

= 1950s American automobile culture =

1950s American automobile culture has had an enduring influence on the culture of the United States , as reflected in popular music , major trends from the 1950s and mainstream acceptance of the " hot rod " culture . The American manufacturing economy switched from producing war @-@ related items to consumer goods at the end of World War II , and by the end of the 1950s , one in six working Americans were employed either directly or indirectly in the automotive industry . The United States became the world 's largest manufacturer of automobiles , and Henry Ford 's goal of 40 years earlier ? that any man with a good job should be able to afford an automobile ? was achieved . A new generation of service businesses focusing on customers with their automobiles sprang up during the decade , including drive @-@ through or drive @-@ in restaurants and more drive @-@ in theaters (cinemas) .

The decade began with 25 million registered automobiles on the road , most of which predated World War II and were in poor condition ; no automobiles or parts were produced during the war owing to rationing and restrictions . By 1950 , most factories had made the transition to a consumer @-@ based economy , and more than 8 million cars were produced that year alone . By 1958 , there were more than 67 million cars registered in the United States , more than twice the number at the start of the decade .

As part of the U.S. national defenses , to support military transport , the National Highway System was expanded with Interstate highways , beginning in 1955 , across many parts of the United States . The wider , multi @-@ lane highways allowed traffic to move at faster speeds , with few or no stoplights on the way . The wide @-@ open spaces along the highways became a basis for numerous billboards showing advertisements .

The dawning of the Space Age and Space Race were reflected in contemporary American automotive styling . Large tailfins , flowing designs reminiscent of rockets , and radio antennas that imitated Sputnik 1 were common , owing to the efforts of design pioneers such as Harley Earl .

= = Interstate Highway System = =

The Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways (commonly called the Interstate system or simply the Interstate) is a network of freeways that forms a part of the National Highway System of the United States . While serving as Supreme Commander of the Allied forces in Europe during World War II , Eisenhower had gained an appreciation of the German Autobahn network as an essential component of a national defense system , providing transport routes for military supplies and troop deployments . Construction was authorized by the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 , and the original portion was completed 35 years later . The system has contributed in shaping the United States into a world economic superpower and a highly industrialized nation .

The Interstate grew quickly , along with the automobile industry , allowing a new @-@ found mobility that permeated ways of American life and culture . The automobile and the Interstate became the American symbol of individuality and freedom , and , for the first time , automobile buyers accepted that the automobile they drove indicated their social standing and level of affluence . It became a statement of their personality and an extension of their self @-@ concepts .

= = Suburbanization = =

The United States ' investment in infrastructure such as highways and bridges coincided with the increasing availability of cars more suited to the higher speeds that better roads made possible , allowing people to live beyond the confines of major cities , and instead commute to and from work .

After World War II , land developers began to buy land just outside the city limits of larger cities to build mass quantities of inexpensive tract houses . One of the first examples of planned suburbanization is Levittown , Pennsylvania , which was developed by William Levitt beginning in 1951 as a suburb of Philadelphia . The promise of their own single @-@ family home on their own

land , together with a free college education and low @-@ interest loans given to returning soldiers to purchase homes under the G.I. Bill , drove demand for new homes to an unprecedented level . Additionally , 4 million babies were born every year during the 1950s . By the end of the baby boom era in 1964 , almost 77 million " baby boomers " had been born , fueling the need for more suburban housing , and automobiles to commute them to and from the city centers for work and shopping .

By the end of the 1950s , one @-@ third of Americans lived in the suburbs . Eleven of the United States 's twelve largest cities recorded a declining population during the decade , with a consequent loss in tax revenues and city culture . Only Los Angeles , a center for the car culture , gained population . Economist Richard Porter commented that " The automobile made suburbia possible , and the suburbs made the automobile essential . "

= = = Decline of the inner city = = =

More people joined the middle class in the 1950s , with more money to spend , and the availability of consumer goods expanded along with the economy , including the automobile . Americans were spending more time in their automobiles and viewing them as an extension of their identity , which helped to fuel a boom in automobile sales . Most businesses directly or indirectly related to the auto industry saw tremendous growth during the decade . New designs and innovations appealed to a generation tuned into fashion and glamour , and the new @-@ found freedom and way of life in the suburbs had several unforeseen consequences for the inner cities . The 1950s saw the beginning of white flight and urban sprawl , driven by increasing automobile ownership . Many local and national transportation laws encouraged suburbanization , which in time ended up damaging the cities economically .

