

# THE TWENTIES IN CONTEMPORARY COMMENTARY



Indiana Historical Society

traffic safety poster, ca. 1925

## — THE AUTOMOBILE —

“Why on earth do you need to study what’s changing this country?” exclaimed an Indiana resident during an interview in 1929. “I can tell you what’s happening in just four letters: A-U-T-O!” What more was there to say? Plenty, it seemed, as the media of the day were filled with commentary on the a-u-t-o and where it was taking America at breakneck speed.

Darrow was the famous defense attorney in the Scopes Trial, the Leopold-Loeb murder trial, and other headline-dominating cases of the 1920s. In his memoir he mused on a range of social issues.

Clarence Darrow  
*The Story of My Life*  
 1932

The day of the horse is gone. The automobile has driven him from the roads. The boys and men and women of this generation must have automobiles. Those who manufacture them and sell them have made fortunes unknown in any former age. Every automobile costs more to sell than to make. No one can even guess at the cost of this new invention to the country or the change that it has brought to life. New roads have been built at great expense so men may ride quickly to some point so they can ride back more quickly if possible. Finance companies have helped the poor to get further into debt; an automobile complex demanding haste, change, and going and coming, has taken possession of mankind. With all the rest, it has furnished an extra harvest of unfortunates for our prisons.

Men and women, boys and girls, who were adjusted to the life of the past cannot stand the new environment. These machines have been used to make a quick trip to the doctor to save human life, to make a long trip to a bank or store in the night to aid in a burglary, all in order to keep up with the progress and process of a moving world. The automobile symbolizes both good and evil. The organism of man is not so adjustable and changeable as his inventions. It will take him a long time to accustom himself to the automobile age. Before that time comes the airplane most likely will have taken the place of the “horseless wagon,” and the human system will have accustomed itself to fresh demands accordingly.

Robert S. Lynd & Helen Merrell Lynd  
*Middletown: A Study in American Culture*  
1929

Selected in 1924 as atypical town of “middle America,” Muncie, Indiana, was the focus of two sociologists’ research into the changes wrought in modernizing America since the late 1890s.



“Why on earth do you need to study what’s changing this country?” said a lifelong resident and shrewd observer of the Middle West. “I can tell you what’s happening in just four letters: A-U-T-O!”



The modern housewife has lost the art of cooking. She buys cuts of meat that are easily and quickly cooked, whereas in the nineties her mother bought big chunks of meat and cut them up and used them in various ways. Folks today want to eat in a hurry and get out in the car.



Men in the clothing industry are convinced that automobiles are bought at the expense of clothing, and the statements of a number of working class wives bear this out:

“We’d rather do without clothes than give up the car,” said one mother of nine children. “We used to go to his sister’s to visit, but by the time we’d get the children shoed and dressed there wasn’t any money left for [street]carfare. Now no matter how they look, we just poke ’em in the car and take ’em along.”

“We don’t have no fancy clothes when we have the car to pay for,” said another. “The car is the only pleasure we have.”

Even food may suffer:

“I’ll go without food before I’ll see us give up the car,” said one woman emphatically, and several who were out of work were apparently making precisely this adjustment.

Allen D. Albert  
“The Social Influence of the Automobile”  
*Scribner’s*, June 1922

No one of us can measure such a development in transportation. Perhaps you recall [Thomas] Macaulay’s saying: “Of all inventions, the alphabet and printing press alone excepted, those that have

shortened distance have done the most for humanity.”

Are you still shocked by reading “Auto Bandits” in the headlines? Have you passed at the side of a country road a car with no lights and two young figures shoulder against shoulder in a corner of the rear seat? Do you know that banks are still refusing to make loans for the buying of cars? Have you observed the bootlegger in the automobile, the doctor in his little coupe, the rural [postal] carrier in his little Ford, the children in the school bus?

We have in 1921 about nine million motor cars in the United States, hardly a third as many as our horses. Yet I think there can be no serious question that the motor car has come to be more important to us socially than the horse.

The most comprehensive change it has wrought for us has been the general widening of the circle of our life. City folk feel this in the evening and at the weekend. Farmer folk feel it from early morning till bedtime every day. . . . Farm men race to town to meetings of the farm bureau, farm women to meetings of the domestic science [homemaking] clubs; all of them to the circus or the movies or the winter concert season. In our youth such expeditions would have required half a day in travel. In our motoring middle life, they require less than half an hour each way. . . .

Strange-looking driveways called “filling stations” with glowing lamps at night, long railroad trains of tankcars, streets painted with white lines to mark zones of safety for pedestrians and parking spaces for cars—how almost without a pause in our thinking have we adjusted our lives to these factors new since yesterday!



