

XAVIER HIGH SCHOOL

TOWN STUDY PROJECT

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TAXI DRIVERS ON MOEN

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INTRODUCTION

Wherever you go on Moen Island you will find taxis. As the district center of Truk District, many people from the other islands in the lagoon and the outer islands have migrated here to establish their residence and seek for government or private sector jobs. These people came here to search for ways to earn a living. Today, Moen is one of the leading islands in Micronesia with its geometrical birth rate; thus, we calculate that in 1978 it will have a total population of more than 12,000. Over the previous years the number of registered taxis on Moen has increased rapidly and new styles of service have been introduced into this private business. Today, it is one of the most extensive private industries on the island. Moen has a total of about 11 miles of roads; however, only four miles are paved (see map). The taxi industry has extended to Dublon which has a sizeable number of taxis, Pefan which has only few, and with the roads under construction on Tol we hope to see taxis after the completion of the roads.

Observing the characteristics of the taxi business on Moen, we became aware of the fact that it is an unusual private industry. One unusual characteristic of this business is that, there are many unemployed Trukese who are taxi-drivers; furthermore, most of these drivers are youth. This business is perhaps a stepping stone for youth or other drivers toward government jobs. Furthermore, it is a business where a driver and owner are not certain of their profit. Its income is fluctuating because it depends largely on how many customers they pick up daily, weekly, or yearly. Because of its unusualness our group decided to do a research of it for this year's Town-Study Project.

We knew that the taxi business is part of the private sector, but we wanted to find out more about it. The purpose of this paper is to explore how taxis work as a private business on Moen. Moreover, to find out who drives taxis and why they drive them. In other words, to present an overall profile of taxi drivers. Furthermore, to investigate the changes and growth rate that took place after it first started.

We first went to the Moen Municipal Office and obtained a profile of registered taxis and Taxi Industry from the years 1974 to 1977. According to the profile, there were a total of 193 registered pickups, sedans, and mini-buses as taxis on Moen last year. Out of the 193 taxis, we interviewed 97 hired drivers and owners. In addition to these 97 interviews, we also interviewed 80 passengers, students and responsible people who had information pertaining to our topic.

During the three weeks of our Town-Study Project, we conducted all our interviews directly. In the early days of our research, we made appointments with owners and some other responsible people. We interviewed many taxi drivers while waiting for their customers especially at these places: hospital, post office, big enterprises, high schools,

private markets and other government facilities. As regular customers, we would ride along and interview the drivers.

While interviewing a driver or an owner, we would ask his age, home island, marital status, educational background, financial arrangement, daily gross, future plans, attitudes and comments about the work and relationship. Although some drivers were reluctant to give us all the time to finish our questionnaires, we would pace along and try to get as much information as we could. If a driver refused to reply, we would try to make legitimate guesses and assumptions. However, most of the taxi drivers and owners were willing to help us and we would like to acknowledge our thanks to all who contributed to the making of this paper.

Changes In The Taxi Industry

The introduction of the taxi business on Truk began during the Japanese Administration on the island of Dublon, the administrative center of Truk at that time. Only four people were allowed by the Japanese Government to drive the taxis owned by the Japanese employers. (At that time only Japanese were permitted to own a car). For a few years after World War II, the taxi business ceased, but resumed on Moen during the early years of the United States Civil Administration. In this era, there were six cars owned by the Trukese. In 1955 Keter Erniss turned his car into a taxi. A year later three other men; Fichita Bossy, Masaichy Angkel, and Kristy Killion did likewise. Most of the owners interviewed said that they found taxi service as a stepping stone to bigger businesses. Two of these men are successful business and political leaders today. So we suspect that they must have had the same reason above. Another reason would be that they wanted to "keep up with the Ernisses". When Erniss started a taxi business, the other owners may have started theirs to compete with him.

Due to the poor condition of the roads, all the taxis except for Fichita's car (a sedan) were jeeps. The fares, in comparison to today's fares, were very low -- only 10¢ per trip regardless of the distance.

