



'Worst 25 miles in state'

Road conditions force daily nightmare on drivers

Early morning in Heppner is often cause enough for even some early rising chickens to want to go back to bed or the nest as it were. But for rural school children and their bus drivers... come frosty cold, chilling west or drowsy fog... the week day trek from home to school must be made.

For Bill Weatherford, Heppner, whose bus route runs the Heppner bus garage Weatherford aims his bus along a road claimed by the state highway department to be at least 18 feet rider," describes the wheeling helmsman, "and as far as I'm concerned it's the worst 25 miles in the state of Oregon."

Leaving at 6:30 a.m. each week day morning from the Heppner bus garage Weatherford aims his bus along a road claimed by the state highway department to be at least 18 feet wide. A wide portion of the road, personally measured by Weatherford, turned up 19 feet 2 inches of pavement across. One side of the road being the side of a hill and the other an abrupt view of a deep valley.

Though the road is comfortably wide enough for a car, the Oregon State Bus Drivers Training Program instructs its drivers to stay in their own lane at all times never venturing across the yellow line into the other lane. "On some of the turns" claims Weatherford, "if you stay on your side of the road you can't stay on the pavement."

Because of break-up of pavement on some of the road edge the width of the road is considerably decreased. This is an especially important factor in that this same road is also used by logging, farm and commercial trucks. "It's a good thing that the road is crowned," Weatherford says with relief, "because I know otherwise our mirrors would hit."

Referring to the mirrors of the eight foot wide bus and equally massive trucks Weatherford asks a boy, we'll call Jack, "Sometimes when we meet a loggin' truck on this road it doesn't quite look like there's enough room does it." The boy nods an acknowledgement.

None of the kids on the bus seem concerned about the road they take to and from school each day. They take the four or five logging trucks each morning and the stock and produce trucks in the afternoon in stride. They can look down the gorge of their picturesque valley each day and appreciate its beauty without worrying about the pending danger it offers. They can enjoy the bumpy ride the broken pavement creates without fighting for control of the "washboard" corners. They can take this

confidence because so far they have been lucky. Says Jack, "No it doesn't bother me, I've been using this road all my life." But even that testimonial doesn't over state the luck that fate hasn't turned against them and so far nothing has happened.

Perhaps Weatherford can take credit for some of that luck. He manages to maneuver his bus over a road often clouded in dense fog in spots and winter ice in others. "Sometimes the fog is so bad that you can't see more than a few yards ahead," dramatizes the bus driver. "It would help if we at least had some more reflectors for reference points, not guard railings, they act as snow guards and I don't need that. Just more reflectors so when you look out off the side of the road you can see more than air."

Weatherford's chief concern in all of this is "for these kids. These trucks carrying their 30 and 40 ton loads are one thing but I'm hauling kids and that's a different kind of livestock." In the

wake of the tragic deaths involving school bus accidents in Oregon in recent years it is understandable that a driver would become alarmed about hazardous conditions he or she must drive in or on. Even though other people and agencies may share an equal amount of responsibility in any or all of the accidents, in the final analysis snorts Weatherford, "it's still the school bus driver's neck." The driver will be either or both legally and emotionally responsible should any form of disaster result. After all, the driver is the only person doing the actual driving.

"These roads were built in the 20's for the Model T's and cars like that," he says. "There is a three inch strip painted down the middle, there's three inches they have taken away from me." Illustrating his point Weatherford recalls, "there's plenty of room for a car even though a lot of them drive over the yellow line in the center anyway."

This hazardous road condition is no passing interest of

Weatherfords. Since he began as a driver five years ago his awareness of the problem has prompted him to write two different letters to the state highway department. He gave a copy of the letter to Rep. Jack Sumner and Gov. Straub personally.

Realizing the state's position Weatherford notes, "there is of course the state side of the coin which has 36 counties all asking for the same thing. They have done some work on portions of the road like widening some corners and that really helps, the road crew has done a heck of a job with what they have to work with. I'm not complaining about them. I'm simply laying the whole blame on the state."

Oregon school bus drivers are required to take refresher courses from the State School Bus Drivers Training Program. It's a program drivers appreciate, says Weatherford, "I haven't found a bus driver that has ever regretted going through a retraining course. As far as being tested about my driving if it ever bothered me then that's a perfect example for a reason to quit."

Weatherford, who claims to have driven over a million miles in the course of his lifetime, says he has, "learned to use all my eyes while driving. You know what's around and your eyes pick up anything different like cows or deer or trucks." This is an important ability for a driver especially in Weatherford's case because as he states, "there's the yellow line to keep track of but sometimes I don't dare look at it, don't dare look at anything except this road."

The concern is certainly warranted especially since the children he transports belong to other people. People who live in his community. People he knows by name.

As a result of the Oregon school bus accidents, State School Superintendent, Verne Duncan recently appointed a blue ribbon committee headed by former Congresswoman Edith Greene to investigate the state's school bus safety practices. Hopefully the investigation will also entail all possible contributing factors to possible accident situations. It's not a simple matter of a bus driver at fault. In Heppner's case it may be the treacherous road that is to blame for any future mishap, hopefully minor. That's why Bill Weatherford must take a little time at the end of each day's route to breath out a prayerfully held breath and say to himself, "Well, one more trip without kill 'em."



Boardman receives \$898 check

Boardman City Manager Jim Thompson said Tuesday the general fund was in the best shape it ever has been especially with the receipt of tax monies and revenue sharing dollars quarterly. Helping things along was a \$898 anti-recession check received this past week.

The council set a hearing for its first meeting in January to hear a request from George Hansen concerning a blanket reduction in property taxes. Hansen is currently developing a site east of Boardman. "Five homes have been sold on the site already," relates Thompson.

The corner of East Columbia and N. Main streets, a particularly hazardous point during harvest time when an estimated 700 trucks a day turn there, was felt by the council to warrant being widened. It will approach the Morrow County School District concerning that decision as the project would involve a small section of school property.

Port orders

The Port of Morrow board, at its last regular meeting, instructed its attorney to obtain a court restraining order in the vent the State Highway Division started to remove gravel from the port's best 40-acre site within the food processing park.

The commission purchased the land from the Corp of Engineers in 1967 and the state's gravel permit did not appear as an encumbrance in its deed.

The Port of Morrow offered an exchange site, in 1972, in a less desirable location at the park which was rejected by the state.

The change would involve moving the curb and fire hydrant on that corner back. The total amount of school property being sought would be 100 to 200 square feet.

A request by HYW Taxi through John Childers, for a taxi franchise was tabled. It was pointed out that offering a franchise was not in the city's best interest at this time. Also, it was brought out

that one of the councilmen had applied for such a franchise several years ago. Further study and investigation was asked to determine whether that application was still valid.

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