

THINK YOU KNOW A LOT ABOUT CARS?

Here are some highlights (and lowlights) of early automobile history that may surprise you.



By Tom Tortorici

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DRIVE BACK WHERE YOU CAME FROM.

A horse-drawn world in 1900 surely must have welcomed the zippy new age of the automobile, right? Apparently not everyone was quite so enthusiastic. Well-to-do families in the early years would set out on weekend car trips into the countryside, only to find rocks and bricks hurled at them by the locals! Cars in those days were loud, oily-smelling beasts that kicked up clouds of dust from the dry dirt roads. Apparently these intrusions of progress jarred the traditional sensibilities of rural folk. Worst of all, the odd, jerking machines scared the horses, who would sometimes careen off the road, carrying their carts and riders on an unexpectedly wild ride.

LOOK AT ME WHILE YOU'RE DRIVING.

The front seat/back seat arrangement seems to make perfect sense for cars, but in the early days, it appears to have taken a while to arrive at that configuration. The French 1890 Panhard-Levassor had a back seat all right, but it faced backward. In a presumable response to the difficulties of group conversation, cars like the 1896 Peugeot had its back passenger seat placed in front of the driver's seat, in a 'vis-

a-vis' or face-to-face arrangement. Finally realizing that the driver's ability to see the road trumped conversational courtesy, passengers soon got moved back to the back, but at least now they could see where they were going instead of where they'd been.

TRAVELING TO EXCITING NEW COUNTIES.

Once back-country Americans got past their early, somewhat violent resentment, and as they noticed car prices dropping, they started to pick up on the possibilities. Now, with one of these newfangled contraptions, carrying their crops to market every week took half an hour instead of half a day. They could visit relatives in other towns who they otherwise might never see again. And, significantly, they had access for the first time to big-town medical care, education, libraries, media, sports and culture, as well as retailers hawking the latest consumer conveniences. In this way, the automobile probably had more overall impact on the lives of farm people than anyone else. Plus Henry Ford made sure that his Model T's engine could be disengaged from the drive mechanism and used to run farm machinery. Not a big selling point today, but it certainly was at the time.

BUT WHERE'S THE ENGINE?

In the earliest cars, the motor was generally mounted under and behind the driver's seat, near the real wheels that it powered. During the first decade of the 1900s, some car makers experimented with engines in the front, under a metal hood, a stylish modification that soon won popularity. Problem was, other manufacturers still hadn't figured out how to drive the rear wheels from a front-mounted engine. For example, the 1905 Yale Model E still kept its engine hidden low in the back, but to attract fashion-conscious buyers, it featured a *fake* hood in the front that held...nothing (except for maybe the water and oil tanks). Eventually, all automobile companies employed the engine-forward configuration, which allowed the entire car to sit lower to the ground. After all, unlike the carriages they had evolved from, cars no longer had to be built to allow the driver to see over the tops of horses.

TWO DOLLARS REGULAR, PLEASE.

The first gasoline providers for early cars were existing establishments like hardware stores. However since the pumps were simply placed in front of the store at the curb, cars that were gassing up tended to block the road. In busy areas, that led to continual traffic back-ups, driver rage, and more than a few accidents. When pumps were finally set back as part of proper 'service stations,' the accompanying structures initially tended to be cheap wood or corrugated metal sheds, creating dilapidated eyesores all along the road. This soon became a serious social, political and aesthetic issue. Then things swung the other way, with stations trying to outdo each other to gain architectural respectability. One gasoline company built their service stations to look like quaint English cottages, and another offered buildings that looked like Greek monuments, complete with classical columns.

NOW I KNOW WHY THEY CALL IT A TRUNK.

Park a modern car next to a hundred-year-old antique, and it's hard to see how one evolved into the other. But if you look at the process step by step, you'll see how exterior body features were gradually absorbed into a unified whole. Before about 1910, the seats were perched on top of the body; after that point, they were eventually lowered and encased *inside* the body. Sometime during the twenties, the hood area was widened to match the passenger compartment, resulting in smooth front-to-back lines then known as the 'torpedo' look. In the early thirties, many cars had an ordinary traveling trunk mounted on the back for cargo; by the end of the decade, the 'trunk' was thoroughly integrated in to the body itself. Finally, fenders gradually merged with the hood between the '30s and the '50s, at which point an interesting thing happened. Other than further streamlining and variations in

styling, car bodies stopped evolving. Sedans of the mid-fifties have the same essential structure and proportions as sedans today.

WOMEN'S RIGHT OF WAY.