As more middle @-@ class and affluent people fled the city to the relative quiet and open spaces of the suburbs , the urban centers deteriorated and lost population . At the same time that cities were experiencing a lower tax base due to the flight of higher income earners , pressures from The New Deal forced them to offer pensions and other benefits , increasing the average cost of benefits per employee by 1 @,@ 629 percent . This was in addition to hiring an average of 20 percent more employees to serve the ever shrinking cities . More Americans were driving cars and fewer were using public transportation , and it was not practical to extend to the suburbs . At the same time , the number of surface roads exploded to serve the ever increasing numbers of individually owned cars , further burdening city and country resources . During this time , the perception of using public transportation turned more negative . In what is arguably the most extreme example , Detroit , the fifth largest city in the United States in 1950 with 1 @,@ 849 @,@ 568 residents , had shrunk to 706 @,@ 585 by 2010 , a reduction of 62 percent .

In some instances , the automotive industry and others were directly responsible for the decline of public transportation . The Great American streetcar scandal saw GM , Firestone Tire , Standard Oil of California , Phillips Petroleum , Mack Trucks and other companies purchase a number of streetcars and electric trains in the 1930s and 1940s , such that 90 percent of city trolleys had been dismantled by 1950 . It was argued that this was a deliberate destruction of streetcars as part of a larger strategy to push the United States into automobile dependency . In *United States v. National City Lines , Inc .* , many were found guilty of antitrust violations . The story has been explored several times in print , film and other media , for example in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* , *Taken for a Ride* and *The End of Suburbia* .

= = Women 's rights = =

The automobile unions played a leading role in advancing the cause of women 's rights . In 1955 , the United Auto Workers Union (UAW) organized the UAW Women 's Department to strengthen women 's role in the union and encourage participation in the union 's elected bodies . In a move that was met with some hostility by Teamsters leaders , the U.S. Division of Transport Personnel had in 1943 instructed Teamsters Union officials that women should be allowed full employment as truck drivers . That proved to be only a temporary wartime measure , but a change of heart among

Teamsters leadership by the mid 1950s led to the Equal Pay Act of 1963 . Women in the auto industry were considered leaders in the movement for women 's rights .

= = Motorsports = =

= = = Hot rodding = = =

The increasing popularity of hot rodding cars (modifying them to increase performance) is reflected in part by the creation of special interest magazines catering to this culture . Hot Rod is the oldest such magazine , with first editor Wally Parks , and founded by Robert E. Petersen in 1948 , with original publication by his Petersen Publishing Company . Hot Rod has licensed affiliation with Universal Technical Institute .

The relative abundance and inexpensive nature of the Ford Model T and other cars from the 1920s to 1940s helped fuel the hot rod culture that developed , which was focused on getting the most linear speed out of these older automobiles . The origin of the term " hot rod " is unclear , but the culture blossomed in the post war culture of the 1950s .

Hot Rod magazine 's November 1950 cover announced the first hot rod to exceed 200 mph . The hand crafted car used an Edelbrock built Mercury flathead V8 and set the record at the Bonneville Salt Flats . This 30 ,000 acre (47 sq mi) region has been called the " Holy Grail of American Hot Rodding " , and is often used for land speed racing , a tradition that grew rapidly in the 1950s and continues today .

