

## Recreation Yesterday and Today

### Car Crazy 1941

pages 299-304

It was a warm, June Saturday night in town. Along the one block of business district sidewalk, parked cars slanted, crowded nose-first into the curb. Dried mud on most of the fenders and wheels attested to farm families come to town for the trading and to take part in the main social event of the week.

This day, farmers had left their fields well before normal quitting time. The kids had lent extra energies to getting chores done early. Getting to town before others meant finding a good parking space where mothers, after the trading was done, could sit in front seats to tend small children. They might even enjoy a rare ice cream cone. They would have an hour or two to watch the people go by: farmers in new striped overalls and clean shirts and Sunday straw hats; other women, each with a baby on one hip and on the other a bag, perhaps of prized beauty notions from the drugstore; neighbors who seldom saw each other during the work week, stopping to chat. Other passing faces required guessing games. This was especially true for the two or three town ladies in the grandstand seats of their fancier, cleaner town cars, which their banker or store-owner husbands had driven downtown for them really early. But visible town people, except for those who worked in the stores, were few. On Saturday night, Main Street belonged to the folks from the country. Their street, their parade.

Teenage girls in light summer dresses did make a kind of circulating parade of it. Groups of them had banded together, giggling and trying to look sophisticated and charming as they kept surreptitious watch for boys along their endless sidewalk rounds. Small boys, too, sporting dress shirts and good pants, moved in clusters here and there. Boys in their teens loitered, dividing their attention between the girls on the sidewalks and the mechanized units of the procession on display in the street—actually the widened block of Highway 77 that ran through town. That Saturday night, as all summer Saturday nights, six or eight shining pampered vehicles of varying makes and ages had come to town—like their proud, young owners, all dressed up and washed behind the ears. They cruised slowly up the block. Their drivers, solitary or accompanied, expected to see and be seen. They made their U-turns at the intersection, purred their fine-tuned engines casually down the other side of the street to the end of the block, and repeated the maneuver.

Some of the cars, carrying young people with a more purposeful agenda, might stop eventually in front of Paulson's Drug. Good-time girls in the back laughed too loudly and exhibited lighted cigarettes as they waited for one of the guys to come out with a bottle-shaped brown bag. Then they took one more U-turn and headed north to the dance at Tunerville.

For Bob, about to turn sixteen and soon a senior in high school, Saturday nights like this brought confused frustration. He felt caught between his two worlds—country ways versus the town life that he had known for three years now. Most of his friends from

school were town boys, who didn't seem to figure in the Saturday night gatherings. Why should they, he reminded himself; they could get together anytime during the week. This night, as he came out of the Gamble Store where he had bought a box of .22 shorts for gopher hunting with Bert, he took a closer look. He recognized both cars idling in front of the drug store across the tree. The new '41 Ford with the spotlight belonged to those two good-looking farm boys from someplace east of town; they had a reputation as regular Tunerville dancers. The driver of the '39 Ford he identified as one of the Holt boys, graduated a couple years earlier. Girls were climbing into his car. "There'll be a hot time in the old town tonight," he heard the old song within his head. The he walked on.

Ma and eight-year-old Jeanie occupied the front seat of the "new" family car. The '37 V-8 acquired the year before was a great improvement and certainly less embarrassing than the old rattletrap Model A. But it still was only another farmer car, needing a wash.

"Where's the rest?" he asked through the open window.

"Your father was looking for you," Ma said. "Took the kerosene can, maybe to Gamble's."

"Didn't see him in there." Bob fingered the concentrated weight of rifle cartridges in his pocket. "I didn't see Bert in town either, did you?" For Bob, Bert had been more of a senior play partner than an uncle. Now twenty-one, he worked out at a farm across Hidewood Creek and had had his own car for a couple of years.

"No," Ma replied. "Maybe went to Estelline or Watertown." Bob nodded; when you're twenty-one you could do things that seemed impossible at fifteen or sixteen. She added: "The Koppman boys went to the show. I thought you was going, too."