As the years passed, the number of taxis increased with the number of imported cars. In 1955 Moen had only six privately owned cars. In 1965 the number went up to 99 cars and in 1975 it jumped to 366. The statistics obtained from the Moen Municipal Office concerning the number of taxis between 1974 to 1977 showed that the number of registered taxis in 1974 to be 78. In 1975, there were 124 -- a increase of 43% over the previous year. In the following year, 1976, the number went up to 189 (52% increase). This great increase during the three years, was due to the increase of the TT budget and the increase in the number of government jobs.

Many of the government employees bought cars and turned them into taxis. They thought that one good way to return the money they lost on the cars was by having a taxi. In 1977 the increase lessened. The number of taxis increased by only 2% over the previous year (see Table A) Perhaps the one major factor that led to the small increase in the number of taxis was CETA. CETA is a program supported by the United States Federal budget to train jobless youth and to give jobless heads of families an opportunity to work and earn money. Since most of the taxi drivers on Moen are youth, we suspect that this is where they applied for jobs and quit their taxi business.

Along with the increase in the number of taxis, we have the changes in styles as many imports came in. A majority of the taxis are pick-ups especially those imported from Japan (Toyotas, Mazdas, Izus); a sizeable number are sedans, and a few are buses (six in all). The buses we have this year are mini-buses, a bit smaller than the regular passenger buses which appeared in the past. These mini-buses can carry a maximum of ten people.

The fares have also changed with time. In the 1960's, the fares were 10¢ or 15¢, while in our day the fares stand at 25¢ to 50¢ depending on the length of the trip and the wishes of the owner.

In September some new twists were introduced into the taxi business by Tatasi Wainit. His two foreign-styled cabs are equipped with signs attached to the top of the hoods and are equipped with a CB transmitter radio set, and a meter which is not used for indicating fares but only the number of miles. These reliable taxis can be called for service anytime from 7:00 A.M to 12:00 P.M on weekdays and from 7:30 A.M to 12:00 P.M on weekends. The fares are not paid individually by the passengers but are paid in trips. Usually the fares are: 50¢ per trip in town and 75¢ to \$1 out of town to the other villages. Tatasi has travelled to the United States, Japan, and Southeast Asia where he saw such services in operation.

Taxi Owners

We can distinguish two kinds of taxi owners: single owners -- owners of only one taxi; and the multiple owners -- owners of more than one. We have found it necessary to separate these two groups because of the different business practices they employ and the different aims of the owners.

Of the 193 registered taxis on Moen, we were able to obtain information from 97 taxi drivers and owners. Of the 97 interviews, 15 of them were personal interviews with the single owners. In addition to the 15 owners interviewed, we were able to gather information on the owners we were not able to meet from their taxi drivers. From our interviews, we found that the majority of the single owners are government employees. They are all married and their families are supported by their salaries.

Often, their salaries may not be enough to support their families so they have to turn their cars into taxis in order to get additional money for living expenses. A great number of them have plans for future businesses.

Today a new pick-up costs \$4,000, a sedan \$3,400, and a mini-bus \$4,800. Comparing these costs to a Micronesian government employee's annual salary, we found that he could not afford such an amount. Moreover, these government employees have families and relatives to support. Raising the money needed to buy the car takes a long time, so in most cases owners would borrow from the bank or credit unions. Most of these single owners seem to have bought these cars with the intention of using them for their own personal use. However, they turned their cars into taxis in order to get back, in part at least, their money.

Out of the total of six multiple owners on Mœn, our group was able to obtain information from four of them. The other two multiple owners' information were given to us by their taxi drivers. They are successful people who have had experiences in dealing with money and have expanded their small stores into enterprises and bigger stores. Unlike the single owners, they do not buy their cars for personal use, but expressly for business. Five of them have been doing this service for several years. The other just started last year with a new type of taxi service. In comparison to the 26 single owners who split their gross on a 50-50 basis with their salaries, all of these multiple owners divide their profits into thirds. Their drivers get one third, one third goes to the bank for future cars, and the other third goes to the car's expenses like fuel and repairs.