Hot rodding was about more than raw power . Kustom Kulture started in the 1950s , when artists such as Von Dutch transformed automobile pin striping from a seldom used accent that followed the lines of the car into a freestyle art form . Von Dutch was as famous for his " flying eyeball " as he was for his intricate spider web designs . As the decade began , hand drawn pin striping was almost unheard of , but by 1958 it had become a popular method of customizing the looks of the hot rod . As the decade progressed , hot rodding became a popular hobby for a growing number of teenagers as the sport literally came to Main Street .

= = = Drag racing = = =

Drag racing has existed since the first cars , but it was not until the 1950s that it started to become mainstream , beginning with Santa Ana Drags , the first drag strip in the United States . The strip was founded by C. J. " Pappy " Hart , Creighton Hunter and Frank Stillwell at the Orange County Airport auxiliary runway in southern California , and was operational from 1950 until June 21 , 1959 .

Hot Rod editor Wally Parks created the National Hot Rod Association in 1951 , and it is still the largest governing body in the popular sport . As of October 2012 , there are at least 139 professional drag strips operational in the United States . One of the most powerful racing fuels ever developed is nitromethane , which dramatically debuted as a racing fuel in 1950 , and continues as the primary component used in Top Fuel drag racing today .

= = = NASCAR = = =

The National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) is the second most popular spectator sports in the United States behind the National Football League (NFL) . It was incorporated on February 21 , 1948 by Bill France , Sr. and built its roots in the 1950s . Two years later in 1950 the first asphalt " superspeedway " , Darlington Speedway , was opened in South Carolina , and the sport saw dramatic growth during the 1950s . Because of the tremendous success of Darlington , construction began of a 2 .5 mile , high banked superspeedway near Daytona Beach , which is still in use .

The Cup Series was started in 1949 , with Jim Roper winning the first series . By 2008 , the most

prestigious race in the series , the Daytona 500 had attracted more than 17 million television viewers . Dynasties were born in the 1950s with racers like Lee Petty (father of Richard Petty , grandfather of Kyle Petty) and Buck Baker (father of Buddy Baker) .

NASCAR , and stock car racing in general , has its roots in bootlegging during Prohibition . Junior Johnson was one of many bootleggers who took part in the sport during the 1950s , equally well known for his arrest in 1955 for operating his father 's moonshine still as he is for his racing success . He ended up spending a year in an Ohio prison , but soon returned to the sport before retiring as a driver in 1966 .

= = New business models = =

= = = Faster food = = =

As more Americans began driving cars , entirely new categories of businesses came into being to allow them to enjoy their products and services without having to leave their cars . This includes the drive @-@ in restaurant , and later the drive @-@ through window . Even into the 2010s , the Sonic Drive @-@ In restaurant chain has provided primarily drive @-@ in service by carhop in 3 @, @ 561 restaurants within 43 U.S. states , serving approximately 3 million customers per day . Known for its use of carhops on roller skates , the company annually hosts a competition to determine the top skating carhop in its system .

A number of other successful " drive up " businesses have their roots in the 1950s , including McDonald 's (expanded c . 1955) , which had no dine @-@ in facilities , requiring customers to park and walk up to the window , taking their order " to go " . Automation and the lack of dining facilities allowed McDonald 's to sell burgers for 15 cents each , instead of the typical 35 cents , and people were buying them by the bagful . By 1948 , they had fired their carhops , installed larger grills , reduced their menu and radically changed the industry by introducing assembly @-@ line methods of food production , similar to the auto industry , dubbing it the " Speedee Service System " . They redesigned their sign specifically to make it easier to see from the road , creating the now familiar yellow double @-@ arch structure . Businessman Ray Kroc joined McDonald 's as a franchise agent in 1955 . He subsequently purchased the chain from the McDonald brothers and oversaw its worldwide growth .

Other chains were created to serve the increasingly mobile patron . Carl Karcher opened his first Carl 's Jr. in 1956 , and rapidly expanded , locating his restaurants near California 's new freeway off @-@ ramps . These restaurant models initially relied on the new and ubiquitous ownership of automobiles , and the willingness of patrons to dine in their automobiles . As of 2013 , drive @-@ through service account for 65 percent of their profits .

