The Effect of the Automobile on American Culture, 1950-1967

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Purpose of Thesis

The purpose of this thesis is to provide factual evidence to support the notion that the automobile was a material good that became such an important part of the everyday lives of the population that it ascended to the plateau of cultural icon. In the years between 1953, coinciding with the release of the Chevrolet Corvette, and 1967, the year in which the Camaro was introduced, the automobile's popularity continued to soar. The popularity of the car is exemplified in three distinct car enthusiast groups: the buying public, the hot rod cult, and the custom car cult. These three groups would be very instrumental in building the reputation of the automobile and securing its place as a true cultural icon for their generation. This thesis also implements elements of music and film to illustrate how the automobile had merged into popular culture in such a way that the automobile was not only a part of the culture, but in many ways directed the actions of the culture itself. The thesis discusses the background of the automobile as it gradually changed from a new fad at the turn of the century into a popular icon. It also discusses the automobile of today, its part in today's culture, and what may lay around the corner for the automobile. Finally, the thesis discusses this author's personal connection to the automobile, his experiences with automobiles, and his own assessment of the automobile's popularity.
I was fifteen years old when I was bitten by the car bug for the first time. The year was 1992, and like most fifteen year old boys, my priorities at the time were sports, school, and girls, not necessarily in that order. But in less than a year I would be old enough to drive, and I knew that the world would stop spinning on its axis if I did not have a car of my own. So my father, being the wonderful, responsible father that he was, set out with me to locate a nice piece of solid, reliable transportation. Not surprisingly, his idea of good transportation did not coincide with mine. We lived a comfortable existence but never an extravagant one. My father had always provided for us and provided for us well. I knew that he would find me a car, but I doubted that it would be a very "cool" one. The day my dad found my car was a day that has always stood out in my memory. I was not yet driving, as I was still fifteen and didn't have a car anyway, so I was catching rides everyday from friends who were old enough and fortunate enough to be able to drive to and from school. I walked in the front door and my dad said "Son, I think I have found what you're looking for. Your mom and I were in town today and we saw a 1977 Nova on a used car lot in Lafayette. We went and checked it out and we thought you might like to go in and take a look at it." Of course, you couldn't get me out the door fast enough. I was ready to go, and now.

When we finally made the drive to Lafayette (the trip didn't take any longer than usual, it just seemed that way) we pulled into a small independent used car lot that dealt with more "economical" cars than most of the other dealerships in town. After taking a quick glance around the lot, I turned to my mother and innocently asked where the car was that we were here to see. "Well, it is right in front of you, silly," she said. I turned around, more than a little confused. In front of me was this dilapidated, run down, rusty
hunk of metal that might have passed for a car, but not a very nice one. The car was a baby blue color, very faded, with a yellowing white vinyl top. The metal around the wheel wells and under the doors was completely rusted, and all four tires were absent of tread. “Yeah right,” I said. My parents quickly assured me that this was indeed the car that I was seeking. My dad, in all his wisdom, had concocted a brilliant scheme while he was searching for my car. He had decided that the best solution for me, both in terms of responsibility and finance, was to buy a car that was a little less than perfect, and then restore it to original condition. This way, according to my dad, I would learn how a car operates and how one is maintained. I would also have a greater appreciation for my car if I worked on it myself. Also, I could pay for the car as I restored it. At the time I was working a minimum wage job and college was right around the corner, so the financial argument carried the most weight. We struck a deal with the dealer, who was more than happy to part with it. On that day I became the proud owner of a three hundred dollar smurf mobile.

For the next three years, I would slowly add things to my car, driving it and restoring it at the same time. It was over this time that I began to catch the restoration bug. I learned a great deal about cars at that time. I learned the inner workings of the internal combustion engine. At age sixteen I overhauled my first motor with the help of my dad. I learned how to install a transmission and change differential gears and tune carburetors and adjust brakes. I learned how to connect wires and stitch seats and hang exhaust. But perhaps more importantly I learned the value of a dollar and respect for an automobile. I appreciated what I had, and I took good care of it. Other kids I went to school with were simply given their cars and set on their way. While they were out
wrecking cars and getting speeding tickets, I was busy restoring mine. I saved my money, and added parts when the money was available. My dad had been a car fanatic himself in his teenage years, and was more than willing to assist me in putting the parts on.

My dad and I had always had a good relationship, but our relationship really blossomed when we began restoring my car. A car restoration is not something that happens overnight. In fact, on my particular car my father and I have an estimated fifteen hundred hours of work. That left a lot of time to talk about a great number of subjects. We talked about life, about women, about money, and of course, we talked about cars. My father had lived in a time when cars were not only a part of life, they were a way of life. My dad had grown up in the 1950s and the 1960s, a time in which cars were not only mixed with culture, but defined it. The years that fall between 1950 and 1960 were revolutionary in both the auto industry and in the nation as well. It was a decade remembered for Bobbie socks, poodle skirts, leather jackets, and James Dean. But more than that it was remembered for the cars. Everyone who was everyone had a car, and if you were really special you had a fast car. The primary form of entertainment on Friday and Saturday nights was to find a long, flat road, and race your cars until either the police found you or you ran out of gas. It was a time of rebellion, a time of innovation, and a time of fun. All three of these descriptions are intertwined with the automobile in such a way that it would be impossible to have one without the other.

In the spring of 1995 I finally was had the money available to have my car painted. In the interim I had been able to completely restore the engine, install a new transmission, put on new tires, new wheels, put in a completely new interior, and update all of the wiring. The only thing left to do was paint the car. I decided to pay another individual to
paint the car, as this was something that neither my dad nor I had the knowledge or the tools to do. After about six weeks of pouring over endless paint chips and color books, I decided on a hue that could best be described as plum. The technical name for the color is ultraviolet, but I call it purple. To make a long story short, my car was painted and was what most automobile restorers call “temporarily finished.” A restoration car is never actually finished, as there is always some new part or new addition that is just around the bend. But for driving purposes, my car was done. I immediately began attending car shows and parades, or virtually any other event where I could show off my new toy. It was at these events that I began to actually feel the effect of the 1950s and 60s. Many of the car shows I attended were dominated by cars and people that originated in the 1950s. The music at these car shows was primarily 1950s era, as was the attire and the conversation. Everyone that I met always liked to talk about the “good old days” when cars were cars and life was lived at full throttle. The scene at a car show is a very intoxicating one. It is not at all unusual to get the feeling that you have stepped back in time when you attend one of these events. Attending these shows, I began to develop a heightened awareness about a decade that had occurred no less than a decade before my birth. I took an interest in it. I began to feel that this decade was a very important one when thinking about where our culture gets its origins. At the same time, I began to feel that these car shows, or more specifically the cars themselves, was an integral part of what that decade was all about.

In the endless hours that I spent with my dad out in our garage under the hood or under the floor of my car, he would tell me stories about the “good old days” It would be impossible to recount every one of the stories that he told me while we were wrenching
away, but there are a few stories that come to mind. He always told me there was a huge
difference between the kids that worked on their own cars and those who just bought
them from the dealership. "The rich kids at school the ones whose daddies were bankers,
lawyers, or maybe even lawyers, they always had the really nice cars. They were always
the kids who had the new Oldsmobile 442s, or the Corvettes, or the Chevelles, or the
Impalas. These kids really had it made. The problem was that these big car companies
like Chevrolet, Ford and Chrysler would guarantee their engines. These rich kids would
get out in daddy's car on Friday night, run up against somebody just as fast as they were,
and the next thing you know there are parts scattered all over the blacktop. These kids
would haul their car into the closest dealership and hand over the warranty papers. The
dealership would then turn around and put in a new engine for them. Next Friday they'd
be right back out there, trying their best to blow that engine, too. Eventually the
dealerships caught on and figured out that they were inadvertently paying for the Friday
night drag races. They eventually stopped putting warranties on the engines. After that
the rich kids just didn't seem to be as big a target. Us poor kids always wanted to knock
of one of those kids, it made us feel like we had accomplished something. You see, the
rest of us were stuck with buying a used car. What most of us figured out was that the
cheapest way to get a car was to buy one from a used car lot or a junkyard, hopefully with
a blown engine, probably one of those that a rich kid had give up on. You see, we could
get a car with a blown engine for maybe two hundred and fifty dollars. We could then
turn around and go to the junkyard and buy an engine block for maybe twenty-five dollars.
You could then go and put as much money in that engine as you could afford. What you
ended up with was a car that was cheap, easy to fix, and as fast as the wind. If you blew
the motor in those, you just went to the junkyard, dropped another twenty-five dollars, and back out you went. I'll never forget how much it used to piss off the rich kids in town when our two hundred and fifty dollar clunkers would blow the doors off their three and four thousand dollar hot rods. They just never understood that it wasn't the money that made the difference, it was what you could do with what you had." \(^1\)

This story exemplifies some of the essences of what the 1950s and 60s was and how the car made the impact that it did. The 1950s and 60s was about drag racing. It was about speed, it was about power, it was about fun. Kids who didn't necessarily have a lot of money found a way, throughout their own innovation, to create something that gave them prestige, power, and popularity.

Unfortunately, sometimes this speed has a price. As cars began coming out with bigger and faster motors, accidents began to increase as well. The number of young people who lost their lives in drag racing or automobile accidents is staggering. Movies such as Rebel Without a Cause, starring 1950s icon James Dean, personifies the danger and consequences that result from drag racing and living dangerously. My father James saw his fair share of accidents as well. "I'll never forget my mom and dad's Pontiac that I totaled out my senior year in high school. Your mom and I had been dating for a few months by then, and I had just dropped her off from one of our dates. I was on my way home and, I admit, I was going a little faster than I probably should have been. I was driving that Pontiac, and that thing had a big 'ol engine in it, so it was pretty fast. I leaned over to change the radio station, and took my eye off the road for just a second. The next thing I knew I was in the air. A couple of guys had been hunting in the woods next to where I flipped. They said I flipped that thing end over end six times. I was knocked out,
and don’t remember exactly what happened. But I can tell you this, I set the radio station now before I start off down the road.” It was not any more unusual for someone to wreck a car in the 1950s and 60s than it is today. The major difference was the size of the car. In the 1950s virtually any Pontiac you bought was a very big car. These big cars, to keep up with the public, came with very big engines. My dad lost a friend at the hands of one of these big, fast cars. “I’ll never forget how Billy Green got killed in high school. Billy was one of those rich kids who always got the big, fast cars. His dad bought him this Chevrolet something or another, and I remember that thing had the biggest engine in it that I had ever seen. He only lived right down the road from me, and was always offering to take me to school if I couldn’t get dad’s car. I was always afraid to ride with him because he just drove too fast everywhere he went. We lived at the bottom of this hill on Barren River Road that was really steep. Billy always used to get a kick out of this hill, because it was so steep. He used to come around the curve in front of our house and just throw the hammer down. He’d roar all the way up that hill and jump the hill at the top. His car was actually that fast and that powerful. Well, it caught up with him one morning when he didn’t pay attention to what was in front of him. He came around that corner, as usual, and started up that hill, just roaring all the way. He topped the hill, went airborne, and then we hear a large crash. What we later found out was that an old farmer had just pulled out onto the road on the other side of the hill. This farmer was driving a flatbed truck, and Billy put his car right into the back of it. The impact killed Billy instantly. The impact pushed that big motor back on top of him, and that motor that he loved so much cost him his life.” As unfortunate as it is, stories like Billy’s are quite common to the 1950s and 60s legacy. The ideas of speed and danger were integral to the 1950s and 60s
culture, but sometimes that speed and danger is accompanied by tragedy and death. Although unfortunate, these ideas must be included in the 1950s and 60s culture as well. Power and speed were not ideals that were held only by the younger people of the 1950s. The adults of the 1950s and 60s were sold on these ideals as well. The adults of the 1950s and 60s wanted a car that was sleek, luxurious, affordable, and of course, fast. This generation may not have participated in very much head to head drag racing, but they were every bit as much impressed with the power of the car as the Friday night drag racer. After all, a great deal of the hand me down cars that the Friday night drag racers converted into drag cars had been former family cars that had originally been mom’s or dad’s. This was the original demographic that the big three were shooting for. Chevrolet, Ford, and Chrysler were fiercely battling for the attention of the American family. These were people that were buying up Ford Fairlanes, Chrysler Imperials, and of course the fifty-five, fifty-six, and fifty seven Chevys. These were the cars that started life as reasonably priced family cars and would end up as the hot rods of the next generation. These hot rods, held so dear by both teenagers and adults alike, are the focus of this thesis. This thesis will show that the 1950s and 60s was a generation that changed the landscape of the American culture. An icon, as described in its most clinical way, is an object that serves as a symbol so powerful that it is held in very high standing, even worshipped, by the great majority of society. The automobile, specifically the hot rod, became an icon to the American public during this generation because of the ideas and experiences that it helped to generate. The ideas and experiences that first took hold in the 1950s and 60s that are present even in today’s culture. The contention that the 1950s and 60s was the birthplace of modern American culture has been argued by many people,
scholars and non-scholars alike. My argument does not ask or attempt to ask or answer this question, rather to present an argument that the car was the heart and soul of that modern culture. This thesis will attempt to prove that many of the things that the 1950s and 60s represent, the music, the rebellion, the speed, the power, would never have come into play without the addition of one important element - the automobile. The automobile is the catalyst that mixes all of these other factors together to form a culture that is unique and very powerful in the history of American culture. Perhaps the music would have come along, and of course there is always rebellion in form or another. But the ascent of the car and its increasing importance in the American lifestyle draws all of these things together. The automobile, more than any other factor, is responsible for the 1950s and 1960s American culture. This thesis will trace the history of the car, and its ascent to prominence. Little did anyone know that when the car first came into existence just prior to the turn of the twentieth century, that a mere fifty years later it would be the cause for the construction of millions of miles of major highways, hundreds of thousands of jobs, billions of dollars worth of capital, and more than just a few laws and regulations. More importantly though, no one would have ever guessed that it would literally change the way that we think and live.