Economics Of Taxi Business

The amount of money that a taxi driver takes in on a regular day when he is working hard can approach \$18 to \$20. When he is not lucky, when the weather is bad, or he is driving for fun, he may get \$7 to \$10 a day. However, the range varies considerably. One driver may get or earn anywhere from between \$7 to \$25 each day; another might get \$15 to \$30; while a third might just get between \$5 to \$20. Judging from what the majority of the drivers felt their average gross to be, we came up with about \$19. However, \$4 is subtracted for fuel expenses, which leaves us with an average daily income of \$15.

From our interviews, we found that all the single owners are government employees. Because these government employees either have no experience or little knowledge of business, they are often not aware of whether they are losing or profiting. Even when they are aware of it, they are not bothered by it because they are not businessmen who support themselves on the money they make from their taxis. They can

rely on their government job salaries. We know that a new pick-up costs about \$4,000 and will ordinarily last two years. Based on a \$15 average daily income, after two years, the taxi income will amount to \$6,000. This income is based upon roughly 300 operating days per year. A taxi is out of service approximately two months out of the year for service and repairs. The \$6,000 is then divided into half, which leaves the owner with only \$3,000. Because most of these owners are not mechanically inclined, they take their cars to small private garages for repairs which may cost him \$50 for each visit. Within two years, if his car is fixed twice each year, the owner could spend \$200 on repairs. Comparing the \$4,200 the owner spent on the cost of the car and repair expenses, and the \$3,000 that he gets as his share after two years, he is losing \$1,200.

Taxi Owners With 50% Cut Salaried Drivers

Cost of a new pick-up -----	\$4,000
Repairs expenses -----	\$200
Total expenses -----	\$4,200
Owners share of gross income -----	\$3,000
Net loss -----	\$1,200

Compensation For Drivers

Based on the information gathered from the 81 interviewed taxi-drivers, we learned that there are drivers who do not have a fixed salary. Of the 81 interviewed, 53 of them reported that they do not have a fixed salary. (see Table B). All of these 53 drivers are closely related to the owners. All of them are living with the owners, with the exception of four drivers who are married and who live separately from the owners but depend on them for living expenses. The majority of the 53 taxi drivers are youth with incomplete education. Since they have poor educational background, they also have a little chance of getting a desk job in the government or private sector. Being employed as a taxi-driver is their only hope of earning money. These drivers get money from the owner according to whatever arrangement they may have with the owners and they use the money for recreation, clothes, and other personal needs.

Some drivers, however, have a fixed salary. Of the 81 taxi-drivers interviewed, 28 claimed to have a fixed salary (see table B). After categorizing these two groups (fixed and not fixed salary), we learned that most of these 28 drivers are not related ; only a few are related to the owner. Furthermore, they are generally older -

people with families to support. In most cases drivers working for a single owner get a 50% share of his daily or weekly gross. The other drivers working for a multiple owner get one-third of what they collect each day or biweekly. The driver who gets a 50% share may earn up to \$3,000 and the driver who gets a third of the take earns an average of \$1,500 annually. (In this figure, \$15 is used as the base for a daily gross for a driver and he works 300 days in a year).

Personal Background of Taxi-Drivers

No matter where a person is from, he can drive a taxi if he has a license for driving. To be qualified, a taxi driver must be 16 years or over and physically capable of driving. A person does not need a high school diploma or a college degree in order to be a taxi driver. Taxi service does not discriminate on the bases of citizenry, culture or sex. In Truk all present taxi drivers are male. Seeing these easy steps to becoming a taxi driver, we got information on the personal background of these drivers on Moen. In doing so, we inquired into their home islands, educational backgrounds, reasons for driving and their comments on the work.

