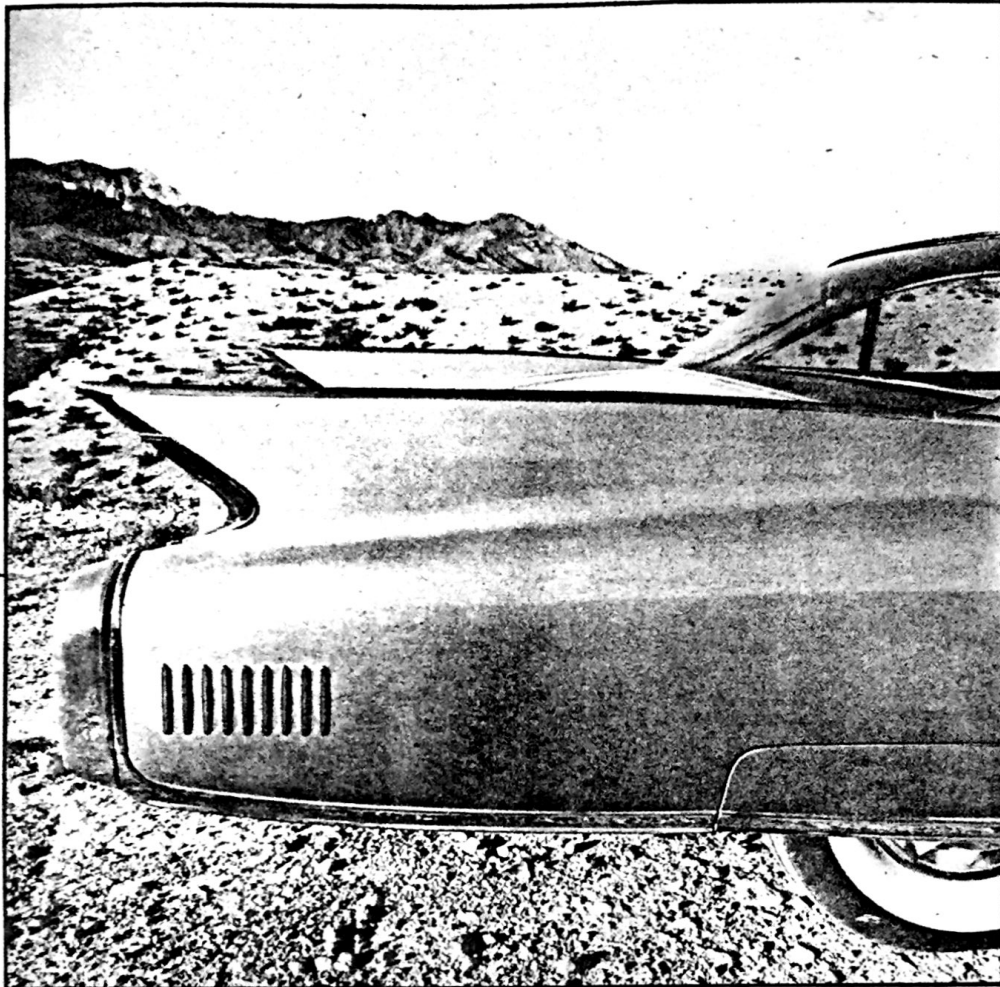


religion

by Hunter Drohojowska

CAR CRAZIES

photograph from the PICTURE PAPER by ELLIOTT McDOWELL



THROUGHOUT THE DAYS OF THE WILD WEST, the Colt 45 was advertised as "The Great Equalizer." Well, that wasn't really an accurate description. Some folks were always more equal than others. Billy the Kid could have blown away Horace Greeley if he'd had a mind to. Shootouts at sundown were just frontier social Darwinism. But owning that Colt 45 gave a body a feeling of greater control, a (somewhat) misplaced sense of security. Since an individual's perception of any situation is ninety-nine percent of what is imprecisely termed "reality," it was sufficient just to possess the weapon. The owner could feel vicariously aggressive in the presence of his gun, without ever demonstrating any particular prowess.

