

# Automotive History Review

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## Trucker's Blues



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## Editor's Note

Number 61 is my first attempt at not writing automotive history but clearly transmitting it to a diverse audience. Pulling this venture together has been a humbling experience to say the least, in terms of both editing text and then presenting it. My objective is simple but ambitious: to publish under SAH auspices the very best material on automotive history broadly defined.

Little has changed since 1936 when G.K. Chesterton wrote "I wonder if anybody has yet written a History of the Motor-Car. I am certain thousands must have written books more or less purporting this; I am also certain that most of them consist of advertisements for particular makes and models." To extend Chesterton's thoughts, rarely is automotive history integrative or contextual in merging themes and episodes related to culture, the automotive industries, and main currents in American life. Without getting personal or critical, one can find plenty of historical narratives that are extensions of the journalism that first described the person, place, or thing at the time of the event. Indeed, a similar malady is pervasive to the writing of all of history. One widespread sin is that of well-worn tales repackaged with little if any critical analysis and a reexamination of the evidence. The story line rarely changes. Indeed, history, including automotive history, often needs to be saved from itself.

Everyone, including myself, is guilty of this sin. New interpretations require archival research, critical thought, and inordinate amounts of time. And we are constrained by the practices within our particular tribes. The "buff" historians are often easily pigeonholed by their tight, non-contextual focus, along with the omission of the footnote or reference. Typical work is akin to 19th century natural history, sort of a science of describing engines, suspensions, and chassis. Further, a critical reader has no idea where the work came from or how the past was reconstructed.

Aldo Leopold, in his *Sand County Almanac*, characterized "good History" as using the saw, wedge and axe when felling a tree and examining its rings. Along similar lines, Carl L. Becker in his 1930 Presidential Address to the American Historical Association deftly depicted that the "buff" or everyman historian "selects only such facts as

may be relevant; and that the relevant facts must be clearly established by the testimony of independent witnesses not self-deceived. He does not know, or need to know, that his personal interest in the performance is a disturbing bias, which will prevent him from learning the whole truth or arriving at ultimate causes....on that low pragmatic level he is a good historian precisely because he is not disinterested: he will solve his problems, if he does solve them, by virtue of his intelligence and not by virtue of his indifference."

Bufs are to be viewed with caution in terms of the evidence they present. Indeed, their evidence is both experiential and usually uncited. Usually their work cannot be reconstructed and thus tested. They see the trees but rarely the forest. And their work, often found on coffee tables, can rarely be found in most libraries. With a relatively voluminous number of readers, often enthusiast authors consider the need for context and meaning to be nothing more than malarkey. Instinctively "buff" historians need the academic historian for legitimacy, but only at arm's length, for they often wish to pursue "anecdotal" accounts, in a sense glorifying self. "Bufs" have a ready audience, while academics rarely do.

But what about academics who can paint a forest scene, but do not know the differences of tree species? And indeed, context without understanding and appropriate detail is malarkey. What good is explanation without solid substance? Thus, academics also need the enthusiasts, and I would argue that their knowledge is absolutely critical to the quality of scholarship. They are a font of knowledge and insights, and incidentally, are frequently more fun to be around than historians. They serve also as a check on the truth, particularly on the microscopic level. Many worked on the assembly lines, or in design studios and executive offices. In a business where archives are few and far between and knowledge is often kept close to the vest, they serve as rich sources. In terms of motorsports history, how many of us can claim to have driven in a race, or piloted a race car at speed? How many of us, so comfortable in the library or in our studies, have truly diced with death? In either case, "buff" or academic, the reality is that both write works that serve as drafts or starting points for the next generation of historians. History is never static or set in stone but renews itself in part by using previously written material. 🚗🏎️

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with Automotive History Review should be addressed  
to John Heitmann, Dept. of History, University of  
Dayton, 300 College Park, Dayton, OH, 45469-1540  
**Jheitmann1@udayton.edu.**

Design & Printing:  
Cars Internationale, LLC • 7491 N Federal Hwy.,  
Ste. C5 337, Boca Raton, FL 33487  
**info@carsinternationale.com**

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# Truck Driver's Blues

## The Origins of Trucker Music: Federal Policy, Rural Folk Culture, National Crisis, and a Changing Entertainment Industry

By James Todd Uhlman

Music is a central feature in the lived experience of automobility. Songs describing the lives of professional truck drivers are one of the most intriguing subgenres in the musical culture of the road. Work songs about truck drivers date back to the late 1920s. The first half of this essay examines the intertwining evolution of the road transport industry and trucking music in the years before 1960. Beginning as early as the 1920s, developments in truck technology, roads, and implementation of government policy led to the growth in the industry. Two sectors emerged: a regulated corporate sector composed of unionized drivers, and an unregulated agricultural sector dominated by rural based individual owner-operators and small firms. As the economic fortunes of farmers declined, many became drivers. Trucking music was born in the live performances at roadside honky-tonks or in the shared experience listening to jukeboxes at cafés and filling stations. Musicians, many of them with experience in trucking, built upon work and rural song traditions to fashion music that resonated with drivers. Out of this combination of work and entertainment a new folk subculture began to form. As radios became more common trucking music gained a wider audience and became a subgenre of country. Initially trucker music was characterized by diverse styles rooted in the regional juke joints and local radio stations. By the 1960s, however, changes in the recording industry and radio business led to a stylistic and thematic convergence in trucking music. After 1963 the synergy produced by these various factors produced the subgenre's first boom in popularity.<sup>1</sup>

The second half of the essay examines the key events leading up to the surprising explosion of interest in trucking music in the 1970s. In that decade

songs and films about the lives of professional long-haul drivers filled popular culture. Several factors caused the rising interest. Structural shifts within the trucking industry played a major role. The importance of rural based owner-operators grew. At the same time national demographic changes, marketing decisions within the country music industry, radio formatting, and built-in audio systems led to an increased exposure to the subgenre among a wider audience. Just as importantly, however, were the economic and socio-political challenges of the period. The protests of owner-operators during the oil crises of 1973 and 1979 galvanized public fascination with drivers and the music that defined them. That music increasingly mythologized drivers as rebels. The outlaw trucker became a figure in whom the wider public could project their growing frustration.

The previous research on trucking music has come in many different forms. Historians such as Shane Hamilton touched upon the topic in his definitive study of the trucking industry. Cultural studies scholars like Steve Manseau closely examined lyrical composition while connecting that to both the occupational realities of drivers and the music industry. Folklorists have paid particular attention to the music origin in work song traditions. Sociologists such as Michael H. Belzer and Steve Viscelli have noted the importance of music to drivers and the public perception of them. Others have taken note of the way trucking music occupies a fascinating place in the study of gender in modern America. I have made use of all of this scholarship with the aim of crafting a holistic argument that expands upon the previous insights while closely linking the music's history to critical developments in government policy, technological in-



novations, business structure, as well as the economic and political trends of the nation. I encourage readers to enjoy the delightful experience of listening to the songs mentioned in the essay. Nearly all of those referred to here can be heard on YouTube.

\* \* \*

In 1928, the North Carolina quartet Red Fox Chasers recorded the first trucker song, “Wreck on the Mountain Road.” It tells the real-life story of a trucker named Lonnie Brown who died in an accident on Bent Mountain in Southwest Virginia.<sup>2</sup> Trucking was a relatively new profession. In 1899, Autocar manufactured the first single-body commercial truck in the U.S. That same year Alexander Winton, in Cleveland, Ohio, sold his first semi-trailer truck. A year later Mack was founded in Brooklyn, New York. By 1914, nation-wide production of trucks hit 25,000. Innovations continued through the 1920s as vehicles grew larger and more powerful. State investment in roads and the introduction of pneumatic tires accelerated the trend. During the farm crises of the 1920s, growers purchased trucks in order to squeeze out higher profits by moving their own produce and thereby avoiding the hated railroad monopoly. The Great Depression that began in 1929 deepened the rural crisis and pushed more farmers into business of moving freight. The inflow had made trucking a highly competitive industry, characterized by intense price competition and instability. But it was growing. By 1939 trucks carried an estimated 30% of the nation’s gross domestic product.<sup>3</sup> That year the first trucking song hit was produced by the Texas Wanderers: “Truck Driver’s Blues.”

“Truck Driver’s Blues” was written by Theron Eugene “Ted” Daffan, a musical instrument repairman in Houston, Texas. Daffan noticed that the first thing truckers did when entering the roadside cafés outside the city was deposit a coin in the jukebox. A song about them might earn a lot of nickels, he thought. “Truck Driver’s Blues” was a simple story about a trucker that is “feelin’ tired and weary from my head down to my shoes” as he speeds along through the night to get to town where he hopes for a little companionship with a “honky tonk gal.” Daffan’s hunch proved correct. More than 100,000 copies of the single sold in 1939, one of the biggest hits that year. Evidently, truckers identified with a man striv-

ing to survive in the highly competitive new industry and finding a little enjoyment in life. Like many of them, the fictional driver “never did have nothin’ [and] I’ve got nothin’ much to lose.”<sup>4</sup>

Partly because of the chaos within the industry, four years before Daffan’s hit, the federal government had intervened to regulate the business with the passage of the 1935 Motor Carrier Act. It established the structure that characterized the business for the next forty-five years. By accident it also created the conditions out of which rural-based drivers, like the one depicted in “Truck Driver’s Blues,” ultimately came to represent the profession.<sup>5</sup> Planners divided the trucking business into two parts. The first was a highly regulated long-haul cartel-dominated business focused on durable goods and characterized by organized labor. Transportation of agricultural produce to market composed the other half of the industry. It remained unregulated and dominated by small companies or independent owner-operators. “Truck Driver’s Blues” captured the experience of rural “gypsy” drivers who after 1935 increasingly linked agricultural hinterlands with hungry cities.<sup>6</sup>

Trucking music was rooted in occupational songs of the past and often linked to folk musical forms associated with rural drivers. The first documented reference to a “trucker song” in an American newspaper appeared in 1895 when a black porter unloaded cotton from steamships along the Mississippi and recorded his observations.<sup>7</sup> Railroad music was another source. For example, “Wreck on the Mountain Road” was a reinterpretation of the railroad work song “Wreck of the Old 97.” Folklorists have also identified cowboy ballads from the West, New England, and Canada as a key influence on trucking music.<sup>8</sup> Like a great deal of traditional workplace folk music, songs about trucking were written for, and often by, the drivers themselves.<sup>9</sup> The term “trucker song” first appears linked with occupational events, like the “Truck Owners Dinner” given to honor Iowa “farm-to-market” motor carriers in 1941. At that event drivers were entertained by a series of bands who regaled them with, among other tunes, an official “Trucker Song” composed in their honor.<sup>10</sup> Far more common were the songs concocted and then performed by local musicians working at roadside honky-tonks like the ones frequented by Daffan outside of Houston.

As the historian Steve Manseau has pointed out, the early recorded examples of such songs display

stylistic variation originating from the diverse locations where the rural trucking industry developed.<sup>11</sup> In the dusty Texas plains out of which Daffan's imaginary trucker hurried, the music that awaited him was a countrified blues and jazz swing. Much like Louisiana-born Daffan himself, the style had migrated west out of New Orleans. Across the West this style fused with Cowboy song traditions to fashion Western Swing.<sup>12</sup> To the north and east, music about truckers evolved along different stylistic lines. Farming communities in Tennessee, and the surrounding south-central Appalachia, gave rise to the spare fiddle and banjo narrative story heard in The Red Fox Chasers' "Wreck on the Mountain Road" and Karl & Harty Cumberland Ridge Runners' "Truck Driver's Sweetheart" (1942). By the later 1940s trucking songs in this region gave way to guitar-driven hillbilly boogies. The Milo Twins' 1948 "Truck Driver's Boogie" featured bouncing harmonica play and a sock-rhythm banjo bass. In the coming years boogie moved south. Under its influence Texans such as Doyle O'Dell created "Diesel Smoke, Dangerous Curves" (1952), a longtime classic in the trucker music tradition. In the Midwest, performers such as Wade Ray created their own hillbilly boogie in songs such as "Idaho Red" (1954). Bluegrass numbers offered another example of the diversity in trucking music form. Good examples were Kentucky-born Joe "Cannonball" Lewis's 1951 "Truck Driver's Night Run Blues," Lonnie Irving's 1960 "Pinball Machine," and the dozens of trucking songs made by the Willis Brothers beginning with "It's the Miles" in 1961.

No matter from which region of the nation a song emerged, trucking music largely shared roots within displaced rural culture. Lewis's "Truck Driver's Night Run Blues," for example, is about a southern cotton sharecropper whose bad luck had left him with

no choice but "drive this truck." His nightly labors leave him "worn out at the end" and so dispirited he would "just as soon be dead."<sup>13</sup> The song's dispiriting tale is offset by energetic instrumentation, combined with Lewis's buoyant vocal delivery and surprising yodels. Despite the evident challenges these songs suggest about trucking, throughout the early post-war era trucking continued to be a major option for displaced farmers. By 1958 the percentage of the nation's gross domestic product carried by trucks had risen to nearly 64%.

The continued growth of trucking meant that there was plenty of demand for songs like the ones already produced by Daffan, the Millow Twins, and Lewis. Radio stations played a critical role nurturing trucker music. Formatting for local radio stations at this time largely comprised a mix of live variety programs separated by segments of disk play.<sup>14</sup> In these early years, performers of country and western music aspired to land regular live performance spots on local stations. Many of the later icons of the trucking subgenre like Red Sovine began their careers at stations such as WWVA-AM in Wheeling, West Virginia, and WSFA in Montgomery, Alabama. The earliest references to "trucker music" can be found in 1929 newspaper



*Music by Mac's Truckers. (Courtesy History and Archives Department, Mason City, Iowa, Public Library)*

listings for radio programs.<sup>15</sup> The first self-identifying trucker band, Mac's Truckers, emerged a few years later. Mac's Truckers was a featured group on KGLO in Mason, Iowa, between 1937 and 1950, composed of semi-professional players that performed at dances, band competitions, and local honky-tonks across the Midwest.<sup>16</sup>

Largely as a result of touring artists such as Cannonball Lewis, trucking music had begun to gain a national audience as early as the 1940s. He, and others, toured the juke joints across the nation and sold albums at shows, while aiming to score jukebox hits, which they promoted by becoming featured guest performers on local radio stations.<sup>17</sup> By the mid-1950s this path towards success began to gradually give way to the quest for playtime on larger stations. To do this, singers were pushed by producers to invest in advanced studio production and eventually to shift to LP format, all in the hope of achieving mass appeal. With that some of the regional distinctiveness began to fade. In New England, for example, observes the historian Clifford Murphy, the region's distinctive version of "Country & Western performers—both live and in pre-recorded form—began to disappear from radio." Indeed, between roughly 1955 and 1965, trucking music, like much of the rural based music across the nation, began to be assume a more blended sound.<sup>18</sup>

One of the key developments in this process was the emergence of more powerful stations that transmitted songs farther and to more people. It is estimated that in 1960, 95% of U.S. homes had a radio receiver of some type.<sup>19</sup> Radio format began to give way to the Top 40 program formula. Standardization of playlists encouraged the development of a blended, acoustically complex, studio-produced music. As a result, Murphy noted, in the Northwest the homegrown cowboy, ethnic folk, and work-song traditions were eclipsed by the rising influence of the Southern-inflected "Nashville Sound" that would eventually be branded "country." The effect this had on trucker songs was gradual. The immediate effect was the embrace of rockabilly, a rhythm-and-blues inspired cross-over style. Rockabilly featured juiced-up versions of hillbilly boogies and swing mellowed with rhythm-and-blues stylings. Singers from diverse regional backgrounds adopted the new style. Several of the most identifiable rockabilly numbers include Bob Newman's 1951 "Haulin' Freight," Link Da-

vis's 1956 "Trucker from Tennessee," and Johnny Horton's 1957 "I'm Coming Home." The influence of rockabilly along with the easy-listening Nashville sound helped popularize country music as a whole. In 1961 there were 81 stations entirely devoted to the converging brand of country music. Four years later the number had increased to 243.<sup>20</sup>

The increasing number of stations devoted to country was also the result of other factors. Perhaps the most important involved a dramatic structural transformation of the mass entertainment business spurred by the arrival of the interstate highway system and television. By 1955 the major radio networks ABC, NBC, and CBS had refocused their business on television broadcasting. Television's rise pulled audiences away from radio. There was, however, one area where the radio market was growing. Suburbanization and the introduction of radios as standard features in cars led to drive-time listening as people commuted to and from work.<sup>21</sup> Then President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956, authorizing the construction of 41,000 miles of interstate over the next ten years. It was an incredible impetus to suburbanization and a subsidy for the trucking and auto industries.<sup>22</sup> In 1964 *Time* magazine estimated that nationwide there were 2,000 stations with at least partial country music formats.<sup>23</sup> Radio stations devoted to it continued to multiply. During the three years between 1965 and 1968 the number of all-country stations doubled to over 500.<sup>24</sup>

This growth enhanced the importance of both radio and the DJs in the music industry. According to early producer Don Pierce, by the late 1950s getting DJ's to play trucker music was "an enormously important means of disseminating, popularizing, and stimulating the trucking song."<sup>25</sup> Two hits in the early 1960s reflected the importance of the changes in radio formatting. In 1962 Hank Snow took "I've Been Everywhere" to number one on the *Billboard*'s "Hot Country Songs." In it a trucker gives, in tongue twisting rapid delivery, a list of the places he had driven. David Dudley's 1963 landmark song "Six Days on the Road" followed. The tune was widely broadcast across the nation on both country and pop formatted stations. By the end of the year it hit number two on *Billboard* "Hot Country Songs." Its surprising success was, however, fueled by the significant cross-over appeal of the song's rockabilly sound and resulted in Top 40 airtime play. By the end of the year it had



reached thirteen on *Billboard's* "Adult Contemporary," and most importantly thirty-second in the Top 40 of *Billboard's* "Hot 100," the pop-music industry premier ranking of success. In total, it charted for more than five months.<sup>26</sup> Today Dudley's "Six Days on the Road" is widely credited with establishing trucker music as a country subgenre.

"Six Days on the Road" evocatively captures many aspects of the culture of "gearjammers," as truckers called themselves. It spoke to drivers and simultaneously piqued the interest of "civilians," as truckers termed the automobile drivers with whom they shared the road. One of the appeals was the fascinating occupational subcultural details of trucking itself. The song's authors, Earl Green and Carl Montgomery, former truckers, reference the material realities of work in the industry by mentioning the brands of rigs such as the GMC "Jimmy," or Freightliner "White," and the federal regulatory regime imposed by the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC).

Beyond discussion of "10-4 gears" and "Georgia overdrives," Dudley's song focuses on the experience of the truck driver.<sup>27</sup> Just as in "Truck Driver's Blues" over twenty years before, we have a hauler, this time one that has been out on the road for many days, a situation much more common in the industry by the early 1960s. He is hurrying to be done with his run, racing this time to get home to his beloved wife. Here the song hits many of the thematic elements that scholars identify with the trucker subgenre.<sup>28</sup> Themes include the depiction of drivers as dutiful family men. The most famous of such songs at this time were "Ten Days Out, Two Days In" (1965) and "Payload

Daddy" (1966). Long-suffering wives are a related trope, best seen in songs such as "The Woman Behind the Man Behind the Wheel." In all of these, family and the postponement of domestic pleasure are key sentimental themes.



"A Salute to Men of the Open Road," rear of Truck Driver Songs.  
(Courtesy Stephen Hawkins, Gusto Records)

"Six Days on the Road" also emphasizes themes of manly individuality. The man behind the wheel is depicted as a master over machinery able to adeptly control the truck to achieve his objective. In other songs, such as Jimmy Martin's 1964 "Widow Maker," drivers are cast as heroic and often self-sacrificing guardians of the road. Part of this is the suggestion they are stoic men who accept with resolution the dangers of their job. This theme spans the subgenre, from the first trucker song "Wreck on the Mountain Road" in 1928, to the 1965 smash hit "A Tombstone Every Mile" by New England country star



Dick Curliss. Together these various themes surround the almost universal characterization of drivers as self-reliant blue-collar heroes. Visual representation of this upright manhood is captured by the back art of the 1963 compilation album *Truck Driver Songs*.

But “Six Days on the Road” also reflects a darker vision of trucker masculinity. Interlaced with these characterizations of working-class sobriety are expressions of elevated sexual appetite, dangerous risk-taking behavior, and irrational demands for unrestrained independence. In “Six Days on the Road” the illicit sexual freedom offered by the occupation is suggested by the rider’s confession that he, like a lot of other drivers, could have had plenty of women on his cross-country journey. To reach home he also admits to taking risks and a degree of illegality. The driver “pops little white pills,” ignores the logs drivers were forced to keep by the ICC, runs overweight, bypasses authorization stations, and speeds to reach his destination.<sup>29</sup> Although these themes were already common to the subgenre, as we shall see in the coming years they become more pronounced beginning with numbers such as “King of the Open Road” (1965) and “Happy Go Lucky Truck Driver” (1966).

These exotic elements in the driver’s life undoubtedly appealed to nontruckers. But stylistic elements in the emerging trucker music sound also helped make this song popular. “Six Days on the Road” is set to an infectious rockabilly 2/4 beat.<sup>30</sup> The deep tones of Dudley’s rich baritone delivery, the chorus harmony accompanying him, and the electric bass driving the song are offset by his sharply upward-pitched ecstatic declarations such as “nothing bothers me to... NIGHT, I can dodge all the scales all...RIGHT.”<sup>31</sup> As Dudley, who you might have guessed was a onetime trucker, told country-music journalist Jon Johnson, he believed the style of the music was critical to its success. “The guitar work,” he said, “made the record really.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the song characterizes many of the general attributes which would define trucker music in the coming years. Murphy argues trucking music is defined by “twangy electric guitar (usually played on a Telecaster, utilizing the tonal qualities gained by playing with a pick down by the bridge),” combined with “some rockabilly and bluegrass underpinnings.” As he colorfully describes it, the result was “a rhythmic gait well-suited to listening while seated behind a large windshield, moving at about 70 miles per hour on the interstate.”<sup>33</sup>

The events following the success of “Six Days on the Road” in 1963 were indicative of yet another development, this time taking place in the record industry, that encouraged artists to produce trucker songs. In Nashville and Los Angeles, the success of Dudley’s song led producers to generate more of the same. Don Pierce, the owner of Nashville’s Starday Records, explained that “trucking songs started to sell as early as 1960 and 1961” when orders for “Sleeper Cab Blues” and “Pinball Machine” were no longer confined to jukebox sales.<sup>34</sup> Seeing an opportunity, Pierce contracted with Dudley to do “Six Days on the Road.” Confident after its initial success, Pierce quickly had Dudley make an entire LP devoted to trucking. On the West Coast, Ken Nelson of Capital Records convinced Joe Cecil “Red” Simpson to write a few songs and then an entire LP recording devoted to the theme.<sup>35</sup>

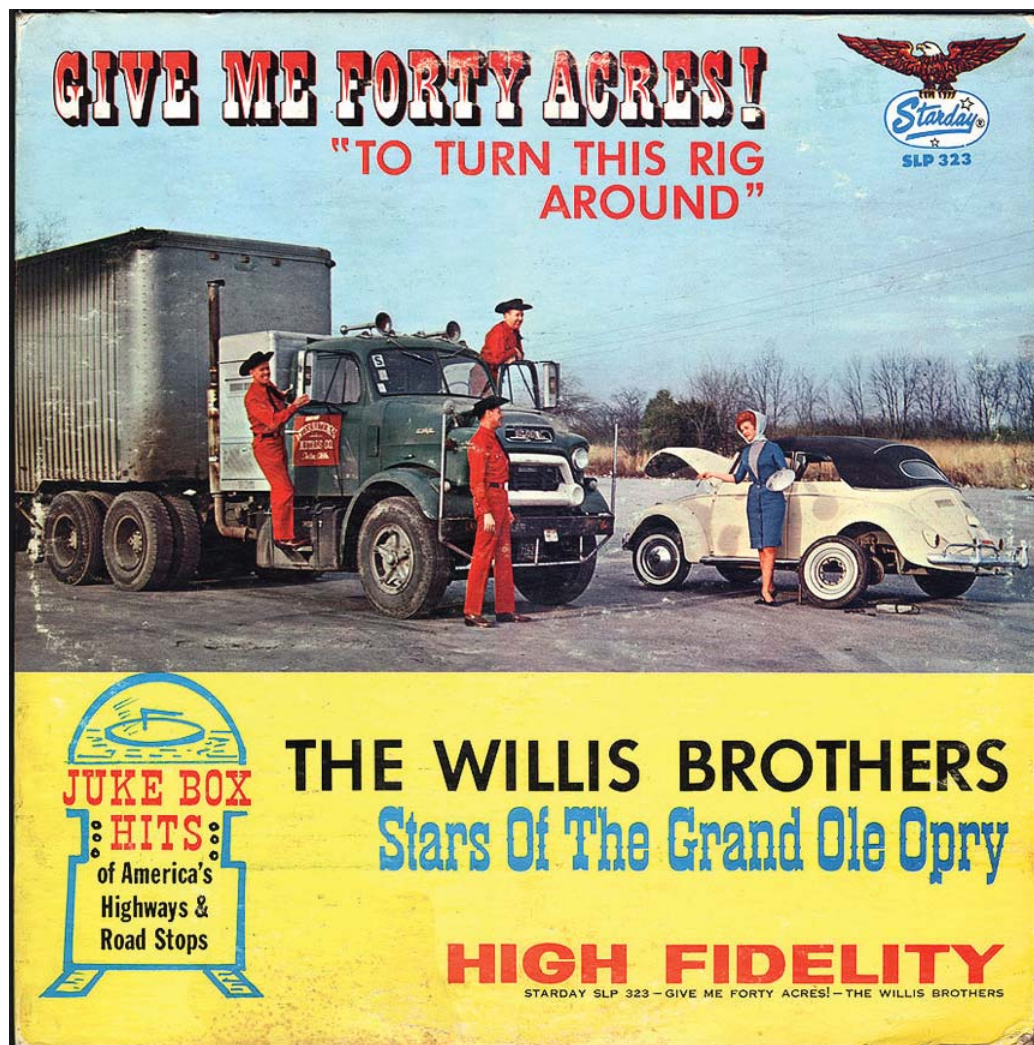
By the beginning of 1965 the Album Era in music had begun allowing artists like Simpson to explore topics more deeply.<sup>36</sup> After successfully testing the waters with the number seven hit single “Roll, Truck, Roll,” Nelson immediately followed with a full length LP by the same title which became the 38th best-selling album of 1966, Nelson repeated the formula with two more road-centered LPs by Simpson that year. Back in Nashville Pierce turned to more LP releases. Starday’s third LP was The Willis Brothers’ 1964 *Give Me 40 Acres (To Turn This Rig Around)*. Pierce also began to repackage singles onto “long-playing album anthologies of trucking songs,” like the 1963 release titled *Diesel Smoke, Dangerous Curves and Other Truck Driver Favorites*.<sup>37</sup> In total he did that fourteen times. Pierce told folklorist Frederick Danker in 1975 that his goal in “constantly repackaging trucking songs in anthology after anthology” was to keep public attention on the songs and in the “repertoires of local singers.”<sup>38</sup>

The arrival of the Long Play and then the 8-track tape markedly changed the financial and marketing strategies within country music.<sup>39</sup> Producing LPs represented a considerable increase in investment and necessitated an economy of scale previously unknown in country. Former rockabilly artist-turned-producer Jimmy Bowen told the scholar Richard Peterson that when he arrived in Nashville in 1971 his peers traditionally “kept costs low because they” anticipated sales to be far less than what was expected just six years later in 1977. Increased sales were made possi-

ble by the ability of the new radio formats to penetrate and concentrate public attention on a select number of artists. And that power was not waning. By 1974 the number of full-time country stations had doubled yet

rations sought to shift transport to independent drivers. Owner-operators cost less because they worked in a highly competitive, unregulated, and nonunionized sector of trucking. The role of independent cattle

haulers illustrates what was taking place and its impact on trucking music. Improvements in mechanical refrigerator (reefer) trucks following the introduction of the Thermo King Model R in 1949 played a critical role in the shift of meat packing away from urban centers such as Chicago. Iowa Beef Processors undercut the old guard of the packing industry by using unregulated trucking.<sup>42</sup> As Dave Dudley, driver in “Bullshippers” (1972), declares, “if it wasn’t for a lot of those truck drivers just like me. Then who would bring those T-bone steaks to you.”<sup>43</sup> Driven at least in part by these occupational connections, the image of the truck driver in music, as well as film, absorbed the mythology long associated with the western wrangler.<sup>44</sup> Songs that reflect this merging of the old and new include Sleepy Labeeff’s



“Give Me 40 Acres (To Turn this Rig Around,” 1964.  
(Courtesy Stephen Hawkins, Gusto Records)

again to 1,016, an additional 1,450 played country for at least four hours, and the *Wall Street Journal* estimated that half of the nation’s radio stations played at least some country during the day.<sup>40</sup>

The importance of trucking was also continuing to grow and that was having an impact on the music. By 1971 the percentage of the nation’s Gross Domestic Product being hauled by truckers was up to 75%.<sup>41</sup> As historian Shane Hamilton details in his definitive history of the industry, *Trucking Country: The Road to America’s Wal-Mart Economy*, the rural trucking sector had grown significantly. Agrobusiness and upstart meat packing companies were driving the change. Beginning as early as the 1950s these corpo-

“Asphalt Cowboy” in 1970 and Jerry Reed’s “Breakin’ Loose” theme song for the 1979 film *Concrete Cowboy*.<sup>45</sup>

The impact of the growth in the unregulated sector and its influence on the rise of the trucking music subgenre went far beyond the meat packing industry. Aided by sympathetic free market advocates at the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), over the next twenty years unregulated drivers were permitted to carry a wider range of products. During the 1960s independent drivers’ earnings (not including benefits) grew faster in the unregulated sector. In response, drivers flocked into the unregulated market.<sup>46</sup> Rooted as the subgenre of trucking music was



in the rural sector of the industry, the growing importance of the owner-operator expanded the popularity of trucking music while altering drivers' perceptions of themselves. A close examination of the lyrics reveals the music worked to create a mythology that solidified drivers' in-group identity but in ways that ran contrary to the realities of their work lives.<sup>47</sup>

In this environment of intensifying pressures, drivers identified with the musicians with whom they shared the lonely hours on the road. The singers gave voice to their sorrows, joys, and reasons for pride, while defending them before an unappreciative world. In return, many drivers saw the musicians as kindred spirits. "A truck driver can relate to a country artist as a person," said Wisconsin driver Jerry Schirk in 1972.

David Dudley was a trucker and even Presley started out driving trucks. Country songs tell stories and they're true to life, or at least to the lives we know. [...] When you've got those tapes playing, it's the greatest feeling on earth to be riding in a truck. You're your own master and there's no chains. Freedom, that's what it's all about.

