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**UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON TEACHER, STUDENTS  
ALL REVVED UP ABOUT CAR CULTURE**

DAYTON, Ohio — When John Heitmann asks students in his history seminar to share their “auto-biographies,” he wants to hear about childhood memories and family vacations, first loves and fast times, wild rides and roadside attractions.

He wants to hear about their cars — and how cars have sparked their imaginations and shaped their lives.

In his class on the automobile and American life, Heitmann, a University of Dayton historian of science and technology, is sharing his lifelong fascination with cars while providing students with the perfect vehicle for examining 20th-century culture.

The auto, Heitmann says, is the quintessential technological symbol of 20th-century American culture, a tangible expression of the quest to level space, time and class, and a reflection of our restless mobility. Every aspect of American culture — business, rural and urban life, work, leisure and the arts — has been transformed by our horse-powered icons of steel and chrome.

Close your eyes and just try to imagine life in America without the Beach Boys, *Car Talk* radio, Motown, Airstream trailers, carpools, road rage, *On the Road*, drive-through windows, Chrysler minivans, KOA campgrounds or Alan “Crazy about a Ford Truck” Jackson.

The seminar offers numerous on-ramps for approaching the subject — from films like *American Graffiti*, *Roger and Me* and *Thelma and Louise* to texts like James Flink’s *The Automobile Age* and Ben Hamper’s *Rivthead*. In addition, students have taken a field trip to the Packard Museum in Dayton, some of them riding in a ‘38 Packard owned by UD administrator Jim Stiles. “Students didn’t really know what the old open cars with wood spokes looked like,” notes Heitmann, who is teaching the seminar this semester.

Student presentations and research papers are adding to the shared learning experience and highlighting individual interests.

“Before this class, I didn’t think too much about the impact of the automobile on gender and class roles,” says Caitlin Toner, a senior English major from Flossmoor, Ill., whose class presentation examined how the early motor age expanded women’s social interaction and

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pop-up bird that rose to stiff attention when you hit the accelerator and a '57 Ford with a 312 special-order Thunderbird engine and a magic-tune AM radio. Working along with his cousin, Heitmann changed points and plugs, poured Gumout into carburetors and read every issue of *Hot Rod* and *Motor Trend*.

Among his memorable cars: a '66 Mustang six-cylinder coupe, "useful for dates, including the one which subsequently led to a marriage that still works, even though I doubt the car does."

Today, the historian's "everyday driver" is a burgundy Mustang convertible, and his mid-life passion is a '71 Porsche 911, a source of continuing education for his self-training as a mechanic.

"Maybe it's a generational thing, but this generation hasn't been so affected emotionally and intellectually by cars," notes Heitmann, a baby boomer cruising 50. "For today's students, some aspects of car culture are already ancient history. Many have never taken two-lane highways, only interstates. What have we lost by not taking two-lane winding roads?" he asks, weighing the convenience and safety of interstate travel against the cost: homogenous scenery and generic fast-food restaurants coast to coast.

Asking those kinds of questions helps students understand the influence technology has on society. "We often take advantage of all the technology around and never stop and think what it's doing not just for us, but to us," he says. "Technology is not value-free. It can totally shape our lives with unintended consequences, as technology can, at times, bite back.

"The automobile can be at the heart of very serious academic study that can be balanced between enthusiasm for technology and critical thinking about technology," the professor maintains.

That being said, teaching the history of the auto brings together "all my interests of childhood and beyond. I can be a kid again. There are not too many things in any academic field that are this much fun."

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