THE ABSTRACT WORLD OF THE HOT-RODDER

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The long holiday-weekend approaches, and at quarter-hour intervals the radio broadcasts the words of Mr. Ned Dearborn of the National Safety Council predicting the total of highway deaths. Average Citizen listens with a vague alarm. "Gosh!" he says, "436 deaths in a seventy-two-hour period! *Gosh!"* And in the back of his mind he goes on planning the family's weekend trip. By leaving a half-hour earlier (he thinks) and by taking lunch with them they ought to be able to make a good three hundred and fifty miles by dark; then they can use the truck cutoff where there is less traffic on Sundays.

So when the holiday begins they set out, wife, husband, children, dog and all, heedless of warnings and prophecies, heedless of previous experience with holiday traffic. Knowingly they plunge into the heavy stream of cars, struggle with it hour after hour, dodge from highway to country road and back again, sometimes going fast, sometimes slow, but rarely stopping, and glancing only briefly at the scenery. When the holiday is over they come home tired, out of temper and with little or nothing to show for their journey. Nevertheless they are somehow glad that they have gone, and they will go soon again. Common sense urged them to stay home and take care of many long postponed household chores; the bloody prognostications of the National Safety Council should have frightened them. But instead they chose to yield to a deepseated urge to

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escape from the city and everyday surroundings into the open country, and, as I say, they were not sorry they did so.

Why the Sunday motorist likes driving even under these conditions is a puzzle worth exploring; but as to the instinct which takes him away from home, it is too universal, too elementary, I should think, to call for much analysis. We all have it whether we indulge it or not. Far from being a product of the motor age, it is probably as old as urban existence itself, and many of us can remember a time when this weekend and holiday exodus had a different, less deadly but no less popular form.

I find myself recalling the days when the streetcar was the chief means of Sunday transportation out of the city. In America, to be sure, we have all but forgotten what the streetcar meant; its heyday is now a good forty years behind us. In Europe it still plays a very useful role, even though it is beginning to surrender its monopoly to the private automobile, the scooter and motorcycle and chartered bus. The finest flowering of the streetcar-borne Sunday exodus in Europe occurred, I think, sometime between the two World Wars. It was then that city people began to have a little more weekend leisure (and a great deal of unwanted leisure during the depression years) for excursions, but did not yet have money enough for cars or even motorcycles. In those days almost every city family of modest means spent its Sunday in that countryside which lay within walking distance of the last stop of a streetcar line. That, in fact, was the late 19th, early 20th Century equivalent of our contemporary two-hundred-mile drive in the country. It was a very important institution in its time.

The Pedestrian Sunday

Is it too early to look back with affection on those streetcar excursions and the country (or suburban) holidays which went with them? They were certainly not exciting by modern standards; they were repetitious and quiet, but I recall them as having the comfortable sameness of a long established tradition, without surprises, perhaps, but without disappointments. Early on Sunday morning in the silent residential streets (entirely

empty of parked cars) you saw small family groups bearing hampers, knapsacks, footballs, tennis rackets, water-wings, walking sticks, folding stools, sometimes a rake or a shovel, standing at every streetcar stop. A half hour later, out where the paved street came to an end among isolated tenements and factory yards and carbarns and cemeteries, you saw them emerge from the streetcar and set off into the open. They had a choice of roads: some went to their own well-fenced-in vegetable plot where they had a minute house with a trellis, others took off for a favorite patch of forest or a river bank or a hillside, or a rustic beergarden with a view. They all vanished in no time. Throughout the day you met them strolling at a child's pace on grass-margined lanes or playing games in a clearing, or picnicking or making love or snoozing with the newspaper over their heads, or gathering wild flowers in the woods. They clustered like flies around public swimming pools or beaches, and toward evening they tended to gather in village cafes and restaurant gardens where they ate the food they brought with them and listened to a small band play popular music. Late into the night the streetcars were once again crowded on their journey into the center of town with drowsy men and women and sleeping children. Their knapsacks and hampers were as full as when they set out, for now they contained flowers, berries, mushrooms, herbs, bundles of twigs for kindling from the woods, and sometimes lard and eggs and butter from farmers. As usual the outing had been rewarding.

