

AutoSunday

Leisure motorists still enjoy the drive

BY DIANA MARZALEK
For The Associated Press

After years of business travel, Don Bednarek gave up flying for good when the airlines cut back on customer service.

But that decision has hardly kept him homebound. With grown children and friends scattered across the country, Bednarek, 73, of Madison, Wis., is a regular on the roads, sometimes logging thousands of miles at a time in his Volkswagen Eurovan.

This fall, the retired television engineer is taking a solo, five-week journey around the West and Southwest, including visits to several favorite mountaintops if the mood strikes.

"Driving is a great pleasure for me," said Bednarek, who before the Eurovan (which includes a bed and kitchen) took road trips first by motorcycle and later in a Ford station wagon, big enough to sleep a few of his six kids.

"I like it both because of the freedom and because it's so very cheap," he said.

Although the economy has depressed leisure travel overall in the United States, Bednarek is one of millions of Americans who continue to hit the highways, seeing car travel as the best alternative in these post-Sept. 11, recessionary times. It is by far the most dominant mode of travel.

Summer 2008 had seen a dramatic 10 percent reduction in the number of Fourth of July travelers from the previous year's holiday, according to AAA, the automobile association founded more than a century ago. The cause? Economic worries and the price of gas, which rose to about \$4 per gallon, the group said. This summer, although gasoline prices dropped by about \$1.50 per gallon since last summer, the number of holiday travelers by car varied little, said AAA spokesman Geoff Sundstrom.

For the Fourth of July holiday, the number of people traveling by air increased slightly from the previous year due to lower airfares, Sundstrom said. But about 88 percent of holiday travelers still went by automobile.

The idea of hitting the open road — whether in cars packed with kids or going solo to find your freedom — is largely an American phenomenon. "It's been ingrained in our DNA," he said.

John Minotti, a 29-year-old coffee shop manager from New Rochelle, N.Y., became a devoted car traveler this summer, using his 1992 Volvo to follow his favorite band, Phish, on their Northeast tour. Driving, he said, is a good way to explore the country, and capitalizes on the freedom that comes with being young and single.

"I just kind of like cruising around," Minotti said.

Don Benarek of Madison, Wis., travels all over the country in this 2000 Volkswagen Eurovan camper.



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WOODWARD AVENUE

More than just the HEART of Detroit, it's the SOUL of the automotive world

BY JASON STEIN
Wheelbase Communications

DETROIT — The place isn't quite what it used to be.

In some stretches, it's littered with abandoned buildings, busted windows and businesses that gave up the fight. Here, the wind gently rocks stoplights that flash amber signals 24 hours a day with few cars in sight.

In other stretches it is the place to be; the neon lights of neighboring Royal Oak or Ferndale drawing couples deep into the night.

Take a trip down Woodward Avenue here in Detroit and you are bound to see a little of everything. Poverty. Prosperity.

But, mostly, mile after mile of automotive history.

Once a sign of turn-of-the-century urban progress, America's historic boulevard typifies today's urban sprawl: a 27-mile spine of road that connects decaying sections of the Motor City to the ever-expanding northern suburbs of Wayne and upscale Oakland County.

Woodward is not quite what it used to be, but each year on one August weekend it is what it was meant to be.

On Aug. 15, for the 15th consecutive year, the car buffs and car crazies lined the boulevard by the millions to watch the classics cruise the avenue.

From Detroit through Highland Park, Pleasant Ridge, Huntington Woods and all the way to Pontiac, the "Woodward Dream Cruise" (woodwarddreamcruise.com) is one of the world's largest festivals of car culture featuring hot rods, antique and collectible vehicles.

They all come to say thanks and admire the people who love the

machines.

After all, this is still Woodward Avenue.

So much went on here. So much still goes on here.

It is 300 years of automotive history in one strip. It is the world's first mile of concrete road, paved between Six and Seven Mile Roads in 1909, followed by the first painted centerline and then the world's first electronic traffic light at Woodward and Michigan in 1920.

It is the birthplace of street tests, where automobile engineers drove new models and cruised in the 1950s and 1960s.

