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AUTOMOBILE IN THE 1950s**

By Maggie Walsh



THE ECCLES CENTRE FOR AMERICAN STUDIES
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The Third Eccles Centre for
American Studies Plenary Lecture
given at the British Association
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Professor Maggie Walsh has taught at the Universities of Keele, Birmingham and Nottingham in Departments of American and Canadian Studies and Economic and Social History. She is the author of *The Manufacturing Frontier: Pioneer Industry in Antebellum Wisconsin, 1830-1860* (1972); *The American Frontier Revisited* (1981); *The Rise of the Midwestern Meat Packing Industry* (1982); *Making Connections: The Long-Distance Bus Industry in the USA* (2000) and *The American West: Visions and Revisions* (2005).

Walsh has edited *Motor Transport: Studies in Transport History* (1997) and *Working Out Gender: Perspectives from Labour History* (1999). She guest edited the gender issue of *The Journal of Transport History* 23:1 (2002) and guest co-edited (with Angel Kwolek-Folland), the gender issue of *Business History Review* 83:1 (2007 forthcoming). She has written many articles on business and transport history, on women's labour history and the history of the American west. She has been a joint editor of *Labour History Review* and has served on committees and councils of professional bodies on both sides of the Atlantic. Her current research is focused on women and car driving in the USA after the Second World War.

AT HOME AT THE WHEEL? THE WOMAN AND HER AUTOMOBILE IN THE 1950s

Between October 1950 and June 1956, Charlotte Nichols Montgomery wrote a series of articles for the popular middle-of-the-market women's magazine, *Good Housekeeping*, entitled '*The Woman and her Car*'. In these short pieces she offered advice to her readers on automobile issues, ranging from how to start a car in the cold weather, through the advantages and mores of carpooling, to buying a vehicle. In the introduction to her 1955 book, which was a compilation of her articles with slight variations, Mrs Montgomery claimed to be an average woman in respect to driving cars. She had learned to drive at the age of sixteen, at which point she drove herself to school, picked up her father from the train station and ran family errands. Forbidden by college rules to take her vehicle there, she then only drove during the vacations. After graduating when she and some friends went to Europe, she rented a car. She worked in the city before marrying, when she moved to the suburbs. Here she chauffeured her children and taught her husband and later her children to drive. Then, when she became automobile editor for *Good Housekeeping*, she learned about the mechanics of vehicles and their ownership issues.¹

Charlotte Montgomery was not a typical American woman of the early 1950s, although she may have wished to portray herself as such a person when communicating with the hundreds of thousands of women whom she hoped would become competent drivers.² Directing her attention particularly at the 30+ year-old suburban mothers who increasingly needed to drive their children to school and to extra-curricula activities, she coaxed them into believing that it was part of modern motherhood to be a chauffeuse.³ She was correct. As many more home-making tasks became dependent on automobility, the vehicle soon became a 'home-on-wheels'. Indeed, according to William H. Chafe, one humorist is reputed to have said that a suburban housewife's life was "'motherhood on wheels' [delivering children] obstetrically once and by car forever after."⁴

Though Charlotte Montgomery sought her prime audience among the ever-enlarging numbers of suburban housewives who were becoming the average American woman in the economic boom years of the 1950s, they was not the only women who used cars or for whom the automobile was becoming an essential vehicle. There was no universal female American car occupier. More women did not hold driving licences than did so, and many women waited for their partners to return home to take them shopping or on family errands.⁵ As passengers they liked automobility, its convenience, and its liberating potential,

but they did not yet feel the necessity to drive themselves. They also knew that they were important in the consumption of motorisation because they had to budget for and run the household which was on the way to becoming auto-attached, if not auto-dependent. But whether they fully understood how automobile manufacturers used them as fashion accessories denoting status, style and standards in advertising their vehicles is a moot point. In the 1950s, women were increasingly in or by the 'home-on-wheels', even if they were not at home at the wheel.

Figures and Facts on American Women and Automobiles in the 1950s

Before discussing the gendering of American automobility in the 1950s, some facts, figures and myths about wheels and women are essential. Historian Mark S. Foster in his recent short volume, *A Nation on Wheels: The Automobile Culture Since 1945*, claims that it would be difficult to identify a segment of American culture that was not affected by the unprecedented spread of the automobile in the 1950s and 1960s. Perhaps, more pointedly, sociologist David Gartman in his social history of American automobile design, tellingly entitled *Auto-Opium*, notes that in the 1950s 'the explosion of suburbanised consumption that contained the larger ambitions of working Americans depended on expanded automobility not only for physical transportation to suburbia, but also for cultural insulation and gratification within it'.⁶ What they and the statistics generated by the federal government are talking about is the increase in the number of car registrations from 25.8 million vehicles in 1945, to 40.3 million in 1950, then to 61.7 million in 1960 and 89.3 million in 1970. Such figures confer a ratio of one car per 3.76 persons in 1950 and one car per 2.93 persons in 1960, by far the highest in the world. Indeed, in 1960 the United States accounted for 62.7 percent of the world's automobile registrations. By 1960, 77 percent of American families owned cars.⁷ The automobile, already perceived as a desirable object in the early years of the century, was becoming everyone's mobile friend as commuting became a way of life and there was a car parked outside every suburban house.