The automobile has spawned a whole field of study among historical scholars. These auto historians have studied virtually every possible avenue that the automobile was involved in. There have been intense studies dealing with the inner workings of the big three automakers: Chevrolet, Chrysler, and Ford. These studies deal with the important people that made the decisions that influenced the American people. They had the final say in what kind of car the American people would be clamoring over next. There have
also been studies that deal with the designers and engineers at these large auto companies. These individuals played a very important, and sometimes very expensive, guessing game. These people were responsible for constantly trying to guess what the American public wanted and finding the most efficient and cost effective means of bringing it to their driveway. There have also been numerous studies dedicated to the influence of rock and roll on the 1950s and 60s. These studies primarily focus on individual performers like Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, Chubby Checker, and others. Other performers like James Dean also had a profound effect on the teenagers of the 1950s and 60s. His influence is not only studied by scholars but also celebrated by thousands of people in a three day event every year in Fairmount, Indiana. This one weekend event, called the James Dean Festival, perhaps more than any one event represents the point that this thesis will attempt to prove. This event is a culmination of everything that the 1950s and 60s was all about. Throughout the weekend, you can find people dressed in poodle skirts and leather jackets, dancing and listening to 1950s vintage music and, of course, cruising the boulevards. The one thing that brings all of these people together, of course, is the automobile. The James Dean Festival is famous throughout the country as one of the premier classic car events in the entire world. All of the themes of the 1950s are brought together and celebrated in one weekend, and the automobile is the catalyst that brings it all together.

This thesis will lean upon the work of many of these auto historians and the wonderful work that they have done. I will start with the origins of the car and how it changed over the years leading up to the 1950s, where it finally comes into its own as not only a useful part of life, but an essential one. Once we finally reach the 1950s, I will
begin to discuss the inner workings at Chevrolet, Ford and Chrysler. Here I will discuss how decisions made at board meetings and in design studios influenced the look and feel of what Americans would drive, but also how fast they would go and how safe they would be. I will then discuss what it is that draws us to cars and why they have become such an integral part of our lives. What is it that psychologically tells us that having a car, be it luxurious or fast or efficient, or "cute," is one of life’s highest priorities. From here I will begin to talk about the cars themselves. I will discuss the cars that were most influential during the 1950s and 60s, and why this was the case. For example, what was so special about the 1955 Chevrolet Bel Air that it set off a revolution in automotive design that would lead the way for years to come. Along with the "civilian" population in the 1950s and 60s, there was also another culture that was coming into its own. NASCAR was being formed at this time, and it would formalize the ultimate form of speed and danger. Obviously, automobile racing was something that had existed for many years. NASCAR, however, was a governing body that could set standards, both for performance and safety, that would give racers a means of doing what they loved and sharing it with others who loved the same thing. NASCAR recently celebrated its fiftieth year in existence, and today it is one of the largest automobile entities in the entire world. The power and prestige of NASCAR today lend even more credence to the legacy of the 1950s.

The 1950s and 1960s generation, both adults and children alike, would leave a legacy behind that would be revered by other generations that would follow it. The 1960s generation would take the power, speed, and excitement of the 1950s and push it one step farther. The 1950s generation must also include with it at least some part of the 1960s, as
the 1960s is almost a carryover from the 1950s. Cars would continue to get bolder, faster, and more powerful all the way through the 1960s, until insurance companies and government regulations began to put a muzzle on all of the power and the speed. Starting in 1976 environmental concerns for all intents and purposes ended the muscle car era, but the real muscle era had long since ended.

Why did it end? The reasons for this are probably as varied as the different kind of cars that were produced during the era. It could be that people just simply grew up. By 1965, the high schoolers that had dominated the 1950s were now carving their own way through life, raising their own families and buying homes. Along with growing up comes new responsibilities. People could now longer afford to spend money on new engines or transmissions or special paint jobs. Money that had once been spent on a high lift cam and big carburetor was now being spent on a play set, or a cradle, or perhaps even a nursery. The good old days of spending an entire weekend under the hood of one’s hot rod was replaced with a trip to the mother-in-law’s. The kind of cars that people were buying also changed. It was no longer prudent to buy a two door, lightweight two seater. That car was replaced by the four door sedan, or perhaps a station wagon.

The fact that the era came to an end does not in any way take away from its importance. Like all eras, the era of the 1950s and 60s had to end so that a new era could be ushered in. This was an era, though, that would end, but never really go away. Each era that would succeed the 1950s and 60s would carry with it some piece of the 1950s and 60s. Not all times in our history have had the ability to do that. The 1950s and 60s, as we will see, was very special. The uniqueness of this era has left a mark that has echoed through time, and can still be heard even to this day.
In order to have an informative view of the impact of the automobile, we need to understand where it came from. Learning the history of the automobile may give clues as to why it is an icon that has achieved such an important place in modern society. If we were to ask a person in normal conversation where the automobile came from, a great number of them would probably say Henry Ford. Ford, after all, is revered throughout the world for making the automobile both popular and affordable. This accomplishment, however, does not entitle him to be named the “inventor” of the automobile. That title belongs to a collage of men who all had similar ideas at about the same time.

The first whispers of a self-propelled road vehicle came from the minds of Renaissance thinkers like Roger Bacon and Leonardo da Vinci. However, their ideas never attained physical reality, probably lost in the storm of ideas that came out of this period of time. The idea of unassisted locomotion appeared between the years of 1765 and 1770, when Nicholas Joseph Cugnot, a Swiss engineer, was contracted by the French government to build steam powered trucks to carry cannons for the French army. His experiments, though successful, proved to be much less efficient than horses, and the idea was abandoned by the French government. Without the finances to carry out his concepts, Cugnot’s steam powered vehicle faded into anonymity. His failure followed those of engineers whose inventions met with similar fates for similar reasons. Richard Trevithick built a steam powered vehicle in the early 1800s in England but could not obtain the finances necessary to commercialize it. In the United States an inventor named Oliver Evans created a steam powered vehicle that he touted in the streets of Philadelphia, a vehicle for which he would even get U.S. patents, but again a lack of financial backing prohibited him from marketing his invention. These are two instances that exemplify the
hard luck stories of numerous inventors who tried to make the automobile a reality throughout the nineteenth century. In most cases, the inventors were fighting losing battles against the large railroad companies that dominated transportation in both the United States and in Europe. In order to operate automobiles successfully, there must be a system of roads to accommodate them. Governments both here and abroad had invested a great deal of money and time in the construction of railroads, and they were somewhat reluctant to cast them away and begin constructing roads for this new phenomenon. However, new road building technology was just around the bend, and the automobile would soon follow.

Thanks to innovations in highway construction by engineers like John L. McAdam and Thomas Telford, shortly after 1800 it would be possible to have tough, smooth road surfaces that would later support the automobile. These pioneers would never see the fruits of their labor, however, because in their time the locomotive companies still held all the political clout, and they quickly dashed the idea of "road locomotives." Despite all the money, the political ties, and the strong arm tactics, the locomotive companies would fall to small, lightweight vehicle that didn't run on steam, or gasoline, or on alcohol. The bicycle would usher in the roads that were needed. In the early 1890s both Americans and Europeans fell in love with the bicycle. This man powered two wheeled wonder allowed people a freedom that they had never had before. Bicycles were affordable, costing only $30, and required no stables, water, or large quantities of food as a horse did. The popularity of the bicycle soared overnight, and no there was no end to it in sight. Of course, coming along with this craze came the need for a system of roads, as bicycles could not cover terrain as easily as horses.
In the United States, the bicycle craze also coincided with another important event. During the 1890s there was also a great deal of discontent brewing with American farmers. They had been complaining for years about the poor quality of farm to market roads, and the monopolistic practices of many railroad companies only added to their negative public image. All of these factors would combine to create a substantial public outcry for the construction of reliable public roads. The railroad companies could no longer prevent the inevitable.

This renewed interest in public road construction opened the floodgates for automobile commercialization and innovation. The primary area of concern for automobile engineers was making the powerplant lighter while at the same time making it more efficient. There were a number of innovations at this time dealing with the steam boiler. Self-condensing steam engines were developed, as was the flash boiler and an instantaneous steam generator that allowed a vehicle to be operated before it build up steam. In 1890 inventor William Morrison successfully constructed a car that was powered by an electric motor. But the most significant development to come out of the 1890s was the invention of the internal combustion engine.

Several men are credited with the invention of the internal combustion engine, and it is unlikely that one man will ever be given full credit for its invention. The truth of the matter is that the internal combustion engine was an inevitable result of the industrial revolution, and its invention was more a matter of natural evolution than the inspiration of one single man. The important issue here is the development of the engine itself. The internal combustion engine began life as a single cycle engine that was neither light nor efficient. In 1872 George B. Brayton of Boston, Massachusetts, acquired a U.S. patent
on a two cycle version of the combustion engine, and this two cycle design would provide the template for automobile engines for the first early years of the automobile’s existence.

Now armed with improved roads and an engine design that was constantly improving in both efficiency and power, inventors started marketing their ideas. Men exploited their inventions and created empires that would last for many, many decades. Some of these early inventors included Gottlieb Daimler, whose name is now associated with the Daimler-Chrysler corporation, Karl Benz, whose name would later become famous as part of the powerful Mercedes Benz corporation, Elwood P. Haynes, who along with Edgar and Elmer Apperson were among the first to build and market automobiles in the Midwest, and, of course, Henry Ford. Each and every one of these men put their mark on the automobile industry not only because they built automobiles and improved on their design, but because they marketed those ideas and made them available to an eagerly waiting public.

