

The Automobile Revolution

by Frederick Lewis Allen

IN THE year 1906 Woodrow Wilson, who was then president of Princeton University, said, "Nothing has spread socialistic feeling in this country more than the automobile," and added that it offered "a picture of the arrogance of wealth." Less than twenty years later, two women of Muncie, Indiana, both of whom were managing on small incomes, spoke their minds to investigators gathering facts for that admirable sociological study of an American community, *Middletown*. Said one, who was the mother of nine children, "We'd rather do without clothes than give up the car." Said the other, "I'll go without food before I'll see us give up the car." And elsewhere another housewife, in answer to a comment on the fact that her family owned a car but no bathtub, uttered a fitting theme song for the automobile revolution. "Why," said she, "you can't go to town in a bathtub!"

This change in the status of the automobile from a luxury for the few to a necessity for the many—a change which, as we shall see, progressively transformed American communities and daily living habits and ideas throughout the half century—did not come about abruptly. It could not. For it depended upon three things. First, a reliable, manageable, and not too expensive car. Second, good roads. And third, garages and filling stations in profusion. And all these three requirements had to come slowly, by degrees, each reinforcing the others; a man who had tried to operate a filling station beside a

dusty rural road in 1906 would have speedily gone bankrupt. But it was during the nineteen-twenties that the impact of the change was felt most sharply from year to year.

When Woodrow Wilson spoke in 1906, and for years thereafter, the automobile had been a high-hung, noisy vehicle which couldn't quite make up its mind that it was not an obstreperous variety of carriage. It was so unreliable in its performance, so likely to be beset by tire blowouts, spark-plug trouble, carburetor trouble, defects in the transmission, and other assorted ailments, that a justly popular song of the time celebrated the troubles of the owner who "had to get under, get out and get under." The country doctors who in increasing numbers were coming to use the little brass-nosed Fords of the day had to be students of mechanical as well as human pathology. Each car had a toolbox on the running board, and tourists were accustomed to carrying with them blowout patches, French chalk, and a variety of tire irons against that awful moment when a tire would pop, miles from any help. One had to crank the engine by hand—a difficult and sometimes dangerous business. All cars except the limousines of the wealthy were open, with vertical windshields which gave so little protection against wind and dust to those in the back seat that dusters and even goggles were widely worn; and a gust of rain would necessitate a frantic raising of the folding top and a vexatious fitting and buttoning of the side curtains.

Roads were mostly dusty or muddy, with no through routes. Even as late as 1921 there was no such thing as an officially numbered highway. In that year the *Automobile Blue Book* warned those who proposed to drive from Richford, Vermont, to Montreal: "Chains on all four wheels absolutely essential in wet weather." And it advised tourists in general that "where mountain roads, sandy stretches, and muddy places are to be met with, a shovel with a collapsible handle" might prove very useful. At the time when Wilson spoke, panicky horses were still a hazard for the driver in remote districts, and speed limits set by farmer-minded local officials were sometimes low indeed: my personal memory tells me—unbelievably but I think reliably—

that in tranquil Holderness, New Hampshire, the original legal limit was six miles an hour.

Ford's energetic driving down of prices helped to make the automobile more popular, but equally responsible were a series of vital improvements: the invention of an effective self-starter, first designed by Charles F. Kettering and installed in the Cadillac in 1912; the coming, within the next two or three years, of the demountable rim and the cord tire; but above all, the introduction of the closed car. As late as 1916 only 2 per cent of the cars manufactured in the United States were closed; by 1926, 72 per cent of them were.

