

ROPE TOWS TO HEAVEN

Nicholas Gordon

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ROPE TOWS TO HEAVEN

Let us speak of the little town of Por Esampleau in Southern Fritalain.

Like most such towns, its winding narrow streets and cobblestone squares were choked with noisome, buzzing, fume-spewing automobiles. Perched on narrow sidewalks, crammed in front of public buildings, besieging fountains, blocking vistas, they were like a swarm of beetles some angry god had dumped on the town one vengeful afternoon, a curse that would afflict the lives of the townspeople until the god's fury could somehow be appeased.

Everyone agreed that life had been better — quieter, healthier, more civilized, more leisurely — before the advent of this plague. Yet no one could agree on how to rid the town of it.

Banning automobiles from one part of town merely piled up traffic in other parts of it. Restricting parking, raising gasoline taxes, charging tolls on bridges leading into town — all these were tried and failed to stem the onslaught. A yellow pall hung over the town, killing its older and weaker inhabitants, turning its rain to acid, eating away at its very stone. Yet the more punitive measures were taken to keep cars out, the more cars flooded in.

The truth is that nothing exists in isolation. The automobile had become embedded in a whole new

way of life, and could no more be removed than one could remove a heart or lungs or stomach and expect the patient to go on living. People had built houses which, without a car, would be well over a day's journey from where they worked. The picturesque mountains surrounding the town were dotted with houses, schools, factories, hospitals, churches, where before had been rock-strewn wilderness. Families that once had been crammed into two rooms on a dark street now lived in three-or-four-bedroom houses surrounded by yards and sun decks and even, in some cases, swimming pools.

There was no going back.

One day Rudolfo, a little boy who lived in one of those new houses in the hills, decided he would like to roller skate to school.

"It's over eight kilometers," his father said.

"So?" Rudolfo said. "I can do it in less than an hour."

"It's dangerous," his father said. "There are too many cars. Besides, when you come home, how are you going to climb the hills on roller skates?"

Rudolfo thought about that. Yes, it would be dangerous to roller skate on the highway. And getting up the hills would be difficult. He would have to take off his skates and walk.

Still, he would surely love to roller skate to school.

"Why can't people roller skate instead of driving cars?" he asked his father.

His father laughed. "It would be more fun, wouldn't it?" he said.

Which meant: How ridiculous!

Well, Rudolfo thought. Not so ridiculous.

He began to draw with his crayons on great white sheets of oak tag.

There would be a lane right down the middle of the highway just for roller skaters, with concrete barriers on either side.

For hills there would be rope tows, as there were on ski slopes, to pull the skaters along.

In fact, the rope tows would go everywhere, pulling people on skates, people in wheel chairs, people on bicycles, people in all sorts of contraptions on wheels.

To protect people from sun and rain, there would be narrow metal roofs above the rope tows.

A whole network of rope tows, along each major street or highway!

Older people and families with babies would ride in carts mounted on bicycle wheels.

Handicapped people would tool along in their wheel chairs.

Rudolfo could see all of the people of the town moving serenely to and fro through the streets, in and out of the hills, across the river, at about 15 kilometers per hour, hanging on to rope tows.

Wonderful!

He finished the pictures and sent them to the mayor of the town. Which, in 999,999 cases out of 1,000,000 would have ended the story right there. In

Por Esampleau, however, the mayor of the town at that moment just happened to be the owner of a sporting goods store.

The rest is history.

A visit to Por Esampleau would be instructive.

Yes, of course there are still automobiles. Not everyone is enchanted by the thought of traveling daily on roller skates pulled along by rope tows.

But automobiles no longer clog the streets. No longer does the yellow miasma arising from tailpipes eat away at lungs and stone. The roar of tens of thousands of explosions per second has subsided to an occasional annoyance, created mainly by truckers who, understandably, resist transferring their heavy loads onto carts mounted on bicycle wheels.

The punitive measures remain in effect. They are, however, made effective by the presence of an alternative which is pleasant, healthful, and cheap. The system of rope tows has evolved beyond even Rudolfo's imaginative dreams.

There are elaborate four-wheel vehicles which snap onto and off rope tows with a flick of the wrist. Little electric motors propel sedentary passengers up and down streets too small or remote to be served by rope tows.

On main thoroughfares, the rope tow roofs have sprouted clear plastic sides to protect against wind and rain. Highway speeds approach 25 kilometers per hour.

Surfaces adjacent to the rope tows have been

paved with hard rubber to reduce friction and the incidence of scraped knees.

Roller skates, bicycles, and other vehicles are available for rent at large parking lots in the regions surrounding the town.

The rope tows themselves have received a four-star rating in the Paparazzi Guide to Fritalan, surpassing even Pedro de Forcanelle's famous fresco, Piccolo de Manger en Tiffania, as the premier tourist attraction of the region.

Yet they are inexpensive to operate. One rope tow (there are all together 700 of them in the town and its environs) requires approximately one quarter of the energy per hour of a single four-cylinder vehicle traveling uphill at 40 kph. If the rope tow carries 2,000 people uphill for five kilometers in an average rush hour, that's 10,000 pkh (people kilometer hours) as against 160 pkh (assuming four passengers) for an automobile using four times the energy!

To avoid wasting energy, the rope tows do not run continuously, but are activated by the press of a button. Many townspeople use them only to ascend steep hills.

Incidence of heart attacks and strokes has decreased by 8.673%

With all these obvious advantages, it is surprising that no other town has adopted the rope tow transportation system as its own.

The cause of this failure is as instructive as the success of the system in Por Esampleau.

It is, simply, that the inhabitants of Por

Esampleau are known as *enfinos* to the people in the surrounding towns, or "children," both because they spend so much of their time on roller skates, and because their laughing, smiling, cheerful, carefree, and happy demeanor seems so out of place in adults.