Many historians and social commentators have looked at the 1920s, when the number of car registrations almost tripled, as the decade when the United States became 'autopia'. Certainly the car became popular, even more popular than indoor plumbing for some families, for as a farmwoman told a US Department of Agriculture inspector 'you can't go to town in a bathtub'.⁸ But what historians who have used such evidence forget is that fewer Americans

had access to a car than did not, for the ratio of automobiles per capita in 1928, before the stock market crash of the following year, was 5.65. Perhaps more appropriate in transferring attention away from the 1920s to the post-war years is, as one of America's foremost automobile historians, John B. Rae remarked, the fact that the United States had the worst road system in the industrialised world. The 1920s was not the decisive decade for the establishment of autopia. Nor were the later years of the 1970s and 1980s, even though Americans then considered that cars, like the right to freedom, were a god-given or natural right of all citizens and 87.2 percent of households had at least one motor vehicle available, while 33.8 percent had at least two. The 1950s was the decade when the nation became hooked on wheels to the extent that most Americans could not imagine how they could cope if they could not drive or be driven in a car of their choice.⁹

Where does the American woman fit into this emerging car culture of the 1950s?¹⁰ She became an essential component who viewed the individualistic capacity of the automobile as the ideal way in which she could fulfil her multi-tasks as modern mother, wife and worker. Whether as a housewife, a gainfully employed worker, a family member engaged in social activities ranging from going to church, going out for the evening, or visiting friends and relatives, or through seeking peer approval as a teenager cruising in a souped-up jalopy, she became auto-bound. She covered short distances on many daily errands and for pleasure, and she increasingly undertook longer journeys as roads and the highway infrastructure improved. Her consuming importance as manager of the household budget had been recognised as early as the 1920s when manufacturers became aware of the importance of marketing the attractions and advantages of enclosed vehicles that were more weatherproof and had windscreen wipers, self-starters, headlights, metal disc wheels, and four-wheel brakes and came in colours other than black.¹¹ But most women still remained car passengers. It was after the war that Mrs America became much more than a passive consumer of improved vehicles; she increasingly sat behind the wheel as driver and also insisted that the car was a family vehicle. Though systematic official statistics on female driving licences are not available for the 1950s, qualitative and quantitative evidence suggests that several million more women learned to drive in the 1950s, such that by the end of the decade 30.8 million women over the age of 14 could drive and nearly two fifths of all drivers were female. As more daughters realised that they would need to pass their driving test to be regarded as a modern woman, the average female driver became younger. And those mothers who did not yet have a driving licence felt increasing pressure to belong more fully to 'an auto-ising society'.¹²

Mrs Montgomery's Readers: Housewives

Female drivers in the early 1950s were growing in numbers as more Americans moved to the suburbs and more metropolitan areas planned their highways with a view to increasing automobility. Mrs Montgomery appreciated that post-war housing was changing into similar, purpose-built, single-unit dwellings designed for families and for car-owners. She aimed her car articles at the occupiers of this housing, those mainly white middle-class upwardly-aspiring suburbanites who were in their thirties. She reckoned that they had two or three children who needed chauffeuring. Their prime destination was school and here 'Mrs Goffer' might share the school run with her neighbours through carpooling. Or she might be among the fortunate 15 percent of families who by 1960 owned more than one car, thus gaining sole right to this second vehicle.¹³

If carpooling, then she was likely to negotiate both with her husband and with the mothers of her children's friends. Her husband might agree to be driven to and from the nearest railway station for his commute to work downtown, or he might carpool into work on one or two days a week, leaving his wife with the family car. If the suburban housewife had sole access to a car then she could be much more flexible, even if she offered rides to the children of other car-less female suburbanites. Certainly she knew that she needed to drive, for it was not only the chauffeuring of children to and from school that was becoming important; it was their travel to and from after-school activities. These could range from dance and piano lessons to gymnastics and school sport teams, and from cubs and scouts to birthday parties or 'sleepovers', let alone visits to the doctor or the dentist.¹⁴ William Chafe astutely points out that in the 1950s, filiality was replacing patriarchy and matriarchy, and that the suburban family was run by or perhaps around children who wanted mobility. More pointedly sociologist David Gartman, commenting on the rising white working-class, who also moved to the suburbs in this decade, notes that women there wanted to ensure that their children went to social engagements because they were starting to identify this activity with participation in mainstream America.¹⁵

Shopping for the household was also becoming more difficult unless one had a car. Many commentators on urbanisation and planning have pointed out that the shopping centre became an essential part of suburban living in the 1950s. The physical set-up of American commercial life had to be rearranged to match the new single-unit domestic residences. Initially, there were inadequate retail outlets within easy walking distance of suburban homes, and planners had not

developed new transit routes either to local shops or to downtown central business districts. Merchants, anxious to tap into the new landscape of mass consumption that was developing in these economic boom years, looked to a new form of marketplace, the shopping centre, and to expanding the scope and size of supermarkets. Though their progress was not as rapid as that of residential housing, they were firmly embedded by the end of the decade and as John Rae pointed out as early as 1971, this was 'automobileborne business'.¹⁶

Indeed, the supermarket came of age in the post-war affluence. In 1950, it accounted for 35 percent of American food sales; a decade later this percentage had doubled because it fitted the new way of life of the middle class. Motorised suburban women increasingly wanted to take a weekly food-shop home in one journey and store it in their recently acquired refrigerator and kitchen cupboards. Supermarkets responded to their growing popularity by becoming bigger and better. They stocked their shelves with new branded products and more sizes of pre-packaged foods. The choice of items increased from some 3,000 in 1946 to nearly 6,000 by 1960. Recognising that impulse buying was as important as the shopping list in food purchasing, managers enticed customers to buy more by attractive displays, special offers, use of colour and heavy advertising. They also tempted consumers with the convenience of non-food items like household wares, stationery, magazines, drugs and soft goods. Though price had been the initial attraction of the supermarket in the pre-war years, the ability to offer a greater variety of items along with a convenient shopping environment kept housewives coming in their cars.¹⁷

Parking facilitated this upsurge in economic activity and indeed was central to the planning of purpose-built shopping centres. It was of no avail to build a compact shopping centre if consumers could not gain easy access. Designed to facilitate automobility and to offer a variety of services in a one-stop journey, malls increased from 8 in 1945 to 3,840 by 1960. Often anchored by department stores, which seized the opportunity to abandon building branches in the suburbs, these centres accommodated a number of different shops and services thereby attracting consumers from a wide area. As women were estimated to do between 67 and 92 percent of family shopping, and spent many hours on this undertaking, they increasingly felt the desire, if not the need, to drive themselves rather than to be driven by their partners either on Saturdays or during the late-night shopping hours. Indeed, as early shopping centres were designed specifically with women in mind, they had parking spaces that were wider than usual because male architects and shop owners recognised that many women were new drivers.¹⁸

