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FRESH

A ~~REVIEW~~ BOOK AT THE AUTOMOBILE

Any proper study of Twentieth Century American social history would have a long chapter ~~on~~ the automobile. It is difficult to overemphasize the impact of the automobile on the American way of life. Its development has been one of the principal reasons for the demise of the family farm and the shift to the urban-suburban society. The mere construction of the car has revolutionized the methods of industry. The auto industry is the largest customer of the steel industry and practically gave birth to the rubber industry and the petroleum industry.

On a less materialistic plane, the auto has changed the life habits of the American people. The last generation grew up with cars; they (or we) were the "mobile" generation. Our ancestors spent their formative teen-age years close to home, and close to the supervision of parents or neighbors. Our generation, via the car, was able to get away--to get "out"--to spend more time alone with our contemporaries. And today's youngsters are even more mobile. A large percentage of the current generation have cars at their disposal at all times. When I was in high school, scarcely a half-dozen students had cars, and most of these cars could most charitably be characterized as jalopies. Today, the teachers had better get to high school well before "book" time, or the students will have taken all the parking spaces.

Nor would I criticize the students for wanting cars. For many persons, the car is more than transportation--it is a refuge.

The time a person is in his car is often the only time he can get away from the intrusions of modern life. A man's home may still be his castle. It is still the law that "the rain may enter, but the king cannot." But while the king or the law may not enter, other more subtle invaders of privacy can. And the drive in the country on a Sunday afternoon is for many, including myself, the only refuge from the jingling telephone, the door to door salesmen, the well-intentioned do-gooders soliciting for charity, the survey takers, the irate wives who want a warrant because their husbands "won't act right," and all the others who seemingly confuse solitude with loneliness, and try to destroy it.

It is, however, not the purpose of this paper to explore the total impact on the automobile on American society. Nor is it my function to deny the tremendous over-all benefit that the automobile has been to us. But among all the benefits there are problems, and it is our purpose to analyze <sup>some of</sup> them.

The most obvious ill-effect of the automobile revolution is the tremendous amount of personal and physical damage done by the car. In 1967, there were 53,140 traffic deaths in the United States. Kentucky, one of fifty states, had its proportionate share of them, 1,023. Christian County had 41. But the grisly process is so steady and gradual that it attracts far too little attention, except perhaps, during long holiday weekends like Labor Day or Memorial Day, when the news media keep gruesome "score-cards", totaling the deaths and comparing the totals with the grim pre-holiday estimates of the National Safety Council.

The total can be made more significant perhaps by comparing the figure 50,000 deaths with the number of deaths from other disasters. The awful agony of the Vietnam War has claimed about 55,000 lives, and this over nearly a ten year period beginning July 3, 1959 when the first American troops were reportedly killed. The greatest natural disaster in history, the explosion of the volcano Krakatoa in the East Indies in 1883 killed approximately 35,000 persons. The greatest mine disaster in history, in Manchuria in 1942, killed 1,500.

And the ghastly comparisons can go on and on. Automobiles have killed more Americans than all the wars we've ever fought. The awesome annual toll of about 50,000 seems almost irreversible. Try as we might, the figure varies little from year to year. It is almost as though a savage blood-thirsty primitive god on a far-away Olympus taunts us: "Come, come, little man! Do not fight me! I must have my 50,000 human sacrifices every year!"

In addition to the deaths there are the injuries. Each year there are nearly two million auto accidents severe enough to cause at least temporary total disability. Nearly three-quarters of a billion dollars of medical bills are incurred and three billion dollars of wages are lost.

The enormity of these statistics has not gone completely unnoticed, and considerable efforts have been made in the three areas where improvement is possible: improve the driver, improve the car and improve the road.

Until fairly recently, most efforts have centered around the effort to improve the driver, an effort that has great appeal to many persons, particularly ultra-conservatives who don't want to pay the taxes to buy good roads and who resent the charge that America's greatest and most successful corporations, the auto-builders, are putting out a defective product.

Efforts to improve the driver have focused on four particular types of drivers, the plain incompetent, the speeder, the drinker, and the repeated offender.

All states now have some form of driver testing before issuing a drivers license, and today the tests are reasonably well given. But a whole generation of drivers my own age and over, who theoretically were tested, were not. In those days a driving test was unknown, and if you missed a question on the written test, the examiner would be likely to say, "Aw, you didn't mean that," correct your test, and give you your license. In some cases I know of, the examiner simply took the applicant's word that he could drive and forthwith issued the license.

