

# Motoring Trends

## The automobile's impact far-reaching



by DAVE HALLIDAY  
Southam Newspapers

EDMONTON - At the end of the 19th century, hardly anyone attached any importance to the few cars then in existence.

Muscle and steam power were the primary means of land transportation - whether it meant walking, riding a horse or a bicycle or taking the train for long trips.

Except for the few train journeys you could afford, most of your life would be spent within a few miles of your birthplace.

Few people, including automotive pioneers, could have foreseen the changes the car has made.

During the 20th century, the automobile became one of the strongest forces shaping our lives and the North American landscape. The impact of most other technological innovations pales in comparison.

The auto has affected the look of the North American landscape, where we live, where we travel, how men and women court and marry, our vacations, the development of communities, businesses and created a whole roadside culture and altered many other facets of modern life.

The car also brought modern society face-to-face with such concepts as urban sprawl, traffic jams and airborne pollution.

The \$5-a-day wage in the auto manufacturing industry also helped to create a whole new class in society - the blue-collar middle class.

"I think in the first half of the century, the automobile was probably the most significant piece of technology," said Bob Casey, curator of transportation at the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Mich.

It's possible to follow most of the human life cycle through the automobile. It's possible to be conceived, born, spend a good part of your life including vacations, go to church, the movies, be married, die and eventually carried to your final resting place in an automobile.

William Clay Ford Jr., great-grandson of the creator of the Model T, explains how that car changed people's lives.



"Most people had never been more than 20 miles from their homes prior to the introduction of the Model T," Ford said.

"It was a staggering change in the history of mankind. It changed where people lived, where they worked."

In more recent years, the computer has had



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With cars lined up in the drive-through, above, Charolette Richards, right, performs a drive-up wedding at A Little White Chapel in Las Vegas.

The automobile spawned a roadside culture across North America, above left, including motels, gas bars and fast-food restaurants.

Henry Ford is shown on his first vehicle, left, the Quadricycle, in a 1896 photograph. This vehicle led to the original Model T, which was Ford's first product, and then to the Model A.

a great impact, Casey said, but points out that "we're still feeling the effect of the automobile."

For example, "it's the engine that drives the economy of developed countries."

The automobile industry had perhaps its greatest impact during the Second World War.

"The industry transformed itself in the 1940s and was one of the keys to winning the war," Casey said. "If it had not been there, things might have been different."

One of the most profound changes made by the car was its impact on freedom of individual movement.

Casey said at the start of the 20th century people who wanted to travel long distances by land had to use the train. Those who travelled were limited by the time available and the train schedule.

"It was not feasible for large numbers of people

to travel long distances," Casey said in a telephone interview.

The automobile opened up travel possibilities and helped make the vacations we know today a reality.

And the ability to travel has changed the gene pool.

"In my grandparents' day, you married someone within horse and buggy distance," Marsden said. "Now you can date someone 400 miles away if you want to."

When the automobile appeared, North American roads were awful, Casey said.

The demands of cyclists and motorists helped convince governments to improve roads.

He points out that the roadside culture we're so familiar with today - from gas bars and fast-food restaurants to motels - did not exist.

All of it was built to serve the car.



Southam Newspapers photo

The Studebaker's Avanti was a curvey and daring little number.

## A last-ditch effort

by BILL VANCE  
For Southam Newspapers

EDMONTON - Studebakers date back to 1852 when Clem and Henry Studebaker opened a blacksmith and wagon shop in South Bend, Ind.

Although staying with horse-drawn vehicles until 1919, they began making electric cars in 1902. They added a gasoline model in 1904, and built both types until the electrics were dropped in 1912.

The 1950s were not kind to independent automakers. With the end of the postwar sellers' market came relentless competition from the Big Three. It drove Kaiser-Frazer, Crosley and Willys-Overland out of the car business. By 1954 Nash and Hudson were forced to amalgamate, becoming American Motors Corp., and Studebaker and Packard joined as the Studebaker-Packard Corp.

The Studebaker designs prevailed. "Real" Packards disappeared in 1956, "Packabakers" in 1958, and the name in 1963.

By the late '50s, Studebaker, too, was in trouble and in 1961 a dynamic new president, Sherwood Egbert, was brought in from the chainsaw and supercharger manufacturer McCulloch Co.

To revitalize the company's image associates worked feverishly in complete secrecy, producing a full-size clay model within five weeks.

It was dramatically different from anything done before.

Called the Avanti (Italian for forward), the four-passenger, two-door Grand Touring had no grille; the hood dipped down to a bladed bumper that wrapped around the sides of the car.

Front fenders extended ahead of the hood flanking two round headlamps.

The car was all curves and arcs; no straight

lines were to be found.

When Road & Track magazine (10/92) tested a supercharged Avanti they found that the 1,545-kilogram (3,400-pound) tester could sprint from zero to 96 kilometres per hour (60 miles per hour) in 7.3 seconds, helped by a low 4.09:1 axle ratio, which limited top speed to only 188 km/h (117 m.p.h.).

Handling was reported as mediocre.

Andy Granatelli, later of STP fame, took three supercharged "R-3" (there were progressively tuned R-1 to R-5 versions) Avantis with 4.9-litre engines in Utah's Bonneville salt flats in August 1962.

He broke 12 stock-car speed records, including the flying mile at 271 km/h (168.15 m.p.h.).

Although the Avanti was introduced in 1962, fibreglass body difficulties delayed production until 1963.

This, plus Studebaker's precarious financial condition, combined to keep Avanti sales to only 3,834 '63 models.

This would shrink to only 809 '64s, which were identical except for square headlamps.

Avanti may not have reached its true potential because by this time it was evident that Studebaker was a failing company.

Studebaker's Indiana operation ceased in late 1963, and production was continued in Hamilton until 1966. Avantis were not made there.

After Avanti production stopped in late 1963, two South Bend Studebaker dealers, Nate Altman and Leo Newman, established the Avanti Motor Corp. in 1964 to produce Avanti IIs.

They operated it until 1982, then sold out to entrepreneur Stephen Blake.

The Avanti was a brave attempt by a failing company to rejuvenate itself with something daring and different.

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