Though they are not marketed as "equalizers," automobiles are the safe power toys of the twentieth century. The contemporary cowboy steps out of the office and into the daydream arena of freeway roulette. He uses the same vicarious aggression as proof that he is still alive and in control. Psychologists call it "displaced aggression." Every complaint not registered in the office is executed in the streets. By breaking speed limits and running lights, the closet outlaw is exercising his right to choose. Society has become so regimented that driving from City Hall to Barney's Beanery in eighteen minutes provides an incomparable rush of rebellion. He knows the sweet exhilaration

of "beating the system" without actively participating in a dangerous situation. The dangers are statistically very real — more so, perhaps, than having a gun. The fatality toll of the Vietnam War totaled less than a year's worth of traffic-related deaths in America. But only myopic scientists see mankind as a rational species. Drivers operate under a deluded sense of safety, believing that two tons of glass and steel will protect them from bodily harm.

Driving is a form of liberation and is essentially antisocial. Swaddled in his chrome cocoon, the driver has little eye contact with others. The anonymity enables him to behave like an egocentric, irresponsible four-year-old.

The territorial prerogatives expressed through body language are more emphatically applied in traffic. Once in their machines, people will sing, talk to themselves, even pick their noses without fear of social castigation. For those truly bored with jam-ups on the cloverleaf, you can order an Auto-Suck by mail. This little vibrator plugs into the cigarette lighter, providing glorious head — without hassles — en route to the office.

People behave with unwarranted hostility if their territorial imperatives are threatened by another car. When being tailgated or, more pertinently, cut off in a gas line, a driver's responses can be excessive-

ly violent. Gas-line anecdotes rival the Scarsdale Diet as the most boring conversational topic of the year, but the anger exhibited in the daily delays at the stations is truly frightening. The stronger the need, the stronger the reaction against the frustration of its fulfillment. Especially in Southern California, going gasless instills claustrophobic fears of dependence, lost mobility and powerlessness.

Cars represent anima projections to a number of men. They are referred to as "she" in what one psychologist called the "convertible-as-mistress syndrome." A man goes to the salesroom, looking long and lovingly at the convertible; but he goes home with the sensible sedan. Another doctor said that the front grill of the Edsel was reputedly designed to look like a vagina. (So much for psychology as a component of successful sales campaigns.) But the car is a "safe" mistress, just as it is a "safe" weapon, being one step removed from the real item. The automobile serves as a multipurpose manifestation of man's power fantasies.

With one-fifth of the American population somehow employed by the automotive industry, it is little wonder that cars have attained such an exaggerated position of importance. Mike Preminger once quipped that the only way carpools could catch on in California is if each passenger had his own steering wheel. The self-reliant attitudes of the West haven't changed much, but the technology has. The urban cowboys and closet outlaws still account for much of the raw, independent energy in California. Despite its bizarre incarnations, this energy is unique and, hopefully, indomitable. ♣

obituary

The Cadillac Ranch was conceived and built by Ant Farm (Lord, Michels, Marquez) in 1974.

THE CADILLAC RANCH will be five years old this June. In those five years it has been copied (by an Australian ad agency), exploited (by French Vogue and an American record company) and disfigured (by travelers and graffiti-ists). It is art in the outlaw zone.

Of course, when we build it we didn't anticipate any of this. We thought it would change with the shifting sands of time, gradually corroding and becoming more elegant in its aging. Instead it has been assaulted and vandalized. Tires slashed, one car burned, fenders pocked by bullet holes. It has become another roadside rock, covered by people compelled to leave their mark. The ground has eroded and a trail has been burned into the wheat field in a path that connects Cadillac Ranch with Interstate 40.

The Cadillac Ranch is famous, too, like Jesse James. It has been on CBS and ABC and it is listed in a pop guide to roadside America. UPI sent a picture of it around the world. But it bears no plaque like other monuments, it has neither guards nor fence. It's just sitting there, next to the highway, placidly wise.

Call us in five years for restoration plans. ♣

photograph: WAYTT MCSPADDEN, 1979

