

# The Car - End of the American Dream?

Some claim the personal ownership of automobiles is coming to an end, so will Generation-Z forego the romance of their fathers?

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In my youth, the cult of the automobile was integrally interwoven into American culture, almost like a second religion which people constantly talked about, their thoughts dominated by machines ranging in all sorts of sizes, shapes and colors. Americans lived, breathed and slept with dreams about their beloved road machines and how perfect their lives would be if only they could own and drive the cars of their dreams. At casual social gathers, discussions abound



over the virtues of one model verses the deficiencies of another. People were committed Ford or Chevy people who would never commit the mortal sin of buying from another car maker, a rivalry akin to loyalties of baseball and football teams, with all the same blind adherence to a maker as found amongst religious fanatics.

But over the years, I seen a decline of this adherence to the cult of automobiles, younger generations less inclined to worship cars as previous generations did, as automobiles took on a sameness forced by the laws of physics and the quest for higher gas milage and safety. The romance of their cars coming to an end ... as car prices spired into the wild blue yonder. And I must confess, I was one of the early adherence to this trend considering the automobile to be nothing more than another utility appliance much like my washing machine and refrigerator. Just a machine to perform certain tasks in my life. Indeed, I didn't even get my first car until I was eight years out of highschool, because I didn't really need one and my money was going to education. I'm seventy-one years old now, and I've only owned three automobiles in my life. A used 1969 Chevelle 300 series deluxe with a 307 V-Eight, column shift and bench seats. I owned and drove it for about 22 years, then got a used Toyota mini-pickup which I drove for about a dozen years. Finally, another Toyota pickup, a cab and a half Tacoma which I'm still driving today. Why? Because I know it's cheaper to repair than to buy new.

I tell people I'm like that John Wayne line in the movie 'The Searchers' where he says "*A white man rides a horse until it drops, then a Comanch comes along, gets that horse back up, rides it*

*another twenty miles . . . then eats it!*" A technologist equivalent for a Comanche Indian, a machine substituting for a horse. Despite my ambivalence to the cult of the car and my peers, I was rather surprised to recently read articles that the personal ownership of cars is coming to an end, that automobiles are becoming a service rather than a possession. Their premise is that cars are becoming too expensive to own anymore. The average cost for a new car in America is \$33,000. For the young and 'up and coming' Americans with earnings significant less than their fathers and grandfathers, this makes ownership even more difficult. Couple that with many young people being saddled with large student loans, it's easy to see their rational.

But in the highly mobile society that America is, this would have little meaning without some alternative, and that alternative is services like Uber and Lyke that provide driving services coupled with the emerging robotic driving systems which can make this premise valid. Once in place, the young people would call up a robot car much as one does today with taxis. Using an app on their smart phones, they could call for a robot car, the phone's GPS telling the robot car where to go, then minutes later, the robot stops near the person, who gets in. The robot already knows where to go since that was part of the person's request for a car. Once arriving, the person only has to get out, payment automatically made electronically, leaving the robot to continue on to its next pickup request.

When I was young, my father commented more than once that it would actually be cheaper to use taxis rather than own a car, that if you count everything, the purchase price, loan interest, annual cost of licenses, taxes, insurance, gas, oil and maintenance . . . the total cost of ownership would exceed the taxi fares paid out. So I can see where purchasing automotive services would be cheaper than ownership of a personal car. Those cost would be distributed over many users, especially that \$33,000 purchase price. For Americans with little hope of having the financial means of their forefathers, the use of technology to share the cost and thus reduce their living expense might be a viable alternative.

In recent years there has been an upsurge in something called 'tiny houses', where people choose a life style living in domiciles of just a few hundred square feet, a small fraction of the sizes of houses they were raised in. This allows the young of limited means to own their own home without the exorbitant cost of a conventional house. Sharing robot automobiles keeps with the strategy of reducing cost to accommodate the reduced earnings that America's youth are facing.

Presently, automobiles and housing comprise about half of the American economy, so the significant downsizing of either or both implies a considerable change to the economy in general. Add to this the increasing demise of many big box stores, we are left with the question 'Can our present hyper-consumerism based economy survive?'. More importantly, the real value of Americans is as consumers, so just what is going to be left for America's Generation-Z in the future? And even more crucially, just how satisfied will they be to accept so much less?

Makes one wonder what other means might come forth for the young people of America to live and prosper in their new world . . . a world far different from my days of youth.