"Naah. Hopalong Cassidy again. Tiresome." A glance at the Majestic showed its lights were off, the second show about over. The better movies came on Sunday nights, if you could get to town. "Guess I'll try a game of pool."

On the sidewalk he met Elaine and Snooky, on parade in the company of Lois Krause and Marjorie Jorvig, their two seventh-grade classmates from the one-room school. They gave him little attention and would keep orbiting until their mothers called them to the cars. Inside Rudy', under the illuminated Grain Belt Beer sign he was surprised when his eyes adjusted to see his father's lean figure at the bar. Pa looked younger with his hat pushed back on his head, gesturing with a cigar in one hand as he made a point to Elmer Krause, like an illustration of some politician in a Saturday Evening Post story. Bob paused, hesitating to interrupt. He and his father had never been in the pool hall at the same time before, and the moment seemed at first tender, then ironic. "Farmer Pa's weekly ten minutes of leisure time," he imagined a caption for the school paper. When Elmer spotted him, he joined them at the bar, aware that he was too young to be offered a beer. Right away Pa seemed in a hurry, downed his glass, tossed the cigar into a spittoon, and picked up the filled kerosene can he had set at his feet.

"Here," he said, "put-near eleven. You take this to the car, I'll get the groceries from the Jew-store."

On the sidewalk again, Bob thought how strange, they got a sign painted on the store side a half-block long, "The New Store." Still everybody called it the Jew-store. Owners must be Jewish; did they name it New Store to rhyme on purpose? If they were the only people of that religion in town, did they feel any anti-Jewish prejudice, like you read about in big cities? How would the town react to a Negro family, like that carful he saw on the road to Watertown sometimes, the father wearing glasses and smoking a pipe like any farmer might? He wondered whether he should follow up on such questions in sociology class when school started again in the fall.

Pa had never cared much about cars, and Bob was by now the driver whenever the whole family went somewhere. On the graveled highway, he clicked on the radio Bert had found and installed for them; with the battered dial clamped to the steering post, it wasn't the same as a factory-built accessory, but it was a car radio. The Watertown station had a program of Glenn Miller records, and by the time the Ford splashed through the last puddle near Schleuters', "Elmer's Tune" was playing. It always made him think of the little button accordion that Elmer Krause had lent him. The others scrambled out, and Pa lifted from the trunk the double egg-case filled with groceries. "You bring in the kerosene when you come," he called back. "Careful you don't run the battery down."

Hands on the wheel, he luxuriated in isolation, listening to the music, appreciating the vastness of the starry sky, inhaling the car smells of oil fumes and dust and upholstery that since childhood had stimulated his imagination, satisfied his fantasy. A car. Driving a car. An absolute, basic necessity for a guy stuck out on farm, to take you wherever you want to go. Like Bert, now that he had that neat Model A roadster, roaming all around the countryside. And the guys cruising up and down Main Street in their own personally adapted chariots, some of them attracting good-looking girls, too, taking them to the dance at Tunerville. Right this minute those guys were out on the dance floor holding sweater-girls in their arms like in the movies; and at intermission there'd be necking and maybe some boozing too and who knows what else going on out in the parked cars in the dark. Maybe he was not yet ready for all that stuff, he admitted. But something was wrong with the situation—nearly sixteen, and good little Sonny-boy went home from town Saturday night with mama and papa and his kid sisters.

There was only one answer, and Bert had led the way. A car of his own. Somehow.

He turned off the radio and left his sanctuary. While relieving himself against the lilac bush, he studied the glittering skies once again, trying to locate the North Star and settling on a brighter light that he thought might be Venus. In his head he began another tune, and the words came clear: "When You Wish upon a Star..." Maybe that is what he had done, at that. The song was still there as he climbed the dark stairs and waited for sleep.

From Robert Amerson, *From the Hidewood: Memories of a Dakota Neighborhood* (copyright by the Minnesota Historical Society, 1996.)