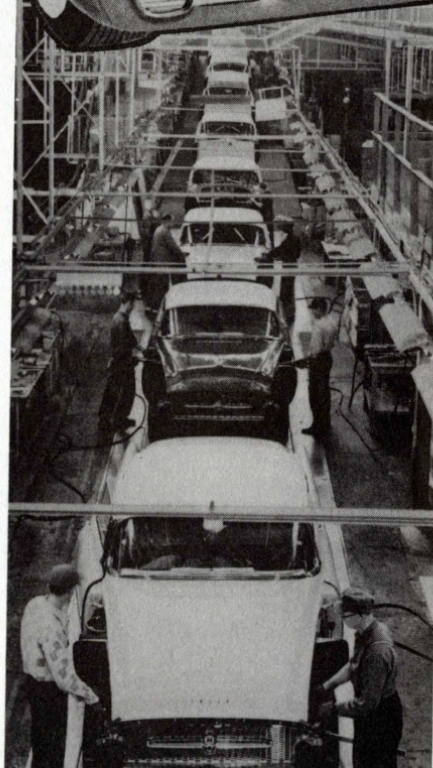


The Love Affair with the Car



High demand for cars keeps these 1950s autoworkers busy. Between 1946 and 1960, Americans bought 33 million new cars, like this Cadillac Sedan deVille (above).



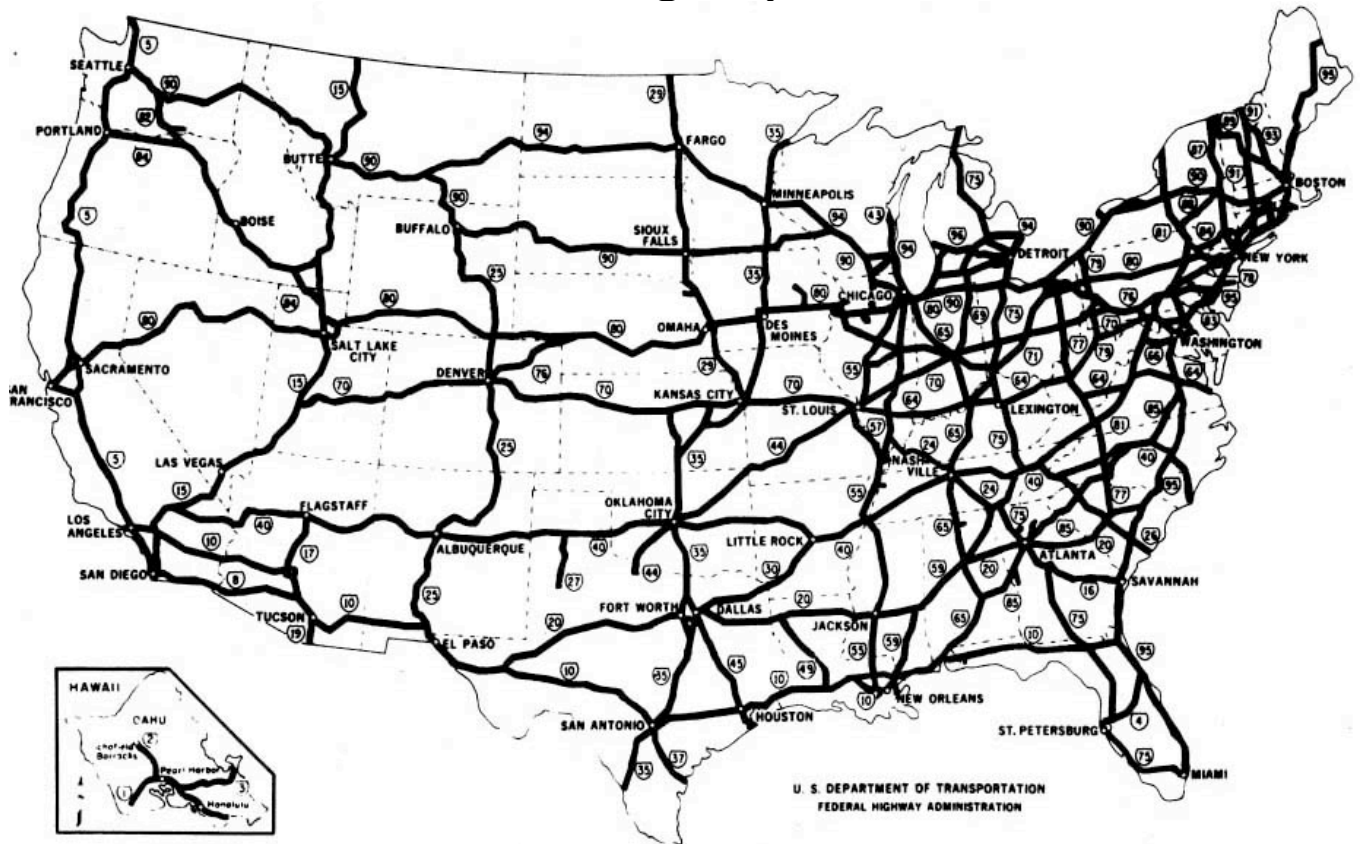
Swooping fins. Glittering chrome. Long, low-slung bodies. Two-tone paint jobs. Hot rods. The cars of the 1950s were something to see!