Karl Benz and his main competitor, Emile Constant Levassor, were responsible for much of the automobile’s success in Europe. Benz had already carved a niche for himself in industrial Germany by building stationary gas engines. It was only a matter of time before he attempted to mount one of their engines on a car. Benz build hid first car in 1886, and then a year later he exhibited his third one at the Paris Exposition. This car was sold to Emile Roger, a Frenchman, who would then go on to sell cars for Benz in France. As a result of these events, Benz became the first company to offer cars for sale to the general public.\(^7\)

His competitor, Emile Constant Levassor, made his mark on the automobile industry by creating the arrangement that modern vehicles would follow. Levassor
acquired the rights from Gottlieb Daimler to manufacture his engine and immediately began modifying its design to make it useful on an automobile. Levassor mounted the engine vertically at the front of the car, with a driveshaft that protruded toward the rear into a mechanism that drove the rear wheels. This arrangement was used in automobiles almost exclusively for nearly one hundred years. The advent of the modern day front wheel and all wheel drive has made this design somewhat obsolete, but it is still used in high performance and sports car applications.

Because of the influence of men like Levassor and Benz, many locations began putting on automobile “races” that put me like Benz and Levassor in the public eye. In 1895 Levassor won the Paris-Bordeaux-Paris race, put on by the Automobile Club of France. Of the twenty two vehicles entered in the race, only nine would finish. However, of those nine, eight of them, including Levassors, were powered by internal combustion engines. The internal combustion engine had proven that it would be the mark by which other designs were measured. Even into modern times, no design has substantially challenged the internal combustion design for automobile superiority.

Similar events were also taking place here in the United States. After reading about Benz’s automobile in 1889, two brothers from Springfield, Massachusetts, began constructing an automobile of their own. Theirs would be the first car in America that relied on the internal combustion engine for power. These brothers, Charles E. and J. Frank Duryea, would sell their first car in 1896 and would go on to sell twelve more just like it that year. In 1897 they created the Duryea Manufacturing Company and began selling cars as fast as they could produce them. In the meantime Elwood Haynes and the Apperson brothers of Kokomo, Indiana, began manufacturing and selling cars. As the
new century quickly approached, the number of automobile manufacturers soared. In virtually every town that had a significant population, you could be sure to find a business that either manufactured cars or sold them for someone else. The automobile craze was catching on, and it was catching on fast.

Although the internal combustion engine was the latest craze in the United States, there were still several manufacturers that were successfully building and selling automobiles that used both steam and electricity as their source of power. In 1897 the Pope Manufacturing Company of Hartford, Connecticut produced nearly 500 electric vehicles and 40 gasoline vehicles. However, despite the success of a few of these scattered companies, most success was found by those companies that employed the internal combustion engine.

The progress of the automobile during these early years is similar to that of a baby taking its few first steps. There was a great deal of awkwardness, some experimentation, and a few bumps along the way. But, like a baby, as the automobile industry began to get its feet under itself, it began taking larger strides, and those strides would lead to the large leaps that were to come in the 1930s, 1940s, and especially in the 1950s and 1960s.

A great deal of innovation took place in the decades leading up to the beginning of the twentieth century. The invention of the automobile is a landmark event that would rival such events as the First World War, the Great Depression, and even the Industrial Revolution itself for the title of most important event of modern times. The invention of the automobile, albeit an evolutionary event, changed the American landscape on multiple levels. The advent of roads obviously changed the physical landscape, but that change pales in comparison to the changes it created in society. The advent of the car, more than
any other factor, led to American urbanization and the end of the primarily agrarian society that we had previously experienced. Our country expanded its horizons on the shoulders of innovative men like Gottlieb Daimler, Karl Benz, the Duryea brothers, Elwood Haynes, the Apperson brothers, and many others. But among this group one individual would stand out. One individual would, through his own determination and innovation, change the way cars were built and who would be able to obtain them. His innovation would allow him to create an automobile empire that would dominate the automobile industry for the better part of the twenty first century.

Henry Ford was a man who had as much talent as a self-promoter and politician as he did as an engineer and a businessman. Probably the only thing larger than Ford’s ego was the juggernaut he created bearing his name. The popularity of the Ford name, as well as the man himself, is hard to imagine in today’s age. According to auto historian James Flink, “Henry Ford probably could have been elected president of the United States had he really wanted the office.” He goes on to mention “And, even though he refused to campaign, he won the 1916 Michigan presidential preference primary of the Republican party by a comfortable margin.” Ford spread his ideas throughout the Midwest. He supported prohibition and opposed the war. Ford seemed to appeal to virtually the entire cross section of American society. He had won over the blue collar, working class with his “invention” of the eight hour, five dollar work day. This innovation was unheard of before Henry Ford began installing the system at his assembly plant in Dearborn, Michigan, a small suburb of Detroit. Ford was also popular with the agricultural community. His Fordson tractor was a cheap, reliable tractor that improved the lot of the farmer at a price they could live with. People from the South championed Ford as the
savior of the South, his plans to construct a plant in Muscle Shoals, Tennessee, was expected to provide a huge lift for the Southern economy. And Ford also appealed to the middle class, most of whom thought that successful businessmen, such as Ford, should be running the country in the stead of politicians.\textsuperscript{11}

What was the secret of Ford's success? Was it the Model T, a vehicle that was within the financial grasp of virtually any working American who desired one? Was it his own savvy, an ability to persuade and mold those around him to perform in a way that gave him a god-like aura? In fact, these are very important factors, but perhaps the single most important course in Ford's success was the innovations that he pioneered at Dearborn, in a plant he named Highland Park. Among these was the eight hour, five dollar work day and assembly line mass production. Historians Allan Nevins and Frank E Hill have noted that the moving belt assembly line and the eight hour, five dollar work day "inaugurated a new epoch in industrial society...Mass production furnished the lever and fulcrum which now shifted the globe."\textsuperscript{12}

Ford was completely aware of his own popularity, as created by both fact and created by fiction. It was no big secret that Henry Ford personally took credit for the low priced automobile and the mass production techniques that made the company bearing his name successful. Ironically, neither idea can actually be credited to Ford. According to James Flink, "Ransom E. Olds and Thomas B. Jefferey were the most important among several other automobile manufacturers who attempted prematurely to implement the idea while Henry Ford was still absorbed with building race cars."\textsuperscript{13} As for Ford's "idea" of mass production, he was simply following the latest trend. According to one of Ford's chief engineers, Charles E. Sorenson, "Henry Ford had no ideas on mass production. Far
from it, he just grew into it, like the rest of us."\textsuperscript{14} Ford applied the idea of mass production at the same time that other automobile manufacturers were doing the same thing. Among these was Walter P. Chrysler, whose namesake battles Ford even to this day for automotive supremacy. According to Chrysler himself, "Henry Ford, after we developed our [assembly] line, went to work and figured out a chain conveyor...."\textsuperscript{15} However, Ford had borrowed the idea, it was not his own as he would have had the public believe.

Despite Ford's fascination with his own popularity, he was still very, very good at producing cars. Regardless of who should receive credit for mass production, Ford made it work and made it work well. By the mid 1920s the automobile had completely taken hold in the American consciousness and the Ford brand name was on the end of everyone's list. A person could purchase a new Model T for as little as $290 in the 1920s, which made it possible for any American who had steady work to purchase a Model T.

The Ford Motor Company reached its zenith in 1923, the year in which it produced 1.8 million Model Ts.\textsuperscript{16} After 1923, the popularity of the Model T began to quickly decline. Ford became spoiled on his own success, and as a result did not reinvest much capital research and development, improvement of the corporate structure, or even design changes on the Model T. People began to look elsewhere for their automotive needs, quickly finding that they could purchase a secondhand model of perhaps a Chevrolet or a Chrysler that had innovative styling and options than a they could a brand new Model T that was virtually unchanged since before 1920. Moreover, Chevrolet was in the business of selling cars on the installment plan, which gave it an increased edge over Ford. Sales continued to decline until on May 27, 1927 Ford was forced to halt the
production of the Model T forever. A radical change would be needed to keep Ford in the
driver’s seat.

Ford’s reaction to the new emphasis on speed, power, options, and styling came in
the form of the Model A. The Model A necessitated the first retooling ever done at
Highland Park, and it came at the incredible cost of $18 million. For Henry Ford, this was
huge gamble. He had fought the idea of changing the Model T for almost a decade. His
gamble, however, paid off. Before any member of the public had even seen the Model A,
Henry Ford had already received orders for some 400,000 of them.

The production of the Model A gave the Ford Motor Company a fresh breath of
life, but it did not necessarily resurrect it. In fact, even to this day Ford has never again
achieved the absolute dominance that it enjoyed in the early 1920s. According to James
Flink, “Neither the Model A nor the Ford V-8 could regenerate the Ford Motor Company.
Between 1931 and 1970 Chevrolet outsold Ford in every year except 1935 and 1945.”
As Ford began to decline and assume its position among other automobile manufacturers,
a new star began to rise. That star would rise under the leadership of Alfred Sloan. That
star would go by the name of General Motors.

Perhaps the best, and most complete, way to give a description of Alfred Sloan is
to borrow a quotation from James Flink. “Sloan was the automobile industry’s first “gray
man.” First, last, and always an organizational man, he abhorred the autocratic rule of
colorful “personal” entrepreneurs such as Henry Ford and Billy Durant. Under his
leadership General Motors became the archetype of the depersonalized, decentralized
corporation run by an anonymous technostructure.” This form of leadership contrasted
sharply with that of Henry Ford, who once had boasted, “The Ford factories and
enterprises have no organization, no specific duties attaching to any position, no line of
succession or of authority, very few titles, and no conferences." Ford was a man who
felt his own genius could will the Ford Motor Company to success. Alfred Sloan held no
such presumption. He relied on a strict, rigid organizational structure that would be
impossible for any one member to dominate or control.

The process at GM didn’t always run so smoothly, though. Sloan’s ideas about
decentralizing and coordination came about due to a drastic failure in the development of
the air cooled engine. This new radical design, called the “copper cooled” engine, was
theoretically superior to water cooled engines in many ways, including fuel economy,
horsepower, and the elimination of overheating and freezing problems. The engine’s
primary designer, Charles Kettering, wanted to use copper as a cooling device, thus the
name “copper cooled.” The “copper cooled” engine was a drastic failure. That failure
was not due to a lack of funding, or poor technology, or lack of backing by GM. The
project failed due to a lack of coordination by the various GM groups that were supposed
to be working together on the project. Sloan would recall the event in 1964. “The
significant influence of the copper-cooled engine was in what it taught us about the value
of organized cooperation and coordination in engineering and other matters. It showed
the need to make an effective distinction between divisional and corporate functions in
engineering, and also between advanced product engineering and long-range research.”

The “copper cooled” engine would be one of the last risks that GM would ever
take under Sloan. His stance became one that was dominated by profit margins and
bottoms lines. He felt that the sole purpose of GM was to make money, not necessarily to
make cars. Under his leadership the control of GM exchanged hands from people with
engineering backgrounds to people with accounting and legal backgrounds. Sloan created a company in GM that was nothing more than a money making machine. It just so happened that the automobile was the means by which that machine made its money. This money is yet another example of the differences between Ford and Sloan. As we have seen, Ford was very reluctant to reinvest his capital into research and development areas. Sloan, however, felt that all profits made in the company should be reinvested into the company so that it could expand itself. This constant push towards expansion and innovation would help to keep GM on top of the automotive heap for many years. As part of this push for innovation and expansion, the idea of styling comes into play. Styling would be a major part of GM’s game plan, and the other major automobile manufacturers would soon follow. This idea of the importance of styling would begin in the 1920s with the arrival of Sloan and would evolve into the styling craze that would dominate the look of cars in the 1950s, when styling was a major component.