What had happened was that manufacturers had learned to build closed cars that were not hideously expensive, that did not rattle themselves to pieces, and that could be painted with a fast-drying but durable paint; and that meanwhile the car-buying public had discovered with delight that a closed car was something quite different from the old "horseless carriage." It was a power-driven room on wheels—storm-proof, lockable, parkable all day and all night in all weathers. In it you could succumb to speed fever without being battered by the wind. You could close its windows against dust or rain. You could use it to fetch home the groceries, to drive to the golf club or the railroad station, to cool off on hot evenings, to reach a job many miles distant and otherwise inaccessible, to take the family out for a day's drive or a week-end excursion, to pay an impromptu visit to friends forty or fifty miles away, or, as innumerable young couples were not slow to learn, to engage in private intimacies. One of the cornerstones of American morality had been the difficulty of finding a suitable locale for misconduct; now this cornerstone was crumbling. And if the car was also a frequent source of family friction ("No, Junior, you are *not* taking it tonight"), as well as a destroyer of pedestrianism, a weakener of the churchgoing habit, a promoter of envy, a lethal weapon when driven by heedless, drunken, or irresponsible people, and a formidable convenience for criminals seeking a safe getaway, it was nonetheless indispensable.

Furthermore, a car was now less expensive to maintain than in the

days when the cost of successive repairs might mount up to a formidable sum each year. And it could be bought on easy payments. The installment selling of cars, virtually unknown before World War I, spread so rapidly that by 1925 over three-quarters of all cars, new and old, were being sold this way.

Over these same years more and more roads had been paved, as public officials discovered that appropriations for highway surfacing were no longer considered mere favors to the rich; and garages and filling stations had multiplied.

The result of all these developments was a headlong rush to buy cars on the part of innumerable people to whom the idea of becoming automobile owners would have seemed fantastic only a few years before. In 1915 there were less than 2½ million cars registered in the United States. By 1920 there were over 9 million; by 1925, nearly 20 million; by 1930, over 26½ million.

So it was that the years between 1918 and 1930 introduced to America a long series of novelties which are now such familiar features of the American scene that one might think we had always had them: automatic traffic lights, concrete roads with banked curves, six-lane boulevards, one-way streets, officially numbered highways, tourist homes, and tourist cabins; and lined the edges of the major thoroughfares with that garish jumble of roadside services and businesses that Benton Mackaye and Lewis Mumford called "road town"—roadside diners, hot-dog stands, peanut stands, fruit and vegetable stalls, filling station after filling station, and used-car lots.

Meanwhile an antidote to the increasing snarl and confusion and frustration of traffic through the built-up areas of the East was already in preparation. For a generation the officials of Westchester County, New York, had been disturbed by the polluted condition of the little Bronx River and by its tendency to flood, and had been planning to restrict and control its flow while making it the chief attraction of a long strip of parkway—which almost incidentally would contain a through automobile road. When this road was opened to the public in 1925, motorists and traffic commissions and regional planners happily saw in it the answer to their prayers: an ample highway, with

traffic lanes separated at intervals, uncluttered by local traffic, winding through a landscape undefaced by commerce. On such a highway one could make time most agreeably. Other parkways, wider and straighter, were thereupon built, both in Westchester County and elsewhere; existing through highways were rebuilt to by-pass towns along their way; so that by August, 1931, Mackaye and Mumford, writing in *Harper's*, could announce that it had at last been recognized that the automobile was less like a family carriage than like a family locomotive, and also could look forward prophetically to a now-familiar scene. The time would come, they predicted, when a motorist with a long drive before him would ease into the fast traffic on a "townless highway" and presently would be spinning along "with less anxiety and more safety at 60 miles an hour than he used to have in the old road-town confusion at 25." When that day came, they said, the automobile would have become "an honor to our mechanical civilization and not a reproach to it."

In 1931 those days had not yet arrived. There was still no Merritt Parkway, no Pennsylvania Turnpike; there were no butterfly intersections; there was no such majestic combination of separate lanes of traffic as would be seen by the mid-century at Caluenga Pass in Los Angeles, where no less than fourteen lanes were to run side by side. Already motor busses had arrived in quantity, but the progressive ripping up of trolley tracks had only begun. Already motor trucks were taking freight business away from the railroads, but there was still no such vast and humming all-night traffic of trucks, truck tractors, and semi-trailers between our great cities as later years were to bring. And that perfect symbol of our national mobility, the residential trailer, was only just appearing: the first trailer had been built in 1929 by a bacteriologist, for vacation use, but these houses on wheels were not to arrive in force until the mid-thirties. Yet already the pattern of the automobile age had been set.

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No such startling change in the habits of a people could have taken place without having far-reaching social effects. Let us glance at a few of them.