Driving to Work

All American women worked in the home as housewives and approximately a third of these were also in gainful employment in these years prior to the modern feminist movement. During the 1950s, the decade when the ideal of the cult of domesticity was re-asserted, the numbers and the percentages of both females of working age and in the total labour force grew noticeably. Even in 1950 with 18.4 million workers, 30.2 percent more women were employed than in 1940, the year before the United States entered the Second World War. Setting aside the remarkable upsurge of female workers during the crisis years of the war and the downward dip as the labour force readjusted to the return of military personnel and to civilian production, more women soon decided to go to work than in previous peacetime years. By 1953, female workers had exceeded their peak wartime numbers. The upward trend continued throughout the 1950s. By 1960, 23.3 million were working, comprising 37.8 percent of the American work force, and 32.3 percent of women over the age of 14 were counted as being gainfully employed.¹⁹

This shift in the female labour force took place primarily among married women. Before the war those who worked were usually young and single, and if they continued to work after marriage it was before the arrival of children. Less than 20 percent of all married women were gainfully employed in 1940. But the statistics for the 1950s point to a distinctive break with what might be called this traditional pattern. By 1950, marriage and a family did not necessarily prevent a return to the labour force. Even in that year, higher proportions of married women of all age groups with husbands present were gainfully employed. Subsequently, married women in their thirties, and more particularly in the age group 45 and above, demonstrated their determination to work. In the 1950s, for every age group over 35 there was a notable increase in female labour participation rates. In the two key age brackets, 35-44 and 45-54, the increase was 21.7 percent and 41.6 percent respectively. Instead of remaining at home, mothers with school-age children increasingly returned to work.²⁰

These were among the groups of women whom Charlotte Montgomery was encouraging to drive. Her attention was focused mostly on the white middle-class female readers of magazines like *Good Housekeeping*. If these women worked, they were more likely to fill the rising number of vacancies in the pink-collar service sector occupations, whether in offices, in retail or hospitality, or in some white-collar feminised professions like teaching and nursing. As housewives and as workers, these women found that it was easier

to combine these occupations if they could drive or be driven to their paid employment, rather than using public transit, which often entailed noteworthy waiting times and delays. Carpooling with their partners or with another worker in the same employment meant that they could accomplish their domestic tasks with fewer adjustments. Driving oneself was even more convenient because it facilitated early versions of 'trip chaining', or stopping off to do domestic errands on the way to and from work, that would become such a female phenomenon in the later years of the century. Access to an automobile to commute to work was more likely to be the prerogative of the middle-class suburbanite, but those aspiring working class women who were also moving out from the central city knew that they too would eventually have to gain automobility. For them too it was becoming more difficult to walk or take the bus to work unless one remained in the city centre. And already there were some signs of a shift of feminised work to the suburbs.²¹

The Male Perception of the Woman and her Car

If more women were driving and were becoming a central feature of automobile culture, how did male car manufacturers and their advertising agents perceive the female auto-presence? These men had known since the 1920s that women were important consumers and that they were influential in household expenditure. Manufacturers had then assumed that as passengers, women wanted comfort, beauty and style, supposedly feminine traits, in contrast to the masculine preference for such dull requirements as practicality, durability and power. In the 1950s they continued to pay lip service to this traditional image, by promoting the fashion and beauty of their vehicles with such noteworthy features as yards of extra chrome, tail fins, vivid tutone colour schemes, curved windscreens, automatic transmission, push button controls, air conditioning and radios and by adorning their cars with beautiful well-dressed women.

Whether they really believed that women's interests in changing fashions meant that automobiles ought to have frequent style changes, or that women's reputed need to have cars that were easier and more comfortable to drive was the decisive element in car purchases is a moot point. Perhaps they knew that men too liked stylish, restful, secure and convenient vehicles, but that in a conventional society man needed to be perceived as being more robust and vigorous. So men took to consuming trendy features by attributing their necessity or worth to the shortcomings of their wives' driving.²² Regardless of

either the overt or subtle reasoning behind the advertising of stylish vehicles, manufacturers continued to perceive elegant women as assets to the sales of their vehicles. Indeed, women were deemed to be accessories rather than agents and at times could buy their coats and handbags to suit their cars.²³

The interpretation of advertising copy has always been double, if not multiple-edged, and the advent of critical and cultural theory has given many more observers the scope to offer individualistic verbal interpretations of pictorial images.²⁴ With fifty years' perspective on the consumer culture of the 1950s, knowledge of a century of trends in automobile production and sales, and the ability to view the past through women's as well as men's eyes, automobile advertisements featuring women can be primarily understood as overtly portraying them in passive roles. Such passivity was lauded at the time because both sexes focused on domesticity and being a good wife and mother. Whether college educated or a high-school teenage bride, most women wanted a husband, a family and a suburban house with its modern conveniences.²⁵ So it is not surprising that advertisements strengthened rather than challenged this way of life. They celebrated the traditional and decorative woman, picturing her as object rather than subject. Most of these images of women in the 1950s remained remarkably similar to those thirty years earlier, even though the number and proportion of women who held driving licences had increased noticeably.

