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Throughout history, man has created several inventions of different shapes and sizes to cater to specific activities in any given moment. Some inventions were directed to people, animals and plants, others were meant for research while a few were made to inflict damage. While inventions were done left and right each year, only a select few have managed to remain in constant development today. One of these continually improved sectors is the field of transportation as people needed means to transport goods and produce and at the same time, transport people to various locations in the country or the world. Inventors created ships, steam locomotives and even bicycles; however, people started to ask for a more practical and efficient mode of transport. Since the idea came into light in the 18th century, automobiles redefined society by permitting better mobility, access to services and information, and provided a means for self-expression, freedom and independence.
Contrary to popular belief, the concept of the modern car or automobiles came from the Europeans and not from the Americans. The first version of a ‘ horseless carriage’ was first conceptualized by a French physicist Denis Papin in 1794 by using a steam piston engine in a small boat . However, since Papin’s invention was not recognized due to his death in 1712, the idea was picked up by the French army engineer named Captain Nicolas Cugnot. Much like Papin, Cugnot used the same type of engine to power his invention, the ‘ fardier a vapeur’ or a motorized horse-drawn cart. Many inventors in the period took on Cugnot’s design and conceptualized several versions of an automated vehicle. However, it was German engineer Karl Benz who introduced the first ever modern car in 1885. It was a petrol-powered motor vehicle with three wheels, a four-stroke engine and a two-chain transmission that would enable the vehicle to move. The car became a patented design on January 29, 1886 as the Benz Patent Motorwagen, and it had impressed the visitors at the 1889 Paris Exposition Universelle. Many admired the car especially after Karl Benz’s wife Bertha did a 65 mile journey from Mannheim to Pforzheim. The Motorwagen sales increased since 1889 and by 1894, Benz sold almost 136 Motorwagens around Europe. Later on, other Germans such as engineer Gottlieb Daimer and business partner Wilhelm Maybach improved Benz’s design for the engine in 1886 and introduced the first Daimer car in 1898 .
As the Europeans continued to improve the designs of the modern car, American inventors have also been revising the idea of having an efficient mode of transport. The first car they invented was called a Duryea, America’s first production car with 13 sold units in the car’s first year. It was a “ powered buggy”, which has a single cylinder engine and can move on any given surface. Following the Dureya was Henry Ford’s Quadricycle, which only weighed 500 pounds and utilized a two inline cylinder, ignition starter, carburetion, valve timing and steering. The majority of the cars that followed from 1896 to 1901 are ‘ powered buggies’ that allowed personal mobility such as R. E. Olds’ Oldsmobile . However, it was the inception of the Model T-Ford in 1908 that had launched American automobiles into the world market. The Model T-Ford was designed by Ford with a 4-cylinder, 20-horsepower engine and operated through a planetary transmission using pedals. After it had successfully won the New York to Seattle endurance race in 1909, Ford managed to sell 19, 000 Model T’s in 1910 to up to 260, 720 units in 1914 .
While the Model-T was earning praise around the country, other American car manufacturers also made the contributions to the American automotive industry. Car manufacturer Cadillac had also introduced versions of a horseless vehicle with a self-starting engine in 1912. By the 1920s, General Motors picked up Ford’s idea and made cars more appealing to American consumers and used in any given purpose. GM’s president, Alfred P. Sloan, introduced innovations such as Chevrolet, Pontiac, Oldsmobile, Buick and the new version of the Cadillac to give a selection of affordable to luxurious cars to the public. Ford tried to counter GM’s popularity by introducing Model A in 1927. A year later, Chrysler acquired the copyrights to Dodge and became the third largest automobile company in the country alongside Ford and GM. While the Second World War and the Great Depression had temporarily halted operations for America’s automobile industry, it is undeniable that they have made a lasting impact in American society .
Americans have varying opinions when it comes to how important automobiles were for the public. There were a few who argued that automobiles insult tradition as Americans tried to preserve the country’s long tradition of horsemanship. Horsemanship had been adopted to aid blacksmiths and livery industries, but with the introduction of mechanized transport, blacksmiths and livery industries were no longer required as people no longer needed elegant carriages or coaches. Many rural farmers lost lands to road constructions and pollution became prominent as more people took cars out on the road . Some social observers had added in the early 1920s that these automobiles may also affect American piety as citizens could now travel in special days like Sabbath and Sunday. Further concerns were also directed to the increase of crime as automobiles now permit criminals to flee before apprehension by the police. Finally, automobiles also became another instrument of discrimination as African Americans were not allowed from purchasing or driving automobiles .
However, there were a few who were against the use of automobiles in American society, it is undeniable that it had redefined American society. First and foremost, automobiles have enabled rural families to come out of isolation from the rest of the world as they could now have access to better schools, markets and industries to aid in improving production. Urban Americans now had a chance to use cars to escape city life and conduct outdoor activities with their respective families. More services are now offered to both urban and rural Americans alike, improving mobility and information sharing. Many American families also benefitted with the growth of the automobile industry as jobs were opened in automobile factories, such as Ford’s Highland Park, to assist in the production. Automobiles also permitted consumers to have a means to self-express perceptions and beliefs as to what a car should be and why they purchased the automobile in the first place. Aside from self-expression, automobiles also represented modernity and freedom, especially for women as they now gained another medium to show independence. Tourism had also flourished upon the introduction of cars and permitted many American cities to flourish as centers of commerce or tourist destinations .
Although the idea of the automobile did not start from the Americans, the Americans knew the value of improved mobility through this invention and tried to improve the car’s design for the American people. On the one hand, American society found these automobiles difficult to deal with due to the tradition it challenges and the negative impacts it has to the environment and to select Americans. However, it is undeniable that many Americans agree that it had changed America for the better as people could now access better services and other areas more efficiency. Without automobiles, it is likely that America’s current progress would not be possible.

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