

A Review of “Motoring: The Highway Experience in America”

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Abstract:

A review of the book “Motoring: The Highway Experience in America” by John A. Jakle and Keith A. Sculle.

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Article:

Jakle and Sculle's *Motoring: The Highway Experience in America* is their fifth book regarding the automobile and American culture. As with their prior works, this book is peppered with an assortment of vintage posters, billboards, advertisements, and photographs from the early twentieth-century American road. The only thing I found missing was the ubiquitous “Burma Shave” road signs and the essential “See Rock City” painted on the side of nearly every barn within 500 miles of Chattanooga, Tennessee. True Americana aficionados will forgive these omissions as the authors pleasure us with that most important of all pre-Disney Florida attractions—St. Augustine's Gatorland.

The book's construction is reminiscent of mid-twentieth-century highway engineering in that an initial foundation is laid broad and deep—the premise that the automobile and automobile ownership is so interwoven into the American character that the two cannot be unbundled. The individual freedom that Americans seek is contained within the metal shell and set on the wheels of the automobile. From this foundation, the chapters build on the last from the horrid nature of early road surfaces to the rise of the “tourist trap,” to that archetypal American construct—the drive-through window.

The authors draw an implied line directly from Henry Ford, whose mechanization of the automobile assembly process made the car affordable, to the self-evident, manifest destiny typified by the greatest road builder of the twentieth century, New York's Robert Moses. It was, has been, and will be, inevitable. It is at the end of the road when Jakle and Sculle look back. Reflections as well as the summation of the cultural consequences of the American love affair with the automobile are saved for the last two chapters.

The authors assert that the automobile, by its very nature as an individual conveyance, matches the core American attitudes and ideals of the twentieth century. The automobile is the key to personal freedom, especially freedom for women. This freedom is expressed by the individual's ability to travel, to live in one place and work in another, to leave and go as he or she pleases, and to be free from public forms of transportation that require extended periods of crowding. Skeptics can certainly point to industry schemes to kill public transportation and the effect of advertising on the American public, but Jakle and Sculle indicate that the automobile facilitated the extension of the basic American culture and formed the basis for freeing suburban women from the home; therefore, it was a natural success from the moment Henry Ford made it affordable.

Several themes and components I found particularly interesting include the impact of the automobile on the American family structure, the fall of the bus lines, and the inclusion of satirical artwork and comics from the early twentieth century. As early as 1922, American magazine polling led editors to conclude that “the passenger automobile has become so important a factor in American life that thousands of families of moderate means are entirely willing to make serious sacrifices of other things in order to be able to possess them” (p. 19). Sociologists found that many Americans would forgo adequate food and new clothing rather than lose their car. As early as 1907, researchers concluded that the lives of women would be enhanced with a car, and a cartoon proclaiming that appeared as early as 1925.

A full chapter is devoted to the rise and fall of the American bus lines. The authors provide a good insight into the history of such American carriers as Greyhound and Trailways; however, they note that airline deregulation in 1978, combined with the American desire for individualism devastated the American bus lines, with the industry in decline since 1980. Air travel took the place of the bus lines as it was faster and more convenient for trips that were deemed too long to drive.

One of the strengths of the book is the period cartoons, advertisements, and commentaries on the automobile, drivers, women, consumption, and convenience that help remind the reader that whereas technology changes rapidly, people change incrementally. The authors could triple the number of such figures and only improve on the book. Social commentary and satire of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s are particularly telling regarding the perceptions of the time about the automobile's benefits and its negative externalities. My favorite is a cartoon from 1929 showing a motorist driving in the country attempting to view the scenery, yet wall-to-wall billboards hawking cigars, hotels, beer, and colas block his view.

The end of World War II becomes the automobile's tipping point, when it makes the leap from technological help to full agent of social and economic change. As Americans came back from World War II, the wages of sacrifice and victory included an expansion of individualism and an automobile was the foundation for this. The handmaidens of the automobile, including the billboards, convenience stores, fast-food restaurants, urban sprawl, and tourist traps, are also

extensions of the American character. This is an egalitarian, middle-class character, processed and ground like the ubiquitous hamburger. While the well-heeled traveled the cobblestone streets of Europe or cruised on trans-Atlantic lines, all the while dining in formality, middle-class Americans could relax in their cars. The opinions of the well-educated, such as that of Pierce F. Lewis in 1973 that “It’s hard to believe that the marketing of sandwiches which happen to be made of meat (mostly) requires an environment reminiscent of a defective [tdot] Wurlitzer juke box, but American fast food restaurants are nearly always built that way,” serve to remind the reader that this middle-class, automobile culture has always been decried by elites.

To be sure, the externalities of this lifestyle are great. Jakle and Sculle use their conclusion to remind us of the negative externalities associated with congestion, sprawl, and the time associated with commuting, but they also remind the reader that the automobile gave newfound mobility to women, especially in suburban America, allowing them to more fully participate in the American economy and seek self-fulfillment between daily obligations. The authors also assert that they do not envision a scenario in which Americans relinquish this freedom—a conclusion I share, as it is very difficult to imagine anything other than a complete and total lack of any fuel source that would curtail American motoring.

Detailed statistics and grand social and economic theories are lacking—as they should be with a book like this. However, as a light introduction into the history and effects of the American love affair with the automobile, Jakle and Sculle have constructed a good read with *Motoring: The Highway Experience in America*, covering the essential elements of the story at a level of detail that is more than adequate for the vast majority of readers. Theorists will be disappointed as the book is topical in sensibility, but as with its inclusions of period comics, cartoons, and advertising, this makes the book enjoyable reading, perhaps even at bedtime.