In the earliest days of the twentieth century, motoring was a man's world. Throughout the late teens and the twenties, though, the lady of the house increasingly found that 'a woman's place' was behind a steering wheel. Three developments helped move this trend along. First, the option of an electric ignition freed the fairer sex from having to crank up the car from the handle in the front, a difficult and often dangerous procedure even for men. Second, cars became more reliable, which made it less likely for a young wife to be stranded on the road. And third, hardtop models began to outsell convertibles, protecting ladies and their children from questionable neighborhoods and unpredictable weather. The sense of freedom and empowerment that females gained by their new mobility surely was a factor in the growing women's rights movement at the time.

AND WE HAVE A WINNER.

At the turn of the twentieth century, electric cars, steam-driven cars, and gasoline-powered cars all competed for market share, and it was far from certain at that point which would prevail. Electric cars, like even today's models, were limited in range, and apparently that was a deal-killer for new owners who might want to jump in and drive to the horizon. Steam cars were powerful enough to cover longer distances, but waiting up to a half hour to get enough steam up was ultimately too tiresome for on-the-go drivers. Early internal combustion engines may have made for a smoky, noisy, vibrating ride, but ultimately they won the newly-mobile hearts of car buyers by default. The fact that they start right up and ride forever made gasoline-fueled cars the driver's exclusive choice for the next hundred years.

OBSTACLES TO PROGRESS.

Beginning in the 1880s, France and Germany made great, rapid strides in developing and popularizing the self-propelled vehicle. England? Not so much. Steam carriages were actually quite successful as public buses in the later part of the nineteenth century. But their competitors, the railroad and horse-carriage industries, had better lobbyists; Parliament was persuaded to levy a tax on the steamers so burdensome it put them out of business. A few years later, British officials were so fearful of the response to personal gas-driven vehicles on public streets, they ruled that every automobile must be preceded by a man on foot, waving a red flag to warn villagers of the 4-wheeled monster coming down the road.

European Oddities

Never imported. Probably best.

Over the years, European automakers have produced an impressive array of stylish, sporty, sophisticated vehicles. And they've also coughed up these curiosities.



It's a bird. It's a plane. It's my ride to the bierfest.
1955 Messerschmitt KR200
German

Now this would impress a parking valet. Let's see: clear canopy over cockpit seating, narrow 'fuselage,' and front fenders that jut out like clipped wings. It doesn't really fly, does it?

Only if it's rear-ended by a truck. This 3-wheel 2-seat enclosed scooter is little, low to the ground, and so light that a buzzing 10hp one-cylinder engine pushes it to 60 mph. After WWII, Messerschmitt could no longer make planes for the Nazis, so they made cars...that looked like planes. The surprising popularity of this evolutionary dead-end seemed due to its classification as a motorcycle, which meant precious cost savings on tax and insurance. Plus no driver's license was needed, making this the perfect pick for elderly old dears who could no longer pass the driving test, as well as citizens who had lost their license for driving around drunk. You'd think that the prospect of being seen in public in one of these carnival rides would be motivation enough to obey the law. And sure, pedestrians were more likely to get knocked down by a blurry-eyed Messerschmitt driver. But at least they could get back up.



Let's just let the engineers do the styling.
1949 Citroën 2CV
French

Would any self-respecting American teenager pick up his girlfriend in a car like that? Yeah, I don't think so. If the aim was to make an uglier version of the VW bug, this was a success. By the way, is that what it competed with?

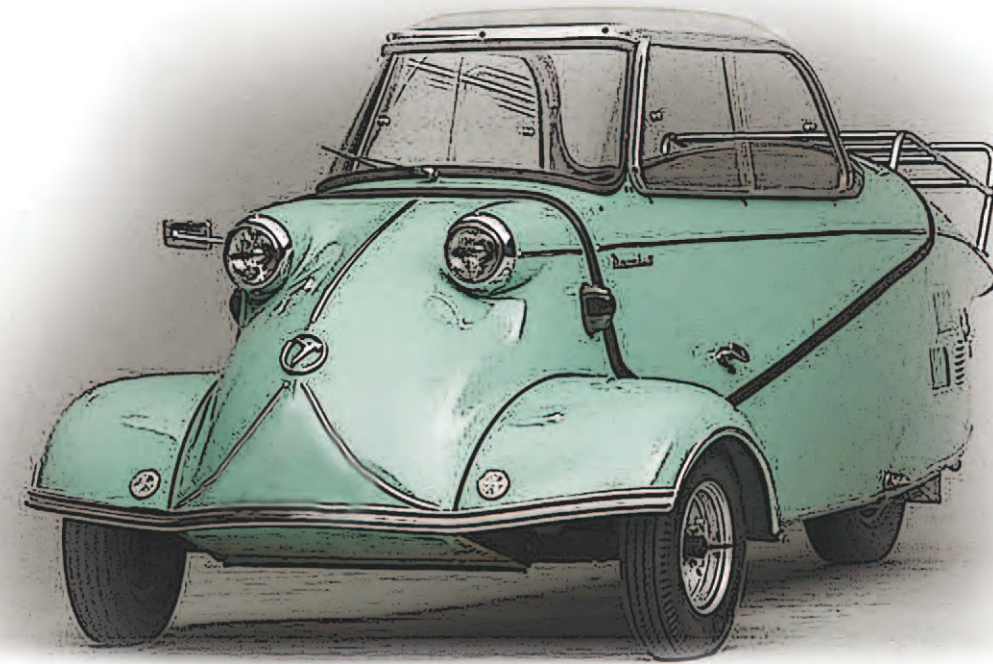
Well, in rural France in the 1950s, it originally competed with the horse and wagon, which is how folks there were still getting around. Soon generally popular enough to have a three-year waiting list, the 2CV almost single-handedly motorized the better part of a country. But don't let its homely design or hammock-like seats fool you; at the time, this baby was technically advanced, versatile, reliable and innovative in its simplicity. Plus it cost half as much as its German cousin. In addition to being a farm family's Sunday-drive car, it had a removable top for piling on farm products to take to market. Plus the production specs called for an extremely loose suspension that would allow it to carry fresh eggs over a plowed field without breaking. Can your car do that? Funny thing is, in the early 1970s, the iconic 2CV once again became highly popular, this time as a hip youth-culture status symbol. Go figure.



