

## 22-10 Remaking Leisure in Middletown (1929)

Robert S. Lynd,  
Helen Merrell Lynd

Sociologists Robert S. Lynd (1892–1970) and Helen Merrell Lynd (1896–1982) wanted to study the effects of modernization on an urban community “in that common denominator of America, the Middle West.” They chose Muncie, Indiana, which they referred to as Middletown. The Lynds’ work, first published in 1929, has become a classic in American sociology.

This selection considers the automobile a new but already troubling phenomenon in Middletown.

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The first real automobile appeared in Middletown in 1900. About 1906 it was estimated that “there are probably 200 in the city and county.” At the close of 1923 there were 6,221 passenger cars in the city, one for every 6.1 persons, or roughly two for every three families. Of these 6,221 cars, 41 per cent. were Fords; 54 per cent. of the total were cars of models of 1920 or later, and 17 per cent. models earlier than 1917. These cars average a bit over 5,000 miles a year. For some of the workers and some of the business class, use of the automobile is a seasonal matter, but the increase in surfaced roads and in closed cars is rapidly making the car a year-round tool for leisure-time as well as getting-a-living activities. As, at the turn of the century, business class people began to feel apologetic if they did not have a telephone, so ownership of an automobile has now reached the point of being an accepted essential of normal living.

Into the equilibrium of habits which constitutes for each individual some integration in living has come this new habit, upsetting old adjustments, and blasting its way through such accustomed and unquestioned dicta as “Rain or shine, I never miss a Sunday morning at church”; “A high school boy does not need much spending money”; “I don’t need exercise, walking to the office keeps me fit”; “I wouldn’t think of moving out of town and being so far from my friends”; “Parents ought always to know where their children are.” The newcomer is most quickly and amicably incorporated into those regions of behavior in which men are engaged in doing impersonal, matter-of-fact things; much more contested is its advent where emotionally charged sanctions and taboos are concerned. No one questions the use of the auto for transporting groceries, getting to one’s place of work or to the golf course, or in place of the porch for “cooling off after supper” on a hot summer evening; however much the activities concerned with getting a living may be altered by the fact that a factory can draw from workmen within a radius of forty-five miles, or however much old labor union men resent the intrusion of this new alternate way of spending an evening, these things are hardly major issues. But when auto riding tends to replace the tra-

ditional call in the family parlor as a way of approach between the unmarried, “the home is endangered,” and all-day Sunday motor trips are a “threat against the church”; it is in the activities concerned with the home and religion that the automobile occasions the greatest emotional conflicts.

Group-sanctioned values are disturbed by the inroads of the automobile upon the family budget. A case in point is the not uncommon practice of mortgaging a home to buy an automobile. . . . That the automobile does represent a real choice in the minds of some at least is suggested by the acid retort of one citizen to the question about car ownership: “No, sir, we’ve *not* got a car. *That’s* why we’ve got a home.” According to an officer of a Middletown automobile financing company, 75 to 90 percent of the cars purchased locally are bought on time payment, and a working man earning \$35.00 a week frequently plans to use one week’s pay each month as payment for his car.

The automobile has apparently unsettled the habit of careful saving for some families. “Part of the money we spend on the car would go to the bank, I suppose,” said more than one working class wife. A business man explained his recent inviting of social oblivion by selling his car by saying: “My car, counting depreciation and everything, was costing mighty nearly \$100.00 a month, and my wife and I sat down together the other night and just figured that we’re getting along, and if we’re to have anything later on, we’ve just got to begin to save.” The “moral” aspect of the competition between the automobile and certain accepted expenditures appears in the remark of another business man, “An automobile is a luxury, and no one has a right to one if he can’t afford it. I haven’t the slightest sympathy for any one who is out of work if he owns a car.”

Men in the clothing industry are convinced that automobiles are bought at the expense of clothing, and the statements of a number of the working class wives bear this out:

“We’d rather do without clothes than give up the car,” said one mother of nine children. “We used to go to his sister’s to visit, but by the time we’d get the children

shoed and dressed there wasn't any money left for car-fare. Now no matter how they look, we just poke 'em in the car and take 'em along."

"We don't have no fancy clothes when we have the car to pay for," said another. "The car is the only pleasure we have."

Even food may suffer:

"I'll go without food before I'll see us give up the car," said one woman emphatically, and several who were out of work were apparently making precisely this adjustment. . . .

