
The Family Car

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Beginning in the 1920s for the middle class and in the 1950s for the working class, automobility revolutionized the lifestyle of the typical American family. Despite the development of rudimentary automobile cultures in the advanced capitalist countries of Western Europe and in Japan in the post–World War II period, the family car remains a uniquely American institution; in the words of French sociologist Jean-Jacques Chanaron, “Except for North America, the automobile [still] is not integrated into the banality of daily life.”¹

Family togetherness was a major benefit anticipated by early proponents of automobility. “Next to the church there is no factor in American life that does so much for the morals of the public as does the automobile,” E. C. Stokes, a former governor of New Jersey and the president of a Trenton bank, claimed in 1921. “Any device that brings the family together as a unit in their pursuit of pleasure is a promoter of good morals and yields a beneficent influence that makes for the good of American civilization. If every family in the land possessed an automobile, family ties would be closer and many of the problems of social unrest would be happily resolved. . . . The automobile is one of the country’s best ministers and best preachers.”²

Intergenerational Conflict

Contrary to Stokes’s widely shared expectations, by the end of the decade it was evident that any tendency of automobility to bring the family together was ephemeral—although an increasing number of people did find the Sunday drive a preferable alternative to attending church. “No one

questions the use of the auto for transporting groceries, getting to one's place of work or the golf course, or in place of the porch for 'cooling off after supper,'” Robert and Helen Lynd found in their 1929 study. “But when auto riding tends to replace the traditional call in the family parlour as a way of approach between the unmarried, ‘the home is endangered,’ and all-day Sunday motor trips are a ‘threat against the church’; it is in the activities concerned with the home and religion that the automobile occasions the greatest emotional conflicts.”³

Although in theory the family car could bring husbands, wives, and children together in their leisure-time activities, the divorce rate continued to climb in the 1920s, and conflicts between parents and children reached a new height during the decade. A major source of intergenerational conflict in Middletown was the use of the family car. There is no evidence that the motorcar contributed to the divorce rate, but then neither did it, as early proponents of automobility expected, stop the divorce mill from grinding.

That the motorcar undercut parental supervision and authority is unequivocal. “The extensive use of this new tool by the young has enormously extended their mobility and the range of alternatives before them; joining a crowd motoring over to a dance in a town twenty miles away may be a matter of a moment's decision, with no one's permission asked,” the Lynds pointed out. “Furthermore, among the high school set, ownership of a car by one's family has become an important criterion of social fitness: a boy almost never takes a girl to a dance except in a car; there are persistent rumors of the buying of a car by local families to help their children's social standing in high school.”⁴

In Southern California the automobile had become by the mid-1920s “a social essential” for teenagers: dating now required a car, and “the automobile was seen as a tremendous threat to parental control, enabling children to escape entirely and with great ease from all the restrictions of their home environments.” A 1921 report from the captain of the Los Angeles County motorcycle squad to the Board of Supervisors noted, “Numerous complaints have been received of night riders who park their automobiles along country boulevards, douse their lights and indulge in orgies.” In a 1925 address the Pasadena police chief complained that “the astounding number of ‘coupe lovers’ who park on dark streets in the Crown City necessitates the use of nearly all the police machines on patrol duty.” High-speed “joy riding” by youths under the influence of alcohol, frequently in stolen cars, became an even more serious problem for Southern California police during the 1920s.⁵

Social workers and teachers put the blame for increasing juvenile delinquency on parents who made cars too easily accessible to their chil-

dren, yet admitted that if boys were not given use of the family car for dates, they might steal one. An average of about 8,000 cars a year were stolen in Los Angeles during the 1920s, with a peak of 11,541 stolen in 1926. Car theft was described in 1921 as “the least risky and most profitable of all major criminal operations.” The chief of the California State Motor Vehicle Division reported in 1929 that stolen cars were associated with at least 70 percent of major crimes in the state. That over 90 percent of the cars stolen were recovered by the police was mainly due to the fact that most were stolen by youths under eighteen years of age, used for a specific purpose, and then abandoned. The superintendent of a state reform school reported in 1929 that 35 percent of his inmates had been committed on a charge of auto theft.⁶

