

Car Culture of the 1950s: How Cars Moved America

Introduction

In this episode we're taking a look at the 1950s and how cars moved America. The growth of the automobile impacted all areas of society - from the suburbs to travel and even the identity of the American teenager.

The number of automobiles doubled in the 1950s, which makes sense, when you consider that the average income of most Americans went up and the distance to work, to the store, the doctor, and other daily needs increased. Cars were no longer purely for entertainment. They became a necessity for daily life and as families grew, one car would not always suffice.

Suburbs

During the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s millions of white middle to upper class Americans migrated to the suburbs, exchanging the noisy, cramped and polluted life of the cities for a more spacious and isolated environment. Space in particular became more and more valuable as the Baby Boom took effect and families grew larger. In 1957 one baby was born every 6 seconds.

Car manufacturers targeted families by designing cars that were larger and safer. New features were added that gave a more luxurious and homey feel to accommodate families travelling long distances, spreading their wealth across the country. Enter the Great American Road Trip.

Road Trip

In the 1950s Americans got in their cars, an'drove. Attendance at National Parks, roadside attractions, and amusement parks skyrocketed. Visitors traveled from longer distances than ever before, and the need for services such as gas stations, motels, and restaurants increased. The first Holiday Inn opened its doors in 1952. In 1955, Disneyland opened and became the dream destination for children of all ages. McDonalds, Taco Bell, Sonic Drive-In, Burger King, KFC, Dunkin Donuts, and others, all owe their success to the fast pace of the traveling American. With more Americans on the road came more traffic jams, car accidents, and the need for the expansion of interstate highways. Noone was more convinced of this than President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Eisenhower and The Highways

As a young soldier in 1919, while transporting military vehicles from the East coast to the West coast of the United States, Eisenhower witnessed the lack of confluence of American roadways. The 81 vehicle convoy averaged a speed of a mere 6 miles per hour on the 62 day 3,251 mile cross country journey. Once past the Mississippi, most roads were dirt roads, or mountain trails. Vehicles became stuck in the mud, they slid off the narrow roadways, and some even overturned. Bridges were terrible, and access to food, water, and shelter were hard to come by.

During his time in WWII, Eisenhower observed the superiority of the German highway system: the Autobahn. He recognized its importance for the German military - making it easier and more efficient to transport troops and military vehicles across Germany.

Eisenhower won the Presidential Election in 1952, at the beginning of the Cold War. Because Americans feared nuclear war with the Soviet Union, Eisenhower made it his mission to improve the interstate highway system in the name of National Defense. He called on Congress to create legislation to expand and improve the interstate highways in order to attend to “the appalling inadequacies to meet the demands of catastrophe or defense, should an atomic war come.”

On June 29, 1956 President Eisenhower signed into law the 1956 Federal Aid Highways Act, the largest public works project in American history. The legislation addressed the issues of traffic accidents, traffic jams, and national defense. Billions of dollars have since been pumped into the economy to build and maintain the interstate highway system. Car travel and commercial trucking increased. But so did pollution. The expansion of the interstate highway system contributed to the decline of mass transit - specifically train travel.

Low income, minority neighborhoods were split in two with the expansion of highways through major cities across the country. Communities were destroyed and home values decreased. Those who could afford the suburbs left and took their tax dollars with them - leading to widespread decay and social problems in cities across America.

Teenage Liberation

It wasn't just the adults in America who were affected by the dramatic rise of car culture. Life for American youth aged 13-18 changed drastically in the 1950s. There was such a major shift that a new phrase entered the English language: teenager. Thanks to a stable economy, most teenagers were no longer working to help support their families and could stay in school longer. Buses transported students from their homes to newly consolidated highschools, leading to the death of the one room schoolhouse.

After school and on weekends, teens spent their time at drive-ins and car hops. The car allowed teens more freedom from parental supervision than ever before. Teenagers and the automobile became entwined in pop-culture, influencing everything from music, to advertising, to film, and everything in between. Entire Hollywood careers, such as those of Steve McQueen and James Dean, centered around the relationship between humans and their cars.

These Teenagers of the 1950's would take their love of automobiles and foster the growth and shape of the American Culture for generations to come, moving it through the 20th century and on to today.