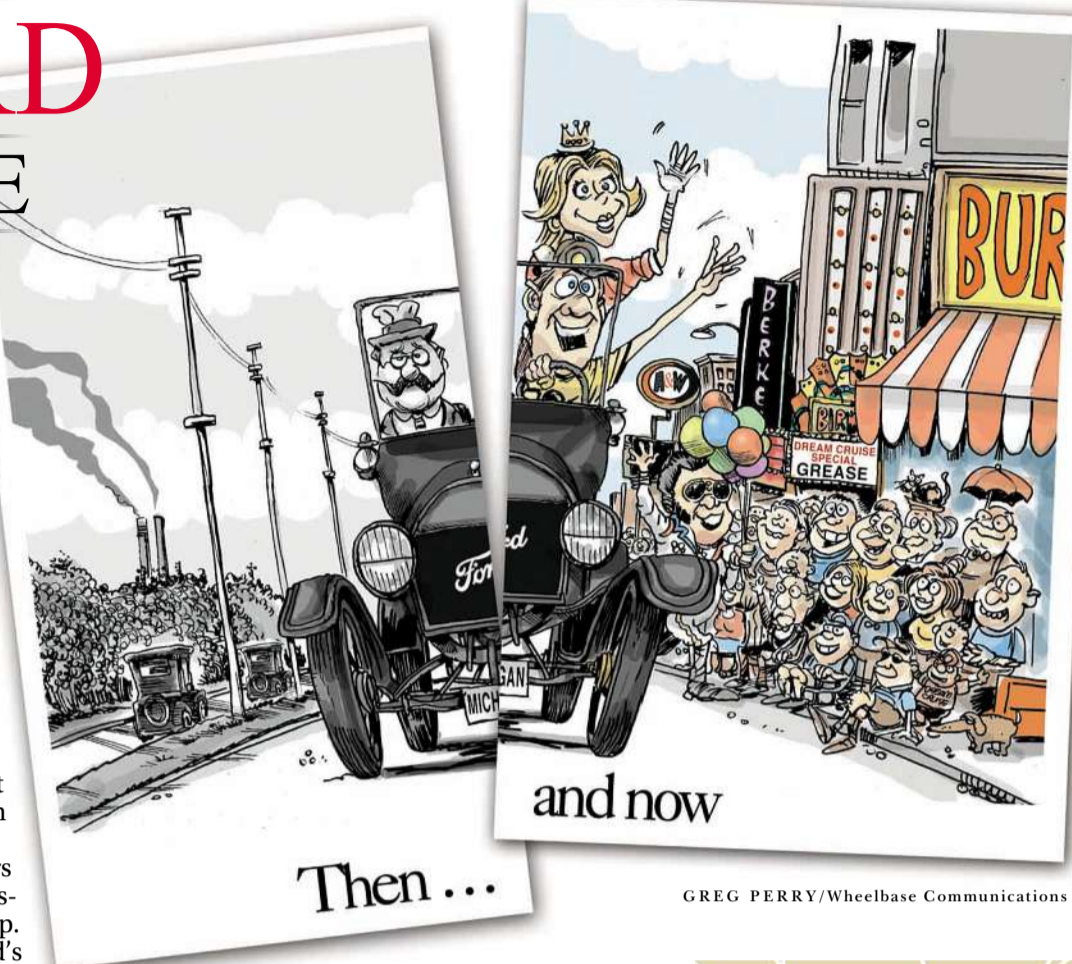
The first urban highway in the United States, the Davison Limited Expressway, was built in 1941 and intersects Woodward Avenue. Some say German engineers used the Davison as inspiration for the world famous Autobahn.

And on July 24, 1701, Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac, along with his 9-year-old son, his brother, 100 soldiers, two priests and 100 American Indians, landed at the foot of Woodward to establish a French settlement. Its name? Detroit.

The story of Woodward Avenue, named after Judge Augustus Brevort Woodward, one of Detroit's early city planners, is purely American. It was created out of a desire for economic prosperity in a climate of innovation and individual freedom.

Judge Woodward believed roads leading out of the downtown should use a hexagon pattern, with wide boulevards and avenues.

In the early 1900s at the onset of the automobile industry, the roadway was asphalt over wooden blocks



GREG PERRY/Wheelbase Communications

in downtown Detroit but was dirt and mud in other areas. As the auto industry grew and the mud became deeper, the public demanded better roadways.

They got one.

Constructed in three months at a cost of nearly \$14,000, the new stretched of paved roadway on Woodward near Henry Ford's new Model T plant drew international attention. Concrete, the planners said, was more durable, cleaner and easier to maintain.

Seven years later, the entire road was paved. Three years later, a three-color traffic light was even installed on the avenue.

Progress was being made and Detroit was known as the "Paris of the Midwest."

The auto industry would grow up on Woodward's "Boulevard of Dreams."

Ford built his first car at his home, four blocks west of Woodward. The assembly line for the Model T was conceived two blocks east of the street.

By 1921, General Motors moved its headquarters to an office complex one block west of Woodward. In 1925, Chrysler would set up shop in Highland Park, three blocks east of the strip.

In 1920, Woodward and Michigan was the nation's busiest intersection with an average of 18,000 cars a day. In 1925, the intersection of



Woodward and State was busier than Times Square.

By the 1950s, "Woodwarding" became the craze as teenagers gathered at drive-ins, showcasing their muscle cars up and down the street.

It's a tradition that was rekindled 15 years ago, although in a more official, carnival-like way. In fact, the "Dream Cruise" is one of Metro Detroit's most anticipated events. Covering 16 miles, it attracts more than one million people from around the world and a whopping 40,000 vintage vehicles.

