

# Driving Home Class Status: Women and Cars in the United States

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Buying a car has been one of the most significant purchases people make, second only to a home in terms of its combined purchase price, maintenance, insurance, and repairs. Certainly most people appreciated what the car offered: speed, ease, pleasure, and expediency. Advertisers shored up concerns about quality and promoted the car as a symbol of status across the twentieth century, which facilitated translating those desires into a reality.

In its earliest years on the national stage, car ownership of any type offered wealthy buyers an affirmation of their status as privileged. Early advertising focused heavily on the technical components of the car; unspoken in the sale was that a car would convey a person's high status. While the richest bought the earliest playthings, wealthy professionals, like doctors, quickly emerged as car buyers as well. Many saw motor vehicles as an investment in greater productivity and an opportunity for elite leisure, which one doctor termed "auto-intoxication." The need to promote a particular brand or style of car more aggressively only emerged when enough people could afford cars that the need emerged to compete more intensely based on assertions of difference.[1]

While initially men bought and drove the vast majority of cars, advertisers still considered women a vital market in their sales pitches. As consumerism emerged, Americans believed women to be the purchasing agents for their families. Women's ability to manage their family's budget and buy smartly not only reflected her worth, but also helped determine her family's status. While most single women did not earn enough money to buy a car, as wives they did participate with their husbands in the decision to buy a car, the determination as to which car to buy, and the consideration of how they would pay for it.

Automobile advertisers used several overlapping themes to convince consumers of their vehicle's high-class status. The symbols and language varied across the century, but the promise remained the same: a car conveys social and economic status – buy it and both will be yours.

As cars became even more central to American identity, women understood that they needed access to a car to improve their lives and that of their families. To one oft-quoted woman it was obvious why her family chose a car over indoor plumbing; "You can't go to town in a bathtub" (quoted in Berger, M. (1979) *The Devil Wagon in God's Country: The Automobile and Social Change in Rural America, 1893-1929*). Many families made decisions to forego improvements to their home and other difficult choices in order get or keep an automobile.

In examining advertising research, it is clear that advertisers continually ignored their own findings. The industry heralded every study that documented the existence of the female market or their influence over family purchases as groundbreaking and revelatory, yet knew that women shaped automotive purchases for nearly one hundred years. This paper will explore what advertisers knew about women's attitudes and behaviors with regard to cars and class in the United States, and the ways in which they sought to appeal to their desire to achieve socioeconomic success.

## Source material or data

Drawing on research from the Henry Ford archives in Dearborn, Michigan; the John W. Hartmann Center for Sales, Advertising, and Marketing History at Duke University in North Carolina; automotive archives like Chrysler and General Motors, consumer analysts like Charles Coolidge Parlin and Ernest Dichter, whose papers are available at the Hagley Library; popular magazines like *Life*, *Working Woman*, and *Good Housekeeping*; and materials found in the Harmer E. Davis Transportation Library at the University of California - Berkeley, this paper will analyze not only how automobile manufacturers and advertisers imagined consumers, but also what they hoped their consumers would imagine. Promises of opulence and grandeur certainly existed, but even the suggestion that a car would bring a family stability and respect was significant. Selling cars to women often entailed

justifying why it would benefit the family. This paper will consider the tropes advertisers employed, including the use of Europe, service workers, Cinderella, activities and destinations, and the second car, all of which signified the status of the car owner. It will examine the ways women's relationship with the automobile enabled them to assert their family's socioeconomic standing.

#### Notes

1. Pamela Laird, "'The Car without a Single Weakness': Early Automobile Advertising," *Technology and Culture* 37, no. 4 (1996): 797; Gijs Mom, *The Electric Vehicle: Technology and Expectations in the Automobile Age* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 58., 107; David Gartman, *Auto Opium: A Social History of American Automobile Design* (London, New York: Routledge, 1994), 53-54, 56.

#### Sample References

##### *Magazines:*

*American*

*Collier's*

*Country Life & The Sportsman*

*Esquire*

*Fortune*

*Holiday*

*Ladies' Home Journal*

*Life*

*Literary Digest*

*McCall's*

*National Geographic*

*Saturday Evening Post*

*Vanity Fair*

*Women's Home Companion*

*Your Car: A Magazine of Romance, Fact and Fiction*

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Buying Trends in the Automobile Field, January 1968

How to Attract More Customers to the Auto Laboratory, October 1969

How to Train Better Car Salesmen, 7 December 1971.

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The Car – Friend or Foe?, 1966

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