W. T. Murch, illustration for Chase Stuart, *Men and Machines*, 1929

Walter Prichard Eaton  
 "The Billboard Curse"  
*The Forum*, November 1923

I own two automobiles. As one or the other is almost sure to go [operate], I regard them as indispensable. To be sure, men lived rather well, and rather happily, in the house where I now dwell for the better part of a century before automobiles were invented. But they also lived without bathrooms. I have no desire to emulate them in either simplicity.

But the constantly increasing flow of motor traffic on our highways, the constantly increasing congestion in our towns and cities, the mounting toll of life from accidents, the rising taxes to meet the demand for more paved roads, and especially the desecration, in spots almost the obliteration, of our fairest landscapes by the advertising signs and ugly filling stations and cheap refreshment booths which have followed in the motor's wake, surely ought to give us pause.

It is easy enough to be humorously satirical about the advertising signs, about the people who dash from place to place seeing nothing of the country leaving their litter of lunch boxes by beds of fern and goldenrod, talking only of mileage and tire troubles, but it gets us nowhere. The problem is beyond satire. Perhaps it is beyond solution. But certainly if America is to remain a safe, comfortable, and attractive place to live and to move about in, we have got to find some way to conquer this machine which appears to have conquered us.



regular humor feature in *Life*

It has recently been computed that in the United States there is one death due to automobile accidents every thirty-one minutes during the sixteen waking hours. Every year now you have one chance in ten thousand of being run over and killed. But do not be discouraged. Next year it ought to be one chance in nine thousand. And if you are still alive in ten years, you will be dead before you know it. Progress is our watchword.

Nov 25, 1920

Nearly one hundred thousand people were killed last year by accidents. If the rate continues to increase, maybe after a while we won't have to have any wars.

June 30, 1921

Deaths from automobiles increased 13% in 1921 over 1920. Practice makes perfect.

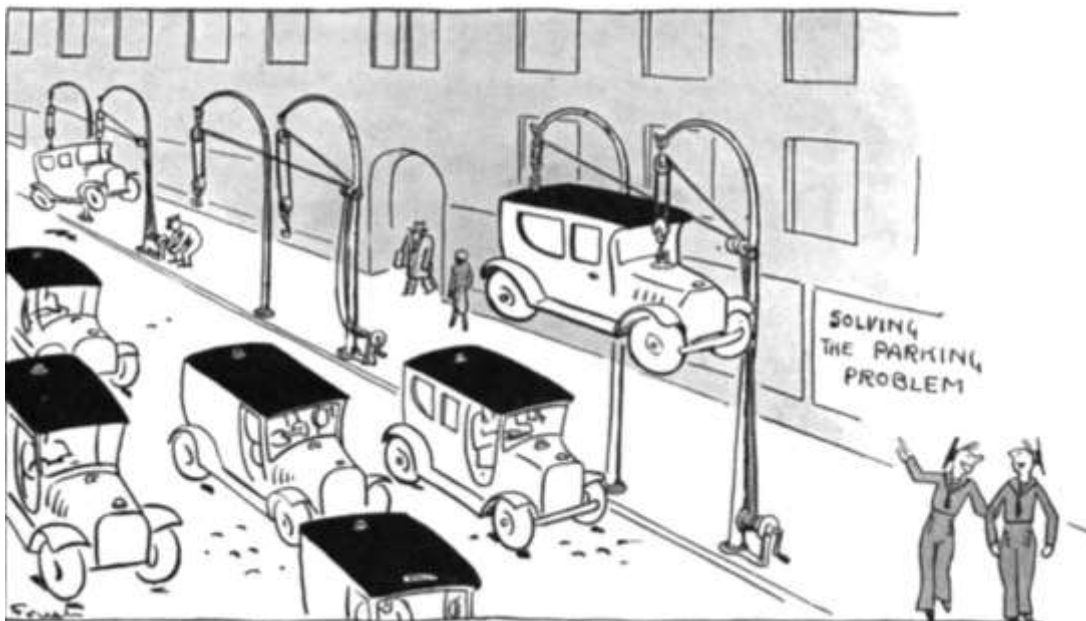
March 23, 1922

We are heartily in sympathy with the plan to apply a literacy test to all applicants for automobile licenses. If they can only be taught to read three words, "Stop, Look, and Listen!" there will be a lot less news in Monday morning's papers.

☪☪☪

Little flasks of silver,  
 Midnight rides by twos,  
 Put the railroad crossings  
 In the daily news.

March 12, 1925



Reproduced by permission of the *New Yorker*.

Al Frueh, "Solving the Parking Problem," *The New Yorker*, May 8, 1926

## "The Murderous Motor"

Editorial

*The New Republic*, July 7, 1926

Complete figures dealing with automobile accidents in 1925 have recently been made public. They reveal that safety on the highway, or the present lack of it, may now fairly be reckoned as one of the major problems of the day. Last year more than 22,000 persons were killed in or by automobiles, and something like three quarters of a million injured. The number of dead is almost half as large as the list of fatalities during the nineteen months of America's participation in the Great War. In sixty percent of the cases, the person killed was a pedestrian struck by a car. Six thousand of these dead were children. Moreover, the automobile toll is increasing. The 1925 total is ten percent larger than that for 1924. . . .