Yet this traditional view of women also evolved in that it recognised that there were modern wives and mothers whose role involved them being able to chauffeur. Though women were still more often in the passenger seat than in the driving seat, manufacturers knew that the rapidly emerging suburban way of life meant motorisation. In this situation, women became that contradiction in terms that William Chafe so aptly captured in the title of his 1972 history of women in the twentieth century, *The Paradox of Change*.²⁶ It was very difficult, if not impossible, to live the comfortable life that consumers were increasingly demanding without having an automobile parked on the drive, and these higher living standards invariably meant that women should drive. How otherwise would the children get to school, the household shopping be done or other domestic tasks be fulfilled? So the 'big three', Ford, General Motors and Chrysler, along with smaller car producers, like Hudson, Nash, Kaiser, Packard, Studebaker and Willys also targeted women as the motorised person.²⁷

According to contemporary culture it was possible to typecast an American by the make and model of their car.²⁸ As most women were ranked as housewives they were supposed to drive Nash cars. But even before 1955, when the big three sold 95 percent of America's new cars, they could not

afford to allow a smaller manufacturer to corner what could be a major market.²⁹ So they also demonstrated that women were at home in the driving seat. As early as 1950 the Chrysler Corporation took great pride in establishing that women could drive and that they could have advanced technological assistance with their automatic transmission if they drove a Dodge. Ford and General Motors would not be outdone, either plying the one-upmanship game of owning two cars or of aping the Jones's social climbing, as well as picturing how easy it was for women to drive their vehicles. There is no doubt that the American woman was becoming more central to the manufacturers' market vision as an active consumer as well as a decorous icon. High-heeled shoes, gloves, children, buggies, toys, sports equipment and the family pets notwithstanding, she drove a car and knew that it had to be practical as well as stylish. Though she might not be as mechanical-minded as the average male and might need more assistance in such routine vehicle maintenance as under-the-bonnet inspections, washing windscreens, and checking tyre pressures, she was increasingly becoming a more decisive participant in car sales and servicing.³⁰

Cars and the Teenage Girl

While the American woman was looking to have better if not more equal access to the driver's seat, her teenage children were more concerned to act out traditional gender roles.³¹ As society became ever more auto-focused, teenagers wanted to be more than passengers. They wanted the freedom that the motorcar could give them to 'do their own thing'. Having wheels meant escaping from prying eyes, gaining street cred(ibility) among high school or college peers, and the ability to enjoy local automobile culture. Gaining a driving licence and the freedom to press an accelerator to the floor was, as Kenneth Jackson suggests, the most important rite of passage in the male high-school experience.³² While by far the majority of teenagers who inherited and customised hand-me-down jalopies were young males, young females were by no means debarred from teenage automobility. They might not drive, nor want to tinker mechanically with engines, brakes or exhausts, nor wish to take part in doing a 'paint job' on the vehicle, but they did wish to be seen, preferably as passengers, thereby enhancing their status with their female peers. Cruising, often to the tune of the new rock and roll music, frequenting the drive-in restaurants, the heart of teenage culture, or visiting the local drive-in theatre where teenagers could explore their burgeoning sexuality in relative seclusion,

preserved the cultural mores of dominant male and submissive female. This new teenage 'auto culture' looked backwards rather than forwards in terms of gender equality.³³

Indeed, the popular music of the age was full of car songs. Automobile-inspired music had been a regular phenomenon in the early part of the twentieth century, but in the years after the Second World War, when improved technology transformed both cars and music, the interlocking of the two was embedded in the hybrid strains of rock and roll. This music first appeared outside the rhythm and blues market in the mid-1950s and starred both the new generation of automobiles, where styling was paramount, and the customised 'hand-me-downs'. Rock performers, whether celebrities or locals, not only raved about cars in their music, but many lived out their fantasies through luxurious automobiles, which became symbols of their lifestyles. And as the decade progressed more and more teenagers played the rebellious records to the dismay of their parents wherever they could, including in the cars they drove. Their parents' nightmare of loud music and fast cars was turning into both the disc jockeys and music industry's dream and the automobile manufacturers' free advertising.³⁴

The rapid growth in the popular music industry took place in the late 1950s.³⁵ Yet many musicologists take pride in locating tracks that can be called rock and roll in the early years of the decade and in these years the macho automotive experience was visible. In March 1951, Jackie Brenston and his Delta Cats (featuring a young Ike Turner), recorded *Rocket 88* which became a number one hit on the rhythm and blues charts. Targeting women, it invited them to go 'sporting' around the town in a new Oldsmobile model. Indeed the then disc jockey Bill Haley liked it so much that he covered it with his country band, the Saddlemen. The success of *Rocket 88* spawned numerous imitations, including Rosco Gordon's *T-Model Boogie* (December 1951), Howlin' Wolf's *Cadillac Daddy* (January 1952), Johnny London's *Driving Slow* (March 1952), and Joe Hill Lewis' *Automatic Woman* (September 1953), which compared his girl-friend satisfactorily to the automatic transmissions then being produced by General Motors.³⁶

But whatever the use and symbolism of gender and automobiles in the popular music of the early 1950s, the second part of the decade, as with car production itself, moved into high gear. Musicologists differ as to whether in the pop star list Chuck Berry or Elvis Presley had more automotive proclivities to offer teenagers. Chuck Berry's 1955 recording of *Maybelline*, which depicts a car chase/romance in which the guy in his beat-up V8 Ford challenges and catches the girl Maybelline in her Cadillac Coupe de Ville, is frequently cited as

the classic conflation of car/female. In his autobiography, Berry claimed that the song originated in his efforts at high school to get girls to ride in his 1934 Ford. He followed this with other car songs such as, *No Money Down* (1955), which was modelled on the salesman's pitch that Berry encountered when buying his first few cars. No matter what consumers wanted, the salesman had or could get it. Presumably this applied also to desirable sexual experiences.³⁷ But Chuck Berry had a rival. Elvis Presley, usually recognised as the 'King of Rock and Roll', had auto-phobia. Very few of his records were car-driven, other than *Baby Let's Play House* (1955), his first national hit in which he adapted the words to include the pink Cadillac. But his fame was almost synonymous with this vehicle. Elvis was fascinated with cars and driving, especially flashy cars, and the blatant sexuality of his songs and the way in which they were delivered interlinked his power over both Cadillacs and young females.³⁸