Styling became an important part of the automobile early on in its history. No sooner than automobiles established their foothold in the American conscious, styling began to dominate as the single most important factor distinguishing one car from another. The earliest forms of styling really were expressions of practicality more than they were expressions of luxury and individualism. The first expression of styling came into existence in tandem with the improved efficiency and horsepower of the V-8 engine that came in the late 1920s. As cars became more powerful, their cruising speeds vastly increased. As the speed of the car increased, it was necessary to make them wider and bring them lower to the ground. This not only made the car more stable, but lowering it also made it more aerodynamic, thus reducing drag. More importantly, though, the
lowering and widening of the car had an aesthetic appeal that the buying public really embraced. This idea was not lost on the big three automakers. As would be expected, the idea of styling came into vogue with a small push from Alfred Sloan. In a 1926 letter, Sloan, expressed his “general views about a need [for GM] to develop a styling program.” The 1924 Chrysler Six was the car that had prompted Sloan’s concern. The Chrysler Six was a car that sat extremely low compared to other cars of its time (most cars of the mid-1920s sat between 70 and 75 inches high, while the Six sat closer to 65) because Chrysler engineers had found that the car needed to sit lower to accommodate the car’s seventy mile an hour cruising speed. This lower stance made the car more stable and thus more safe. Sloan accepted the idea completely, even going so far as to purchase smaller wire wheels for his own Cadillac in order to bring it closer to the ground. Sloan brought his ideas to the general manager of Cadillac, Lawrence P. Fisher. Fisher had been impressed by some of the work produced by Don Lee, who ran an custom auto body shop in California that created cars for Hollywood movie stars. Fisher hired Harley J. Earl in 1926 from Lee’s shop as a special consultant. Sloan created a special Art and Color Section at GM, headed by Earl, that would staff as many as fifty people and whose purpose was “to direct general production body design and to conduct research and development programs in special car designs.” It would be under the supervision of Earl that some of GM’s finest vehicles would be produced.

One of Earl’s first innovations at GM was to create mock ups and models using modeling clay. This was an important change because it allowed Earl to conceptualize more fluid, rounded shapes than had been possible before. Until modeling clay came into use, most designs were either constructed by hammered metal or wood, which was very
inflexible, left on the drawing board because of a lack of three dimensional visualization. This technique of using modeling clay led to Earl’s first creation at GM, the 1927 LaSalle, which was a huge success, a long, low car with “Flying Wing” fenders. This car was in Sloan’s words “the first stylist’s car to achieve success in mass production.” The 1927 LaSalle was a nice preview of what was yet to come.

Earl would continue to design cars for GM for the next two decades, and many of his ideas became benchmarks by which the other car manufacturers would measure their efforts. Both Ford and Chrysler would eventually follow GM’s lead and create styling departments of their own, most of them staffed by men who first trained under Earl at GM. It would be virtually impossible to calculate exactly how large Earl’s influence over the automobile industry actually was, but there is no doubt that his influence was quite substantial. It was not until World War II, though, that Earl had a stroke of genius that would change the industry forever and make it so dependent on styling that things would never be the same.

At sometime during the war Earl was struck by the silhouette of a Lockheed P-38 Lightning. What he saw in the outline of this famous American fighter plane would change both the auto industry and American culture for many years to come and arguably still effects our culture today. What Earl conceived in that silhouette was the tailfin. He would bring his inspiration to reality for the first time on the 1948 Cadillac. The Cadillac was the perfect car to implement the tailfin, because it already had a reputation for being extravagant and luxurious. The tailfin was just one more option that allowed customers to feel that they were getting more car for their money. In the words of automotive historian
Thomas Hine, “It derived its luxurious identity from having something additional, a badge to attest that money had been spent.”

Why did styling become so important at the time it did? Why not earlier, or later? The most important factor is purely economic. As the 1950s began, the car buying boom had begun to wind down. World War II had been over for five years, and most returning G.I.s had already purchased the post-war car that they needed. By the beginning of the 1950s, most people who needed a car already had one. However, the big three automakers were still producing cars, and needed to find a new way to sell them. If there was no actual necessity for a new car, the automakers had to create one. Somehow they had to manufacture a reason that would convince the public that their present car was not efficient enough, not luxurious enough, or not flashy enough, and that it was time to purchase a new one. Engineering, unfortunately, was not the answer. As far as the purchasing public was concerned, the only practical use for engineering came in the form of horsepower. Engineering should be used to make the car go fast and get to its destination quickly. Public opinion indicated that most people felt that all cars were well made and were virtually the same. “They felt the major choice they had was to find the car that made them feel good.” The answer to the automakers’ prayers was styling. The tailfin was the first of these styling techniques geared at selling cars to people who didn’t really need them.

The tailfin would be seen on a great number of GM cars after 1948, most of them Cadillacs or other higher priced cars that needed such an addition to justify a higher price. For the 1955 model year, Earl and GM decided to go in another direction. Just as the 1948 Cadillac had been influenced by the P-38 Lightning, his next inspiration would also
came from an airplane. The Douglas F-4D Skyray, a plane that like its namesake reflected the outline of manta ray, was the new inspiration. This plane was characterized by its back swept wing and parabolic air intakes. The overall design of this airplane would be the inspiration for one of GM's all-time greatest masterpieces, the 1955 Chevrolet. The 1955 Chevrolet was a car that would today be characterized as mid-sized. It was a large car by today's standards, but in its day it was not very big. The car was also popular because it came with a huge variety of options, including several high output engines and transmissions. But most importantly, the 1955 Chevrolet was the first reasonably priced car to come equipped with fins. It brought the tailfin down to earth, and made it possible for the common man to own a car with fins. This was yet another stroke of genius conceived by Earl and GM and made the 1955 Chevrolet one of the most popular cars ever made. In the words of Thomas Hine, "The 1955 Chevrolet tailfin affirmed that nearly everyone was able to move up to luxury." This was the first jet-age car, a car that had an angular profile that suggested it was inspired by the latest airplanes. GM was even known to photograph the car parked next to jet airplanes to spell the connection out for those who didn't understand it. This connection between automobiles and airplanes would continue to evolve, and increase in popularity as the 1950s faded away and the 1960s quickly approached.

Another aviation influenced styling technique involved the advent of the bubble-topped cockpit. A few of these cockpits came with optional clear tops, but this idea was quickly scratched when it was discovered that without the protection of the roof, both the occupants and the upholstery suffered sun damage. Parts of the bubble-topped cockpit would remain for many years however, especially the idea of the wrap around windshield.
Though the windshield itself was somewhat non-functional, up to $1/3$ of the glass was so distorted that it was unusable, the popularity of the wraparound windshield was enormous.

There were other techniques used in styling that did not derive from fighter planes or supersonic jets. Some aspects of styling had no function whatsoever, and this fact was not kept secret. An example of this "styling just for the sake of styling" appeared on the front end of the 1953 Cadillac. Again, the Cadillac was used as the guinea pig because of its extravagant, luxurious reputation and its considerably higher price tag. This time, the styling addition was a bullet shaped appendage that peered out from the front bumper. As described by Thomas Hine, "These non-functional, expensive-to-repair pieces of chrome were known in the business as 'bombs' or more commonly 'Dagmars,' in honor of an extremely busty, none-to-bright blond bombshell of late night television."\textsuperscript{28}

The additions of tailfins, "Dagmars," larger grilles and tons of chrome all led to increased sales for the big three automakers. It could be explained that this increase in sales was due in no small part because of the personification of cars. Thomas Hines explains,

Throughout the 1950s, the faces of cars tended toward hostility and defensiveness, especially on the big cars, but also on Chevrolets and Plymouths. The chrome was thick. The teeth were large, the Joseph McCarty glaring out defensively from their front ends. The pugnacious grilles provided a mobile image of an American obsessed with finding and fighting enemies within. That image changed in the Populuxe era. Cars gained a friendlier look. If they had teeth they were smaller, but the mouth often stretched the entire width of the car in an almost Eisenhowerish smile. Headlights developed rather large and protruding eyebrows, but these did not project a defensive air as much as an urge to move forward.\textsuperscript{29}

The personification of the car meant a lot more than a few simple styling techniques. The purchase of a new car was a status symbol, a way to tell others that the owner had arrived, was successful, and deserved the finer things in life. Through styling the car had become a statement of personality and prestige. This golden era of styling
began in 1955 with the introduction of the 1955 Chevrolet and abruptly ended with the introduction of the 1958 Ford Edsel, one of the major disasters in automotive history. And at both ends of the spectrum, styling was responsible. Styling had created the mad rush to go out and buy a new car, whether the owner needed it or not. The craze was best described by the head designer at Ford, George Walker: "The 1957 Ford was great, but right away we had to bury it and start another. We design a car, and the minute it's done, we hate it - we've got to do another one. We design a car to make a man unhappy with his 1957 Ford 'long about the end of 1958.'" But in the end, the styling craze, and the men responsible for it, went too far. They went too far with the design of the 1958 Edsel because it had too many lines in the overall shape of the body and also came with so many luxury options that much of the functionality was lost. The car had too many features, and the styling of the car was not aesthetically pleasing. The car was described by most accounts as one of the ugliest cars ever produced. All of these factors led to an automotive disaster that sent Ford into a tailspin from which it had a great number of problems recovering. The failure of the Edsel marked the end of the styling era, but it did not ruin the legacy that styling had left behind. The cars produced in this era of styling were the cars of the 1950s and early 1960s. These were the cars that would shape a generation and would shape a culture in more ways than even the geniuses at GM, Ford, and Chrysler could have ever imagined.

Another factor leading to the phenomenal success of the big three automakers in the 1950s and 1960s was the increased use and innovations coming from advertising. America was quickly changing from a country that got its information from television rather than the traditional radio. The auto industry was desperately trying to keep up, and
in some ways mold, the American culture. In order to do so they too needed to take advantage of this new and creative advertising medium. As with most automotive innovations of this period. General Motors lead the way, and Ford and Chrysler followed. According to David Halberstam, "No company spent more money on advertising or advertised its products better, as the country was riding the crest of that great economic wave, than GM." The man who would help GM take the lead in advertising was Kensinger Jones. Before arriving at GM, Ken Jones was an up and coming advertising whiz at the Leo Burnett Advertising Company in Chicago. While working at Burnett, Jones saw an add in Advertising Age in the middle of 1957 for an unidentified company looking for a television creator to take on the world’s largest advertising account. This ad intrigued Jones, who immediately suspected that this largest account was probably GM. At this time, television advertising was still in its infancy. Most people’s idea of a good television commercial was simply a radio commercial with images. Jones was one of the few people who wanted to use television to accomplish much, much more. He felt that most advertising did not exploit television’s greatest strength: its images. During his five years at Leo Burnett, Jones had been allowed the freedom to experiment with television commercials. Unfortunately, at that time, most commercials had extremely low budgets and were done almost entirely live. These two factors lead to some very poor quality and a bit of an awkward start for television advertising. Despite this, Jones had made a name for himself through his innovation and creativity. Jones had already done commercials for Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer, Green Giant vegetables, and Campbell’s tomato juice. General Motors granted Jones an interview, and were very impressed with him. He was a television man, with a reputation for being unpredictable, but he came from a background
that fit the GM image. Born, raised, and educated in the Midwest, Jones represented the stereotype that interested GM. He was initially hired with a virtually free reign and a very large budget - around $1 million. Another factor that seemed to make GM a positive situation was Ed Cole. Cole was an executive who knew that the best way to get the most out of advertising was to let the advertising people do their job. He felt that if advertising men made commercials that were as good as his cars, the company would sell even more cars. Jones was also encouraged by the fact that GM seemed to be very committed to television, and very soon Jones’ budget would balloon to the phenomenal figure of nearly $90 million. Chevrolet would even go on to sponsor three network shows: My Three Sons on ABC, Route 66 on CBS, and Bonanza on NBC.