Naturally, the enormous waste [loss] of life has not gone unnoted, nor have we lacked efforts to reduce it. . . . The fact is, the automobile is changing the whole face of our civilization so profoundly, and so rapidly, that society as yet does not realize the scope of the development, and is tardy in enacting measures and changing old habits to meet the needs of a new day. No phenomenon in history presents any parallel for this sudden rush to the roads. There are already four cars for every five families, while the number of drivers can hardly be less than half the total number of adults (in California it is almost equal to that number). Not only is this true, but no previous type of vehicle has been used to any comparable extent. On a basis of distance covered, man's mobility must have been increased at least twenty times. . . .

It is probably true that much of the present waste of life is inevitable and will continue no matter what preventive measures are taken. It is part of the price we have to pay for the new era which, whether it is worth what it costs or not, is certainly here to stay.

## TOPICS IN BRIEF

*The Literary Digest*

The *Literary Digest*, a weekly magazine that offered excerpted commentary from major periodicals, featured two humor sections, "Topics in Brief" (one-liners) and "The Spice of Life" (jokes); items from both are presented here. Dates indicate publication in the *Digest*.

Bad news for the pedestrian: Another reduction in the price of cars.

*Indianapolis News*—LD: July 2, 1921

The doom of the automobile is approaching. It will arrive when they are so thick on the highway that none of them can move.

*Columbus Dispatch*—LD: July 23, 1921

We might save time and point a moral by locating our cemeteries at points where automobile highways make sharp turns.

*Baltimore Sun*—LD: Aug. 20, 1921

There is one automobile to every fourteen persons in the United States, and the thirteen other persons are always in the way of the one automobile at street intersections.

*New York Evening Mail*—LD: Aug. 27, 1921

With so many automobiles, the supply of pedestrians will soon be much short of the demand.

*Nashville Banner*—LD: Sept. 10, 1921

What we wish is that Henry Ford would now concentrate his genius on the quantity production of parking places.

*Ohio State Journal*—LD: July 29, 1922

TRAFFIC COP:—"Hey you! Didn't you hear me yelling for you to stop?"

AUTO FIEND—"Oh! Was that you yelling? I thought that was just somebody I had run over."

*Dry Goods Economist*—LD: Aug. 19, 1922

IRATE CUSTOMER: "I bought a car of you several weeks ago, and you said if anything went wrong you'd supply the broken parts."

DEALER—"Yes."

IRATE CUSTOMER—"I'd like to get a nose, a shoulder blade, and a big toe."

*Manitoba Free Press*—LD: Sept. 16, 1922

An American who claims to be the oldest motorist in the world is a hundred and eleven. The odds are increasingly against anything like that age being attained by a pedestrian.

*Punch* (London)—LD: Sept. 23, 1922



"YOU ARE ALIVE NOW — DON'T TAKE A CHANCE," railroad crossing warning sign, Dixie Highway, Florida, August 8, 1924  
State Archives of Florida

“Voice of the People”  
Letters to the Editor  
*Chicago Tribune*, May 26, 1928

CHAMPAIGN, ILL., MAY 21 [1928]—I am not in favor of 40-foot roads for Illinois or any other state. Forty foot roads will be all right for today, but not for tomorrow. Today we are driving 35 to 40 miles per hour, and tomorrow we will be driving 50 to 60 miles per hour, as cars are already being built for higher speed.

What we need and will have to have is two slabs of 20 feet each with a 10-foot parkway between them for separation, as well as for stalled cars and tire trouble, and one-way traffic on a slab. That is the only solution to safe travel at high speed.

FRED L. CANNON

CHICAGO, MAY 21 [1928]—You publish day by day full particulars of deaths caused by autos, but I have never as yet seen any mention of the hundreds of lives which are “saved” every day by auto drivers, many of them crushing the wheels of their cars by crashing into curbs, trees, etc., in order to avoid running over careless pedestrians walking on the streets with their minds on anything and everything excepting using their eyes, ears, and brain to avoid accident.

It is enough to give the careful auto driver heart diseases to drive on many streets filled with little children at play in the middle of the street with their parents seated on the porch a hundred feet away.

FRED PARKER

## CAN'T CONTROL MODERN TRAFFIC

Low Runners and High Flyers  
Too Much for City  
Officials

MONROVIA, Nov. 7.—Modern traffic has completely confused city officials of Monrovia. They're ready to admit defeat and call it quits.

