

## ECHOES OF A LOSER'S HISTORY

### VOICES AGAINST THE AUTOMOBILE IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY FINLAND

Tapani Mauranen

The automobile arrived in Finland relatively late compared to the neighbouring countries. Russia, Sweden, Norway and Estonia had their first cars long before the Benz Velo Comfortable, which was imported to Finland in May 1900 by the leading seller of agricultural technology in Finland Victor Forselius.<sup>1</sup> Finland's motherland Russia and the former motherland, Sweden, constructed their own car models before Finns could even buy one – or see one.

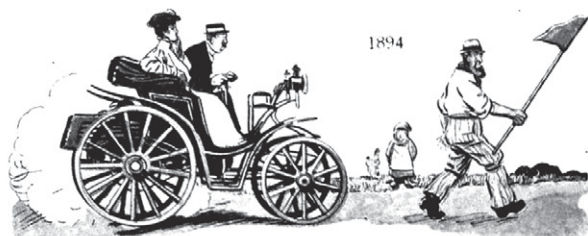
The Finnish transport sector experienced a profound technological change during the second half of the nineteenth century. The content of this process was to replace the traditional main transport energy, muscle power (horse or human) with other forms of energy (steam, electricity or combustion engine). This change included for example the railway and steamboats. Floating also grew as a means for transporting timber, and took an important role in the transport sector. Thus, change as such was nothing new for Finns at the turn of the century. The novelty of the automobile was not so much the machine power itself, or spontaneous movement. It was perhaps more likely to be the human scale: owning an automobile was conceivable, whereas no one would imagine owning a train.

The arrival of the automobile is often presented as a revolution, the entrance of

a clear, irresistible winner to the scene of traffic – *veni vidi vici*. Instead of a revolution, however, there was a long series of important changes. The arrival of the automobile was only one of them – and it is perhaps more important to us today than it was to the people who lived through it during the first decades of the last century. So where did the automobile start its conquest of traffic? From the easiest circumstances: summer, good weather, and the best roads. The most difficult tasks in the forests were left to horses until the 1960s. There was even some resistance to the automobile, and this opposition presented real arguments. *Hooray* was not the only voice heard when the automobile arrived.

Unlike Tapio Bergholm in his article in this publication<sup>2</sup>, I will not examine the big economic and social frame of the transformation of traffic, its prerequisites and consequences. My goal is much more modest, to find the opposition to the automobile, and to try to understand their points of view. Who dared to rise against the car?

Before the turn of the century new technology did not have much impact on Finnish road traffic. There were some experiments with road locomotives from the 1860s to the First World War. These monsters mostly carried products or raw material for sawmills or the metal industry. In Britain there were about 8 000 locomotives, in Finland perhaps five. The Finnish solution was to float the raw material down waterways to the large new steam sawmills located near the export harbours. Over shorter distances timber was transported during the winter, when there was an excess capacity of horses and men at farms, that could be used for this purpose. Locomotives were too heavy and their season for operation too short. Horses could use the winter roads that cut across frozen lakes and rivers, shortening the distances. These roads were also more even, and the ice



Series of images:  
"Development of the  
automobile". Source:  
*Urheilijan joulu* 1914.

made it easier for the horses to transport heavy loads.

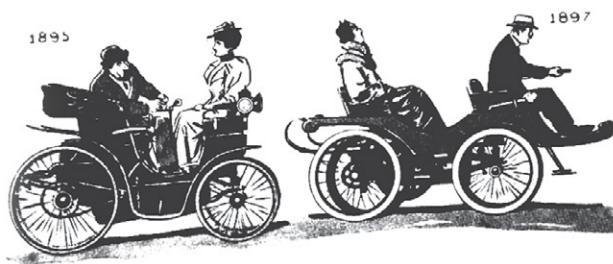
### WHERE'S THE ACCELERATOR?

Why did the automobile arrive so late? Finland was a poor country with a small rich elite and no court to set an example, or an upper limit to excessive consumption. The harsh Finnish climate did not much favour car traffic: the driving season was short.

The arrival of the first car did not have much of an impact on traffic. The pace of car trade was very slow. The turning point came in 1906 when taxi traffic started in six or seven towns in Finland.<sup>3</sup> Now the automobile was starting to be much more present in people's everyday lives. It was possible to see a taxi, ride a taxi, and for the wealthy, even to own an automobile. The automobile was now seen as a viable option in road traffic. The number of cars began to grow.

There were some interesting connections between Sweden, Finland and Russia at the turn of the century concerning the sales of cars. A car merchant, Arvid Schubert from Stockholm advertised in Finnish newspapers that he could deliver cars to Finland. He even had sales agents, Torsten Costiander, an officer in Helsinki and Ernst Börtzell in Kuopio.

