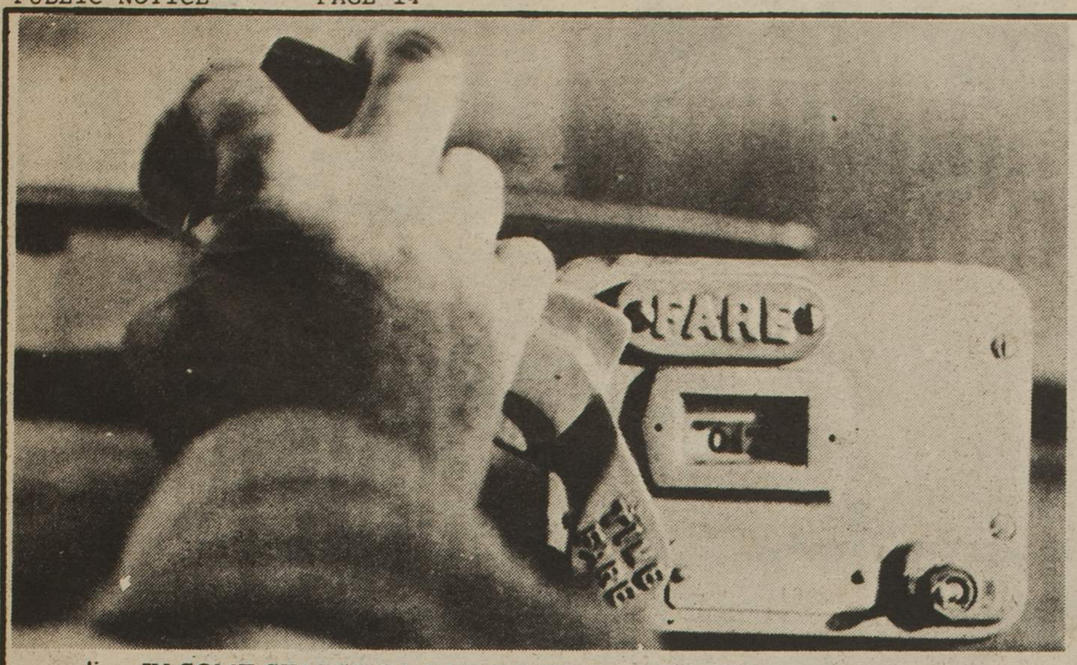


'...IN SOME STATES YA RUN BY TIME, NOT DISTANCE, AND THE METER'S ALWAYS CLICKIN AWAY...

... TAXI

The yellow lamplight of the cab shines onto his face like a spotlight.

"I wrote it after looking out over Lake Erie," he says. "Mom really likes it...lessee... 'The evening has arrived and the sun clings to the western sky, shining in all its glory as though hasting to give up this part of earth even for a little while. But, alas,soon it is gone and then a million stars begin to shine.'"

He puts his head on the steering sheel and scratches his scalp.

"Lessee...'a shooting star races across the sky as though restlessness has urged it to see what the rest of the universe looks like and it seems, almost, to be laughing all the way. As a quiet breeze whispers through the trees, the moon comes up from behind a mountain to keep the stars from being lonely until the sun comes out again to tuck them all to bed.'"

His eyes shine and moisten after he finishes. As he lifts his head from the wheel the same four Indian women he hauled earlier climb into the back seat.

"Small world, isn't it?" one of them says.

"It sure is, girls," Jones says. "Where are you all headed tonight?"

"We're goin' to the courthouse," another says.

"Courthouse! C'mon, I bet you're goin' to the Longbranch for beers. You just don't want the boys the there to know you got enough cash for cabfare. Whattya got, a big ten?"

"No, that's not it. We're just goin' to the courthouse," a third says.

Jones flips on the meter and drives them to the courthouse. After he changes a $20 bill for the $1.60 fare he watches the women walk up the street and into the tavern.

A cabbie has to master physical reality, know city's streets better than the lines on a lover's face. For Jones, living in Lawrence has been a long, but often interrupted, love affair.

"I love Lawrence," he says. "My family is here and so are my friends. And it's the kind of place where it's easy to make new friends if you show yourself a bit. Besides that, it's got some fancy eatin' places and I love to eat.

"But comin' back I see this town has changed a lot, grown mostly. Before, the stores would be open on Saturday night so the farmers could come in and do their shoppin' and when you walked the streets you knew everybody. Now you're lucky if you know anyone at all."

Jones doesn't own a car and takes a cab on his day off to get to a restaurant or the three private clubs he belongs to. Often he'll visit his 93-year old mother and sister at Babcock Place or drive them to see Kansas City or the KCI airport in his sister's car.

Come spring he'll drive the day shift so he can get off and do some fishing while there's still light.

"I don't think there's anything quite like sittin' out on the bank of the Kansas River with a hunk of New York cheddar cheese, a six-pack of beer and a fisin' pole," he says.