Not merely in the material sense, of course, though I have often thought that what the Sunday holiday makers brought back with them illustrated very neatly what the city ought to derive from its green surroundings. The real benefits were of a different kind; the holiday makers were relaxed after healthy exercise and healthy rest; they had enjoyed an easy sociability with strangers, they had heard music, they had revived their awareness of natural beauty, and their ancestral ties with the land. Above all they had known an emotion, vaguely religious in character, best expressed in the old-fashioned phrase of "being close to Mother Nature." I do not mean to imply that this experience of the outdoors was necessarily varied enough or intense enough or even long enough; I merely mean that what these families got from their Sundays included almost everything (in a small degree) that we want, or used to want, from rural

nature—everything from food to esthetic pleasure to spiritual sustenance. When the time comes for us to draw up the inventory of all the contributions the old suburban Sunday made to our culture we will be astonished by its richness. It has directly inspired schools of painting and writing and music—from the popular Viennese song which evolved in Grinzing to Seurat's "Summer Sunday at La Grande Jatte." Untold minor scientific and artistic accomplishments came from the same abundant source; local botanical and geographical and historical descriptions, small books of nature verse, amateur sketches and compositions, now relegated to store rooms and second-hand shops, testify to what this custom meant. And the most wholesome benefit of all, I think, was the love of nature it instilled among city dwellers of every class from childhood on.

All this, it must be remembered, was drawn from a very small area around the city; the range of the excursionist in pre-motorized days rarely exceeded twenty miles. And yet, once we have duly appreciated the splendid results and the poverty of means, once we have compared the old Sunday excursion with its frenzied, unfulfilled contemporary equivalent, we have to ask ourselves in all honesty whether it is possible or even desirable for us to revert to that old order. Much more has happened to us than the advent of the automobile; we have learned to see the world differently even on our holidays; we confront the familiar setting in a new manner. Broadly speaking, the former experience of nature was contemplative and static. It came while we strolled (at three miles an hour or less) through country paths with frequent halts for picking flowers, observing wildlife and admiring the view. Repose and reflection in the midst of undisturbed natural beauty, and a glimpse of something remote were what we chiefly prized. I do not wish to decry the worth of these pleasures; none were ever more fruitful in their time; but the layman's former relationship to nature—at least as part of his recreation—was largely determined by a kind of classic perspective and by awe. A genuine sense of worship precluded any desecration, but it also precluded any desire for participation, any intuition that man also belonged. The experience was genuine enough, but it was filtered and humanized; it was rarely immediate.

Contemplation without Participation

We need to bear these qualities in mind if we are to understand why the Sunday excursion (and the experience of nature that went with it) began to pall about thirty years ago. For even while the tradition seemed to be flourishing with unabated vigor—in the decades between the wars, that is to say—a new attitude toward the environment, a new way of feeling, began to emerge on both sides of the Atlantic. The prevalence of the automobile in America helped confuse the process, but in Europe it was easier to follow. In both parts of the world it resulted in the rejection of conventional pleasures.

What happened was that people—mostly young people—began to tire of the Sunday streetcar excursion relationship to nature and to go off on their own. In the process they discovered or adapted a variety of new ways of entertaining themselves and of exploring the world. Skiing, long established as a means of winter travel in Scandinavia and among a few eccentrics in America and England, first became really popular when city holiday makers took possession of it and transformed it. Rivers, once admired for their romantic turbulence, were suddenly alive with *faltboots*. Mountain climbing had formerly been a highly professional (and highly expensive) sport involving several trained guides for every Russian grand-duke or English milord; it now became a favorite lone-wolf pastime for amateurs. Small sailing boats, even during the Depression, multiplied on the lakes of Northern and Central Europe. Less popular but no less esteemed was the sport of gliding. Bicycling and hiking, neither of them novelties, of course, began to involve greater and greater distances with youth hostels and camping sites to accommodate the travelers. Lastly in the eyes of many young city dwellers the motorcycle came to be a symbol not only of cheap transportation to work, but of freedom and adventure on holidays.

Since the last war the number of new sports has increased enormously, with America taking the lead in devising them: skin-diving, parachute-jumping, surf-riding, outboard motorboating, hot-rod racing, spelunking—a variety of outlandish combinations like water skiing and hot-rod racing on ice. Some are so new that there is no telling yet how significant

they are; others are too expensive or complicated to be widely popular. In the sense of being "character building" or "body building," few of them can qualify as conventional sports; some of them even lack the competitive or spectacular element altogether. Nevertheless according to the etymological definition of a sport as "a turning away from serious occupations," they certainly belong. To the question of why they should have risen when they did sociologists are ready with answers. They represent (so it appears) rebellion against parental authority or a compensation for the monotony and security of modern industrial society. Reuel Denney, for instance, describes hot-rodding as an attempt to escape from the conformity in automobile design imposed by Detroit and its "status car." These explanations are good enough as far as they go, but I still do not see how we can interpret any human activity without some reference to its chosen setting; I do not see how we can discuss purely in sociological terms any sport which is obviously designed as a form of psychological exploitation of the environment. To put it more simply, when people choose to practice a certain activity out of doors we ought to assume that the outdoors is somehow important to that activity. As I see it, those who adopted those sports did so because they had had enough of contemplation, and of the old sublimities which a century of poets and painters and musicians had interpreted over and over again. They may have resented the persistent loyalty of their parents to these things, but subconsciously what they wanted was a contact with nature less familiar and less pedestrian in both senses of those words—a chance to experience nature freshly and directly.

