MORNING WITH A CAB DESPATCHER, July 18, 1956, by Kevin Lynch

Mr. Carr, Checker Taxi, 10 Gainsboro Street.

Company has about 208 taxis in fleet, of which perhaps 100-120 were active that morning. About 30-40 were waiting at stands or cruising, and about twice that number seemed to be carrying fares.

He received about 70 to 80 calls for cabs per hour, and has taken them at the rate of 180. This is in addition to the constant posting of cabs reporting fares or reporting unoccupied. I would guess about 6 - 10 transactions per minute: often a steady stream with operations backed up 3 or 4 deep.

Operates only with a microphone and a peg board, no map. Board has two parts: one for occupied or non-operating cabs, one for active but unoccupied cabs. A number is assigned to each cab: four digits - the first two referring to the year of make, and the second two, individual. Each cab has a peg, colored in groups according to the first two digits.

Pegs are racked in the "occupied" section by their numbers in order. The "waiting" section is divided into columns of holes, each column corresponding to a cab stand and its associated district. There are 52 "zones", arranged from L to R, and from top to bottom as follows:

Forest Hills
Charlestown
Airport
Cleveland Circle
Allston-Brighton
Parker House
Statler-Park Square
200 Berkeley
Copley Square
Deaconess
Beth Israel
Sears-Jersey
Park Drive-Beacon
605 Commonwealth
Kenmore Square
Somerset-Pensgate
Mass.-Commonwealth
Mass.-Boylston
(end top row)

Tremont
Touraine
Tremont & ?
Tremont-Dover
South Boston
Army Base-Fargo Bld.
Bowdoin Square
North Station
Post Office
So. Station
Mass.-Norway
Huntington-W. Newton
Mass.-Huntington
Gainsboro-Huntington
Hemenway-West
Longwood-Huntington
Brigham Circle
Children's Hospital
Riverway
(end middle row)

Field's Corner
Upham's Corner
Charles Circle
Lincolnshire
Bellevue
Jackson Square-Egleston Square
Roxbury Crossing
Slades
Mass.-Tremont
City Hospital
Mass.-Washington
Grove Hall
Dudley-Warren
Columbus-Dartmouth
Columbus-W. Newton
(end last row)

These used to be arranged "from Riverway on down" (presumably geographic), but found better simply to put most frequently used areas in easiest-to-reach points (the Right hand ends of middle and lower rows). (The biggest ranks were at Post Office and South Station, and these columns had most holes.)

Three telephone operators receive calls, and give out certain number of requests to cab telephone boxes (these requests are sorted by : North End,

Downtown, South Boston, South End, Beacon Hill, Back Bay and Upper B.B. (Back Bay?)) But majority go to despatcher at radio (80/hour does not include telephone despatcher).

Despatcher receives request, computes nearest "stand" (or cruising zone), calls first cab in line in this "stand", and places his peg in proper number in "occupied" section. Other cabs report local pick-ups, and their pegs are also removed. As fares are completed, cabs report their new "stand", and their peg put in proper column. This goes at rapid, overlapping rate.

Basic job thus to keep track of cabs by static zones, and also to figure nearest "stand" to request. Says he does this taking in account not only distance, but the one-way street system, and the time-distance on best routes due to traffic at that time, number of lights to be met with, etc.

Carr says he does this in his head so quickly that hard to describe, but that he does not picture Boston as a map (he never uses one). Rather as though he were driving through streets himself (probably at a very rapid rate). Basically he organizes from the main streets, associating addresses and minor streets from the way they "come off" the mains.

He is able without other aid to locate any address in Boston, South and East Boston by this means. Cambridge, Brookline, Newton are "harder" for him (i.e., he occasionally must look up minor streets in a directory (note: not a map)). But thinks he could master these areas too if needed, but his cabs are rarely used there.

Several times drivers ask for directions. These are always: basically a tracing of channels through which to go "along X street, left at the circle, right after two blocks on Y street" etc. This is reinforced by a recital of buildings in terms of their uses and names at the critical points "opposite the Bond Building" or "at the corner with two drug stores". Never any visual picture.

He thus has a complete picture of the street network of all Boston, linked by the main streets (especially the bridges and other mains which are the only ways across certain areas, he says) on a sort of moving belt system. This is liberally sprinkled with named or used-designated places. He knows how the numbers run on all but the tiniest streets (and often they run in opposite directions on parallel streets he says). This is retained by memorizing the numbers of all important buildings, and of all critical corners (i.e., the number at which Commonwealth crosses Mass. Ave.) Thus he can spot any number within two-three blocks.

He cannot visualize minor intersections, or ordinary buildings. Would not know where he was at some commonplace street corner, unless he had experienced driving up to it over known mains.

Has never thought of drawing a map of Boston as a whole, does not think he can, but will try it. He never pictures the city thus, as one whole. He drew several fragmentary maps for me, illustrating difficult places (corners or 2-3 block areas). Rough sketches, streets double-lined and of exaggerated

size, intersections often simplified to right angles.

Believes no area of Boston more difficult for him now, since "knows it all." But earlier, and for others ("outsiders") he mentioned several tricky points (Church Green near Dewey Square, Copley, Park Square etc.). These are all characterized by (1) more than four streets coming together: oblique intersections; and (2) one-way systems. This latter is what makes it especially hard for him to organize his routings.

Says he never thinks of hills, or of water.

The alphabetical organization of Back Bay and along St. Botolph Street is helpful.

Drove cab for four years (by which time he "knew" most of city), and has been five years on board, picking up speed and facility. No special training for despatchers - simply use experienced men, and learn on the job. Says he learned from driving experience, and by studying the directory (his Bible).

Driver two nights of the week - to keep up his acquaintance with the city, and with the changes of one-way systems, new streets or lights, building demolitions. (Note similarities to Twain's river pilots).

Apprentice now learning dispatching, took over noon hour. Carr says he knows city "pretty well" (meaning he must look up occasional minor streets). Obvious difficulty in keeping pace; in associating addresses with proper "stand", in giving detailed directions to puzzled driver. Requests tended to pile up, and Carr intervened twice to clear them..(and to tell driver to "go back again and look for 326 X Street, I know there is a building there - it is the ABX Manufacturing Co.").

Carr says he can go all day, and is obviously able to stay ahead of the pace I saw. But there are facial evidences of strain or effort at times as he organizes the way to a given place. He can be 4 or 5 behind in pegs to rack, carry them in head while handling other calls, and clear them in next lull - also give outgoing call while removing other pegs. Also engage in side conversations