About a year ago, they attempted traffic regulation by installation of red “blinkers” in large steel frames set in a concrete base. A confused woman driver hit one on Foothill Boulevard and reduced it to bits. An unknown early-morning motorist smashed into one at Huntington Drive and left it on crumpled cement chunks. So many automobiles got tangled up around one in the main business section that police demanded its removal. Thus, one by one, the “blinkers” passed.

“I suppose an airplane will swoop down and smash our highway sign,” exclaimed one exasperated City Trustee, referring to a large electric sign, “Monrovia,” which hung twenty-five feet above Huntington Drive and Myrtle avenue.

He doubtless intended this statement as a joke but early this morning a steam shovel, with a towering crane, passed along Huntington Drive.

And thus passed Monrovia's final effort to keep a sign on the highway.

*Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 8, 1926



Detroit Public Library

downtown Detroit, ca. 1920

Walter Lionel George  
*Hail Columbia!: Random Impressions  
of a Conservative English Radical, 1921*

W. L. George was an English writer, a lover of America, and a social liberal, despite the tongue-in-cheek subtitle of *Hail Columbia!*, a memoir of his 1920 travels throughout the U.S.

I have several times referred to the automobile, and you may think that I am an old-fashioned partisan of the stagecoach, which is not the case. It is good to see that the American city has emancipated itself from the horse, but I do believe that the automobile is having an evil effect upon the country. It has made the center of some towns almost uninhabitable. Before a window on North Michigan Boulevard in Chicago, three thousand automobiles pass every hour. The night is filled with mechanical sounds; the throttles are open; the automobiles are parked outside hotels, and the engines allowed to run; it is like sleeping in a garage. The streets are clotted; in Fifth Avenue [New York City], for instance, between four and half past five, any fat old lady will walk six blocks while a vehicle passes two. The automobile, at certain hours, is making the traffic of Manhattan unmanageable. It will drive the city of New York into the immensely costly expedient of cutting underground motor roads in the rock, or to the more revolutionary method of building elevated roads over the old elevated railways and over certain cross-streets. All that because scores of thousands of people want to get about. Watch the line of automobiles in the afternoon, near, let us say, the New York Public Library; not one in ten is a commercial vehicle. You will say that this is luxurious New York, but I have seen the same thing in little towns of New England, in St. Louis, in Kansas City. Traffic is mostly composed of people who are getting about for excessive pleasure or hardly necessary business. This leads one to the conclusion that America is getting about to too many places, trying to handle in one day too many jobs, and in one night too many pleasures.



"Modern Traffic," *The Nation*, Sept. 15, 1926

Felix Graf von Luckner  
*Seeteufel erobert Amerika*  
[*Sea Devil Conquers America*]  
1928

A former German naval officer who earned the nickname "Sea Devil" during World War I, von Luckner was received warmly during a 1926 speaking tour of the U.S. due to his reputation as a commander who minimized war casualties.

The immense volume of traffic in America invariably strikes me with astonishment. In our large cities [in Germany] we have the same means of transportation, but everything here is pitched on a larger scale; matters are more simply, more practically, organized. . . .

To grasp the magnitude of the automobile problem, one must realize that New York alone has more cars than all of Europe. I am told that every fourth person here owns a car. Workers and simple people have their own machines, which they naturally drive themselves. The auto is not a luxury here; it is in somewhat the same category as a bicycle among us, a simple means of transportation that makes possible residence outside the city. Those for whom a new vehicle is too expensive can cheaply buy a used car someone has traded in. Some can even more cheaply make cars for themselves; they need only go to the great auto junkyards on the outskirts of the city, collect usable parts from the old machines abandoned there, and put together their own. This is not considered illegal robbery but rather a sign of cleverness; a man makes something useful out of worthless trash.

# TRAFFIC TIPS IN BIBLE PARLANCE

*Modern Police Edition of  
Commandments Out*

*Twentieth Century Version  
Guide to Safety*

*Heath Issues Tablet and  
Mayor Approves It*

The Ten Commandments undoubtedly implied an additional ten commandments for citizens of the twentieth century, and Mayor George E. Cryer and Acting Chief of Police A. W. Murray today put the stamp of their approval on an additional decalogue for motorists and pedestrians who are willing to take such precautions as are necessary to avoid meeting an untimely end of their career on this terrestrial globe.

The ten traffic commandments were written by Deputy Chief of Police Cleveland Heath, commander of the police traffic division. He has traveled over all parts of America studying traffic problems and before setting forth ten rules for conduct to avoid accidents he studied the charts compiled by the bureau of records and ascertained the ten chief causes for sudden death on our city streets.

Motorists and pedestrians are instructed that holy writ implies and suggests all of these additional ten commandments for safety in traffic. Impartially compiled statistics prove that every sane citizen should heed this supplementary decalogue:

## SHOWING THE WIND

(1.) Thou shalt not travel at an excessive speed, either by night or by day, or on any highway! for they that "sow the wind shall reap the whirlwind."