Country music plays "a special role for the trucker," declared the author of the essay "Hitch Your Fate to a Country Star," because, although truckers were loners, "they stick together—individuals within a group." Country music was one way they do that, said the author.<sup>48</sup>

The impact of the expansion of unregulated rural-based drivers on the growth of trucker music intertwined with larger demographic shifts taking place inside the U.S. The outward flow of southerners and inward flow of northerners into the South expanded the popularity of rural-based music traditions more generally.<sup>49</sup> In 1974 John Egerton examined the significance of these changes in his book *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America*. Egerton concluded the rural-based Southern culture was spreading over the country.<sup>50</sup> Southernization offers another explanation for the growing interest in country-politan-country broadly and trucking songs more specifically.<sup>51</sup>

Launched by the success of "Six Days on the Road," the popularity of trucker music had grown dramatically in the 1960s. The singer and onetime DJ at KWKH in Shreveport, LA, Nat Stuckey explained that Dudley's hit had inspired him to write "Paralyze

My Mind" (1968) about Kelly's Truck Terminal. Taught by his dad, an owner-operator, he had learned to drive a truck before a car.<sup>52</sup> With songs like Stuckey's, the decade ended with an impressive run by the subgenre on the charts. Led by Red Sovine's mystical "Phantom 309," in 1967 five of the year's top 100 country charting singles were trucker tunes. Johnny Dollar's "Big Rig Rollin' Man" and seven more made the chart in 1968. Another hit that year was Norma Jean's "Truck Driving Woman." Two years earlier Kay Adams broke the double-white no-go gender line when she declared "I'm a gear-swappin' mama, and I don't know the meaning of fear" in her number thirty charting single "Little Pink Mack." The emergence of songs about female drivers was a testament to the growth of trucking.<sup>53</sup> It was also a sign of the music's broadening appeal.

\* \* \*

Thus far I have explained the rise of trucking music as a result of increasing access to the subgenre and the growing population of people familiar with country music more broadly. These trends continued into the 1970s. But support for the trucking songs was also growing in intensity. The 1960s had witnessed a significant rise in the subgenre, with a total of over three dozen hits in the Country Top 100 between 1957 and 1969. Nearly five dozen would reach that milestone between 1970 and 1983.<sup>54</sup> Adding trucker-related songs on the pop-rock charts would increase the latter numbers even more. What caused the popularity? In this section, I argue that the "trucker craze" of the 1970s can be explained by the way average Americans increasingly associated the challenges faced by truckers with their own lives. Part of the story has to do with the collapse of the post-war era's shared cultural and political values.<sup>55</sup> That had begun in the 1960s, but it had not made the trucker a hero. Two catalyzing events focused public interest on the trucker and trucking music in the 1970s. Those events led Americans, as a 1976 article put it, to see truckers as "rugged individualists" and "genuine folk heroes."<sup>56</sup>

The first catalyzing event was the end of the long post-war economic boom. By 1969 the U.S.'s share of the world's economic output had dropped by nearly 21% since 1950. Adding to the troubles was the rise of inflation.<sup>57</sup> The blue-collar workers that had prospered in the post-war years began to see the number



of high-paying industrial jobs decline and their life savings dwindle. In the changing economy, driving trucks began to look more alluring. Songs such as Red Sovine's "Payload Daddy" presented the owner-operator as his own boss and because of that "not afraid of automation takin' my job away."<sup>58</sup>

Occupational alternatives emerging in the new economy were unappealing to many. Although white-collar and service sector jobs were growing, in the early 1970s that work also seemed precarious. Just as importantly the white-collar desk-bound work struck many as unmanly.<sup>59</sup> In "Payload Daddy" Sovine juxtaposed the masculine, self-sufficient driver against the effete, dependent office worker. The driver proudly declares he had "turned down a job wearing a big white collar" because, even though there is "a whole lotta difference between a dime and a dollar," he was free to roam.<sup>60</sup> Listening to this music, audiences actively reaffirmed to themselves the merits of dignified independence over the inauthentic, self-imprisoning life that they liked to imagine resulted from education and affluence. At one level, in the midst of the growing economic and gendered anxiety of the day, the trucker began to emerge as a romantic figure through whom the public could escape the troubling changes taking place.<sup>61</sup>

The capacity of the trucker to serve that role resulted from the way owner-operators could be cast as liminal figures. Trucker songs repeatedly depict drivers as people caught between different worlds. The drivers were identified with an agrarian economy but were also described as masters of complex modern machinery. Similarly, drivers operated in a space between country and city. Songs depicted them as people whose sense of home bounced between traditional notions of community, and the modern individualist possibilities of adventure on the road. For men, the truckers' marginal status held particular allure. Drivers were men whose occupational identity vacillated between a pride of independence and an emasculating sense that their fate remained outside of their control.<sup>62</sup> At a deeper level then, the figure of the trucker became a nexus at which the trials of modernity could be negotiated.

By the early 1970s the growing interest in truckers could be seen in multiple entertainment platforms. Two trucker TV shows appeared during the 1960s and 1970s. In 1971 the release of *Moonfire*, the first feature film about truckers in several decades, began

what would be a flood of movies about them. Within the trucking industry itself, a greater focus on the musical representation of drivers began to occupy a place of importance. Occupational magazines such as *Overdrive* increasingly featured reports on singers and movies that depicted drivers.

Marketing inside the radio industry also suggests a growing recognition of the importance of the trucker figure. In 1971 the WENO all-country radio station began broadcasting in Nashville with a promotional campaign featuring semi-trailer trucks that had its call sign painted on their sides.<sup>63</sup> That same year, WWL, a famed AM station out of New Orleans, began broadcasting Charlie Douglas and Dave Nemo's "Road Gang." Nemo recalled that "Charlie went to WWL and said, 'You've got all these truckers with nothing directed towards them. Why don't we start a program aimed for the trucking audience exclusively?'" As *Time* magazine explained in 1973: "Six nights a week at 9:30, Charlie Douglas sounds two beeps on a truck horn, and thousands of truck drivers on the road all over the country cock an ear. For the next 7½ hours, over WWL [...] they can hear not only country music but business information that could be vital."<sup>64</sup> Other stations, most prominently WHO in Des Moines, Iowa, followed their daytime hours with separate all-night 10pm to 5am broadcasts aimed at the estimated 800,000 truckers driving on the road at night in 1976.<sup>65</sup> Radio stations such as KWKH in Shreveport, Louisiana, and in WRVA Richmond, Virginia, were broadcast from truck stops.

It was not just truckers listening. On any given night Big John at WRVA received 200 to 250 phone calls, mostly from home listeners.<sup>66</sup> Charlie Douglas, at WWL, received fan mail "from police and fire departments, sanitation crews, even Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops, and of course trucking firms."<sup>67</sup> Transplanted rural migrants and their city-born neighbors were watching movies or listening to songs about trucking. As an article in the *Chicago Daily News* in the fall of 1973 observed: "Some people love it [country music]. Some people hate it. Some call it the white man's blues, but whatever you think of it, its time has come." Trucking music was on the rise. As the *Chicago Daily News* article explained, country-western fans "live in the country and they live in the city, and they drive the trucks in between."<sup>68</sup> This fact encouraged country's big stars to dabble with trucker-themed songs. Merle Haggard had been Ken Nelson's

first choice back in 1965 to record a trucker-based LP. Haggard turned Nelson down, but in 1968 Haggard released the trucker's existential lament "White Line Fever." Johnny Cash famously performed a medley of trucker tunes on ABC's "The Johnny Cash Show" (1969-1971).<sup>69</sup>

The second of the catalyzing events that would transform the public image of truckers took place on December 3rd, 1973. Months before OPEC began an oil embargo resulting in a rapid rise in fuel prices.<sup>70</sup> Some state governments established gas and diesel rationing programs. The long-term consequences of the oil shock were devastating to the economy. It tipped the already weak economy into recession. Inflation rose, growth stagnated, and unemployment began to creep higher. In the following years the nation became mired in stagflation: a crippling and hard-to-resolve economic limbo when all three conditions combined. Back in early December of 1973, however, a more immediate event helped transfigure the public perception of truckers into alluring figures of rebellion and hope in troubled times. That day an owner-operator named J.W. Edwards, with diesel limited by rationing, ran out of fuel on Interstate 80 in Eastern Pennsylvania. Throughout the day he had become infuriated by the constant need to stop in order to buy the few gallons he was permitted at any one station. The delays were costing him the money he needed to make his truck payments. In the back of his mind he knew that President Nixon was also considering limiting Interstate Highway speeds to 55 miles an hour in order to improve fuel consumption. That would cost Edwards even more time and money. Rather than pull to the side of the road, Edwards decided to stop his rig in the middle of the interstate. Other truckers soon joined him and before long the highway was jammed for a dozen miles in both directions.<sup>71</sup>

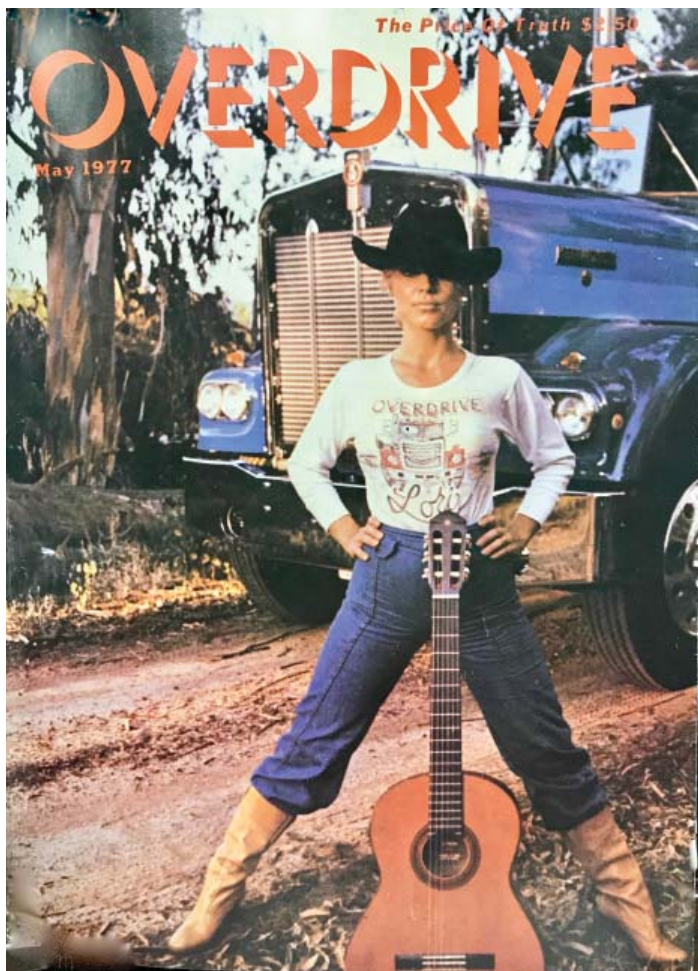
For drivers the protest galvanized the development of a deeper level of collective political consciousness. News of the wildcat strike Edwards had started spread across the CB and other truckers joined the stoppage in at least ten states. Local and national media attention was intense. Both frequently linked the protests with trucker music. As a local news story in the *Clarion-Ledger* of Jackson, Mississippi, described, since the strike began the songs sung by local independent Jack Scott Jr. are "sadder." Truckers love the nation and hate having to protest, Scott suggested. Drivers had been forced to strike. Gas prices,

he complained, were threatening to ruin many drivers. Then in January of 1974 Nixon signed the Emergency Highway Energy Conservation Act, limiting speed to 55 miles-per-hour. Personally, Scott complained, he lost "a trip per week" because of the ruling.<sup>72</sup>

The frustrations of the independents with government authority had long been a part of trucking music. Rooted as the subgenre was in the rural sector of the industry, the songs largely expressed the experiences and concerns of the unregulated market. Coleman M. Wilson's 1960 "Radar Blues" and 1961 "Passing Zone Blues" were early examples of the music capturing the irritation independent drivers felt towards the authorities who impaired their ability to drive faster, for longer, and thereby make more money. In Dudley's famed and much covered 1963 hit "Six Days on the Road," resentment and resistance were explicitly expressed. State authority was presented in that song as an obstacle a driver had to overcome to get home.

But the protest also shaped the wider public's image of truckers as rebels. At this moment truckers began to more clearly emerge as heroes willing to fight back against the injustices many average people felt were smothering the American Dream. Following the protest in the winter of 1973-1974, interest in truckers and their subculture grew dramatically. In a widely syndicated *New York Times* article "The Trucker Emerged as a Modern Cowboy," trucker Elmer Arbaugh explained he was "not sure just how long-haul truckers have suddenly become media heroes." "Oh," he said, "you make a livin' at it [...] but I'm not sure about the cowboy business." "Arbaugh's demur notwithstanding, that appears to be the new popular image – the trucker as a modern existential cowboy, set loose in time and space," author Wayne King concluded.<sup>73</sup> King observed that movies, trucker songs, and TV shows such as *Movin' On*, which featured the Merle Haggard number one charting song by that name, had been busy transforming drivers into folk heroes.

There were plenty of signs that this was true. Bands playing trucking songs witnessed an increased attendance and enthusiasm following the strikes. In an article from the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, for example, a surprised music critic described how the "grungiest of truck-stop bands," known as "Commander Cody and his Lost Planet Airman," wowed the 4,000 youths with high-powered renditions of "Truck Stop Rock" and "Mama Hated Diesels."<sup>74</sup> By the end of 1974



Cover, *Overdrive*, May 1977.  
(Courtesy Max Heine, Randall-Reilly)

interest in truckers and trucking music had grown to such an extent that the first annual “Truck Drivers’ Country Music Awards” was organized.<sup>75</sup> Articles with colorful titles such as “Cannonball Dash” (*Time*), “Nuisance or Boon?” (*U.S. News and World Report*), “America with its Ears On” (*New York Times Magazine*), and “The Bodacious New World of CB” (*Time*), poured from mainstream magazines.

Following the highway stoppages trucker songs demonstrated an increasing militancy. Red Simpson’s “Inflation” was an early, and today largely unknown, example. In the winter of 1974-1975 inflation hit 12% and after falling to the still-high figure of 5% in late 1976, it rose again, ultimately topping out at over 13% in later 1979. Simpson appears to have recorded “Inflation” sometime in 1976. “Well on the news everyday they keep saying, inflation is just around the bend,” declared Simpson, “and a big old depression, is headed our way again.” The “dollar ain’t worth a dime no more, and it will never be the same again” he warned. The radical nature of the song was Simpson’s

willingness to lay blame for this grim reality. None of this “bothers those whales in Washington, because we are the ones that feel the squeeze,” he asserted. Simpson continued, “yeah, the government’s living in luxury” even as they “keep raising them taxes up, every time we turn around.” “If you ain’t rich or have a friend in the Government,” he concluded, “there ain’t no way you’re going ever win.” Although Simpson played “Inflation” at concerts and on live radio shows, perhaps because of its explicit politics, it remained unreleased until much later.<sup>76</sup>

The single most important song reflecting this growing distrust in authority, and perhaps the most important trucker tune of all time, was C. W. McCall’s sensation, “Convoy.” “Convoy” mixed a strident anti-authority message with a spirit of fun-loving mayhem. Released in November of 1975, “Convoy” gathered speed through the Christmas season. “Strange Song Sweeps U.S.” declared the front page of the *Reno Evening Gazette*.<sup>77</sup> By then it had reached number one on the Country 100 and topped the pop Hot 100 on January 10, 1976. “Convoy” is about a trio of independents led by a trucker with the CB handle of “Rubber Duck” who refuses to bow to the police, the ICC rules, and the 55-mile speed limit. Together they become the core of an unplanned uprising in the form of a gigantic convoy. The line of rigs barrel across the country in a vague, cathartic protest against the corrupt authority of the state. The song not only captured the heightened frustrations of independent drivers, but the wider public’s bewildered anger at government in the midst of a developing national crisis.<sup>78</sup>

The song’s origin was yet another example of the fascinating convergence of grass roots and top-down cultural origins. C.W. McCall was actually a character created in 1973 by an Omaha-based advertising executive named William Fries for an ad campaign for the Metz Baking Company’s Old Home Bread. The ads centered upon a fictional 18-wheel bread delivery driver named C. W. McCall and played by Fries. C. W. McCall was surrounded by other comic characters, including Mavis, his waitress love interest, who worked at the “Old Home Filler-Up an’ Keep-on-a-Truckin’ Café.” The advertisement campaign depended on motifs central to the trucker music tradition, not least of which was the love for waitresses seen in songs dating back to the early 1940s hits “Truck Driver’s Coffee Stop” and “Truck Driver’s Sweetheart.” The twelve-commercial series was a Midwest-



ern hit, ultimately earning Fries the 1974 Clio Award for the nation's best advertising campaign.<sup>79</sup> The pitch for Old Home's baked products was interwoven into spoken narrative delivered in Fries's deep bass with "down-home" banjo accompaniment, M.C. McCall's fourth-wall breaking asides, subtle sexual suggestions, and curiosity-inducing use of trucker CB slang. "The spots turned out to be such a huge hit," Fries later said, "that people began to call the television stations and asked to see these commercials played almost like they were records!"

So, we went back to the client and said, "Well, let's do a record of that and sell it around here locally." They sold about 30,000 of those in a couple of weeks. When you do anything like that, people sit up in Nashville and Los Angeles and take notice.

McCall later recalled that the impetus for the song itself came from several sources. The first was the public fascination with CB radios. "We decided to do 'Convoy' because right at that time the big CB craze was going on," explained McCall. The intensive coverage of the wildcat strike of 1973-1974 had made the public aware of CBs. Dave Dudley's "Me and Ole CB" and Joe Stampley's "Roll on Big Mama" were other songs about CBs released at almost exactly the same time. Fries understood the appeal. "We listened to the jargon and fell in love with that because it was such colorful language," he said. He wanted to wed that to a "very rebellious sounding score."<sup>80</sup>

"Convoy's" success led to a slew of imitations. In 1976 the company offered a \$100,000 prize for best original music featuring the CB radio and co-sponsored the annual "Truck Drivers' Country Music Awards."<sup>81</sup> Fries quickly continued the story in the modestly successful "Round the World with the Rubber Duck." Others quickly sought to duplicate the success of Fries's song. And they met with considerable success. That same year Cledus Maggard, the stage name for Jay Huguely, an advertising man turned singer, hit number one on the Country 100 with his even more comic mockery of authority in the CB song "The White Knight." Red Sovine also hit number one in 1976 with the CB tear-jerker "Teddy Bear." Other notable numbers in the same vein included Cledus Maggard's "Kentucky Moonrunner" (1976) and Rod Hart's "CB Savage" (1976-1977).

Scholars contend that the rise of the CB allowed

non-truckers to participate through the shared language with a subculture whose imagined authenticity and rebellious independence provided an antidote to their feelings of marginalization, anxiety, and anger.<sup>82</sup> Asked to explain his songs' popularity, Fries emphasized, "the rebellious nature of the thing. It was about beating the system. And the jargon, of course, caught on, too." Americans, Fries observed, were ready to rebel and they found expression for this in the trucker. "Truck drivers were striking. The speed limit was 55. There were gas shortages, and [then] all kinds of [other] things were happening around the country." In the midst of it all "truck drivers made a big splash in the news, using CB radios to beat the 55-mile-per-hour limit."<sup>83</sup> The new speed limit was an especially important rallying point because it affected all drivers. DJs such as Big John refused to utter "the 'obscene number'—55" on the air. Temperatures had to be delivered as "one degree more than 54."<sup>84</sup> The public, in short, was prepared to project onto the trucker the feelings of rebellion that were stirring within them.

"Convoy" represented a significant escalation in the rhetoric surrounding the trucking subculture's rebellion against public authority, and the interconnection of that act with American nationalism. The song evokes the primordial "Don't Tread on Me" American fetish for limitless independence as a radical justification for lawlessness. Despite the song's tongue-in-cheek delivery, an article titled "Rollin' Cross the U.S. in Fantasy Convoy" in *The Palm Beach Post* the day after Christmas 1975 broke down the song's radical import. The driver's initial decision to disobey the law was troubling but in what follows next, writes the author, "we get into some heavy anarchy." "The convoy thumbs its nose at the roadblock, blasts across the nation." "But we've only begun to flout. Next they shoot through Illinois' supply of Smokies and National Guard reinforcements." "Now there's citizenship for you," the author sarcastically concludes.<sup>85</sup> Officials in the Iowa Department of Safety concluded the song threatened law and order. They successfully placed pressure on radio stations such as WHO in Des Moines to stop playing the song because it made it "harder to enforce the 55 mile an hour speed limit."<sup>86</sup>

Truckers were very aware of the song's anti-authority themes and while some approved, others did not. As one 32-year older trucker named Jim Miller told the *Nevada Evening Gazette*, "I think [CBs] and all those other trucker songs are helping the trucker's

image.” Overhearing Miller, another disagreed. He did not believe that it was helping truckers by showing them “‘Crashing the gate doin’ 98, [while declaring] we ain’t gonna pay no toll.” “Things like that” did help the trucker image, responded Miller. “Those songs are making truckers the good guy. The public likes things like that.”<sup>87</sup> In terms of sheer popularity, it was hard to argue with Miller’s conclusion regarding public opinion. “There was a time,” Fries observed with only a little exaggeration, “when you could turn on any radio station in the country and within 30 seconds you’d hear ‘Convoy.’”<sup>88</sup>

Nevertheless, some observers continued to view this celebration of truckers as rebels with trepidation. These critics knew that music bore a great deal of the blame for the rise of the image of the rebel trucker. “Thanks to the endless supply of trucker songs being ground out by country music artists,” wrote one local newspaper editorial, “the truck driver has emerged as a romantic figure, like so many other country music heroes, the embodiment of the American Way of Life. So, one criticizes the trucker at his own risk.” However, the editorial continued, despite their growing heroic stature “truckers regularly ignore the laws of the road” and that was hardly something to be celebrated in music.<sup>89</sup>

Most did not see it this way, however. The image of rebel drivers proved alluring to nationalists as well as counterculture adherents. Sympathizers of both read the resistance of truckers as the realization of the idealized notion of American individualism. As the trucker Jim Miller discussed above put it, their rebelliousness was “making truckers the good guy.” Indeed, the love of truckers had become something of a cult, argued writer Graeme Ewens

and photographer Michael Ellis in their opportune 1977 book *The Cult of the Big Rigs and the Life of the Long-Haul Trucker*.<sup>90</sup> Almost as soon as “Convoy” hit number one, Hollywood producers set to work making it into a film. Sam Peckinpah, master of the ultra-



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*Jerry Reed*

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Sound protection for America's truckers.

See Jerry Reed in "Smokey And The Bandit II."

*“That’s the Sound Only a Trucker Could Love,” Overdrive, June, 1979. (Courtesy Max Heine, Randall-Reilly)*

violent rebel western, was selected to direct. Country western singer Kris Kristofferson starred as Rubber Duck.<sup>91</sup> To drive home the film’s appeal to rebelliousness, C. W. McCall wrote a new version of the hit song laced with profanity and a stronger anti-authori-

ty message, and the film climaxes with Rubber Duck, driving his 1977 Mack RS712LST on a suicidal run at the police and National Guard.<sup>92</sup>

Once again, the identification of the trucker with the cowboy served to close the mythological circle. Peckinpah's selection to direct the film strongly suggests the producers understood that they were making a Western on wheels. Truckers were, as a character in the film *Convoy* said, he continued, "The living embodiment of the American cowboy tradition."<sup>93</sup> The interconnection between the CB phenomenon, film depictions, and musical creation of the gearjammer as rebellious, anti-authoritarian folk heroes, can also be seen in Jerry Reed's 1977 hit "Eastbound and Down" from the film *Smokey and the Bandit*. In this song, just as in "Roll on Big Mama," "Convoy," and "Kentucky Moonrunner," the CB facilitates the renegade trucker's evasion of the law.

Public identification with truckers as populist rebels willing to buck the system was reinforced by events in late 1978 when oil prices rose again. But in a sign of the growing cynicism gripping the nation, as the summer began the next year a startling 54% of Americans believed the shortage was not real. Prices, they guessed, were being inflated by gas companies and perhaps the politicians in their pockets.<sup>94</sup> On June 5th truckers once again became national TV news when a convoy of owner-operators surrounded the Capitol building and the Energy Department to protest the rising price of diesel.<sup>95</sup> It was the beginning of a nation-wide strike of independents.

In many respects, the gear-jamming subculture of rebellious manhood embodied the "outlaw" music tradition that had begun to rise in country music at this time. Beginning in the early 1970s a growing group of country singers pursued greater freedom from the Nashville industry. Musically, outlaw country was characterized by the rediscovery of some of country's roots that had been, and remained, such a big part of the trucker subgenre, namely honky-tonk and rockabilly.<sup>96</sup> The public conception of the trucker as "the last American cowboy, a romantic folk-hero and pop-cult phenomenon" represented a nostalgic revival of a mythologized manhood of autonomy, liberty, and mastery.<sup>97</sup> As William Fries, the author of the "Convoy" song, explained to reporters of *Newsweek* in early 1976, his song "appeals to the rebel instinct in Americans" who are upset by "how regulated our lives have become and how many of our freedoms we

have lost."<sup>98</sup> Kris Kristofferson, one of the key outlaw singers, in his shirtless "Rubber Duck" in *Convoy* blends the powers of the rambling male archetype: sexual conquest, radical individualism, fanatical anti-authoritarian independence, and mastery over others. Beyond the central quality of unrestrained mobility—perhaps best captured in songs such as Haggard's "Ramblin Fever" (1977), a tune which once again reveals the folkloric origins of trucking music in the older traditions of railroad and hobo songs—several motifs within trucker music fed this outlaw masculine vision. As previously discussed, the disregard for highway speed laws and ICC rules fit the bill. Other motifs include a preoccupation with alcohol, drugs, and sexual adventurism.<sup>99</sup>

Drugs and alcohol had long been acknowledged in the gearjammer tradition as the fuel that kept the drivers on the road. The master of the trucker song David Dudley had long played with the theme. From the "little white pills" in "Six Days on the Road" (1963), or, one of the author's personal favorites, "Freightliner Fever" (1976), Dudley's oeuvre leaves little doubt about the importance of amphetamines, termed "second drivers" or "west coast turnarounds." The oft-mentioned truck driver "fever" frequently refers to a drug-induced, white-knuckle state of driving energy. Red Simpson and Jack Greene's versions of "California Turnarounds" again testify to the theme's deep roots. By 1980 Reed's need for "pocket rockets" in "Caffeine, Nicotine, Benzedrine (And Wish Me Luck)" was a proud declaration of the trucker's outlaw drug-popping status. Dudley's "Two Six Packs Away" (1965), The Willis Brothers' "Alcohol and #2 Diesel" (1968), and Johnny Paycheck's "Drinkin' and Drivin'" (1979), among many others, contributed to the interconnections between substance abuse, driving, and the Outlaw figure. Newspaper articles about drug use by truckers indicate the wider public's awareness of the problem was largely a result of trucking music.<sup>100</sup>

As we have seen, the centrality of the theme of sexual opportunism in trucker music stretches back to the subgenre's origin. Among the many previous hits along these lines had been Willis Brothers' "When I Come Driving Through" (1965), Del Reeves' 1965 "Girl on the Billboard" (later covered by Dudley), Dudley's "Truck Drivin' Son-of-a-Gun" (1965), Red Simpson's "Mini-Skirt Minnie" (1967), and Jim Nesbitt's 1968 "Truck Driving Cat with Nine Wives."



Sexual braggadocio appears in Johnny Dollar's 1968 "Big Rig Rollin' Man" where he declares himself "a playboy of the road" who is sure to see his baby to-night "because he has a half dozen of them waiting in every town he pulls in."<sup>101</sup> Red Simpson's racy 1970 songs "I Got a Beaver on My Lap, and a Bear on my Tail" and "Diesel Smoke, Dangerous Curves" further exemplified the theme. Furthermore, during the latter half of the 1970s the outlaw trucker music brought an intensified emphasis on this roguish sexuality via the songs' linkage with the onscreen allure of Kris Kristofferson's and Burt Reynolds's movie characters. Jerry Reed, Burt Reynolds's co-star in *Smokey and the Bandit*, performed the film's three theme songs. In addition to "Eastbound and Down" were "The Legend" and "Bandit." When heard in conjunction with the film and the Bandit's onscreen sexual energy, outlaw becomes code for sexual liberation if not predatory behavior. Other signs of the ripening sexual suggestiveness in trucker music is illustrated by the borderline raunchy duet "The Bull and the Beaver" (1978) sung by Merle Haggard & Leona Williams.

Perhaps because of the exaggerated sentiments expressed in the subgenre during the second half of the 1970s, by the early 1980s trucking music lost its allure for a large number of Americans. As far back as 1976, in the midst of the trucker delirium, some nonetheless expressed exasperation with the trucker craze. In a letter to the *Columbia, Pennsylvania, Lancaster Intelligencer Journal*, Clarence Bachman complained "I'm sick of all this talk about trucks and truck drivers. If I see one more TV commercial advertising trucker songs, one more CB radio sale, or even one more letter to the editor about truck drivers, I'll go crazy."<sup>102</sup> Late in the decade signs of eroding public interest were more evident. In 1979 the annual Truck Drivers Country Music Award Show was discontinued. After five-year of sponsorship, *Open Road* magazine and Radio Shack ended their financial support of the event.<sup>103</sup> Of course, trucker songs continued to be produced. Six charted on the Country 100 in 1980 and six more in 1981. However, the successes were modest and another tune about drivers did not make the *Billboard* list until 1983. Whatever the cause, by the end of the decade there was palpable fatigue with the trucker phenomenon.<sup>104</sup> The white-line fever had broken.

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Trucking music continued to be produced and find an audience in the decades after 1983 but the subgenre's peak had passed. Between 1983 and 1996 the number of trucker songs making the charts dramatically dropped to sixteen and that level of interest continued into the next century.<sup>105</sup> To conclude here, however, it is worthwhile to reflect more deeply on what the end of the trucker craze suggests in light of the history detailed here. Once again, this event highlights one of the central conclusions of this essay: the trucking musical subgenre was deeply intertwined with political culture.

If 1970 had marked a shift in the political mood of the nation, 1980 brought the rightward shift more fully to the surface. Ironically given the symbolic role of the trucker in facilitating the resurgent politics of libertarian individualism, after 1981 the non-truck driving public reacted with greater skepticism to the depiction of owner-operators as ideals of individualist ethos celebrated by the resurgent political culture. Trucker culture simply no longer seemed as symbolically potent as it once had. Several events conspired to cast the rebel trucker in less favorable light. Media coverage of strikes in the 1970s increased public awareness of truckers, but over time it also revealed a dramatic contradiction between the failure of independent minded drivers to achieve their aims and the myth of potency produced about them in music and film. Given the trucker rebel figure's dubious relationship to actual drivers, the mythmaking process itself became a subject of mockery. Stretching back to the strike of 1974, articles in newspapers and magazines poked fun at the phenomenon. The *New York Times* review of the film *Convoy* in 1978 termed it a "big, costly, phony exercise in myth-making." This sentiment was echoed by other critics.<sup>106</sup> Some of the bards of trucking music were no less forgiving. In 1980 David Dudley decided to "set this story straight" in his song "Roloids, Doan's Pills, and Preparation H." "Songs have been written 'bout us heroes of the road," declared Dudley, but the realities of driving were much less romantic, and drivers were dependent upon donut seats more than the wonders of self-determination. Indeed, looking back on the decade it appears that a good portion of the music about truckers, as well as the trucking filmography, was at least subtextually tongue-in-cheek. A reflective tone of self-indulgent buffoonery threads its way through the lyrics of the CB narratives of "Convoy" and "Teddy Bear,"

among others. In this light the hypertrophied masculinity of the trucker may have increasingly struck viewers as pathetically compensatory. True or not, with the direction history took after 1980 audiences had a harder time seeing truckers in heroic terms. As the local Maine songwriter and singer Jimmy Barne said, "I mean, if you think the life of a truck driver in reality is glamorous, stop at any truck stop and sidle up to the salad bar, man and look around." The reality is, he said, "you gotta fantasize [trucking] in song, or do somethin' to it, or otherwise ..."<sup>107</sup>

The "otherwise" became hard to ignore after 1980. Significant structural changes took place in both the trucking industry and the nation's political culture that exposed the myth pervading the sub-genre. Despite the failure to achieve direct substantive reforms, the trucker protests of the 1970s, combined with the growing political push by corporate interests to get cheaper transportation costs, led political leaders to deregulate the industry. President Jimmy Carter signed the 1980 Motor Carrier Act curtailing or ending many aspects of federal oversight and opening the industry to market dynamics. Deregulation took away one of the central animating grievances that defined the trucker's romanticized identity as "independents" fighting against an unjust system.

