

# THE TWENTIES

## WILL ROGERS on AUTO FATALITIES & PROGRESS

Syndicated column, April 4, 1926



All I know is just what I read in the papers. And there is something that we all read in the papers every morning of our lives, no matter what paper it is we pick up, and it has generally happened right in the town that particular paper is printed in. It's in there every morning, just like a Florida and California paper have the same headline all winter. "Big Blizzard Hits East! New York freezing! Tremendous suffering!" That stays there on that front page from November to March, even if New York has had a heat wave. But that's only during the winter. The one I am speaking of stares you in the face so constantly that you don't even read the names anymore.

"Four Killed and Three Wounded Yesterday by Automobiles in This Town." Maybe it's more; maybe it's less, but it's there every day. As I sit here writing this it's Monday and I have the *Chicago Tribune* in front of me and here is yesterday's toll just in: "12 Killed, 13 Hurt, By Autos in City Sunday." "Cook County death toll goes to 169, in 1926, an increase over this time last year of 44 deaths or 34 percent."

Now right over in the adjoining column of the same edition of the paper is the following: "Annual Auto bill of U.S. is 14 Billions of dollars per year."

That's billions, not millions, and it takes a smarter fellow than I am to even tell how many millions there is in ONE billion. I know our entire debt from the war that foreign Nations owed us, even if they had paid it, was only 11 billions. In another part of the paper it tells that 22 thousand met their death last year by Auto and that we are well on our way to beat that record. Fourteen billion dollars we paid to kill 22 thousand. About \$635,000 a piece, with no charge at all for the wounded. They will run at least two or three times as many as the killed, and FOR WHAT? Why, just to get somewhere a little quicker, that is if you get there at all.

Why don't we get in an Airship? We can get there three or four times as quick as an Automobile. No Detours. No kicking about bad roads. But no, we won't do that. We haven't got the nerve. Our Alibi is, "Well they haven't perfected them yet. They will be all right in a few years. There is a lot of improvements to make in them yet." That's the old excuse. Aeroplanes are twice as safe now as Automobiles. The only difference is that when there is an Aeroplane Accident the Guy in there gets hurt, and not some poor fellow crossing the street that is not responsible for you hitting him at all.

The Statistics show that of those 22 thousand killed, 70 percent were foot travelers. So you see the fellow in the Auto knows that even in case of accident his chances of being hurt is only 30 percent, while the one walking is 70 percent. It don't take any nerve to step into a fast car and go burning 'em up down the road, and maybe have a man step out from behind or in front of his car and you bowl him over, or a child maybe darting across the road and not seeing you. But when you step off the ground and into an Aeroplane the Driver says: "If you want speed I will show you some. There is nobody we will hit. Nothing we will run into. We got a good Ship and a wide open sky. Step in. I will shoot you out to Chicago in six hours."

Oh no. You want to burn up the Boulevard, but you haven't got the nerve to step in that, where if anything happens it ain't going to happen to anybody but you and the pilot. The pilot is willing. He knows his business. But old man Public is the one that has the streak of Orange up the old Spine-a-marino.

Europe is using Aeroplanes and flying everywhere, and in Automobile accidents they don't have a third as many as we do, even figured on a car per car basis.

The Public over here ain't waiting for Airships to get safer. The Public is just waiting till they can accumulate themselves some more nerve.

Now they call all these accidents PROGRESS. Well maybe it is Progress. But I tell you it certainly comes high priced. Suppose around 25 years ago when Automobiles were first invented, that a man, we will say it was Thomas A. Edison, had gone to our Government, and he had put this proposition up to them: "I can in 25 years time have every person in America riding quickly from here to there. You will save all this slow travel of horse and buggy. Shall I go ahead with it?"

"Why sure, Mr. Edison, if you can accomplish that wonderful thing, why we, the Government are heartily in accord and sympathy with you."

"But," says Mr. Edison, "I want you to understand it fully, in order to accomplish it and when it is in operation it will kill 15 to 20 thousand a year of your women and children and men."

"What! You want us to endorse some fiendish invention that will be the means of taking human life! Why do you insult us by asking us to listen to such a plan! Why, if it wasn't for our previous regard for you we would have you thrown into an Asylum. How dare you talk of manufacturing something that will kill more people than a war? Why, we would rather walk from one place to another the rest of our lives than be the means of taking one single child's life."

Now, that is what would have happened, if we had known it. But now it don't mean anything. It's just a matter of fact. Too bad. Well, he should have been watching. Maybe he was deaf, maybe blind or nearsighted. Well, if that's the case, he ought not to have been allowed out. If Cholera or Smallpox or some disease killed and left affected that many, why Congress and every agency of the Government would be working and appropriating money and doing every mortal thing necessary to do something about it. But as it is, we go right on. Build 'em faster and get better roads. So we can go faster and knock over more of them. This is the age of Progress.

Live fast and die quick. That's the Slogan. Let's get a run for our 14 Billion Bucks per year. We are always talking about putting something to a vote of the people. We seldom do. Our Legislatures make up our minds for us. But suppose you left it to a vote of everybody. "Do you want to keep on killing 22 thousand and maiming 50 thousand more every year, and pay for the privilege of doing it 14 Billions, besides your tremendous road tax?" Now, how do you think they would vote on that? It's a pretty tough thing to vote to take Human life. Of course it will never come up. The Humane side of anything can't compare with PROGRESS.

No, we will argue and fight and vote for something of far more importance, like maybe, "Should we send a Judge to the World Court to help misrule Europe?" Or perhaps, "The Long Haul or the Short Haul; shall they be made the same Price?" or "Shall the Lakes-to-the-Sea Canal go from Lake Erie or south from Lake Michigan?"

Those are the subjects that "mean the very existence of this great commonwealth." Imagine taking that 14 billion (making them pay it in just the same) and in two years our National Debt would be paid and that would do away with 70 percent of our Taxes, because there is where 70 percent goes is Interest on our own debt. It would be pretty near worth driving a Buggy and Team again if you knew you wasn't killing anybody and that you lived in a Country that didn't owe a single dime. Then we would also get the taxes of those 22 thousand. Sounds almost like a *Promised Land*, don't it? Well, don't get too enthusiastic about it, because nothing will be done about it. It would pass a National Vote, but it ain't going to get there.

I want my friends in the Automobile business to know that I have no personal feelings against them in the suggestion. Take for instance Henry Ford. You could take every nickel he had and make him start broke in some other business tomorrow, and in 10 years he would be manufacturing nine-tenths of the World's supply of bath tubs, or own eight-tenths of the Hot Dog stands in this Country. My plan wouldn't disscemede [sic] him in the least. Neither would it A. R. Erskine, of the Studebaker. He would make the best wagons and Buggys. Or Mr. Willis, or Roy Chapin or anybody less in the Automobile business. There is not a man in it that couldn't make a better living at something else.

*John N. Willys: president of the Overland Automobile Co.*

*Roy Chapin: co-founder of Hudson Motor Car Co, and Essex Motors Co.*