

Taxi! Hey You, Taxi!

BY JEAN SHEPHERD

Pro football "taxi squads" were but one of the fronts that the great cabs of the past spawned



CULVER PICTURES

• "How come yah asking me? You takin' some kinda poll or sompin'?"

I could see the squat cab driver's neck bulge slightly as he began to negotiate the turn. His reptilian eyes peered narrowly at me through the grimy rear view mirror. A tough old Westclox dangled by adhesive tape from the mirror. The padded dash sprouted ball-point pens like the back of a plastic porcupine. All around us Manhattan crashed and roared, and the heavy stench of Urbanis hung over the city like a soft woolly yellowish scratchy blanket.

"Yeah," I answered in my Manhattan monotone, "What's the best cab you ever drove in your whole career, uh . . . Myron?" His name and full front visage were visible under a cracked plastic hack license protector screwed on the glove compartment door.

"Now that's a good question. You from the Bureau or sompin'?"

No cab driver in contemporary New York ever answered a question directly. Answer a question with another, a tradition that pervades all of New York life.

"Naw, I'm just interested, that's all. What is the best cab you ever drove? I don't mean a regular cab, but *cab*."

"I drove plenty in my time, Bud. Seen 'em all. But lemme tell ya, for my dough the best hack ever built was the Luxor. Now that was real class." He chuckled, a rich rasping croak, and exhaled the aroma of the true pastrami lover.

"The Luxor? I saw one of them in a late movie. Lloyd Nolan was driving it."

"I seen the movie!" Myron shouted over his shoulder. "What a phony hackie that guy is. He would'na lasted ten minutes on the street. And for your information, that was no Luxor he was driving. It was a Paramount, which incidentally wasn't all bad . . . GM built it, but it didn't have the class of the Luxor."

I sat back as far as I dared on the filthy vinyl seat, squatting gingerly amid small heaps of road soot and decaying cigar butts. Every time I get into a New York cab and I know it's going to be a fairly long ride and I'm lucky enough to get a truly veteran hackie, I love to get them started on talking about the great cabs

of the past. Probably more passenger miles have been logged by taxicabs than any other form of human transportation. Yet very few, students of motorcars can even tell you the names of the great machines. And not many of them still exist because they rarely wound up on used car lots. Instead they were dismembered for the parts bin as reward for a half million honorable miles crashing through the potholes of America's cities.

"What's the first cab you ever drove?" I asked, leading him on.

"Well, let's see. It was a Baby Shaw. The Big Shaw was just before my time, but I seen a few of them. But that Baby Shaw was all right. Lemme tell you, in those days the driver sat out in the open. They didn't have no door on the other side, and you threw the luggage right in there next to you, and you froze your ass. But that Baby Shaw was one helluva car. You *couldn't* kill it."

We proceeded at a pace that would have embarrassed an arthritic snail. Myron, feeling expansive, rolled on.

"Worked for a guy for a while had a



Happiness is your own 1930 Luxor at the corner of Fifth and 139th



Striking cabbies pull over a 1931 General Motors-produced General



(Left to right) '36 Checker, '33 Ford, '33 Checker and a General

fleet of Whites. Up inna Bronx. Nothing but trouble. Had 2-wheel mechanical brakes, was like stoppin' a steam roller by draggin' yer feet. Use to give me cramps in my leg I still feel."

"Ever drive a Black Beauty?" I asked while kicking around the floor of the cab at something that seemed to be moving.

"Hey," Myron looked up into the rear-view mirror, "You ain't old enough to know about the Black Beauty."

"You didn't have to be at Bull Run to know about the Civil War."

He laughed, "Yeah, that's true. But nobody ever talks to me about them great cars. Once in a while, when I meet some of the old timers at the H an' H or the Belmore, we talk about them, but nobody believes us . . . most of 'em just push in the food and yell a lot about the late scratches at Yonkers. And you know, these guys today actually think the garbage they drive are actually cabs. This piece a junk is made outta tinfoil. It

One of the last true delights left in the city of New York is a fairly long cab ride with a veteran driver who is willing to reminisce

ain't nothing. Nothing! This piece a crap is three months old, and look at it! Damn thing shimmy, transmission went out twice, body's shot. If I could get ahold of a Model G somewheres, man, I'd never get rid of it."

"Model G?" I asked.

"You ain't never head of the Model G? Best car Checker ever made. Now some guys will tell ya that the Model K cut the G, but that G was some car!"

Myron seemed to be settling into some kind of silent personal reverie over the G, so I handed him the Doublemint-crusted armrest that had just thudded onto my thigh and asked, "What are some of the others you remember?"