Courtship and Mating

The impact of the automobile on courtship and mating has been most thoroughly studied and wittily portrayed by David L. Lewis. “Cars fulfilled a romantic function from the dawn of the auto age,” he writes. “They permitted couples to get much farther away from front porch swings, parlor sofas, hovering mothers, and pesky siblings than ever before. . . . Courtship itself was extended from the five-mile radius of the horse and buggy to ten, twenty, and fifty miles and more. Sociologists duly noted that increased mobility provided by the motorcar would lead to more cross-breeding and eventually improve the American species.” However, autos did more than facilitate romantic love among couples who would marry and settle down to rear children. “They also have influenced American culture by abetting prostitution, creating the ‘hot pillow’ trade in tourist courts and motels, [and] providing an impetus for drive-in restaurants and movies.”⁷

The traditional visit on the veranda or parlor call was replaced by the automobile date to a dance or movie that ended up in the local lovers’ lane. No one ever has proved that the 38-inch-long seat of a Model T was more convenient or comfortable than a haystack, and Henry Ford allegedly designed the Model T seat so short to discourage the use of his car as a place in which to engage in sexual intercourse. But determined couples found ways to thwart Ford’s intentions, and the auto makers came to facilitate lovemaking in cars with such innovations as heaters, air conditioning, and the tilt steering wheel. The 1925 Jewett introduced the fold-down bed, and the bed conversion option on Nash cars after 1937 became popular as “the young man’s model.” The height of accommodation to sexual drive in automobile design came in the vans of the 1970s, called by

Lewis “the most sexually oriented vehicles ever built.” Van owners tended to be single men under 35 years of age; and vans featured interiors with all the amenities of a bordello and suggestive exterior murals and slogans that, in Lewis’s words, “leave no doubt as to their owner’s motives. . . . Vans also are a prostitute’s motorized dream.”⁸

Thousands of drive-in fast-food stands were built at the edges of towns in the 1920s and 1930s, after the first, Royce Hailey’s Pig Stand, was opened in Dallas in 1921, and the Pig Stand Company was formed. The drive-ins served hamburgers and hot dogs washed down with soft drinks or milk shakes, to patrons who remained in their cars. The food was delivered on trays by low-paid teenaged help, called carhops. A&W, which followed the Pig Stand Company into business with its national chain of drive-ins in 1924, introduced “tray girls,” who became a major attraction to the main patrons of the drive-ins—youths cruising in cars in search of sexual adventure. In most areas of the country, the drive-in business was seasonal. Many cities passed restrictive legislation to abate the nuisance of drive-in noise and litter. At the height of their popularity in the mid-1960s, there were some 35,000 drive-in eateries in the United States, with California and Texas leading in numbers.

The first drive-in movie theater was opened in Camden, New Jersey, on June 6, 1933, by Richard M. Hollingshead, Jr., who was granted a patent on the idea. With his cousin, Willis Warren Smith, owner of a chain of parking lots, Hollingshead formed Park-In Theaters, opened a second drive-in theater on Pico Boulevard in Los Angeles in 1934, and began selling his idea to other entrepreneurs for a fee of \$1,000 plus 5 percent of their gross receipts. The drive-in theater consisted of a giant screen; a building that housed a projection room, a stand dispensing soft drinks and snacks, and rest rooms; and rows of parking spaces on a large lot on the outskirts of town. Relatively low overhead costs compared with those of downtown theaters were passed on in the form of low admission prices, and family patrons had neither to dress up nor to worry about leaving young children at home with a babysitter. The main drawback was that, like the drive-in food stand, the drive-in theater was a seasonal business closed for the winter months in most areas of the country.

Only a handful of drive-in theaters were in operation nationwide as late as 1946. But they proliferated in the 1950s with expanding automobile ownership, and at their peak of popularity in 1958 there were 4,063 of them in the United States. After that the drive-in theaters became a casualty of home television and entered a period of gradual decline.

Drive-in theaters made special attempts to appeal to a predominantly family trade, both in the low admissions charged and in the provision of special facilities to amuse children, such as playgrounds and animal parks.