The make he offered was de Dion Bouton. Schubert started his advertising campaign in March 1899, over a year before Victor Forselius's car arrived in Turku. At the end of July 1900 Schubert placed an advert in Finnish newspapers offering a second hand automobile at a low price. The car was most likely already in Finland – he would probably not have offered it for sale unless it was already in the country. It is therefore possible that Schubert's car could already have arrived in Finland in 1899. Schubert's main line of business was boat motors. It seems the combustion engine gained popularity on the water earlier than it did on the roads. Another Swedish merchant, Fredr. Wagner, also advertised in a Finnish journal – only once, however. Wagner's main business was printing machines. He advertised these in a printing trade journal, where, in 1900, he also published one advert for automobiles. By contrast, Schubert's campaign was big: he had adverts in many newspapers over a period of five years. We do not know if neither of them sold any cars in Finland.<sup>4</sup>



De Dion Bouton was the biggest producer of cars at the time. The French manufacturer's engines in particular were renowned and widely used. The company had an agent in Finland from 1899: Suomen Valokuvaus Kauppa ja Tehdas oy ("Finland's photography shop and factory ltd") sold all kinds of new technology, including Patria and Phoebus automobiles, that have since been reclassified as motorcycles. The company also acquired an agency for de Dion Bouton in Russia, and opened a large and luxurious shop in St. Petersburg. It was soon bankrupted, however.

### COACHMEN AGAINST THE AUTOMOBILE

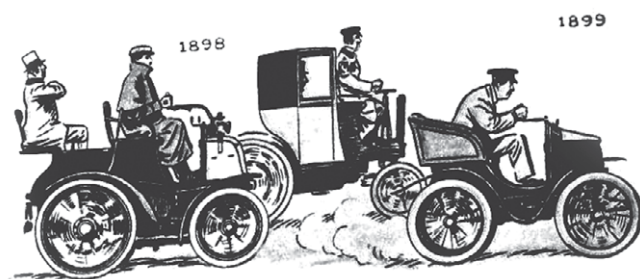
It seems there was less opposition to the car in towns than in the countryside. The only group of opponents in towns were professional coachmen who were worried about their fate. In some Finnish towns the coachmen went on strike because of the first automobile. This happened for example in the little spa-town of Lovisa.<sup>5</sup> The result was that in the end, the coachmen bought a car. In other towns, especially in Helsinki the coachmen had meetings and wrote letters to the authorities to hinder the use of cars. "Hooray for competition – and our boys, too", wrote the coachmen of Vaasa. In their journal *Ajuri* (Coachman) the Union of Coachmen wrote against the car. It is very clear that the two parties had conflicting interests and claims, and it is no wonder that there was a fight over clients and the market.

In towns, there had also been other new vehicles on the streets, such as trams and bicycles, and unlike on country roads horses

were used to them. In November 1899 the newspaper *Aftonposten* reported how Queen Victoria accustomed her horses to the car. The same method – a harsh desensitisation by driving a very noisy car among the horses every day – was later recommended for example by the governor of Häme province.

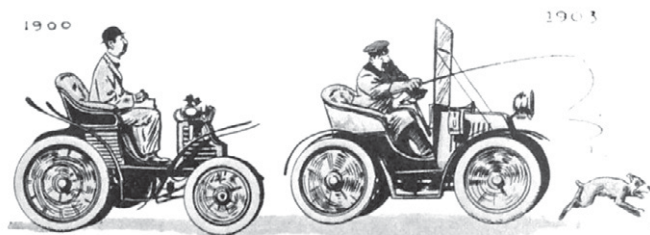
### MANY MERCHANTS, FEW CARS

So a Swedish merchant sold cars to Finland and a Finnish one to Russia. As the number of cars began to grow after 1906, the authorities sought to regulate automobile traffic. The first set of rules was set on a local level, the first in Helsinki were in 1907. In the northernmost part of Finland there



were rules already in 1906, written for one car that arrived in 1907. Other towns established rules quite soon after the first cars started to show on the streets. The idea was to protect passengers.

In 1865 Finland got a new system of municipal administration. It did not bring democracy to municipal life but it was a step towards it. The most important new organ was the municipal council, a meeting of the local landowners. In 1906 to 1908 automobiles were frequently discussed in municipal council meetings – should the parish permit automobiles on its roads or not? This question was addressed in the municipal council meetings in 1906–08 by the governors



in three provinces: Uusimaa and Häme in the south, and a part of the northern province of Oulu.<sup>6</sup> The same question was also put to rural police chiefs and bailiffs who were among the highest officials in the countryside. This indicates that the subject was widely discussed in municipalities that represented a significant part of the population. This was not a question of a few individuals opposed to the car – although this was not unheard of either: for example the owner of the Sarvilahti manor in southern Finland, V. M. von Born, banned the use of automobiles on his land.<sup>7</sup>

The municipal council meetings were one important platform for the opponents of the automobile. Newspapers were another one – the sins, the accidents and the arrogance of drivers were reported. Journalists, however, were upset, as in the beginning they had to write about subjects they knew as little as their readers.