(2.) Thou shalt not drive when there is even so much as a drop of alcoholic liquor within thee; lest thy days be short or thou becomest the slayer of thy neighbor.

(3.) Thou shalt not jaywalk, for a jaywalker in the path of an automobile is like the chaff which the wind driveth away.

(4.) Thou shalt not steal the "right of way," neither shalt thou fail to stop at boulevards; lest there be weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth and the Angel of Death follow thy wake.

(5.) Thou shalt not cut in ahead of another automobile at any curve or turn or at any place without sufficient clearance, for they that heed not this commandment shall perish from the face of the earth and may shed the blood of the innocent.

## AS TO LOITERERS

(6.) Thou shalt not loiter nor amuse thyself in the streets or thoroughfares, lest thy joy be turned to sorrow and the undertakers wax exceedingly fat through thy folly.

(7.) Thou shalt not fail to look to the right and to the left, before thee and behind thee, and to use all the brains with which thou wert endowed when approaching railroad crossings, lest thy flesh and bones be scattered and you and those that travel with thee shall know thee as their slayer.

(8.) Thou shalt not fail to signal, either when thou desireth to turn or to stop thy automobile, lest thou lure thy neighbor to destruction or thyself to an unhallowed end.

(9.) Thou shalt have no glaring headlights upon thy automobile or motorcycle or any vehicle thou wouldst maintain; for they that heed not this commandment are like unto a great pestilence.

(10.) Thou shalt heed the welfare of all that live; doing unto others as thou wouldst be done by, so that thou shalt be beloved in the land.

*Los Angeles Times  
August 2, 1925*

Sinclair Lewis  
*Babbitt*  
Novel, 1922

In Lewis's novel of changing times in America of 1920, businessman George Babbitt brings up the prospect of buying a

new car during dinner conversation with his wife, teenaged son Ted, and daughters Verona and Tinka.

"Sort o' thinking about buying a new car. Don't believe we'll get one till next year, but still we might."

Verona, the older daughter, cried, "Oh, Dad, if you do, why don't you get a sedan? That would be perfectly slick! A closed car is so much more comfy than an open one."

"Well now, I don't know about that. I kind of like an open car. You get more fresh air that way."

"Oh, shoot, that's just because you never tried a sedan. Let's get one. It's got a lot more class," said Ted.

"A closed car does keep the clothes nicer," from Mrs. Babbitt; "You don't get your hair blown all to pieces," from Verona; "It's a lot sportier," from Ted; and from Tinka, the youngest, "Oh, let's have a sedan! Mary Ellen's father has got one." Ted wound up, "Oh, everybody's got a closed car now, except us!"

Babbitt faced them: "I guess you got nothing very terrible to complain about! Anyway, I don't keep a car just to enable you children to look like millionaires! And I like an open car, so you can put the top down on summer evenings and go out for a drive and get some good fresh air. Besides—A closed car costs more money."

"Aw, gee whiz, if the Doppelbraus can afford a closed car, I guess we can!" prodded Ted.

"Humph! I make eight thousand a year to his seven! But I don't blow it all in and waste it and throw it around, the way he does! Don't believe in this business of going and spending a whole lot of money to show off and—"

They went, with ardor and some thoroughness, into the matters of streamline bodies, hill-climbing power, wire wheels, chrome steel, ignition systems, and body colors. It was much more than a study of transportation. It was an aspiration for knightly rank. In the city of Zenith, in the barbarous twentieth century, a family's motor indicated its social rank as precisely as the grades of the peerage determined the rank of an English family—indeed, more precisely, considering the opinion of old county families upon newly created brewery barons and woolen-mill viscounts. The details of precedence were never officially determined. There was no court to decide whether the second son of a Pierce Arrow limousine should go in to dinner before the first son of a Buick roadster, but of their respective social importance there was no doubt; and where Babbitt as a boy had aspired to the presidency, his son Ted aspired to a Packard twin-six and an established position in the motored gentry.

Katherine F. Gerould  
"Modern Comfort"  
*Harper's*, May 1927

I do not like motor cars, myself, and never use one except for a definite purpose of speed or convenience. . . . The motor car enables us to visit places with ease that once were visited only with difficulty. Above all, it enables us to move faster, to keep a dozen engagements where we kept one before. Like

the telegraph and telephone, it is invaluable in speeding up first aid—the fire engine, the physician, the policeman. Certainly it permits us all to follow Nietzsche's precept: "Live dangerously." Yet one is dogged and haunted, in spite of oneself, by the old question: *What for?*



State Archives of Florida

Young man with his Chevrolet, St. Petersburg, Florida, 1924



William Ashdown  
"Confessions of an Automobilst"  
*The Atlantic Monthly*, June 1925

The paramount ambition of the average man a few years ago was to own a home and have a bank account. This ambition of the same man today is to own a car. While the desire for home ownership is still strong, I believe people are giving less thought to the home and more to the car as an indicator of social position. The house stands still; only a chosen few can see the inside. But the car goes about; everybody sees it, and many observers know what it cost. . . .