Nevertheless, they quickly gained reputations as “passion pits” where the show in the cars was usually better than the one on the screen.

Similarly, the cabin camps that came to dot the roadside after 1925 were assailed by FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover in 1940 as “camouflaged brothels.” He claimed that many so-called tourist courts refused accommodations to travelers to concentrate on the more lucrative local “couples trade” and that some Texas cabins were rented as many as sixteen times a night, while others provided prostitutes.

Mobile lovemaking has declined appreciably in the United States since the 1970s. Urban sprawl, a result of auto-induced decentralization, has diminished greatly the availability of safe trysting spots. Gas-guzzling vans have become less popular with escalating oil prices following the oil shocks of 1973 and 1979. The downsizing of passenger cars places severe limits on the possible positions for expressing passion. Most important, changing sexual mores and standards of community and parental acceptance have resulted in living arrangements that make mobile lovemaking largely unnecessary. “Who needs cars when beds are so readily available?” Lewis asks rhetorically.⁹

Changing Woman’s Role

Motor Trend in 1967 cited a survey showing that out of 1,100 marriages nearly 40 percent had been proposed in an automobile. Motorization profoundly affected the lifestyles of middle-class couples whose “spoon, moon, and June” back-seat romance rhymed with family life in a suburban home.

To begin with, as early as the 1920s automobility was making the role of the middle-class housewife vastly different from her mother’s. Despite the traditional association of the automobile as a mechanical object with men and masculinity in American culture, automobility probably has had a greater impact on women’s roles than on men’s, and women have been enamored of the motorcar from the outset of its diffusion.

Because driving an automobile requires skill rather than physical strength, women could control one far easier than they could a spirited team. They were at first primarily users of electric cars, which were silent, odorless, and free from the problems of hand-cranking to start the engine and shifting gears. Introduction of the self-starter in 1912, called the “ladies’ aid,” and of the closed car after 1919, which obviated wearing special clothes while motoring, put middle-class women drivers in conventional gasoline automobiles in droves. Most of the comfort and convenience options added to cars since then—including vanity mirrors, plush

upholstery, heaters, air conditioning, and automatic transmissions—were innovated with the ladies especially in mind.

Since the 1920s the bulk of automobile advertising has attempted to appeal to women, who generally have the final say in the selection of the family car. One of the major pioneers of this strategy was Edward S. “Ned” Jordan, who eschewed engineering language to focus on the emotional richness of the car for women drivers. His classic 1923 ad for his Playboy car began: “Somewhere west of Laramie there’s a bronco-busting, steer-roping girl who knows what I’m talking about. She can tell what a sassy pony, that’s a cross between greased lightning and the place where it hits, can do with eleven hundred pounds of steel and action when he’s going high, wide and handsome. The truth is—the Playboy was built for her.”

Despite a pervasive myth to the contrary, as early as 1925 the American Automobile Association announced that tests had proved conclusively that women drivers were not only as competent as men but even more stable and predictable in their responses to driving situations. Statistics on motor vehicle accidents and traffic violations continue to bear this out and to demonstrate that the most dangerous drivers are young males.

Until the automobile revolution, in upper-middle-class households groceries were either ordered by phone and delivered to the door or picked up by domestic servants or the husband on his way home from work. Iceboxes provided only very limited space for the storage of perishable foods, so shopping at markets within walking distance of the home was a daily chore. The garden provided vegetables and fruits in season, which were home-canned for winter consumption. Bread, cakes, cookies, and pies were home-baked. Wardrobes contained many home-sewn garments. Mother supervised the household help and worked alongside them preparing meals, washing and ironing, and house cleaning. In her spare time she mended clothes, did decorative needlework, puttered in her flower garden, and pampered a brood of children. Generally, she made few family decisions and few forays alone outside the yard. She had little knowledge of family finances and the family budget. The role of the lower-middle-class housewife differed primarily in that far less of the household work was done by hired help, so that she was less a manager of other people’s work, more herself a maid-of-all-work around the house.

