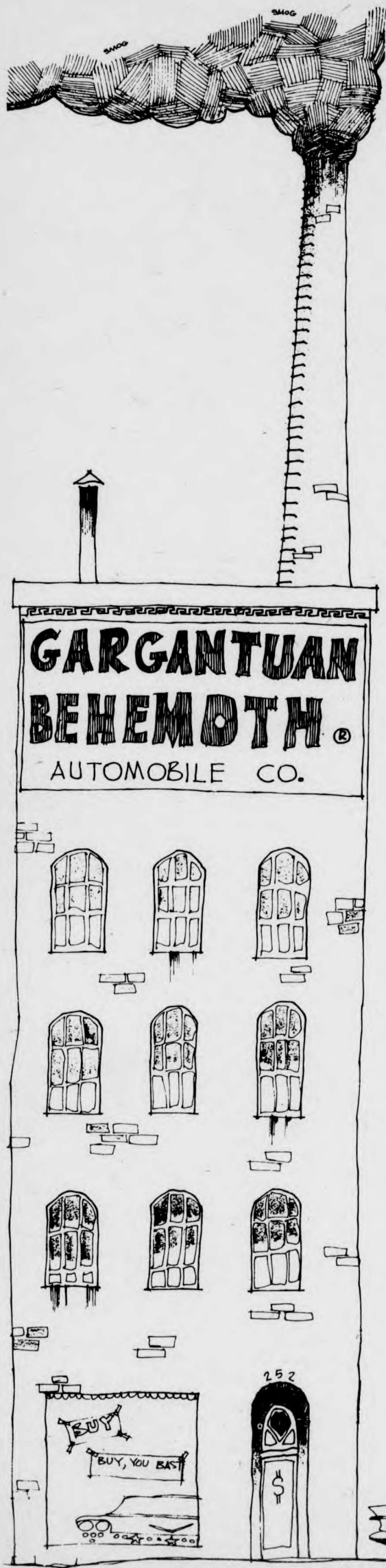


SYMBOLISM



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If the seeds of antithesis in modern society are hard to find, the symbol of its faults and of its apparent future is not. That symbol is the automobile.

It seems quite likely that future historians will probably write whole volumes on the meaning of the car to our age and, if man by chance saves himself, they may point in wonder to the fact that all America drove cars at one time without realizing that in doing so they had at their fingertips the key to the troubles of their times.

A status symbol

To many in North America, in fact to most, the car is a symbol of status and success.

While the Rolls Royce remains aristocratic, and Italian cars are left to the sons of the very rich, owning a Cadillac has become a symbol that one has arrived. Lincolns and Imperials are provided for variation only.

The hollowness of this symbol is, however, starting to become apparent even to the rich especially since even the working man can buy one on the instalment plan.

Seeing a person driving General Motors' finest product today really means almost nothing. He may be parking it in front of a tenement house.

Somewhat unconsciously, the rich consider this unfair — their symbol is being destroyed. The search for material objects with which they may announce their success is being frustrated.

The process exposes the real reasons people buy such a product as a Cadillac. Not because it is better but because it is more expensive. In many ways it is inferior to the little Volkswagen whose retail value it will share within 10 years.

But, no matter, it is not real value that counts, it is surface-deep images we chase.

20 errors guaranteed

The Cadillac owner does share one common problem with the poor unfortunates who buy Chevrolet Biscaynes. Both cars have a habit of coming apart at the seams.

Automobile magazine tests show that it is virtually impossible to buy a car today without finding at least 20 errors in its workmanship. Every car buyer lives in fear of the lemon.

It is not unusual to read in those same magazines fond words for the days of yesteryear when cars produced by a much inferior technology at least seemed to have less faults upon delivery.

If the machines have become better, it must be the men operating them who are making more mistakes.

This conclusion holds true in practice and in theory and the reason for it is summed up in one word — alienation.

The production of cars today is really the result of a long stream of men screwing nuts on bolts or similarly uniform and minor tasks.

If you ask one of those production line men about the pride he feels when he sees a car made by the company he works for, he will laugh at you. In fact you would laugh at yourself if you thought of asking the question.

Anyone sitting screwing nuts on bolts all day really doesn't give a damn about the final product that rolls off the production line. He probably doesn't even see what he has to do with it. If he didn't screw the nut someone else would.

So our case study goes to his toil every day to make his \$2.90 an hour by doing as little labor as possible.

If he can get away with turning the nut six times instead of seven and thereby lighten his work load, he probably will. He will do this because he is so divorced from his toil that he doesn't care about the quality of the final product and he doesn't care about who buys it.

Why should he, they don't care about him.

So in the end we all get cars that have poorly screwed-on nuts.

Planned obsolescence

By the time we finally get the necessary nuts rescrewed, we will be face to face with the second challenge to our car's meagre existence — planned obsolescence.

Any thinking engineer can tell you that for the resources we allocate to the production of automobiles (expressed in terms of the final number of dollars we have to pay for them), we should get a very superior product in return.

We don't, and every child knows the reason why — the automobile manufacturers want to make sure you buy a new car within four years.

Now engineers aren't told to design cars that will fall apart. There is no need to be so obvious.

All the manufacturer has to do is offer thousands of economic reasons why one screw should be used instead of two, why research on new methods and materials should proceed "slowly and surely" and generally how change must come about gradually. He believes all that himself.

Presto — an inferior product that is on one's fault but sure makes the shareholders a lot of money.

One big happy family

Now Adam Smith, great free-market economist, would have argued that progress can't be held back because one of the companies will always be trying to get the jump on the others.

Adam Smith never met Henry Ford II. Today the car industry has illustrated that man need not always be at war. Instead of fighting with one another, they have banded together in one big happy family.

A family big enough to suggest to other families that they change businesses or quit.

Not all members of the family are brother and sister like Cadillac and Chevrolet — some are cousin like Pontiac and Ford — but they all help each other out.

That is why General Motors loaned American Motors millions of dollars during the last few years. If any more cousins disappear from the market, U.S. federal authorities are probably going to investigate.

Anyone who has any doubts that the big three and A.M. are in cahoots should watch the rise in car prices over a period of several years. They all go up together.

Air pollution

All the problems don't meet around board room tables either. Some of them come out of the cars exhaust pipes.

The U.S. government has finally forced companies to do a little about car exhaust air pollution. Regulations applying to buses and trucks are on their way.

But the moves may be too little and too late. Our major cities are already being buried under a blanket of blackening smog.

The industry could, of course, clear up the situation if they wanted to, but since exhaust cleaning devices cost money they've chosen not to.

Their problem is that if they add a \$50 cleaner to every car and truck they have to up the final price \$100 to cover everyone's profit. They would rather not do this as they feel the resulting decreased number of sales would hurt their overall profit situation. It would hurt because they are already charging as much as the market can bear in order to receive maximum profits.