

Minivan Motoring, or Why I Miss that Old Car Smell by Sam Patteson

It is very difficult to look “cool” while driving a minivan, and I never bothered to try. “Cool” is overrated anyway. What’s not overrated is the urban camouflage a minivan affords. “No one suspects the soccer mom,” Joe deadpanned as he rolled us a joint on the open door of the glove box. I had to agree as I pulled the van into the Shell station to gas up before our long trip to Charleston. I let the tank fill while I checked the various reservoir levels for brake fluid, antifreeze, power steering, and the like. As usual, I needed a quart of oil.

Rednecks on last minute beer runs cruised through the parking lot as I returned from the store. Joe blasted *Frampton Comes Alive* through the open windows. Pete’s guitar had something to say, and the van was rocking. I poured the oil into the engine, slammed the hood home, and slid into the driver’s seat.

I turned to quiz Joe on last minute preparations. We had planned this trip for months, and I didn’t want to forget anything. “Suitcases?” He turned to look back at the empty rear of the van. We had removed the back seats in favor of a twin-sized bed. Our suitcases nestled securely between the bed and the back door. “Check.” Pillows and blankets? “Check.” Wallet, money, keys? “Check.” Er... *extras*? “Check!” Joe coughed and handed me the joint. I took a deep drag and handed it back. “Good,” I said, “Let’s go pick up the girls.” I turned the key in the ignition. Nothing happened.

The Cost of Keeping It Real

I’ve driven beaters, junkers, and lemons for the majority of my adult life. Once I bought an ’85 Volvo station wagon sight unseen for \$400. Laugh all you want, but it lasted me a whole year, and I would still be driving it today had I been able to get it to pass inspection. Another time I won an ’87 Plymouth K-Car in a poker game. I used it as a farm vehicle and stunt mobile. Still another time, a ’90 Chevy Cavalier kept me on the road all summer while I had a daily 75-mile commute.

If there is one thing I’ve learned from driving old cars, especially old *domestic* cars, it’s that they always break down. *Always*. Granted, I am not a trained mechanic, but even if I were, the *parts* in automobiles constantly fail. In fact, in 2005, the Automotive Aftermarket Industry Association reported that new and used auto parts were a \$267.6 billion industry in the U.S. alone (qtd. in United States, *U.S. Automotive* 11).

Why did I drive these cars when I knew with certainty that they would fail me? Cost was an issue, of course. The average new car loan costs \$479 a month (Solheim). I was saving this and much more when you factor in the low cost of auto insurance for liability on 15-year-old cars (when I actually *had* insurance, that is).

After years of saving money this way, buying one junker after another, my family, after years of trying, finally convinced me to buy a new car. It has all the standard bells and whistles that come with a brand new Japanese automobile. *This* car will never leave me stranded somewhere back of Hell’s half-acre. *This* car can drive in the passing lane of the Interstate without inciting rage in my fellow commuters. *This* car doesn’t leak oil, nor will its heater only operate in the dog days of summer. So why do I still miss my old beat-up Dodge Caravan?

A Game of (No) Wits

I guess I enjoyed the uncertainty that came from driving old automobiles. After the minivan failed to start before our trip to Charleston, Joe and I did some hasty troubleshooting and discovered the starter motor was shot. We decided to forge ahead and make our problem a bit of a game. This game had three rules for parking the minivan:

1. It must be pointed downhill.
2. It must not be towed, and, perhaps most crucial,
3. It must not allow another car to park in front of it.

These conditions, strictly followed, allowed me to “kick-start” my minivan through the trip and for another six months.

“Kick-starting” is simple, really. First, remove the hand brake. Second, put the car in neutral and begin drifting down the hill. This “hill” part is optional, so long as a few friends are on hand to push. Lastly, and this bit takes no small amount of finesse, as the car gets up to speed, put shifter in gear and “pop” the clutch.

In six months, I became extremely good at this game. Friends placed bets on when I would fold and just buy the part. I forget who won. The only reason I finally gave in was the rather stern talking-to I received one day after I parked somewhere my girlfriend had to get out and push. Unfortunately, the starter motor was not the first part I had to buy for the van, and it certainly wasn't the last.

