





# CARS, CARS, CARS

by Phyllis McIntosh

At the beginning of the 20th century, few Americans would have guessed that the newfangled contraptions some called “devil wagons” would prove to be a godsend for the average family and would dramatically change the face of a nation. Just 30 years after cars were introduced, 50 percent of families in the United States owned one. Within a few decades, the automobile would affect virtually every aspect of American life—where people lived and worked, where they shopped, and how they spent their leisure time. For many Americans, the car is more than simple transportation. It is a reflection of themselves. Car enthusiasts lovingly restore classic models and display them at thousands of car shows that attract crowds throughout the country. America’s love affair with the car, it seems, is never ending.

## From Novelty to Necessity

The first commercial car manufacturers in the United States were Charles and Frank Duryea, bicycle makers who in 1896 built by hand 13 gasoline-powered automobiles in their Springfield,

Massachusetts, shop. The first mass-produced car was the 1901 Curved Dash Oldsmobile, built by Ransome Eli Olds, who went on to manufacture more than 400 vehicles in the next three years.

It wasn’t long before the new machines were making news, not all of it good. The first recorded automobile accident occurred in 1896, when the driver of a Duryea struck a bicycle in New York City, breaking the rider’s leg. Concerned about noise, dust, and frightened horses, some townspeople hung steel cables across roads to keep cars away. The State of Vermont passed an impractical law that required a person waving a red flag to walk ahead of every car to warn both people and animals of the approaching hazard.

In a more positive development, in 1903 Dr. Horatio Nelson Jackson, accompanied by a bicycle mechanic and a bulldog in goggles, completed the first cross-country automobile trip, traveling from San Francisco to New York in 63 days. Their daring adventure did much to publicize the potential of the new “horseless carriage.”



Henry Ford introduced the Model T Ford, known as the Tin Lizzie, in 1908. This restored Model T, owned by a California car enthusiast, is still in running condition.

But it was the genius of Henry Ford that turned the automobile from a rich man's plaything into everyday transportation. After achieving some success in building race cars, Ford founded the Ford Motor Company in Detroit, Michigan, in 1903. His goal was to mass produce cars that the average American could afford. In 1908, he introduced the Model T, fondly known as the Tin Lizzie, a basic black vehicle that was easy to operate and cheap to maintain. It was an immediate hit.

The key to the Ford Motor Company's success was the assembly line, where a worker added one component to each car as the line moved continuously along. The process improved efficiency to the point where the company could turn out an auto chassis every 93 minutes and could sell a Model T for less than 400 dollars. In another revolutionary move, Ford paid workers five dollars a day, more than twice the typical wage, to compensate them for the monotonous labor—and, not coincidentally, to enable them to buy his cars. By the time the Ford plant ceased produc-

tion of the Model T in 1927, more than 15.5 million had been sold.

Around the same time, Ford opened the massive River Rouge plant near Detroit. The ultimate example of efficient auto production, this plant had a deep harbor, the world's largest (at that time) steel foundry, 94 miles of railroad track, and 19 buildings with facilities for every aspect of car assembly. The burgeoning auto industry, led by Ford and up-and-coming manufacturers such as General Motors, attracted thousands of workers from the rural South and the Midwest. Detroit would henceforth be known as Motor City.

To accommodate the growing number of cars, state and local governments paved roads and passed laws governing traffic and car ownership. The first red and green electric traffic signal was installed in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1914. By 1918, all states required license plates on cars, and many began to mandate licenses for drivers as well.

## The Age of the Automobile

For average Americans, especially in rural areas, the advent of cars meant newfound mobility. Within a few decades, automobiles came to dominate the landscape and revolutionize American society. Important changes brought about by the automobile include:

- **Suburbs.** Cars made it possible for Americans to work in the cities but live in outlying communities where housing was cheaper and the living was pleasant. In sharp contrast to the noisy, crowded city, suburbs featured detached, single-family homes with large yards and green spaces, situated along winding streets and cul-de-sacs.

The growth of suburbs began in the 1920s but accelerated dramatically after World War II. The

housing needs of veterans and their young families fueled mass construction of affordable, often look-alike homes in huge new suburbs such as the Levittowns outside New York City and Philadelphia.

Today at least half of all Americans live in suburbs, and suburban life still revolves around the car. Many residents commute long distances to work, and children ride to school on buses or are driven by parents. Individual businesses and shops have been replaced by large supermarkets and shopping centers and malls surrounded by huge parking lots. Not surprisingly, a prominent feature of modern suburban homes is the garage, often designed to accommodate more than one car.