= = = Drive @-@ in movies = = =

The drive @-@ in theater is a form of cinema structure consisting of a large outdoor movie screen , a projection booth , a concession stand and a large parking area for automobiles , where patrons view the movie from the comfort of their cars and listen via an electric speaker placed at each parking spot .

Although drive @-@ in movies first appeared in 1933 , it was not until well after the post @-@ war era that they became popular , enjoying their greatest success in the 1950s , reaching a peak of more than 4 @, @ 000 theaters in the United States alone . Drive @-@ in theaters have been romanticized in popular culture with the movie American Graffiti and Grease and the television series Happy Days . They developed a reputation for showing B movies , typically monster or horror films , and as " passion pits " , a place for teenagers to make out . While drive @-@ in theaters are rarer today with only 366 remaining and no longer unique to America , they are still associated as part of the 1950s ' American car culture . Drive @-@ in movies have seen somewhat of a resurgence in popularity in the 21st century , due in part to baby boomer nostalgia .

Robert Schuller started the nation 's first drive @-@ in church in 1955 in Garden Grove , California . After his regular 9 : 30 am service in the chapel four miles away , he would travel to the drive @-@ in for a second Sunday service . Worshipers listened to his sermon from the comfort of their cars , using the movie theater 's speaker boxes .

= = = Malls = = =

The first modern shopping malls were built in the 1950s , such as Bergen Mall , which was the first to use the term " mall " to describe the business model . Other early malls moved retailing away from the dense , commercial downtowns into the largely residential suburbs . Northgate in Seattle is credited as being the first modern mall design , with two rows of businesses facing each other and a walkway separating them . It opened in 1950 . Shopper 's World in Framingham , Massachusetts was the two @-@ story mall , and opened a year later . The design was modified again in 1954 when Northland Center in Detroit , Michigan , used a centralized design with an anchor store in the middle of the mall , ringed by other stores . This was the first mall to have the parking lot completely surrounding the shopping center , and to provide central heat and air @-@ conditioning .

In 1956 , Southdale Center opened in Edina , Minnesota , just outside Minneapolis . It was the first to combine all these modern elements , being enclosed with a two @-@ story design , central heat and air @-@ conditioning plus a comfortable common area . It also featured two large department stores as anchors . Most industry professionals consider Southdale Center to be the first modern regional mall .

This formula (enclosed space with stores attached , away from downtown and accessible only by automobile) became a popular way to build retail across the world . Victor Gruen , one of the pioneers in mall design , came to abhor this effect of his new design ; he decried the creation of enormous " land wasting seas of parking " and the spread of suburban sprawl .

= = = Aftermarket = = =

The 1950s jump started an industry of aftermarket add @-@ ons for cars that continues today . The oldest aftermarket wheel company , American Racing , started in 1956 and still builds " mag wheels " (alloy wheels) for almost every car made . Holley introduced the first modular four @-@ barrel carburetor , which Ford offered in the 1957 Ford Thunderbird , and versions are still used by performance enthusiasts . Edelbrock started during the Great Depression and expanded after the war . They provided a variety of high performance parts for the new hot rodders , which was popular equipment for setting speed records at Bonneville Salt Flats . Owners were no longer restricted to the original equipment provided by manufacturers , helping not only create the hot rod culture but also the foundation for cosmetic modifications . The creation and rapid expansion of the aftermarket made it possible for enthusiasts to personalize their automobiles .

= = = Distribution = = =

Most new cars were sold through automobile dealerships in the 1950s , but Crosley automobiles were still on sale at any number of appliance or department stores , and Allstate (a rebadged Henry J) could be ordered at any Sears and Roebuck in 1952 and 1953 . By mid @-@ decade , these outlets had vanished and the automobile dealer became the sole source of new automobiles .

