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HOMEMAKERS' CHAT

Thursday, August 18, 1938

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Subject: "DRIVER RESPONSIBILITY IN HIGHWAY ACCIDENTS." Information from the Bureau of Public Roads, U. S. Department of Agriculture. Publication available, "Highway Accidents, Their Causes and Recommendations for Their Prevention," for sale by the Superintendent of Documents, Washington, D. C.

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The human factor contributing to a bad automobile accident is one of the most difficult to control. Highways are being constantly improved and made safer, the mechanical details of automobiles are strengthened and perfected from year to year, but there is always the individual driver whose judgment is faulty, whose eyesight or hearing may be bad, or whose sense of responsibility and fair behavior toward other drivers on the road is deficient.

The Bureau of Public Roads of the U. S. Department of Agriculture recently participated in an extensive study of the causes of highway accidents. Among the many recommendations in its report, the Bureau strongly urged tightening up the tests and requirements before an applicant is given a license to operate any sort of motor-vehicle. Rigid examinations should include familiarity with the traffic laws of the State, of course, and a demonstration of the ability of the applicant to operate a motor vehicle reasonably well. Physical limitations, such as poor eyesight, color blindness, deafness, and mental disability, are grounds in 37 States for refusing a license, but what of such drivers in the other 12 States? (The report, for convenience, calls the District of Columbia a "State.")

Requirements for a driver's permit vary widely. It may surprise some of you to learn that 8 States do not even require the licensing of drivers! In 4 States a child of 14 may drive a car. In 4 others, 18 is the minimum age, showing a desire to be conservative. In 25 States the age limit is 16 years, corresponding to about the second or third year in high school.

That's the reason we are hearing so much at present about high school classes in safe driving. Where communities are keenly awake to the problems of safety on the highway they realize that every year there is a new crop of boys and girls reaching the age where it will be permissible to drive motor vehicles. The wiser heads are seeing to it that along with the proper "know-how" of starting, stopping, parking and rolling along, a sense of real responsibility is being instilled in these students.

They learn that while it's fun to drive a car, it's no fun to lie mangled in a hospital, or to go through life knowing that one's crazy driving has crippled or caused the death of a friend. Importantly connected with this lesson is the development of a sense of fair play toward the other users of the highways.

Emphasis on safe driving is considered by all investigators to be particularly necessary for this younger group, before they hold in their hands the power of life and death. It's no adult prejudice against youthful exuberance, but plain somber figures that lead teachers and safety committees to engage in this pre-driving educational movement.

The survey made under the direction of the bureau of accident records in the State of Connecticut brought out the fact that the younger drivers have an undue proportion of accidents. Drivers between 16 and 20 years of age had, in the period studied, between 1.24 and 2.10 times as many fatal accidents as the average for all ages. The age group 21 to 25 had between 1.29 and 1.65 times as many fatal accidents as the average. The figures show that together drivers from 16 to 25 constituted 23.15 percent of the driver population, but had 35.3 percent of all the fatal accidents -- or one and a half times as many as the laws of chance allow. Non-fatal accidents ran about as high in this age group as fatal accidents.

However, the educational campaign for safe driving does not stop with those about to become operators of motor-vehicles at the minimum age. It reaches out to make safety-conscious the older drivers who have formed habits which unconsciously govern them when operating a car. Sometimes these habits are formed in accordance with the traffic regulations and rules of the road in one city or State and make the driver an involuntary lawbreaker when he leaves his own community. Sometimes they are due to faulty teaching of the use of the car from the mechanical standpoint, but oftener they are personal habits, such as disregard for traffic lights and signs, driving too fast for road and traffic conditions, weaving from one traffic lane to another, or such carelessness as lighting cigarettes or putting on gloves without slowing down.

The accident study has shown that there is a fairly large group of drivers who are called "accident-prone." After they have been involved in one accident, they soon have another, or several more. The accident-prone drivers should be detected and either "reformed" or their driving privileges revoked.

Along with the constant safety education campaign, the Bureau of Public Roads urges greater uniformity in motor vehicle and traffic laws everywhere, and stricter enforcement of such laws by highway patrols and traffic courts. It is to be deplored that there are too few highway patrolmen at present to cover the necessary distances and regulate the large volume of traffic; but as time goes on and the public sees the need for additional safety guardians, more will doubtless be added.

Among the safety regulations that ought to be universally emphasized and strictly enforced, are those relating to excessive speed, reckless driving of any kind, driving while under the influence of liquor or narcotics, disregard of the rules of the road, and failure to stop after an accident.

At the present time penalties for traffic violations are not enforced strictly enough in many States. Revocation of a driver's license should be mandatory for more serious offenses such as manslaughter, driving under the influence of intoxicating liquor or narcotics, reckless driving, failure to stop, render aid, and disclose identity after an accident, and offenses connected with felonies.

One fact stands out with complete clearness: Possession of a license to operate a car or a motor vehicle of any sort should be regarded as a responsibility and a privilege, a "cum laude" award following a rigid examination of the candidate's fitness. Abuse of this privilege should result promptly in its revocation.

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