- **Freedom for women.** For women, the automobile afforded unprecedented mobility, especially as the two-car family became the norm. Women were free to shop and visit family and friends when they wished, to transport children to school, activities, and appointments, and as more women joined the labor force, to drive themselves to work.
- **National highway system.** As more Americans took to the road, demand for new and better highways increased. In 1913, planning began for the first transcontinental highway—from New York City to San Francisco—to be named in honor of President Abraham Lincoln. With private and corporate donations, the Lincoln Highway Association funded stretches of the road and encouraged local governments to do likewise. The association dedicated the highway to Lincoln's memory with 3,000 concrete markers that



A 1957 Corvette parked out front draws visitors to Hackberry General Store, a museum along Route 66 in Arizona.



Popular for family road trips, the Pacific Coast Highway in California ranks as one of the most beautiful drives in the United States.

troops of Boy Scouts placed (about one every mile) along the route.

Perhaps the most iconic of American highways, Route 66 traversed only half of the country, from Chicago to Los Angeles. Begun in 1926, it became known as the Main Street of America because it wound through numerous small towns in the Southwest and spawned a host of strange



tourist attractions, such as a totem pole park and a motel with cabins in the shape of wigwams. Popularized in song (“Get Your Kicks on Route 66”) and in literature (author John Steinbeck called it the “Mother Road”), the highway carried farmers escaping the Midwest Dust Bowl during the Great Depression and families seeking new opportunities in sunny California after World War II. Now largely bypassed by newer interstate highways, historic Route 66 remains a nostalgic part of Americana.

In 1956, President Dwight Eisenhower signed a law mandating construction of a 41,000-mile interstate highway system that would link cities across the country. The highways were designed for fast and safe travel, and access was limited to major interchanges, where ramps allowed drivers to enter and exit without slowing traffic. Superhighways such as I-80, which crosses the country from San Francisco to New Jersey, and I-95, which runs from Maine to Florida, now define long-distance travel in the United States.

- **Family road trips.** With better roads and roomy, comfortable automobiles, more and more families traveled by car to vacation destinations, such as national parks, seashores, and historic sites. Billboards and historical markers sprang up to alert tourists to points of interest.

Some routes became famous for scenery alone. California’s Pacific Coast Highway, which hugs the coast from San Francisco to Los Angeles, ranks as one of the most beautiful drives in the United States. In the East, the Blue Ridge Parkway, which runs more than 400 miles atop the

Appalachian Mountains through Virginia and North Carolina, is packed with sightseers, especially during the colorful fall foliage season.

- **Roadside services.** To accommodate the legions of auto travelers, gas stations, motels, diners, and chain restaurants mushroomed along main arteries and around highway interchanges. Gas stations, which numbered 200,000 by 1935, offered a variety of services, including windshield washing and free maps and travel guides.

Hometown businesses also sprang up to supply food and entertainment to customers in the comfort of their own cars. By 1958, nearly 5,000 drive-in theaters, where people watched movies from their cars, provided an inexpensive night out for the whole family. Drive-in restaurants featured waitresses known as car hops, often on roller skates, who delivered food to people in their cars. No doubt drive-ins inspired the drive-through windows popular at today’s fast-food outlets.

## From Excess to Efficiency

American cars reached their heyday in the late 1950s and 1960s. Having swallowed up smaller competitors, the Big Three automakers—General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler—tried to outdo one another with annual model changes and bigger, fancier, more powerful cars. Design excess reached a pinnacle in the late fifties, when manufacturers embellished their cars with huge tail fins and outlandish amounts of decorative chrome. That era also produced classic, sporty models that are still prized by collectors—iconic cars such as the Ford Mustang and Thunderbird, the Pontiac GTO, Chevy Corvette, and the ever-popular 1957 Chevy Bel Air.



**(Left)** Tail fins, like this one on a 1957 Chevy Bel Air, were a popular design element of cars produced in the late 1950s. **(Right)** The shiny interior of a Chevy Bel Air attracts attention at a Wisconsin car show.

However, the next two decades would bring a dramatic shift in the American auto market. The gigantic gas guzzlers would give way to smaller, safer, cleaner, more fuel-efficient cars, many of them imports from other countries, especially Japan. Influences that brought about these changes in car design include:

- **Safety concerns.** By the 1960s, Americans were becoming more concerned with automotive safety. In 1965, consumer activist Ralph Nader published a blockbuster book, *Unsafe at Any Speed*, which made the issue front-page news. Nader accused Detroit automakers of putting style ahead of safety and pointed a finger at some of the unsafest models, such as the Chevy Corvair.

Faced with new federal safety regulations, manufacturers responded by building more crash-resistant cars equipped with safety devices such as seat belts, air bags, and anti-lock brakes.

- **Air pollution.** By 1966, motor vehicles accounted for more than 60 percent of atmospheric pollutants nationwide. With Los Angeles ranked the smog capital of the nation, California became the first state to establish emission standards for new cars. In 1963 and 1970, Congress passed clean-air laws that established federal controls on vehicle emissions.