Automobility freed such women from the narrow confines of the home and changed them from producers of food and clothing into consumers of national-brand canned goods, prepared foods, and ready-made clothes. The automobile permitted shopping at self-serve supermarkets

outside the neighborhood and in combination with the electric refrigerator made buying food a weekly rather than a daily activity. The car also permitted attendance at movie matinees followed by downtown shopping sprees or getting together with the girls for lunch or an afternoon of bridge.

Far less household help was needed, as the household stopped being a producer of many items, and as domestic servants were replaced by a bevy of increasingly sophisticated electric vacuum cleaners, ranges and ovens, mixmasters, irons, washing machines, and clothes dryers. Control of the family budget inevitably passed to Mother as she took over the shopping and became the family expert on the technology of household appliances.

She was the primary user of the family car, for shopping, for carting the kids to school and Little League practice, and for a myriad of other activities. Consequently, her views on what kind of car the family needed often became a mandate for the purchase of a nine-passenger station wagon. "By midcentury," writes Ruth Schwartz Cowan, "the automobile had become, to the American housewife of the middle classes, what the cast-iron stove in the kitchen would have been to her counterpart of 1850—the vehicle through which she did much of her most significant work, and the work locale where she could be most often found."¹⁰

Domestic Economy

Folklore notwithstanding, the impact of the automobile on the bedroom has been far less profound than its impact on the kitchen. And it was the kitchen that was the heart of the turn-of-the-century middle-class home.

In conjunction with electric kitchen appliances, particularly the refrigerator, the automobile transformed shopping and food preparation. The electric refrigerator with freezing compartment, which permitted large amounts of perishable foods to be purchased at one time and stored until needed, was appropriately developed and popularized by GM's Frigidaire Division and by Nash-Kelvinator during the 1920s and 1930s. Now it was possible to load up the car with a week's worth of food—more and more of it partially prepared convenience food—at a one-stop, self-serve market whose prices were lower than those at the specialty stores.

Prior to the widespread diffusion of the automobile-refrigerator complex, shopping for foodstuffs and housewares was virtually an everyday chore, at a series of retail specialty stores operated by the dry goods merchant, the butcher, the fishmonger, the produce dealer, and the baker. Orders read to clerks were boxed from stocked shelves behind a counter in

the grocery store. Meats were cut to order and wrapped by the butcher. Fresh vegetables were selected under the peddler's watchful eye. Credit was extended to steady customers, and phoned-in orders were delivered to the door. The large amount of store labor necessitated by this personal service, together with uneconomical wholesale purchasing in small lots, resulted in relatively high retail prices for foodstuffs.

The self-service market was introduced by Clarence Saunders, who opened his first Piggly Wiggly store in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1916 and patented the idea. Instead of reading orders to a clerk behind a counter, the customer entered the Piggly Wiggly through a turnstile, picked up a basket, and followed a one-way "circuitous path" along which groceries were stacked, including perishables in refrigerated cases. The path ended at a "settlement and checking department," where the prices of the goods selected by the customer were totaled on an adding machine and the purchases were bagged by a checker. The innovation won immediate popularity, and the changeover of retail food sales to self-service was evident by the early 1920s. By the end of that decade over 2,600 Piggly Wigglys were in operation.

Simultaneously, there was a movement away from independently owned small specialty stores to chain stores that could purchase in large lots and pass the savings on to customers, and to "combination stores" that sold a full range of foodstuffs under the same roof. The largest corporate chain was the Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company (A&P). Founded on the eve of the Civil War, the A&P mushroomed from only 372 stores in 1920 to over 16,000 by 1927, compared to some 4,000 stores for Kroger, A&P's chief corporate-chain rival. The policy of the chain stores was to replace several smaller specialty stores with a larger combination store, resulting in fewer stores serving a given area. By 1932 some 4,500 of A&P's 15,700 stores were combination stores.

The last outpost of the clerk was the meat market, where butchers continued to cut and wrap meat to order through World War II. Pre-packaged meats were introduced by A&P in 1939. Meats packaged in plastic wrap and displayed in self-serve refrigerated cases, along with partially prepared frozen foods, introduced in the 1930s as "frosted foods," became common after World War II with the rise of the discount "supermarket," a store several times larger than the typical four- to six-thousand-square-foot combination store of the 1930s.