What is certain is that after 1980 the wider public found it more difficult to see truckers as heroic rebels. One event that suggests this was the popular reaction to the trucker strike of 1983 that spread over twenty-one states. Americans greeted the shutdown with far less sympathy than the previous protests. The strikes were roundly criticized by Ronald Reagan, the champion of neoliberal policy in Washington despite the independent trucker vote having helped elect him president. Indeed, Reagan's plan to hike the fuel tax by five cents a gallon and increase road use taxes had triggered the shutdown. Only two years before, Reagan had significantly reduced the top marginal income tax rate from 70% to 50%, a move that did nothing for individual owner-operators but helped truck company owners.<sup>108</sup> In short, the gap between the mythology of individualist liberty celebrated in song and the realities of working as a trucker, did little to perpetuate the myth-making processes.

At this point the cultural potency of the themes that had driven public interest in the genre through the 1970s weakened. The music continued to recycle the tropes of driver oppression at the hands of the

wealthy, corporations, police, and government, but the complaints no longer appeared to excite the same level of interest. Hits emphasizing heroic defiance, as in tunes like "Bonnie Jean (Little Sister)" (1987), became less common.<sup>109</sup> The reality of working as a truck driver simply did not support strutting claims to independence. In the decades before, whatever complaints there may have been, it was largely true, as one songwriter said, trucking "pays the bills!" However, following the passage of the 1980 Motor Carrier Act trucker pay plummeted.<sup>110</sup> Together these developments gave greater substance to lyrics in songs such as Eddie Rabbitt's 1980 hit "I'm Drivin' My Life Away." As another trucking song at the time might have put it, life was like following a "Chicken Truck" (1981). The crap that drivers had to face, in short, was enough to inspire "Highway 40 Blues" (1983).

Songwriters were on more secure ground when they returned to the themes of sorrow, suffering, and sentiment. That turn clearly had more commercial viability, as exemplified in the prevalence of hits such as "On the Road Again" (1980), "Midnight Hauler" (1981), "Roll On (Eighteen-Wheeler)" (1984), "Thank God for the Radio" (1984), "Running the Roadblocks" (1985), "Eighteen Wheels and a Dozen Roses" (1988), "In My Eyes" (1989), and "Rollin' Home" (1990). As the sociologist Lawrence Ouellet argued, in the 1970s, the fantasies spread by trucker music helped imprison the drivers in a self-destructive myth.<sup>111</sup> In a sad epilogue to the relationship between music and trucking in the 1970s, in March of 1980 a "desperate trucker" held the office manager of Elektra Asylum Records hostage while demanding to see "Jackson Browne or a member of the Eagles." The man had had his truck stolen and wanted to borrow \$2,500 from the musicians. In the end he settled for the local radio station playing "Desperado" and for the DJ to introduce the number dedicated to "the desperate trucker."<sup>112</sup>

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# The Soft Sell

## Gender, Advertising, and the Chevrolet Corvair

By John E. Mohr

In September of 1959, General Motors' Chevrolet Division introduced the Corvair to consumers. GM launched the Corvair as a response to a foreign challenge in the American car market. The compact Corvair appeared at a time when Americans overwhelmingly preferred large cars, but the market share of smaller vehicles was on the rise. The remarkable success of the Volkswagen Beetle had taken the overconfident leaders of the American auto industry by surprise. Social commentators, including John Keats, increasingly criticized the products offered by the Big Three Detroit automakers towards the end of the 1950s. They saw Detroit's dreamboats as overpowered, expensive, ugly, and unnecessarily complicated "insolent chariots" that undermined simple Fordist ideals of automobility.<sup>1</sup> The Beetle seemed to be the antithesis of many of Detroit's products, and it appealed to consumers weary of chromed land yachts. In addition to the Beetle, imported makes such as Fiat, Renault, and Peugeot populated the small-car segment. GM hoped to counter this competition with its latest model. The Corvair made quite a splash upon its debut, but the road ahead proved rocky. Five years later, an enterprising young Washington lawyer named Ralph Nader published *Unsafe At Any Speed*, a scathing exposé of the Corvair's alleged deficiencies, and those of the auto industry in general.<sup>2</sup> Attitudes in Detroit (and Washington) changed dramatically as a result of Nader's critique. Despite cumulative sales of over a million and a burgeoning enthusiast community, GM discontinued the Corvair in 1969. The Corvair's disappointing demise spelled the end of one of Detroit's most unique product lines.

The point of this essay is not to revise the Corvair's safety legacy. There is little evidence to suggest

that the Corvair was more dangerous than the other compact cars of the time period, including Volkswagen's Beetle.<sup>3</sup> What this article seeks to explore is the juncture between the Corvair and gendered ideas of automobility in the 1960s. Through an analysis of advertising media, one can identify the gender identities that the Corvair's designers and marketers sought to articulate. Of particular interest is the way in which the Corvair's gender identity evolved over the years of its model run. This evolution corresponds with other shifts in the Corvair's design and ostensible function. Indeed, these design modifications (and the advertising that accompanied them) help reveal the gendered nature of automobility in 1960s America, and indeed reflect broader social trends.

In its early years, GM sold the Corvair as a practical, economical, and sensible model to families, especially as a "second car" for women. Initially, Corvair advertising specifically targeted women. When the advertising campaign shifted away from a practical image to one of luxury, performance, and style, the gender roles in Corvair advertising became more complex. General Motors continued to market the Corvair as a practical car for women, while at the same time selling it to men on its sports-car virtues. The 1965 redesign of the Corvair, which gave it a more stylish body and increased performance, attenuated these trends.

Advertisements say much about the construction of gender in 1960s America, including "appropriate" roles for men and women. They also reveal the beginning of GM's long struggle to successfully introduce and market a competent small car with broad appeal. Sportiness and performance were considered to be the preoccupations of male consumers, whereas practical-

ity, thrift, and ease of use were the dominant characteristics in Corvair advertisements directed at women. All Corvair advertising used styling as a selling point, regardless of the targeted gender. However, Chevrolet marketers encouraged women to think of the Corvair as a device for enhancing sexual appeal, a tactic they did not repeat in advertisements directed at men.

The idea of marketing cars to women began long before the introduction of the Corvair. Ray W. Sherman tackled the emerging phenomenon of female auto consumers in the January 1928 issue of *Motor*.<sup>4</sup> Sherman attempted to convince service garage proprietors to re-design their facilities in a way that would please female consumers. He noted how much female consumers had already influenced the design of the automobile itself:

Hardly a decade ago the woman began to be a factor in the market .... And then the car maker realized if he was to make a real bid for the woman driver's business, he must create something more in accord with what was created for her in household goods, in dress goods, by food suppliers .... A survey of America's streets and roads today reveals the result-millions of women behind the wheels of good-looking automobiles.<sup>5</sup>

Sherman attributed the appearance of closed automobile bodies and artistic designs to the demands of female consumers. He was right to believe that the auto companies fashioned their products to appeal to women. GM and its Fisher Body division recognized early on the importance of women to the auto market. The company intentionally feminized its marketing in the 1920s. However, conflating the shape of the female body with the shape of its cars also helped sell them to men. The car therefore became an object of desire for both men and women. Manufacturers played a key role in promoting this trend through their marketing.

From its very beginning, the automobile functioned as an important means of communicating economic status. This became especially true with the rise of premium brands such as Cadillac. Historian Margaret Walsh has written extensively on this subject. In one article, she describes how women in these early advertisements "were frequently perceived

to symbolize class, style, and status."<sup>6</sup> These women appeared in passive roles, their bodies used as decorative objects to enhance the appeal of motorcars. Manufacturers hoped that consumers of both genders would identify with this portrayal of women, both as highly fashionable tastemakers and as sex objects.

Walsh summarizes this strategy as:

Such an appeal to beauty and elegance, with the car personified as feminine, could be interpreted by men and women in different ways. Women as important shapers of consumption could perceive the vehicle as fashionable as well as a means of mobility. Men could perceive the vehicle as a status symbol to gain the admiration or attention of women. Car advertisements featuring women in both the 1920s and 1930s offered malleable viewpoints.<sup>7</sup>

Manufacturers accepted that women were increasingly influencing purchasing decisions, even if they did not do the actual buying. However, these same manufacturers relegated women to a narrow role as consumers and appreciators of "fashion," rather than any substantial mechanical understanding. They certainly did not view women as appreciators of speed, or of technical craftsmanship. Those traits remained the preserve of men.

The long-running "Fisher Bodies" ad campaign exemplified this duality, and it cemented a strong conception of female and male technical roles: men as builders, women as consumers. Ruth Oldenziel discusses this issue in some detail in her article on the Fisher Body Craftsman's Guild, which sought to inculcate young boys with an appreciation for technical excellence.<sup>8</sup> Manufacturers accepted the success of Sloanism (created demand based on aesthetic design) over Fordism (unrestricted mass production of identical products at low prices) as proof of the female consumer's shallow influence on the market for technical goods. As Steven Lubar argues, women influenced the design of cars, but only in an aesthetic sense. Men were depicted as the ultimate arbiters of craftsmanship and engineering excellence, with women relegated to an ancillary consumer role. Thus, technical knowledge remained an exclusive domain of male expertise, even when the products produced were intended for female consumers.<sup>9</sup>

In their advertising campaigns, manufacturers tried to straddle the boundaries between the “soft” world of female consumerism and the “hard” world of male sexuality and technical interest. There is some evidence that consumers prefer product brands whose advertisements include models of their own gender.<sup>10</sup> However, the overall effectiveness of such marketing is questionable. Some studies have demonstrated that advertisements with non-stereotypical gender roles have a greater level of communication effectiveness; others have disagreed.<sup>11</sup> In either case, the Corvair’s early advertising clearly attempted to market to consumers of both genders equally. It did this within the gendered traditions of consumption and technology, although the lines occasionally blur. The Corvair’s debut in late 1959 came on the cusp of the “sexual revolution.” This led to a corresponding uptick in the sexual content of advertising across all categories, not just automobiles. Fiat’s “The second best shape in Italy” is one of the best-known examples of this trend.<sup>12</sup> Although the Corvair’s early advertisements were fairly conservative, later examples gradually increased in their risqué content. This coincided with the shifting portrayal of the Corvair from practical vehicle to sports car. Corvair advertising therefore does not fit neatly into Lubar’s and Oldenzil’s understanding of the gendering of technology, but it does support some elements of their analysis. Most importantly, it shows the identification of “sportiness” as a masculine quality. It also demonstrates the way that a supposedly gender-neutral artifact can be repurposed along gendered lines when it falls short of its original goals.

To understand the Corvair’s fluid identity, it is important to discuss the physical evolution of the car. Nader famously characterized the Corvair as “sporty,” but it did not start out that way.<sup>13</sup> Chevrolet conceived the Corvair as a basic economy model, but it soon became a favorite among sports-car buffs. An internal GM document uncovered during a 1973 Senate subcommittee investigation sheds light on this transformation.<sup>14</sup> This document is a record of a presentation given by Chevrolet managers to GM’s Engineering Policy Group (the committee responsible for approving new product plans) in February of 1963.<sup>15</sup> In this presentation, Chevrolet managers discussed their plans for a redesign of the Corvair, to be launched for the 1965 model year. To justify the cost and complexity of the planned redesign, the managers detailed

the unique market position of the Corvair. Although originally envisioned as practical transportation, it “instead actually created an image and a market of its own. This image was largely that of a sports car.”<sup>16</sup> Higher trim levels such as the Monza luxury range made up the bulk of Corvair sales. In 1962 Chevrolet introduced the Chevy II Nova when it became obvious that the Corvair did not actually compete in the low-priced, practical small-car segment.<sup>17</sup>

Additional revisions to the Corvair range through 1964 further reinforced this demographic shift. Chevrolet added more convertibles and luxury models to the lineup and offered performance engine and suspension upgrades to enthusiasts. At the same time, it reduced the number of low-trim-level cars and dropped a station wagon variant after just two years on the market.<sup>18</sup> The 1965 redesign completed this transition. Freed from having to compete on price alone, Chevrolet gave the Corvair a more complex rear suspension, as well as an all-new body with sharper lines and a host of other upgrades.<sup>19</sup> This suspension redesign would later come under criticism from Nader, who labeled it a last-ditch attempt to correct a defective product.<sup>20</sup> The engineering wisdom behind the early car’s softly sprung suspension is a matter of dispute, although government investigators eventually concluded that the original design was not particularly unsafe.<sup>21</sup> For the purposes of this study, however, the effect of the redesign is clear. It represents a complete change-over from the Corvair’s original market, moving from an economy to a sports model. While GM revised the Corvair to better fit its target demographic, it modified its advertising campaign to match.

When launched in 1959, the Corvair generated considerable interest in the automotive press. Although GM ran some paid advertising before the release of the car, much of the publicity came in the form of free press coverage. The *New York Times* and *TIME* magazine both carried cover stories about the car, as did *Popular Mechanics* and *Popular Science*. Virtually all of the automobile enthusiast periodicals were feverish with speculation well before the new model came to market. *Motor Life* ran a special on the Corvair in its August 1959 issue, as did countless others.<sup>22</sup> Corvair aficionado Tony Fiore declared that “[t]he motoring press had never before, nor has it since, been so excited and agog over the introduction of a new car.”<sup>23</sup> Contemporary media accounts





(Courtesy, General Motors Heritage)

certainly seem to bear out the first part of that assertion. Regarding the Corvair, *TIME* crowed: “Not since Henry Ford put the nation on wheels with his Model T has such a great and sweeping change hit the auto industry.”<sup>24</sup> Placing Chevrolet Division general manager and Corvair mastermind Edward N. Cole on the front cover, *TIME* gushed over both the car and the man in its pages. *TIME* also profiled the other compacts soon to be released by Detroit manufacturers, such as Ford’s Falcon and Plymouth’s Valiant, as well as the Rambler line of American Motors.<sup>25</sup>

The language used to describe the Corvair is gender-neutral, focusing more upon the technical aspects of the car and Cole’s personal life than anything else. Cole stated that he thought the Corvair would occupy the role of a “second car,” but he never addressed the topic of gender directly. The only model released in 1959 was a four-door that seated six, a highly practical design. He did mention that Chevrolet intended to release a two-door version for the “sports car type” as well as a station wagon, but he made no indication of who would buy or drive them. Cole indicated that the Corvair’s design focused heavily on practicality and quality. The air-cooled design eliminated antifreeze and radiators, its light weight and small displacement gave good gas mileage, and the simple drivetrain could be repaired by a home mechanic. Although these were hardly new ideas, the Corvair represented

the first time that an American manufacturer had designed and built a car along these lines.<sup>26</sup> All of the images of the Corvair included in this article were static and without drivers. In one image, Cole inspects a Corvair on the assembly line with plant manager Linus Rausch; in another, he stands in front of his home with his wife, son, and daughter.<sup>27</sup> No special gender construction of the Corvair is implied.

*Popular Mechanics* heralded the arrival of the Corvair in its October 1959 issue. Declared author Art Railton: “Here is the most radical engineering design to come down the American road since the car pushed the horse out of the barn.”<sup>28</sup> Textually, the article parallels the piece in *TIME*. Unlike the *TIME* article, however, the *Popular Mechanics* piece has several “action shots” of the Corvair alongside mechanical images. On page 108 there are three photos. On the top, an attractive and buxom young woman in a cardigan stands alongside a stationary Corvair, smiling at the camera. She reaches with her right hand to the driver’s door of the Corvair; the other is in her pocket, but enough of it is exposed to show a driving glove. The woman does double duty; she is a piece of “eye candy” that attracts the attention of male readers, while at the same time subtly suggesting the appropriateness of the Corvair for female drivers. In the middle photograph, an ungloved, nail-polished hand daintily adjusts the Corvair’s dash-mounted gear

select lever. The bottom photo is angled towards the front floor, just enough to see the feet of the driver and a passenger. A male foot in a leather shoe presses the gas pedal, while two female feet in high heels sit in the next seat over. Taken from the passenger side, the photo exposes the entirety of the woman's legs below the knee, where her skirt ends. Page 109 has a total of five photos. At the very top, a Corvair occupies the foreground, the photo displaying the passenger side of the vehicle as it sits on a wharf. In the background, an attractive young couple appears to share a picnic lunch by the water. The woman wears the same white skirt and high heels as in the bottom photo on page 108, and the man wears the same dark pants, suggesting continuity between the two images. Below this image, a male hand deposits a briefcase in the front trunk of the Corvair, and another picture demonstrates the Corvair's folding rear seat. Below the image of the seat, a pair of male hands pumps gas into the Corvair's fuel tank. At the very bottom, another woman tucks a wrapped gift box into the car's rear luggage compartment. She reaches through the rear window, smiling at the apparent ease of access.

Taken together, these photographs communicate a variety of ideas to the viewer. The Corvair is practical, but it is also stylish, a suitable accessory for the young and fashionable. Moreover, it is appropriate for both genders, both as passengers and as drivers. These photos demonstrate that the Corvair had no strong identification with either gender at this point. An advertisement for the Corvair included in this same issue displays similar themes.<sup>29</sup> Much of the ad copy is dedicated to extolling the virtues of rear-engine design, and the practicality and thriftiness of the Corvair in operation. There are two images within this advertisement. At the top, a large picture of a Corvair and a family dominates. A middle-aged man consults a map as a woman stands next to him. Two children play in the background, a young boy and a girl; the boy peers through binoculars. This nuclear family scene could be repeated anywhere in 1950s America on a Saturday afternoon. In the bottom right corner of the ad, a small cutaway image shows an attractive young woman driving a Corvair. Clad in high heels and a beret, she appears as the archetype of a fashionable urbanite, with small bags of shopping tucked in the Corvair's front trunk. Although this seems to suggest that the Corvair is a "woman's car," it is counterbalanced by the ambiguous nature of the photograph

above it. In these early advertisements, it appears that GM adopted a scattershot approach in its portrayal of the Corvair's gender suitability. Whether this was intentional or not is difficult to prove, but regardless of intent, the end result is the same: a middle-of-the-road image that portrays the Corvair as suitable for both genders.

Enthusiast magazine reviews exhibited similar gender neutrality. *Road & Track* dedicated the front cover of its November 1959 issue to the Corvair. The cover photo includes a white Corvair on a red stage, the front facing the camera. In the background, a young woman in a striped cardigan and driving gloves leans against the rear of the car, and peers around the edge with a coy smile. This appears to be the same woman from the *Popular Science* photographs, strongly suggesting that these images are all part of a promotional set distributed by GM. The magazine did not impute distinctly feminine or masculine qualities on the Corvair in its road test of the car. Instead, the emphasis lay on practicality and ease of use. The "Corvair is a sane, sensible, well designed car of a type we've been asking for 10 years."<sup>30</sup> *Sports Cars Illustrated* echoed this view in its own test. The author called the Corvair "profoundly revolutionary," a "Chevy-VW" that "reflects the same brand of restless, ruthless emphasis on essentials that characterized most of Dr. Porsche's work."<sup>31</sup> The rest of the test emphasized the Corvair's practicality and mechanical ingenuity, with nary a gender reference in sight. One might be tempted to draw conclusions about the Corvair's sports car pretensions based on its inclusion in this magazine, and the commendation the reviewer gave it for handling and braking performance.<sup>32</sup> However, given the general editorial disdain of magazines such as *Road and Track* and *Sports Cars Illustrated* for the large cars of the 1950s, this embrace of the Corvair is not surprising. These magazines had long chided Detroit for failing to produce a competent small car, and they touted imported compacts as the appropriate choice for motoring enthusiasts. The motoring press therefore described the Corvair in glowing (albeit gender-neutral) terms as the fulfillment of a long-held wish. This was despite the original intention of GM to market the Corvair as a practical family car, and not a toy for the "sports car set." The gender neutrality apparent in these early magazine reviews also appeared in Chevrolet's official advertising brochures and print ads.





(Courtesy, General Motors Heritage)

Chevrolet generated new brochures for the Corvair every year, thus providing a convenient way to track historical changes in the marketing of the model. The main 1960 brochure stayed neutral in its imagery.<sup>33</sup> On the cover, a young man sits behind the wheel of a Corvair, parked on a bucolic country road. Two women clad in sweaters and jackets stand behind the driver's side of the Corvair, gazing far off to the right at something interesting in the distance. The man appears to be looking at the same thing, away from the viewer. On the second page, a drawing of a Corvair, a woman and two children occupies the entire upper half of the page. Two children of nondescript gender play in the front seat of a parked Corvair (set against a neutral brown background) while the woman, a placid smile on her face, appears to be walking towards the Corvair. She is midway through putting on a jacket, overtop of her conservative brown dress; her hair is long and blonde, her age no more than early thirties. The juxtaposition of the car (a four-door model), the woman, and the children strongly suggests maternity, as well as the woman as driver. On page three, a dark-haired man, clad in a heavy topcoat, muf-

fler, and sunglasses, stands alongside a driverless blue Corvair. His arm rests on the roof of the car; a camera on a strap dangles around his neck. His demeanor is suave, poised, and unruffled. He conveys a sense of effortless sophistication, and the positioning of his arm emphasizes the car's low height.

Chevrolet produced another Corvair-specific brochure this year, showcasing the extra-cost features available for the model.<sup>34</sup> It contains similar imagery. On the second page, a young woman with dark hair and a pink shirt sits behind the wheel in a green Corvair, parked alongside a dock. Two strapping young men lean against the passenger side of the car and converse with her; her arms rest on the top of



(Courtesy, General Motors Heritage)





*(Courtesy, General Motors Heritage)*

the Corvair's steering wheel. In the background, two people work on a dry-docked sailing ship. On the page over, a fancily-clad young blonde in a pink dress, black pumps, black hat, and white gloves hands something to a young boy of about ten years of age sitting next to her. They appear to be sitting in the rear passenger seat, both wearing seatbelts and floating against a white background. On page five, a well-dressed man and woman, most likely in their mid-to-late thirties, stride out of a fancy restaurant. A parking attendant smiles at the couple as he leans over to open the door of their waiting Corvair. Page eight shows another interior shot of the car, as taken from the passenger side. This time, a man in a grey suit and hat is behind the wheel. His back faces the viewer, and he appears to be entering or exiting the vehicle, as the door is open. His head faces the back seat, where a young woman, also well-dressed in gloves, a pink topcoat, gold jewelry and black high heels, sits. On the opposite page, a high-school-aged girl holding books and two football players stand in front of a grey Corvair. The girl's arm rests on the shoulder of one of the players, and all three appear to be conversing. She is also dressed conservatively, in a long-sleeve blue blouse and brown skirt that falls below the knees. In the background, three more football players are practicing. Page eleven depicts the front of a Corvair dealership and showroom. A variety of well-dressed people mill about the scene, inspecting Corvairs of varying hues. The entire brochure exudes middle-class respectability. Men and women are

depicted in equal measure as drivers, and advertisers avoid overtly sexual imagery.

There is one more Corvair-specific brochure for 1960. This one advertises the two-door Monza Club Coupe, which debuted later in 1960 after the Corvair had already been on the market for months.<sup>35</sup> Only one image from this brochure contains any people. Page four is a full color illustration with no text. A bright red Monza Club Coupe with matching interior is parked in the middle of a crowded street. The driver's door is open, and a young woman in a white dress and no shoes sits absent-mindedly on the driver's seat. She stares at the ground while people mill about: men in director's berets, fashionably-dressed women, and technical personnel holding clipboards and cameras, several of whom sit at an umbrella-covered table and fiddle with complicated-looking electronic equipment. The background is vaguely European, and a visible sign suggests a French location. Clearly, they are occupied in shooting a movie. The net effect is to give the Corvair (bejeweled with a beautiful woman) an air of effortless glamour, one at home in a movie scene on the French Riviera. It is an appealing concept that would find favor with consumers of both sexes. It emphasizes the "European" sophistication of the Corvair.

The gender neutrality articulated in these early promotional materials is supported by at least one contemporaneous study of consumer buying habits. In 1960, a student by the name of Eugene Edward Heaton undertook a comparative study of new Corvair

and standard Chevrolet buyers in the metro Philadelphia area.<sup>36</sup> His study uncovered some interesting differences between these two groups. At least 16.9% of Corvair buyers were female, versus 6.2% for the standard Chevrolet.<sup>37</sup> Corvair owners tended to be wealthier and better-educated than standard Chevrolet buyers, and to be employed in white-collar and professional jobs in greater numbers.<sup>38</sup> Corvair owners also had smaller families, but they tended to own more cars generally, and had a greater preference for foreign marques.<sup>39</sup> These data are strong indicators that the average Corvair buyer resided higher on the general socioeconomic spectrum than the Chevrolet buyer. However, Heaton did not collect enough data to make generalizations about Corvair buyers compared to the auto market as a whole.<sup>40</sup> Heaton did conclude that the Corvair and the Chevrolet were not generally competing for the same pool of customers.<sup>41</sup> Corvair buyers valued engineering features, appearance, and weight distribution much more strongly than customers who chose the standard Chevrolet.<sup>42</sup> These data give an interesting glimpse into the buyer's market for the Corvair, even if they are somewhat incomplete. At the very least, the clientele for the early Corvair was clearly more feminine, better educated, and higher earning. The portrayal of the Corvair as "something different" in later marketing efforts helps to back this assertion. The standard Chevrolet existed to satisfy the typical customers in the low-price segment; the Corvair became a way of adding value to the Chevrolet brand name by introducing a different kind of customer to Chevrolet dealerships.

For the 1961 model year, little changed in the Corvair's sales literature. The introduction of new station wagon and van models formed the big news in the 1961 brochure.<sup>43</sup> Chevrolet introduced the Lakewood five-door station wagon and the Greenbrier van as part of a family-focused strategy for the Corvair platform. The Lakewood seated six, like the standard sedan, but it had increased cargo capacity added by a hatchback rear end. The Greenbrier could seat nine, and its van configuration created even more space than in the Lakewood.<sup>44</sup> The standard four-door sedan continued to be offered, as did the Monza two-door coupe. The mostly gender-neutral imagery of the previous year continued on with little change. A variety of smiling young families are shown driving, camping, and loading cargo into their various Corvair models. The mode of dress is conservative, and the activities wholesome

and family-oriented. The page for the Monza Club Coupe bucks this advertising model only slightly. The only person on this page is a young woman in her late twenties, leaning casually out of the passenger window of a Monza Club Coupe and looking backwards. She is dressed in a shawl overtop of a long-sleeved shirt and white gloves; she wears a hat, her hair is immaculate, and her lips are rouged. The overall image is of class and sophistication rather than overt sex appeal. The text on this page heralded the Monza as "luxury with a sports car spirit," but the overall description of features leans heavily towards the "luxury" side of the equation. Chevrolet croons that the Monza offers "sports car pleasure, luxury features for the young-in-heart family."<sup>45</sup> Even the language used to describe the sportiest Monza model emphasized the luxurious qualities most likely to appeal to families. The introduction of the Lakewood and the Greenbrier confirms that GM still considered families and practicality-minded consumers of both genders to be the primary target market for the Corvair.

Early advertisements in both *LIFE* and *TIME* magazines further affirm this family-friendly image. Chevrolet ran the same ad in the October 12 issue of *TIME* that appeared in *Popular Science* earlier that same month.<sup>46</sup> *LIFE* also featured this ad.<sup>47</sup> *TIME* included a second, different Corvair ad in its November 16 issue.<sup>48</sup> The text of this ad describes the Corvair as "nimble," but it primarily focuses upon its practical capabilities, such as its gas mileage. In the image, a man playfully adjusts an umbrella near the front of a blue Corvair as a woman and two children lean against the front of the car. In the next week's issue, *TIME* ran a two-page Chevrolet ad spread that included the Corvair.<sup>49</sup> With a green Corvair in the background and a blue Impala in the front, a large extended family gathers in front of a house and a barn in a wintry countryside. It is a heartwarming, Rockwellian scene, as an elderly woman admires a baby and a young couple greets family. A young boy peers out from the back window of the Impala, but no drivers are shown. Later ads for the Corvair display a remarkable shift away from this depiction of bucolic wholesomeness.

In 1962, some important changes in rhetoric are noticeable in Corvair sales literature and advertising campaigns. The main 1962 brochure strongly emphasizes the handling and performance prowess of the Corvair.<sup>50</sup> In terms of artwork, no major changes are apparent. Families still dominate the various scenes,

and practicality remains a strong selling point in the wagon and van models. However, there is a new and prominent attempt to make handling performance a key selling point in the sedan and coupe models. In the inside front cover, a man, his wife, and their daughter cruise down a curving expressway in their racy black two-door coupe. The man grins with pleasure, and the exaggerated twists and turns of the highway in the background indicate that the family has just made it through a challenging section. Another Corvair coupe trails them, midway through a turn. The text on this page proclaims that “The Corvair just plain gives you the darndest feeling of driving .... Performance and sports car maneuverability make driving Corvair more than mere point-to-point transportation .... Quite simply, Chevy Corvair is fun to drive, economical to operate.”<sup>51</sup> Later in the same brochure, handling appears again as an important selling point. The “Corvair has proved it. Driving can be family-style fun again .... Threading through downtown traffic, a competitive course, or out on the open road, Chevy Corvair’s light and positive feel of the wheel gives you a new kind of motoring confidence.”<sup>52</sup> This page shows three Corvairs, all of them driven by men. On both of the pages where handling prowess and sportiness are key selling points, the Corvair has only male drivers. Chevrolet gradually masculinized the marketing of the Corvair even as it emphasized the family-friendliness of the car. The Corvair Monza Convertible appeared in 1962, the first Corvair convertible to be offered.<sup>53</sup> There are no female drivers in the special promotional brochure for this model. Women appear as passengers, as do children. The Corvair’s “exceptional maneuverability” and “talon-like gripping power” are for men alone to enjoy.<sup>54</sup> The addition of the Spyder package with optional turbocharged engine to the Corvair line is a clear indicator of the trend towards performance attributes and away from practicality.