So why did I go to such lengths to keep the damn thing? It's hard for me to say. I had the means to buy something *new*, or at least something *nicer*. My dad always told me I was born with an extra inch of bone around my skull. Maybe I was just too stubborn to give up on the van. Every part I replaced gave me renewed confidence in my self-reliance; every setback challenged me to be even more resolute.

The van started to become an extension of me, or at least a member of my family. You can't just get rid of members of your family. They have to die on their own.

Does the Car Make the Man?



Figure 1: Every van project starts and ends this way

Recently, I became very concerned about the incredibly strong feelings I was having about my old car. Are these normal? I decided to dig a little deeper into America's car fetish culture and was surprised at what I found.

America has always loved its automobiles, from the first Model T off Henry Ford's assembly line in 1908 to today's fascination with the SUV. The wide-open spaces in sparsely populated turn-of-the-century America practically begged for exploration. Our grandparents and great-grandparents responded enthusiastically to the call, and blazed a Manifest Destiny their parents could scarcely imagine.

By 1960, there was a passenger vehicle for every 2.4 people in the United States. Now, almost fifty years later, there is a vehicle for every 1.2 people in the U.S. (United States, “No. HS-3”; United States, “Table 1-11”). Why have we had such an explosive increase in the total number of cars in this country? Economics played one role in this transformation, as incredibly cheap gasoline prices, coupled with low energy taxes and low interest rates in the United States made it possible for everyone to own a car.

When Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956, also known as the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act, he created a completely new paradigm for America, at least according to the “Good Roads and Civilization” article in my parents' 1963 *Compton's Encyclopedia*. The middle class (including my grandparents and parents) expanded to include most of the population (“Good Roads”). No longer would anyone have to live in the city for work. This interstate expansion gave Americans a new ideal, call it the American Dream: Get a job. Make lots of money. Buy a McMansion in the suburbs. Drive the biggest, baddest, most expensive car on the block.

Americans drive everywhere. According to one news poll, 90 percent of us drive *everywhere* we want to go, be it the grocery store, the library, or even the mailbox (Langer). We average almost an hour and a half *every day* in our automobiles (Langer). With all of us spending so much time in automobiles, it's no wonder they have become the supreme status symbol in our culture.

Car manufacturers know this of course. They prey on everyone's insecurities like any other product: This Lexus ES gives you the luxury other car owners only dream about. This Ford Mustang will give you the confidence and sex appeal you are so sorely lacking. This Hummer H3 will crush every other car in your path. This Toyota Yaris makes a nice escape pod for your Hummer.

My 1989 Dodge Caravan did not say very flattering things about me, to say the least. I'm poor. I'm slow. I hate the environment. Seemingly every day I had to defend its honor from richer, cleaner, and better maintained cars. It was depressing. Once, late in my and the van's relationship, I asked a woman for a date. Her immediate response: “What kind of car do you drive?” We didn't go out, and I started to question my allegiance to the van. So, I decided to take her on a last hurrah to the only region in the entire United States where car ownership is actually *dropping* per capita: New York City (“Declining”).

Driving Makes Me Sick Sometimes

An old friend of mine recently moved to the city with his mother. The directions he gave seemed simple enough: Take I-81 to I-78. Get on 295 towards the George Washington Bridge. Cross the bridge, take a right, and you're there. It seemed so simple over the phone. But driving in New York City is a harrowing experience, to say the least. I was used to driving on roads near my home in the Appalachian Mountains where I might not encounter another vehicle for miles. Contrast this with the George Washington Bridge, where 300,000 vehicles cross into Manhattan daily (Rife C1). I was white-knuckled and sweating, terrified that my old minivan would choose this moment to break down, halfway across the GWB. I imagined enraged New Yorkers honking and shouting, until their collective rage forced them out of their cars and over to mine. In my mind's eye, I saw them shouting and swearing as they rocked my van back and forth until they had enough people together to simply toss me and my vehicle over the bridge and into the river below. I heaved a huge sigh of relief as I finally crossed over the bridge and into Manhattan, but the GWB still had my head spinning, so I pulled off the Henry Hudson Parkway at the next exit and vomited.

Like I said, driving in New York is an experience. My friends up there all like to crow about how they don't need a car, because of the public transportation. Or how they don't even know anyone *with* a car. I found that a bit hard to believe; the fact remains New York City has 1,881,563 vehicles registered with the DMV (“NYS DMV – Statistics”). Sure, in Manhattan, this translates to only one-fifth of the population, but still, cars are everywhere (“Census Shows”). Surely my friends know tons of people with cars.

