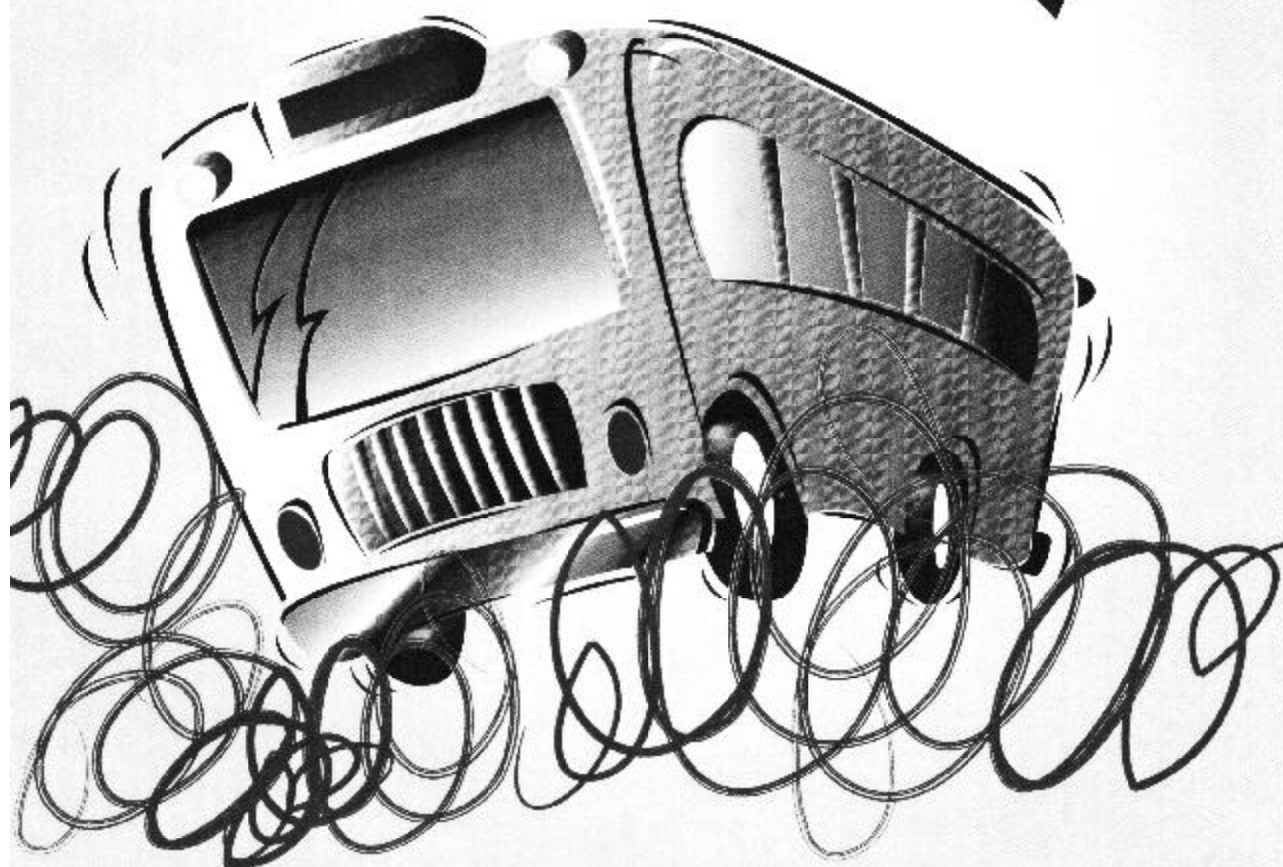


Taken for a **RIDE**



Follow along as our intrepid reporter does
without her car ... for a whole week.

By Julia Smillie Carey

Illustrations by K. Lauher

Let me start by saying that I am by no means anti-public transportation. Some of my best friends use it, I swear. In fact, last year more than 42,300 people rode the MetroLink light rail and another 120,000 took Metrobus each weekday, shuttled through their lives by the Bi-State Development Agency and its commitment to “regional economic development through excellence in transportation.” In all, the Agency transported nearly 51 million passengers. Not all at the same time, I presume.

Statistically speaking, someone I know might have been among them. But who were the rest of them? Not me. I mean, I experimented with public transit once or twice in college. Who didn’t, right? But St. Louis is a drivin’ town and I’m a drivin’ gal. Like 90 percent of area commuters, I head to work in the privacy of my own vehicle.