Not only is the car a symbol of the social and business status of the owner, but its loss is a calamity. I have never known a man to give up an automobile once owned, except to buy a better one. The experience of the finance companies is that only an insignificant percentage of the cars financed by them are ever repossessed. In other words, the car stays sold, no matter what hardships may attend its keeping. It takes courage of no mean order to confess to the world that you have had a motor [car] and have lost it. Therefore the car is the last sacrifice to be offered on the altar of reverses. . . .

The avalanche of automobile owners is not a good omen. . . . The race to outdo the other fellow is a mad race indeed. The ease with which a car can be purchased on the time-payment plan is all too easy a road to ruin. The habit of thrift will never be acquired through so wasteful a medium as an automobile. Instead, the habit of spending must be acquired, for with the constant demand for fuel, oil, and repairs, together with the heavy depreciation, the automobile stands unique as the most extravagant piece of machinery ever devised for the pleasure of man.

But—

I still drive one myself. I must keep up with the procession, even though it has taken four cars to do so.

Stuart Chase  
*Prosperity: Fact or Myth?*  
1929

In his analysis of the Twenties economy, Chase outlined the "three great gifts" promised by the automobile, the first two being the "elation of great speed" and its "power to determine social position."

Lastly, and equally important, the automobile, beside the elation of sheer speed, and its power to determine social position, promises romance, adventure, and escape from the monotony which all too often characterizes modern life. Over the hills and far away, an engine throbbing at our doorstep, and North America lies in the hollow of our hands! Mountain, canyon, pass and glacier; mighty rivers, roaring cataracts, the glint of the sea—jump in, step on it, all are yours. This was promised; this was what one felt in his bones when first he bought a car. It fired the blood like wine. . . . And it used to be true. Fifteen years ago, if one could negotiate the roads, he was indeed an explorer in a new world. He did leave his past behind; shake the dust of his city from his shoes. Alas, it is not so true today. With twenty-five million cars upon the roads, the city has spilled over a thousand highways into the country. The old has corrupted the new. Once we could find escape with a motor car. Now how shall we escape from the line which creeps, fender to fender, North, South, East and West; and from the universal Goodrich tire signs, Antique Shoppes, and Come-On-Inns, which greet our eyes? [Ellipsis in original]

But most of us have not tired of this gorgeous toy. Its appeal strikes deep into our innermost natures. It has captured our psychological *interest*, as nothing has ever done before, and as perhaps nothing will ever do again. It is the outstanding Why of American prosperity—both commercial and visible.



Wisconsin, ca. 1920  
Wisconsin Historical Society



Miami, Florida, 1925  
State Archives of Florida



Aurora, Illinois, 1926  
Wisconsin Historical Society

“Where the Car Has Helped the Church”  
*The Literary Digest*  
July 16, 1921

The *Literary Digest* was a weekly periodical that summarized and excerpted commentary from a wide range of magazines and newspapers.

Has the motor-car helped or hindered church attendance? Rumors, apparently well founded, have credited Sunday motoring with being as potent a factor as Sunday golfing in cutting down church attendance. The question was recently put to several clergymen, says *The American Motorist* (Washington), and while there were some who thought that the automobile had been bad for churchgoing, “the predominating impression was that it had been an ally of the church.” Answering the question we are told—

[*Lutheran minister in the East*] “In summer the automobile detracts from the town church and adds to the rural church. In winter we find it helps our attendance. People are able to get out in wet weather, and we have a system of bringing out our children and aged people by a volunteer motor-service league.” . . .

[*Methodist minister in the Midwest*] “. . . many a pastor faces empty pews, particularly at night, while his congregation are out enjoying themselves in their automobiles.” . . .

[*Baptist minister in a Great Lakes city*] “In my own church very few owners of autos have neglected attending church. People who are not strongly religious, however, succumb to the lure of the road and the auto, especially those who work hard all week.” . . .

[*Presbyterian minister in a Southern city*] “People send their children to Sunday School, but stay at home to save themselves for the long afternoon outing [in their cars].” . . .

[*Evangelical minister in the Central States*] “In my own congregation the coming of the automobile has proved a great help. Many of our people live outside of the city and are now able to come in regularly. Our town people attend as well as they formerly did.” . . .

[*Episcopal minister in a Western city*] “Don’t blame the automobile if you think that church attendance has decreased. The automobile is only one of the many factors that have changed the whole world in which we live. The movie, the auto, the lure of the city, the opening of industrial opportunity to women and girls, the telephone, the telegraph, the inexpensive daily paper, the increase of tenantry, the passing of the individual home and the coming of the apartment and flat, the increase of ready-to-wear, ready-to-eat, ready-to-use products, and many other factors have changed our world. Our psychology has changed. Our sense of values is in a state of flux. Great social and industrial problems have entered the field of our common experience. Men’s interests have widened. Men’s ideals of religion have changed. . . .