Ads in *LIFE* and *TIME* expanded upon this new-found tack towards sportiness and masculinity. In its September 28, 1962 issue, *LIFE* ran a four-page advertising spread for the new 1963 Chevrolet models.<sup>55</sup> *TIME* also ran this ad in its issue appearing the same day.<sup>56</sup> The Corvair featured prominently in this spread, which cast the new Chevrolets in an exciting, performance-oriented light. A Corvette Convertible, the compact Chevy II Nova, a Corvair Monza coupe, and a Chevrolet Impala Sport coupe all appeared on

the first page. Throughout the entire advertisement, only the Chevy II Nova features a female driver. On the last page, the Corvair reappears opposite the Corvette, Chevrolet’s top-of-the-line sports car. A white Monza Spyder Convertible with a red interior is piloted by a blonde man in sunglasses, his hands firmly gripping the wheel. The woman beside him in the passenger seat wears a scarf and a hat, as she daintily adjusts a tennis racket. The stodgy and economical Chevy II Nova became the new “thrifty model” in the Chevrolet lineup, and Chevrolet marketed it heavily to female consumers. When the Corvair appears as a “sports” model, women are usually relegated to primarily passive roles. The exception that proves this rule is an ad that appeared in *LIFE* in late 1962.<sup>57</sup> Chevrolet ran this ad again in *TIME* two months later.<sup>58</sup> A young woman in a white Monza Convertible drives down a dirt road, dust coming off the rear wheels suggesting motion. The text in this ad is especially interesting, because it is probably the best illustration of GM’s attempt to sell the Corvair as practical transportation and a sports machine at the same time:

Mated to the road like it’s married to it ... the experience of driving [a Corvair] is more emotional than mechanical. Put one through some twisting turns and you’ll most likely be convinced of that .... It hugs the road like it’s in love with it, steers, precisely, responds swiftly to finger or foot ... while the ’63 Corvair is very much a family car, it has a compulsive desire to run with the sports car set .... Of course, you don’t have to take a ’63 Corvair on maneuvers in the country to enjoy it. It’s just as much at home in rush-hour traffic, loaded up with school kids or groceries, or easing you gently into parking places you once had to pass up.<sup>59</sup>

Given the context of the ad, perhaps it is best to interpret the inclusion of a female driver as a reassuring move for consumers. Even though the Corvair can be great fun to drive, it is still tame enough that a woman can handle it. In this middle stage of the Corvair’s metamorphosis, GM still felt the need to qualify the car’s performance abilities, in order to avoid alienat-



ing a thrift-minded target market. Rather than empowering women, GM used females to show that the Corvair is relaxed enough for a general, non-gendered consumer set. As the Corvair became more powerful, more luxurious, and more expensive, this caution gradually disappeared.

Even though GM began to explore a masculine sports car market for the Corvair, it did not abandon its effort to market the car to women. Instead, GM targeted female buyers by focusing on attributes other than sporting prowess. In 1963, the company began running ads in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, one of the most popular and longest-running women's magazines in America.<sup>60</sup> These ads used a variety of arguments to sell women on the Corvair's virtues. The first ad, appearing in October of 1963, emphasized the Corvair's "delightfully light, precise steering. No tugging in tight parking spots, no dragging around corners. Just plain strainless."<sup>61</sup> A middle-aged woman in a red dress and pearls sits behind the steering wheel of a beige Monza Club Coupe, a happy expression on her face. As the title of the ad proclaims, "If we built a car for women only... it couldn't be easier to drive than this one."<sup>62</sup> Notice that in this case, the Corvair is presented as "easy to use" rather than "fun to drive." Instead of providing a competitive advantage around the racetrack, the light steering of the vehicle reduces the drudgery of day-to-day driving. Another ad which appeared in the December issue of the magazine also played up this angle: "A car of your own should be as easy to handle as the new Corvair."<sup>63</sup> In this ad, two young women drive a red Monza Convertible with the top down on a sunny day. A man in a beige Monza Club Coupe follows them at a distance. His presence is almost voyeuristic: he appears to be staring expressionlessly at the women, who seem oblivious to his presence. The ad men for GM wrote confidently that "We think that you'll find that Corvair is the perfect car for you. It's small, so it handles easily in traffic and parks between meters with 7 feet left over."<sup>64</sup> Even though this same car has been offered in other venues as a performance machine, the emphasis here clearly returns to practicality.

These ideas continued on into 1964, when some suggestive sexual themes also debuted. The very first ad to appear in 1964 challenged the gendered order of the Corvair's marketing campaign up to that point, but the transformation is incomplete.<sup>65</sup> A man sits on a bus stop bench at the top of the ad, holding an um-

brella with a forlorn look on his face. In the middle, his smiling wife drives a Corvair directly towards the viewer, wrapped presents loaded in the passenger seat. The text is the most compelling part of the advertisement. As the man sits on the bench, the narrator ponders his situation:

He's having some second thoughts on just who talked whom into buying a new Corvair. Sure, he had his for-men-only reasons. Output in the standard engine is up nearly 19 percent this year .... He also had a knowledgeable appreciation of Corvair's steering, cornering, and rear-engine traction. Things his wife really couldn't be expected to be interested in. Tidy styling and tasteful (she called them 'chic') interiors- that's all that concerned her. Or so our bench warmer thought .... The point is that the same things he liked about the car- its spirit, the ease with which it turns and fits into parking places, the way it grips on ice, mud and snow- his wife liked too. Maybe even more so.<sup>66</sup>

Have women really become equal opportunity sharers in the Corvair's sporting prowess? The gentle parody of masculine prerogatives in the text would seem to suggest so. However, the image of the ad still places the female in a heavily stereotyped role: the gadabout who likes to shop. Through the eyes of the Corvair's marketers, driving is presumed to be a necessary evil for women. The drudgery of this task can be reduced, but it will never truly "please" women in the same way that it does men. GM ad men considered women to be more conscious of style and sex appeal, as demonstrated by subsequent advertising in the *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1964.

The title and artwork of the second ad to appear in 1964 ("Because Of The Way It Hugs And Squeezes") were clearly meant to evoke a sexually charged atmosphere.<sup>67</sup> A young man pilots a yellow Monza Convertible down a country road, the front facing away from the reader. A dark-haired young woman leans over to rest against his shoulder, her pink headband and scarf in sharp relief against his green (perhaps military) jacket. "Take the Corvair on a stop-and-go shopping trip or a jaunt in the country.

Take it in any kind of traffic, on any kind of surface, over any kind of terrain, in any kind of weather.”<sup>68</sup> There is still some appeal to practicality, but the door has been opened to thinking of the Corvair as a pleasure vehicle, even under female custodianship. It is curious that a male driver is depicted, however. The end message is mixed, and the same is true for the third advertisement for the Corvair to appear in the *Journal* that year.<sup>69</sup> On a moonlit dock, a man behind the wheel of a blue Monza Convertible jokes around with his date, a lovely young blonde in a bright pink strapless dress. He is dressed in Navy whites; the front of the car faces a dockyard full of military ships. She appears to have snatched away his officer’s cap, and she winks playfully at him as she places it on her head. She is halfway through the motion of either sitting down or getting up; her arm and her posterior rest on the bank of the front passenger seat, the folds of her dress exaggerating the latter. The text plays up the sexualized context: “It flirts with you, that’s what it does. But its come-hither looks aren’t the only attraction.”<sup>70</sup> The rest of the text emphasizes the practicalities of Corvair ownership for women, but these are mere footnotes to the power of the image. The Corvair is sold as an object which can enhance sex appeal. That they appeared in a woman’s magazine says much about the gender paradigm of the Corvair, and what its marketers believed female consumers wanted in their automobiles.

The same can be said for the final two Corvair advertisements that appeared in the *Journal*, both of which advertised the restyled 1965 car. Chevrolet probably spent serious money for its November 1964 ad buy in the *Journal*, which appeared on page three, before the table of contents.<sup>71</sup> A young dark-haired woman in a straw bucket hat and a ruffled blue dress sits in the passenger seat of a red Monza Convertible, gazing directly at the reader. Her left hand rests on her cheek in a cloying gesture; her entire demeanor is highly invitational, a contrast to the disengaged persons depicted in older Corvair advertisements. The car is parked in a golden field, with the ocean, picturesque craggy rocks, and bales of straw in the background. According to the text, this new Corvair is a surefire attention-getter. “Longer and wider than last year, it boldly says: ‘Hey, look me over!’”<sup>72</sup> Besides styling, the luxury and practicality of Corvair ownership receives top billing. The powerful new engines of the Corvair are mentioned, but only “for quicker

passing— up to 180 hp if you care to order it.”<sup>73</sup> Even after couching the performance gains of the Corvair in such a cautious manner, the ad men are careful to note that lower-power versions are still available for Chevrolet’s conservative customers. Performance thus makes an appearance here, but it is within a wider package of features that have little to do with “driving pleasure” in a traditional, sporting sense. Mechanical power has been redirected to a wider vector of luxury and ease of use (“for quicker passing”) that has little to do with competition or the fun of driving.

The final ad is similarly focused on style.<sup>74</sup> A blue four-door Corvair Monza Sport sedan is parked alongside a curb. A dark-haired man in a black shirt and beige scarf is loading what appears to be a piece of modern art into the rear seat of a Corvair, reaching through the open side windows to emphasize the lack of frames or pillars. A woman in a cream-colored sweater, orange headband, patterned pencil skirt, and red shoes with high socks lounges casually in a nearby doorway. She observes the man as he loads the painting into the car. The most interesting part of the text is in the ad, as it shows an almost complete metamorphosis of the Corvair from frugal transportation to attention-getting item of conspicuous consumption. “There are no side posts to come between you and the view. Or others’ view of you ... Longer, wider, and roomier this year, Corvair is even easier to get into and out of like a lady ... Come get acquainted with Corvair for ’65. It might turn into quite a romance ...”<sup>75</sup> For women, the Corvair is a car to admire and to be admired in. As noted previously, stylistic concerns figured heavily in the decision to redesign the Corvair for the 1965 model year.<sup>76</sup> The pillarless design of the new hardtop models certainly raises some interesting questions. Did the designers actually intend for the Corvair’s passengers to be more easily observable by passers-by, or is this merely some marketing lingo cooked up after the fact? It is impossible to tell. Either way, the spin placed on this final ad in the *Journal* is highly indicative of what marketers thought women wanted from the new Corvair: a splashy, attractive vehicle whose mechanical performance meant little.

Later ads in *TIME* and *LIFE* made use of women as ornamentation, but not as drivers. In 1964, the restyled Corvair hit the market, and Chevrolet blanketed the country with advertisements. The first one to appear in *LIFE* ran in September.<sup>77</sup> This ad announced the arrival of the new Corsa trim line, the

highest-priced and highest-performing set of Corvair models.<sup>78</sup> A tan Corsa Sport Coupe stretches across one and a half pages, its rear facing the reader. Behind it, a man in a black sport coat, sunglasses, and yellow turtleneck holds a large golden trophy in his hands. He smiles broadly. A woman in a yellow sweater and a bucket hat leans up against him, posed so that she looks upwards to his face. The origin of the trophy is ambiguous, but the association is plain: winners drive the Corvair. On October 2, *LIFE* and *TIME* ran another ad for the 1965 Corvair line.<sup>79</sup> A green four-door Monza Sport Sedan faces away from the camera, with no background image. Inside the Corvair, a male driver in a sweater faces forward, his eyes on the road. In the passenger seat, a young blonde woman with a headband and sunglasses looks backwards, her face turned cheekily towards the viewer. A Saint Bernard dog rests its head on the rear seat passenger windowsill. The text is heavily focused on the “international” flair of the Corvair, claiming that “We can’t help but feel that the ’65 Corvair is the sporty new American car Europeans will be clamoring to import.”<sup>80</sup> With this statement and others, GM more firmly positioned the car against Fiat, Renault, MG, Triumph, and all the other manufacturers of imported low-priced sports cars.

After late 1965 and the release of Ralph Nader’s exposé on the Corvair, sales collapsed. Chevrolet withdrew all advertising for the car in 1967, although it continued to be sold through dealerships and built to special order. Eventually, Chevrolet cancelled production in the middle of 1969, and the car became a collector’s item. Nowadays, clubs such as CORSA work to keep the memory of the Corvair alive.<sup>81</sup>

In the extant advertising literature for the car, there is a curious window into the juncture between gender norms and automobility in 1960s America. Even though women had long been a strong presence on the roads of America, in this era they remained a class apart from male drivers. Chevrolet marketers expected women to take a practical interest in the Corvair, one that focused primarily on issues of fuel economy, usability, and cost of upkeep. As long as the Corvair remained true to its origins as humble family transport, the ad men at Chevrolet had no problem devising family-friendly and gender-neutral marketing for the car. As a nascent enthusiast market sprung up around it, however, these same marketers struggled to find ways to sell the car to women

without infringing on gender boundaries. Chevrolet marketers wanted to preserve “sportiness” and “performance” as masculine activities, but at the same time realized that women appreciated a good-handling car as much as their male counterparts. So, Chevrolet repurposed the performance attributes of the Corvair into a variety of guises when it marketed later versions of the car to women. This distinction shifted as the Corvair progressed more and more steadily towards the sports-car end of the auto market. However, Chevrolet continuously discouraged women from considering the Corvair to be a sports car, and in the most extreme cases marketers relegated women to the role of passive actors, mere ornaments for a masculine vehicle. By maintaining this distinction, Chevrolet marketers hoped that the Corvair would not become too feminized for male consumers. Although Corvairs inhabited American roads for a few brief years, the dual onslaught of market competition and Nader’s crusade soon sent this highly innovative vehicle to a premature grave.

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74 "This Year Every Coupe and Sedan Has True Hardtop Styling- Even The Lowest-Priced Ones: '65 CORVAIR By Chevrolet," advertisement, *Ladies' Home Journal*, January 1965, 54.

75 "This Year Every Coupe and Sedan...", 54.

76 Senate Subcommittee, *Corvair Stability Controversy*, "Exhibit 18," S. 9804.

77 "Beautiful Shape for '65 Corvair- Look Who Got Sophisticated!" advertisement, *LIFE*, September 25, 1964, 26-27.

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# The Rough Road Ahead

## Cuba, the Spanish American War, and the Development of Good Roads in the US, 1880-1916

By Andrew James Clyde Hart

“For one thing, the picturesque beauty of the island, enhanced by the charm of its semi-tropical verdure, is sure to attract the attention of American wheelmen, and when wheelmen get their eye on a country it is certain that the condition of its roads will speedily improve.”<sup>1</sup>

—*New Oxford Item*, November 4, 1898.

Between 1880 and 1916, American attempts to improve rural roadways evolved from a campaign for local and state funded programs into a nationwide Progressive Era demand for direct federal investment in infrastructure. At first, public demand was manifested in numerous local, state, and national automobile and road enthusiasts’ clubs.<sup>2</sup> These organizations held conventions, published periodicals, and lobbied for roadway investment programs with varying degrees of success. Engineers and contractors also contributed to the national movement towards better roads. Eventually, this popular demand and political lobbying were collectively identified as a nationwide Good Roads Movement. This story has been told as an American tale. However, a closer study suggests trans-national connections.

This period and topic are often limited to an examination of the popular *American* organizations and professionals emboldened to spur demand for improved roadway infrastructure.<sup>3</sup> The Spanish-American War and subsequent expansion of territorial holdings complicates this traditionally domestic configuration of the Good Roads Movement. After 1898, the United States shed its Gilded Age, Laissez-Faire reservations over empire and replaced them with an emphasis on rationality, order, and governance in its newly acquired territories of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and

the Philippines.<sup>4</sup> This study will analyze how the implementation of infrastructure projects in American occupied Cuba offered an example of a centralized federal road building program yearned for by American advocates. This investment in Cuba boiled over into the rhetoric, conceptualization, and professionalization of the Good Roads Movement while at the same time allowing for the political, economic, and social reorganization of the Caribbean nation, thus solidifying American visions of informal empire.<sup>5</sup> These same programs and building projects in Cuba catalyzed action in the United States, offering positive notions of federal intervention with centralized road building and funding.

Towards the end of the 19th century, roads in the United States were deplorable. Since 1830, railways made travel easier and shipping cheaper, leaving little incentive for states to collect tax revenues for highway or local road construction.<sup>6</sup> Cities such as Chicago, New York, and Boston, had macadam and packed roads. Outside the cities, however, travelers encountered muddy roads of gravel or the dirt left behind from the initial clearing of vegetation. States either elected or appointed supervisors for road maintenance using local residents to work out their taxes by spending “a day on the roads.”<sup>7</sup> Corruption was high among supervisors who accepted payments in lieu of work, virtually guaranteeing roads remained poor.<sup>8</sup> Roads were in such poor condition that a common tale of the era told of a man walking down a particularly rough section of muddy road. In the middle of the road he saw a hat which he plucked from the mud only to find a head attached. “Why you poor fellow,” the man exclaimed, “you are in an awful fix!” “Well, I don’t mind it very much,” the man calmly replied, “but it is pretty hard on the horse.”<sup>9</sup>



Rampant corruption and a lack of road building expertise meant state officials were unable to effectively use tax money for road construction and maintenance. The growing popularity of the bicycle brought awareness of deplorable road maintenance as cyclists venturing to the outskirts of town struggled on rutted muddy roads.<sup>10</sup> In response, the League of American Wheelmen (LAW), founded in 1880, promoted highway improvements, establishing clubs throughout the United States reaching a peak membership of 100,000 in 1898. The organization also published a monthly magazine titled *Good Roads* in which it printed photos and stories of the nation's road system. Initially LAW's outreach and advocacy focused exclusively on roadway improvements that benefited cyclists. Eventually its message of good roads stalled, however, as farmers, opposed to new taxes, viewed road improvements for the "idle rich" as benefitting urban elites, not the rural countryside.<sup>11</sup>

Farmers also suffered from poor road conditions as they struggled to deliver goods to markets or railway stations. Seeing a powerful untapped political force, the National League for Good Roads (NLGR), founded in 1892, sought the inclusion of state governors into the organization as vice presidents and formed partnerships with farmers through the Farmer's Grange movement. In his opening address at the first conference of the NLGR at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, President Roy Stone highlighted the national road peril.<sup>12</sup> He claimed, "Our foreign visitors will be searching for the weak spot in our armor, and they will speedily find it in the fact that with all our wealth and magnificence....we lack the first great requisite, the acknowledged symbol of civilization...toward the building of roads."<sup>13</sup> The federal government established in a symbolic gesture an Office of Road Inquiry (ORI) within the Department of Agriculture in 1893.<sup>14</sup>

A competent civil engineer and the leading

proponent of good roads, Roy Stone was appointed the department's manager. However, Congressional assistance for road building was continuously bogged down in debate over the constitutionality of federal intervention in road building. In an attempt to interest farmers in good roads, the ORI supported practical research demonstrations of good roads rather than scientific research studies aimed at improving road surfaces. Adopting a Massachusetts strategy of object-lesson construction programs, the ORI funded \$500 quarter-mile roads to be built across the country supervised by "competent engineers of more than ordinary experience and judgment."<sup>15</sup> As LAW, ORI, and NLGR continued to publish and convene meetings in support for better roads, federally funded roads remained a distant topic of discussion on Capitol Hill. The topic of better roads, however, would reach Congress, just not in a way Roy Stone or Progressives envisioned.

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On February 15, 1898, the *USS Maine* exploded in Havana Harbor, Cuba. After months of speculation and debate over America's involvement in the Cuban War for Independence, pro-war factions in the United States finally received justification for a path to war. In the months leading to America's entry into the war



("Building Road to Battlefields, 1898," Courtesy New York Public Library)

with Spain, the War Department combed over plans and maps analyzing what might be the best possible road for moving troops through Cuba. The *New York Times* elaborated the War Department's frustration in an article entitled "Only A Small Army Ready: Absence of Roads Perplexing." The paper continued, "The nature of roads, or, rather, the absence of them is perplexing the War Department more than the strength of the Spanish forces. There are no good roads in Cuba, and very few roads of any description."<sup>16</sup> Ironically the critical appraisal of Cuban roads further excoriated Spain's rule and treatment of the island colony.<sup>17</sup>

Not until the war with Spain did the issue of better roads reach the patriotic fervor and support desired by roads enthusiasts. As the War Department struggled to map a route through Cuba the ORI enjoyed new importance and influence.<sup>18</sup> Secretary of War Russell A. Alger consulted with the now-conscripted Brigadier General Roy Stone as he prepared his \$3,107,000 budget for the initial incursion onto the islands of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. He proposed funds to cover troop deployments, dynamite, electrical services, and road repair. Though the \$25,000 allocated for civilian and military roads in Cuba paled in comparison to the rest of the budget, it nonetheless marked the largest investment in road building by the federal government since the Civil War.<sup>19</sup> Chief Engineer of armies in the field William Ludlow suggested three outfits of road-making machinery fit with road rollers, ditchers, graders, and rock-quarrying and crushing apparatuses to "economize" the labor of the troops leaving them free for military work.<sup>20</sup> Stone accompanied General Ludlow's men to the field, and prepared a manual for road building in Cuba. The manual outlined the importance of ditches, size requirements for effective military transport, and made use of the abundant guava tree bundles as fascines for corduroy roads.<sup>21</sup>

Military leaders not only saw the practical benefits of roads, but they saw them as part of their civilizing project, adding to the already growing number of metaphors used by the United States' as it worked towards an eventual "special relationship" with the Cuban nation.<sup>22</sup> Newspapers blamed Spain's gross accumulation of debt for the deplorable state of Cuban infrastructure. As one article explained, "Has she [Spain] constructed new roads in Cuba? Has she improved roads in Cuba? Has she ever expended a

dollar of the borrowed money for the advantage of Cuba and its people?"<sup>23</sup> Another popular criticism of Spanish rule came from a travel appraisal of Cuba. Experiencing the roads first hand, traveler James Steele remarked, "road-making is not a lost art among Spaniards, but, rather, an art not yet acquired."<sup>24</sup> The war with Spain, as if overnight, elevated the importance of good roadways as a sign of civilization and prerequisite of modern industrial society. The United States was poised to be a benevolent colonial power bringing roads and improved communications, rather than an imperial oppressor.

The end of the war brought swaths of new territory under American control. Under the Platt Amendment, U.S. troops were to remain stationed on Cuba until a transfer of power in 1902. For this reason, roadwork persisted under the direction of the War Department and its Army Corps of Engineers.<sup>25</sup> The War Department continued with programs improving communication via roads to reinforce order in Cuba as an act of "civilizing" the island and increasing access to the island for development. At the beginning of America's occupation of Cuba, the island consisted of roughly 160 miles of improved highway.<sup>26</sup> As one news article reported, roads helped secure peace on the island since "the effect of easy communication between interior districts and the coast cities was seen at once, not only improvement of business, but in the temper of the people."<sup>27</sup> During the occupation, the military constructed and improved 248 miles of roadway, mostly in the capital province of Havana and the rich tobacco province of Pinar del Río.<sup>28</sup>

Better roads in Cuba were altruistically touted as a civilizing program for the Cuban people. However, economic opportunities remained a foremost concern of American interests. As Governor-General Leonard Wood explained, "the commercial opportunities in a practically undeveloped island like Cuba is of undoubted importance to the American people, especially as the island lies so near the doors of our own country."<sup>29</sup> Access to mines, timber, delivering cattle to market, and the development of agriculture were key in determining the terminus of roads and highways.

Looking to other nations with a history of reorganizing and developing island nations, the United States used roads as a measurement of international prosperity.<sup>30</sup> Special Commissioner to Cuba and Puerto Rico Robert P. Porter expressed interest in the



(Courtesy, United States National Archives)

progress of road and infrastructure projects conducted by another European power, Great Britain. Porter specifically focused on the former Spanish colony of Jamaica, acquiring the island in 1834. The United States viewed the economically prosperous British Jamaica as a blueprint for success in Cuba. British Jamaica proved to be a useful model in three ways. The British occupation of Jamaica, first as a trust, then as a possession in 1834 mimicked Congressional debates over how Cuba should or would be admitted into the Union.<sup>31</sup> Second, the case of Jamaica mimicked US treatment of Spanish “mishandling” of Cuba thereby easing fears over investment in the island as difficult and without positive returns. Third, Congress viewed Jamaica’s control over a largely black populace as a promising model for segregating Cuba’s “mixed” population. Porter defended Jamaican policies, noting that “The fact that a majority of the people in Cuba are white insures prompter success for American government in the island than was possible for the British in Jamaica.”<sup>32</sup> Porter recommended settling workers on small plots of land to establish a minor agricultural industry, improved communications with English possessions, and increased trade with New York and London. However, most importantly, Porter urged “liberal expenditure of Cuban revenues in building good roads” which promised the greatest chance of success for the island.<sup>33</sup> The report necessitated a course of action for handling the large Afro-Cuban

population coinciding with the entrenchment of Jim Crow laws in the American South and racial attitudes elsewhere across the United States.

Congress deliberated on the cost and efficacy of new road building projects that would connect ports with sugar mills and tobacco farms. But tourism rivaled plantations as the most important reason for better roads on the island. Good road leagues and organizations in the United States published material about road conditions in Cuba, comparing notes from recently returned soldiers. Entrepreneur James Fray described his tour of the country, noting that “There are some good roads in Cuba... I suppose that as soon as they become thoroughly Americanized [sic] down there we will have to send missionaries and organize a LAW alliance and a good roads association.”<sup>34</sup> Frank C. Lorting, a Western mining engineer investigating prospects in Cuba, delivered a positive account of road conditions. “A hundred miles of as good macadam roadbed as I have ever seen are being constructed,” he said. Plugging the agricultural bounty yet to be tapped he continued, “it is one of the richest and most fertile lands in the world...sooner or later everyone will come to a proper realization of this fact.”<sup>35</sup> Planning seemed to be a constant theme in the reports on road building throughout the island. Reports boasted grand plans for Cuba’s coming road revolution. According to the *New York Times*, “During the 400 years of the Spanish regime only 275



kilometers of public roads were built as compared with the 440 kilometers now under construction, not to mention, 492 kilometers surveyed and 1,347 projected.”<sup>36</sup> Nearly three months after the cessation of the war with Spain, the *New Oxford Item* extolled the island in “Good Roads for Cuba: The Island is a Natural Paradise for Wheelmen.” The paper declared that though “no roads worthy of names exist,” the “apostle of good roads” Roy Stone was showing how effective “Yankee engineering” could be at supplying roads.<sup>37</sup> The *New York Times* reported “automobiling in Cuba is as yet a novelty so great that a machine attracts much attention as it passes along the roads outside of the city,” the paper continued, “whatever Cuba may not have, she does not lack good roads and plenty of them.”<sup>38</sup>

At the turn of the twentieth century automobiles remained expensive, prone to break, and production remained low. Therefore, the automobile was more than a technological wonder; it became a status symbol of wealth and luxury only affordable by the wealthy. Despite the costs, wealthy “motor enthusiasts” and “chauffeurs” emerged as some of the greatest advocates during the Good Roads Movement. “Touring” arose as a new weekend affair of many Midwestern and New England industrialists hoping to escape the noise and filth of the big city for the fresh air of the countryside. Starting in 1903, wealthy motor enthusiasts shipped their cars south to tour and race along the hard-packed sands of Daytona Beach, Florida. Having departed from the clutches of winters in New England and the Midwest, wealthy northern tourists migrated to the new winter resorts along Henry Flagler’s Florida East Coast Railroad. By 1912, wealthy tourists could travel from New York City to Key West. With only 90 miles separating Key West and Havana, the Cuban capital became one of the earliest rendezvous points for Americans traveling in the Caribbean.<sup>39</sup>

Founded in 1904, the International Automobile Association of Cuba (IAAC) conducted the island’s first officially sanctioned race running 100 miles between Marianoa and San Cristobal.<sup>40</sup> Automobile racing in Cuba allowed American motorists to quench their desire for winter destinations to conduct motor-ing events. More importantly, however, conducting races in a foreign country meant drivers fell outside the jurisdiction of the American Automobile Association (AAA)<sup>41</sup>. At the encouragement of wealthy

American “speed merchants,” Cuban President Tomás Estrada Palma dedicated funds to improve the roadway between Havana and San Cristobal, supplying grandstands and police to line the road course for spectator safety.<sup>42</sup> The road course showcased Cuba’s desire for foreign investment, while at the same time proving that Cuba was indeed capable of self-government and modernization. The showcase paid off as H.W. Fletcher broke the one-mile distance record in his De Dietrich car, establishing a new time of 45 seconds.<sup>43</sup> Pleasant weather, greater than expected attendance, and the superior road course funded by the Palma government earned Cuba accolades. Papers claimed Cuba was “overtaking Florida as an automobile paradise,” and predicted “Cuba to become the mecca of American automobilists.”<sup>44</sup>

While automobile tourism seemed to be the purpose for new roads in Cuba, their rationale evolved from the strategic reinforcement of troops and supplies to a strategic plan for the improvement and expansion of agriculture production on the island. Jose R. Villalon, Secretary of Public Works, outlined plans for a main road system the entire length of the island. Extending from this road, branch roads could connect coastal towns allowing planters to reach ports with their crops and remove the necessity of railroads. Despite enthusiasm for such a project, agri-business lacked the funds. Agricultural investors hesitated to invest without a guarantee of return on their investment. As one article reported, “Capital stands ready to enter liberally upon the labor of agriculture, but an essential of adequate returns is the creation of new and the improvement of the old roads leading to the chief markets in each province.”<sup>45</sup> The intersection of a central road building authority funding and planning new roads allowed for capital to enter the island. By building roads in Cuba, the U.S. government experimented with the centralization of road building authority, leading to investment in areas where new roads expanded. Road building programs offered an example of the benefits of federal intervention in building roads, but advocates of good roads still encountered a major problem; namely, road construction in Cuba was executed by an occupying force, not civilians.

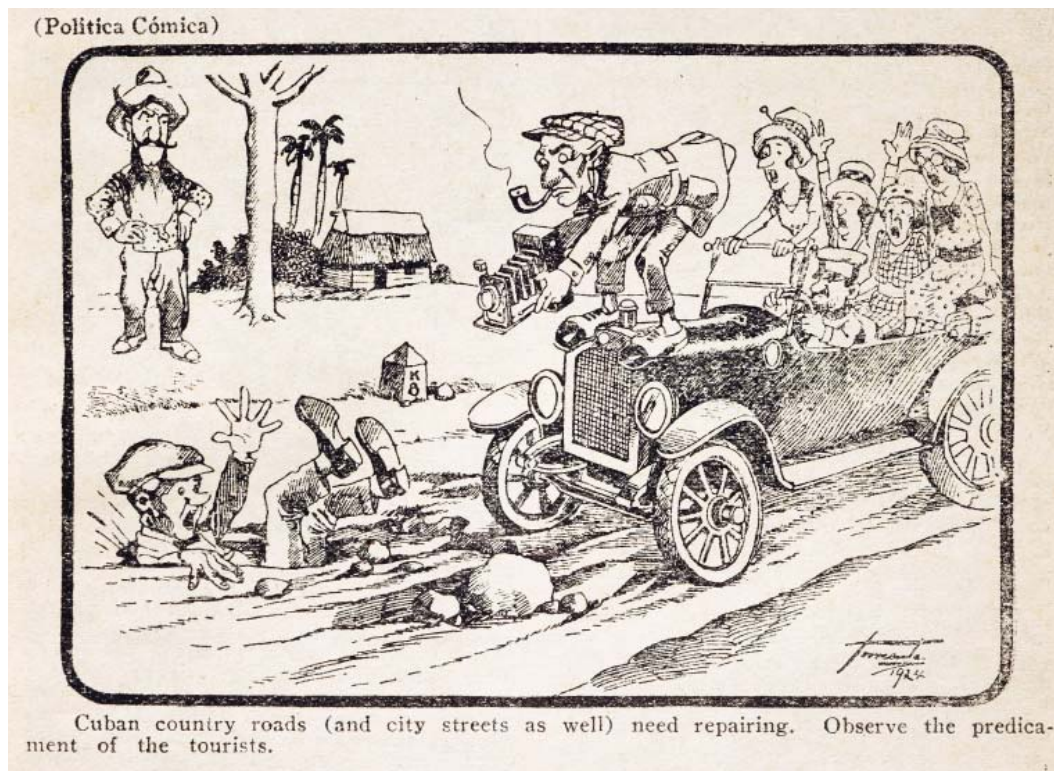
The election of 1905 broke any semblance of Cuban cohesion.<sup>46</sup> Liberal political rivals to the Palma regime alleged that the election had been rigged. The conflict grew into an outright revolt a year later. In

what should have been the third running of the Havana Cup, the political upheaval diminished local investment in the race as well. Ramon Mendoca, president of the Havana Automobile Club, when approached to take on the planning of the race responded: "I am tired of this work. You may get two Cubans to pull together, but three, no. It is the same in sport as in politics."<sup>47</sup> As Cuba experienced political upheaval, roads fell into disrepair as a series of hurricanes thrashed the island, leaving only military roads with any sort of maintenance. In an effort to establish peace and protect economic interests on the island, US military forces were deployed to Cuba from 1906-1909 during the Second Occupation of Cuba.

perspective and interpretation of U.S. intervention on the island not only worked towards political change, but also promoted internal improvements on the island. Much like the U.S. arrival in Cuba in 1898, the redeployment of U.S. personnel to Cuba in 1906 came just as political upheaval had undermined many public services, including roads.