The marketing concept of the discount supermarket was innovated by Michael Cullen, who opened a chain of fifteen discount supermarkets in the New York metropolitan area during the Depression. The savings from large carload purchases of foodstuffs at bargain Depression prices

were passed on to customers at his huge King Kullen markets. The first use of the term “supermarket” in a corporate trademark was probably by Albers Super Markets, Inc., of Cincinnati, in 1933.

The kitchen began to lose its status as the center of household activity as shopping and food preparation came to require far less time, and moreover as automobility encouraged families to eat out far more often. Automobile tourism created a demand for wayside family restaurants, and a meal out became the capstone of the Sunday drive or weekend automobile outing for hungry, tired families. Chester H. Liebs points out that coincident with the rise of mass personal automobility, “the nation . . . entered a full-fledged eating-out boom, with the estimated number of restaurants jumping 40 percent between 1910 and 1927.”¹¹ The experience of eating out also changed dramatically for the middle-class family—from a leisurely, full-course meal in the formal atmosphere of a hotel dining room, to the quick pickup of a hamburger and french fries in a come-as-you-are roadside diner.

The final blow to the hegemony of the kitchen came with the rise since the 1950s of the limited-menu, self-service restaurant, innovated and exemplified by McDonald’s. In 1948 the McDonald brothers, Maurice and Richard, dismissed the carhops from their San Bernardino, California, drive-in restaurant, reduced their menu to a minimum, and began to develop assembly-line techniques for the preparation of food. By 1952 the McDonalds were selling a million fifteen-cent hamburgers and twenty-cent malts and shakes, and 160 tons of ten-cent orders of french fries a year at their food factory, where the combination of a hamburger, french fries, and a beverage could be served to a customer in twenty seconds. Ray Kroc, a former Lily Cup and milk-shake machine salesman, began franchising the McDonald concept and name in 1954 and by 1960 had sold some 200 franchises nationwide. The concept caught on immediately, with Burger King and Kentucky Fried Chicken becoming McDonald’s chief competitors. Liebs observes that by the mid-1950s “restaurant trade journals began to thicken with advertisements soliciting franchises for a wide assortment of fast-food ventures. . . . By 1960 thousands of other limited-menu, self-service roadside franchises serving everything from tacos to doughnuts to pizza had become familiar fixtures along the Miracle Mile.”¹²

Hearth and Home

Automobility transformed the architecture of the American middle-class house. Folke T. Kihlstedt describes this process of change, beginning with

the pre-automobile era, when “the front porch still functioned as the buffer zone between the privacy of the house and the communality of the neighborhood. . . . The parlor and the front porch supported a formal style of life . . . built around an accepted social hierarchy in which a progression of architectural spaces, from front porch (or veranda) to hall to parlor to library (or sitting room) and to dining room, were related to increasing degrees of intimacy.”¹³ The unsightliness and stench of the stable kept it located away from the house at the back of a large lot.

By removing leisure-time activities away from the home and the neighborhood, automobility “offset the need for a large house with many rooms into which one could escape and seek privacy.” The front porch and the parlor were eliminated as the home became more of a dormitory and rooms lost their former specialized functions. Fear of the danger of gasoline storage, enforced by building codes, zoning laws, and higher insurance rates, generally kept garages detached from houses until after World War II. But under the leadership of Frank Lloyd Wright, architects were designing houses with integrated garages for middle-class clients by the mid-1930s. Wright’s 1930s “usionian” houses developed the carport and made it necessary to walk down the driveway and under the carport to find the front door. “In contrast to a turn-of-the century house, the house of 1945 has no hall, no parlor, and a mere vestige of a porch,” Kihlstedt observes. “The garage was moved from the back of the lot to the front of the suburban house, and adjacent to the front door. . . . Entry is directly into the living and dining rooms, or into the kitchen through the adjoining garage. The element that projects farthest toward the street to greet the passer-by is no longer a shaded and generous porch. It is the large prominent surface of the garage door.”¹⁴