In itself the automobile is a great advantage to humanity. If we misuse this blessing the cure lies not in new cars for old, but in new men for old. If we have lost out by the coming of the motor-car, the fault is in ourselves. Do not blame the automobile or anything else for keeping people away from church. People ought always to be superior to things. The only place you can locate the causes of conduct is within ourselves. The bane or blessing of anything we have in this world depends on ourselves.

The auto is all right in itself if only gasoline were cheaper.



Wisconsin Historical Society

Automobiles parked near a country church, Perry, Wisconsin, 1924

Charles Merz  
"The Once Open Road"  
*Harper's*, November 1925

Listen to the conversation of two travelers. They have pulled up at the siphons to buy oil. They are complete strangers, voyagers who have passed, met once by chance, and will not meet again. The first is eating a "hot dog" and waiting for his change. He is, as the crow flies, sixteen miles from home. For a traveler on the open road, a client at the filling station, that is a shamefully short distance. Wild horses would not drag the admission from his lips.

He looks at the customer on his left and nods. "How far you come?" he asks, then adds, "Come thirty-five since noon, myself. Not bad for an hour, eh?"

The other cocks his head. He too is heating a "hot dog," while his son removes the wrapping from a chocolate bar.

"No not bad," he says. "Come about that far myself. Let's see. Been on the road an hour and a half and covered forty-six." This with an unseeing glance at his speedometer, which shows plainly that he has covered twenty-five.

"Come from the west, through Freeport?" asks the first.

"Freeport? Yes, that was the name of it. A little town about six miles back."

"Roads good?"

"Roads fair. One detour, with a lot of sand."

"Sand----!"

"Yes, heavy sand. Of course, it don't make any difference to *this* car."

"My car either."

"This car is great on sand."

"Yeh? My car is a bear at sand."

"Hills, too."

"Hills? Say, this car of mine will go up hills like a greased pig shot out of a barrel. Why, coming up a hill near Schuyler Falls [New York] I passed three cars stalling, one of them an eight [cylinder]. Just have to touch the throttle—"

"I know. Same way with mine. Passed a Mercedes back there a way just like it was standing still. Say, this boat of mine—"

"*And distance!* Oh boy, but this car is a bird for distance. Never had her out in my life but I got twenty to the gallon. Never had her out, I guess, but I got twenty-one—"

"Yeh? This car of mine'll just about get that. Nearer twenty-two, I think. And run? Say, runs like a locomotive. Never have to touch her. Haven't had the hood up in two years, I guess."

"No? Me neither. Longer than that, I guess. Must be nearer three. This car—well, good luck and I'll have a look at that sand of yours. Here's my change."

Clutches grind. off on the trail they go, one headed east, one headed west. What does it matter that five miles down the road both will have their coats off, bending over smoky motors? This is a humdrum, mechanistic age, but are men to have no chance at all to tell each other sagas?

The Indians are dead. There are no Blackfeet left to conquer. There is no pioneering to be done, no corner of a wide country undiscovered, no stubborn soil which has never yielded to the plow. What is there left for Americans to make epics of, if not their motors?



Wisconsin Historical Society

Auto fill-up, Kilbourn, Wisconsin, March 1928

Edward S. Martin  
"Model T and the Millennium"  
*Harper's*, February 1928

The introduction of the Ford Model A in late 1927, replacing the no-pizzazz twenty-nine-year-old Model T, was, as the *Harper's* editor aptly described it, "an Event" with a capital E.

Henry Ford's new cars were put on exhibition on the second of December after being introduced by their creator by copious advertisements in about two thousand newspapers. This was not a mere occurrence; that was an Event. The famous Model T has never had an inferiority complex worth mentioning and, though it is and always has been a modest vehicle, it has not avoided publicity. But not all that has been said about it has exceeded its importance. . . .

Model T had to go because it was no longer up to the date. It was not pretty enough, it was not comfortable enough, and it could not go fast enough. All that means progress. The demand for beauty, physical comfort, and for speed is increasing. All of those things imply progress; they all call for great reconstruction of physical and mental life. . . . In all the big towns now there are already more automobiles than the streets can hold and millions more coming. City life is at present very much more hazardous and constrained, and less agreeable than it used to be. It necessitates constant vigilance to avoid being run over and it has actually been slowed up by street congestion. It is too hard on people's nerves. But for the country the motor cars have been an enormous boon, immensely increasing the pleasure of life away from towns. . . .

What a world! What a world! Who really knows what is going on in it. A vast deal certainly both for good and ill which most of us are quite without facilities to measure.