The municipal council was a good forum to raise one's voice against the new vehicle. There was a possibility to change something, to set limits for the car. Between 1906 and 1908 the regulations of motorised road traffic were sent to the municipal councils of three provinces, Uusimaa (around Helsinki), Häme and Oulu. In the Oulu province, in northern Finland the subject discussed was a plan to open a 250-kilometre bus line from Kemi to Rovaniemi and Kemijärvi and a couple of other lines. In the southern part of the country the governor sent a draft for the car traffic

regulations to be discussed on a parish level. Here was a possibility to get results. A council statement could propose changes in speed limits, close some roads for the automobile, or even try to close all the roads in the parish from the dangerous vehicle.

The main themes discussed in council meetings were responsibility and safety. Horses were afraid of the automobile: its sounds, its smell – and the fear of the horse driver – this fear spread from the human being to the animal causing the horse to panic. A rampant horse was, and is, very dangerous, and thus the subject was discussed in detail. For example peasants could no longer send a young boy or a woman on the road with a horse, as handling a panicked horse was difficult even for a grown man. This could cause problems during the busy periods in agriculture. Should something happen to the horse it would be a great loss to the farmer. Horses were expensive, and raising a horse into maturity took three years. The horse was everything in agriculture: it was needed for working the fields, for forestry, and for all kinds of transport needs of the farm. The freight traffic on the roads was entirely dependent on horses. For example timber haulage was extremely important to the economy.

The fear of out-of-control horses was on the agenda from the beginning – this was the most evident argument, and the easiest to understand. Newspapers had reported on panicking horses long before the first automobile arrived in Finland. In Kärkölä, in southern Finland there was a rumour in 1898 that a manor had bought two automobiles to pull the plough. The farmers immediately tried to call a municipal council meeting to discuss the horse problem – two years before the first car arrived.

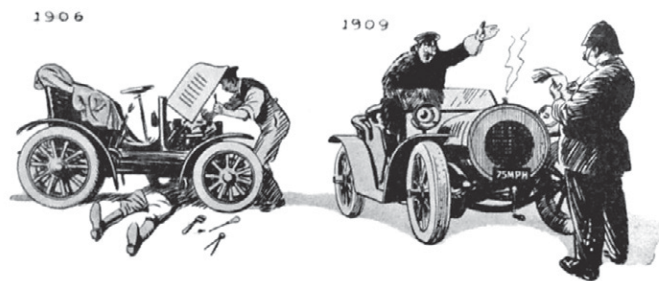
The next step was when people started thinking about the practical side of the traffic itself. Narrow roads and heavy traffic were difficult to combine with the automobile. Horse caravans transporting board from sawmills were long and there could be hundreds of horses on the road at the same time, going in different directions. One solution suggested was to have an exact timetable, so that horsemen could stay home, wait in a calm place for the automobile to pass by, or at least avoid the most difficult roads with deep ditches and other problems. This was impossible to achieve due to malfunctioning cars and because from time to time the roads were full of horses. In some parishes they found another solution: widening the roads at the state's expense.

Finnish roads were built and maintained by farmers as well as a relay system – these two can be seen as a form of taxation. The automobile opened discussion over the important question of Who will pay. This question received less attention in the early years, as people had no experience of how much damage a heavy lorry can inflict on their roads.

In the newspapers these practical problems were much discussed and many kinds of solutions were offered. Speed limits were the most popular among these: either general limitations or specific ones for dark, fog or other special circumstances. Winter conditions were not among them, however, and the whole subject seems to have been forgotten – there was, of course, no experience of winter driving. The Finnish winter favoured the horsemen: the cold was a problem for the cars, as was the ploughing of the roads that would need to be ploughed differently for cars and horses.

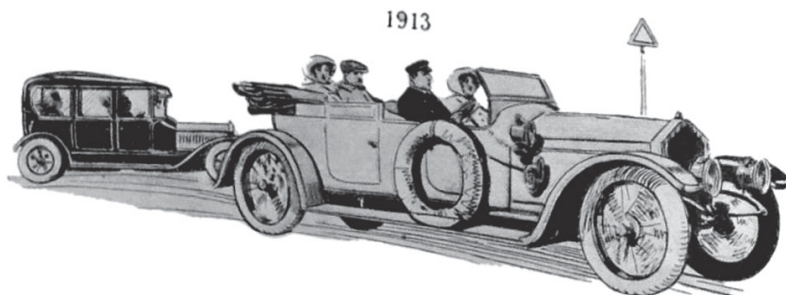
In practice the automobile left the roads to horses for the winter. From an economic point of view this was good – the automobile could not disturb the flow of goods from the harbours to the inner parts of the country as much as it did in summer. There were some prerequisites for car traffic during winter – for example coolant, (the recipe was published in the first Finnish automobile journal *Automobilen* in 1906). However, the issues discussed in the newspapers were perhaps not that urgent, as best the automobile could offer before the First World War was cruising and other short pleasure drives.