Ken Jones wanted to use television to tell stories with images as opposed to words. He wanted the camera to do all of the storytelling, if any was needed. Coincidentally, at virtually the same time that Jones was brought on at GM he also received some experimental films from a friend of his, Gerry Schnitzer. There was one work in particular that caught Jones’s eye. It was a short film that showed a mailman making rounds when he comes upon a hopscotch board drawn on the sidewalk. The mailman looks around to see if he is alone, and then goes on to play a quick game. It is this kind of film, no words with powerful images, that impressed Jones the most. Schnitzer was producing the exact type of material that Jones was hoping to use in his GM advertisements. Up to that point Schnitzer had been altogether infamous and unsuccessful, mainly due to the fact that he had not sought out success. His work, however, was brilliant and his fortunes were about to change.
In 1958 Jones and Schnitzer shot their first commercial, introducing the 1958 Chevrolet. They were searching for a message that said basic American life, something that they could point to and connect it to Chevrolet. The image they decided on was the family at graduation time. The commercial, which ran for a "marathon" two minutes, featured many symbols of the perfect American lifestyle. A young blond teenager is dressed in a white dinner jacket and is frantically rushing out the door for prom night. His good natured mom and dad and tomboyish younger sister all gather in the doorway behind him. The boy rushes out to his old jalopy car to be on his way, when a shiny new Chevy convertible catches his eye. Dad and Sis exchange smiles, as the boy eyes the new convertible with amazement. He turns to his dad just in time to see him reach for the keys. Throughout this commercial, the only sounds heard are the Chevrolet anthem "See the USA in Your Chevrolet" and an announcer speaking about how common this scenario is. The implied message is that any great American family is not complete without that shiny new Chevrolet sitting in the driveway.

This first commercial was a huge success, especially with the brass at GM. In fact, the advertising manager at Chevrolet broke down into tears saying "It's perfect - it makes me think of my oldest son." Riding this wave of success, Jones and Schnitzer would go on to produce several more commercials for GM. Their second commercial was intended to encourage Americans to trade in their older model now for a new one, despite the soft spot that the economy had hit during the year. This commercial showed a husband and wife contemplating the purchase of a 1959 Chevy wagon. It is obvious that the two have argued the point before, and that the wife has clamped down on family spending. The wife has problems getting the door on her jalopy to latch, and when it pops open and spills
out her groceries, she can't stand any more. The commercial flashes ahead to the family making a deal in the showroom. Later commercials would feature a Chevy driving through the streets of Paris, achieving the approval of the style-conscious Parisians, and another commercial featuring a Chevy on top of a mountain in Utah, all the while the pilot expressing his disbelief. It wouldn't be long before Chevrolet management began to meddle with Jones and Schnitzer's ideas, wanting more narration in commercials that were not meant to have any. Chevrolet advertising would go on, but its golden age was over. The brilliance of Schnitzer's commercials led the way into a new era, but the pioneering spirit of both Ken Jones and Gerry Schnitzer created a new medium in which GM could move its product. In today's marketplace the television commercial is by far the most important part of the advertising of a new automobile. That is the legacy of these two, and it will go on to be felt well into the next millennium.

What gave the car its power? I'm not speaking about horsepower, or gear ratios, or four speed transmissions. Why did the car have such a stranglehold on the American culture? Why did people place so much importance on what kind of car they drove? These are all questions associated with the psychology of the car. Authors Peter Collett and Peter Marsh have attempted to answer this very complex question. Their book, *Driving Passion: The Psychology of the Car* takes an intensive look at the relationship between people and their cars. This book provides valuable insight into the 1950s and 1960s American culture and how the car affected that culture.

In the United States, there were essentially three distinct car cults, or groups, that defined the place of the car. This first group is the group that I have focused on up to this point. They are the group that was purchasing the new models coming out of Detroit
every year. This group consisted mainly of adults who could afford to keep up with the annual model change that Detroit had convinced them was necessary. For these people, the purchase of a new car meant a renewal of their status in the neighborhood. A new car reaffirmed that you were financially stable and could keep up with both Detroit and your neighbors as well. In the words of Peter Collett and Peter Marsh, "For the automobile satisfies not only our practical needs but the need to declare ourselves socially and individually."

For these people, the car was an expression of individuality and social status. However, it had to be a new car. Only the most modern car could establish that social status, last year's model simply wouldn't do. This group of people were always concerned with obtaining the newest product, not necessarily the most well engineered or well built. Detroit bought into this idea, and made every attempt to accommodate the public, producing new models at least every three years and sometimes even more frequently than that.

The second car cult was called the hot rodders. This group had its roots on the west coast. Marsh and Collett said, "The west coast of America has spawned more auto cults than any other part of the world." Of all of the car cults that California produced, the hot rod cult is the one that today has the largest membership. There are literally hundreds of thousands of hot rod enthusiasts that live in virtually every corner of the United States. They are a group that is mired in tradition and legend and have become a group that continues to expand the legacy of hot rods even to this day.

The hot rod culture began to take shape in the 1920s. There were a great deal of people who lived in California who had jobs but did not make enough money to purchase a new car. Instead of purchasing a new car, they were forced to make do with old jalopy
Model Ts and Model As. They would purchase these used cars and spend their money trying to fix them up. Many of these people quickly found that they could spend money hopping up the engine and drivetrain. They would then remove the bumpers, chrome, fenders, and anything else that was considered extra weight. These cars didn’t look like much, but they went really, really fast. These people got a great kick out of pulling up next to a new, fancy model from Detroit, belonging to a rich person, and then outrunning it down the boulevard. This “competition” paralleled the social struggle that already existed between the economic classes in California. The lower middle class people had finally found an area that they could stand on equal ground with the rich, and thus the popularity quickly increased. These hot rods gave the lower middle class kid a way to make a personal statement and have a sense of pride.\textsuperscript{38}

Hot rodding had its roots in the 1920s and 1930s, but it really didn’t come into its own until the late 1940s and 1950s. Collett and Marsh stated that “The people who were initially drawn to hot machines and later to hot rods tended to be either working-class or lower middle class.”\textsuperscript{39} Flashy exteriors were of no importance to these people, they were more concerned with the vehicle’s performance. Because of this need for speed, appearances were of only secondary importance. Collett and Marsh said “With its emphasis on racing, raunchy machines and manly virtues, hot rodding had little place for women…. The guy who was interested in girls was therefore unlikely to become a hot rodder, simply because no self-respecting girl would ever be seen in one of those unsightly, monstrous machines - let alone with some wrench slinger with grease under his fingernails.”\textsuperscript{40}
Hot rodders did not seem to have any problems finding a substitute for the pursuit of the opposite sex. They replaced it with drag racing. Drag racing in the early 1950s and 1960s was quite different from the drag racing today. Today’s drag racers are equipped with trailers, pit crews, back up cars, million dollar budgets, and a fan base that follows them around the country. In the early days of drag racing, however, this was not the case. Drag racing began with these blue collar kids who were building hot rods at home in their garages. Their budgets went as far as their job at the grocery or gas station would sustain, and not a penny more. That being said, the drag racing that occurred during this time was every bit as exciting and intense, and may very well be the primary reason that this generation and the car are so intimately entwined. According to Bill Pavey, a modern day gearhead who cut his teeth on 1955 Chevy small blocks, “When I started cruising... we we mainly concerned with how fast it could go. We’d come into town hunting races, which was kind of illegal. That’s what we did... I guess it’s just in our blood.”\textsuperscript{41} The typical Friday night drag race in the 1950s and 1960s started off simple enough. “Racing was usually informal: a hot rodder might pull up beside another car at the traffic-lights and issue a challenge by revving his engine, glancing defiantly or offering a verbal taunt. Sometimes a contest was specially arranged at the drive-in, and the combatants would then proceed to a deserted street where they would either race for the hell of it or for ‘pink slips’ - that is, for the ownership documents of the other person’s car.”\textsuperscript{42} It is obvious that the kids took this drag racing thing pretty seriously. Drag racing became the ultimate arena for gaining a reputation, for becoming a living legend. Collett and Marsh stated “It meant that however lackluster a young man’s achievements, he could always make his mark. Even if he was a failure at school and a flop on the playing field, he still
had a chance of gaining the admiration of his peers. 

The fact of the matter is that drag racing simply did not require much in terms of physical or mental commitment. A person did not necessarily have to be in good shape, and you didn’t have to be particularly smart. If a racer could put their foot to the floor when the flag dropped, and they could steer straight, they could drag race. The only real skill required came into play if the car had a manual transmission, where some dexterity was needed to shift the gears quickly. Other than that, the outcome of a drag race would be determined by who built the better car. This made drag racing an undeniable attraction, especially to young men looking to create an identity for themselves.

Drag racing was such an important part of this generation that the concept would inspire scores of poems, songs, and even movies. One band in particular, the Beach Boys, rode the idea of drag racing all the way into superstardom, as many of their hit songs dealt with the Friday night street wars that, although illegal, were common place in every town in America that had a straight road. Their song “Little Deuce Coupe” is a song about a teenager who owned a hot rod that had a “flat head mill, and she’ll walk a thunderbird like she’s stand still,” and “she gets pushed out of shape, and she’s hard to steer, when I get rubber in all four gears.” Another popular Beach Boy song was “Buddy Gonna Shut You Down,” a song that was entirely dedicated to the pageantry surrounding a Friday night drag race. Yet another popular Beach Boys song incorporated the two most important themes in the life of a 1950s and 1960s teenage male. This song “Till Daddy Takes the T-Bird Away,” was a song about a girl whose father had a hopped up T-Bird that could out run anything in town. This was the teenage boy’s dream. Perhaps the most popular car-related song performed by the Beach Boys was “409.” The release of this
song must have been a dream come true for the brass at Chevrolet. This song would immortalize the Chevrolet Impala, which in its early years came equipped with the mammoth four hundred and nine cubic inch big block Chevy motor. This motor, depending upon the source, generated anywhere from four hundred and fifty to five hundred and fifty horsepower, an unheard of amount even for this time and day. This car had become the stuff of legend at drive-ins all around the country, and thus prompted the Beach Boys’ rendition. The Beach Boy’s were not the only musicians to capitalize on the automobile during this time period. Many other performers also had songs that were either about cars or referred to cars in their lyrics. The fact that these songs were recorded does not necessarily speak to the importance of the car. What does is the fact that these songs were some of the most popular of their time.

Musicians were not the only people who chose to use the car to express themselves creatively. There are also a great number of movies that were produced either during this time or about this time that draw the obvious ties between society and the automobile. There is one actor who rises above all others when one begins to think of hot rod car and the movies they made famous. James Dean is the quintessential icon of the 1950s culture. His image represents the 1950s to a great number of people. He was the ultimate rebel who lived hard and died young. He was someone who other young me could look up to as a shining example of how you could be somebody if you had the nerve to drive faster and harder than the next guy.

One of James Dean’s most famous movies is Rebel Without A Cause. This was a movie about rebellion, both from parents and from society itself. It represented many of the feelings of the young people of this time period. The young people in this movie were
rebelling against the conservatism that their parents believed in, and they were doing it
mainly by drag racing their hot rodded cars. The fun and excitement ends quickly, though,
when one of the young men is killed in a car wreck while drag racing. This is a harsh
reminder of how vulnerable youth actually are, especially when they play with their lives in
3500 pound machines that are very unforgiving at high speeds. As in the 1978 hit Grease,
this movie also has a romantic subplot. Dean and his costar, Natalie Wood, are going
against the grain and carrying out a romance despite the fact that they come from opposite
sides of the tracks and are not supposed to interact. This is a great example of how
Hollywood used Cars and this generation to tell a pretty good story.