But I’ve been thinking lately: Although neither of us likes to acknowledge it, my 1988 Nissan and I both know the party can’t last forever. There might come a

day when I actually *need*

to take public transportation. In a fleet of 461 buses and 65 light rail vehicles, somewhere out there had to be a Bi-State with my name on the LED display. Figuratively speaking, unfortunately.

Thus was born my mission: For one week I would give Bi-State a shot and make my way around our fair city using public transportation. To be perfectly honest, I had hoped that my time on the bus would be, well, none. My aim was to take MetroLink everywhere I needed to go. After all, light rail is so much more *sophisticated* than the bus, and I’m certainly fond of thinking I’m that and more. I’ve taken the MetroLink. It’s linear, and far less confusing than the bus. It goes to about 10 places, and they’re all in a row.

Call it fate or call it Bi-State, but MetroLink and I never made a love connection. Why? Because getting to MetroLink in order to ride it is half the battle. If I had a car, sure, I could park and ride, like the commuters that represent the majority of MetroLink’s users. But using my car would be cheating and that would be wrong, wrong, wrong. I could wait until they put a MetroLink station within walking distance of my house, but in the meantime, what do I do? Call work and tell them I’ll be three years late?

In any case, I obviously survived the experiment, and I can definitely say that, as a result, I’m a little bit older (one week, to be precise), a little bit wiser and, in some ways, a little hardened to the harsh

realities of life.

What good is knowledge gained but not shared? To that end, let me offer up some bits of wisdom gleaned from my experience

Lesson 1

Be Prepared

I’m no Boy Scout—never have been. But I still knew that whatever mode of transportation I chose would require some preparation on my part, some basic knowledge, all stemming from one core question: Where do I need to go? South Grand? U. City? Ballwin?

The possibilities were endless, but I chose ... work. What better test than to get downtown and back, and see what this city has to offer residents and visitors in the way of public transit?

Which led to question number two: MetroLink or bus?

Ha! It’s a trick question! Kids, in the world of public transportation, decisions are often made for you on the basis of the complete lack of options. As I’ve mentioned, for me, MetroLink was out. But the bus would pick me up not far from my house and drop me off 40 minutes—*forty minutes?!—later* right in front of the office.

I knew, essentially, where I was going. I pretty much knew how I would get there. Prepared? Yes. Ready? Absolutely not. On the night just before my great adventure, it dawned on me that I really had no idea how to go about

taking the bus in St. Louis.

Like a helpless child (or an idiotic adult), I turned to my husband, Chris, a bus survivor. “I need to take the bus to work,” I told him, “but I have no idea how! I don’t know how much it costs, I don’t know where it goes or when it comes or ...” He glanced up from the television for a moment. “You can pick up the Manchester bus right on the corner. Runs every half hour.”

How on earth did he know this? Apparently by—get this—taking the bus in the past. And this was the moment at which I learned perhaps the most valuable lesson of my journey: To ride the bus in St. Louis, you must have 1) \$1.25 in exact change, and 2) a Rain Man-like ability to memorize hundreds of bus schedules.



Lesson 2

Know Your Resources

If I can give you one gift, let it be that of time saved. Much as one might ponder the sound of one hand clapping, many have wondered how in the hell they're supposed to figure out which bus goes where, and when. Yes, smarty-pants, I know that's what the schedules are for, but just where do you get the schedules?

How about a trip down the information superhighway? (Don't you just love a good

spread them out around me on the living room floor. I contemplate their tiny hieroglyphics. Half an hour later I still haven't a clue, and I have to be at work in 17 hours. Time is running out.

Determined to find a more civilized way of doing things, I return to the Web. (When in doubt, return to the Internet. At the very least, you can wind up shopping.) To my sheer delight, I discover that Bi-State has agents to help you figure out your route. I had wasted valuable time trying to do it myself, when Bi-State has route-planning specialists to help you figure it all out. I dial the number and a helpful young lady answers. "I'm planning to take a bus," I



transit-related metaphor?) The official Web site of the Bi-State Development Agency (www.bi-state.org) puts a world of information at your fingertips—fares, maps and schedules for a handful of routes, as well as fascinating facts. Otherwise, I might never have known that Bi-State's bus models include the Neoplan, Flexible and Gillig coaches.

