

A ride in the wayback machine

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I know all good things must come to an end, but sometimes when that happens it means the end of an era.

That's why I was sad when I read an article by auto industry expert Mark Phelan of the Detroit Free Press. "Two types of cars that once dominated American roads are on the verge of extinction. The six-passenger sedan (and coupe) may soon vanish entirely," wrote Phelan. "The Chevrolet Impala is the last 6-person sedan to be built with 3-person bench seat instead of buckets." (www.freep.com/article/20110619/COL14/106190421/Mark-Phelan-Six-person-sedan-coupe-their-way-history)

While Phelan bemoaned the fact that there will be no longer be passenger cars capable of carrying six people, the truth of the matter is that he missed the main reason for the three-person bench front seat. I'll excuse him because judging by his picture in the newspaper he's a whippersnapper, too young to know any better. It takes persons (particularly guys) with a fair amount of mileage on their personal odometers to understand the true importance of the front bench seat.

An explanation is in order, so hop into my wayback machine and enjoy a ride. If you're a whippersnapper, pay attention because you may learn something.

As any guy over 60 will tell you the true purpose of a front bench seat in a car was so your honey could slide over into the middle

and snuggle up next to you. Then you could put your right arm around her and drive with your left. Back in the day there were no seat belts or center consoles to get in the way of your "smooth move."

The bench seat also served as a gauge, just like the gas gauge or the oil gauge, a "Honey Meter" if you will. The Honey Meter was controlled by the girl and it showed how things were going between you and your honey. If she was cuddling next to you with her head on your shoulder that meant the meter (romance) was reading full; you could probably expect a goodnight kiss. If she was way over on the other side of the seat pressed against the passenger door (in the meter's red zone) not only was a kiss out of the question but she might leap out and sprint toward her parents' front porch before you could bring the car to a stop. Heck, if you were in a car behind a couple you could tell if they were fighting or not just by where they were sitting on the bench.

So assuming you and your honey wound up side-by-side on the bench seat; then what? Why, you'd go "cruisin'," that's what. In good weather you'd turn that AM radio on full blast; were there ever two better summer songs than "Dancing in the Streets" and



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"Heat Wave?"

In Flint, where I grew up, you might wind up at Carol's Hamburgers on Clio Road. They had "Battle of the Bands" nights right in their parking lot. I loved it when a local group named the Jazzmasters played. (Later that band became Terry and the Pack and then Grand Funk Railroad.)

Carol's also had the best hamburgers I ever tasted

and I ate thousands of them until the health department closed Carol's down because they were mixing sawdust with the ground beef. After that we had to go to a new place called McDonald's where the All American meal was a hamburger, fries and shake for 49 cents. McDonald's was OK, but Carol's was still better, cellulose and all. My mouth still waters whenever I hear a chain saw.

I know, I know ... geezers like me always think things were better in the olden days. But I'm telling you whippersnappers out there, you'll never know what you missed by being strapped into bucket seats. Cruisin' with your honey next to you on a steamy summer night was about as good as it could get.

For you geezer guys (like me) not only are bench seats heading toward oblivion, there's more bad news. A new study by the University

of Washington suggests that if you drive with just your left hand on the wheel that hand is more likely to develop skin cancer. It turns out that while our right hands were squeezing our main squeezes our left hands were being bombarded with ultraviolet rays. How's that for adding injury to insult? Ah, but it was worth it; wasn't it?

Well, time marches on and you can't stop "progress." You can, however, use it to your advantage. These days I put my Logitech Squeezebox Boom Internet radio on my back porch and program it to pick up the wireless signal from my home network. Then I log into my Pandora music account where I've created a custom radio station I call "Beach Boys Radio." On that station on a summer night I can listen to the Beach Boys, Jan and Dean, Dick Dale and the Deltones, the Ronettes, and Freddy "Boom Boom" Cannon. As for my honey, well I married the girl I took to the senior prom so if things are OK on the Honey Meter I can still fake like I'm scratching my head and then put my arm around her. On most nights I still score a goodnight kiss. It's not like cruisin' in the old days, but it's pretty doggone good.

Speaking of my wife, next week I'll have a story for you. I call it "My Wife the Terrorist."

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