Citing fewer than five hundred miles of macadamized road in Cuba, Magoon ordered an expenditure of \$4,500,000 for construction of local roads and a highway system. The project opened new land for sugarcane production, improved transportation, and improved communication networks.<sup>50</sup> However, the plan also served a secondary purpose. The lull between cultivation and

harvesting of sugarcane left many Cuban laborers, specifically Afro-Cubans, without work. During U.S. occupation, this lull in productivity coupled with racial prejudice resulted in the employment of thousands of Afro-Cubans and other immigrant laborers of African descent to curb black "trouble making" at the end of sugarcane season.<sup>51</sup> The treatment of Afro-Cubans, along with Haitian and Jamaican laborers continued the long standing attempts by U.S. officials to curb the "Africanization" of Cuba and segregate labor based on race. The Afro-Cuban workforce was often cited



The Times of Cuba, n. 3, March 1924. (Courtesy, The Wolfsonian –Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida)

Citing the Platt Amendment agreed to under the first U.S. occupation, Secretary of War William Howard Taft, duly appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt's Executive Order 518, declared himself Provisional Governor of Cuba.<sup>48</sup> Taft's short-lived governorship passed to General Edward Magoon. While Taft worked towards the re-establishment of Cuban self-rule, Magoon believed that until such rights were restored U.S. forces maintained "Constitutional authority over acquired territories in place of suspended or destroyed sovereignty."<sup>49</sup> Magoon's

as lazy or incapable. And these generalizations were used to rationalize delays and increased costs for road projects throughout the island. Engineer Nathaniel P. Turner included similar reasoning in constructing a road in Santiago de Cuba "The cost of the materials and the inefficiency of the native labor greatly influenced the final cost of the work...averaging \$18,128 per mile."<sup>52</sup>

By January 1909, with Cuban self-governance re-established, newspapers declared victory for democracy, secured in no small part by the development

of good roads. Newspapers detailed the election of José Miguel Gómez, but lauded “the real Cuban army of pacification” as not those in khaki uniforms, but rather “men in overalls, armed with picks, and supported by the most up-to-date road building machinery.”<sup>53</sup> In reality, if the road building programs during the second occupation of Cuba can claim any success, it was to further development of agriculture (mainly sugarcane) and the opening of a fertile new market for automobile sales by America’s automotive industry. U.S. Commerce Reports announced a burgeoning automobile market in the West Indies. Out of the entire Caribbean market, Cuba made up 84% of automobile sales from the U.S. From auto-trucks for the plantations shipping sugarcane to the highest-priced passenger cars, the U.S. value of motor vehicles shipped to Cuba multiplied by twenty from 1913-1918.<sup>54</sup>

The United States road building programs in Cuba offered an example of a centralized federal road building program yearned for by good roads advocates. At the beginning of the Spanish American War activists for the Good Road Movement remained a collective of local and state level road organizations with each determining how roads should be built.<sup>55</sup> This disorganized collective represented one of the weakest characteristics of the Good Roads Movement. Without a unified effort for road building programs, the United States remained a patchwork of poorly built roads connecting at times to macadam highways and then reverting back to muddy byways.<sup>56</sup> The island acted as an example of the benefits of road building, and over time, advocates for better roads used the example of Cuba as a rallying cry for improvements back in the United States.

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Farmers associated with the Grange Movement decried federal and state inaction for road building projects while Cuban markets in the sugar industry benefited from U.S. road building programs.<sup>57</sup> Newspapers weary of federal expenditures on roads abroad rather than at home unleashed a cascade of domestic pro-road building efforts for the US. Editorials declared, “The United States Government proposes to give Cuba good roads at an enormous expense. Why not commence this valuable work at home?”<sup>58</sup> Numerous papers published the farmers’ collective grief of being unable to get crops to market because of poor

road conditions. The popular “His Belief” column in the *Washington Star* depicted a farmer in conversation with his wife, “It’s a great scheme,” explained farmer Corntossell, “They’re buildin’ good roads all around Havana. They’re goin’ at it enthusiastic and industrious. An I’m in great hopes that after they git through with good roads in Cuba they’ll work around by degrees to the similar needs of some of us folks in the United States.”<sup>59</sup> As more Americans moved West, Chicago papers decried the need for more roads leading to the Western states, “Americans are doing more for good roads in Cuba, Porto Rico, and the Philippines than they are in any of the Western States....if bad roads have kept Cuba back 100 years, they have not had a very wholesome influence in the West.”<sup>60</sup>

The combination of the Good Roads Movement with the Progressive Era political reform movements of the early 20th century brought pressure for Congressional action. Whereas the wealthy tourist could venture around the city and tour on the newly developed roads in Cuba, poor rural families, especially in the south, continued to be at a disadvantage. In 1903 Tennessee Congressman Walter B. Brownlow cited the road building efforts in Cuba, urging the government to apply “the same principle...[which] may make good roads in any state where its co-operation is asked.”<sup>61</sup> Although his attempt for a national road building project cited as the “Brownlow Good Roads Bill” failed, road improvement societies changed tactics and adopted single-issue voter platforms to elect candidates who championed road improvements as their top priority. Candidates like James W. Kehoe of Pensacola, Florida ran a successful campaign on the platform of good roads for the country rather than Cuba. In numerous speeches he focused on the need for better roads stating, “The federal government has appropriated and expended more than fifteen million dollars for good roads in Cuba...if it can be done for those residents of those foreign possessions certainly the same can be done here.”<sup>62</sup>

Inspired by the promise and example set forth in Cuba, organizations continued to lobby for road building in their respective communities. However, proponents for better roads often overlooked a key component of Cuban road development, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Road building efforts in the United States continued as either privately funded or planned at the state level.<sup>63</sup> In 1907 the Supreme Court decision *Wilson v. Shaw* ruled Congressional



funding of road building did not violate the Constitution, but was allowed under the regulation of interstate commerce.<sup>64</sup> Despite the Supreme Court's ruling, Congressional debates over road programs in the U.S. centered on financing and the delineation of labor.<sup>65</sup> One newspaper attempted to explain this point justifying why the government conducted projects outside the U.S., as "Good roads in Cuba were made under military authority...in Porto Rico built by the government...in the Philippines for the convenience of army as well as trade."<sup>66</sup>

Good roads enthusiasts eventually realized the necessity of qualified and experienced engineers in road construction, many of whom gained first-hand knowledge and training by building roads for the U.S. Government in Cuba. The ninth annual convention of the National League for Good Roads reinforced this notion, "If we can by any means adopt a system analogous to that of the military authority in Cuba and benefit most by those who know most about road construction...we shall not have good roads until we as a people realize that the way to build good roads is to build them."<sup>67</sup> Road enthusiasts continued adopting examples of Cuban roads as a rallying cry for federal road building aid, but the projects in Cuba supplied the United States with the best tools for road building, reliance on experienced road engineers.

Frustrated with the lack of Congressional oversight and the inability of good roads organizations to push forward actual legislation, the acting director of the Office of Public Roads, Logan W. Page, organized the American Association for Highway Improvement (AAHI) as an umbrella organization uniting state engineers in the pursuit of state specific legislation. Despite its state focused nature, the AAHI helped to bring the idea of federally funded highways to the national spotlight.<sup>68</sup> The organization bridged popular and logistical support for better roads. Congressional action was hampered not so much by political infighting among its members, but rather by a tidal wave of proposed projects by groups like the American Road Builders Association (ARBA), the National Automobile Chamber of Commerce (NACC), AAHI, AAA, and the OPR. The battle over federal road funding now rested on the Progressive Era desire for improved roads for the countryside and rural parts of the nation versus the implementation of a central highway. To counter Page's rural focus within the AAHI, another faction of pro-highway senior state and federal high-

way officials founded the American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHO). The AASHO consisted of mostly eastern state engineers and professionals residing in states with prolific state funded road building programs.<sup>69</sup> Coupled with support from AAA and the National Association of Automobile Manufacturers, the AASHO authored what would become the 1916 Federal Aid Road Act. The act supplied \$75 million dollars to match up to 50% of state sponsored highway construction with supervision conducted under the newly formed Bureau of Public Roads (BPR).

Members of the Good Roads Movement were exuberant in finally securing federal funds for the construction and management of better roads.<sup>70</sup> States poured money into the federal aid matching program. However, unlike its role in Cuba, the federal government now entered a civic/civil partnership rather than a military operation. Once admired for their expertise and apparent "apolitical" nature, engineers proved politically minded in their lobbying for the 1916 legislation, but also shoehorned themselves as necessary members of the road building bureaucracy. Noticing the increased powers of the BPR, *Engineering News* commented "the rules and regulations of governing surveys, plans, specifications, estimates, contracts... are so comprehensive that the BPR will have a dominating influence in all work for which federal application is made."<sup>71</sup> This dominance was particularly felt by rural communities who relied on Rural Free Mail Delivery and the promise of better routes to ship their produce to market. "Wiggle worm roads," most notably used in rural communities, were not deemed the primary focus of the 1916 legislation. Instead, securing strong state commissions that adhered to federal policy remained the ultimate first step in securing federal funding. Good roads had finally come at last, but not how grassroots supporters of the movement had hoped. The fight for better roads had entered its next stage; determining the boundaries of state and federal intervention and not only oversight. However, before this debate could begin, America's entrance into World War I postponed challenges to oversight, and also the federal road building experiment itself.

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In *Becoming Cuban*, Louis Pérez describes the automobile's arrival in Cuba as "seizing hold of the

popular imagination and quickly becoming a national symbol, symbolizing progress and modernity, available for purchase and possession.”<sup>72</sup> Similar associations are made for the United States infatuation with the automobile and its democratization of travel. Yet, as Christopher Wells explains “this ‘love-affair’ thesis suggests Americans fell in love with the automobile and, once enamored, did whatever was necessary to accommodate them.”<sup>73</sup> As this study and previous studies have shown, American automobility did not take root overnight. Rather, the meticulous planning, development, and construction of infrastructure for the automobile is what made the horseless carriage become one of the most influential technologies of the twentieth-century. The ninth annual convention of the NLGR believed that the best solution towards the road problem “was simply to build them.”<sup>74</sup> However, as the Good Roads Movement proved, building roads remained much harder than advocating for them. By looking at the United States’ expansion and adoption of new overseas territories, a new transnational look at automobility unfolds and complicates a traditional narrative.

#### (Endnotes)

1 “Good Roads for Cuba,” *New Oxford Item* (New Oxford, Pennsylvania) November 4, 1898.

2 For much of the nineteenth century, the role of the federal government in meeting the demands for road improvements was heatedly debated. Funds for canals and roads were seen as crucial for rural societies to prosper, but federal expenditures for such work, even interstate roads, were viewed as unconstitutional. In 1806, Thomas Jefferson levied the budget surplus of \$300,000 for the construction of the national highway beginning in Washington D.C. and extending along the Braddock Trail. However, by 1835, with the road reaching Vandalia, Illinois, the federal government shed all funding and left road maintenance and construction to the will of respective states. See Thomas L. Karnes, *Asphalt and Politics: A History of the American Highway System* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc., 2009), 8-9. For more on the history of road construction see, I.B. Holley, *The Highway Revolution, 1895-1925* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2008); Theodore Sky, *The National Road and the Difficult Path to Sustainable National Investment* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011); William Kaszynski, *The American Highway: The History and Culture of Roads in the United States* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc., 2000); Karl B. Raitz, *The National Road* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); and Norris F. Schneider, *The National Road: Mainstreet America* (Columbus: Ohio Historical Society, 1975).

3 This attitude toward the Good Roads Movement has been promoted throughout numerous studies, See Bruce E. Seely, *Building the American Highway System: Engineers as Policy Makers* (Philadelphia: University of Temple Press, 1987); Peter J. Hugill, “Good Roads and the Automobile in the United States 1880-1929,” *American Geographical Society*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (1982): 327-349; Hal S. Barron, “And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight: Public Road Administration and the Decline of Localism in the Rural North, 1870-1930,” *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (1992): 81-103; Ballard Campbell, “The Good Roads Movement in Wisconsin, 1890-1911,” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (1996): 273-293; Wayne E. Fuller, “Good Roads and Rural Free Delivery of Mail,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (1995): 67-83; Martin T. Oliff, “Getting on the Map: Alabama’s Good Roads Pathfinding Campaigns, 1911-1912,” *Alabama Review*, Vol. 68, No. 1 (2015): 3-30; Robert B. Starling, “The Plank Road Movement in North Carolina,” *North Carolina Historical Review*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1939): 1-22; Andrew Vogel, “Hamlin Garland’s Roads, the Good Roads Movement, and the Ambivalent Reform of America’s Geographic Imagination,” *Studies in American Naturalism*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2010): 111-132; Christopher W. Wells, “The Changing Nature of Country Roads: Farmers, Reformers, and the Shifting Uses of Rural Space, 1880-1905” *Agricultural History*, Vol. 80, No. 2 (2006): 143-166; and Christopher W. Wells, “The Road to the Model T: Culture, Road Conditions, and Innovation at the Dawn of the American Motor Age,” *Technology and Culture*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (2007): 497-523.

4 Alfred W. McCoy and Francisco A. Scarano (Eds.), *Colonial Crucible: Empire in the Making of the Modern American State* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009); See also, Alfred W. McCoy, Joseph M. Fradera, and Stephen Jacobson (Eds.), *Endless Empire: Spain’s Retreat, Europe’s Eclipse, America’s Decline* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2012).

5 Recent studies of the role of road building as an extension of national power include Thomas Campanella, “‘The Civilising Road’: American Influence on the Development of highway and motoring in China, 1900-1949,” *The Journal of Transport History*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2005): 78-98; Gordon Pirie, “Automobile Organizations Driving Tourism in Pre-Independence Africa,” *Journal of Tourism History*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2013): 73-91; and Brian J. Freeman, “Driving Pan-Americanism: The Imagination of a Gulf of Mexico Highway,” *Journal of Latino-Latin American Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (2009): 56-68.

6 Rae, *The Road and the Car in American Life*, 25.

7 Holley Jr., *The Highway Revolution*, 4.

8 Holley, Jr., *The Highway Revolution*, 4-5.

9 A version of this story is frequently cited in studies of the Good Roads Movement in America. A mixture of this story can be found in Tammy Ingram, *Dixie Highway: Road Building and the Making of the Modern South, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 13, and, I.B. Hol-

ley, Jr., *The Highway Revolution, 1895-1925* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2008), 4.

10 The penny farthing was a bicycle with a large front wheel and a tiny back wheel and was deemed extremely difficult to ride. The invention of the modern bicycle also known as the safety bike allowed for the bicycle to reach a greater audience for its practicality and user-friendly design. Reid, *Roads Were Not Built for Cars*, 47.

11 Michael Berger, *The Devil Wagon in God's Country: The Automobile and Social Change in Rural America, 1893-1929*. (Hamden: Shoe String Press, 1980), 13.

12 Roy Stone was a civil and mechanical engineer who served as a Major for the 13th Pennsylvania Reserves and Brigadier General for the 149th Pennsylvania Reserve Infantry during the Civil War. Because of worn down roads that were adjacent to swamps, Stone was unable to maintain his position at McPherson Ridge during the Battle of Gettysburg. The battle motivated Stone to pursue a lifetime of good roads advocacy after the war. For more on Roy Stone see Richard F. Weingroff, "Portrait of a General: General Roy Stone," *U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration*, 11/08/2016, <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/stone.cfm>.

13 Roy Stone, "Opening Address," *National League for Good Roads*, 1982, 6.

14 Rae, *The Road and the Car in American Life*, 54.

15 Roy Stone, "Object Lesson Roads," *Yearbook of Agriculture* (Washington DC: United States Department of Agriculture, 1897), 374.

16 "Only A Small Army Ready," *New York Times* (New York City, New York), April 15, 1898.

17 For more on the events and actions leading up to and during the Spanish American War see Louis A. Pérez Jr., *Cuba in the American Imagination: Metaphor and the Imperial Ethos* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Louis A. Pérez Jr., *Cuba Between Empires, 1878-1902*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1983; Lester D. Langley, *The Banana Wars: United States Intervention in the Caribbean, 1898-1934* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1983).

18 Although Roy Stone left for Cuba and Puerto Rico during the conflict with Spain, the ORI was headed by long-time roads enthusiast and Ohio State Road Commission President Martin Dodge. Dodge continued Stone's promotion of good roads during the war and subsequently organized stronger political advocacy for better roads. See, Bruce E. Seely, *Building the American Highway System: Engineers as Policy Makers* (Philadelphia: University of Temple Press, 1987), 72.

19 "Plans for Invasion," *The New York Times* (New York City, New York) June 02, 1898.

20 "Plans for Invasion," *The New York Times* (New York City, New York) June 02, 1898. Road building equipment was made available from Stone's Bureau of Road Inquiry under the authority of the Department of Agriculture. See "May Make Good Roads," *Allentown Leader* (Allentown, PA) May 12, 1898.

21 "Road Making in Cuba," *Evening Star* (Washington D.C.) June 23, 1898.

22 For more on metaphors used by the United States during and after the Spanish American War see Louis A. Pérez, *Cuba in the American Imagination: Metaphor and the Imperial Ethos* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

23 "Spain's Debt-Who Should Pay It?" *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn, NY) November 10, 1898.

24 James W. Steele, *Cuban Sketches* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Son, 1881), 30.

25 Nathaniel P. Turner, "Road Building in Santiago de Cuba," *Good Roads Magazine*, June 1903, 219; During the American occupation, Turner was an engineer and later superintendent of roads for the Santiago de Cuba province.

26 Of the 160 miles of improved highway throughout the island, 85 miles were in the province of Havana and 75 miles in Pinar del Rio. The remainder of the island consisted of footpaths and mule trails. See, Albert G. Robinson, *Cuba Old and New* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1915), 95-97.

27 "Military Roads as Civilizers," *Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL) July 6, 1903.

28 "President Palma's Message," *New York Times* (New York City) November 3, 1903.

29 Perfecto Lacoste, *Opportunities in Cuba* (New York: Lewis, Scribner & Company, 1902), 16.

30 In 1899 France (330,000 miles), the United States (300,000 miles), and Germany (275,000) had the largest road networks. Roads were not only a civilizing tool, but a symbol of economic prosperity. "Good Roads Notes," *Record-Argus* (Greenville, PA) January 12, 1899.

31 "England Sets A Good Pattern," *Bessemer Herald* (Bessemer, MI) January 14, 1899.

32 "England Sets A Good Pattern," *Bessemer Herald* (Bessemer, MI) January 14, 1899.

33 "England Sets A Good Pattern," *Bessemer Herald* (Bessemer, MI) January 14, 1899.

34 "Good Roads Notes," *Salisbury Truth* (Salisbury, NC), February 15, 1899.



- 35 "The Passing Throng," *New York Tribune* (New York City, NY), March 26, 1900.
- 36 "New Roads in Cuba," *New York Times* (New York City, NY), September 29, 1900.
- 37 "Good Roads for Cuba," *New Oxford Item* (New Oxford, PA) November 4, 1898.
- 38 "An Automobile Trip in Cuba," *New York Times* (New York City, NY), October 4, 1903.
- 39 For more on the growth and entrenchment of tourism in the Caribbean at the turn of the century see Christine Skwiot, *The Purpose of Paradise U.S. Tourism and Empire in Cuba and Hawai'i* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); Dennis Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise: U.S. Tourism and Empire in Twentieth-Century Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Henry Knight, *Tropic of Hopes: California, Florida, and the Selling of American Paradise, 1869-1929* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2013); and Catherina Cocks, "The Pleasure of Degeneration: Climate, Race, and the Origins of the Global Tourist in the Americas," *Discourse*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2007): 215-235.
- 40 "Touring Car Wins Cuban Race," *Motoring and Boating*, February 1905, 762; "Cuba's Promising Automobile Future," *The Automobile*, February 22, 1906, 411-12; See also, "Record Falls in Cuba's Initial Race Meeting," *Automobile Topics*, February 18, 1905, 1495-1501.
- 41 By 1905, the AAA outcompeted numerous motoring organizations to become the sole American organization for the certification and promotion of competitions throughout the country; this allowed the organization access to considerable profits charging entrance fees for both spectators and drivers. See, "The A.A.A. in Race Control," *Motoring and Boating*, February 1905, 797.
- 42 *Automobile Topics*, February 18, 1905, 1493.
- 43 Because of many American motorists desires to race without wagering fees to race, *Automobile Topics* lamented over the failure to annex Cuba by the United States "Now, if Cuba was American territory the new record of the 45 seconds for a mile would be a real American record." See, *Automobile Topics*, February 18, 1905, 1493.
- 44 "De Dietrich Company Dines H. W. Fletcher," *Motoring and Boating*, March 1905, 854.
- 45 "Good Roads for Cuba," *Caucasian* (Clinton, NC), January 18, 1900.
- 46 For more on the Second Occupation of Cuba see Ralph Eldin Minger, "William H. Taft and the United States Intervention in Cuba in 1906," *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (1961): 75-89; Lester D. Langley and Thomas D. Schoonover, *The Banana Men: American Mercenar-*
- ies & Entrepreneurs in Central America, 1880-1930* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995); Benjamin R. Beede, *The War of 1898 and the U.S. Interventions 1898-1934* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
- 47 "No Auto Racing in Cuba This Season," *Minneapolis Journal* (Minneapolis, MN), December 9, 1906.
- 48 Ralph Eldin Minger, "William H. Taft and the United States Intervention in Cuba in 1906," 82.
- 49 Charles E. Magoon, *The Law of Civil Government in Territory Subject to Military Occupation By The Military Forces of The United States* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1903), 12.
- 50 David A. Lockmiller, "Agriculture in Cuba During the Second United States Intervention, 1906-1909," *Agricultural History* 11, (1937), 185.
- 51 "Good Roads for Cuba Will Be Next Thing," *Emporia Gazette* (Emporia, KS), April 25, 1907.
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- 54 U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, *Commerce Reports* (Washington DC: GPO, 1920): 179-182.
- 55 Examples of how local good roads organizations differed in their planning and goals see Barron, "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight," 93; Campbell, "The Good Roads Movement in Wisconsin, 1890-1911," 280.
- 56 Roads varied at times from state to state, but also at the border between counties, leaving roads an uneven patchwork of poor quality roads. See Fuller, "Good Roads and Rural Free Delivery of Mail," 71; Oliff, "Getting on the Map: Alabama's Good Roads Pathfinding Campaigns, 1911-1912," 14; Starling, "The Plank Road Movement in North Carolina.," 6.
- 57 Examples of farmers protesting Cuban investment for roads instead of American roads included, *Weekly Register* (Point Pleasant, VA) January 18, 1899; "Roads for Who," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (Pittsburgh, PA), March 3, 1900; "Need More Farms," *New Oxford Item* (New Oxford, PA), December 22, 1900.
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60 "Practical Work," *Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL) September 10, 1900.

61 "Uniform Road Construction," *Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL) February 13, 1903. See also U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, *Hearing on Roads and Road Building* (Washington DC: GPO, 1904): 44.

62 "Walter Kehoe at Chipley," *Pensacola Journal* (Pensacola, FL) April 1, 1908.

63 Although the federal government refused to fund road construction, believing it to be an infrastructure project of the states, many called into question the legality of road building abroad, "It has often been stated in Congress that the national government had no authority to expend money for road improvement, yet money is poured out by the million to build roads in possessions beyond the seas." See *Anderson Intelligencer* (Anderson Court House, S.C.), June 11, 1902. However, proponents of interstate highways argued they were, "Burdened by antiquated road laws; because there is also a reluctance on the part of farmers to submit to close supervision in the matter of road making." "The Way to Do It," *Times* (Richmond, VA), November 29, 1900.

64 Holly Jr., *The Road Building Revolution*, 124.

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# ‘Der Porsche vas Pushin’

## Porsche’s Expansion into the US Market and Its Cultural Impact on American Consumers

By Keenan Shimko

*What was true at the start is still true today: there is no arena as important to the success of a brand as the American market. The US has had an informed car culture from the very beginning and brings the hardest competition as well as the most potential for starting trends that will have a global impact. Porsche has become a globally recognized brand, yet its strength is inextricably linked to America.*

—Dr. Ing. h.c.F. Porsche AG<sup>1</sup>

This essay examines one German automaker, Porsche, and the American enthusiast organization which grew around its products from 1950 to 1969. Porsche, alone amongst its competition, produced only sports cars in this period, and therefore serves as an ideal case study to examine the ways in which the design, engineering, and marketing of a German performance vehicle served to transport elements of European automotive and German national culture to American consumers. This essay also examines the way in which Porsche balanced the need to appeal to Americans with the need to retain the authenticity of Europeans performance that defined the niche sports car market. Ultimately, Porsche sports cars were transformed through their contact with distributors, American consumers, and were adapted for the American market while simultaneously retaining the kernel of European authenticity that both appealed to American consumers and served to transport elements of German culture to Americans. This illustrates the fluid nature of global cultural exchange fostered through consumption and further complicates established narratives of

‘Americanization’ by demonstrating that processes of globalization occurred within the United States, not just beyond its borders in the 1950s.

This essay comprises three sections, the first of which is an examination of Porsche’s emergence in the postwar period as an independent manufacturer, in addition to the ways in which the postwar German economic and political environment shaped their initial models and target market. The second section focuses on how Porsche sports cars were adapted for an American consumer, first by independent distributors using their power as gatekeepers to American consumers, and later how the firm attempted to find a balance between catering to trends in the broader American automotive market while continuing to provide an authentic European driving experience. For instance, the development of the ‘Sportomatic’ automatic transmission, which complicated the idea of a European cultural ‘authenticity’ in Porsche sports cars, represented an attempt to reconcile American consumer trends and European sports-performance. The third section analyzes the response of American enthusiasts through the lens of the Porsche Club of America (PCA). The very existence of the PCA and its growth from 1958 to the 1970s is an indication of the cultural significance of the Porsche sports car among American enthusiasts. More specifically, this section examines the transmission of German culture through the consumption of the two most significant models of the Porsche sports car, the Typ. 356 and the 911, a process intensified by the activities of the PCA in addition to other enthusiast clubs.

A close examination of the Porsche sports car through its design, marketing, and the enthusiast community that consumed it, reveals the complex currents and counter-currents of cultural globalization in



America over the course of the 1950s into the 1960s. Together these three sections illustrate how a European product was sold to American consumers as being consummately European. At the same time, it also illustrates how that ostensibly European product was molded by the pressures of competing in the American market, and the ways in which this complex relationship was represented and refracted by the American enthusiasts who consumed it. This reveals the complex currents of cultural and economic globalization, and illustrates that America was not immune to the cultural transmission fostered through consumption as some histories of 'Americanization' assume. Lastly, this essay examines the formation of transnational connections between German and American automotive enthusiasts through Porsche sports car and the PCA, revealing a form of imagined community which was created around these products and connected individuals across both national and linguistic borders.<sup>2</sup>

Porsche noted the importance of the sports car and its unique position in the American market in 1952, indicated in its in-house periodical, *Christophorus*, intended for consumers and employees alike:

It is true that the leading German automakers have made representations in America, but it would be self-deception to promise more than a representation. The English example to be taught is that German industry is giving itself false hopes. The British automotive industry has made great efforts to make a foothold into the US in the aftermath of US traffic and parking problems, this seeming to be a chance for the European small car. The export has never reached substantial numbers, and besides some snobs who buy every automobile for pleasure, neither the English nor the experimentally exported German small cars have found serious buyers. Things are a bit different in the case of sports cars, for which there is a keen interest, especially since the few American sports cars are only more or less patched-together cars [i.e. home-built, or not mass produced by any major manufacturer], which also have a correspondingly high price. Porsche is forging ahead here.<sup>3</sup>

While similar to the small British sports cars that gained serious traction in the American market in the immediate postwar years, automotive exports from Germany were clearly distinct. Due to the exchange rate, relatively high labor costs, and labor-intensive construction, German manufacturers were simply unable to be price-competitive with most British sports cars. Therefore, they intentionally moved their products up market. To justify the additional expense, Porsche executives focused on the vehicles supposed technical quality, and later, as their foothold in the American market expanded, luxury. Therefore, differing strategies were adopted in their sales and marketing, many of which were built around German cultural tropes. This can be clearly seen in the 1951 English language brochure for Porsche, in which the first page focuses entirely on Porsche's prewar engineering heritage.<sup>4</sup> Their market position and focus also meant that the German brands were forced to keep their vehicles updated and modern to be competitive at their higher price-point. The dichotomy between the British cars that were increasingly seen as old-fashioned – an image compounded in the early 1970s by their struggle to comply with increasingly strict American safety and emissions legislation—and German sports cars, which appeared to be on the cutting edge of automotive engineering, further helped establish the stereotype of German automobiles' superior design and technical quality which had already begun to be built on the back of motorsports success in Europe.

The German sports cars coming to American buyers in the 1950s also benefitted from the cultural groundwork laid by the earlier British automotive imports. First, clubs like the Sports Car Club of America had established a small, but rapidly expanding, fraternity of American enthusiasts of European cars. The SCCA and other regional European automotive clubs had also begun to build a network of amateur sports car racing events within the US; competitions which the SCCA would eventually take over entirely as they became the official sanctioning body for American amateur road racing. Therefore, prospective Porsche buyers would already have an established venue through which they could enjoy their new purchase in the manner in which it was intended, both on the road and the track. Furthermore, American consumers considering the purchase of a Porsche sports car would have more of an opportunity to see it in action at local or regional amateur racing events. American consumers of Ger-

man automobiles would also create their own exclusive clubs, like the Porsche Club of America, in the tradition of European single-marque clubs of the 1930s. Their group activities could then be tailored to cater to a more German cultural experience, or at least an American interpretation of it. This is illustrated by the annual American “Oktoberfest,” and national “Porsche Treffen,” or Porsche meeting, at which PCA members would stage their own European style driving events such as the road rally and gymkhana, before enjoying German beer and German food. The amount of enthusiast participation in these events and the discourse surrounding them in club periodicals – as well as the pulp automotive press more generally – reinforces the notion that sports cars were not culturally blank. Rather, these German sports cars served to transport aspects of the national culture that produced them to America and American consumers, a ‘Europeanization,’ of American consumers, which indicates that American culture was just as permeable to outside influences during this post-war period.

### Identifying the Market and Means to Entry

As a brand Porsche was unique; it sought to build its entire identity around the superior performance and engineering of a small sports car. Moreover, as evidenced from the quote that opened this chapter, Porsche targeted Americans as key consumers of their product from the beginning. This is further supported by a jubilant article from *Christophorus* in 1954, “...in the year 1953 no less than 680 cars will be exported to the USA, over 35 percent of the total production from [Porsche] Zuffenhausen! The USA, termed by Porsche, is export country number one.”<sup>5</sup> While 680 may seem like an incredibly small number when compared to the sales numbers from larger, more established domestic manufacturers, for Porsche it represented a significant portion of total production, and the number of vehicles exported would steadily grow. Perhaps more importantly, those 680 cars very clearly began the process of transporting elements of German automotive culture, as well as German culture in a more abstract sense, to American consumers. One needs to only examine the rapid growth of the Porsche Club of America (PCA), and the close ties between the Club and executive management at Porsche, Zuffenhausen (often referred to as ‘the Factory’ in contemporary documents) to see the deep

influence of the Porsche sports car on American enthusiast culture, and the transnational connections forged between PCA members in the US, Porsche enthusiasts in Germany, and Porsche Factory executives. In many ways, it is Porsche enthusiasts and the PCA which demonstrate a more thorough globalization of American consumers than perhaps any other brand or organization, as the final section of this chapter will illustrate.