Other rock performers followed in the wake of Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley. Indeed, some commentators have suggested that the deluge of car songs came in the period 1954-1964, which Thomas Hine has described as *Populuxe*.³⁹ Automobiles, whether of the chrome and tailfin variety that Detroit was mass-producing, the hotrods, or the Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Babies,⁴⁰ were popular musical subjects and objects. A list of such songs does little justice to their status. Of the more famous, The Everly Brothers, who concentrated their attention on 14-16 year old teenagers, caught the mood with their 1957 hit, *Wake Up Little Susie*, about an adolescent couple who fall asleep at the drive-in movies until 4.00 a.m., with the ensuing problems of explaining this situation to sceptical parents. Again in 1957, Buddy Holly's love was 'bigger than a Cadillac' in *Not Fade Away*. Little Richard, the most mega personality in the rock field, mimicked car advertisements with *Long Tall Sally*, who was built for speed and had everything that Uncle John needed. While rock's first guitar hero, Bo Diddley, designed a rocket shaped guitar with two fins which he called the 'Cadillac Tail' that imitated contemporary car styles.

But it was in the early 1960s that the car-song motif came into its own as the Beach Boys sang *Little Deuce Coupe*, *Fun, Fun Fun*, *This Car of Mine*, *Drive-In* or *Little Honda*, to mention a few, and the surf/hot-rodders Jan and Dean crooned *Dead Man's Curve*, *I Gotta Drive*, *Move Over Little Mustang* and *Surfing Hearse*. As E. L. Widmer remarks, 'it became difficult to imagine how the state of California had ever existed before Henry Ford came along'. Furthermore, the automobiles themselves starred as names for groups, ranging from The Cars, The Corvettes, Flash Cadillac and the Continental Kids, to the Imperials and The Sting Rays. Being a teenager and being female frequently meant listening to popular music which involved both automobiles and women

as objects of desire, or women competing with cars for attention.⁴¹ Industrial designer Raymond Loewy may have got it right when he commented in 1955 that teenagers loved cars and that cars were jukeboxes on wheels.⁴²

Conclusion

The 1950s were a decade of paradox for the woman and her car. Contradictions and inconsistencies were everywhere. Cultural mores recommended, if not dictated, that females were passive, submissive, domesticated and decorous, in a modern version of the Victorian cult of domesticity. As such, women were desirable and often beautiful. So too were the cars of the decade, which shifted from their more functional style of the immediate post-war years in which vehicles were in short supply to the high-chrome sleek vehicles that were made for flair as well as practicality. Yet automobiles were agents of mobility and freedom, and women were attracted to the driving seat as well as the passenger seat for these reasons. The increased presence of American families in the suburbs placed many women in a location where they needed to drive if they were to succeed as wives and mothers, let alone enjoy a modern and comfortable lifestyle. Women were torn between being culturally dependent and practically independent, and as more women entered the labour force, whether as part-time or full-time workers, they aimed to have their own automobiles or to gain equal access to the family vehicle. The widespread consumer boom in the 1950s only speeded up this process. So Mrs Montgomery, who later advised petrol dealers and tyre salesmen to 'dress up' the process of looking after female customers, may sum up the ambivalence of female automobility. Women were driving and should be driving, but they should be treated differently and be given the more courteous treatment due to ladies.⁴³

Footnotes

- 1 *Good Housekeeping*, (hereafter cited as GH), cited as October 1950 –June 1956; Charlotte Montgomery, *Charlotte Montgomery's Handbook for Women*, New York: The Vanguard Press, 1955, xi-xiii.
- 2 *Good Housekeeping* was among the forty-four general and farm magazines that each had a circulation of over a million, but it was not the leader either among general magazines or of women's magazines. *Life* had a circulation of 5.9 million copies in 1957 and *Saturday Evening Post* had a circulation of over 4 million copies, as did *Ladies Home Journal* and *Better Homes and Gardens*. By 1957 *Good Housekeeping* had expanded its pattern of fiction and service to the reader to include features for teenagers, and it had departments of music, medicine and health, and home appliances as well as of automobiles. Theodore Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956, revised edition, 1958, 56, 204.
- 3 Charlotte Montgomery noted in 1952 that the driving school run by the Automobile Club of New York reported that their average pupil was a woman of 38, married and the mother of two children. 'Learning to Drive', *GH*, March 1952, 44.
- 4 William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II*, New York: Oxford University Press, 4th edition, 1999, 124.
- 5 The federal government first reported licensed drivers by sex for the United States in 1963, at which point some 37 million females were driving, comprising 39.6 percent of the nation's licensed drivers. Prior to that date *Automobile Facts and Figures* occasionally reported statistics and information on women drivers. In 1953, for example, 29 percent of the country's drivers were women, and in 1959 38.2 percent of the increasing number of drivers was female. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, *Highway Statistics Summary to 1995*, Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1997 [FHWA-PL-97-009], Table DL-201; National Automobile Chamber of Commerce, *Automobile Facts and Figures*, (1952), 63, (1953), 36; (1959-60), 44.
- 6 Mark S. Foster, *A Nation on Wheels: The Automobile Culture Since 1945*, Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2003, 65; David Gartman, *Auto Opium: A Social History of American Design*, New York: Routledge, 1994, 141.