Rolling Off the Assembly Line

Because of the war, carmakers stopped making cars from 1942 to 1945. Even after the war ended, steel and other goods needed to make cars were in short supply. But wartime ads had promised shiny new cars for returning soldiers. By 1946, automakers in Detroit were keeping their promise and rolling them out.

And Americans were buying them like never before. From 1930 to 1940, the number of cars in the United States had risen by only 3 million. Between 1946 and 1950, Americans bought 8 million new cars. They bought millions more during the 1950s. By 1960, there were 62 million cars on the road – one for every 1.8 adults.

Interstate Highway Act



<https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/interstate/finalmap.jpg>

On June 29, 1956, President Dwight Eisenhower signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956. The bill created a 41,000-mile “National System of Interstate and Defense Highways” that would, according to Eisenhower, eliminate unsafe roads, inefficient routes, traffic jams and all of the other things that got in the way of “speedy, safe transcontinental travel.” At the same time, highway advocates argued, “in case of atomic attack on our key cities, the road net [would] permit quick evacuation of target areas.” For all of these reasons, the 1956 law declared that the construction of an elaborate expressway system was “essential to the national interest.”

<https://www.history.com/topics/us-states/interstate-highway-system>

Fun Fact: By the time it was finished, the cost to build all the roads was \$121 billion!

Midcentury America: What It Cost to Live

In 1950, the average American's salary was just under \$3,000. That may not sound like much, but the money went a long way.

- Housing: Less than \$500 paid the rent or mortgage for the whole year.
- Transportation: The family could buy a new Chevrolet for \$1,329. A gallon of gas cost less than 30 cents.
- Food: A half-gallon of milk cost about 42 cents. A loaf of bread cost about 14 cents.
- Reading Material: The daily newspaper cost a nickel, and *Time* magazine was just 20 cents.

Houses, Cars, Airplanes, Electronics, and Stocks!

Americans on a Spending Spree

Suppose your family's income in 1950 was \$3,000. By 1960, it probably would have grown more than 57 percent, to \$4,700. How did Americans spend their newfound wealth?

- Houses: In 1945, 20 million people owned their own home. By 1960, 33 million did. And most of the homes were new. Building them created jobs for bricklayers, carpenters, electricians, lumbermen, plumbers, and roofers, among other workers.
- Cars: The automobile industry boomed after the war. People who lived in the growing suburbs needed cars to travel to work. They also needed cars to shop, to drive children to school, and to visit the doctor and dentist. Many suburban families owned two cars. And more cars meant a boom in the businesses that helped them run – oil, glass, leather, metals, and rubber.
- Airplanes: The airplane industry boomed too. Many people could now afford to travel by air. That called not only for more planes but also for more runways and airports.
- Electronics: The new electronics industry grew quickly. Americans jumped from the age of radio into the age of television. In 1947, only a few people owned TV sets. By 1960, about 85 percent of American households had TVs.
- Stocks: Since the 1929 stock market crash, very few people had bought stocks. But from 1949 to 1950 alone, the total number of shares of stock traded on the New York Stock Exchange nearly doubled. By 1960, about 17 million Americans owned stocks. The money invested in American business helped it grow and prosper. ■

Fads of the Fifties

In the 1950s, a new material was suddenly everywhere: plastic. It was part of dozens of fads in the postwar decade – including Hula Hoops, tiny building blocks, unbreakable records, and unstoppable yo-yos.