Reinhold Niebuhr  
*Leaves from the Notebook  
of a Tamed Cynic*, 1929

One of the most influential American Protestant theologians, Reinhold Niebuhr pastored a small Detroit congregation in the 1920s and witnessed the effects on auto workers of the year-long closing of the Ford plant while it transitioned to manufacturing the Model A.

The new Ford car is out. The town is full of talk about it. Newspaper reports reveal that it is the topic of the day in all world centers. Crowds storm every exhibit to get the first glimpse of this new creation. Mr. Ford has given out an interview saying that the car has cost him about a hundred million dollars and that after finishing it he still has about a quarter of a billion dollars in the bank.

I have been doing a little arithmetic and have come to the conclusion that the car cost Ford workers at least fifty million in lost wages during the past year. No one knows how many hundreds lost their homes in the period of unemployment, and how many children were taken out of school to help fill the depleted family exchequer [treasury], and how many more children lived on short rations during this period. Mr. Ford refuses to concede that he made a mistake in bringing the car out so late. He has a way of impressing the public even with his mistakes. We are now asked to believe that the whole idea of waiting a year after the old car stopped selling before bringing out a new one was a great advertising scheme which reveals the perspicacity of this industrial genius. But no one asks about the toll in human lives.

What a civilization this is! Naive gentlemen with a genius for mechanics suddenly become the arbiters over the lives and fortunes of hundreds of thousands. Their moral pretensions are credulously accepted at full value. No one bothers to ask whether an industry which can maintain a cash reserve of a quarter of a billion ought not make some provision for its unemployed. It is enough that the new car is a good one. Here is a work of art in the only realm of art which we can understand. We will therefore refrain from making undue ethical demands upon the artist. Artists of all the ages have been notoriously unamenable to moral discipline. The cry of the hungry is drowned in the song, "Henry has made a lady out of Lizzy."



Ford Motor Archives Model A assembly line in the Ford River Rouge plant, 1928

Frederick Lewis Allen  
*Only Yesterday: An Informal History  
of the Nineteen Twenties, 1931*

Labeling himself a “retrospective journalist,” Allen published an informed and widely popular narrative of the 1920s just two years after the decade ended.

If any sign had been needed of the central place which the automobile had come to occupy in the mind and heart of the average American, it was furnished when the Model A Ford was brought out in December 1927. Since the previous spring, when Henry Ford shut down his gigantic plant, scrapped his Model T and the thousands of machines which brought it into being, and announced that he was going to put a new car on the market, the country had been in a state of suspense. . . .

Rumor after rumor broke into the front pages of the newspapers. So intense was the interest that even the fact that an automobile dealer in Brooklyn had “learned something of the new car through a telegram from his brother Henry” was headline stuff. When the editor of the Brighton, Michigan, *Weekly Argus* actually snapped a photograph of a new Ford out for a trial spin, newspaper readers pounced on the picture and avidly discusses its every line. The great day arrived when this newest product of the inventive genius of the age was to be shown to the public. The Ford Motor Company was running in the 2,000 daily newspapers a five-day series of full-page advertisements at a total cost of \$1,300,000; and everyone who could read was reading them. On December 2, 1927, when Model A was unveiled, one million people—so the *Herald-Tribune* figured—tried to get into the Ford headquarters in New York to catch a glimpse of it; as Charles Merz later reported in his life of Ford, “one hundred thousand people flocked into the showrooms of the Ford Company in Detroit; mounted police were called out to patrol the crowds in Cleveland, in Kansas City so great a mob stormed the Convention Hall that platforms had to be built to lift the new car high enough for everyone to see it.” So it went from one end of the United States to the other. . . .

And as it came, it changed the face of America. Villages which had once prospered because they were “on the railroad” languished with economic anemia; villages of Route 61 bloomed with garages, filling stations, hot-dog stands, chicken-dinner restaurants, tearooms, tourists’ rests, camping sites, and affluence. The interurban trolley perished, or survived only as a pathetic anachronism. Railroad after railroad gave up its branch lines, or saw its revenues slowly dwindling under the competition of mammoth interurban busses and trucks snorting along six-lane concrete highways. The whole country was covered with a network of passenger buslines. In thousands of towns, at the beginning of the decade a single traffic officer at the junction of Main Street and Central Street had been sufficient for the control of traffic. By the end of the decade, what a difference!—red and green lights, blinkers, one-way streets, boulevard stops, stringent and yet more stringent parking ordinances—and still a shining flow of traffic that backed up for blocks along Main Street every Saturday and Sunday afternoon. Slowly but surely the age of steam was yielding to the gasoline age.



Al Frueh, “Progress in Rural America”  
*The New Yorker*, June 18, 1927



Carey Orr, “Still Suffering from the Same Old Nightmare”  
*Chicago Tribune*, January 11, 1928  
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