

Joyriders Vs. Jaywalkers: a Collision of Cultures

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“Look both ways for cars before you cross the street.” That’s one of the most important warnings American children hear when they’re old enough to walk alone. That’s because we live in a culture in which cars, trucks and SUVs rule the streets.

But it wasn’t always that way, said Peter Norton, assistant professor in the Department of Science, Technology and Society at the University of Virginia’s School of Engineering and Applied Science.

Early in the 20th century, pedestrians claimed the right of way on country roads and city streets, sharing the public space with children at play, domestic animals, carts, vendors, carriages and streetcars. A spooked horse galloping through the streets might send people running for cover, but generally, pedestrians and vehicles shared the right of way. Then came the age of the automobile.

Henry Ford sold the first Model T in 1908. Over the next 19 years, 15.5 million of those cars were sold in the United States. During that time, there was a clash of cultures, particularly in the cities, between residents who used the streets as an extension of their homes, chatting with neighbors and watching their children at play, and drivers of the newfangled vehicles who wanted to travel quickly from one place to another, Norton said. The residents viewed the drivers as dangers and the drivers viewed people in the streets as obstructions.

“Of all the many rivalries between various street users, the feud between

pedestrians and motorists was the most relentless — and the bloodiest,” said Norton, who estimates that well over 210,000 Americans — about three-quarters of them pedestrians, half of whom were children under 18 — were killed in traffic accidents from 1920 to 1929, a four-fold increase over the death toll of the previous decade.

The argument over who should have the right of way still resonates today around such issues as signal timing — the length of time pedestrians are given to walk across a street before the light changes and the waiting time between one “walk” signal and the next — and left-hand turn signals, which are operated by a sensor under the pavement set up to detect the presence of a car, but not calibrated to detect a bicycle, Norton said.

And he sees modern-day activists carrying on the fight by advocating such measures as bike paths and bike lanes, traffic-calming measures in residential areas, and pedestrian malls, which ban cars and reclaim the street as public space for strolling, street performers, sidewalk cafes and vendors selling their wares from carts.

In the early days, despite the threat to public safety, Model T’s and other automobiles gained supremacy on America’s streets — a battle that Norton sees encapsulated in the redefinition of the word “jaywalker.”

In 1909, “jaywalker” was an obscure Midwestern colloquial term that referred to a country hick in the city who got in the way of other pedestrians. But with the rise of the automobile, people connected with the auto industry used “jaywalker” to mean a pedestrian who crosses the street against regulations.

“Most people living in cities didn't think fast cars belonged in streets,” Norton said. “So when cars hit pedestrians, it was always the driver's fault. Angry city residents wrote letters to their newspapers denouncing

'joy riders' and 'speed demons.' But some people wanted to give cars a rightful claim to street space. The word 'jaywalker' was one way to do this. By casting doubt on pedestrians' place in the street, it strengthened cars' claim to street space. Making streets places for cars took not just regulations and devices such as traffic lights — language was also part of the struggle."

By 1930, “jaywalker” was routinely applied to pedestrians engaging in street uses that had once been beyond reproach. “By then most people agreed (readily or grudgingly) that streets are chiefly motor thoroughfares,” Norton wrote in “Street Rivals: Jaywalking and the Invention of the Motor Age Street,” an article currently under review by the academic journal *Technology and Culture*, and drawn from the research he conducted for his forthcoming book, “Fighting Traffic: The Dawn of the Motor Age in the American City” (MIT Press, 2007).

Pedestrian safety continues to be a matter of public concern. In 2003, drivers registered 231 million motor vehicles in the United States. The year before, 4,808 pedestrians were killed and another 71,000 injured in traffic accidents, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Also in 2002, one quarter of the children 5 to 9 years old who were killed in traffic accidents were pedestrians.

For the past century, America’s love affair with automobiles has meant that motor vehicles have ruled American streets. Despite sporadic efforts to assert the rights of pedestrians and bicyclists, that culture prevails.

Source: University of Virginia

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