One popular solution to the horse problem was a detailed set of rules for what the driver must do if he sees a fearful horse on the road. He would have to stop, cut his engine and assist the horse-drawn vehicle to get past the car. These suggestions had their problems. For example, drivers were expected to honk to alert pedestrians, but that would scare a horse, so instead of honking, the driver should shout. In practi-



cal traffic on the roads a new phase began – horses and cars had to find a compromise for decades.

The traffic regulations that made this coexistence possible were first set locally, town by town, province by province during the first decades on the century. The first regulations for the whole country were established in 1922. In those provinces where



regulations were discussed in the municipal council, landowners could get their voice heard. Another way to do this was to gather a group of parishes to petition the authorities. For example in 1911 a group of small parishes in the Turku region requested a prohibition of automobiles inside their boundaries. There was also an attempt to establish a similar coalition in the north in 1913, but this was unsuccessful. Some parishes tried to establish a prohibition alone. The first of these was Uusikirkko near the Russian border in 1901. Altogether about a hundred parishes reacted to the car problem either on their own initiative or that of the authorities. Most of them were content with the governors' propositions; others found different solutions, from total prohibition to imposing speed limits.

There were about 25 parishes that proposed a total ban. These were all kinds of parishes, large and small, south and north, those with important roads in their area, and those in the backwoods, altogether representing a fairly large population.<sup>8</sup> Some of the parishes had experience of the automobile, for example Nurmijärvi and Uusikirkko, but others did not. Some of them even tried to unilaterally ban the automobile on their roads. That was, however, outside the limits of local power, and needed a governor's approval.

Time did not heal the wounds. There had been automobiles in the Turku region from the beginning of the century, but a decade was not enough to settle the argument between cars and horses. Instead of settling it, the intervening years exacerbated the problem, until in 1911, in a group of 11 parishes demanded a ban on the automobile.

The beginning of the automobile age in Finland was slow, and as Tapio Bergholm demonstrates, the pace did not pick up until much later.<sup>9</sup> The early years of the automobile in Finland were marked with arguments within communities that in some instances resulted in suggesting bans. This happened at a very early stage, 1906 to 1908 – at a time when there were perhaps a hundred automobiles in Finland. The number would soon grow, as the first taxis emerged, offering people a possibility to get acquainted with cars.

The 25 or so parishes that proposed a ban were home to some 100 000 Finns. The decisions to ban automobiles were, however, mainly taken in the municipal councils, which were not representative, but were controlled by landowners. Landowners were also horse owners and the role of the horse, especially in the form of freight traffic, could be very important in the economy of the farmers. Thus landowners were of-

**Parishes opposed to the use of automobiles within their boundaries, 1901–13**

Anjala  
Askainen  
Hauho  
Jokioinen  
Karjala  
Kemin maalaiskunta  
Kiiminki  
Laitila  
Lemu  
Masku  
Mietoinen  
Mynämäki  
Myrskylä  
Naantalın maaseurakunta  
Nousiainen  
Nurmijärvi  
Pornainen  
Pusula  
Raisio  
Rovaniemi  
Snappertuna  
Tervola  
Tuulos  
Uudenkaupungin maaseurakunta  
Uusikirkko (Turun ja Porin lääni)  
Uusikirkko (Viipurin lääni)  
Ylikiminki

ten opposed to automobiles, but they were simply advocating their own views, not those of the other parishioners.

The situation on the roads was complex, and it was difficult for the farmers to see how the automobile could have a positive role when most of their practical experience was negative. Of course we can try to find a role – starting from the pictures in this article.

Tapani Mauranen is a researcher at the automobile and road museum Mobilia and Oy Chronicon Ltd. His best-known work includes the history of taxis.

<sup>1</sup> Bergholm, 2001; Mauranen and Levä, 1999; Vähäkangas, 2000. Masonen, Antila, Kallio and Mauranen, eds. 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Bergholm, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Mauranen, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Mauranen, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Sirén, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Mauranen, 2001; Mauranen, 2003; The data of the councils' views is from the archives of the provinces and the Historical Newspaper Library (digi.lib.helsinki.fi). See also Heurgren, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Sirén, 2003; Tandefelt, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Approximately 100 000, of a total population of 2.6 million in 1900. Source: Statistics Finland.

<sup>9</sup> Bergholm, 2013.

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