One of the most popular films with hot rods as a central theme is the movie
American Graffiti, directed by George Lucas in 1975. Graffiti, set in the year 1962,
emphasized the two major influences on young men of that time - cars and girls. Most of
the characters in the movie have some sort of hot rod car. The main character, a perfect
example of the all American kid, and he drives an immaculate new Chevy Impala. His
antagonists, the Pharaohs Gang, bombs around town in a chopped flame red Mercury.
The local street racing champion is named Milner, who has built a hopped up yellow 1932
Ford Coupe. He is the perfect example of the hot rodder. The outsider is a redneck kid
who drives a hopped-up 1955 Chevy. This car is jet black, and a perfect challenger for
Milner. One of the key sequences in this film involves the drag race between Milner and
the Redneck. This movie represents the typical Friday night drama that was going on
during the 1950s and 1960s.

Another very popular film when made whose theme is cars and drag racing is
Grease. It is not only one of the most popular car films of all time, but also one of the
most popular films of all time, period. The movie starred John Travolta and Olivia Newton John. This movie, defined by many as a musical mocking the 1950s, actually compliments the era by celebrating the fun and excitement that was ever present at the time. Travolta’s character is a typical hot rodder, or as they call it, greaser. He and his entourage of friends spend the better part of their time in the garage under the hood of their car, a beat-up jalopy that does not have the appearance or the engine to be taken seriously. Over the course of the film, Travolta and his mates proceed to fix up the old car in an attempt to make it competitive with the car owned by a rival “gang.” The climax of the film occurs when Travolta races the car to victory in a “race for pinks” that wins him not only the car but more importantly the status of living legend.

The other subplot going on at the same time is the romance occurring between Travolta’s character and that of Olivia Newton John. John’s character is the stereotypical good girl, one of those girls who would never be caught dead with a hot rodder. But as the movie progresses, we see that love truly does conquer all as Travolta’s character begins to change his ways in order to gain the love of John’s character, only to find that she has changed her ways to gain his love. In the end the final message is that love does, and will, conquer all. This movie was a huge hit when released in 1978 and continues to be a favorite among movie goers even today.

One final movie I would like to mention finds itself at the other end of the car spectrum. This movie shows what happens when a car obsession goes too far. The movie, Christine, was first made famous by the best selling novel written by Stephen King. Christine is a story about a young man who has been pushed around and bullied for all of his junior high and high school years. In order to try to establish an identity for himself, he
decides to buy an old car and try to hot rod it. The car is a 1959 Plymouth Fury that had been named Christine by its previous owner. The character becomes overly obsessed with his restoration, and the car actually takes on a personality of its own. When Christine is destroyed by a group of boys who like to bully the main character around, Christine takes matters into her own hands and begins killing them off, one by one. This movie, although it puts a different spin on the theme, again tells the same story about how the building of a hot car can establish an identity among peers. As twisted as this may sound, Christine may very well be my favorite car-related movie. People name their cars all the time, and many believe that their cars have their own distinct personalities. Whether this actually occurs or not is irrelevant. The point is that people believe it. Christine simply exaggerates this theme.

Along with hot rodding and the adults purchasing new cars, there was a third cult according to Collet and Marsh. This cult was the custom car builders. This group, like the hot rodders, first got their feet wet on the sunny boulevards of California. This group took a different angle on making their cars unique. Hot rodders spent their efforts making their cars lighter and faster, giving little thought to creature comforts and outward appearances. The custom car builders, like the hot rodders, were blue collar people who could not afford to buy the newest flashy model coming out of Detroit. This group chose to express their individuality by making their cars as sleek and luxurious looking as they could. In most cases this involved buying a used older model, perhaps a Mercury or an old Ford or perhaps a Chrysler, and through hours of painstaking body work, converting it into a low slung custom vehicle that not only looked as good as a new model, but in many cases looked better. This low slung, sleek look was accomplished through a variety of
different methods. Some builders would chop sections out of the tops of their cars. This process involved cutting horizontal sections out of the roof pillars and shaving the glass down to fit. This would sometimes produce a car that might have a windshield a mere four inches in height! Builders might also "French" their headlights or taillights, which involved recessing them into the lines of the car, giving it more a more flowing look. Other tricks included tuck and rolled interiors, blue dots in the taillights, shaved hood ornaments, trim, side mirrors, and door handles, white wall tires, and new hubcaps. This would all be topped off by high gloss paint job and the ever-present dice around the rearview mirror. These cars were not intended to be driven at high speeds, and were rarely driven much over the speed limits. They were boulevard cruisers. Their owners’ biggest thrill was cruising up and down the street, having everyone gawk at their exquisite paint and body work.

As the years went by this cult would merge with the hot rodding cult and the two would become intertwined. Hot Rods of today combine the finest attributes of both cults, utilizing fast powerful drivetrains while also displaying top notch body work and paint. Some extremists from both cults see this as a degradation of their particular group and curse the change as a sign of better times falling to the wayside under the pressure of progress. Many car builders even now are putting standard carburetors on their cars despite the fact that their are very affordable fuel injection units available. They do this as a mock protest to the changing times in the hot rod building hobby. I tend to disagree with this point of view, believing that the merger of the hot rod and custom car culture has not only preserved the better parts of both cults but has even expanded car building creativity. Hot rods today have more powerful engines that run more efficiently, and paint
jobs that used to last only a couple of years might now last up to ten years before a repaint
is necessary. Cars now employ devices like computer controlled fuel injection,
superchargers, nitrous oxide, light alloy wheels, disk brakes, hideaway headlights,
hydraulically controlled hoods, doors, deck lids, and suspensions, etc. The hot rodding
hobby is now a multimillion dollar business, and it continues to expand year after year.
According to Larry Perkins, a veteran hot rod builder or numerous years, a great deal of
hot rodding's popularity is "the reason I think it's important for me, personally for
myself, is that it's something that I got into that my wife and I can do together, and we
can work together on it and enjoy it as opposed to golf or something like that that I can't.
I think the reason that other people get into the car shows is just to have a reason to sit
and visit with other people, get to know other people, and just get to see all of the unique
things that other people do to their automobiles."44

I have personal experience with the hot rodding hobby, as my father and I have
been building hot rods for as long as I can remember. I can personally vouch for the
popularity of the hot rodding hobby, as well as the astounding number of people who are
either in the hot rodding or would like to build hot rods. In my years of attending car
shows, I have been able to meet and speak with the entire cross section of hot rod
builders. I have met guys who have built cars on as little as a five thousand dollar budget,
while I have met others who had over one hundred thousand dollars wrapped up in their
rides. Some guys build their cars to a radical custom state, while other guys are so picky
about factory restoration that they even use the correct color nuts, bolts and washers to
make their car as original as possible. The hobby has gone through a great number of
changes over the years, though the underlying theme, people enjoying their cars, remains
the same. Larry Perkins is an individual who has seen these changes occur right in front of his eyes: "Well, the big thing that has changed is that so many people have gotten involved in it, and of course all of these companies have gotten involved so that you can easier get parts and things to work on these cars with, to rebuild and restore cars, I think just the sheer number of automobiles out there now is the biggest difference."\(^{45}\)

Hot rodding expanded throughout the 1940s and 1950s, as GIs began to return from their tours of duty at their various posts from World War II. Those stationed in the South Pacific were the first to spread the word about this hot rodding phenomenon, as many of them were stationed at military bases in California before their assignments were made. And, of course, California was quickly becoming a hotbed for custom car and hot rod activity. These GIs began to spread the word, and very soon hot rods began showing up all over the country. In order to feed this fledgling hobby there needed to be some sort of rallying point, perhaps a publication that would draw hot rod enthusiasts together from all walks of life and regions of the country. This need would be fulfilled with the first publication of *Hot Rod Magazine*, which first appeared on newsstands in the year 1951 and continues to this day to be the leader in hot rod enthusiast related materials. In the pages of *Hot Rod* the automotive enthusiast will find material on anything relating to hot rods. Articles appear concerning factory built supercars, full scale restorations, full blown showcars with all the bells and whistles, one hundred and eighty mile an hours street racers, as well as technical articles ranging from carburetor selection to nitrous oxide installation. *Hot Rod* is a comprehensive publication that has been selling subscriptions for the past forty five years, and will probably continue to do so for the next one hundred and forty five years. Today, the magazine sponsors events all over the country, among
them are some of the largest hot rodding events in the entire country. They now sponsor an event called the Hot Rod Power Tour, an event in which approximately 2000 hot rods come together and tour the country. Starting in Los Angeles, this group picks up members along the way as they make eleven stops on their journey to the east coast. This is an event that has drawn national television coverage and thousands of spectators.

Another event that Hot Rod Magazine is involved in is the Hot Rod Power Festival. The Festival is a three day event that includes a very impressive car show, all weekend drag racing, a manufacturers midway, bikini contests, and nighttime cruises. Hot Rod sponsors fifteen of these per year, and they are always a very anticipated event. The appearance of Hot Rod Magazine is a very important moment not only for hot rods but for automobiles in general, as it reflected the importance of the automobile to normal society, and it signaled in the arrival of the hot rodding hobby to the entire country.

Another important event that helped to signal the arrival of the automobile as something more than just means of transportation was the creation of NASCAR, which stands for the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing. NASCAR has one of the most colorful and fascinating histories of any major American sport. And make no doubt about it, NASCAR is indeed a major American sport. Today NASCAR is a multi-billion dollar business, with drivers that rival rock stars and basketball players for popularity and a fan base that is unparalleled. NASCAR fans are among the most passionate of any sports fans in the world, with only European soccer fans being more rabid and passionate. Today every NASCAR race is televised on a major television network, and marquee races like the Daytona 500 and the Brickyard 500 are broadcast live in countries on every continent except Antarctica, where these races are probably broadcast on tape delay.
The NASCAR of today is strikingly different from its meager beginnings. There was a time that NASCAR was simply struggling to keep their heads above water. Their resurgence to prominence also lends to the popularity of the sport, as Americans love a good success story. NASCAR’s history is long and colorful, and changes in automobile policy and design were reflected in the actions of the racers, the owners, and the administrative body.

The roots of NASCAR come from the early part of the twentieth century, specifically the years surrounding prohibition. When the prohibition legislation was passed, it was understood by most common folk that the sale and distribution of alcohol would not stop, it would simply change form. This change in form led to the creation of bootleggers. These bootleggers were essentially illegal delivery men who would transport alcohol across county lines, and if necessary, across state lines. Some of these men worked for organized crime, while some were independent. Regardless of their affiliation, their work was very risky and the penalties for getting caught were quite severe. As a result, many drivers, if they were in danger of being caught, preferred to take their chances with their cars and the open road than to deal with the consequences if the law were able to catch them. Bootlegging seemed to be more rampant in the South, and the winding roads of the region made bootlegging even more dangerous and challenging. As more and more individuals got into this act, competition for work became stiffer. Many times the bootlegging contract might go to the driver who could deliver the liquor in the shortest time. Bootleggers began off road racing this way. Eventually, prohibition would be repealed, but the competitive juices of some of these old bootleggers still remained. Men like Junior Johnson, Richard Petty, and Cale Yarborough would become very famous.
names in the auto racing world. Many of these men could trace their roots back to the old
days of bootlegging, either through personal experience or family ties. To satisfy this
desire to race, many of these bootleggers began racing on make-shift dirt and mud tracks
at county fairs, old farms, or anywhere else where there was enough open space to wind
out an engine and see how fast the car could turn laps. As with anything fun and
dangerous, this style of racing became more and more popular, and more and more people
began to join the game. As this happened, more and more severe and sometimes deadly
accidents began occurring. Some of these racers saw the need for some type of governing
body to establish standards in driver safety, car specifications, driving rules, and even prize
money. This body would eventually be known as NASCAR.