I found out firsthand how wrong I was soon after arriving at my friend's apartment.

Rediscovering an Old Friend

I rang the bell for my friend's apartment. He buzzed me in, and I trudged my heavy suitcase up the stairs to apartment 402. My buddy Sam greeted my knock with a hug. “Put your suitcase in the corner. Come with me, we're moving a couch.” With that, he hustled me out the door and down into the street. We got in the van and he directed me a few blocks over. Two girls were sitting on a large couch outside a large apartment building. Sam reached over and honked. The girls picked up the couch and

walked towards us. I popped the hatchback and they lifted the gate and slid in the couch. They tumbled inside the back and slammed the gate shut behind them. "This van is so cool!" one the girls cooed. "Really?!" I replied, somewhat perplexed at the compliment. "Yeah!" she replied, "I can't believe you have this in the city! That's so awesome!" We traveled the fifteen blocks or so south to the girls' new home. They climbed out and gave Sam and me thanks and invitations to their house-warming party.

The entire week I stayed with Sam in New York, I was bombarded with requests to help people move things or pick people up or go joy riding downtown. In return, I received bribes, IOUs, kisses and favors. For the first time in my life, I was popular *because* of my car.

After returning home, I found out that the illusion was dead. My car was no longer a hot commodity, but at least I regained my respect for it. Later that month, I drove through a foggy patch of mountains near my home and hit a deer. The van was totaled.

Having the Ride of my Life

In the past, I never thought much about what an automobile means to people in this country. To me, it was simply a conveyance, a means to getting from point A to point B. To others, though, it represents so much more. An automobile is the ultimate symbol of freedom. It can grant the wish we've all had to simply pick up and *go*. It can move us to the suburbs of the city we grew up in, or it can move us to the opposite coast. It gives the freedom to choose a job thirty miles away, or simply the ability to move a couch. Like it or not, our cars say something about all of us. I knew what my van said about me. I just didn't know I'd miss it.

Works Cited

- "Census Shows City's Population Rising." *New York Sun*. 20 March 2008. 4 April 2008 <<http://www2.nysun.com/article/73307>>.
- "Declining Car Ownership, IKEA, NJ Trucks and more." *Transportation Alternatives*. Spring 2004: 19. *Transportation Alternatives*. 8 April 2008 <<http://www.transalt.org/files/newsroom/magazine/042Spring/19metro.html>>.
- "Good Roads and Civilization" *Compton's Pictured Encyclopedia*. 1963 ed.
- Langer, Gary. "Poll: Traffic in the United States: A Look Under the Hood of a Nation on Wheels." *ABC News*. 13 Feb. 2005. 4 April 2008 <<http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/Traffic/Story?id=485098&page=1>>.
- "NYS DMV – Statistics – Vehicle Registrations in Force – 2006." *New York State Department of Motor Vehicles*. 2008. 4 April 2008 <<http://www.nysdmv.com/Statistics/regin06.htm>>.
- Rife, Judy. "George Washington Bridge Turns 75 Years Old." *Times Herald-Record* 26 Oct. 2006: C1.
- Solheim, Mark. "ABCs of a Great Car Loan" *Kiplinger's Personal Finance* Feb. 2007. *Kiplinger.com*. 4 April 2008. 4 April 2008 <<http://www.kiplinger.com/magazine/archives/2007/02/drivetime.html>>.
- United States. Dept of Commerce. Office of Aerospace and Automotive Industries. *U.S. Automotive Parts Industry Annual Assessment*. March 2007. 4 April 2008 <<http://www.ita.doc.gov/td/auto/domestic/2007Assessment.pdf>>.
- . Dept. of Commerce. US Census Bureau. "No. HS-3. Population by Age: 1900 to 2002." *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2003*. 2003. 4 April 2008 <<http://www.census.gov/statab/hist/HS-03.pdf>>.
- . Dept. of Transportation. Research and Innovative Technology Administration/Bureau of Transportation Statistics. "Table 1-11: Number of U.S. Aircraft, Vehicles, Vessels, and Other Conveyances." *National Transportation Statistics*. 2007. 4 April 2008 <http://www.bts.gov/publications/national_transportation_statistics/html/table_01_11.html>.