- ⁷ *The Statistical History of the United States From Colonial Times to the Present*, New York: Basis Books, 1976, Compiled from Tables A6-8, Q 148-162 and Q 175-186; *Automobile Facts and Figures* (1964), 28.
- ⁸ Though road transport history in the United States has been much neglected, two names are outstanding in the history of the automobile and its usage: John Rae and James Flink. Other historians writing on aspects of the car usually draw on their books. See John B. Rae, *The Road and the Car in American Life*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1971; John B. Rae, *The American Automobile: A Brief History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965; James J. Flink, *America Adopts the Automobile, 1895-1910*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1970; James J. Flink, *The Car Culture*, Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, 1975 and James J. Flink, *The Automobile Age*, Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, 1988. More recently Michael L. Berger has compiled a reference guide and evaluation of source material in *The Automobile in American History and Culture: A Reference Guide*, Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2001. For cultural observations on the automobile in the years prior to the Second World War see Joseph Interrante, "'You Can't Go to Town in a Bathtub': Automobile Movement and the Reorganization of Rural American Space, 1900-1950", *Radical History Review* 21: Fall (1979), pp. 151-168 and Joseph Interrante, 'The Road to Autopia: The Automobile and the Spatial Transformation of American Culture', in David L. Lewis and Lawrence Goldstein (eds.), *The Automobile and American Culture*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983, 89-104.
- ⁹ For statistics see *Statistical History of the United States*, Tables A6-8 and Q 148-162 and Motor Vehicle Manufacturers' Association, *Motor Vehicle Facts and Figures* (1982), 45.
- ¹⁰ Remarkably little has been written on women and cars in the United States. The most notable contribution is Virginia Scharff, *Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age*, New York: Free Press, 1991, but she only covers the years up to 1929. Martin Wachs wrote two interesting articles 'Men, Women and Urban Travel: The Persistence of Separate Spheres' in Martin Wachs and Margaret Crawford (eds), *The Car and the City: The Automobile, The Built Environment and Daily Urban Life*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992, 86-100, and 'The Automobile and Gender: An Historical Perspective', *Women's Travel Issues*, United States Department of Transportation, *Proceedings from the Second National Conference*, October 1996 (internet access at www.ntt.bts.gov/lib/4000/4407/), 99-108, both of which primarily featured the 1920s. Although he started collecting materials to cover later periods, he did not publish any further articles of historical substance. Charles L. Sanford, "'Woman's Place" in American Car Culture' in Lewis and Goldstein (eds), *Automobile*

and *American Culture*, 137-5, sweeps across the decades into the 1970s, and Michael Berger, 'Women Drivers!: The Emergence of Folklore and Stereotypic Opinions Concerning Feminine Automotive Behavior', *Women's Studies International Forum* 9:3, 1986, 257-63 essentially deals with the early years of the twentieth century. Beth Kraig wrote her dissertation on women and cars, *Woman at the Wheel: A History of Women and the Automobile in America*, PhD thesis, University of Washington, 1987, but she published very little on the topic. Her article, 'The Liberated Lady Driver', *The Midwest Quarterly* 28:3 (Spring 1987): 378-401, looks at cultural images of the women driver.

¹¹ For information on automotive technology that greatly improved the drivability of cars see Rudi Volti, *Cars and Culture: The Life Story of a Technology*, Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2004, 30-33, 58-60.

¹² *Highway Statistics Summary to 1995*, Table DL-201; *Automobile Facts and Figures*, (1953), 36; (1959-60), 44; (1961) 50; US Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, 'Characteristics of Licensed Drivers', National Personal Transportation Survey, Report No.6, April 1973, 18.

¹³ For information on planning and suburban sprawl see Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier* and Owen T. Gutfreund, *20th Century Sprawl: Highways and the Reshaping of the American Landscape*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. The earliest of Charlotte Montgomery's articles was entitled 'When You Taxi the Children to School', *GH* October 1950, 42, 308. Ernest R. Mowrer notes that the role of the wife as chauffeur was one of the two roles that most eloquently characterised adult suburban life, 'The Family in Suburbia', in William M. Dobriner (ed.) *The Suburban Community*, New York: Putnam, 1958, 156. Wendell Bell, 'Social Choice, Life Styles and Suburban Residence', 225-47, notes that the new suburbanites were mainly persons who had opted for a family lifestyle that participated in the 'good life', while Charles E. Stonier, 'Problems of Suburban Transport Services', 326-44 points out that suburban living without a car was virtually impossible, with 93 percent of all suburban families driving at least one vehicle, both in Dobriner, *The Suburban Community*. It is difficult to know whether working-class wives were among the readers of *GH* and also whether they could and liked to drive. In *Workingman's Wife*, New York: Oceana Publications Inc., 1959, Reprint, New York: Arno Press, Inc., 1979, 181, Lee Rainwater, Richard P. Coleman and Gerald Handel suggest that young working class women enjoyed owning cars and liked to use them if their husbands did not drive to work. They also suggest that 'a good third of these young working-class wives have not yet learned how to drive'.

- ¹⁴ Charlotte Montgomery, 'When You Taxi the Children to School', *GH*, October 1950, 308; 'All Around the Town', December 1950, 4; 'Automobile Manners', September 1951, 163; 'Sharing the Family Car', November, 1951, 46, 179, 180; 'School Car Pools', January 1955, 6, 154; *Automobile Facts and Figures*, 1950, 37, 1951, 49, 1952, 63, 1958, 42, 1959-1960, 35-37.
- ¹⁵ Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, 123; Gartman, *Auto Opium*, 138. Both authors draw on sociological tracts on suburbanisation including Herbert J. Gans, *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community*, London: Allen Lane, the Penguin Press, 1967; William M. Dobriner, *Class in Suburbia*, Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963; Dobriner (ed.) *The Suburban Community*; Rainwater, Coleman and Handel, *Workingman's Wife* and Bennett Berger, *Working Class Suburbs: The Study of Autoworkers in Suburbia*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960. One of the main features of the discussions on suburbanisation in the 1950s is the extent, or the lack of extent, of conformity. Helen Z Lopata, *Occupation Housewife*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1971, drawing on extensive work on Chicago city and suburban housewives in the late 1950s and 1960s, does occasionally point out that chauffeuring was a function of a modern wife and mother; that car pooling did take place; and that women did drive their husbands to and from the train station for their commute to work.
- ¹⁶ Elizabeth Cohen, 'Commerce: Reconfiguring Community Marketplaces', Chapter 6, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, New York: Vintage Books, 2003, 257-89, has by far the best recent historical discussion of the issues of shopping and women's access to the new public spaces of shopping malls and supermarkets. She does not, however, deal with the issue of women and driving automobiles, though she does point out that couples and families were shopping together. She also notes that relatively few people travelled to shopping centres by bus. Cohen quotes Robert Wood, *Suburbia: Its People and Their Politics*, New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1959 (Reprint edition, New York: Arno Press, 1979), 63 as the source of quantitative data for shopping centres, but this is his only excursion into the new retail space. She also usefully cites Stuart U. Rich, *Shopping Behavior of Department Store Customers: A Study of Store Policies and Customer Demand, with Particular Reference to Delivery Service and Telephone Ordering*, Harvard University, Graduate School of Business Administration, 1963. Kenneth T. Jackson's discussion of shopping centres is essentially superficial, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 257-61. He obtains his figures for shopping centres from Rae, *Road and the Car*, 228-33.