This prominence of the driveway and direct entry into the kitchen from the garage turned the suburban home into an extension of the street. So much so that sidewalks were eliminated from many post-World War II housing tracts. The blending of the house into the highway has proceeded furthest in auto-dominated Southern California. “A domestic or sociable journey in Los Angeles,” notes Reyner Banham, “does not so much end at the door of one’s destination as at the off-ramp of the freeway, the mile or two of ground-level streets counts as no more than the front drive of the house.” He continues, “Though the famous story . . . about the [Southern California] family who actually lived in a mobile home on the freeways is now known to be a jesting fabrication, the idea was immediately convincing . . . because there was a great psychological truth spoken in the jest. The freeway is where the Angelinos live a large part of their lives.”¹⁵

Community: From Neighbor to Night Dweller

The new mobility of families was destroying the traditional pattern of close relationships among neighbors by the 1920s. Wrote the Lynds, "The housewife with leisure does not sit so much on the front porch afternoons after she 'gets dressed up,' sewing and 'visiting' and comparing her yard with her neighbors', nor do the family and neighbors spend long summer evenings and Sunday afternoons on the porch or in the side yard since the advent of the automobile and the movies." Automobility had made "a decorative yard less urgent." "In the nineties we were all much more together," a Middletown housewife explained. "People brought chairs and cushions out of the house and sat on the lawns evenings. We rolled out a strip of carpet and put cushions on the porch step to take care of the unlimited overflow of neighbors that dropped by.... The younger couples perhaps would wander off for half an hour to get a soda but come back to join in the informal singing or listen while somebody strummed a mandolin or guitar."¹⁶

Such a scene contrasts sharply with the conception of neighborliness revealed by a 1929 survey of the residents of a twenty-block middle-class section of Los Angeles near the USC campus. The interviewer found that "a new definition of a friendly neighborhood is apparent; it is one in which the neighbors tend to their own business." One householder explained: "We have nothing whatsoever to do with my neighbors. I don't even know their names or know them to speak to. My best friends live in the city but by no means in this neighborhood. We belong to no clubs and we do not attend any local church. We go auto riding, visiting and uptown to the theaters." The interviewer concluded, "This straining against the bonds that hold them in the area makes for many families an uneasy, unsettled, uncertain state." But another observer of 1920s Los Angeles interpreted the phenomenon positively: "The role particularly of the automobile ... has cut down spatial distance and tended to increase social nearness to such an extent that every person may live in wide-flung communalities of his own [making], in place of the old closely circumscribed neighborhoods."¹⁷

On the Road

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Before the automobile revolution, extended vacations away from home were the privilege of the rich. The average middle-class family could not afford railroad fares to a remote national park and a long stay at a luxury hotel. With the advent of the Model T and improved roads, the automobile outing and the automobile vacation became middle-class American institutions. As Foster Rhea Dulles points out in his history of American recreation, the automobile “greatly stimulated the whole outdoor movement, making camping possible for many people for whom the woods, mountains, and streams were formerly inaccessible.”¹

Until the late 1920s, however, automobile touring, especially to remote western parks, was severely limited by poor roads. Despite the efforts of bicycle organizations, automobile clubs, and farmers, the good-roads movement had accomplished little up to the outset of the Model T era. Roads meandered from town to town without forming a system of interconnected highways. They were poorly marked when marked at all. Roadside services for tourists were virtually nonexistent. Over 90 percent of the roads were unsurfaced, and impassable much of the year. Only 8.66 percent of the roads in the United States were surfaced at all in 1909, a gain of only 1.5 percent over 1904, when the first census of American roads was taken. These few improved roads most commonly had gravel surfaces, which automobile traffic quickly destroyed by sweeping the gravel into windrows, rather than packing it down as did much slower horse-drawn traffic. Macadam was no solution, for the weight and speed of motor vehicles quickly broke down macadamized surfaces too. Brick roads were satisfactory, but their cost was prohibitive. Until 1909 there was not a single section of paved road in a rural area.

At the Second Annual Good Roads Convention in 1909 at Cleveland,