Handily, the Web site points out that a complete selection of schedules—along with comprehensive route map—is conveniently located downtown at the MetroRide Store or (equally convenient for, like, no one) at the Saint Clair Transit Plaza in Belleville.

So how, I find myself wondering, am I supposed to figure out how to get downtown in order to *get* the schedules? It's a little too chicken-or-egg for me.

I print out virtually every area bus schedule I find on the Bi-State Web site and

inform her. "I understand you'll be helping me with my travel arrangements?" And she does.

Lesson 3

When in Rome

The last thing I wanted was to look like someone who never takes the bus. I was having flashbacks to middle school, when the school bus was a cruel little microcosm on wheels. Must ... fit ... in. What if I couldn't find exact change? What if I fell in front of everyone? Who knew there was so much anxiety involved with public transportation?

My husband, who decided it would be "fun" for us to both take the bus into town, presented me with my very first Bi-State pass—a week's worth of unlimited travel for

a mere \$14.30. "That includes transfers," he told me. "What's a transfer?" I asked. He just patted my arm and shook his head.

The only thing worse than waiting for the bus on a hot, muggy day is waiting for the bus on a hot, muggy, *rainy* day. Especially if halfway across Manchester you fall—as feared—flat on your face. It was not a happy time for me as I dusted off my pride and followed Chris to the bus stop. "Here we are," he said.

Where were we? There was no bus stop. No shelter from the increasingly heavy rain. No Bi-State informational poster to teach me how to swipe my pass. Chris pointed to a street post with a microscopic Bi-State sign affixed. I knew then why he had come with me. I wouldn't have had a snowball's chance in hell of finding this on my own. "It's not a bus stop," I said. "It's a bus pole." He put his arm around me. "Well, honey, it's *your* bus pole."

What else did I need to know? He tells me to step into the street, and I briefly suspect that he is trying to kill me. "You have to step out into the street a couple of times and look down the road for the bus as if it'll make it arrive sooner," he explained. "You do want to fit in, don't you?" he asked. And I did. Oh, how I did.

So I stepped out into Manchester Road, narrowly avoided being sideswiped, and peered into the distance. No bus in sight. "Atta girl," my husband said. I smiled triumphantly as the rain continued to fall. This was when I learned Lesson Number Four.

Lesson 4 Time Is Not Necessarily On Your Side

Riding the bus can truly, truly suck. One of the most obvious drawbacks of public versus private modes of transportation is the lack of schedule flexibility. If I needed to run over to Target, I first needed to whip out my secret decoder ring and figure out how many (two) and which buses would get me to a store that is three minutes from my house by car.

No matter how nicely you ask the bus drivers, they're all pretty touchy about sticking to their routes. *I have errands to run, people!* Everything requires intricate planning and forethought. I can't even plan dinner.

And out the window with flexibility goes choice. When you ride the bus, you don't go to the grocery store you like best. You go to the one on the route of the easiest bus ride, which isn't necessarily the closest store. Convenience takes on a whole new mean-

ing. You can't buy more groceries than you can take back on the bus with you, I realize, as I contemplate the logistics of hauling my melons home.

Lesson 5 You Can't Always Get There From Here

At some point during the week I found myself staring at the silver pole on the bus—the one standing passengers hold to keep their balance—and I was overcome by the strangest urge. You know when you're walking across a bridge or at a great height and you get that fleeting, overwhelming urge to jump, an urge that vanishes as quickly as it comes?

I found myself overwhelmed by the urge to lick the pole. *Just lean forward and lick it.* For one nanosecond, I am in the clutches of this demented thought. But I don't do it. Of course I don't. So why am I telling you about it? Because Bi-State does not go

everywhere you need to go in this city. Even with the MetroLink, an abundance of buses and good old footwork, there are some places I just can't reasonably get to.