- ¹⁷ Margaret Walsh, 'The Organization of American Consumption', in Grahame Thompson (ed.), *The United States in The Twentieth Century*, Vol. 2: *Markets*, London: Hodder and Stoughton in association with The Open University, (2nd ed. revised, 2000), 26-27.
- ¹⁸ Cohen, *Consumers' Republic*, 278-81; Rich, *Shopping Behavior*, 83-88, 133-69; *Automobile Facts and Figures 1952*, 63. Parking, parking costs, and congestion were deterrents to downtown shopping in the early 1950s, but as yet these disadvantages were offset by the greater variety of choice in the central business district. By far the majority of journeys to suburban shopping centres were made by car. Highway Research Board Special Reports 11 and 11A-D, *Parking as a Factor in Business*, Washington DC: National Academy of Sciences, National Research Board, 1953-1956.
- ¹⁹ *Statistical History of the United States*, Tables A23-28 and D29-41; Valerie K. Oppenheimer, *The Female Labor Force in the United States: Demographic and Economic Factors Governing Its Growth and Changing Composition*, Berkeley: University of California, Population Monograph Series No 5, 1970, 1-24.
- ²⁰ Oppenheimer, *Female Labor Force*, 1-24.
- ²¹ It is difficult to locate information, statistical or qualitative, on women driving to work before the 1970s when planners and policy makers became increasingly concerned about issues of congestion and the rising numbers of automobiles on the roads. Much work on women in the 1950s suggests that middle-class women, who were more likely to be located in the suburbs, conformed to the cultural mores of domesticity and thus were unlikely to be in paid employment. Nevertheless the numbers of women and married women who were gainfully employed was rising in the 1950s, and some sociological studies of the 1950s suggest that working-class women were not anxious to join the labour force. The best general discussion on this subject is Julia K. Blackwelder, *Now Hiring: The Feminization of Work in the United States, 1900-1995*, College Station: Texas A & M Press, 1997, 147-76. Planners and geographers tend to talk about the traditional suburban commute to the central city prior to 1970, but there were already signs of the suburbanisation of gainful employment in shopping centres and in medical, cultural and educational services for local residents.
- ²² Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dreams: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, offers the best historical analysis of advertising in the early twentieth century. Laura L. Behling, 'Fisher Bodies: Automobile

Advertisements and the Framing of Modern American Female Identity', *The Centennial Review* 41:3 (Fall 1997): 515-528, suggests that in the 1920s and 1930s women were passively portrayed in relationship to the technology of cars. But the arguments of Gartman, *Auto-Opium*, 97-9, 165-67, and Scharff, *Taking the Wheel*, 51-66, 111-134, for the years before 1929, are more persuasive in suggesting that technological and stylish improvements were welcomed by both sexes rather than being targeted towards women.

²³ In the early 1950s the Ford Motor company arranged for Ford Dealers and some leading department stores to stock or to order Motor Mates coats especially designed to match the 'beauty' of the 1953 and 1954 Ford cars. Ford Dealers were given advice on how to promote the cars, coats and the handbag accessories in television, radio and local print format, and were even recommended to hold a fashion show in their dealership, 'Journal Sales Bulletin No. 658, 1954,' and 'How You Can Use Motor Mates Coats to Sell Superb Ford Styling', both from the Collections of the Benson Ford Research Center, Dearborn, Michigan.

²⁴ For a pertinent discussion of advertising targeted at women and using cultural and critical theory see Ellen McCracken, *Decoding Women's Magazines: From Mademoiselle to Ms*, Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993. Daniel D. Hill's volume, *Advertising to the American Woman, 1900-1999*, Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2002 is much more descriptive. Many advertisements were created in dummy format using the same iconography, with the possibility of changing some of the messages; others were reproduced several times in different print outlets. As the car required a major expenditure, it was often assumed that males needed to be targeted as well as females in contrast to lower ticket-price goods like clothing, food and even furniture where women might be more decisive in making the purchases. Remarkably little has been written on gender and car advertising in the postwar years.

²⁵ For discussions of 1950s families and women's roles see Eugenia Kaledin, *Mothers and More: American Women in the 1950s*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984; Wini Breines, *Young, White and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992; Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. New York: Basic Books, 1992, 23-41 and Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms with America's Changing Families*, New York: Basic Books, 1997, 33-50. A classic source on the ideal of domesticity in these years remains Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1963.