Mark D. Howell is an automotive historian who specializes in the history of
NASCAR. He provides an excellent description of one of the first NASCAR sanctioned
events:

The first official NASCAR Strictly Stock event was held on June 19, 1949, on a
¾-mile dirt track at the Charlotte Fairgrounds (Fusco 40). A driver had to run under
NASCAR regulations, which stated that cars were to be “new model,” or no more than
three years old and of showroom quality. This meant cars were to be entirely stock,
except that headlights could be taped over and hub caps and mufflers removed (Petty.
King Richard 65). For moonshiners, this was automatically a step backward since they
drove cars modified to outrun the law. Moonshine cars were not “stock,” even though
they were used on open roads, and so deemed illegal according to NASCAR. In this
new “Strictly Stock” division, victory would be based on the skills of each individual
driver, not on the modifications of his car. This race marked the beginning of what is
today known as the NASCAR Winston Cup Series.”

What lends to the unbelievable popularity of NASCAR? A great deal of this
popularity comes from the fact that these “stock cars” begin life as actual stock cars. One
of the stipulations of racing a car on the NASCAR circuit is that the car must start out as a
factory vehicle right out of the showroom. From this point the “stock car” and the factory
car go their own separate ways, with the factory car ending up in your driveway, and the
“stock car” ending up on the straight-away at one hundred eighty miles an hour. These
cars are also significantly different from hot rods, because hot rods are primarily built for
decent performance on the street where they can be seen up close and admired. Stock
cars, on the other hand, are built strictly for competition, not including such things as
mufflers, interiors, or even such legal necessities as headlights or treaded tires. Car
builders will initially disassemble the car and completely strip it of its factory components.
The original motor, transmission, computer equipment, and even tires and interior will be
removed and discarded. While this is being done, at a separate facility a chassis building is
constructing a new chassis on which the factor car will sit. This new chassis is made of
chromemoly, a substance that is several times lighter and stronger than steel, and is more
apt to handle the stresses of high speed racing. While this chassis is being assembled, an
engine shop is assembling a specially prepared small block engine. This engine would be
equipped with components like billet rods and crank, lightweight pistons, aluminum
cylinder heads, and high flow carburetor. A typical NASCAR engine will produce
anywhere from seven to eight hundred horsepower and is capable of speeds in excess of
two hundred miles per hour. Despite all of these massive changes and modifications,
when a car approved by NASCAR takes the track, you can still recognize it as the same
vehicle sitting at home in your driveway.

The approachability of the sport adds to its popularity. It is not uncommon to
attend a NASCAR event and be allowed to tour the pit area prior to the race. This allows
NASCAR fans the opportunity to see the cars up close and personal as well as experience
all of the behind the scenes activities that are necessary to keep a winning vehicle
operating at its greatest efficiency. Also while in the pits a NASCAR fan might be able to meet and possibly speak with their favorite NASCAR driver. Over the years, NASCAR has done a very good job of promoting their drivers and making them accessible to both fans and the media. Today drivers like Dale Earnhart, Rusty Wallace, and Jeff Gordon might make more money off of endorsements and merchandise than they could if they won every race on the circuit. These drivers are personable and very appreciative of their fans. That is one of the many reasons that NASCAR is so popular.

As the years went by, the image of NASCAR would continue to change, as the cars became more and more modified, and the tracks did so as well. Detroit began producing cars that were capable of greater speeds, and thus racers also began traveling faster. To accommodate these higher speeds, new tracks being built were now paved instead of using dirt, and tracks that were once perhaps a mile to a mile and a half around were now two and half or more miles around with banked turns that could reach angles of up to thirty-five degrees. Some of these tracks are now popular tourist attractions that draw visitors year round who simply want to see the track, regardless of whether there is a race going on or not. Daytona Speedway, NASCAR’s most famous track, is truly awe-inspiring the at first sight. Upon entering the city of Daytona, Florida, nothing in particular stands out. There are typical landmarks that are familiar to any mid sized American city: fast food restaurants and strip malls and banks. Coming through town there is a clearing a large shopping mall off to your left. On the right is the backside of the large grandstands. These grandstands seem to reach up into the heavens so that God Himself might sit in on race or two if He wanted. From the edges of the large mounds connected to the grandstands you can see the safety fence and the edges of the pavement
that make up the high banks in the turns. Daytona Speedway appears to be something completely out of place, yet it is the primary reason that the town of Daytona even exists. Daytona is one example of the various tracks that NASCAR calls their own all over the country. NASCAR has tracks in Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, California, Texas, Indiana, Connecticut, Michigan, and Nevada. Track building for NASCAR has become a national affair due to the economic benefits of having NASCAR in town.

What can be said about the legacy that this generation has left us? Were these years just points on a timeline that historians can debate, discuss, and then move on from? Or is it something else, do these years contain attributes that are passed on through the years in such a way that it actually changes the next generations so much that they would not be the same if this generation had not existed?

It is very difficult to draw similarities between the 1950s and 1960s generation of automobiles and the generation that followed it. The later 1960s and on into the 1970s generation is much darker, much angrier generation than the generation that preceded it. This generation had to deal with things like the Vietnam War, drugs, civil rights, and the devastating disease that is commonly referred to as disco. Cars did not live on the same pedestal for this generation as they had in the 1950s and 1960s.

The automotive icon of the 1950s and 1960s could be one of many. It could have been the 1955 Chevy, a family sedan turned Friday night racer and boulevard menace. It could have been any one of many Corvettes, the quintessential sports car that was known as much for its sleekness as it was for its speed and power. The 1955 T-Bird also stakes a claim for automotive icon for the generation. This was a powerful car that represented all
of the engineering and design accomplishments that this generation held most dear.

Although the 1955 T-Bird actually appeared at about the mid-point of this generation's existence, it actually represents all of the best parts of the era. It was a two seater, it was fast, agile, and it had smooth, flowing lines. This was all accented by the gleaming chrome that could be found throughout the car.

The 1960s and 1970s generation could be symbolized, at least in an automotive sense, by one vehicle. The Volkswagen Beetle, a car that had a production run from 1953 until 1966, is the car that most people associate with the generation that was ruled by sex, drugs, and rock and roll. The Volkswagen came along at a convenient time, as concerns about gasoline shortages and the environment forced the Automakers to rethink their ideas about what the public actually wanted in an automobile. The days of stuffing a big car with a big, powerful engine were over with. In the 1960s and 1970s the public was looking for a vehicle that was inexpensive to buy and operate. The Volkswagen was the perfect answer. This vehicle could operate twenty five miles on a gallon of gas, while the typical muscle car was getting around twelve to fifteen miles to the gallon. Another advantage of the Volkswagen was the fact that it had remained virtually unchanged since the early 1950s, so parts and services for this vehicle were simple and inexpensive, very much like the Model T that had preceded it by nearly half a century. Prior to this, the big three automakers had been making wholesale changes in automotive design every three years. Parts did not interchange, and many parts were getting very hard to locate, not to mention the fact that mechanics could not keep up with the changes and techniques required to fix such a broad range of cars. The Volkswagen became the car of choice for
this new generation, and the big three had little choice but to jump on the bandwagon that public opinion had created.

If there was a way to segue the two generations together, that moment would have to have occurred along the same time that the pony wars began. The pony wars refer to the battles that were fought, primarily by Chevrolet and Ford, for supremacy of the lightweight sports car class, which would later be called pony cars. In 1964 Ford threw down the gauntlet with the introduction of the Mustang, the brainchild of Lee Iacocca, then an executive at Ford. (Besides the Mustang, Iacocca is also famous for resurrecting the Chrysler Corporation in the 1980s, bringing it from the brink of destruction to becoming one of the greatest American success stories ever told.) The Mustang was a revolutionary car that, like the T-Bird, the Corvette, and the '55 Chevy changed automotive design in such a significant way that for years after its introduction automakers attempted to duplicate the Mustang's success. The Mustang was small, light, and came equipped with a variety of engines, the most powerful of which was initially the two hundred and eighty nine cubic inch small block. This engine could produce up to two hundred and fifty horsepower, which was more than enough for such a light car. But more importantly, the Mustang came with a variable that was invaluable to its success - styling. More than anything else, the Mustang simply looked cool. It was a car that appealed to the entire cross section of the general public. Guys liked the low weight and powerful engine, girls loved the “cuteness” that came from the long front end and short rear end. It was a car that older people could own and help liberate them from their everyday lives. Young people loved it because it was a car that seemed to have been created specifically for them.
In addition to building a car that seemed to appeal to everyone, Ford also accompanied this with a gigantic ad campaign that included magazine ads, billboards, television and radio commercials, and the ever important word of mouth. Iacocca seemed to have created a heaven on earth for himself, as his creation reigned supreme ruler of the automotive world unchallenged. But it is very lonely at the top, and the Mustang would not stay there for very long.

General Motors did not sit by and allow Ford to dominate this new found market without a challenge for very long. No sooner than the Mustang had made its debut, the think-tanks at GM began creating a “pony car” of its own that could compete with the Mustang on its own terms. This car, which would first be made available to the public in 1967, was the Camaro. The Camaro became a classic overnight, and it immediately challenged the Mustang for supremacy in the “pony car” class.

These two cars would continue their battle through the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and even the 1990s. Their battle for pony car supremacy is a constant reminder to all of us of how things used to be. The Mustang and the Camaro are our links to the past. They are vehicles that changed as the years have gone by, while at the same time drawing us back into years gone by simply by creating an image of what hot rodding and cruising used to be.

As we begin to talk about the legacy of the car and how it left its mark on popular culture, we have to ask what actually defines a legacy. As it relates to culture, I think that for a thing to have a lasting legacy it must have changed the culture in some way. That thing may not necessarily be positive, and it may not necessarily be healthy for the culture, but it did change it in some way. Some say that the assassination of President Kennedy
changed the generation of the 1960s in a very profound way. After his death the entire
country seemed to have been snapped out of its exuberant youth, its innocence. Many
people no longer seemed as excited and optimistic about the future after his death.
Although this event was a very tragic one, it did have a profound effect on the culture, and
left a legacy that is still felt and remembered even today.

The automobile created a change in the American consciousness. Before the car
ascended to its apex of prominence, much of the culture had a different outlook on life.
Times before the car were slower, more laid back. People were not in a hurry to get from
one place to another because they did not have the ability to do so. The car shrank the
nation, making it smaller without ever removing a single grain of sand. People could now
travel in a few hours distances that had previously taken them days. A trip to grandma’s
house that used to be a once per year adventure could now become a weekend excursion.
The car became a vital part of people’s everyday lives that they could not live without, and
most began to forget that there was a time when they did actually live without it.

But more importantly, the car became an icon. As more car manufacturers entered
the market trying to capitalize on people’s thirst for an object that was both functional and
individualistic, styling and performance became the most important attributes of the car.
The styling craze of the early 1950s was a reflection of people’s desire for individuality in
a world dominated by cookie cutter homes and the 2.5 child family. The car gave people
an escape, a way to show the rest of the world who you were and why you were
important. Because of this desire for individuality, the car became an inseparable part of
the culture, and the culture became an inseparable part of it.
This lack of separation is evidenced by the benchmarks of the culture. Cars can be found in songs, movies, advertisements, news footage, virtually anything that people will look upon in the future when studying the 1950s and 1960s will have a car involved with it in some fashion or another. And the car, of course, reflected the needs of the culture. When people desired low slung cars that were sleek, the stylists provided cars with laid back lines, low profiles, and big tires. When family values became the latest trend, every car manufacturer was rushing around to get the latest station wagon onto the showroom floor. When speed, power, and living dangerously became the latest trends, Detroit was happy to oblige with cars that produced more power and speed than could ever possibly be used. The car and the culture go hand in hand with one another more so in the 1950s and 1960s than at any other time. This is the legacy that car leaves behind it.