By focusing solely on the sports car market niche, Porsche avoided the common pitfalls of other European manufacturers like MG, which attempted to use sports cars to open the market for their lines of small production cars. When European manufacturers looked to the US market in the 1950s most tended to concentrate on the mass market trends, which were towards medium-sized to large sedans that included luxurious optional equipment like automatic transmission. However, as one anonymous writer for *Christophorus* discovered:

One must revise the opinion that in the US only cars with automatic gear-boxes have the right to exist when one reads the American automobile sport magazines, some of which have half a million copies, and in which European sports cars are embraced. As far as our American sports car friends are concerned, they are even more enthusiastic about the matter than we are, and there are a lot more sports car races per season than in our country - pure amateur races by the way, which makes things particularly appealing.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, the rest of the article discussed the various victories of the Porsche 365 1.5L sports car as it appears in American enthusiast magazines, and included a translated report from one of the aforementioned enthusiast periodicals, *Autosport Review*. This supports Ferry Porsche’s notion that American enthusiast publications were interested in the European racing scene, which itself demonstrates American interest in European road racing. Additionally, not only German manufacturers, but also German enthusiasts were paying attention to the rapid development of amateur sports car racing in the United States, a point of growing transnational connection among enthusiasts.

Just as was the case in postwar Britain, the need for stable foreign currency enforced an export-focused industrial policy, one implemented through the con-

trolled provisioning of raw materials. While eventually the rationing would end, this forced Porsche from the outset to pay close attention to satisfying its potential export market. Porsche's posturing as a purveyor solely of fine sporting machines may strike the casual reader as slightly odd. Ferdinand Porsche Sr., is, of course, the same man who also designed the now infamous KdF Wagen, the "People's Car" for Nazi Germany, which would go on to become the utilitarian Volkswagen Beetle to American consumers. However, in the inter-war period he had also designed racing cars for Auto Union, a brand that would eventually grow into Audi, and his son, Ferdinand Anton "Ferry" Porsche always wanted to produce a sports car. After the war ended, Ferry Porsche looked to turn his dream into reality, and due to the economic realities of postwar Germany, that meant focusing on America as the primary export market.

Porsche was also limited in terms of the materials at hand; Porsche would have to make use of Volkswagen parts, primarily the ones he and his father had designed such as the engine, transmission, and suspension. However, acquiring the raw materials and space necessary to produce even a small number of cars proved exceptionally difficult due to the nature of Allied occupation and industrial controls. Porsche's old factory in Stuttgart was being used by the American military authorities, and was therefore off limits. A further complication was that Volkswagen parts were in short supply, and any parts requisitioned had to be approved by Allied authorities. Porsche was not to be deterred, and set up a small production facility in Gmünd, Austria and turned to Volkswagen distributors abroad to get the parts he needed. Proving to be quite adept at negotiations within the turbulent administrative structures of post-war Europe, Ferry acted quickly when opportunities presented themselves, and "entered into a contract with Herr von Senger for the supply of VW parts from AMAG and sheet aluminum from Switzerland. Authorization for the import of these materials had to be obtained from the government in Vienna. It was granted to us, on the condition that we sold all the vehicles we manufactured abroad, since Austria urgently needed foreign currency."<sup>7</sup> This further focused Porsche, along with OEMs elsewhere in Europe and Great Britain, on exploiting the American export market to earn the valuable dollar.

Thus, the Typ. 356 Porsche sports car was born. The vehicle itself was an amalgam of modified Volk-

swagen parts under a totally redesigned sleek coupe body made from light-weight aluminum. The air-cooled, VW-sourced engine displaced a miniscule 1.1 liters, and produced just 36 horsepower. What made the vehicle unique among other European sports cars was its rear mounted air-cooled engine. This meant that the powertrain was very light since it lacked the systems necessary for water-cooling, and the simplicity resulted in greater reliability in the sense that there were simply less things that could fail. Perhaps a sign of high confidence, "just three weeks after it was completed, it got a chance to prove itself at the Innsbruck City Race, marking the first demonstration of a Porsche 356."<sup>8</sup> Racing, even at this early stage, was critical to the development of the Porsche sports car, and the clear lineage from racing machine to street vehicle would become one of the brand's defining features.

Correctly realizing that the United States was the one place where a niche vehicle like the sports car would have a good chance at finding consumers in the immediate postwar years, Porsche set about finding a way to break into the American automotive market. This was largely driven by Ferry Porsche, who understood that, "potential exports to European countries with strong exchange rates such as the United Kingdom, Switzerland, and the Netherlands, would not be sufficient for the long-term survival of the Porsche brand." He therefore specifically targeted the American market.<sup>9</sup> As Karl Ludvigsen, an automotive journalist in the 1950s and later an independent automotive historian, argues in his massive three-volume compendium, *Porsche Excellence was Expected: The Comprehensive History of the Company, its Cars, and its Racing Heritage*, there were three distinct periods which encapsulate Porsche's "engagement" with the US market. These periods are defined by Porsche's method of distributing vehicles to American consumers. The first period, from 1950 to 1958, is categorized by Porsche's relationship with Maximilian E. Hoffman as sole distributor for the American market. The second period, from 1959 to 1969 is defined by Porsche's attempt to work through multiple individual distributors to try and establish more control over its own importation, distribution, and dealership network. The third phase, from 1969 on, is defined by Porsche's decision to grant distribution rights in the United States to Volkswagen, which would establish a new "Porsche+Audi" division specifically to sell the cars.<sup>10</sup> This periodization is useful because it allows one to see Porsche, the



company's, steps to increasingly direct involvement in the sales and marketing of its vehicles in the American market which is a microcosm of the complex processes of international business leading to postwar globalization.

### **Hoffman, Porsche, and Adaptation for the American Consumer**

The path of the Porsche brand in America was initially dependent on one man, Maximilian E. Hoffman, the owner and President of Hoffman Motors Corporation. M.E. Hoffman was the same man who first brought Jaguar into the US market and was also involved in the importation of Fiat, and Alfa-Romeo. By the time of his first contract with Porsche in 1951 he was therefore already seen as a veteran of the automotive import distributor business. Because of his commanding position in the American market his input in those early days was very influential on model design, especially when he was essentially the gatekeeper for the American market. Therefore, Hoffman would play a significant role in initially adapting the Porsche sports car for an American audience, first through his control as distributor over ordering the cars for import, and later by exerting pressure on Porsche to produce a model specifically for the American market, the Speedster. However, even after Hoffman was removed and Porsche changed distribution tactics, they still kept a close eye on the American automotive market.

Max Hoffman excelled at reading the automotive market trends in the United States, especially in the niche market of European sports cars, which is why Porsche initially selected him to be its American distributor. The importance of recognizing these trends was not lost on German manufacturers and even the German automotive press, which noted that, "just as an automobile factory with a single misconstruction can lose its good name for years, the products of a whole country may be discredited when gross errors or the peculiarities of a market are not intelligently recognized."<sup>11</sup> The 'peculiarity' of the US market in this case was that while European sports cars would sell well, often with limited marketing effort, their other offerings, usually small to mid-size sedans, would not. Rather than expend marketing resources on what appeared to be a lost cause, Hoffman focused instead on what he knew would sell well to American consumers, the sports cars, and urged Porsche, to create them, or

modify their current offerings to appeal to American consumers.

However, the glowing representation of Hoffman as visionary importer presented in corporate and public histories tends to jar with the very shrewd and risk-averse Hoffman that emerges from Porsche, and later BMW, archival documents. Hoffman was ultimately not interested in growing a foreign brand's image within the United States, or in significantly expanding its market share. Rather, he was content to sell European performance cars, primarily to sports car enthusiasts in the US, people who did not need to have the car sold to them by an expensive marketing campaign, but who would actively seek out the opportunity to purchase a foreign sports car, usually paying a premium. Thus, despite his role in establishing Porsche as a brand in the American market, he would later be relegated to East Coast imports, before finally being removed from the distribution network entirely.

When Hoffman began selling Porsche cars in 1951, he chose to import only variants of the Typ. 356 with the larger 1.5-liter engine, an increase in displacement from the 1.1 liter engine offered to European customers. Hoffman understood that American consumers who faced none of the taxes on engine size that had molded the sports car in the 1920s and 1930s, enjoyed plentiful supplies of cheap, high-octane gasolines, and were in the market for a performance vehicle would inevitably choose greater power over economy. The increase in displacement from 1.1 to 1.5 liters increased the power output significantly to approximately 60 horsepower at 5,000 rpm. The larger engine was still rather small by American standards, however, the weight of the Porsche Typ. 356, roughly 1,800 pounds, was quite low, which gave the vehicle balanced performance in the European tradition.<sup>12</sup> This was true even with the other key difference separating the prototype cars from the production models: the bodywork was now steel, made by Reutters, a sacrifice necessary to increase production while keeping down costs, rather than the hand-formed aluminum panels of the Austrian prototype cars. Despite its obvious differences from other European sports cars like the Jaguars and MGs, the Porsche Typ. 356, due to its light weight and small, high revving 4-cylinder engine, would ultimately feel very European when driven by American consumers.

To appeal to a broader swath of enthusiast consumers, and to make the most of the single sports car model Porsche offered, Hoffman, on his own initiative,

created two quasi-models of the Typ. 356. He was able to do this by pre-selecting certain options from the list Porsche offered. It was a tactic only possible due to his position as sole distributor, giving him total control over Porsche imports and ordering for American customers. For American consumers looking for Porsche performance without such a hefty price tag Hoffman imported what he called the '1500 America.' This was a Typ. 356 equipped with the 1500cc Normal engine which produced 55 horsepower, cloth covered seats, and lacked a radio, climate control (heater), metallic paint, adjustable-back passenger seat, the passenger's sun visor, the folding back for the rear seats, and aluminum door panels.<sup>13</sup> For Americans looking for a more luxuriously equipped sports car for touring, Hoffman offered the '1500 Super.' This was a Typ. 356 equipped with the 1500 Super engine, a variant that had different carburetors, camshaft, crankshaft, and other internal parts and therefore produced more power (between 60-70 horsepower). It also included all of the options removed on the 1500 America.<sup>14</sup> The strategy proved effective, the America model cost \$3,445 for the coupe, and \$3695 for the cabriolet compared to \$4,284 for the Super coup, and \$4,584 for the Super in cabriolet form. However, even the lower price of the Typ. 356 America still put Porsche at the high end of the sports car spectrum in the American market, and Hoffman felt a new offering was required.

By 1953, it was clear that competition in the sports car market would be fierce, and that Porsche, still quite new to the American market and lacking an established brand image, would have to take drastic action if it wanted to expand sales volume. Therefore, Hoffman urged Porsche to produce a new car, one that would be directly competitive with sports cars at the lower end of the spectrum, cars like the British Triumph TR2, MG, Austin-Healey, and the new American sports car, the Corvette. With Hoffman's idea supported by new west coast distributor John von Neumann, and the pressure that both distributors were able to exert considering that, in Ferry Porsche's own words, the "most important overseas market was America," Porsche responded with the Speedster, a low cost roadster.<sup>15</sup> The Speedster, while retaining its unique Porsche engineering and design heritage, was also more in line with the British roadster sports car models currently reigning supreme in the American market. The Speedster was a Typ. 356 cabriolet with new body panels that covered the area where the rear seat used to be, and fitted with

a low windshield and canvas top. Power came either from the 1500 Normal engine, or, for \$500 extra, the 1500 Super engine. The car was specifically designed for the American market and American enthusiast consumers, as Ludvigsen notes, "The emphasis was on acceleration to suit American driving and racing conditions, enhanced by special gear ratios and light weight. Weighing 1,750 pounds at the curb, the Speedster was some 80 pounds lighter than other Porsches."<sup>16</sup> The price of the Speedster was \$2,995 from Hoffman, or an even more affordable \$2,550 if European delivery was chosen, although this low advertised price was made possible by listing as optional two pieces of equipment that actually came on every Speedster regardless: the tachometer and the heater.

Hoffman's hunch proved correct, and the comparatively 'cheap' Porsche was a resounding success. It garnered significant praise from American enthusiast magazines, and not simply for its price. *Sports Cars Illustrated* called the Speedster optional 1600cc engine, introduced in 1956, "one of the most significant technical accomplishments of our time."<sup>17</sup> The Speedster earned this glowing pronouncement primarily due to its balanced handling qualities, "you can wag its tail and get through short, tight-radius turns with amazing nimbleness and speed," and its ride quality, "In common with the ride of many continental cars..."<sup>18</sup> The Speedster was clearly able to retain the kernel of European sporting authenticity that appealed so much to the American enthusiasts who bought them. Despite the creation of a model solely to appeal to Americans, its pronounced oversteer, and the slightly dishonest advertised price, the Speedster was still very much a European sports car and these qualities helped it find its way into the garages of many American enthusiasts. Just as European sports cars influenced Americans, the case of the Speedster indicates that European manufacturers and their products were not untouched by the American market and American consumers. While there is no direct evidence that Porsche looked at the British competition while designing the Speedster, the influence of the popular two-door, two-seat, cheap roadsters cannot be overlooked in the final product. Furthermore, it is indicative of the level of power held by independent distributors, in this case Hoffman and von Neumann, in the early phase of European automotive manufacturers expansion into the American auto market.

The Speedster was a short-lived vehicle, only in production from 1954 to 1958; however, it left a deep



1953 Porsche 356 America Roadster. (Courtesy Society of Automotive Historians and Louis F. Fourie)

impact. When an American enthusiast learned in 1958 of the looming end of Speedster production and the replacement of the model with the 356 “Convertible D,” he was compelled to write: “I bought my Speedster (I also have a coupe) because it was the nearest thing to what I wanted, but now I find that the already too fancy Speedster is to be supplanted by wind-up windows and any day now we will look for an automatic transmission, push-button windows, air-conditioning, mechanical steering aids and other appeals to the old ladies.”<sup>19</sup> Clearly, the Speedster satisfied an enthusiast demand, yet its phasing out after only four years of production demonstrates that the effect of the Speedster on broader Porsche design trends would be minimal. The Porsche brand, despite Hoffman’s influence, was never intended to be a cheap sports car along the lines of the MG or Triumph. Indeed, Porsche wanted to compete within the upper echelons of the sports car market alongside the Jaguar X-120 and later American competition such as the Chevrolet Corvette. The stripped-down Speedster was a compromise to fit a market demand and increase sales volume in the early days of Porsche in the American market, when Porsche had little brand recognition among American enthusiasts and simply needed to get more cars into the hands of American

consumers. The other Typ. 356 variants, as well as the successor to the Typ. 356 – the 911 – would cement the position of Porsche sports cars as premium models in an increasingly crowded niche market. As one reviewer for an American enthusiast magazine wrote, “Those who feel Porsches are too expensive should give one a careful looking over to realize the amount of value received.”<sup>20</sup>

A much larger concession to the American market came with the offering of an automatic transmission in 1968, long after Hoffman had moved on from Porsche distribution, and after the introduction of the Typ. 356’s successor model, the 911. Market trends had clearly established by 1962 that American consumers were beginning to buy Porsche sports cars for reasons other than European performance. As Porsche distributor and dealer John von Neumann noted in an interview in *Daily Pilot*, “We used to sell Porsches principally to people who wanted to race them. Now – even though Porsche still wins more racing championships than any other make of car – our biggest buyers are engineers. And right behind them are doctors and dentists...”<sup>21</sup> Indeed the source itself, the *Daily Pilot*, is indicative of Porsche’s expansion beyond the strictly enthusiast market; the *Daily Pilot* was a regional newspaper for Or-



ange County, California, an affluent area where many of the new target customers, doctors, dentists, and engineers worked and lived. Essentially, the market was changing as Porsche's successor model to the Typ. 356, the 911, expanded Porsche's core market from European performance enthusiasts to include wealthy consumers interested in the prestige that came from owning an expensive foreign marque with a European pedigree.

The changing demographics of Porsche ownership in the 1960s meant that, just as it had with the Speedster in the 1950s, and the 911-derived 912 from 1962 to 1969, Porsche would have to make concessions to increase the brand's appeal in America. Entering production for the 1968 model year, the 'Sportomatic' was a typically German (or European) response to the demands of the American market; it was a compromise which aimed at retaining the kernel of European performance authenticity while still satisfying American consumer demand. The Sportomatic transmission was not a true automatic, but rather an automated manual. The distinction is important; an American automatic transmission was fully automatic, meaning the driver had only to put the gear selector in the drive position and would not have to touch the selector again until he or she needed to park or reverse. The Sportomatic on the one hand eliminated the need for a driver-operated clutch, but one still needed to move the gear selector between the four forward gears, the same as with a traditional manual transmission, to drive the vehicle. This compromise was born out of the worry that an automatic in a Porsche would "dilute the pure, sharp image of the car... It was not easy to shrug off the lesson of the Corvette, which started out with naught but an automatic and had to struggle painfully to gain recognition as a legitimate sports car."<sup>22</sup> This also indicates just how closely Porsche was paying attention to the American market, and further that they understood a critical aspect of the 911's appeal to American consumers was the vehicle's ties to a European sporting heritage.

The risk of losing legitimacy is therefore better understood by viewing a sports car's 'European-ness' as an amalgam of driving experiences typically associated with the European sports car. A significant part of this European driving experience, at least as many Americans believed, was the manual transmission which required both skill and experience to drive smoothly and quickly. For many American enthusiasts the ability

to drive a manual transmission well helped set them further apart from other, mainstream American drivers. Indeed, until the model year 1968 Porsche 911, only the Mercedes 230 SL (assuming one considers it a sports car) and the 1966 Jaguar XKE had been sold with an optional automatic in any market. Therefore, Porsche's fear of a negative public response to the release of an optional automatic transmission was certainly not born out of paranoia. This was a fact clearly demonstrated by one of the first reviews of the Sportomatic in an American enthusiast magazine which began, "Putting an automatic transmission in a Porsche is like artificial insemination: It's no fun anymore."<sup>23</sup> Even the official magazine of the Porsche Club of America, *Porsche Panorama*, which typically could be counted on to run a full article on any major new Porsche development, was uncharacteristically muted when it came to the Sportomatic, giving it three small paragraphs in their November 1967 issue but no full article in all of 1968.<sup>24</sup> Given this context it is somewhat ironic that the Sportomatic was better received in Europe, where the manual transmission dominated sales in cars of all types, than it was by enthusiasts in America. As the English enthusiast magazine *Autocar* noted in a 1969 road test, "Sportomatic, then, is a good compromise, whether in heavy traffic or on long cross-country journeys... In open country, so good and well-coordinated is the change that there is every incentive to match ratios to conditions."<sup>25</sup>

As this section has demonstrated, Porsche products were influenced by American market trends, and in fact, they were never as purely German, or even European, as they were perceived to be by the Americans that consumed them. However, at the same time it is important to note that neither were Porsche sports cars dominated by American market trends either; it was a fine line that Porsche was able to navigate. Porsche was able to retain the core of authenticity that satisfied its American enthusiast demographic, as well as adding features like the automatic transmission, and later air conditioning, which helped broaden the car's appeal.

A perfect example of the complex nature of market influence on the design process, and how Porsche was able to retain European authenticity in their products, is the creation of the successor model to the Typ. 356: the 911. Press coverage for the Typ. 356 in American enthusiast magazines was still overwhelmingly positive. However by 1958, as one reviewer noted, "It's very hard to write a road test on a car which has re-

mained essentially the same for so long..."<sup>26</sup> The push for a new product came from America, and due to fears that the market for small, two-seater sports cars was nearing capacity, voices within the company called for the Typ. 356's replacement to be a true 4-seater. While not directly referenced this is no doubt based on the fact that by 1958 Porsche would have seen Chevrolet's Corvette struggle to gain significant volume sales while at the same time Ford's Thunderbird, which gained a rear seat and room for four adults in the 1958 model year, exceeded sales goals.<sup>27</sup>

Yet the final design of the 911 selected for production was not a four-seat vehicle. While carrying over certain styling cues from the Typ. 356, namely the look of the front of the car with its distinctive round headlights in prominent fender bulges, the sleek look of the new 911 represented a bold step into the styling cues of the 1960s. As Bernard Cahier – a highly regarded automotive journalist writing for *Sports Car Graphic* – wrote at the 911's launch in 1964, "The 911 bears a definite family resemblance with the current production Porsche [Typ. 356], and yet its lines are quite different... the car has a longer, lower look. The slim wrap around bumper emphasizes the fast, clean lines of the car..."<sup>28</sup> Although American consumers represented well over half of Porsche's market for new cars at the dawn of the 1960s, the 911 eschewed design fads prominent in American cars of the period. For example, the 911 used little chrome on the outside of the car, having just thin strips of it around the windows and on the bumpers to highlight the flowing lines, and lacked the tail fins that became emblematic of American cars of the period.

The ultimate death of the four-seat Porsche, despite all indicators pointing to its probable success in the American market, is a decision that has perplexed automotive historians. Ludvigsen, in *Porsche Excellence was Expected*, argues that this was largely due to the compartmentalization of the German automotive industry, a relic of the cartel system that defined interwar-period German industrial organization, a system that survived despite Allied controls in the immediate postwar years. He notes that until the introduction of the Opel Kadett as a direct Volkswagen competitor, the "alignment was clear: Volkswagen built the cheap cars; Mercedes-Benz the expensive ones; Ford and Opel the middle-class cars; Borgward (and later BMW) offered alternatives in the upper-middle class; and Porsche built the sports cars."<sup>29</sup> In this light, the death of the

four seat Porsche is understood as a deliberate decision taken to preserve the established order among the cartel of German automotive manufacturers.

While initially compelling, this explanation is undercut by more recent trends in the historiography of German industry. Historian Gary Herrigel's work, *Industrial Constructions: The Sources of German Industrial Power*, pushes for a new understanding of postwar German industrial order, what he terms the decentralized industrial order. This system of industrial organization, characterized by small to medium sized companies, "utilizing the local reservoir of skilled labor and flexible small suppliers to maintain competitiveness," fits Porsche's business model quite well and explains why Porsche would have eschewed a cartel-type arrangement, especially in the beginning of the 1960s.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Ludvigsen's argument is not supported by Ferry Porsche's autobiography, in which the death of the full four-seat Porsche, a story told in a mere few paragraphs, is framed as the result of an internal struggle which resulted in styling dictating function.<sup>31</sup>

An explanation this author finds more compelling is that Porsche, outside of its activities in European racing, was a conservative company and cautiously protected its budding brand image, especially in a market as crucial as the United States. The fact that the same basic design stayed in production from the Gmünd coupes in 1949 to the final production year of the Typ. 356 in 1965 substantiates this view. Certainly, there were many updates to the vehicles' chassis, suspension, and some modifications were made to styling elements as well, but if one were to put the two cars together their relationship would be unmistakable.

Furthermore, the early 1960s were a pivotal period for Porsche, not only was the firm introducing a new model, a first for the company, but the company was also changing their distribution system in America. Porsche had begun the process of taking a more direct role in the importation and distribution of its sports cars as early as 1957, indicated by a letter to the Baden-Württemberg Ministry of Economic Affairs (Wirtschaftsministerium) in which the formal request to open a US based subsidiary was filed.<sup>32</sup> The Porsche of America Corporation (POAC) was founded as the main importer of the cars and spare parts; however, distribution and the establishment of American dealerships was split into geographic regions. Porsche divided the American market into multiple distributorships with its own American organization at the head,

rather than have Hoffman in charge of all American distribution. Hoffman's last year at the helm of Porsche distribution in the United States was 1959 and, despite the eventual superiority of this arrangement for Porsche and its American consumers, it would take a few years for POAC and the new regional distributors to function well together at the national level. This is indicated by the failure of national-level marketing as noted by one disappointed Porsche enthusiast in 1960:

Porsche of America and Porsche dealers should hang their heads in shame at the miserable Porsche display at the International Auto Show at New York's Coliseum, April 16-24 [1960]. About half a dozen cars were stuck on one side of the second floor without any promotion or display except a few enlargements of the emblem tacked on columns nearby... The general stodginess of the exhibit and lack of salesmanship and promotion, was exceeded only by Ferrari—and even they had the hoods open so you could see the powerplants. Isn't it a bit presumptuous of the factory, Porsche of America, and distributors and dealers, to expect PCA to carry almost the entire load of creating good will and promoting Porsches?<sup>33</sup>

Therefore, with the new model coming at the same time as a major change in its American distribution and sales framework, Porsche eschewed a potentially greater volume of sales to establish a cohesive brand image built on a very particular construction of European style and performance.

### **Porsche Club of America: Cultural Transfer and Enthusiasts**

The increasing presence of Porsche and its cultural significance in the American market is indicated by the founding of the Porsche Club of America (PCA) by Virginia based enthusiast William "Bill" Sholar in 1955. The PCA initially began as a way of Porsche owners to share maintenance tips, spare parts data or availability, and camaraderie. However, by the early 1960s it had expanded into a full-fledged enthusiast club, complete with annual and semi-annual meetings called "Treffens," named after the German language

word for meeting, annual and semi-annual trips to Germany in addition to other regional events, and a national monthly publication, *Porsche Panorama*. These events created a sense of community among owners, who referred to themselves as 'Porsche-pushers,' even though they may have been vastly separated geographically. Importantly, one had to own (or co-own) a Porsche vehicle to be an active member of the club, and this kept the club's activities tightly focused around the Porsche car and German automotive culture.<sup>34</sup> Porsche's expanding consumer base also expanded the membership of the PCA, which served to magnify the German cultural heritage of the vehicle and enhanced its transmission to American consumers.

While ceding much of the control over the marketing of the Porsche sports car in the American market to Hoffman and his importer-distributor company in the critical initial years of 1951-1959, Porsche nevertheless sought ways in which to build positive market presence in America. For this reason, during the formative years of the 1950s and 1960s, the Porsche factory maintained close contact with its official clubs at the national level, which was the PCA in the United States. This was accomplished primarily through "Huschke" von Hanstein (Fritz Sittig Enno Werner von Hanstein), a German racing driver and Chief of Porsche's racing department and public relations department, and Richard von Frankenberg, a Porsche team racing driver, journalist and chief editor of Porsche's magazine, *Christophorus*.<sup>35</sup> The two men would travel between the US and Germany frequently, engaging with American enthusiast consumers in both locales and reinforcing not only the technical superiority of the car, but also the sense of community between the Porsche personnel and consumers.

"Huschke" von Hanstein played a crucial role in helping the Porsche sports car transport German automotive culture to America by establishing the first "Driving School," in the US. This was an event following the Sebring Road Race in 1956 attended by several "PCAers," a self-given term for members of the Porsche Club of America, in addition to many other sports car enthusiasts in the United States. With relatively little publicity, "since the sports car drivers in America represent a similarly conspiratorial community like us, the rumor of the Porsche driver school was quickly known... and on the scheduled date no less than 300 sports car enthusiasts arrived with their own vehicles."<sup>36</sup> This demonstrates two important factors



in the spread of European automotive culture. First, American enthusiasts, despite the geographical distance that may have separated members, were a reasonably close-knit group and shared information rapidly through the enthusiast magazines and club newsletters. Second, this illustrates how enthusiasts were willing to travel great distances to share in the experience of using their sports cars ‘as intended,’ in this case meaning to find the cars’ limits of performance and test their individual skill as drivers. As the jubilant *Christophorus* article noted, “This sporty driving school was the first event of its kind in America and, as the unexpectedly high number of participants showed, attracted the strongest interest. The Porsche company hopes to make a further contribution to the ever-growing idea of the sports car in the USA in general and for the popularity of German vehicles in particular.”<sup>37</sup> Important to note here is the acknowledgement of explicit factory support in the spread of European sports car culture to Americans. While the overall goal was certainly a simple one, to sell more cars, the cultural baggage attached was embraced; no effort was made to strip the European sports car of its cultural heritage. To the contrary, factory support was given, in the Porsche case, to ensure that the Porsche heritage of European racing was passed to, and embraced by, American consumers.

Porsche was largely successful. Factory support in combination with latent interest among American enthusiasts resulted in a greater American interest in European road racing. This process is evident in an excerpt from a recurring editorial segment in *Porsche Panorama* in which their “European Correspondent” promises, “The race of the 1000kms on the Ring [Nürburgring] is next on the schedule... During the race, I will cut about one hour of tape recording and you will be hearing something about the race during the PCA Parade.”<sup>38</sup> For those who wanted to experience European road racing in a more visceral way than a recording, or even spectating the event itself, there was the option, for those who could afford the travel, to attend an international drivers school in Germany on the Nurburgring itself. While the experience of driving a sports car on a famous European race course was no doubt exceptional, it is interesting to note the focus of a narrative by Frederick Smith. Smith, an American enthusiast fortunate enough to attend a Nurburgring driver’s school in 1960, found comradery among German sports car enthusiasts. He noted that, “Also, we were to be the guests of the Weisbaden Porsche Club... who invited

us over for their meeting in the Rathskeller across the street. Several hours of shop talk, racing, speeches, and delightful German beer followed.”<sup>39</sup> These types of transnational experiences, in which American enthusiasts were able to immerse themselves in European automotive enthusiast culture, are a further example of the messy, complex steps in which the transfer of European enthusiast culture to American consumers took place. They are single parts of the larger concurrent process of the globalization of America made possible by the consumption of a European product; Mr. Smith’s consumption of a Porsche was a prerequisite to the consumption of a broader European automotive culture.

Another way in which the factory directly contributed to the Europeanizing influence on American consumers was through the “Treffens,” trips, organized by the Porsche Club of America in concert with the Porsche factory in Stuttgart. These trips, the first of which occurred in 1958, were annual to semi-annual affairs in which American consumers purchased a Porsche automobile and picked up the vehicle at the factory in Stuttgart before embarking on a planned or at least semi-planned driving tour of major European tourist destinations. While the entire trip lasted roughly three weeks, the first three days followed a close schedule and allowed Porsche to deliver its own narrative and “European-ness” that would be attached to the Porsche sports car. “You’ll be greeted by Porsche factory personnel as you step from the plane and it won’t be long before you’ll hop into your brand new, special order Porsche. Yes, it’s true... and then all of Europe is yours waiting to be discovered. But before you’re off, you’ll visit the fabulous Porsche assembly line and enjoy the hospitality of Porsche and Stuttgart,” extolled an article in *Porsche Panorama* that was perhaps more advertisement than editorial.<sup>40</sup>

The Porsche Treffen was less a series of parties with some driving in between, although there were certainly parties on the Treffen, and more an event focused around introducing Americans to the Porsche company, German culture, and building an appreciation of driving the Porsche sports car in its native European environment. As the itinerary for the three official days of the 1963 Treffen indicate, the rather packed schedule of events included a tour of the factory, a driver’s school, where new American owners would be shown how to drive their Porsches in a sporting fashion, and a banquet style dinner hosted by Ferry Porsche

and key Porsche executives.<sup>41</sup> While the focus of the first full day of activities was solely on the Porsche factory and vehicles, the second day was less focused on the Porsche car and driving and included a bus tour of Stuttgart and a tour through a local brewery. This last day of factory-planned activities emphasized the local culture of the region from whence the vehicles came. Here the Treffen again distinguished itself from the European tours sponsored by the British marques; after leaving the tightly scripted three-day introduction, most members would then go on a tour of Europe organized by European Porsche clubs, undoubtedly consuming more aspects of German, and European, culture as independent tourists. Perhaps a sign of Porsche's confidence in its products (and consumers) there was no parts van following behind American consumers in their new Porsches, no factory workers that would service, clean, and polish the cars every few nights. Porsche Treffen participants relied on local Porsche dealers and independent service stations, and the locations provided in a booklet given to the new owner when they took delivery at the factory. At the conclusion of the Treffen the vehicles that these American sports car enthusiasts had purchased, picked up from the factory, and toured through Europe in, would be shipped to the United States.