If a car and a motorcycle had a baby together...
1999 BMW C1
German

Whoa, if I spotted this riding in the next lane, I'd wreck for sure. Looks like they chopped the sides off a Smart Car just for fun. I'll bet a lot of people were surprised when this thing went from concept to production.

Shocked, I'd say. In the press kit, it was branded as the Urban Personal Commuter—a name that only a committee could come up with. BMW was hoping that Europeans who drove a motorcycle to work might want to cruise in just a little more comfort, but not too much more. The product without a category did benefit from solid BMW quality, boasting an interior reading light, heated seat and grips, and a sound system whose volume adjusted with the speed. But the core focus of the C1 was safety, with a roll cage for a car-like safety cell, plus a crumple zone for front-end collisions. Of course, if you were broadsided, all bets were off. BMW claimed that with all the protective features, a helmet was unnecessary. But stick-in-the-mud British officials didn't buy that story, thereby eliminating a major selling point. Plus the C1 was awkward at slow speeds. So in the end, BMW's quirky experiment rode the fast lane to nowhere.



Radio? Airbags? Cupholders? Ha!
1953 Iso Isetta
Italian

This little blob of transportation engineering looks like a family car for people with no family. Not a four-door. Not a two-door. But a one-door car that opens in the front like a refrigerator. Gee, why do you think that clever arrangement never caught on?

Hard to say. The original manufacturer, Iso SpA, tried their hand at carmaking after years of building—guess what—refrigerators. After WWII, Europeans needed cheap, basic transportation, and by delivering up to 70 mpg, the bubble-like Isetta was apparently worth parking one's pride at the curb. Licensed by BMW in Germany, the two-seater was fondly known there as the *Sargwagen*; this was roughly translated as "coffin on wheels," alluding to the fate of any riders unfortunate enough to partake in a head-on collision. The length of the Isetta was about the same as the width of American Buicks at the time, which means we could have almost carried one in the trunk as a spare, um, car. Eventually, as both families and income grew, folks in Europe would trade up to something much more roomy and practical—like a Mini Cooper.



The classic light, light, light delivery vehicle.
1953 Peugeot Trimoteur
French

As a kid, I had a bicycle with a basket in the front. I guess this was the next step up. But if you're delivering a heavy load of potatoes to the village market, you don't want to take those turns too fast, do you?

With a 15 mph max speed, I don't think that was much of a problem. But they certainly were clumsy little beasts to drive. Other than that, these business bikes actually were quite suited for light delivery on narrow, crowded city streets. Americans don't realize that in many parts of the world, motorcycles and scooters have been widely used as primary personal vehicles. Commercial vehicles too, apparently. In fact, the release of the Trimoteur was exciting news for small-time vendors who were understandably tired of trying to balance, say, 200 lbs. of lettuce on a bicycle. Plus the French, for some inexplicable reason, have always had a fondness for all kinds of three-wheeled vehicles, or *tripteurs*, both gasoline and foot-powered. In the wide-open U.S., of course, we tended to graduate from tricycles at about age 4, and it's never occurred to us to look back.



Seating for 4, 6, or heck, maybe 12.
1956 Fiat 600 Multipla
Italian

Is that the front? Or is that the back? Perhaps just step on the gas, and see which way it goes. Anyway, I thought the Plymouth Voyager was the first family minivan. But this must have been its granddaddy, right?