Many families feel that an automobile is justified as an agency holding the family group together. "I never feel as close to my family as when we are all together in the car," said one business class mother, and one or two spoke of giving up Country Club membership or other recreations to get a car for this reason. "We don't spend anything on recreation except for the car. We save every place we can and put the money into the car. It keeps the family together," was an opinion voiced more than once. Sixty-one per cent. of 337 boys and 60 per cent. of 423 girls in the three upper years of the high school say that they motor more often with their parents than without them.

But this centralizing tendency of the automobile may be only a passing phase; sets in the other direction are almost equally prominent. "Our daughters [eighteen and fifteen] don't use our car much because they are always with somebody else in their car when we go out motoring," lamented one business class mother. . . . "What on earth *do* you want me to do? Just sit around home all evening!" retorted a popular high school girl of today when her father discouraged her going out motoring for the evening with a young blade in a rakish car waiting at the curb. The fact that 348 boys and 382 girls in the three upper years of the high school placed "use of the automobile" fifth and fourth respectively in a list of twelve possible sources of disagreement between them and their parents suggests that this may be an increasing decentralizing agent.

An earnest teacher in a Sunday School class of working class boys and girls in their late teens was winding up the lesson on the temptations of Jesus: "These three temptations summarize all the temptations we encounter today: physical comfort, fame, and wealth. Can you think of any temptation we have today that Jesus didn't have?" "Speed!" rejoined one boy. . . . The boys who have cars "step on the gas," and those who haven't cars sometimes steal them: "The desire of youth to step on the gas when it has no machine of its own," said the local press, "is considered responsible for the theft of the greater part of the [154] automobiles stolen from [Middletown] during the past year."

The threat which the automobile presents to some anx-

ious parents is suggested by the fact that of thirty girls brought before the juvenile court in the twelve months preceding September 1, 1924, charged with "sex crimes," for whom the place where the offense occurred was given in the records, nineteen were listed as having committed the offense in an automobile. Here again the automobile appears to some as an "enemy" of the home and society.

Sharp, also, is the resentment aroused by this elbowing new device when it interferes with old-established religious habits. The minister trying to change people's behavior in desired directions through the spoken word must compete against the strong pull of the open road strengthened by endless printed "copy" inciting to travel. Preaching to 200 people on a hot, sunny Sunday in mid-summer on "The Supreme Need of Today," a leading Middletown minister denounced "automobilitis—the thing those people have who go off motoring on Sunday instead of going to church." . . .

"We had a fine day yesterday," exclaimed an elderly pillar of a prominent church, by way of Monday morning greeting. "We left home at five in the morning. By seven we swept into—. At eight we had breakfast at—, eighty miles from home. From there we went on to Lake—, the longest in the state. I had never seen it before, and I've lived here all my life, but I sure do want to go again. Then we went to— [the Y.M.C.A. camp] and had our chicken dinner. It's a fine thing for people to get out that way on Sundays. No question about it. They see different things and get a larger outlook."

"Did you miss church?" he was asked.

"Yes, I did, but you can't do both. I never missed church or Sunday school for thirteen years and I kind of feel as if I'd done my share. The ministers ought not to rail against people's driving on Sunday. They ought just to realize that they won't be there every Sunday during the summer, and make church interesting enough so they'll want to come."

But if the automobile touches the rest of Middletown's living at many points, it has revolutionized its leisure; more, perhaps, than the movies or any other intrusion new to Middletown since the nineties, it is making leisure-time enjoyment a regularly expected part of every day and week rather than an occasional event. The readily available leisure-time options of even the working class have been multiplied many-fold. As one working class housewife remarked, "We just go to lots of things we couldn't go to if we didn't have a car." Beefsteak and watermelon picnics in a park or a near-by wood can be a matter of a moment's decision on a hot afternoon.

Not only has walking for pleasure become practically extinct, but the occasional event such as a parade on a holiday attracts far less attention now.

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**Questions**

1. Why did the people of Middletown worry about the automobile's effect on religious worship?
2. What habits did the car seem to alter?
3. How did adolescents adapt to the automobile culture?

**Questions for Further Thought**

1. How might Bruce Barton's portrayal of Jesus (Document 22-8) have strengthened the self-esteem of businessmen, including his own?
  2. Is the ad reprinted in Document 22-9 different in degree or content from current advertising? In what ways?
  3. Cars, movies, and advertising—were the residents of Middletown (Document 22-10) right to feel uneasy about the changes they saw occurring in their community? Why or why not?
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