These events allowed Porsche the opportunity to shape customer perceptions of the vehicle and its production. Factory tours, for instance, reinforced the small-batch, hand crafted production nature of the Porsche sports car. As one PCA member fortunate enough to participate in the Fifth International Porsche Treffen and tour the Porsche factory in Stuttgart observed, "This is no assembly line by any means, everything is custom-made—hand filing, beautiful old world coachwork and custom engine and transmission assembly. Every car turned out is subjected to a very critical road test."<sup>42</sup> As noted earlier, the "handmade" or "bespoke" aspects of the Porsche sports car was one of the factors by which American consumers defined the European sports car in general. Enthusiast consumers would struggle to find such attributes in any domestically produced car. Porsche also allowed photography and video-recordings during the tours, correctly assuming that this would be spread amongst enthusiasts and further elevate the perception of their brand. This was certainly the case, based on the observations of Jim T. Seolas, a PCA member from Arizona, "All of the precision hand work done on each and every unit is some-

thing for us to see. Mass production and assembly lines as we know them can DROP DEAD!" which was itself based on a film of the production of Porsche sports cars shot during an international Treffen to Stuttgart.<sup>43</sup>

While the level of Porsche factory participation in the Treffen was high, the brunt of the financial burden of the trip fell upon the Porsche Club of America and the American enthusiasts who embarked upon the usually month-long adventure. By 1966 the cost of the chartered flight alone was \$35,000, and that did not include the shipping of the vehicles to (for those who were not taking delivery of a new Porsche car) or from Germany.<sup>44</sup> All of this is to say that while certain aspects of the Treffen were indeed part of a marketing system designed to sell more Porsche sports cars, it was not one funded by Porsche, or its distributors, directly. Rather, the PCA assumed the burden of deploying a marketing scheme in the US that benefited Porsche directly. In the process the PCA increased its membership as in the 1960s participation in the Treffen was restricted to PCA members and their wives only. Rather the experience of being at the factory and using the vehicle in its "native" environs was seen as justification enough for the extravagant costs of the trip.

While the international Treffens were extravagant affairs in which only a small percentage of American Porsche buyers could participate, other events organized by American enthusiasts also point to a form of European influence. While the fortunate few (roughly 80) were gallivanting across Europe, Porsche enthusiasts at home staged their own Treffen of sorts:

The first country on the tour was ITALY where thoughtful customs officials at the important landmark of the 'Leaning Tower of Pizza' offered delicacies and some of that famous black coffee. Following a short rest and a 'secondo di atterimento,' the tourists continued on to GERMANY and found themselves accosted in the Black Forest Preserve by Bavarian types never seen before. They were friendly, though, and served a typical local specialty—bratwurst and beer. Refreshed after a 'schrecksekunde,' the travelers then took a long winding tour arriving high in the FOX River ALPS, where they were greeted by yodeling officials in original costumes. After paying their dazzle toll and

taking their ‘temps de reflexe,’ visitors nibbled on a special cheese, wandered over the ramparts and across the draw-bridge of the beautiful old castle. All of these control point delicacies merely whetted the appetite for the feast spread out by our French hosts at the Villa d’Este. Under the tricolor, beret-topped hand-shakers closed the tour with finesse and a ‘seconde d’effroi,’ for the weary wanderers.”<sup>45</sup>

While the passage above may at first appear to be a description of the Second Annual Treffen of the PCA to Europe, it is in fact an overview of the Chicago-Milwaukee Region “Treffen” event put on by the Committee for the Advancement of Poor Porsche Pilots, or CAPP, a self-deprecating jab at the affluence of the average Porsche owner. Obviously styled after the big “Treffen” to Europe, local members wanted it to “appear to be as much like a Treffen as possible, with travel vernacular, local atmosphere, etc. We knew we had a leaning ‘Tower of Pisa,’ an old Chicago landmark constructed by a wealthy gentleman after a sojourn to Italy in the Thirties. We also had forest preserves, one of which had the appearance of the Black Forest with a replica of a German building.” However, to make the outing even more complete participants were given fake travel documents, called a “Passepartout” and set up fake customs checks and agents at the rally’s main checkpoints. Met at the Chicago airport by, “PCA immigration officials,” participants had their photographs:

stapled and embossed into the Passepartout under a hot sun... At each border crossing (check point), one of the customs officials stamped the Passepartout with a rubber stamp. Each of the stamps indicated in the language of that country a ‘Moment of Thought,’ a term used in Europe for the time charged on your bill that a mechanic thinks while working on your car. It was a day of make believe, but unlike in Alice in Wonderland, the dream had come true.<sup>46</sup>

When one considers the time and expense involved in planning and executing even local or regional events such as these it reinforces the idea that it is an element of “European-ness” that appeals to the owners of (in

this case specifically) Porsche sports cars. It was not enough to merely stage a sports car rally though the greater Chicago-Milwaukee region, even though this was itself an element of European enthusiast culture, but it also had to include a stylized depiction of Europe as well. The 90 members of the Chicago-Milwaukee PCA who participated in this event are exemplary of the broader base of American sports car enthusiasts. These enthusiasts, at the close of the 1950s, were clearly chasing after a type of European image and cultural experience attached to sports car ownership, even if when it came to elements beyond the vehicle itself this image was perhaps more stylized than authentic.

Not all American interactions with Europe and European enthusiast culture took place in the carefully mediated environs of a club or factory organized international Treffen. Sports car enthusiasts also, on occasion, found themselves caught up in the realities of Cold War Europe, exemplified here by the trip taken by Bill and Virginia Sholar, founder of the PCA and whose wife shared an equally enthusiastic passion for Porsche sports cars and European travel. While on vacation with the Porsche Club of America Tour in Germany in 1960 inclement weather resulted in the cancellation of their planned trip to the North Sea region. On the insistence of an unnamed German friend, the Sholars were encouraged to use the time to travel to Berlin via autobahn in their new Porsche sports car. Their trip was largely uneventful, and much of it was consistent with other travel literature written about the Communist East from a Western perspective; a bustling, busy and friendly western zone contrasted against guarded, desolate, and cold eastern zone. Care was taken to point out the, “contemptuous glances... [and] unsmiling characters,” from East German border security, the empty roads, propaganda billboards, and, in East Berlin, the large Communist boulevards conspicuously free of pedestrian traffic.<sup>47</sup> However, despite the cliché writing style, indications of shared humanity broke through. For instance when the author, Virginia, noted, “I got the impression that the officials back of those windows in those wooden shacks filling in endless forms with useless information were just as tired of this whole stupid business as we were,” a reference not only to the border checks, but to the geopolitical divisions of the Cold War as well.<sup>48</sup> This tiny sentence at once reinforced and yet at the same time called into question Cold War stereotypes. While Bill and Virginia’s experience was certainly unique, it would





*1966 Porsche 912, a Temporary Compromise. (Courtesy Society of Automotive Historians and Louis F. Fourie)*

be far-fetched to claim significance in terms of direct transnational contact between East and West. What is perhaps far more significant is the way in which Virginia chooses to end the article, “It had been a wonderful experience and one which I wish all thoughtful Americans could have.”<sup>49</sup> It hints to the open nature of European sports car enthusiasts and a willingness to look past established stereotypes that tends to come with a more cosmopolitan worldview.

The Treffens continued to grow along with the PCA in both size and complexity as well as the level of cultural immersion. By the mid to late 1960s, the PCA was a busy organization. It consisted of 4,668 members in 1968, usually planned one PCA Treffen annually or bi-annually, organized at least one Porsche Parade in the United States, carried out numerous events organized at the regional level, and controlled an annual budget of \$75,000 to \$80,000 at the national level to make all of these events possible.<sup>50</sup> In terms of cultural immersion, the 1966 Treffen was timed so PCA members would be able to take in the Oktoberfest in Munich, as well as a Porsche Club meet that included, “the German and European [Porsche] clubs.”<sup>51</sup>

This demonstrates the durability of the cultural connection forged by the consumption of the Porsche

sports car, for even in the late sixties, after the cars had been on the market in the US for nearly two decades the associations of the owners with aspects of German culture was still quite strong. Perhaps more important than the questionably authentic ‘Bavarian Night,’ the Potomac region PCA also arranged a reception for Parade participants at the Chancery of the German Embassy, a noted first, “the German Embassy has never before given a reception to any social organization such as PCA.”<sup>52</sup> As promotional material for the XII Parade pointed out, participation in events such as ‘Bavarian Night’ inspired, “that unique bond which makes each Porsche owner a part of a tradition unmatched by any other marque in the world.”<sup>53</sup> Through instances like this, it is clear to see the ways in which the vehicle itself, as well as the enthusiast organization which grew around it, functions to spread aspects of the national culture of the vehicle’s production.

This essay has illustrated the ways in which the design and sales of the Porsche sports car in North America contributed to a transfer of German automotive culture, and German culture more broadly, to American consumers from the mid-1950s through the 1960s. The design and engineering of the two most significant Porsche models in terms of the American

market, the Typ. 356 and 911, demonstrated a kernel of European motorsports authenticity that was well received by American automotive journalists and consumers. However, the complex process of American cultural globalization, as seen through the lens of the Porsche sports car, cannot be understood solely by focusing on the manufacturer's perspective. Key to understanding this process was the perspective of the American consumers who purchased a Porsche sports car and became enthusiasts. American enthusiasts embraced the 'German-ness' of their automobiles; from hosting Oktoberfests in the United States to travelling abroad to see the factory. Driving on the roads of Europe in a manner befitting the performance heritage of their Porsches, American enthusiasts who purchased a Porsche also bought into aspects of the national culture of the country in which it was produced. Despite the rising tide of American culture flooding into Europe in the postwar period, Americans consumers could not escape participation in the same processes of cultural transfer inherent in the exchange of goods across borders. American culture would feel the touch of European influence, channeled through automotive enthusiasts and the sports cars they purchased.

#### (Endnotes)

- 1 Dr. Ing. h.c.F. Porsche AG, *Porsche in America*, trans. Andrea Hiott (Stuttgart: Porsche-Museum, 2015), pp. 4-5.
- 2 For more on the concept of 'imagined community' see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* Revised Edition, (London: Verso, 2006).
- 3 Carl O. Windecker, "Offene und Geschlossene Märkte: Ein Kapitel Export-Probleme" *Christophorus* 1952. Porsche auf dem amerikanischen Kontinent, CRISTOPHORUS 1, 1952/54 Heft 1-10, Porsche Historisches Archiv, Stuttgart. Note on Translation: I am interpreting the word 'zusammengebastelte', lit. 'put together' to imply homebuilt/not mass produced, given the context of the document.
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- 5 "Americana" *Christophorus* (1954). Porsche auf dem amerikanischen Kontinent, CRISTOPHORUS 2 1954/54, Heft 11-19, Porsche Historisches Archiv, Stuttgart.
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- 7 Dr. Ing. h.c. Ferry Porsche & Gunther Molter, *Ferry Porsche: Cars are my Life* (Wellingborough: Patrick Stephens Limited, 1989), p. 153. Porsche Historisches Archiv, Stuttgart.
- 8 Dr. Ing. h.c.F. Porsche AG, *Porsche in America*, trans. Andrea Hiott, 8-9.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 24-25.
- 10 Karl Ludvigsen, *Porsche Excellence was Expected: The Comprehensive History of the Company, its Cars, and its Racing Heritage* Volume II (Cambridge: Bentley Publishers, 2003), 497.
- 11 Carl O. Windecker, "Offene und Geschlossene Märkte: Ein Kapitel Export-Probleme" *Christophorus* (1952). Porsche auf dem amerikanischen Kontinent, CRISTOPHORUS 1, 1952/54 Heft 1-10, Porsche Historisches Archiv, Stuttgart.
- 12 Karl Ludvigsen, *Porsche Excellence was Expected*, 70/71.
- 13 Dr. Ing. h.c.F. Porsche A.G., "Anlage 1" Attachment to „Sketch“ Draft Letter between Hoffman Porsche Inc. and Dr. Ing. h.c.F. Porsche AG, 1952. Abt. RW (Rechtswesen), Bestand Vertrieb/Marketing 5b, Porsche Historisches Archiv, Stuttgart.
- 14 Karl Ludvigsen, *Porsche Excellence was Expected*, 85. Note: The horsepower figure is disputed, Ludvigsen's work states 60, Dr. Ing. h.c. Ferry Porsche & Gunther Molter, *Ferry Porsche: Cars are my Life*, 198 states 70. The actual figure is no doubt variable within this range given the nature of the vehicle's production.
- 15 Dr. Ing. h.c. Ferry Porsche & Gunther Molter, *Ferry Porsche*, 197. Porsche Historisches Archiv, Stuttgart.
- 16 Karl Ludvigsen, *Porsche Excellence was Expected*, 91.
- 17 "SCI tests the Porsche Speedster 1600" *Sports Cars Illustrated* Vol. 1 No. 12 (1956): 14.
- 18 "SCI tests the Porsche Speedster 1600" *Sports Cars Illustrated* Vol. 1 No. 12 (1956): *Ibid.*, 16-17.
- 19 Gerald T. White "Letters to the Editor" *Porsche Panorama* Vol. 3 No. 10 (1958). PORSCHE PANORAMA 1958, Porsche Historisches Archiv, Stuttgart.
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- 21 "More Orders Than Cars: Porsche Sets No Records" *Daily Pilot*, October 10 1962. Bestand Dokumentation Firma, Vertrieb USA, Porsche Historisches Archiv, Stuttgart.
- 22 Karl Ludvigsen, *Porsche Excellence was Expected*, 388.
- 23 Bob Kovacic, "Driving the Porsche 911 Automatically" *Sports Car Graphic*, Vol. 8 No. 3 (1968): 16.

- 24 “1968 Porsches” *Porsche Panorama* Vol. 12 No. 11 (1967): 5-6. Porsche Panorama, Porsche Historisches Archiv, Stuttgart.
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- 28 Bernard Cahier, “Road Test 1/64: Porsche 911” *Sports Car Graphic* Vol. 4 No. 9 (1965): 41.
- 29 Karl Ludvigsen, *Porsche Excellence was Expected*, 340.
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# So, Whatever Happened to General Motors in Dayton, Ohio?

## —A Panel Discussion

Led and Transcribed by Edward Garten

### Background

In Fall 2019 a seminar titled *So, Whatever Happened to General Motors?* was offered through the University of Dayton's Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. Over fifty senior citizens participated in the seminar. Many of those individuals—prior to retirement—had either worked for one of the former Dayton-area GM plants, subsidiaries or suppliers or had immediate relatives who had been employed in one of those operations. During the 1950s and early 60s, the Dayton area comprised the third largest number of General Motors-related facilities outside of Flint and Rüsselsheim Germany. Among GM operations once located in Dayton were Frigidaire, Delco Products, Inland Division, four of the GM Delphi component plants, and the Moraine Assembly.

A significant portion of the seminar dealt with the early history of General Motors from its inception in 1908 through the corporation's immense contributions during World War II and then into the "golden age" of GM in the 1950s and 1960s. However, the latter part of the seminar gave special emphasis to the decline of General Motors' presence in the greater Dayton region. That decline resulted in plant closures, widespread unemployment and economic distress, as well as a substantial population decline of the city of Dayton proper.

The last session of the seminar featured a panel of local individuals who, together, contributed a range of insights and observations with respect to the gradual loss of the General Motors presence in the Dayton region.

### Panelists

*Don Bigler* worked for a number of suppliers to various former Dayton-area General Motors plants. Those suppliers included TNT Logistics that later became CEVA Logistics, the industrial welding supply company AWISCO, and AGA Gas, an industrial gas manufacturer.

*Richard Downing* retired from General Motors with forty years seniority and was a full-time union representative for the last twenty-five years. He gained substantial insight into the challenges faced by local General Motors union-represented workers.

*Tom Green* was an executive with General Motors and Delphi for 36 years prior to retirement. He was plant manager for several large GM facilities during his last fifteen years and was tasked with winding down the local Dayton Delphi plants after they were spun off of General Motors. He is an engineer and lawyer by training.

*John Heitmann* is professor emeritus at the University of Dayton and a specialist in automotive history and the history of science and technology. During the latter period of the decline of General Motors in Dayton, he was often called upon for comment by the national press.

*Gary Ruff* is a retired local high school teacher who spent his summers during college working on the assembly lines for several Dayton-area General Motors operations.

*Edward Garten* moderated the panel. A retired University of Dayton administrator, he regularly teaches seminars in automotive history and car culture in that university's Learning in Retirement Institute.

### **Moderator Garten**

In 1962, General Motors claimed 52% of the entire automobile market in the United States. Today, it barely claims 17% of the market. Although a dramatic fall over the years, its largest decline began in the 1970s and continued through the 1980s. And then events from 2007-2009 largely ended the GM chapter in Dayton. In your opinion, and in the big picture sense, what were the major turning points that caused General Motors to move from being "the big guy in the room" to now being "just another player" within the highly competitive global auto industry? In short, what factors caused GM to decline?

### **Richard Downing**

Since 1970 we always heard from higher management that our jobs would be moved offshore or to Mexico. Everyone thought that was just a GM scare tactic. The feeling was that Mexican workers didn't have the skills necessary. It was true that workers could be more productive. But there was so much more than that. China was a communist nation and no one ever thought that GM would invest in a rogue nation. But the Mexicans became educated and with the help of GM business people and engineers, Mexican workers developed and learned the complicated industrial equipment. Additionally, trade agreements were implemented that made it easier for GM to leave the United States. And there were unfair trade agreements that made it profitable for GM to go offshore. The unions are very political. The top union leaders are educated and responsible, but they have to deal with the membership. If GM had been honest and opened their books and showed us how health care was eating up profits, I'm sure the top union leaders would agree that selling this to the membership would be impossible. It can be noted that the truck plant in Dayton was very efficient and won many awards for safety and productivity. But that didn't matter because there was a corporate mindset that wasn't going to change. There are all kinds of reasons why GM left Dayton, but the real truth is that jobs are sent overseas so that

corporations, banks, and stockholders can make huge profits off the backs of non-unionized, uninsured people living in third world countries and often in poverty.

### **Tom Green**

Can I jump in here? It might not be surprising that Richard and I come from a different point of view on this. A really different point of view! But, number one, I think we at GM totally underestimated the foreign competition. That's fairly obvious. But the truth is we didn't realize how thirsty they were. They were really hard-working people. They weren't very good when they started out making cars and some of the cars, as you know, were junk. And that gave us even more confidence. And I was trying to reflect back on this as to whether we were arrogant—the leadership—about this, but I will tell you that with all the leaders I worked with I never knew arrogant people. But I think they didn't think we were vulnerable. They were just so confident that they didn't think we were vulnerable. The people were good people whether the union people, the people on the floor, or our people in management, but we just underestimated the competition. GM lost its historical roots and, in this seminar, we talked about all the cars in the 1980s that all looked alike. Earlier, we'd gotten to where we were as a company by distinguishing each of the GM brands. Who thought of that? Well, Roger Smith, whom you talked about. I was never a fan of Smith, but when we had financial people running the company. We lost track of the loyal owners, we lost track of the styling, the marketing, we lost track of everything except trying to get to the bottom line. I think that was a piece of it, too. Non-competitive wages and fringe benefits were a piece of it. I say that not compared to Chrysler and Ford, but compared to everybody else. So even here in the United States when GM is paying \$70 an hour in total compensation, wages, and benefits—this is back at the time bankruptcy—Toyota's paying \$43, Nissan's paying \$41, so we could not compete even in this country let alone what they were doing in their countries. And there are things I remember distinctly, even some of the tariffs they were putting on—and you've mentioned some of that here Richard. But I remember Chevrolets that cost \$20,000 to make here but with the tariffs it became a \$40,000 car in Japan. Who is going to pay \$40,000 for a





*Aerial View of Delco Products, Dayton, OH, 1964. (Courtesy, Dayton History)*

Chevrolet when you can buy a Toyota for \$20,000? As it turns out that 95% of the cars sold in Japan are built in Japan. Surprise, surprise! They protected their markets, while we did not. And last, what bothers me is that I don't know where the Board of Directors was. Boards are charged with giving direction to the big, big picture of the business. The first time some of us heard anything from the Board of Directors was after the bankruptcy. Ed Whitaker was running GM for a while; that was after it was all over. Where the heck were they five years, ten years before the crisis hit? I'm very critical then because that's what their job was, that's what they're paid for.

And this last thing, I might say, is sort of a cultural thing. I was sitting beside someone here in the class

and when we introduced ourselves, it turns out he worked at the Delphi Vandelia plant as an operator when I was plant manager. And we didn't know one another and he said "oh, that's likely because I was a good worker." Boy, that made me think, there's a lot of truth to that because we spent a lot of our time worrying about the people who were poor workers and that was a minority by far but both the union and we in management had to spend a lot of time on those folks over those who came to work on time and did a good job.

### **John Heitmann**

The seeds of the decline go all the way back to the 1930s; it was a time when a major technological



stagnation took hold in the American industry. Just prior to this period there were the last big changes technologically, with the introduction of strip steel and plate glass in the early 1930s. An industry wide shift followed, to planned obsolescence and design. And so from the 1930s onwards, the American automotive industry was characterized by very little break-through technology, and very little R & D with an impact. This strategy was implemented at General Motors, Ford and Chrysler until the late 1980s. And so, where did the innovations come from? It came from the suppliers who are now often at the root of some of the new technologies and processes and foreign corporations. For example, fuel injection was developed at American Motors but actually implemented by Bosch and foreign makers like VW beginning in 1967. Throughout the 1970s—a very troubled time—given pollution controls and safety devices, the American automobile industry was not the primary source of new technologies. The Germans, the Japanese—Honda with the CCCV engine in that little Civic drove changes in the industry. Those hungry folks knew about new technologies and how to introduce them into automobiles. In contrast, many of our cars, at least into the 1980s, used carburetors and a maze of vacuum lines.

### **Moderator Garten**

John, many automotive historians would argue that the 1980s was GM's worst decade ever in terms of market share loss. For example, the Chevy Citation not only kicked that terrible decade off but also set the template for almost all of GM's cars from that point on. The Citation was GM's first ever front-wheel drive mass-market car. And it was a sales success right out of the gate; people waited for months to take delivery of what one wag later called "GM's worst deadly sin." Handling was horrible; steering and suspension systems were mediocre; front hubs failed, and on and on. After only the fourth year from launch sales had dropped over 90%. Only a few years prior to the Citation's demise, Toyota was bringing out its own front-wheel drive Camry that, in its first year, was considered by the automotive press as foolproof and utterly solid. In short, possibly the beginning of the end for GM was its focus on and obsession with the next quarter's profits at the expense of quality vehicles that would ensure brand loyalty.

### **Don Bigler**

I've only owned one GM car—one of the first 1980 Chevy Citations in Dayton. Delphi built the hubs. The trick on a good front-wheel drive car is good outer hubs. You can go back to the old Cord where you had to rebuild the hubs every thousand miles or so. But one hub had to be replaced under warranty at around 12,000 miles while the other had to be replaced slightly out of warranty at my expense. Then I had a Chrysler K-Car with a small engine, over 100,000 miles and never had a problem. And I had a Plymouth Minivan, high mileage, never a problem. Why? They bought them from the French front-wheel drive manufacturer Citroen and some other company. Never had to replace a front universal joint. A guy hit me one time when I was on a thousand-mile trip, the hub sounded a little funny, but it never failed. My brother-in-law bought a Vega—like three-fourths of a car—little steering wheel, little arm rests. GM wanted you to buy up-market; they didn't copy what the Japanese were doing. I had a 1968 Toyota Corona -- few people remember those—a box with a 1.5 liter engine, commuted to Iowa with it because that's where my wife was from, back and forth, back and forth, never a bit of problem with that car. I wanted a smaller car and it was under \$2,000. The smallest car that GM had when I bought that Toyota was, in fact, the Nova that, to my taste was gigantic. So, in most instances what GM started to produce in the 1980s we can say that they really didn't learn anything from the Japanese.

### **Seminar participant**

One of you mentioned the notion of planned obsolescence -- was that planned and how did it affect General Motors over the years?

### **John Heitmann**

Yes, it was planned. It was really the idea of Alfred Sloan and by the early 1930s—let's say mid-30s—the idea was that the designers were far more important than engineers. What emerged became a keystone to our economy—our growth fetish—from that period on. You want to buy that new i-Phone 11 even though the I-Phone 5 works. As regards cars, it was better looking interiors, sleeker looking streamlined designs; but in terms of performance, safety, and powertrains,

maybe not as much innovation. Now there is a shift as to why you make a car, and why consumers buy cars. Today, take BMW, where they keep that 3-series pretty much the same for a long time. Chevrolets, particularly in the golden age of the 1950s and 1960s, were characterized every year with a retooling and a new line. All I'm saying is that there wasn't an emphasis on things like better technological systems.

### **Moderator Garten**

Let me move now to the local area—the Greater Dayton area. GM's presence in this region declined over quite a few years. More recently, Dayton has made some very positive and some would say heroic efforts to rebuild and achieve some of the vitality of the city's glory days. But thinking back and in your judgment, what were some of the pivotal points that highlighted General Motors as a local manufacturing force? I'll put that question first to John Heitmann, as he and I have previously discussed this question and I think he had a couple of excellent insights.

### **John Heitmann**

Not too many years ago Lee Iacocca wrote a book titled *Where Have All the Leaders Gone?* Remember 1958 in terms of the Dayton story. "Boss" Kettering died and the year before that Richard Grant died. Charles Kettering did much to make Dayton what it was. When he died, I think that was a significant loss to the community. It's the loss of leadership locally. With Kettering gone one of the most powerful people at General Motors was no longer here. Who's going to replace him? He owned an enormous block of GM stock but Dayton is no longer as relevant to GM anymore. At the same time the Japanese start to come to our shores—Toyota and then Nissan. To compound these changes, 1958 also experienced a sharp yet short recession. That recession began the start of consumers becoming dissatisfied with Detroit automobiles. And it was the first time that we see a number of European cars—the Fiats, the Citroens, the Renaults—those cars coming into this country in a big way. These smaller cars caused Detroit and GM to react and so GM came out with the Chevrolet Corvair, Ford came out with the Falcon, and Chrysler came out with the Valiant. That corporate response dramatically reduced the early surge of foreign imports until

about 1963 or 1964. However, it was only a short-term strategy. What followed was that those compacts or what were called "import fighters" essentially got bigger, heavier, and far more powerful and then we were caught up in the "muscle car" era. For example, the GTO goes back to the Tempest that goes back to one of those import fighters.

Relative to the decline of General Motors locally, I don't know that the gradual decline of the area's tool and die industry was a major factor because it was a great way to make money --- to have one of these small, often family-owned tool and die shops. These businesses were all over Dayton, because there were many German-born machinists—often working at National Cash Register. When the auto industry developed, many gravitated to support this flourishing new industry. There is still a lot of money in the tool and die industry in Dayton—not as much—but it is still here. It was German precision machining and the fact that guys who worked for these local industries would have apprentices who would continue practicing these artisanal skills. It was a great way to do well in Dayton. It's your own business and you're a supplier and you're making good money.

### **Richard Downing**

I was down in the trenches. I was on the floor every day and what these gentlemen are talking about—the engineering, the business—I really don't know what to tell you because I never dealt with it. I worked with union problems on the floor and I never really dealt with the stuff these guys are talking about. I understand what they're saying. I know this may sound simplistic but I think a lot of the downturn—the decline of GM in Dayton—was work going to foreign countries, that is, globalization. I do understand that health care was a problem. It was a problem for everyone. I saw a diagram that had a picture of a car, graphically divided so much for this, so much for that, and a portion of it went to healthcare. I guess they fixed that with the bankruptcy. But I think we do need some type of national health care. We can't afford it and certainly the auto industry can't afford it.

### **Tom Green**

I have a little different point of view. Mine is not as

historical, I guess. I came to Dayton in 1995, after having been with GM for quite a while. But I came to Dayton when there were 65,000 GM employees here in Ohio and I had a choice of where to come. To be honest with you, I came to Dayton because Dayton was the second biggest employer for GM, the only town bigger for GM was Flint. Dayton had a great reputation, a great history, a great community. But by the time the bankruptcy came about, the 65,000 GM employees in Ohio were down to 8,900. All that happened even before the bankruptcy. By the way, half of that 8,900 was the Lordstown plant which just shut down. My perspective is the component parts business of General Motors was huge. When we spun off Delphi there was 200,000 employees, there were 172 plants worldwide, and 38 engineering centers in 38 different countries.

And Dayton's plants were component parts plants with the only assembly plant being Moraine. And the latter was shut down because that was unionized under the IUE. Frankly, GM likely was afraid it might become another UAW plant. GM needed to shut down a plant and they likely needed a victim. But everything else here in Dayton was components and the component business is different from assembly. So, the numbers I gave you on wages, that was on the assembly side of the business. But in building components, we were paying triple the wages and benefits of what our competitors were paying—three times more! So, you've got to separate the car and truck business from the components business and you've got a whole different group of competitors and that's who we came up against. Since, as Delphi, we were part of General Motors, wages and benefits all stayed the same as the assembly plants and even when Delphi was spun off the legacy costs were the same because we did not change the wages and benefits. Basically, we became non-profitable operations. When I came here, the Needmore plant had lost money for ten years straight and it was only being carried because we were making money in the assembly plants elsewhere and in plants overseas. We were able to carry this non-profitable plant for a while. Thus, Dayton was a parts town other than the one assembly plant. And some of you folks would know better as it's a very, very competitive industry and it could not just be handled anymore. In running a manufacturing plant 9 out of 10 costs are people costs—union folks. The

rest are managers and supervisors. When you have that kind of structure you cannot manage to get out and be profitable in business without dealing with that structure. We would lay out the costs over many years with various levels of the organization, but the fact of the matter is we could never figure out how to cut enough costs from the organization.

### **Richard Downing**

I always had a good relationship with management in my forty years. We only had one strike that lasted one week in 1967, and that was uneventful. And as far as my day-to-day relationships, yes, you have your arguments and back-and-forth, political things, and sometimes I would rant and rave but I compare that to a baseball game where a manager is arguing with the umpires. It really doesn't mean anything, he's just trying to inspire his team. I would do this and most other guys would do this to get elected and stay elected. But they could handle that, that's no big deal. Again, I always had a good relationship with management. I respected where they were coming from and, most of the time, they respected where I was coming from. We both had a job to do.

### **Tom Green**

We're looking at what caused the demise here and, in my mind, the UAW strike in 1996 left challenges at the Delphi Wisconsin and Needmore plants. Some people thought that this was a big part of the local demise. I mention this because at that time, these two plants could shut down the entire General Motors Corporation because we made all the brakes for GM cars and trucks. When the UAW wanted something, they'd go to these plants and say "we need you guys to strike." That strike cost the corporation five billion dollars and went on for fifty-four days. The people up north in Detroit never forgot that. GM lost 500,000 vehicles they never made up and the center of the strike was right here in Dayton, Ohio.