1. It developed the motorized suburb. Where a suburb had previously been accessible by railroad, but had been limited in size because of the difficulty of reaching the station from any place more than a mile or so away from it, it grew with startling speed, as real-estate subdividers bought up big tracts of property and laid out Woodmere Road and Edgemont Drive and Lakeside Terrace, suitable for English-cottage-type or Spanish-villa-type or New-England-salt-box-type (or, later, ranch-type) houses with attached garages; where the children would have the benefit of light and air and play space, and their parents would have the benefit of constant battles over the policies of the local school board; where the wife would gulp down her coffee at 7:52 to drive her husband to the 8:03 train before driving her children to school and doing the family errands.

In a suburb which had previously been inaccessible by railroad the same phenomenon took place with only a slight variation: the carner of the family drove all the way from his almost-rural cottage to his place of work—and worried about the parking problem in the city. The number of Americans whose heart and treasure were twenty miles apart, as Agnes Rogers has put it, was vastly increased. And as more and more people whose living was dependent upon work at the center of the city fled to the leafy outskirts, urban planners began to be concerned about the blighted areas around the center of the city, where land values were falling and a general deterioration was manifest.

2. The coming of the automobile age brought other changes too. It caused a widespread shift of business, and of economic and social importance, from the railroad town to the off-the-railroad one; from the farm that was four miles from a railroad station but had poor soil to the fertile farm that was twenty or fifty miles from rail; and from the center of the small city to its outskirts.

The hotel on Main Street, that had formerly been the one and only place for the traveling salesman to stop, lost business to the tourist camp on Highway 84. In due course this tourist camp was transformed into a new kind of roadside hotel, which offered overnight privacy—and sometimes luxury—without having to carry the eco-

conomic load of high land value and of maintaining a restaurant and other public rooms. The shops along Main Street lost business to the new Sears Roebuck store at the edge of town, with its ample parking lot. City department stores, becoming painfully aware of their dwindling appeal to commuters, opened suburban branches to catch the out-of-town trade. And by the mid-century, shopping centers were beginning to be developed out in the open countryside, where the prime essential of parking space would be abundant.

The big summer hotel lost business, as the automobile opened up to a vast number of people the opportunity either to range from motel to motel or to have their own summer cottages, to which they could travel not only for the summer, but even for occasional week ends at other times in the year, by wedging the family into a car that bulged with people, suitcases, and assorted duffle. In resort after resort a pattern of change was repeated: the big hotel on the point, or at the beach, or on the hilltop was torn down, while the number of cottages in the neighborhood of its site doubled, tripled, quadrupled; and meanwhile the Friday afternoon traffic out of the city to various points, beaches, and hilltops became denser and denser. The trunk manufacturers lost business to the suitcase manufacturers, and the express companies languished.

During the single decade of the nineteen-twenties, railroad passenger traffic was almost cut in half; only commuter traffic held up. (In the outskirts of New York, the next two decades were to witness a decline even in railroad commuter traffic, as the new parkways, bridges, and tunnels into Manhattan swelled the number of commuters by bus and by private car.)

3. The automobile age brought a parking problem that was forever being solved and then unsolving itself again. During the early nineteen-twenties the commuters who left their cars at the suburban railroad station at first parked them at the edge of the station drive; then they needed a special parking lot, and pretty soon an extended parking lot, and in due course a still bigger one—and the larger the lot grew, the more people wanted to use it. New boulevards, widened roads, and parkways relieved the bottlenecks at the approaches to the

big cities—and invited more and more cars to enter. At the end of the half century the question, "Where do I park?" was as annoyingly insistent as it had been at any time since the arrival of the automobile.