Sure looks like it. But if you were to stand next to one, you'd be surprised to see it's actually the size of a subcompact car. Enjoyed as urban taxis as well as family cars until the late '70s, the rear-engine Multipla came in a number of seating arrangements, but quite often squeezed in a lot more Italians than its official capacity. To keep prices affordable, Fiat designed the 600 with an absolute minimum of sheet metal. Safety, shmafety, right? So for just 24 installment payments, a big Roman family could own their first new auto, and escape all the other Multipla traffic for a spicy picnic in the countryside. An impressive 3 million of these distinctive little buggies were produced over the years, and sold in places as far away as Argentina. They were considered fun to drive, but I'm guessing only by people who had never been behind the wheel of a Ferrari.

More...

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Might be safer to just walk in the street.

1952 Felber Autoroller
Austrian

I think these would go over well in Texas. You could herd cattle with it, then dash to the mall.

Yep, Texans could hold their head high driving a Felber. Designed by a maker of motorcycle sidecars, it looks like they couldn't quite complete the transition to actual automobile. In an unusual arrangement, this three-wheeler's three seats were diagonally staggered. Plus the bodies were all painted a nice shade of industrial green, since that common paint was the cheapest. Inexplicably, when import restrictions were finally removed, Austrians ditched their domestic Autorollers in favor of "real" cars. And Felber went on to try their hand at washing machines.



Oh, no, here comes a speed bump, aaahhh!

2007 Piaggio Ape Calessino
Italian

I see it, but I'm not sure what I'm seeing. Is that a motorcycle under there pushing this thing?

Pretty much. The modernized, limited edition Ape (pronounced Ah-peh) pays homage to the open taxis that swept stylish tourists around southern Italy coastal resort towns in the 1950s and '60s. However these *Autorickshaws* have always been far more popular in India as well as throughout Southeast Asia. Many busy streets bustle with a colorful variety of both the personal and taxi versions, known as Tuk Tuks. But with several passengers and a motorcycle engine, trying to make it up a hill only provides amusement for onlookers.



Hey, with just 3 wheels, I'll save money on tires.

1970 Bond Bug
British

A wedge of cheese with wheels and headlights. At least it has the right number of headlights.

Don't laugh—with a top speed of 78 mph, this fiberglass-bodied automotive insect compared favorably with English 4-wheeled sports cars of the time. It was only available in Tangerine Orange, perhaps based on some questionable market research. The market, by the way, was 17-25 year olds, presumably color blind, who could drive it with only a motorcycle license. At the product launch, one proud company executive claimed that the Bug would "appeal to a much wider section of the market than we originally envisioned." Hmm, good luck with *that*.



A vision of the car of the future. Well, maybe not.

1922 Rumpler Tropfenwagen
Austrian

Is it an automobile shaped like a cigar? Or a cigar shaped like an automobile? Just not sure.

The Tropfenwagen foretold the future in one sense: it was the very first streamlined car. In fact, curious testing engineers just recently were astonished at its low drag coefficient. In lieu of fenders, its four distinct wings were designed to protect the body from splashed-up mud without creating forward resistance. The driver sat alone up front, like a no-nonsense pilot. The Rumpler originally caused a sensation at the 1921 Berlin Motor Show, but alas, it was just too advanced for the emerging carbuying market, which collectively looked at it, shook its head, and walked away.



We need you to deliver 6 refrigerators right away.

1948 Piaggio Cross Country
Italian

Cross country? I think this little tricycle truck should win a prize if it makes it cross-town.

Developed by the inventor of the Vespa (note front fender), these nubby little delivery vehicles were tougher than they looked—even if their drivers didn't look so tough. One-seaters steered with handlebars, they were designed to slowly nose their way through busy urban streetscapes. After WWII, the need for cheap transport included the commercial market. Six decades later, the CC's modern, squared-off descendants still roam Italian and Greek cities. Though I imagine Athens deliverymen daydreaming about nice big red Ford pickups as they toot around in their Piaggios.



Can I give you a lift in my...space ship?

1934 Tatra 77
Czechoslovakian

Isn't that the '34 Cadillac Fleetwood? No, I'm mistaken; the Caddy didn't have a dorsal fin.

Designed by a zeppelin aerodynamic engineer, the large, luxurious Tatra took the car streamlining craze to an obsessive new level. Innovative, fast, and nearly silent, it made extensive use of light magnesium alloys. The 77 looked so futuristic that a popular sci fi movie director ordered several for his upcoming film. Fourteen years later, many of the Tatra's unique features were borrowed by Preston Tucker for his own innovative machine. Fun fact: the steering wheel was placed in the middle of the front seat, perfect I suppose, for cruisin' with a pair of hot Czech babes.