

Charlie to Tap Out?

Apparently, the \$1 billion fare collection system scheduled for roll-out by the MBTA in 2024 has a serious drawback – the potential for increased fare evasion on the Green Line. One proposed solution by the MBTA would require riders to pay when they exit the trolley. Has anyone at the T looked at the name on the fare cards? Does no one remember why they were named for a poor guy named Charlie? One would think a transit agency which uses the image of the hapless commuter who, lacking funds to exit the system was doomed to “never return,” would not be so anxious to resurrect the same policy.

The story of Charlie began in 1949. A mayoral candidate, socialist Walter O’Brien, seized upon a new policy by the MTA (Metropolitan Transit Authority, precursor to today's MBTA) to require a nickel at certain end-of-the-line stops in the system. O'Brien seized upon the nickle as both an unfair tax and an issue of equity, reasoning the burden of the new fare policy would unfairly impact working-class residents. What better way to spread these portents of doom than with a bouncy, catchy campaign song? Enter Jacqueline Steiner and Bess Lomax Hawes who composed a song about the travails of man named Charlie, who was invented to represent the fate of all commuters under the new policy:

*Charlie handed in his dime at the Kendall Square station
And he changed for Jamaica Plain
When he got there, the conductor told him "one more nickel"
Charlie couldn't get off of that train*

*Well did he ever return, no he never returned
And his fate is still unlearned (what a pity)
He may ride forever 'neath the streets of Boston
He's the man who never returned...
("The MTA Song," ©1956 Atlantic Music Corp. ©renewed 1984)*

Walter O'Brien lost the 1949 election to John Hynes, and he retired from politics to become a librarian in Maine. Ten years later his campaign song struck gold, becoming a national hit when recorded by the Kingston Trio. Poor Walter couldn't even bask in the song's success. To assuage critics who felt the song made radical O'Brien a hero, the candidate's first name in the song was changed to George.

This isn't the first such attempt by the T to foist payment on exiting riders. In 2017 Keolis, the private firm hired to run the commuter rail portion of our rail transit system, faced what they claimed was a similar fare-evasion crisis. They publicly floated the proposal to have riders show proof of payment when they disembarked at Back Bay, North Station, and South Station stations. Those without tickets would have been expected to dig into their pockets for the fare (which surely cost more than a nickle.) Public outcry put the kibosh on the plan. Now another exit (fare) strategy, and poor Charlie is in danger again of being “the man who never returned.”