5-6-2009

The Automobile and American Life

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/news_rls

Recommended Citation
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/news_rls/1468

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Marketing and Communications at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in News Releases by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mslangen1@udayton.edu.
The Automobile and American Life

05.06.2009 | Culture and Society

The U.S. automobile industry's current crisis is a dark chapter in the history of American car culture, according to John Heitmann, University of Dayton history professor and author of a new book, The Automobile and American Life.

"There was a time when cars were at the center of American cultural life," Heitmann said. "What you drove told so much about who you were. But that has changed in recent decades, and there is a lot of negativity surrounding cars. For many Americans, they are viewed now as appliances more than objects of desire. They are seen as discardable."

Recent events in the auto industry will be regarded as watershed moments in the history of the automobile, along with the release of the 1908 Model T, the engineering marvels of the 1930s, the emergence of rock 'n' roll in the 1950s and the oil shocks of the 1970s, Heitmann said.

Heitmann's book recounts the colorful history of America's "love affair" with the automobile. Launching in June, The Automobile and American Life (McFarland) is both a general history of the automobile and an analysis of its impact on American culture. Topics include the emergence of the car as a plaything for the well-to-do; Henry Ford and the evolution of labor; government involvement in building roads and regulating safety and environmental concerns; the automobile's impact on religion, gender, courtship and sex; effects of the Great Depression and World War II; the 1950s golden age of automobiles and the rise of a youth culture; racing, road trips and the family car; and how American car culture has been represented in film, song and literature.

"We have devoted music, films, literature, hobbies — you name it — to the automobile," said Heitmann, who also teaches classes on the history of science and technology. "It represents freedom, offering independence and mobility to rural residents, teenagers, women and minorities, and its legacy is living wages for everyday Americans. This book is not buff history. I'm far more interested in how technology shapes us into who we are, and how we make choices concerning the technologies we use, than the technology itself."

Despite the troubles of the United States' Big Three automakers, Heitmann has no doubt the auto industry will thrive again, though it may look much different than it does today. The key to its future success lies in capturing the imaginations of Americans.

"The love affair with the automobile is not over, car companies just need to generate excitement again," he said. "We're a large country, and people get excited about driving. If you can win the culture, you can win the market."

Heitmann's book reveals that some of the auto industry's past has striking similarities to the challenges facing it now and in the future.

The current race to develop alternative fuels is in full force, but the debate echoes the earliest years of the automobile. Gasoline power would eventually win, but at the turn of the 19th century, steam cars dominated the automotive field. An alternative was the electric car; but they were expensive and limited in range and speed. The early designs of the internal combustion engine were primitive and anything but reliable and smooth running.

In the 1960s, General Motors explored steam propulsion, hybrid vehicle designs, and electrics, only to drop them as unfeasible, believing oil supplies would be abundant for the foreseeable future. The debate arose again following the oil shocks of the 1970s, and it has been renewed in recent years.

Government intervention in the industry is also nothing new. On Feb. 22, 1942, the government forced the production of automobiles to cease, and American auto industry conducted total war against the Axis powers, converting factories to create vehicles and parts for military use. In the 1950s and 1960s, the federal government began regulating exhaust emissions, safety restraints, dealer practices and consumer protection.

The automobile has also played a critical role in the nation's economy. During the 1920s, when the auto industry over-
expanded, the market became saturated, and as it contracted, it pulled the economy downwards, Heitmann writes in his book.

"We should be careful about drawing parallels between the Great Depression and today's economic crisis as it relates to the auto industry, but it's important to recognize that the automobile is far more than a chunk of pressed-out steel," Heitmann said. "It's the largest consumer of computers today. It requires rubber, plastic, glass, fabric and thousands of smaller parts. When the automobile industry is in trouble, it has a tremendous ripple effect on the rest of the economy."

Heitmann is a prolific researcher who studies the connection between science, technology and religion, in addition to topics related to the history of the automobile. As a car buff, he continues to restore a green 1971 Porsche 911T Targa and travels to car shows, museums and meetings with other auto historians.

For more information, contact Cameron Fullam, assistant director of media relations, at 937-229-3256 or fullam@udayton.edu.