

Women's Automotive History Highlights

At the turn of the century, restrictive Victorian ideas prevailed and women were viewed as too timid and fragile to deal with public affairs, participate in strenuous activity, or operate complex machinery (such as automobiles). These same arguments were used to deny women a higher education and the right to vote. However, some bold and courageous women refused to fit into the mold that society dictated for them. For other women, the automobile provided opportunities for work, inventions, and independence. Here are a few examples of women who made automotive history – and possibly steered the course for who we are today:

- 1902 Mary Anderson invented the first windshield wiper after riding a New York City Street car. Before that, people smeared a mixture of onions and carrots on windshields to repel water.

- June 6, 1909 Mrs. Alice H. Ramsey was 22 years old when she boarded a 30 HP Maxwell and began a 3,800 mile trip from New York to San Francisco, making her the first woman in history to cross the United States in an automobile. Her husband, a New Jersey congressman, never learned to drive but regularly purchased new Maxwells for Alice. He is quoted as saying “Alice, how the heck do you stop this thing!”

The museum has a 1910 red Maxwell on display similar to the one Alice owned.

- By 1910, 5% of licensed drivers were woman.

- The 1912 invention of Charles Kettering's self-starter did away with the necessity of crank starting a car. This arduous and often dangerous task had deterred many women (and no doubt, numerous men) from driving.

- Actress Florence Lawrence invented the first turn signal or “auto signaling arm” which attached to the car's rear fender. She is quoted as saying “A car to me is something that is almost human, something that responds to kindness, understanding and care, just as people do.” Her prowess behind the wheel is evident in many of her silent movies, which helped to encourage women drivers.

- The women's fight for suffrage and the right to vote took a new tactic with a series of auto tours which criss-crossed the nation with their message. Women rented automobiles much like the ones on display at the Museum. They draped the cars with large banners and made speeches from the roomy back seats, with the tops down. The spectacle attracted large groups of men.

- In 1916 Alice Burke and Nell Richardson traveled for seven months and 10,700 miles carrying the women's suffrage and right to vote message and demonstrating women's equality at the wheel.

Several early open cars on display are typical of the type these women would have driven, or toured with a hired chauffeur.

- 1914 (early WWI) Women began driving for the French and British branches of the Red Cross. American women, including famous art patron Gertrude Stein, were recruited to drive for them. Overseas drivers had to furnish their own cars and were also expected to maintain them, including making minor repairs. Ms. Stein sent to her aunt in New York to “ship a Model T.”



Many such automobiles are on display including a later 1941 Lincoln Zepher Ambulance, typical of WWII domestic Women's Motor Corp.

- In 1915 Wilma Russey became the first woman to work as a taxi driver in New York and was an expert garage mechanic.
- 1916 The Girl Scouts initiated a "Automobling Badge" for which girls had to demonstrate driving skill, auto mechanics, and first aid skills.
- In the 1920s women educated in home economics criss-crossed the country visiting women on farms and giving home canning demonstrations. For the isolated farm women, these visits were referred to as "a little bit of heaven come down in a Tin Lizzie." (Ford Model T).

The Museum has several Model Ts on display.

● In 1922 Henry Ford opened his Phoenix Factory employing women to do assembly and welding work. Workers at this plant were either single or widowed, as Mr. Ford did not approve of married women working outside the home. He said "I consider women only a temporary factor in industry. Their real job in life is to get married, have a home and raise a family. I pay our women the same as men so they can dress attractively and get married."

The Literary Digest for April 7, 1928

"Never before such beauty and quality for so little money"

J. H. Whippet
President
The Ford Motor Company, Dearborn, Michigan



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Only Whippet Has All These Features:
 Full Force-feed Lubrication—
 Silent Timing Chain—Gas Tank at Rear—Big 4-wheel Brakes—
 Roll-over Fenders and Sashers—
 Adjustable Steering Post—
 Single-Plate Clutch—Rear-type Rear Axle with removable shaft—
 Longer Connecting Rods—
 Interchangeable Choke-type Main Bearings—Sheldon Hotchkiss Drive—Trapezoidal Long Semi-elliptic springs with aluminum shock absorbers and steel.

THE perfected Whippet has proved the 1928 sensation in the light car field. Offering more motor car beauty and quality than was ever sold for so little money, its success has outdistanced the most optimistic predictions. Hundreds of thousands who have driven the Whippet are aware of its remarkable speed, flexibility, hill-climbing ability, safety, comfort and unusual economy. Now added features of design, new items of equipment, greater beauty of line and color, plus radically reduced prices, raise the standard of light car value to a new high point. Prices f. o. b. factory and specifications subject to change without notice.

\$585
4-Door Sedan

\$535
The Coach

\$525
The Roadster

\$445
The Cabriolet Coupe

\$455
The Touring

The Perfected Whippet

● Beginning in the 1920's and 1930's many major automobile manufacturers recognized the growing trend of women driving for fun and necessity. They began to gear their print ad campaigns to women, hire women in design and sales positions, and recognize women in many other ways.

At the museum, these influences can be seen in interior and exterior examples of color options, vanity cases, plush upholstery, decorative door handles, and even interior mounted sterling silver bud vases! Interpretive visual labels also reinforce this story.





- During World War II, American auto manufacturers stopped making cars and converted their assembly lines and factories over to war production. The supply of new automobiles dried up.

After the war, reverting to peacetime production took a while: American factories produced fewer cars in 1945 (dealers sold just under 70,000 cars) than they had in 1909, before the advent of mass production.

The prevailing motto of the day was “Do the job he left behind” as women pumped gas and did other jobs traditionally done by men.



- Helene Rother (1908-1999)

was a French designer of jewelry and fashion accessories who fled Nazi-occupied France with her seven-year-old daughter Ina in 1942. She was the first woman to work as an automotive designer when she joined the interior styling staff of General Motors in Detroit in 1943. Four years later she opened her own design studio in the Fisher Building, where she specialized in designs for automotive interiors, furniture and stained glass windows. She spent her later years at her horse farm near Metamora, Michigan.

Car advertisements show how marketers after WWII in the late 40's and 50's tried to make automobiles a symbol of the owner's personality and psyche.



- 1956 Chicago Auto Show

In this close-up view of a Custom Royal La Femme 4-door hardtop, at the Dodge exhibit space, the car is on a raised platform with a rotating floor. Two female models are next to the vehicle, while a spokesman at left points to the car. Note the open umbrella, which was part of the accessory package that came with the La Femme model--unabashedly aimed at women.