And prior to the era when I began to drive, there was usually no testing at all. Is it any wonder that ~~there are so~~ many older incompetent drivers? Here in the city of Hopkinsville we have many of them, and most of us know who they are. Charity (and the fact that I plan to <sup>be</sup> running for re-election this year) forbids my mentioning their names.

Today, therefore, we have made much progress in the testing of drivers before giving them their initial license. But there is little follow-up.

It has been suggested that all drivers should be re-tested, at least every five years. But the State Police claim that they are understaffed and do not have the personnel to do such a big testing job. However, it seems to me that it would not be asking too much to at least give an eye test. This would prevent the reoccurrence of an incident I read about in the paper a few weeks ago. A Pennsylvania driver was totally blind, yet he had a valid drivers license and actually drove a car--with his six year old son sitting beside him, telling him when to stop, start, slow down and turn!

The speeder is of course a prime cause of traffic accidents and high speed is obviously a factor in the severity of the accident. The slogan "Speed Kills" has been prominently featured in the news media. Efforts to check the speeding driver have been numerous. The most common, at least around here, is still the old-fashioned "clocking" of the speeder by a following police car. Radar has been used here and has the advantage of being capable of giving a quick reading, that is, a determination of a car's speed at the instant of checking without the need of a long pursuit in a following patrol car. A device called "Vascar" is also used to time speed, but I don't believe it is used in this area. The Vascar instrument is simply a small computer which quickly calculates a speed reading from the time a vehicle takes to travel a given distance. It is claimed to be cheaper than a radar unit and more portable.

In the last year or so in Christian County, the State Police have been using airplanes to clock speeders. Lines are painted across the road one-eighth of a mile apart. An observer

in an airplane simply clocks with an ordinary stop-watch the time it takes the car under observation to travel the one-eighth of a mile distance. The officer then allows the motorist three-tenths of a second for potential reaction time or observation error, but if the distance is covered in 3.5 seconds or less, you are going sixty miles per hour or over, and a chart there in the airplane gives the exact figure. The officer in the plane then radios to a police car on the ground that, for example, the green car with the white top is going 32 miles per hour. The ground officer then stops the vehicle described, double checks by radio with the airplane officer to make sure he's stopped the right car, and issues a citation. This method of clocking speeders cannot however be used at night when the observer in the airplane could not see the lines on the road or the color of the speeding vehicle.

It is true the the speeder is a danger; it is certainly true that he is responsible for his actions. But do not the auto builders deserve some part of the blame? The manufacturers say not. They claim that high speed is built into their vehicles for (of all things) safety. They cite the fact that in tight places, the high acceleration of their cars can prevent accidents. But if only a burst of high acceleration for very rare emergencies is the goal, is it necessary to put a speedometer on the car reading up to 120 mph or more, as all of them do?

The drunken driver is another menace on the highways. While attention is paid to him year round, the emphasis increases during the Christmas-New Year's period when celebrations

and parties are common. Official police statistics indicate that approximately half of all fatal accidents involve a driver who has been drinking. Efforts to stop the drunken driver have concentrated about two main areas. First, the detection of drunkenness has been made more scientific, and second, the penalty upon conviction has been made quite severe.

Since 1954 Kentucky has had a law that if a person had .15 per cent of his blood ~~had~~ weight composed of alcohol, he was presumed drunk, or technically, "under the influence." In 1963 under prodding from the Federal Highway Safety Act, the figure was lowered to .10%. A doctor friend of mine advised me that four ordinary drinks (or beers) consumed in about an hour ~~will~~ will get the average person to that level.

The determination of alcohol blood level has become more scientific. Here locally we have for several years been using a device called a "Drunkometer," but it requires an officer to compare the color a chemical turns (when alcoholic breath is passed through it) with a known color key, and the comparison is often subjective. The new "Breathalyzer" is more accurate. It too involves, in effect, a color comparison, but the comparison is made by photo-electric-cells, and is more precise.

In addition the 1963 Legislature adopted an "implied consent" law. This in substance provides that when a person uses the highways he by implication "consents" to the following. If stopped by an officer for drunk driving, he will take a test for alcohol. If he refuses to take the test, his license to drive is suspended by the state, regardless of whether he is later convicted of drunk driving. The constitutionality of

this law has not yet been tested in the courts, but most lawyers feel that the law will be upheld.