Although the auto industry fought the regulations, within the next two decades, all new cars were equipped with features such as fuel injection, catalytic converters, and computerized systems that dramatically reduce emissions. Lead, a major environmental pollutant, was phased out of gasoline.

- **Energy crisis.** In 1970, an OPEC oil embargo led to gasoline shortages, long waits at the gas pumps, and restrictions on when drivers could refuel. Congress mandated more fuel-efficient cars, and consumers, shocked by the shortages and rising gas prices, demanded smaller, more economical models.
- **Imports.** Detroit, heavily invested in its gas guzzlers, could not respond readily to new consumer demands. Americans turned in droves to small, inexpensive, fuel-efficient imports. By 1980, Japanese cars accounted for 20 percent of all new cars sold in the United States. American automakers would never again dominate the market as they had for much of the 20th century.

## Cars in the 21st Century

Cars today, whether domestic or imported, are safer, cleaner, and smaller than those of 40 or 50 years ago. A 1960s-era car looks immense next to a “full-size”

modern model. Still, the pendulum swings. Americans' love of roomy vehicles led to a boom in sport utility vehicles (SUVs) and minivans in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Classified as light trucks, they are exempt from the fuel economy standards imposed on cars.

Steadily rising gas prices have caused a shift once again. Demand increased for crossovers, SUV-style vehicles on car platforms, which get better mileage and which ride and handle more like a car. By 2006, crossovers accounted for more than half of all SUV sales, and their popularity shows no sign of waning. Economy-minded consumers are also turning to hybrid cars—high-mileage vehicles that combine an ordinary gasoline engine with an electric battery-powered motor.

Large or small, SUV or sedan, the car is and will likely remain an enduring part of American culture.

## Websites of Interest

### Automobile in American Life and Society

[www.autolife.umd.umich.edu](http://www.autolife.umd.umich.edu)

This University of Michigan website features highly readable essays from leading scholars about the influence of the automobile on various aspects of society, including women, the environment, and race relations.

### Henry Ford Museum

[www.thehenryford.com/exhibits/hf](http://www.thehenryford.com/exhibits/hf)

The official website of the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, this site features information about Ford's background, the company he founded, and his innovations in the auto industry.

### The Age of the Automobile

[www.ushistory.org/us/46a.asp](http://www.ushistory.org/us/46a.asp)

In addition to a quick rundown of the history of the automobile in the United States, this webpage offers links to articles about the Lincoln Highway, a fictional family taking their first trip in a Model T, and a legendary race car built by Henry Ford in 1902.

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Ford unveiled this crossover vehicle at the North American International Auto Show in Detroit in January.



# CLASSIC CAR SHOWS



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Classic cars, restored to their original glory, line the streets of Bakersfield, California, for a car show.

Almost as much as they enjoy driving cars, Americans love to *look* at cars. Every year thousands of car shows are held throughout the United States, ranging from casual gatherings in fields or parking lots to fancy affairs for the affluent car enthusiast. Shows typically feature classic cars dating from the 1950s and 1960s; sporty, high-horsepower “muscle cars” from the same era; or antique and vintage cars from before 1930. Some shows are sponsored by car clubs or commercial enterprises, such as a car-products company; others are loosely organized by collectors who simply enjoy showing off their prized vehicles.

The most famous and glitzy U.S. car show is the annual Pebble Beach Concours d’Elegance

in Monterey, California, where some of the most valuable and rarest collector cars in the world are exhibited and judged.

Antique and classic cars are found at more than a hundred museums across the country, ranging from the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C., to roadside establishments with modest collections, found in almost every state.

Classic car auctions also have a loyal following. The Barrett-Jackson Collector Car Auction, which has sold specialty cars for as much as five million dollars, is broadcast live on the Speed channel, a cable TV channel devoted to all things automotive.



## The Road Trip: A Recurring Theme

The road trip is a popular staple of American literature and film. Perhaps the reigning classic is the novel *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, the story of a poor Oklahoma family setting out during the Great Depression to seek a new life in California. Later in life, Steinbeck penned *Travels with Charley*, a travelogue of his 1960 trip through the United States with his poodle. *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac, a largely autobiographical work that chronicles a series of cross-country journeys by two friends, defined the Beat Generation of the 1950s.

One of the first American road-trip movies

was the Oscar-winning *It Happened One Night*, a 1934 romantic comedy about a runaway heiress who ends up hitchhiking with a reporter played by Clark Gable. More recent comedy favorites include *National Lampoon's Vacation*, the story of a family's ill-fated cross-country trip to a California theme park, and *Little Miss Sunshine*, the chronicle of a dysfunctional family transporting their daughter to a beauty pageant. One of the most iconic road movies, however, is *Thelma and Louise*, which features two outlaw friends who lead authorities on a cross-country chase in their Thunderbird convertible.



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