"Well, did ya ever hear of a cab called the Five Boroughs?"

"Nope. Can't say I ever did. You mean the five boroughs, like in New York?"

Myron lit up a White Owl and flipped the match into the window of a cab that was hurtling past driven by what looked like a maddened Revolutionary.

"Wouldja look at that guy. He'd hustle his old lady for a buck."

"The Five Boroughs, Myron. You were telling me about the Five Boroughs."

"Oh yeah. A lotta cab. Built up in the Bronx. Just for New York. Had a map of the five boroughs on the radiator. A big Six, a lot like one of them big Packards. You musta heard about Larry Faye?"

"No, can't say as I have. What's he? A ball player or something?"

"Ha, that's a good one. He sure played plenty, all right. He was a big-time hood back inna Thirties. Had a fleet of Five Boroughs which they say he designed. Everybody figured the fleet was a front, but lemme tell ya, Larry Faye treated you right . . . as long as you didn't get wise and cross him. I know one guy tried to ride the flag on him and Larry's boys worked him over good. Said if he ever drove a cab again in New York, he'd find out what the river bottom looked like."

"What happened to Larry, Myron?"

"Same as happened to all them guys. Got drilled steppin' out of a cab with some bimbo from the Follies."

6
Memories of the Golden Age of Taxi-cabs—when you had your choice of almost 30 different marques—are enough to make today's cabbies bitter at their lot

"Did you ever drive any of those big celebrities of the Twenties, Myron?"

"Hell yes. Had the Babe in the back seat many a time. Used to pick him up in them Speaks over on the East Side. One time he had me wait six hours with the meter running. He liked his booze, but he sure could hit the hell outta the ball. One time I took him from this joint on East 53rd early in the morning and drove him right up to the Stadium, wearing his tux. He didn't sleep at all that night. Played a doubleheader against Detroit. Got five hits, including two homers. Let Hank Aaron try that sometime."

We were getting near First Avenue and the traffic heading out of town for the weekend was getting tougher. Myron squatted in his piece of junk like he owned the town, which in a way he did.

"One time a guy come out and hailed me on Broadway in the Fifties and the next thing I knew I had this Rudolf Valentino in the cab. This big crowd of women came crowdin' around and started bangin' on the doors. He slipped me a ten and yelled, 'Get me the hell outa here! They're gonna get me!'" He didn't

(Continued on page 95)



Vying for the furniture trade, a 1933 Checker and a 1936 General



A 1935 Sunshine, so named for a sun-roof over the back seat



A 1948 DeSoto easing through unusually light traffic in Times Square

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HEY TAXII

(Continued from page 77)

look nothin' like he did inna movies. Kind of a little bird, but he sure knew how to get them women. I felt real bad when he died. Kinda like I knew him."

"Ever own your own medallion?"

"Hell yes. You wouldn't believe it, but you know, back in those days you could get all the medallions you wanted for ten bucks a shot. That's how a lot of guys got rich . . . couple of years back they were worth maybe \$25,000. The same medallions. The price isn't anything like that now with all the gypsies and talk about throwing all cars outta New York. But I didn't play it smart. Sold the medallion back to a fleet guy right after the War. They were the only guys who could get enough gas. All I got after fifty years of hacking is a 4-room off the Eastern Parkway, a set of bad kidneys and a TV that don't work more'n half the time."

"What kind of cab did you have when you owned your medallion?"

"The first one I bought was a Locomobile. Now *there* was a really fine machine. You ever heard of it?"

"Yes. But I never knew that they were used as taxicabs."

"Oh yeah. If you wanted to go first class and pick up real carriage trade, you drove a Locomobile. I knew one fleet had Pierce Arrows. Would you believe it, Pierce Arrows!"

"How about some more great cabs, Myron. There must be more."

"Well, let's see. I told you about this Black Beauty. Boy, that thing would corner like a low-slung baby buggy. Did you ever hear of the Radio Cab?"

"Vaguely."

"Well, that cab came with a radio. Nice neat little car. And the passenger could tune the radio from the back. But they kept stealin' the knobs. Didn't work out too good. Then, of course, there were the great DeSotos, come along after the War, and the Sunshine Cab. That was real nice. Just slide back the roof . . . them lovers liked to drive around in the Park with roof open, with the rain comin' down on them. By the way, Buddy, thanks for nothin'."

"What do you mean, Myron?" I asked. We were at my destination and I was fishing for my wallet.

"You reminded me all over again what a piece of crap this is. Don't stiff me on the tip and it's okay. See ya, Buddy." •

Photo research by Charles Vidich, whose book, The New York City Taxi Driver, will be published this fall by Schenkman Publishing of Cambridge, Mass.

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