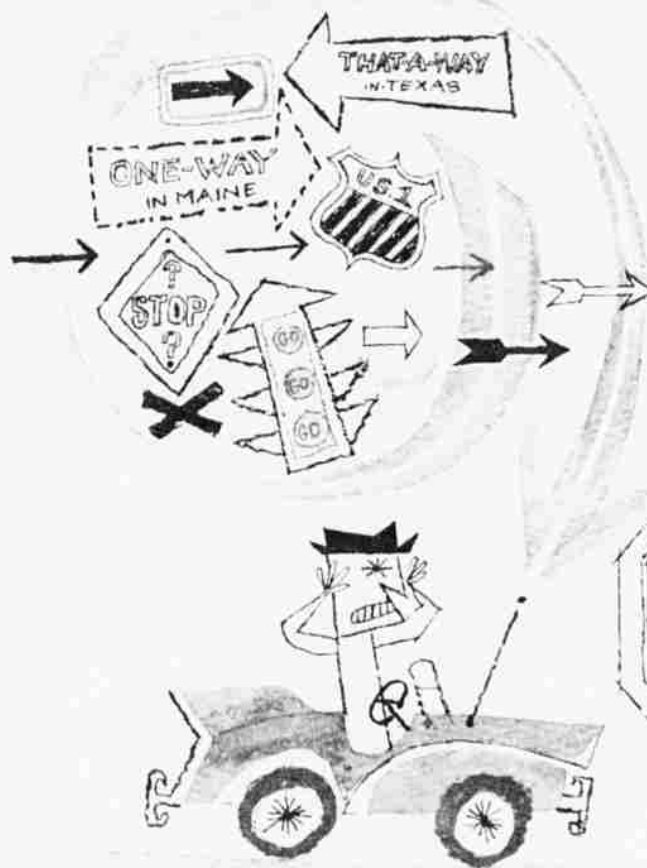




Let's Unify Our Traffic



YOU'RE TAKING a Summer vacation trip with your family—heading into northern Michigan for some fishing and swimming. You enter Michigan from out-of-state, and you're moving along the highway at a comfortable speed when the driver of the Michigan car in front of you puts his left arm straight out the window and slows down as you approach an intersection.

The pavement widens at the intersection and, after slowing down, you swing out to the right to pass. But just as you start around, the other car turns directly in front of you, and you hit it amidships. You're lucky; you were slowed sufficiently so that no one was hurt. But the damage to both cars runs up in the hundreds of dollars.

Whose fault? Yours, of course. But, you say, he turned right after signaling for a left turn! Sure, it was a left turn signal in your state—but not in Michigan. There the left arm extended can mean a start, stop, or turn in either direction!

This is only one example of many hundreds of complex, confusing, and conflicting traffic laws across the length and breadth of the United States. Supposedly created to protect motorists, in many cases these laws do exactly the opposite. As a result, many Americans motoring cross-country this year will find themselves in trouble not of their own making.

Consider some of the other remarkable contradictions in traffic laws. In one cross-country trip last year, I ran into the following welter of confusion:

In one Midwestern town, I was tongue-lashed by a policeman for turning right after a stop for a red light; in another city in the same state, I was chastised for holding up traffic by not turning under the same circumstances. In neither case was there a sign indicating the proper procedure.

In Colorado and Utah, I was honked at incessantly

for stopping behind loading school buses. I finally inquired and found out it was legal to pass school buses in those states. I shudder to think what might happen to Colorado and Utah drivers who try that gambit in other states!

I saw at least a half-dozen different types of highway centerline markings—ranging from nothing at all to a pair of solid lines sandwiching a dotted one. In some states, any line meant no passing; in some, there was a continuous center line with no markings for passing; in others, a continuous dotted line with solid lines to indicate no passing. And so it went. True, it was possible to make an educated guess as to what was indicated; but even working hard at it, I found my guesses weren't always right.

I discovered—the hard way—that most states do not permit parking on a bridge, even though it's legal in 21 other states.

In one small Western town, I played footsie with a car facing me for several minutes when we both wanted to make a left turn—while other drivers blasted their horns behind us. I was trying to turn inside the intersection, as I had been taught to do. But such a turn was illegal in this state, where left turns are made after crossing the intersection.

NOT ONLY conflicting traffic laws, but some state and local ordinances make cross-country driving dangerous. Many times these laws are safety hazards because they put such a mental burden on the driver trying to keep abreast of them that he doesn't pay sufficient attention to his driving.

New York, for example, has a 30 m.p.h. speed limit throughout the state, whether the road is a four-lane expressway or a backwoods lane—and traffic laws there haven't been changed much since 1929.

A study taken at 41 sites throughout the state by

the Bureau of Public Roads showed that more than half the drivers were exceeding the unrealistic speed limit—most of them all the while watching in the rear-view mirror for pursuing police cars, thus increasing the danger of an accident.

A number of surveys have shown almost beyond question that realistic speed limits promote traffic safety. When the State of Washington raised the speed limit from 50 to 60 m.p.h. on several hundred miles of primary roads, fatalities on the highway decreased by 33 percent. St. Paul, Minn., raised the limit to 40 m.p.h. on a well-traveled street where motorists were consistently exceeding a 30-mile limit. Result: drivers obeyed the new speed law, and accidents decreased considerably.

How serious is all this? According to the Council of State Governments: "Out-of-state drivers are responsible for 20 percent or more of accidents in some states—mainly through unfamiliarity with local driving habits and regulations." An official of the Highway Transportation Congress estimates that unified traffic laws could reduce accidents 30 percent.

CONFLICTING and foolish traffic laws aren't a new problem, but they are fast becoming a desperate one as the number of cars traveling cross-country increases almost as rapidly as their horsepower. Thirty-three years ago, Herbert Hoover sponsored a movement for nationwide uniformity of traffic ordinances. Although progress has been made since then, we still have a long way to go.

As long ago as 1926, the National Conference on Street and Highway Safety appointed a committee to review traffic laws and create uniform standards. These model ordinances for both states and municipalities have been carefully and periodically brought up to date ever since—and a new revision has just