(first offense)

The legal penalty for drunken driving<sup>is</sup> is a fine of from \$100 to \$500. But as everyone knows, there is also a six-month suspension of the defendant's drivers license. And it is the very severity of this additional punishment that causes enforcement difficulty. Picture the dilemma of the judge or the prosecutor when the defendant is a cab-driver, or a truck-driver, with a wife and three or four kids, all totally dependent on the father's right to drive a motor vehicle. Add in the fact that juries are notoriously reluctant to convict in drunk driving cases. The result is that the defendant is often convicted of, or pleads guilty to, reckless driving, is fined the same \$100, but keeps his license.

It would be my suggestion that the automatic and total suspension of the drivers license be abolished. There should be some method whereby a man could be/ to drive while working, if his job required it. Tennessee, for example, has such a law. In short, it is my opinion that the severity of the penalty for drunk driving means that it is seldom applied, and enforcement of the law is inhibited.

It is conceded that other countries, mainly European ones, have had some success in controlling drunk driving by severe sentences, including mandatory jail terms at hard labor in some of the Scandinavian countries. But, I submit, these countries do not have trial by jury, and until the general public and the juries want the law strictly enforced, it can't be. Too many Americans believe in the inalienable right to drive.

Before leaving the subject of the drunken driver, I wish to mention an article that appeared in the November, 1968 issue of the American Law Journal. It was the intriguing conclusion of the authors that the really dangerous drunk driver is not the ordinary social drinker, but the chronic alcoholic. If this theory is correct, it suggests that perhaps drunk driving is really only ~~one~~<sup>one</sup> component of the problem of alcoholism, and that perhaps the ultimate solution will come from the medical and psychiatric profession, and not from the lawyers and traffic safety experts.

The repeat offender is another major problem. Auto liability insurance companies recognize this fact, and for years have raised premiums or cancelled policies of persons with poor traffic records. Unfortunately for the general public, this too often means that the dangerous driver simply continues to run as before, but now without any liability insurance to compensate the future victims of his negligence.

Kentucky has attempted to curtail the chronic offender by the so-called "point system." The point system, as most of you know, requires the state to keep a permanent record of each person's driving. Points are awarded each person for every traffic violation, from three to six points for speeding, four points for reckless driving, etc. When a driver accrues twelve points in a certain period his license is suspended for six months. The length of this "certain period" has varied. Initially it was two years; then it was extended to three years; now it's back down to two years again.

Points can be worked off by attending a traffic school. The traffic school procedure is unfair in many cases since schools are not held in every area in the state. However, they are conducted here (at the Community College) and drivers in this section, at least, now have the opportunity to work off their demerits.

Many other efforts have been made to improve the driver, including driver training in the schools, television programs giving driving tips, and many others, but time does not permit our exploring all of these.

Let us now turn our attention to efforts to improve the vehicle. Here there are essentially two problems; first, ~~to~~ design and build a safe car; and second, keep it safe, or get it off the road.

Building a safe car is a more serious problem than most Americans think. We are enamored with our technical ability and the Detroit auto industry has long been regarded as the archetype of American industrial know-how, as Detroit and its advertisers constantly remind us. But the list of unsafe features in American cars would fill a book--and in fact has--~~been~~ for example, Ralph Nader's "Unsafe at Any Speed."

For Detroit is style conscious, not safety conscious. Functionally useless chrome trim often covers the car. It not only reflects the glaring sun into the eyes of the driver but often makes a sword-like blade for impaling or slashing struck pedestrians. The curved windshield is pretty, but too often

gives optical distortion when viewed at certain angles. The scene of style-conscious Detroit is the convertible, usually advertised with a bare-legged sun-tanned blonde sitting beside the driver, conveying the clear message: buy the convertible and you too can get a luscious chick like that for a girl-friend. And the convertible is a very unsafe automobile, since if it rolls over, the persons inside are almost always seriously injured. When pressed, however, Detroit claims the convertible is safe, since it has a low center of gravity and is <sup>not</sup> likely to roll over. The logical rejoinder to this is, "But what if it does anyway?" Detroit could reply to this sally by putting a roll bar on the convertible (no racing driver would think of being without one) but this would ruin the looks of the convertible and give it an unsafe "image", so the argument ends at that point.