Due to the fact that this taxi service is operating on Moen Island, it is easy for the Moenese to get a car or become a taxi driver. 50 out of the 81 taxi drivers interviewed are from Moen (see table C). Only eight of the drivers are from the other islands in the lagoon. 23 came from the outer islands of Truk (see same table). They came to Moen in search of jobs. Others came to school and when they dropped out of school, they chose to remain on Moen because they find life more enjoyable and lively than the quiet life on their islands. Most of these outer islanders are from the Mortlocks.

As we investigate the educational backgrounds of the taxi drivers we realized that they have a small chance of getting a government desk job. 34 of them (42%) out of the total of 81 taxi drivers interviewed graduated from elementary schools but did not complete high schools. 26 of them (32%) graduated from high schools. Only 2 (3%) finished two years of college. The remaining 19 (23%) are without any formal education (see table D). Thus, we can say that taxi driving is a job for those people who are unable to get a desk job in the government.

Dealing with a man's reasons for driving a taxi, we have salaried drivers who drive around to earn money. The youth, on the other hand have other reasons for driving. They drive taxis for popularity. They want to be known to all people especially the girls, "I feel great when a girl sits beside me." They also drive around to escape the native dirty work in the land. The main and perhaps common reason for these people driving taxis is because of prestige. They see that driving-

a taxi is a cleaner and higher work than working in the land. They hate the people to look down upon them as bums or ' good for nothing ' people.

There are drivers who like being a taxi driver and there are, on the other hand, others who dislike it. Those who like it find it as an easy, a "no sweat" job. As one of them stated, " Driving is easier than a government job, I never run out of cash." Those who dislike it find the government job much better. These people are mostly the youths without salaries, and the reason why they like the government job much better is because they want to have money of their own. They are always on the lookout for vacancy in the departments. The majority of them have applied for the CETA and will quit their job as taxi drivers if they are accepted into the program. They feel that their present job is just a temporary one leading to a government job.

Summary

This concludes the three weeks' research on the profile of Moen taxi drivers based upon the data and interviews collected.

In the year 1955, the taxi industry started with a jeep here on Moen. In the preceeding years, it has increased in numbers. Today, we have a total number of 193 registered taxis. The fares kept on changing; innovations were introduced. Today, the industry is bigger than anyone could have predicted.

There are two distinct kinds of owners. The taxi industry enables single owners to pay back the loans on their cars, to get extra money for living expenses, and to possibly build up bigger private bussinesses of their own. Multiple owners began their taxis trade as an extention of their private businesses. Unlike single owners, they are professional businessmen who are out to earn a profit.

The majority of the taxi drivers on Moen are youth who are related to the owners. They do not receive a fixed compensation from the owners because they depend on these owners for food, money and other personal needs. In most cases, these youth drive taxis for fun, prestige, popularity, and respect. A sizeable number of these youth came from the outer islands of Truk. On the other hand, the taxi drivers who have a 50-50 split salary income with the owners are generally older men with families who depend on the taxi money for living expenses. Along similar lines, the small group who have a 33% cut salary also work to support themselves and their families. The taxi industry has become an almost indispensable part of daily life on Moen. It is an important business on the island --important to the owners, drivers and to the people serviced. The taxis business seems likely to remain with us and will only continue to grow in the years ahead.

Table A: Number of Taxis Over the Previous Years

Year	No. of Taxis	Percentage of increase
1974	87	
1975	124	43%
1976	139	52%
1977	193	2%

Table B: Employment Status of Taxi Drivers

	Salaried Drivers	Non- salaried Drivers	Total
No. of Drivers	28	53	81
Percentage Total	35%	65%	100%

Table C: Home Islands For Drivers

	Moeneese	Other Islands	Outer Is.	Total
No. of Drivers	50%	8	23	81
Percent of Total	62%	10%	28%	100%

Table D: Educational Background on Drivers

	Compl. 8gr-not 12gr	12grade	2yrs coll.	none	Total
No. of Driver	34	26	2	19	81
Per. of Total	42%	32%	3%	23%	100%

MAP OF MOEN ISLAND AND TRAFFIC ROUTE

