



WHEN THE RULES OF THE ROAD WERE WRITTEN

BY TOM TORTORICI

The first autos didn't have to follow traffic laws, because there weren't any yet. But soon, chaotic traffic jams, erratic speeders, and mowed-down pedestrians made cars the new urban menace. Something had to be done, but what?



Chaos on every corner. Imagine every busy intersection as an automotive free-for-all, with no agreement – only constant quarrels – over who has the right-of-way. Welcome to the early days of motoring.

The first traffic cops only added to the yelling and confusion, pointing and waving in a frantic ad-hoc effort to keep the traffic moving. It hadn't occurred to anyone yet to let the north-south lanes proceed while holding back the east-west lanes, then switching.

Stop and go. The alternating method finally caught on, along with the idea in 1914 of using different colored electric lights to signal drivers whether to stop or go. However those lights didn't cycle by themselves; they had to be manually switched back and forth all day by a presumably bored officer of the law.

The tallest officers were assigned to the traffic beat in order to see over the tops of cars, trucks and trolleys. When that didn't work, cops were stationed in tall traffic towers in some cities, where they could see, and coordinate with, adjacent intersections.

Houston boasted the first street-corner traffic lights with automated switching in 1922. Soon, just about every town in America installed at least one traffic light, whether they needed it or not, as a status symbol of civic progress and importance. White-gloved officers, with their shrill whistles, mostly faded away as the standard unit of traffic control.

There oughta be a law. For a few decades, automobiles and horse carriages shared the road, with the former nimbly weaving in and out among the latter. There were, after all, no lanes. Drunks and kids had as much right to drive as anyone else. New Yorkers crossing the street to the ice cream parlor risked being added to the *Times'* daily tally of run-over pedestrians.

These were new problems, so no one had any experience solving them. Early efforts at rulemaking resulted in a spotty patchwork of laws that varied from one place to the next. Signal lights meant different things in different cities, so each approaching driver might think they had the right of way...just before the crash.

Getting traffic under control. Finally, a sharp New Yorker named William Eno observed, and pondered, and published his *Rules of the Road* as a guide for standard driver behavior. His clever effort eventually became the foundation for the traffic laws in many cities.

Though traffic control was a complex problem, authorities realized they had to keep the rules simple and intuitive. The process took some trial and error, to calibrate for the limitations of human cognition and response time.

Right-of-way rules evolved, which basically came down to two principles: First, every vehicle has a right to a 'safety zone' immediately surrounding it. And second, drivers making a change must yield to those simply proceeding forward.

With consistently followed rules, drivers could predict the likely behavior of other vehicles, and proceed accordingly. This discovery turned out to be key.

Hey, slow down. Connecticut was the first state, in 1901, to impose a speed limit to try to stem the epidemic of road collisions: 12mph on city streets, and 15mph on country roads. Some citizens pushed back, though, as if being told how fast to drive was somehow an affront to the American spirit.

Laws naturally are meaningless unless they're backed up with the threat of punishment. Night courts popped up to handle traffic infractions, imposing fines that were paid with simmering resentment. The worst punishment for a driver was not the electric chair, but even more bitter, the loss of their license.

One for the road. The first drunk driving law was passed in 1910, but included no standard of intoxication. By the '30s, road patrols were making suspect drivers blow into a balloon. The new Drunkometer device displayed a color to show their level of inebriation.

As more excited new drivers took to the roads, the National Safety Council promoted public awareness that climbing behind the wheel implied a social and legal responsibility.

License and registration, please. As with other regulations, some states were slower to start issuing driver's licenses than others. In fact, South Dakota didn't license drivers until 1954. And despite all the clearly incompetent drivers, many states didn't impose the indignity of a driving test. People who actually learned to drive often received their instruction from the salesman who sold them their car.

New York was the first state to register automobiles, with a fee based on the car's horsepower. They issued no tags, however, expecting the driver to craft their own, usually using house numbers. When states did start distributing steel tags, they came in all shapes and sizes, not standardizing to the current size until 1956.

Give me a sign. First-time car owners were setting out all over America – and promptly getting lost. The first directional signs were planted not by local governments, but by drivers' clubs. Eventually, a highway numbering system, used on signs and maps, helped motorists navigate long trips with more than just guesswork.

The first stop sign, black-on-white, showed up in 1915 in Detroit. Standard shapes for each type of sign were soon set, since people could recognize the octagon before they were close enough to read the word.

Park it right here. More cars driving on Main Street meant more cars parking on Main Street. The first Park-O-Meters were installed in Oklahoma City in 1935 to discourage all-day parking in front of local stores. Aghast citizens showed up to protest, only after dropping in their nickel, since there was no place else to park.

Local governments soon became addicted to the revenue from parking meters, as well as from fines for all kinds of infractions. Counties with busy through-roads hid their black-and-whites at strategic spots. Why? To trap out-of-towners singing along with the radio who hadn't noticed the speed limit sign.

Policing ourselves. Since there couldn't be a watchful cop on every corner, a general agreement on street rules had to become psychologically internalized by drivers. To this day, we're still conditioned like mice in a lab to stop at red and go on green, when nothing is preventing us from doing the opposite – except maybe the honking wrath of the other mice. ●