It took the threat of legislation to get the auto builders to put in the collapsible steering column and a back-up break system. Seat belts and shoulder harnesses are now required, but the shoulder harness furnished (usually a seat belt running vertically across the chest) is a shabby parody of what is really needed.

The writer would like to see more done. For example, I would like to see abolished one of Detroit's latest gimmicks, the little doors that come down over the headlights. True, they work automatically, but only when they work. Consumers Guide has even reported instances when the doors automatically worked, to close themselves while the headlights were ~~on~~ on.

Let us now examine efforts to keep the car safe, once it gets on the road. The key here is obviously periodic inspection. This seems almost self-evident. But witness the public furor kicked up by the enactment of Kentucky's inspection law of 1966. The bill passed the legislature in 1966 for two principal reasons. First, it was argued, we would lose Federal road funds unless we adopted it. Secondly, its proponents wisely included a provision that it wouldn't go into effect until 1968, nearly two years later. It was therefore the 1963 legislature that got the pressure. The "solid citizen" type, who kept his car in good repair, objected to paying for an inspection. The East Kentucky coal-truck operator objected to having his vehicle tested for headlights because he "only used it in the daytime." And one would have thought that the auto mechanics were the biggest bunch of crooks since the James Brothers.

The legislature reacted accordingly and repealed the periodic inspection law. Governor Kunun, however, courageously vetoed the repeal bill, although he threw a sop to the foes of auto inspection by "watering down" the requirements a good bit and lowering the fee required for the inspection.

Why all the opposition to anything so eminently sensible? We could give many reasons, but I think it essentially stems from the same idea mentioned earlier. Too many Americans believe that there is an inalienable right to drive. This includes, apparently the ~~whole~~ correlative right to drive any kind of car that can be induced to move under its own power.

So at the present time, Kentucky has an auto-inspection law--not much of one, to be sure--but still a law. And that affords the hope that a better and more workable inspection program can be established in the future.

Let us now examine the third part of our problem--the improvement of the road itself.

Present efforts have been centered on the development of the multi-lane road, often limited access. This has helped, but the irony is that in our road building program we are somewhat like Alice in Wonderland and the Red Queen--we have to run as fast as we can to stay ~~-----~~ in the same place. For the mushrooming traffic of today, with about nine million new vehicles being built per year, virtually packs a new road as soon as it is opened.

Nor are our super-highways as safe as they should be. For example, ~~----- highway builders~~ have ignored a new type of guard rail, which could perhaps save hundreds of lives. The new rail would be installed on the inside lane of multilane highways. It would be located about hub-high for the ordinary vehicle, and a car veering to its left would not hit the shoulder of the road, going out of control, or worse, head-on into oncoming traffic, but would be nudged gently back onto the roadway.

It is, however, the writer's belief that what is really needed in the field of highway improvement (particularly in metropolitan areas) is something even more radical. The multi-lane highway is not the answer.

The solution is to reorganize our urban transit methods.

Specifically I advocate greater reliance on public transportation, mainly railroads, even monorails. Studies have shown that / ~~the~~ <sup>by far</sup> the most efficient way to carry a lot of people without taking up a lot of space, is by rail. And yet we ~~have~~ <sup>to</sup> permitted the commuter system in our cities ~~fall~~ into chaos. There is room in the median strips of many of our highways for a railroad. The monorail is even more space-saving. It runs on an elevated track and its base can be a series of posts or columns just a few inches on each edge. A monorail could be installed along the existing right-of-way of most our urban thoroughfares.

The problem however is money--big money. In all probability the only source of that kind of money is the Federal government. But with increasing <sup>Federal</sup> emphasis on the problems of the cities, it just might become available. And in my judgment, there would be many beneficial side effects, which would save the tax-payers money in other areas. Just one example. The urban poor would be greatly aided. What good does it now do the unemployed man in Harlem if there is a job at the new factory in the suburbs? He can't get to it! he can't move near the job, for economic and other reasons. There is no adequate public transportation, and getting there by car would take two or three hours. And he doesn't have a car. And if he did, he wouldn't have a place to park it.

And so we come to the end of this paper. In it I have outlined some of the problems created by the automobile and described some of our present attempts at solving them. I hope that I have mentioned some few other things that we can do in the future to alleviate the trouble caused by that most important of American inventions---the automobile.