The river is half-frozen now, the boundaries of Lawrence are limited and sometimes, Jones gets road fever.

"I can't understand people who're single and don't have nothin' holdin' them down doing no traveling," he says. "It's such a beautiful country. I picked up a blind man the other day and told him that'd bother me more than anything, not bein' able to see this beautiful country. I haven't seen the Grand Canyon or been up into the Statute of Liberty yet so there's still things to do."

After eleven a pack of five high schoolers are huddled in front of Rusty's as Jones steers through the Hillcrest parking lot to pickup a fare at the bowling alley. When he turns the cab towards the kids he sees that one guy's getting beaten up on the cement.

He whips the cab across the empty lot and the four scatter and leave the fifth sitting on the pavement with a bloody nose. Jones jumps from his cab and makes sure the guy is alright and asks whether he needs a ride. Then he drives over to the bowling alley.

The man who's waiting for the cab outside the alley is in his 50's. His breath smells like kerosene.

"What the hell are you doin' Jones?" he shouts, slurring his words. "You were supposed to be here a long time ago. You're supposed to be getting me!"

Jones puts it in park, steps out of the cab and stands tall. "Lessee...how long you gotta walk, I can't remember...is it a long way?"

"You're goddamned right it is!"

"Then you'd better start walkin'," Jones says, as he gets in the cab and leaves the man to stare at the cab's red tailights.

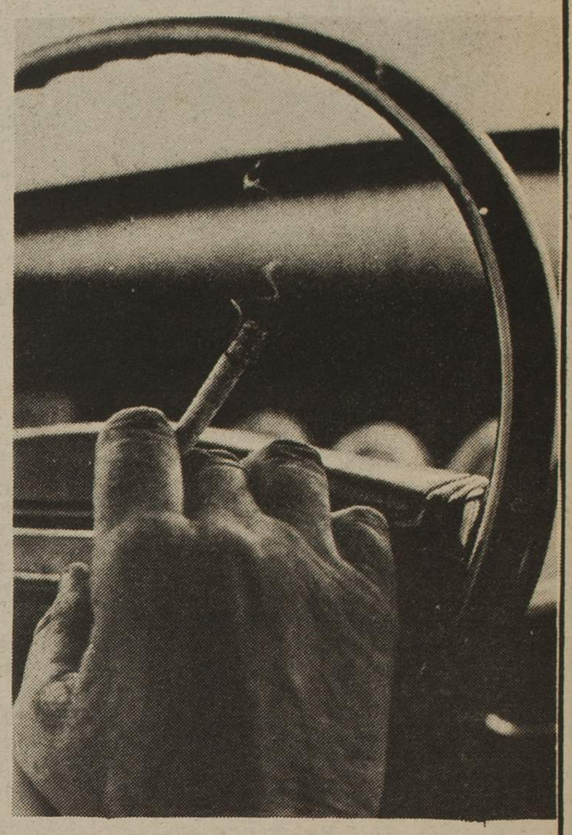
It's past midnight. The sun orange cabs orbit the empty depot and the only sound in the city is the singing of truck tires on the turnpike. Jones waits for a fare at the depot while the exhaust smoke from the cab rises blue and melts away in the night.

He lights up a cigarette and turns down the squawking radio.

"Ya know, I was wild and ornery when I was younger and did some things that I regret but that's all over now," he says. "And I may not have a schooling education, but I got an education in life, which, as far as I'm concerned, is a helluva lot better. I've met and known and loved some beautiful women and I got no complaints. If I were to die tomorrow I'd say my life has been good. I wouldn't have a dime in my pocket, though."

A Trailways bus turns in the station's drive and Jones moves the Checker along the curb a few feet so that he can see whether any of the riders want a cab.

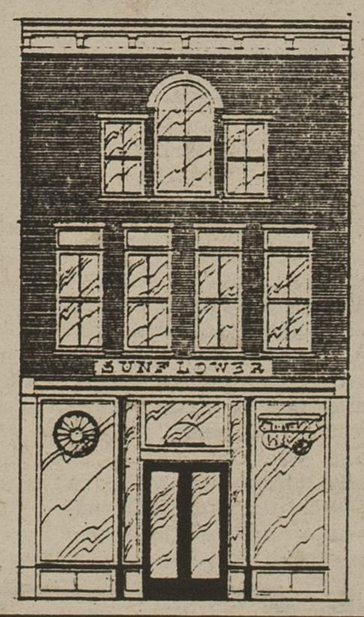
"I'll drive at least through the winter," he says. "No tellin' what the spring will bring. I might get an itch in my foot and take off. Like I say, I'd still like to see the Grand Canyon."



WAITING IN CHECKER NUMBER 3

The radio crackles. "Stand by there a few minutes wouldja three?"

"Sure. I'm not goin' anywhere," Jones answers.



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