I searched throughout the entire time that I was working on this thesis for one thing, one icon, or person, or cultural characteristic that truly defined what the car has meant to people and how it effects of their lives. Throughout the sixteen weeks that I have worked on this project I have not been able to find that one object, though I have found many that when combined together form the statement I would like to make. Then, two days prior to the completion of this thesis I heard an old song, (well, old for me, I was born in 1977), whose lyrics said exactly what my sentiments were in this thesis.

The song entitled “My Old Yellow Car” was recorded by a country music singer by the name of Dan Seals in the mid-1980s. It is a song about a man reminiscing about the good old days in his “old yellow car” and how much better things were back then. The man is now very successful and cannot be seen driving around town in an old beat up jalopy. In this song, though, he laments the loss of the old days and how he longs for their
return. These few verses symbolize for me the American car, its impact upon culture, and
the legacy it leaves behind.

"Old Yellow Car"

She weren't much to look at
She weren't much to ride
She was missing a window
On her passenger side
The floorboard was patched up
With paper and tar
But I really was something
In my old yellow car

An American boy
With his hands on the wheel
Of a dream that was made of
American steel
Oh the seats had the smell of
A nickel cigar
I really was something
In my old yellow car

Somewhere in pile
Of rubber and steel
There's a rusty old shell of
An automobile
And if engines could run
On desires alone
That old yellow car
Would be driving me home

There's the seat where poor Billy
Threw up on his date
And where Larry and Sandy
Could no longer wait
There was no road too winding
And no where too far
On two bucks of gas
And my old yellow car
Somewhere in pile
Of rubber and steel
There's a rusty old shell of
An automobile
And if engines could run
On desires alone
That old yellow car
Would be driving me home

Take a look at me now
Throwing money around
And paying somebody
To drive me downtown
Got a Mercedes Benz
With a TV and bar
God I wish I was driving
My old yellow car....

The End
1 James Thompson, Interview by Jason Thompson, June 26, 1998.
3 The Car Culture, p. 6.
4 The Car Culture, p. 7.
5 The Car Culture, p. 8.
6 The Car Culture, p. 9.
7 The Car Culture, p. 11.
8 The Car Culture, p. 15.
9 The Car Culture, p. 16.
10 The Car Culture, p. 68-69.
11 The Car Culture, p. 69-70.
13 The Car Culture, p. 75.
14 The Car Culture, p. 75-78.
15 The Car Culture, p. 76.
16 The Automobile Age, p. 230.
17 The Automobile Age, p. 231.
18 The Automobile Age, p. 232.
19 The Automobile Age, p. 87.
20 The Automobile Age, p. 233.
21 The Automobile Age, p. 235.
22 The Automobile Age, p. 235.
23 The Automobile Age, p. 235.
24 The Automobile Age, p. 236.
26 Populuxe, p. 84.
27 Populuxe, p. 87.
28 Populuxe, p. 93-94.
29 Populuxe, p. 96.
30 Populuxe, p. 99.
32 The Fifties, p. 51.
33 The Fifties, p. 52.
34 The Fifties, p. 55.
35 The Fifties, p. 55-56.
37 Driving Passion, p. 83.
38 Driving Passion, p. 84.
39 Driving Passion, p. 84-85.
40 Driving Passion, p. 85.
41 Bill Pavey, Interview by Jason Thompson, July 23, 1998.
42 Driving Passion, p. 85-86.
43 Driving Passion, p. 93.
Transcription Number One

Name: James R. Thompson

Relation to Thesis: Primary Source. James is my father, and grew up during the era around which this thesis is based. He has real life experiences that tell a more complete story than many volumes of books could tell. He has owned, raced, and cruised in many of the vehicles described in this text, and is also a hot rodder himself. He is currently building a 1963 Chevy Nova Station Wagon street rod. His experience represents the changes that this generation has endured over the years.

Q: Where did your interest in cars come from?
A: I don’t think that I really had much of a choice in the matter. Where I went to school the only thing really fun to do was hang out at the drive-ins on Friday and Saturday nights. Even before I had my license, I was hanging out at these places with my friends who could drive.

Q: Describe for me, if you will, the atmosphere present at these drive-ins and hangouts.
A: The drive-ins was a place to see and be seen. Just like in school, you had your rich kids in their new, fancy cars with shiny new paint jobs and the like. You had the middle class kids who were driving around in their hopped up older cars, and then you had the poor kids like me, driving around in my mom’s Pontiac Catalina.

Q: What did you guys do all night?
A: Well, most people started showing up around dusk or so, and we’d usually grab a bite to eat. Shortly after that was when the showboating and grandstanding would start. Some guy might stop his car, and then hammer down on it so hard that the tires would smoke on takeoff. Others
would drive around revving their engines so loud that you thought they might blow at any minute. As this grandstanding continued, eventually the talk would turn to racing. Guys would race over just about anything. Some guys would race for money, others to protect their reputation, some would race because they thought that a red car was faster than a blue one, but the main reason that guys raced was because there were girls around. You just couldn’t let yourself be disgraced with other girls around, whether you could win the race or not.

Q: Do you remember any particular races that were outstanding in some way?

A: Most of the races were just for kicks, and everyone knew who was going to win before they ever lined up. There were considerable differences in cars back then, and if your car was slower than the other guy’s, that was the end of the story. I did have one friend who had an old Camaro who went too far. We used to live up on Barren River Road at the bottom of a hill. My friend had this big block Camaro and he always got a kick of coming up that hill so fast that he could get airborne at the top of the hill. One morning he did this without knowing that a farmer had pulled out onto the road in front of him. When he came over the hill, in the air, he landed that Camaro in the bed of the farmer’s truck. The crash killed him instantly, as the impact placed that big block chevy motor right in his lap.

Q: What were some of the more popular cars that you remember?

A: In my day, the Impala, the Chevelle, and the Chevy II were the most popular cars. The Impala was famous for that 409, the one the Beach Boys sang about. The Chevelle was your big, powerful muscle car. These cars were the race cars of choice. The Chevy II was popular because it was the most affordable, and they were light. It didn’t take much to make those cars go really fast. That was one crowd. The Mopar crowd was the real deal. This group had the Dart, the Super Bee, the Charger, and the Barracuda. The Barracuda was the most feared car on the strip.
I knew a couple of guys that had those with the hemi engines in them, and those guys were unbeatable. The Ford crowd didn’t really have much, other than the Galaxy and the Fairlane. That was, at least, until they came out with the Mustang. The Mustang came out in, I think, ’64 or ’65, and then Chevy came out with the Camaro a few years later. Both of these cars were really fast, but I think they signaled a big change, because these cars were much smaller than the older cars and for the most part, they didn’t have near as much power as the cars before them did.

Q: Why do you think that hot rodding and drag racing has held on as long as it has?

A: I think most people are trying to hold on to their past, to sort of relive their childhood. In my case, I can afford cars now that I could only admire as a teenager. By buying these cars and restoring them, I can recapture some of that childhood that I couldn’t afford to have at the time. I think that is the most important reason why hot rodding is still so popular. Another thing is that you can purchase an old car, and with a little patience and hard work, you can actually build the car up the way you like it for about half of the cost of a brand new car. You have a car that is unique to you and you’re not in debt for decades. It just makes more sense.

Q: Thank you for your time Dad.

A: You are certainly welcome.
Name: Bill Pavey

Relation to Thesis: Bill Pavey is the owner and builder of perhaps the finest example of a hopped up 1955 Chevy in the entire country. His vehicle is custom, boasting attributes such as an all aluminum five hundred and two inch big block chevy, equipped with dual edelbrock carburetors that puts out over 550 horsepower, a custom tweed interior that rivals that of many modern luxury cars, a three inch lowering job, and torch red paint that shines through 5 coats of laquer. His vehicle has been featured in numerous calendars and magazines, and Bill is considered one of the foremost experts on 1955 Chevrolet restorations. He is a genuine certified car nut.

Q: I need your name, and the kind of car that you have.
A: Name's Bill Pavey and I drive a 1955 Chevrolet.

Q: How did you come into the decision of building a 1955 Chevrolet, what was your motivation for building it?
A: I've built about three of them. I've built '56 Chevs, and I've built '57 Chevs. This is just what I happened to find at the time, so I built it.

Q: How important was this car, like when you were growing up as a teenager? Was the fact this was the car to have, the car to hot rod, that had the most to do with it?
A: Probably was, because when I was 16, I bought a '56 Chevy, and I was always partial to those.
Q: I've always read that the 1955 and 1956 Chevy is the most popular car in American culture, do you think that is true?
Q: Can you give me an overview of what it was like? What was cruising and racing like in the 1950s and 1960s? How important was that compared with today?
A: Well, back in the '60s, that's when I started cruising was in '62, we were pretty much concerned with how fast it would go. We'd come into town all the time and hunt races, which is kind of illegal. That's what we did.
Q: Yeah, but you can't get away with that now.
A: No, but we still got the cars and cars are hotter and faster than they even were back then. I think that it's just in our blood. That's my age.
Q: Thank you bill, I appreciate you sharing your time and your thoughts.
A: No problem. Thank you.
Name: Larry Perkins

Relation to Thesis: Larry is the owner of a 1933 Plymouth Sedan. His relation is that he represents the trend in hot rodding of going back to older cars, restoring them, and modernizing them with more modern equipment. His car is equipped with a new Chevy three hundred and fifty cubic inch small block, backed by a three fifty turbo automatic transmission. Inside, this car is equipped with corinthian leather seats, tilt steering, digital gauges, and air conditioning. None of these options were available in 1934. His interview speaks to the legacy of hot rodding and how the hobby has grown over the years. In 1933, his car brand new was probably valued at $2500. Today, in its current state, it would be valued at over $50,000!

Q: I need your name, and the kind of car that you drive.

A: My name is Larry Perkins, and I have a 1933 Plymouth, four door sedan.

Q: Ok Larry, what I would like to have you discuss with me is why cruising is important to you and why it’s important to other people. Also, talk to me some about car shows, parades, and that kind of thing.

A: Well, the reason I think it’s important for me, personally for myself, is that it’s something that I got into that my wife and I can do together, and we can work together on it and enjoy it as opposed to golf or something like that that I can’t. I think the reason that other people get into the car shows is just to have a reason to sit and visit with other
people, get to know other people, and just get to see all of the unique things that other people do to their automobiles.

Q: What do you think has changed over the years, do you think there is anything different now from, say, like during the 1960s, when cruising was really in vogue?

A: Well, the big thing that has changed is that so many people have gotten involved in it, and of course all of these companies have gotten involved so that you can easier get parts and things to work on these cars with, to rebuild and restore cars, I think just the sheer number of automobiles out there now is the biggest difference.

Q: Speaking of the number of automobiles, your vehicles is more of what they call a street rod. What do you think is the appeal of a street rod to people, because they are very, very popular?

A: Well, I think the big difference is that everybody’s got their own little different things that they like to do, whether it be the dash or the wheels or whatever. A street machine is something that people look at as being a little more powerful. A street rod is something that you just start out on and you just have to have a lot of imagination as far as getting parts for them and putting them together.

Q: Well, thank you Larry. I appreciate the time.

A: Thank you.