- ²⁶ William H. Chafe, *The Paradox of Change: American Women in the 20th Century*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1972. At the time of its publication this volume was considered 'pathbreaking' and though much subsequently has happened, both in terms of the writing of women's history and developments in American women's position and rights, this volume remains a classic.
- ²⁷ The smaller producers declined and then went out of business in the 1950s. In 1955 Kaiser and Willys disappeared, followed by Hudson and Nash in 1957, and Packard in 1958. Yasutoshi Ikuta, *Cruise O Matic: Automobile Advertising of the 1950s*, San Francisco: Chronicle Books, English Translation, 1998, 21; Volti, *Cars and Culture*, 90-92.
- ²⁸ Ikuta, *Cruise O Matic*, 20.
- ²⁹ Janet F. Davidson and Michael S. Sweeney, *On the Move: Transportation and the American Story*, Washington DC: National Geographic and Smithsonian Museum, 2003, 234. Flink, *Automobile Age*, 278, gives the big three 94 percent of the domestic market, with General Motors having 50 percent, Ford, 27 percent and Chrysler 17 percent. The remaining 6 percent was shared by American Motors, Studebaker-Packard and all varieties of imports, each accounting for 2 per cent.
- ³⁰ Montgomery, 'The Woman and Her Car' articles, *GH*, October 1950 –June 1956, ranged widely. For example, she advised women how to dress for driving and to sit pretty behind the wheel, as well as how to drive in the winter and what they should know about tyres and antifreeze.
- ³¹ For discussions of teenagers and youth culture in the 1950s see Grace Palladino, *Teenager: An American History*, New York: Basic Books, 1996, 97-188; Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*, New York: Avon Books Inc, 1999, 225-248; Breines, *Young, White and Miserable*, 47-166.
- ³² Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 246.
- ³³ Forster, 'The Fabulous Fifties and the Soaring Sixties', *A Nation on Wheels*, 65-99 best captures the spirit of teenage auto-culture as it is not set against the background of the conformity element of the 1950s.
- ³⁴ The best overview of cars and popular music in the 1950s is E.L. Widmer, 'Crossroads: The Automobile, Rock and Roll and Democracy', in Peter Woolen and Joe Kerr (eds.)

Autopia, London, Reaktion Books, 2002, 65-74. Other sources either focus on cars and minimise music or concentrate on music and skimp mention of cars. See also Foster, *A Nation on Wheels*, 82-86; Breines, *Young, White and Miserable*, 151-159; James Miller, *Flowers in the Dustbin. The Rise of Rock and Roll, 1947-1977*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1999, 25-173; Paul Friedlander, *Rock and Roll. A Social History*, Boulder, CO, Westview Press, 1996, 1-61.

- ³⁵ The sales of popular music records increased in value from \$189 million in 1950 to \$213 million in 1954, and then jumped to \$603 in 1959. Charlie Gillett, *The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll*, New York, Outerbridge and Dienstfrey, 1970, 48, 360.
- ³⁶ The best discussion of *Rocket 88* is Ike Turner with Nigel Cawthorpe, *Takin' Back the Time: The Confessions of Ike Turner*, London: Virgin Books, 1999, 1-5; Widmer, 'Crossroads', 68; Gillett, 155-56; Colin Larkin (ed.) *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, Enfield, Middlesex: Guinness Publishing Ltd, 1992, 2nd ed. 1995, 3, 1719.
- ³⁷ Widmer, 'Crossroads', 71-73; Warren Belsaco 'Motivatin' With Chuck Berry and Frederick Jackson Turner" in Lewis and Goldstein (eds.), *Automobile and American Culture*, 262-79; Miller, *Flowers in the Dustbin*, 103-107; Chuck Berry, *The Autobiography*, Isalee Publishing Co, 1987, London: Faber and Faber, 1988, 141-162.
- ³⁸ There is a veritable library of volumes on Elvis Presley, but the definitive work is Peter Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley*, Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1994 and *Careless Love: The Unmaking of Elvis Presley*, Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1999. For a brief description of Cadillacs and Elvis see Widmer, 'Crossroads', 70-71; Foster, *A Nation on Wheels*, 83-85.
- ³⁹ Thomas Hine defines Populuxe as not merely having things, but having things in a way that they'd never been had before. It is an expression of outright, thoroughly vulgar joy at being able to live so well. The Populuxe era presented an invitation to indulge in luxuries. Thomas Hine, *Populuxe*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986, 3-14.
- ⁴⁰ Tom Wolfe, *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine Flake Streamline Baby*, New York: Noonday Press, 1963, famously dissects the customised car culture in southern California in the essay of the same name as the book title, 76-107.

⁴¹ Widmer, 'Crossroads ', 73; Foster, *A Nation on Wheels*, 85-86; Friedlander, *Rock and Roll*, 48-76; *Guinness Encyclopedia*, 1, 316-319, 3, 2134; George R. White, *Bo Didley: Living Legend*, Chessington, Surrey, Castle Communications, 1995, 111.

⁴² Raymond Loewy, 'Jukebox on Wheels', *Atlantic Monthly*, April 1955, 36-38. Loewy, designer and stylist at Studebaker since 1938, was basically castigating the contemporary automobile industry for its hideous styling of cars, which he considered vulgar. Indeed, he described the gaudy shells that covered car technology as being, 'more like an orgiastic chromoplated brawl'.

⁴³ www.babcox.com/editorial/tr/tr302h.htm, 30/12/05.

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She examined the fresh summer dresses of "The Automobile Girls," and a look of envy came into her eyes as she cast them down on her cotton skirt full of tatters from the briars and faded from red into a soft old pink shade. But she was very pretty, even in her ragged dress, which was turned in at the collar showing her full, rounded throat and shapely neck. She was lithe and graceful, and as she thrummed on the guitar with her slender, brown fingers her ragged dress and rough shoes faded into insignificance. Her reflections were interrupted by a general movement toward the automobiles. Zerlina was evidently pleased at the praises she had received, for her cheeks were flushed with pride. "Won't you let us see your dagger, Zerlina?" asked Bab. "Oh, yes, do!" begged Mollie.

Women at the Wheel book. Read 2 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. Ever since the Ford Model T became a vehicle for the masses, the ... It offers alternative perspectives on things such as the way the automobile allowed men and women to go off anonymously on jaunts. I'm still not sure she's captured it, a function not of the work but, as I said, the difficulty of coming to terms with gender and the automobile. ...more.