
in the American City***

**By Peter Norton
MIT Press, 2008**

By Bob Anderton

In *Fighting Traffic*, Peter Norton provides a fact-packed overview of the change from pedestrian-based cities into cities where the automobile rules. He shows how, before the 1920s, no one questioned that streets were for pedestrians. Well-meaning, humorless adults would tell kids, "Go play in the street."

As automobiles increased on urban streets, pedestrian carnage ensued. Norton has compelling facts: In 1928, for instance, more than 8,000 pedestrians were hit by motor vehicles ... just in the city of Philadelphia. Of these, about half were under age 16. In 1925, cars and trucks killed about 7,000 children nationwide.

"City people saw the car not just as a menace to life and limb, but also as an aggressor upon their time-honored rights to

city streets." Conflict was inevitable because, in the 1920s, there were no accepted rules of the road. Street signs indicating anything other than directions and distances were almost unheard of.

Norton documents this conflict amusingly with a history of epithets. Pedestrians called motorists "joy riders" and "speed demons" based on their disregard for "the weaker occupants of the street."

Drivers (and those who advocated for them) coined the term "jaywalker" and won the rhetorical war. A "jaywalker" was a "hayseed," someone out of place who didn't know how to walk in the city. Police, who struggled to control the streets, began using the term for pedestrians who ignored their directions.

In 1916, The New York Times called the word "highly opprobrious" and a "truly shocking name." Any attempt to arrest pedestrians, it said, would be "silly and intolerable." By 1924, however, "jaywalker" appeared in a standard American dictionary. Pedestrians continued to cross streets willy-nilly, but by 1930 "most such persons, when they obstructed vehicles, were jaywalkers."

Norton documents the conflict between community safety organizations that tolerated "auto vilifies" and groups like the American Automobile Association.

Norton shows how "motordom" used Herbert Hoover and others who followed him to engineer the momentum to reconstruct city streets into places where cars dominate.

In 1939, the chief of the federal Bureau of Public Roads said, "We must dream of gashing our way rather ruthlessly through built-up sections of overcrowded cities in order to create traffic ways capable of carrying the traffic with safety, facility, reasonable speed."

Fighting Traffic provides perspective for bicyclists and pedestrians who often feel oppressed on today's urban roadways. ■

Bob Anderton is the managing attorney at Washington Bike Law and is a daily bicycle commuter. He can be reached at 206-262-9290 or bob@washingtonbikelaw.com.

Reprinted with permission of the King County Bar Association Bar Bulletin.