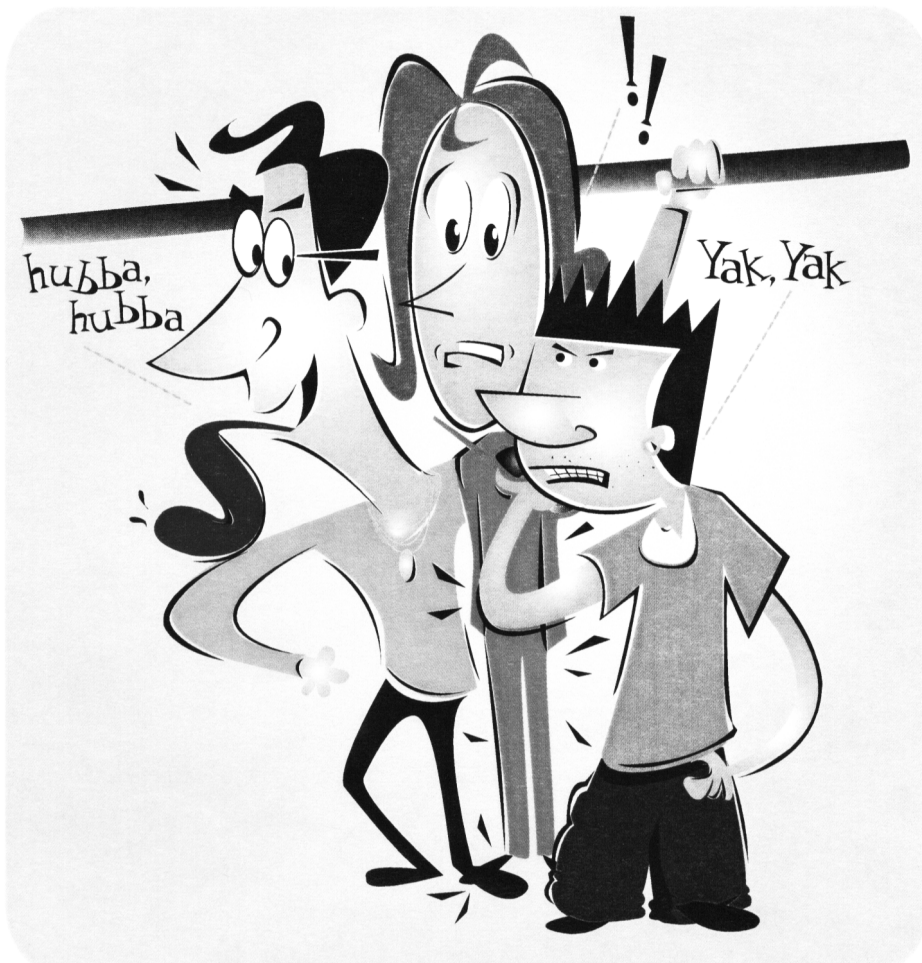
Which brings me to my point: It's a good thing I didn't lick the pole, because one of the places I couldn't figure out how to reach was my doctor's office. If I had contracted some horrible disease, I probably just would have died. Does Bi-State want my blood on its hands?

This, of course, harkens back to the previous lesson: lack of freedom and of choice. As if managed care doesn't whittle down my options of doctors enough, I realize that most people who rely on public transportation have to consider accessibility as well. Take Dr. Crapply—he may have a suspiciously high patient mortality rate, but he *is*

Lesson 6 My Bus, My Choice

on the Cross County route.

Get this: A full 68 percent of MetroLink riders own at least one car. People do this *on*



purpose? I mean, I hug trees. I recycle most of the time. I understand the value of saving gas and minimizing pollution. But I had no idea how far some of these radical types would go. And, in a stroke of sheer genius, they do it disguised ... as business people.

Lesson

7

We're Bi and We're Proud!

It's not long before I'm a full-fledged Bi-State rider—and proud of it! Sort of.

People—especially those snooty car drivers—have a tendency to look down on those who ride the bus. They act as if it is some form of punishment.

I know, because so many times I've driven by a bus stop in less-than-perfect weather and looked at the people standing there, arms straining under the weight of briefcases or grocery bags and thought, "Look at those poor people."

And just as the master ultimately becomes the servant (or something pseudo-profound like that), I found myself laughing wryly as I realized that I had become one of those "poor people." (Tip: Do not laugh wryly at the bus stop, as people might mistake it as a sign of mental instability.)

In the office, my gas-guzzling, antisocial, earth-hating coworkers looked at me like I was a lost puppy. "Man, that sucks," they said, rife with faux-sympathy, before launching into the tale of their Worst Experience on Public Transit Story.

There I was, sitting at the bus stop outside my office while everyone who drove past me stared as if I were some sort of caged freak—when clearly there was no cage. So what did I do? I stared back, shaking my fist in the air, crying "Public transit equals power, man! Yeah, that's right! I'm riding the bus, buddy, AND I LOVE IT!"

And deep down inside, I realized something about my week as a bus rider that made me grin from ear to ear: It was almost over. ●

