

Mobile America: The History of Automobiles in the United States, 1890s-1930s

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Origins of the Automobile

The first American vehicle, the Duryea Motor Wagon, was made in 1893. The earliest automobiles in the United States looked like horseless carriages with small engines. These coach-built works of art, crafted by skilled tradesmen, were only for the wealthy. Critics of the era dismissed them as "appalling manifestations of conspicuous consumption." This view changed once mass-produced, affordable cars, like the Ford Model T, became widely accessible; people soon realized their potential as a method of escape from the owner's daily lifestyle. Thus, a new and efficient transportation method was born.



Impact on Rural Areas

Not all farmers were initially opposed to automobiles, but many were. Motor vehicles not only helped get farmers' crops to market faster; they also helped rural doctors get to their patients faster. When the affordable and reliable Ford Model T came out in 1908, the number of automobiles purchased by farmers greatly increased. As more farmers purchased cars, two major shifts occurred in rural education and medicine. Both became centralized, shifting from in-home doctors to centralized hospitals and from one-room schoolhouses to larger schools in towns. Patients received better care from hospitals than they did from traveling doctors. Centralized schools used busses to transport children, while also giving them access to better educational resources.



The Rise of Domestic Travel

The introduction of transcontinental highways and automobiles' rise in popularity during the early 20th century made domestic travel an option for more Americans. Many jobs required people to work less and permitted them more time to use their new cars to see the American landscape. "Autocamping" grew in popularity among these new travelers. They would pull to the side of a road and sleep in their cars until designated roadside campsites were created.

Impact on Cities

The rise of affordable cars during the early 20th century allowed people to live further from where they worked causing many cities to expand outward. Progressives of the time believed that automobiles would allow people to leave city slums and escape poverty. Many people, especially families, wished to move out of the crowded, dirty cities in favor of suburban areas or suburbs. Although suburbs initially began for the wealthy, soon the middle and working classes made the move as well. Many of these communities were too far away from the cities for urban public transportation, so suburbanites relied almost exclusively on personal automobiles making forms of transportation like trolleys obsolete.

Initial Automobile Safety

Early automobile drivers had little to no concern for safety. Henry Bliss was the first pedestrian fatality in the United States when he was struck by an electric taxi in New York City. As cars became faster, automakers began to advertise the safety features of their cars including additions like all-steel bodies and hydraulic brakes. Cities and states also started to implement speed limits. In 1901, Connecticut was the first to impose speed limits for cars limiting them to 12 mph in cities and 15 mph on country roads. Another way states regulated motorists was by requiring drivers' licenses. In 1903, Massachusetts and Missouri were the first states to do this; however, the states did not initially require a driver's license test.

The Push for Good Roads

When automobiles were first introduced there were already roads in the country; however, they were used by pedestrians and horses and buggy. Many of them were filled with ruts and potholes and made of stone or gravel instead of asphalt like modern roads. As more people were able to buy affordable cars, such as the model T, they began forming groups to advocate for improved road conditions. One of the largest of these, the American Automobile Association (AAA), was formed in 1902 and is still around today. Some of their first actions included pressuring cities to fix their roads and widen them for cars.

Automobile's Rise in Popularity

Americans in cities and rural areas viewed early automobiles as a danger to pedestrians and horses. To avoid startling horses in the early 20th century, some towns passed ordinances requiring cars to be preceded by a person holding a red flag as a warning. Others required drivers to make a telephone call to the next town to alert them to the arrival of a vehicle and its potential dangers. More modern-thinking communities asked that cars stop and let horses pass. The increase in popularity of motorcars required cities to plan their expansion around them. As city populations grew and trolley companies faced rising expansion costs due to World War I inflation, the automobile overtook the electric trolley in popularity.

Ford's \$5 Workday

Henry Ford changed many things about the automotive industry with the introduction of the Model T and his \$5 workday. The Model T became a popular car quickly after its 1908 debut due to its efficient production and affordable price. Not only did Ford introduce an automobile for the masses, but he also introduced the idea of the \$5 workday. Ford hoped that by paying his factory workers more he would have a reliable workforce. Introduced in 1914, the \$5 workday paid select workers \$5 for eight hours of work, nearly double what other factory jobs paid at the time.

The Rise of Car Culture

Many early car enthusiasts had an adventurous spirit and would drive across the country for fun. Because they traveled early roads so much, they came together and created groups to advocate for better roads. E.G. "Cannonball" Baker, a legend at the time embodied this adventurous spirit. He not only drove across the country but raced across and set records. His fastest time was in 1933 when he crossed the country in a record-setting 53 hours. Automobile racing quickly became a part of car culture as well, with the first race being held between Chicago and Evanston Illinois, on Thanksgiving Day 1895.

Conclusion

The positive socio-economic impact of the early automobile is still seen in the United States today from the way that cities are designed to how rural and suburban landscapes look today. They have continued to grow in popularity, and keep the United States connected.

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References

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