### **Don Bigler**

Everybody making cars in Europe came to the United States in 1958 and they were mostly gone by 1963. Why was that? Lack of distribution of parts. A joke I was told once was that Max Hoffman, an importer



of many successful brands like Mercedes, BMW, VW and many more would make you a dealer if you brought two cars and a pallet of parts. The American car companies had a golden chain. Delphi was making some parts for the Chrysler K-cars and so they must have been making money back in the 1980s.

### **Tom Green**

Oh, we made money at some plants; I ran the airbag plant up at Vandalia. Only three companies in the country were making airbags at the time. But five years later we weren't profitable and had to move the business. You could move from making money to losing money in a short period of time because things were becoming so competitive.

### **Richard Downing**

I worked in IUE and those plants were UAW. What was the reason for going on strike?

### **Tom Green**

Well, the claimed reason, Richard, was that GM wanted to outsource 100 of the brake jobs (contracts) and they wanted to outsource them to Bosch. Likely the UAW was upset because they didn't want to start a precedent of moving work out. That was what was claimed. Frankly, I think there was more to it than that.

### **Moderator Garten**

John Heitmann in his courses on automotive history asks students to read a book titled *Rivethead*. John, how about a quick summery of *Rivethead*, what was that book all about?

### **John Heitmann**

*Rivethead* is one of the few blue-collar accounts of working on the assembly line in the 1970s and 1980s. The main character and author is Ben Hamper. The book got a lot of acclaim. It is sort of a troubling piece in many ways because it points to issues both with workers and drugs and alcohol on one hand. On the other hand, there was poor management and the inability to connect with workers. Ben Hamper is a great

riveter on the line (with issues related to authority). He psychologically falls apart as the story unfolds because he's laid off, then re-hired, then laid off, then re-hired. As the story ends Hamper is found shooting hoops at the local mental health center in Flint. I always ask students who read the book "how representative do you think this is?" And, of course, it is an unfair question, because few if any of them have actually worked in an assembly line situation. But at least in the 1970s and 1980s what you're taken away with is pervasive absenteeism, alcoholism, drug use, and doubling-up. But management tries to address this aberrant behavior with a mascot "cat" called "Quality Cat"—a guy dressed up like a cat that runs around the assembly line to teach folks that quality is a very important. It's a funny book because you have "Quality Cat" dressed up like these costumed characters—mascots—you see at basketball games or like Rudy Flyer here at the University of Dayton. To add to the humor a vandal gets to the "Quality Cat" costume stored in a locker and mutilates it! In sum, it is really a statement of what does management really thinks of these workers-- that somehow, they are going to respond like little children to some costumed mascot running around the line. In another example, GM has message boards placed on the lines. But when it counts and Roger Smith is coming to the plant to meet with workers, workers are told to go home. Roger Smith tours the plant all by himself with a few other executives. Workers just don't matter for much. Again, it's a very interesting book in part because it is one of the few pieces we have about line workers by a very talented writer who could only write one book: An autobiographical recollection about working on the assembly line.

### **Richard Downing**

Well to be honest, in many respects management was probably right in issuing discipline, but then the union was blamed for supporting workers that should have been fired. The review process was much like the judicial system. Management had the right to issue discipline, but the burden of proof was on them. In my experience, there were incidents where it appeared that management had a good case, but either they did not have enough evidence or they were arrogant in arbitration hearings. Also like the judicial system, every worker had the right to representation. It would be unlawful to deny anyone this right. There were many



*Aerial View, General Motors Dayton Truck Assembly Plant, 1985. (Courtesy, Dayton History)*

poor work habits that management failed to confront. The union encouraged a good work ethic and said, in a national agreement, that workers should work at a normal pace. But because of human nature, being what it is, some workers deviated from this. In component plants where there were no assembly lines, workers would quit early, sometimes two hours early for whatever reason, and management would fail to correct this problem. Management should have made every worker work the full eight hours. When this practice started, it was almost impossible to correct. It was common knowledge that some workers were leaving the plants early. The way this worked was that a designated worker would take others' time cards and clock them out. Finally, management solved this problem by installing turnstiles where each individual had to personally clock-out. But why did management let this go on for so long? It appeared that management just didn't have the fortitude to enforce the shop rules. Management was really not very efficient, in my judgment. They wanted older workers to retire so

they could pay those with less seniority less money. And to achieve this there were buyouts. This made sense, but in my case, they knew that I was going to retire soon but they gave me \$75,000 to get out. They mostly did this on their own with little pressure from the union. It was of great benefit for me, but it was lousy business. The other challenge was the so-called job bank. Instead of laying off workers they had them report in every day and they did nothing. Workers just sat and talked. I don't know if the union pushed this or whether management pushed it. I heard it was management's idea. I'm sure there were bigger issues than these but these were the only things I saw as a union rep. At other times we talked about other bad work habits that management allowed—some were just outrageous, unbelievable, and funny. There were some employees who abused the grievance procedure. The abuse of the grievance procedure was a major problem at Delphi Harrison. Committeemen had an obligation to write up grievances if they were contractually right. Supervision should have stepped up to

these chronic abuses instead of letting them go on. All a supervisor had to do was to act angry with a grievant or sign him or her to an undesirable job.

### **Seminar participant**

Why was the onus on management? Why didn't the union step up and corral their workers to deal with these poor work habits and abuses?

### **Richard Downing**

Well, the management, they are the boss. We are (the union rep) like a lawyer and if something goes wrong they have a right to protest it. The union doesn't tell people what to do.

### **Moderator Garten**

Tom, a few weeks ago when we were having lunch together, you suggested to me that Honda sort of got this union and management relationship right. Would you want to comment on that?

### **Tom Green**

Well, Honda coming in late had the benefit of not having the history of unionization from the 1930s into the 1970s, and all the wars we had to go through to get there. They just walked in the door and they were very smart about it and said "we'll try to build the right relationship right from the start." And they did. I'll tell you, the hardest job on the management side is the first-line supervisor. You talk about the challenges on a daily basis. Absenteeism was horrendous. We had to have 200 extra people in the plant all the time just to cover absenteeism. That's 200 folks at \$70 an hour too. A hundred of those absent didn't come to work and were out on sick leave. And the other hundred didn't come to work for one reason or another. And the supervisor had to manage this. He didn't know who's going to show up. He's got a thousand parts to get out that day; he's got quality problems; he's got machine problems; he's got, whatever, you name it. It's the toughest job out there.

### **Gary Ruff**

One situation I remember with a line-supervisor is

that management put me in a new job every couple of days, taking the place of fellows who were on their vacations. In one situation, they saw that I was kind of energetic and really strong and they had me lifting some things and they kind of watched me for 20 minutes to a half hour until they realized it was too much for me. I went down the line a bit and there was this big burly guy on there and I was watching him. About a half hour later he was having trouble. Before the day was over they had three people doing that particular job. But they were watching us and, hey, a little too much for this person, and a little too much for that person. Perhaps a union person was watching, but eventually they rectified the problem by having three people doing what one person had been doing.

### **Moderator Garten**

The last question I wanted to pose relative to the demise of the major and now former General Motors presence in this area may get at a more positive aspect. It's easy to dwell on the negative parts of the decline including the reality that the city of Dayton lost around 40% of its population from the early 1960s to today. But as GM's fortunes in the local and regional area declined were there any positive things that happened in spite of the often day-to-day adversarial relationships that often existed between management and organized labor? Was the area decline of GM all bad news or where there any bright spots that held out hope for the future? John, let me offer this question to you to begin.

### **John Heitmann**

Actually, I think it is almost too early to say. It may be a while before we really get to see the full sweep of the legacy of GM's decline here. We'll just have to see how innovative this region is going to be in the next twenty to thirty years. You need to take some time to gain perspective on how these transitions unfold. Was there any good that came out of the decline? I think one of the things we've learned in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is don't put your eggs all in one basket. With this global economy, markets move very quickly and I think you could get overly reliant on one particular economic sector. In the end, with shifts in the global economy



you may well be left behind, like someone who owns a palm oil plantation in West Africa. With the Arcade Project and Innovation Hub that we're going to have in downtown Dayton and other economic initiatives we are moving into a very different technological landscape. Let's wait and see. Already there are some signs of change in terms of new businesses, and young people engaged in entrepreneurship. Things change. There were a thousand automobile manufacturers at one time and this kind of cycling is going to happen. I think that if there's anything we end up having to deal with as a significant hindrance it is Dayton's competitive disadvantage compared to its urban rivals. As a smaller city Dayton is surrounded by Cincinnati, Indianapolis, and Columbus and so there's going to be that kind of competition. That situation will play a part in our future story.

### **Moderator Garten**

Tom, you shared with me a little book that you and a colleague authored shortly after you closed down the local Delphi operations where you and your colleague utilized the Greenleaf Servant-Leadership model to address the changes and challenges that were required. I read the book twice and it seems to be that some positive things came out of the approach you took. What were the positive outcomes from the difficult task you faced in closing down these local component operations?

### **Tom Green**

After 34 years of managing plants you say to yourself: "We've got to do something different or we're never going to get through this thing." When you announce a closure to 1,700 people and you tell them you need them for two more years while four other suppliers gear up to take your business, that was a challenge I'd never been faced with and I'm not sure many people had been. I backed into a different leadership style that was all about focusing on people. People hear about this or read this little book and, frankly, they go "no shit." But we just went in and tried to deal with every individual. "What can I do to help you?" People didn't know how to write their résumés; people didn't know what to do about their finances. We brought in financial experts, we brought in résumé writing experts; and

I could go on and on. So that was kind of neat and perhaps that was more on the salaried side. But there were a lot of great people who got a lot of great jobs as we drew the place down. And that brings me to a positive regarding the skills that we have, both on the workers side and on the management side. The skills that we had in General Motors were just tremendous. We left a lot of people with skills—the skilled tradesmen—you got carpenters, plumbers, and tool-and-die people. On our side you had a lot of people who knew about quality and all the things that it takes to run businesses, so when we got them hooked up with the right people that was great. One of the people who worked for me became the CEO of one of the small businesses here in Dayton and another lady became head of quality for a major company. Skills were a big thing we left behind and, believe it or not, the empty floor space is turning out to be a blessing in disguise. This is a great location logistically (I-75, I-70) a lot to sell and you're seeing all these warehousing people recognizing there's a million square feet of floor space they can use, not to mention the Chinese glass plant down there is filling up again with 2,500 workers. That's about it but there are also some good model cities to go look at like Pittsburgh. At one time one industry—steel—ran the whole city—they lost that but if you've been there recently it's now diversified and a great place to be.

### **Moderator Garten**

Speaking of the Chinese-owned glass factory—Fuyao—that went into part of the former General Motors Moraine Assembly plant, most of you saw the recent documentary film *American Factory* (2019) directed by local area filmmakers Julia Reichert and Steven Bognar. That film follows the establishment of the automotive glass factory in the same building that once held General Motors Moraine Assembly. Each of you likely has a different take on that documentary film. Personally, I viewed it twice and I thought it fairly objective, but then I talked with a couple of other people who said, "Oh, Obama produced that film and it was biased." What's your take?

### **Don Bigler**

For one thing, Obama got involved with the film after

it was already completed. He didn't have anything to do with producing it up front. They shot 1,200 plus hours and edited it down to an hour and forty-five minutes. It was done with the cooperation of Fuyao. Culturally, I thought it was a really balanced movie because the next night we saw a movie that was made in China. The directors of *American Factory* tried to give everyone an open forum and they saw it before it was released. So Fuyao did not influence how that was put together. They gave them pretty much open cameras roving around the plant.

### **Moderator Garten**

My favorite part was when Senator Sherrod Brown got up to speak and made some pro-union comments at the factory's opening and then sat down and the CEO said "who the hell was that?" And then later he was captured saying, in effect, "well, he won't be allowed on the premises in the future."

### **Don Bigler**

The CEO of the company comes out in the paper and says "I didn't say that." They had four people who translated his Mandarin and that's what he said. In fact, they will let him come back. But the Chinese are not pro-union because they don't know what a union is in China. But when they came here to Dayton that was a giant cultural and economic risk. Just like it was a giant risk for Honda to build its plants here in Ohio. If those plants had not been successful, Honda would have gone bankrupt given how much money they put into Ohio.

### **John Heitmann**

I left with a little different take on the film. I concluded, "these Chinese work hard." What I see is that they may work us into the ground in the long run. Our society is so fragmented with moral issues and with drugs, so much that has riddled our urban areas. Americans rarely work as hard as the Chinese do. One of the Chinese guys in the film eats Twinkies for lunch on the run between doing two things. And all of those Chinese workers are dedicated. When the American workers come over to visit the Fuyao headquarters in China, I thought it amusing to see that almost every one of those visitors was overweight and

in contrast none of the Chinese were. So that's kind of my unvarnished response, but I was sort of chilled by just how hard these people work compared to so many of us. OK, we still have a lot of hard-working people, don't get me wrong. But when you start looking at the whole profile of our population that's not the case. The Chinese are regimented, their economy is strictly planned, and they are not distracted politically as in a democracy.

### **Moderator Garten**

Any other thoughts on the day-to-day challenges that were felt?

### **Don Bigler**

I thought something odd about GM was that it kept backing out of promising ventures. For example, they backed out of making appliances and yet they had some of the most innovative appliances. I worked as an electrician after I got out of industrial sales and I found some really interesting and strange stoves in houses in Kettering. They made probably one of the best washing machines around except they were so complicated you could hardly work on them. They had a different design. But GM's former Euclid Equipment in Cleveland had a lot of really innovative ideas for their equipment but they just couldn't compete. I find it interesting that they kept selling off subsidiaries.

### **Tom Green**

It was all about cost. They couldn't make money doing it.

### **Don Bigler**

My grandmother always bought General Electric refrigerators but she said she always owned a "Frigidaire."

### **Richard Downing**

I think there's one positive thing that happened. I hired in at Delco Products but, ironically, got laid off and then went to Frigidaire in 1964. I was only a high school graduate. Later on, I graduated from college

but I didn't know anything. I went to Delco Products and I loved it. I really liked General Motors. And I didn't have any bad experiences at all. I made a lot of money and even people with big families could do that back then. You can't do that now. You need more than a high school education so I think this period of decline might have encouraged many young people to get a trade or get a college education. You didn't have to back then.

### **Moderator Garten**

Before we conclude, a few questions from seminar participants, perhaps?

### **Seminar Participant**

I'd just like to find out if this is a truth or just a myth. In the 1960s and into the 1970s, there was the tendency of my colleagues to say "if you're going to buy a new car, don't buy one that was made on a Friday or on a Monday because assembly line workers are already drunk on Friday and aren't sobered up by Monday morning." I would always respond by asking: "Well how in the heck would I know what day a car was assembled?" There just seemed to be a tendency to blame the workers for poor quality products and not the company or management. How do stories like this get started?

### **Tom Green**

My experience with that was absenteeism. People would like to take off on Friday to get a long weekend and if they had a really good weekend they wouldn't come in on Monday morning. The people building the vehicles were not used to the job they were on. I think there was something to it. Likely more chance for product defects on Fridays and Mondays.

### **Seminar Participant**

Mr. Downing, was there any feeling from the line workers that they were being overpaid for what they were doing?

### **Richard Downing**

Nobody felt they were overpaid, they were grateful

for what they had. Actually, you had different wage structures. For example, I might be making \$20 an hour and the person next to me might be making \$10 an hour. I never heard guys making \$10 an hour complaining, they just accepted things for what they were. I never thought people felt they were underpaid or overpaid. Most people I knew thought they were pretty much satisfied with what they earned.

### **Seminar Participant**

When I was a younger man my extended family and friends were all General Motors but gradually when the imports started coming in, these folks started to look seriously at those cars. Also, the press at the time was often very negative about the salary structure, wages, benefits, and these hundred people just sitting on the sidelines doing nothing. A lot of people I knew started to say "I'm extremely jealous of those type of benefits and the quality of cars doesn't seem to be there anymore and there are alternative cars now available." That was also the start of the decline.

### **Seminar Participant**

In the 1970s and 1980s people were complaining that General Motors, Ford, Chrysler were all building junk. How can you explain that?

### **John Heitmann**

I've got a controversial answer for you. Beginning around 1972 the government began to design the cars.

### **Seminar Participant**

You're talking about regulations, right? But weren't all the companies including Honda and Toyota subject to that?

### **John Heitmann**

But they actually read the regulations and designed cars after reading the proposed regulations before they were implemented. In the late 1960s, when some of those laws were first passed, Japanese manufacturers studied those laws very carefully and they responded to them. Detroit didn't quite do it the same way because they battled the imposition of



regulations particularly in the early 1970s. But by the late 1970s, a decade characterized by technological stagnation, drivability issues of many American vehicles were quite bad. That is only part of the explanation, but many Detroit cars were poorly put together. Everything from Oldsmobiles with Chevrolet engines to the Volare with rusted fenders. My father bought a 1979 Malibu with a THM200 transmission and every couple of months the seals blew out on the pan because the transmission couldn't handle the engine. Nobody wanted to do anything about it except replace the gaskets, and that was the last GM car my family purchased.

### **Tom Green**

Well back then we weren't sure that quality sold cars. It wasn't until the Japanese demonstrated that quality did, in fact, sell cars, and we still had a few leaders who emphasized finances and the bottom line over quality.

### **Moderator Garten**

Recall that last week we talked about the trend that GM took during the 1980s in particular—the move toward vehicle de-contenting where various small features were removed each year after vehicle launch—a way of shaving a few pennies off the cost of each vehicle.

### **Seminar participant**

This may be minor, but attention to detail. I bought a new Pontiac back then. They gave me this little gray case that had this little plastic key in it. Therefore, you've have a back-up key if you ever lost your keys. Well, I lost my keys and pulled this little plastic one out of my wallet and it doesn't fit.

### **Seminar participant**

When I started with the Inland Division of GM and then got laid off in 2008, I worked at the Home Avenue Plant of Delco Chassis. When we started at Inland we had a general manager and everything about that business was contained in those buildings—the Home Avenue plant and the Vandalia plant. The idea at that time was to develop prod-

ucts to put into those two plants to make money for those two plants and that would be a good thing for General Motors. But starting in the late 1980s or thereabouts, GM was doing all of these combinations and mergers. Then the general manager was someplace else. His job was to design a product to put on a car and then find some plant around the world to put it in. In short, he wasn't as focused on the Dayton plants like it was in the 1970s. And back then we had softball leagues, golf teams, etc., but when you're managed from someplace else some of what made the local environment special disappeared.

### **Tom Green**

I just want to add something. One of the basics of capitalism is competition and General Motors back then just dominated and they made a reasonable product. But when the Japanese came in and started to make excellent products it forced General Motors and related industry to do better, to build better cars.

### **Seminar participant**

I want to ask a question on government regulation because it seems the government gets a bad rap most of the time. But I think it was government regulations that got us seat belts and airbags and other safety features. Every company had to do this, not just General Motors, but can you think of some of the regulations that you thought were unfair or unacceptable?

### **John Heitmann**

The 1973 mandated seat belt interlock device, for all 1974 cars. They were to be equipped with a seat belt interlock where you were not able to start the car unless the seat belt latched. If that device didn't work you could go under the hood and for one time only, press a button so that you could start the car. This was at a time when only about 15% of Americans were wearing their seat belts. Thus, this was a response to the majority of Americans who did not want to use their safety equipment.. That law was reversed a year later. And why did they have to take out vent windows, mandated as part of an anti-theft

law? Because you could jimmy open that little window, then break in and steal the car. But we lost flexible ventilation as a consequence.

### **Seminar participant**

The big question I have is where were the shareholders? Why were the shareholders seemingly quiet during the long decline of General Motors?

### **Tom Green**

Mary Barra is picking up where earlier GM major shareholders and critic Ross Perot started. Barra said “if there’s a problem we fix it now. We don’t wait six months. We don’t wait two years because the problem will get worse.” That was Ross Perot’s message when he stepped in and everyone just shook their heads at him and said “we’re not ready for that.”

### **Seminar participant**

What about fuel efficiency standards, what difference did that make with General Motors? You know, what they called C.A.F.E. Did this force GM to make smaller cars?

### **John Heitmann**

Of course, GM didn’t really want to make small cars. When they made cars like the Vega and other small cars they really didn’t want to make them because the profit margins were so small.

### **Tom Green**

And it drove the first attempt by GM at an electric vehicle—the EV-1.  
I managed a plant that made the seats for it in Canada.

### **Seminar participant**

In class we talked a bit about W. Edwards Deming, the quality expert who went to Japan and taught quality control but was rejected by the American auto industry including General Motors. This is a small example of how he influenced things here.

I moved here from Celina, Ohio, about twenty-five years ago. Honda came to town in Marysville, Ohio, and they set up feeder plants all around Ohio within 150 miles of the assembly plant. In Celina they put a plant that made aluminum pistons for Hondas and they started with about 100 employees and my neighbor two doors down became the plant manager. A bunch of us guys got to tour the plant and what we saw was Edward Deming all over the place. You drove in the parking lot and there were no executive parking spots; there was no executive washroom or cafeteria. Everybody wore white coveralls. These were all simple Deming principles. And that company is just chugging right along, they have close to 800 employees now, they’re making tons of pistons for Honda that get shipped down to the Anna engine plant and then down to Marysville to get put into Hondas on the assembly line. And the people who work there are happy. They didn’t give all the benefits like GM and Ford and Chrysler offered but for some reason they were contented with their jobs and they didn’t have the usual Friday and Monday problems with workers. Of course, that area up there is very agricultural and farmers have a strong work ethic and most of the people who worked in those plants had a farm background. But the Deming principles were dominant in that plant and in the other Honda supplier plants around Ohio. This was just like General Motors did here in Dayton at one point, making component parts.

### **Seminar participant**

Were there too many GM dealerships and did that contribute to the company’s problems? It seems there were many GM dealers in small towns and likely each dealership had a slim profit margin making it hard to stay in business. And it was mentioned here in class that during the bankruptcy GM eliminated 40% of its dealer network.

### **Tom Green**

I can’t speak to that but it was the Auto Taskforce that looked at that and it was based on what Toyota, Honda and others had in terms of dealer networks. Whether it was right or wrong, I can’t tell you but it put a lot of good dealers out of business.

## Summary by Moderator Ed Garten

We began by focusing on the big picture, namely, just what were the major factors that precipitated the decline of General Motors, a decline that was especially hard felt in the Dayton region. All agreed that the rise of foreign competition—especially from the Japanese—was a major factor that challenged GM. Tom Green, a long-time GM plant manager, acknowledged that foreign competition—that at one time seemed little more than an irritant to GM’s dominance—swiftly emerged into a real threat. Richard Downing noted the dramatic shift in trade policies that, while labor would suggest was unfair—made it easier for GM and other auto makers to shift production to Mexico, China, and other low-wage countries. All agreed that globalization was a key factor in Dayton’s automotive decline.

Then each panelist agreed that consumers began to perceive—as early as the mid 1970s—a quality difference between Japanese vehicles and General Motors’ vehicle offerings. John Heitmann brought a historical perspective to this question by arguing that the US auto market dynamics during the 1970s and 1980s changed profoundly and that after two oil price shocks rocked the nation, leading to a permanent increase in fuel costs, GM’s albatross—its inability to make high-quality small, fuel efficient cars for the masses—became a real vulnerability.

Relative to what I termed “turning points” that triggered the local General Motors decline as a manufacturing force, John Heitmann suggested that we go back to 1958 when Charles Kettering died. He noted that it is easy to forget the huge influence that Kettering had within General Motors and this area, but with his passing there really were no influential giants here. Rather power and influence began to flow back to Detroit. Tom Green then reinforced for us the reality that locally, apart from the Moraine Assembly, Dayton was primary as to a components supplier. When revised trade agreements together with foreign cost and wage structures made it economically easier to outsource component parts, Dayton was quickly at a disadvantage. Add to this the reality that labor and management relations here have been historically divisive. Green maintained that the Delphi strike of 1996 was yet another ma-

jor turning point in the local decline. Since all GM brake manufacturing was centered here, the union could literally shut down the entire company. That long strike alone cost GM five billion dollars and remained in GM’s memory. Pointedly, perhaps GM senior leadership thought “Dayton is not a place to continue doing business.”

We then asked the question relative to the major day-to-day challenges that local GM installations faced during those challenging times that accompanied the decline. Several panelists agreed that both union leadership and management had to spend an inordinate amount of time on the abuse by line workers of the grievance process. Tom Green and Richard Downing both agreed that the vast majority of line workers did care about the quality of their work, yet so much time had to be expended in dealing with the minority of employees who repeatedly demonstrated bad work habits. It was agreed that both management and the union shouldered considerable blame for this frustrating but persistent environment.

Yet another day-to-day challenge centered on the constant struggle to explain to workers the unsustainable cost and compensation structure that GM faced here and elsewhere. In short, management would lay out costs, year after year, but there was never any agreement reached on how to slash costs. As a result, many of the local GM plants became unprofitable operations, indeed with some operating for years at a loss.

Finally, we asked the panel whether there were any bright spots that deserved appreciation during the period when our GM presence was winding down. Tom Green rightly noted that while many organizations have faced crises, often times those crises persisted for only a short period of time. But the Dayton crisis he managed while closing down Delphi operations lasted for two years during which time local workers and supervisors were told that they were expected to keep production at a high level and with on-time delivery. All the time, of course, with employees knowing they would be losing their jobs. Going against the grain of what might have been expected, Tom and his staff team worked with employees in the development of plans and strategies



to keep moving forward together. And as he emphasized, the skills that employees had in this area were, to quote him, “just tremendous.” Tom revealed that many workers and managers, in the process of winding down the Delphi plants, discovered talents and skills that they transferred to other area or regional occupations, trades, or entrepreneurial opportunities. Others on the panel affirmed the broad range of skills that remained in the Dayton area during the post-manufacturing decline.

In sum, we can say that Dayton’s early dependence on traditional manufacture and assembly line work put the region at a competitive disadvantage as growing international trade and heightened competition allowed for global dispersion of factory work. But as several suggested here, perhaps most remarkable is not so much the region’s decline, but rather its resilience. Yet, as John Heitmann has rightly cautioned, it may be too early to render a verdict on the future of the Dayton region post-General Motors. Despite the decline of Dayton’s manufacturing sector and, essentially, the near-complete loss of the General Motors influence, the area still knits together a population of over one million people. The regional economy has begun to diversify. Now, as in many other metropolitan areas, the growth in employment is in services. Two local major health-care networks—Premier Health Partners and Kettering Medical Network—employ 15,300 in facilities that are nationally recognized for their quality of care. Wright Patterson Air Force Base is a center for scientific research and development and employs another largely civilian workforce of 21,000. Some parts of the earlier robust local tool-and-die industry have—pun intended—retooled to become more globally competitive. And as Tom Green pointed out, the region remains at a strategic logistical and demographic location in the Midwest. Combined with access to three major airports, the Dayton region can easily benefit from and tap into economic growth in nearby metropolitan areas such as Columbus, Cincinnati, and Indianapolis. Moreover, much quality and unused warehouse and industrial space remain available. Dayton may no longer be what it was at its peak two to four generations ago and its clearly no longer a “GM Town,” but its future is far from grim.

## Contributors, Number 61

**Edward Garten** is retired from the University of Dayton where he continues to teach in that university's Learning in Retirement Institute. He served two terms as Vice-President of the Society of Automotive Historians and currently chairs the Society's Nicolas-Joseph Cugnot Award Committee and its James J. Bradley Distinguished Service Award Committee.

**Andrew James Clyde Hart** received his Bachelors in History from the University of Florida and his Masters of Liberal Arts in Florida Studies from the University of South Florida: St. Petersburg. He is the co-owner of New Smyrna Speedway.

**John Mohr** is a Lecturer in the Department of History at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. He grew up in central Ohio and attended Wittenberg University, graduating in 2012 and then graduated from Auburn University in 2018 with his doctoral degree in History. John specializes in the history of technology, with a focus on the automobile and transportation. John is also interested in the history of marketing, gender and technology, and theories of economic development.

**Dr. Keenan J. Shimko** is an independent historian and automotive enthusiast. He transformed his passion for history and cars into a dissertation, *Driving Foreign Relations: The European Sports Car and the Globalization of America*. Following the completion of his Ph.D. in History at Purdue University in the spring of 2018, he switched gears and joined Porsche Consulting, the management-consulting arm of Porsche A.G. Keenan now works as a consultant in the fields of strategy and operations.

**James Todd Uhlman** is an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Dayton, where he teaches social and cultural history and American Studies. His interests are broad ranging, and include the history of film and music as well as mobility studies.

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Manuscripts should not exceed 10,000 words and should be double-spaced. An abstract is requested. Judging criteria include clear statement of purpose and testable hypothesis, accuracy and thoroughness of research, originality of the research, documentation, quality and extent of bibliographic resources, and writing style. Diagrams, graphs, or photographs may be included. Submissions are to be electronic, in Word or pdf files only, to the e-mail address below.

Possible subjects include but are not limited to historical aspects of motorized land mobility, automobile companies and their leaders, regulation of the auto industry, financial and economic aspects of the industry, the social and cultural effects of the automobile, motorsports, highway development, roadside architecture, environmental matters, and automotive marketing, design, engineering and safety

The appropriate translation of tables, figures, and graphs can only be accomplished when sent in Word format since all files must be converted to Adobe Acrobat pdf format for publication in the Review. Remove any hidden commands (i.e., track changes) prior to submitting your electronic file. Incorporate tables in the text, rather than providing them separately.

Photographs that are not especially sharp, such as those taken in the early 20th century, should be submitted as glossies 10 ensure best-quality reproduction. More contemporary photographs may be submitted as e-mail attachments. TIFF format is preferable 10 JPEG. Resolution should be 300 dpi.

The spelling of words that prevails in the United States should be used, e.g, "tires" rather than "tyres;" "color" rather than "colour." Dates should be expressed in the style used in the United States: month, day, year. However, if a publication is cited in which the date of publication is expressed as day, month, year, that style should be used.

Measurements should be in English; followed, if the author chooses, by the metric equivalent within a parenthesis.

Numbers over ten should be expressed in Arabic numbers (for example, "21st century." Numbers often or less should be spelled. The exception is units of quantity, such as a reference to a "4-door sedan" or a "6-cylinder" engine. If the engine is V-type, place a hyphen between the V and the number of cylinders, e.g. V-6.

Titles of articles referenced should be in quotation marks (British authors should follow the American style of double marks instead of single marks, which seems to be now common in the UK). Titles of books, journals, newspapers, and magazines should be in italics. Following American practice, the period in a sentence ending in a quote should appear following the word, not following the closing quotation mark. However, semi-colons and colons appear outside the closing quotation mark.

For ease of reference endnotes are preferable. When citing works, the following order, style, and punctuation should be used:

Rudy Koshier, "Cars and Nations: Anglo-German Perspectives on Automobility Between the World Wars," *Theory, Culture, & Society*, 21 (2004): 121-144.

Alfred P. Sloan, *My Years with General Motors* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday & Company, 1964), 439-442.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2cPB16scJk> (accessed July 17, 2008).

Where there is no doubt as to the state where the publisher is located (e.g. Boston, New York City) the state is omitted. When an endnote refers to a work referenced in the immediately preceding footnote, the word "Ibid." is used. When an endnote refers to a work referenced earlier in the article, the following style is used: Foster, *op. cit.*, p. 54. If the author has used works that are not referenced in a endnote, they should be added at the end of the article under the title "Additional References."

In cases of doubt, please contact the Editor at **Jheitmann1@udayton.edu**.



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DEEDS BARN GANG .....1952

*Lerbe Bradford*      *William Johns*      *Charles F. Kettering*  
*Walter Gehiewetz*      *William Chryst*      *Col. Edward A. Deeds*

So, Whatever Happened to  
General Motors in Dayton, Ohio?