Starting in the mid @-@ 1950s , new car introductions in the fall once again became an anticipated event , as all dealers would reveal the models for the upcoming year each October . In this era before the popularization of computerization , the primary source of information on new models was the dealer . The idea was originally suggested in the 1930s by President Franklin D. Roosevelt during the Great Depression , as a way of stimulating the economy by creating demand . The idea was reintroduced by President Dwight Eisenhower for the same reasons , and this method of introducing next year 's models in the preceding autumn lasted well into the 1990s .

During the decade , many smaller manufacturers could not compete with the Big Three and either

went out of business or merged . In 1954 , American Motors was formed when Hudson merged with Nash @-@ Kelvinator Corporation in a deal worth almost \$ 200 million , the largest corporate merger in United States history at that time .

= = = Muscle cars = = =

The muscle @-@ car era is deeply rooted in the 1950s , although there is some debate as to the exact beginning . Old Cars Weekly claims it started with the introduction of the original Chrysler " Firepower " hemi V8 engine in 1951 , while others such as Hot Rod magazine consider the first overhead valve engine by Chevrolet , the 265 cid V8 , as the " heir apparent to Ford flathead 's position as the staple of racing " , in 1955 . The " small block Chevy " itself developed its own subculture that exists today . Other contenders include the 1949 Oldsmobile V8 engine , the first in a long line of such powerful V8 engines , as well as the Cadillac V8 of the same year .

Regardless how it is credited , the horsepower race centered around the V8 engine and the muscle @-@ car era lasted until new smog regulations forced dramatic changes in OEM engine design in the early 1970s . This in turn opened up new opportunities for aftermarket manufacturers like Edelbrock . Each year brought larger engines and / or increases in horsepower , providing a catalyst for customers to upgrade to newer models . Automobile executives also deliberately updated the body designs yearly , in the name of " planned obsolescence " and added newly developed or improved features such as automatic transmissions , power steering , power brakes and cruise control , in an effort to make the previous models seem outdated and facilitate the long drive from the suburbs . Record sales made the decade arguably the " golden era " of automobile manufacturing .

Harley Earl and Bill France Sr. popularized the saying " Race on Sunday , sell on Monday " , a mantra still heard today in motorsports , particularly within NASCAR . During the muscle @-@ car era , manufacturers not only sponsored the drivers , but designed stock cars specifically to compete in the fast @-@ growing and highly popular sport .

= = Songs celebrating the automobile = =

As the automobile became more and more an extension of the individual , it was natural for this to be reflected in popular culture . America 's love affair with the automobile was most evident in the music of the era .

" Rocket 88 " was first recorded in 1951 and originally credited to Jackie Brenston and his Delta Cats , although it was later discovered to be the work of Ike Turner 's Kings of Rhythm . It is often credited as the first rock and roll song ever produced and has been covered by other artists .

" Hot Rod Lincoln " was first recorded in 1955 by Charlie Ryan , and has since been recorded by Roger Miller and others . The 1960 Johnny Bond version charted at number 26 on Billboard Hot 100 . Comedian Jim Varney produced a version with Ricky Skaggs for the motion picture The Beverly Hillbillies . The song is still a popular live song for artists such as Asleep at the Wheel and Junior Brown .

" Maybellene " , released by Chuck Berry in 1955 , is an uptempo rocker describing a hot rod race between a jilted lover and his unfaithful girlfriend . It was a # 5 hit and was described by Rolling Stone as the starting point of rock and roll guitar .

" Wake Up Little Susie " recorded by The Everly Brothers , reached number one on the Billboard Pop chart , despite having been banned from Boston radio stations for lyrics about elaborating " our reputation is shot " because the narrator and his date slept through a drive @-@ through movie date and missed their curfew by six hours .

" Teen Angel " was released in 1959 and initially met with resistance by radio stations because of its dark message about a young girl who dies in an automobile / train accident .

Other songs recorded during the decade also reflect the automobile 's place in American culture , such as " Brand New Cadillac " , Sonny Burgess 's " Thunderbird " and Bo Diddley 's " Cadillac " . A 1955 Oldsmobile was celebrated in the nostalgic " Ol ' ' 55 " by Tom Waits (1973) .