For one weekend, Woodward is Woodward again. Dreamers can dream. And cars are once again king.

• E-mail feature writer Jason Stein at www.wheelbase.ws/mailbag.html.

A good repair shop's expenses are many and varied

Q. I read your column about how it's not always a wise decision to try your own auto repairs. I would however like to comment about people in your profession who fail to talk about the high prices charged for auto repair.

For instance, why does it generally cost anywhere from \$70 to \$90 an hour for labor? If my local mechanic is making this much, I'm in the wrong profession. Prices auto repair shops charge for parts are generally two to three times as much as you can buy the same part for at the auto parts store. Diagnostic charges are around \$100 simply for connecting a computer plug into an ECM and punching in some information to get a diagnostic code, all of which takes about 15 minutes.

I have my own mechanic I take my cars to and although he is very honest and tells me what I need done without trying to sell me everything under the sun, I think even his prices are excessive. Unfortunately I have few options because the charges are pretty similar anywhere you go.

I realize every business needs to be profitable, but if labor rates would be around \$50 per hour and parts prices would only be marked up 50 percent to 75 percent above cost vs. double or triple the price, you may notice an increase in business to make up for this as more people would be inclined to bring their cars in rather than fix it



Doug McAllister
Under the hood

themselves. I hope you have the guts to print this in the paper and comment on why repairs are so expensive in the industry, as no one seems to talk about it.

What are your charges for parts and labor? Being in the Barrington area, I'm sure you have a high markup.

One last thing, I feel that the \$200 you charged the guy for tightening some power steering mounts is excessive considering it was basically a labor and diagnostic charge. How long did your mechanic actually spend looking at and repairing the car start to finish? I'll bet probably only an hour tops. It seems you may have taken advantage of this guy as another shop told him he needed a transmission, which is usually in excess of \$2,000, so he probably was more than glad to only have to pay \$200. Looking forward to your comments.

A. First of all thank you for reading my column and taking the time to write to me. Needless to say you have given me a lot to respond to. So I will do my best to answer all of your points as completely as I can.

You answered your first question — why is auto repair so expensive — in your second paragraph, "every business needs to be profitable."

However, I will elaborate a little more.

An automotive repair shop is no different from any other business. In the past, the typical owner of a repair shop was a mechanic who wanted to be on his own, so he rented a building and put up a sign. He was able to survive with little or no capitol and without paying attention to financial statements, profit and loss statements, or marketing and human resource costs that are required of a business in today's marketplace. On top of that, the complexity of current automobiles requires hours of training, expensive specialized tools, equipment and computers, along with the building that houses the shop.

Then add higher insurance costs, government regulations, increased customer expectations (rightly so) for comfortable waiting rooms, courtesy shuttles, loaner cars and extended warranties for repair work. These are just some of the reasons that labor rates and parts prices continue to climb.

With all of this expense the business owner had better be paying attention to the bottom line or he won't have a business and will not be there for his customers. I love this business and I love helping people keep their cars in top shape, which in turn helps them with their desire for worry-free driving. With all of that being said, it is a businesses' responsibility to put out a great product

while serving both its customers and employees well. When a business, any business, does this they can't help but be successful.

Regarding your second question — the cost of diagnostics. I have written several columns on the fact that just scanning the computer for codes is not all that happens in a diagnostic procedure. Sometimes the code is the answer and in that case I don't even charge to hook up the scanner, but more times than not there are voltages and resistance values to test on multiple wires. There are technical service bulletins to look up, flow charts to read and wiring schematics to study. Without doing this ground work, a technician is just guessing or arbitrarily replacing parts, probably at your expense.

You asked about the pricing in my Barrington shop and suggested that I had a high markup due to my location. The pricing is exactly the same between my Barrington and the Crystal Lake shops. We have a wonderful shop on a side street in downtown Barrington and it costs me no more to do business there than in Crystal Lake. All of our work, parts and labor, is backed by a 24-month, 24,000-mile nationwide warranty to give you the confidence that we'll be there if you need us.

As far as the \$200 customer charge you mentioned, it was not as easy as it sounded.

There were multiple test drives and many components that had to be taken off the car to gain access to the area that was loose. It was a lot easier to write about than it was to diagnose and repair.

In terms of repairing it yourself, I understand the desire to save money. My point was that in many cases a person can cost themselves more in the long run.

Automotive repair and maintenance facilities invest a great deal upfront to put together the infrastructure to properly repair and maintain your vehicle. Add to that the ongoing yearly expense for technical training and information. There has been a tremendous amount technological advances to vehicles over the years and we are committed to making sure our team is up to date with the necessary tools and training.

I'd like you to consider investigating other repair and maintenance trades and review their charges for services vs. their expense structure. I believe that once you truly understand the complexity of the automotive business you will truly have a greater appreciation for the price.

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