4. The new dispensation brought sudden death. During the nineteen-twenties the number of people slaughtered annually by cars in the United States climbed from a little less than 15,000 in 1922 to over 32,000 in 1930; eighteen years later, in 1948, it stood at almost exactly the 1930 figure. As cars had become more powerful, and roads had become more persuasively straight and smooth, and speeds had increased, the shocking death toll each week end had led to the more cautious licensing of drivers and inspection of cars, to the multiplication of warning signs along the roadsides, and to the study of the causes and cures of death on the highway by such organizations as the National Safety Council and the Automotive Safety Council. But meanwhile youngsters had learned to play "chicken," and hot-rod enthusiasts had taken to the road; and many older drivers, after a few drinks, found it easy to persuade themselves that they should overtake and pass that damned old creeping car at the crest of a hill, and even the most sedate motorist sometimes fell asleep at the wheel—and now the accidents that took place, while less frequent, were more lethal. So that at the turn of the half century one could still predict with reasonable certainty that a holiday week end would bring several hundred men, women, and children to an abrupt and gory end.

5. Along with the telephone, the radio, and the other agencies of communication, the automobile revolution ended the isolation of the farmer. In 1900 Ray Stannard Baker, describing a wave of prosperity among the farmers of the Midwest, had said that when a farmer did well, the first thing he did was to paint the barn; the second was to add a porch to his house; the third was to buy a piano; and the fourth was to send his children to college. By the mid-twenties the purchase of a car was likely to come even before the painting of the barn—and a new piano was a rarity. The widening use of the tractor was enlarging farms; and with the aid of the profusion of scientific information which was made available through the publications and county agents of the Department of Agriculture, the farmer was becoming less and

less a laborer by hand, using rule-of-thumb methods, and more and more a businessman of the soil, an operator of machines, and a technologist. No longer, now, when he visited town, was he a rube, a hayseed, whose wife and daughters looked hick in calico. By 1939 the Sears Roebuck catalogue was listing dresses "inspired by Schiaparelli," and in 1940 it solemnly announced that "The traditional lapse between the acceptance of new fashions . . . in metropolitan centers and on farms apparently no longer exists."

6. The automobile broadened geographical horizons, especially for people who had hitherto considered themselves too poor to travel. One could still find, here and there, men and women who had never ventured farther from home than the county seat, but their number was dwindling fast. For now the family who had always stayed at home on their day off could drive to the lakes or the shore, and on their vacation could range widely over the land, see new things, engage in new sports, meet new people. Even their daily radius of activity lengthened startlingly: by the nineteen-forties it might be a matter of routine for a rural family to drive ten or fifteen miles to do their shopping, twenty or thirty to see the movies, fifty to visit a doctor or dentist.

Furthermore, the automobile weakened the roots which held a family to one spot. Always a mobile people by comparison with the peoples of Europe, now Americans followed the economic tides more readily than ever before, moving by automobile—and before long by trailer—wherever there might be a call for construction workers, or fruit pickers, or airplane mechanics. Sober intellectuals were wont to deplore the growing American restlessness and to praise the man who was rooted to the land where he and his forefathers had been born and bred; but the automobile suited the American genius. For that genius was not static but venturesome; Americans felt that a rolling stone gathers experience, adventure, sophistication, and—with luck—new and possibly fruitful opportunities.

7. The automobile revolution engendered personal pride. When I say this I am not thinking of the envy-in-reverse of the man or woman who revels in having a finer model of car than the neighbors can af-

ford, but of something less readily defined but no less real. Someone has said that the Asiatic, long accustomed to humiliation at the hands of the lordly white European, will endure it no longer after he has once sat at the controls of a tractor or a bulldozer. Similarly the American who has been humbled by poverty, or by his insignificance in the business order, or by his racial status, or by any other circumstance that might demean him in his own eyes, gains a sense of authority when he slides behind the wheel of an automobile and it leaps forward at his bidding, ready to take him wherever he may personally please. If he drives a bus or a huge truck trailer his state is all the more kingly, for he feels himself responsible for the wielding of a sizable concentration of force.

This effect of the automobile revolution was especially noticeable in the South, where one began to hear whites complaining about "uppity niggers" on the highways, where there was no Jim Crow. But the new sense of pride was dispersed far more widely than that; in some degree it affected almost everyone on the road. In 1950 the civilian labor force of the United States was estimated to number a little less than 59 million men and women; in the same year the number of drivers in the United States was estimated to be a little larger: 59,300,000. More than one driver for every jobholder! Never before in human history, perhaps, had any such proportion of the nationals of any land known the lifting of the spirit that the free exercise of power can bring.

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