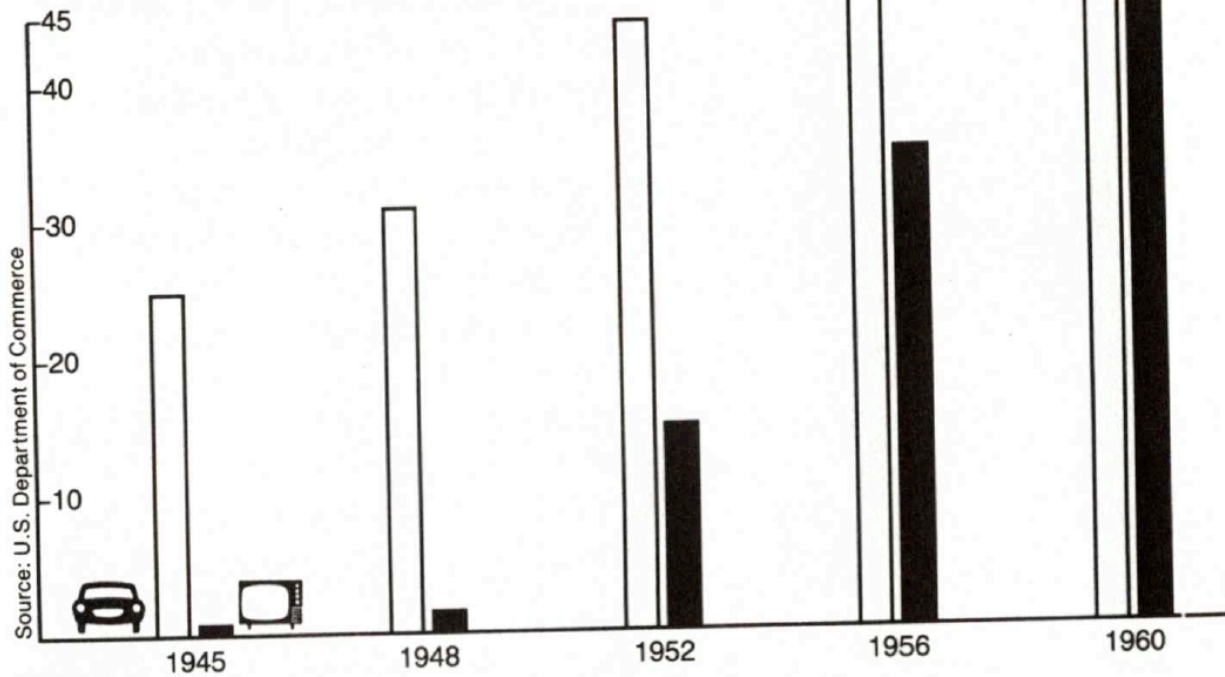
Fads caught on with Americans of all ages. Youngsters used Silly Putty to transfer pictures from comic strips. They played with the coiled metal spring called Slinky – making it crawl downstairs. Upstairs, father brushed his teeth for the second time with whiskey-flavored toothpaste. Mother practiced for her cha-cha lesson on the plastic (there it is again!) dance-step mat.

The automobile was the biggest fad of all. Americans spent more time than ever in their cars. They went to drive-in restaurants and drive-in movie theaters.

Every era has its fads. But thanks to the new products and the new wealth of postwar America, the 1950s saw an explosion of them.

AMERICAN HOUSEHOLDS WITH CARS AND TVs

1945-1960, In Millions



Document A: *Harper's Magazine*, 1953 (Modified)

The daily pattern of household life is governed by the husband's commuting schedule. It is entirely a woman's day because virtually every male commutes. Usually the men must leave between 7:00 and 8:00 A.M.; therefore they rise between 6:00 and 7:00 A.M. In most cases the wife rises with her husband, makes his breakfast while he shaves, and has a cup of coffee with him. Then she often returns to bed until the children get up. The husband is not likely to be back before 7:00 or 7:30 P.M.

This leaves the woman alone all day to cope with the needs of the children, her house-keeping, and shopping. (Servants, needless to say, are unknown). When the husband returns, he is generally tired, both from his work and his traveling. . . . Often by the time the husband returns the children are ready for bed. Then he and his wife eat their supper and wash the dishes. By 10:00 P.M. most lights are out.

For the women this is a long, monotonous (boring) daily [routine]. Generally the men, once home, do not want to leave. They want to "relax" or "improve the property" -putter around the lawn or shrubbery. However, the women want a "change." Thus, groups of women often go to the movies together.

Document B: *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan (Modified)

The problem . . . was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, . . . lay beside her husband at night--she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question--"Is this all?" . . .

Source: Betty Friedan was one of the early leaders of the Women's Rights movement that developed in the 1960s and 1970s. She published The Feminine Mystique in 1963. In the book, Friedan discusses how stifled and unsatisfied many suburban women were in the 1950s.

Household products marketed to women



A 1950s ad for an electric iron



A 1950s ad for a cleaning product

Walter Girardin → A GI's Reflection

When I got discharged and sent home from Europe at the end of the war, they flew me down to Burbank, where my family was. My wife met me at the airport. She was beautiful, as usual. I just didn't want to let go of her. And that was the first time I'd seen our daughter since she was a little over a year old, and there she was, almost four. My wife told me that during the war, whenever my daughter saw a photo or a film of a man in uniform, she would say, "There's Daddy." Coming home, it's a joyous occasion. You're filled with tears, but you're so happy.

In southern California at that time, things were booming. Jobs were plentiful, and salaries were better than they were in other parts of the country. It seemed to me that everything was moving more rapidly than it had been before I left. Cities were growing, big highways were popping up everywhere – even the cars seemed faster. It felt excited by it..."