Yes, but how to achieve this freedom? One way was by acquiring mobility, mobility not only for going to new places but for seeing them in a new, non-pedestrian manner. Mobility does not necessarily mean speed. By the end of the 19th Century speed was hardly a novelty to the Western world, and we were aleady boasting of the Age of Speed that lay ahead. But the sensation of speed that a previous generation enjoyed when it traveled by fast train must have been strangely akin to its enjoyment of nature: it was passive, detached, and I daresay respectful, for when you sat inert in an upholstered railroad carriage and were swiftly borne along a pair of rails to an entirely predictable destination you

could not flatter yourself that you were taking a very active part in the proceedings. It was quite a different sensation, however, infinitely more exhilarating, when you could actually manipulate the controls yourself, choose your own course and destination and rate of progress. That is why I would put the dawn of the new era at a time when we began to devise individual means of locomotion. The airplane and automobile; of course! But until a very few years ago, outside of America and perhaps England and France, how many men had ever driven a car or flown a plane? The precursors of those inventions, if not in time at least in popularity, were those simple, easily controlled devices: skis, sailboats, *faltboots*, gliders, bicycles and motorcycles.

The Discovery of Mobility

In any case, the holiday makers who adopted these contrivances soon found that their weekend contacts with nature had become new and exciting. Why? Well, for one thing, skis, *faltboots* and the rest were ideally suited for traveling in uncharted and hitherto inaccessible landscapes. The *faltboot* avoided navigable streams in favor of "white" water; the skier found himself moving down mountain slopes where there was no trace of man to be seen. The glider explored a new element, and so in a sense did the sailor. The motorcyclist went farthest afield of all and sought out rough terrain and paths impassable for four-wheeled vehicles. Each of these sportsmen saw aspects of the countryside that he had never seen before. To a generation which had never strayed very far from home, particularly to the urban European, this topographical freedom was a revelation; to be able to desert the well-marked, well-traveled path, to leave rails and highways behind and to move swiftly at one's own free will across remote hills and valleys and rivers and lakes was a fundamental departure from the old Sunday walk; and when to this was added a series of physical sensations without counterpart in the traditional contact with nature, then I think we are justified in calling this experience of the environment revolutionary.

For in these new, more or less solitary sports there is usually a latent, not entirely unpleasant, sense of danger or at least of uncertainty, producing a heightened alertness to surrounding conditions. Without much experience, without the presence of others to help and advise, without a stock of traditional skill, the sportsman, whether on skis or aloft or in a boat or on wheels, has to develop (or revive) an intuitive feeling for his immediate natural environment. Air currents, shifts of wind and temperature, the texture of snow, the firmness of the track—these and many other previously unimportant aspects of the outdoors become once more part of his consciousness, and that is why mountaineering, even though it entails a very deliberate kind of progress, has to be included among these new sports. None of them, for one reason or another, allows much leisure for observing the more familiar features of the surroundings; the skier or *faltbooter* or motorcyclist moves too fast (the mountaineer with too great a concentration on technique) to study the plants and creatures which his father loved to contemplate by the hour. A considerable loss, no doubt; nevertheless the new style sportsman is reestablishing a responsiveness—almost an intimacy—with a more spacious, a less tangible aspect of nature.

An abstract nature, as it were; a nature shorn of its gentler, more human traits, of all memory and sentiment. The new landscape, seen at a rapid, sometimes even a terrifying pace, is composed of rushing air, shifting lights, clouds, waves, a constantly moving, changing horizon, a constantly changing surface beneath the ski, the wheel, the rudder, the wing. The view is no longer static, it is a revolving, uninterrupted panorama of 360 degrees. In short the traditional perspective, the traditional way of seeing and experiencing the world is abandoned; in its stead we become active participants, the shifting focus of a moving abstract world; our nerves and muscles are all of them brought into play. To the perceptive individual there can be an almost mystical quality to the experience; his identity seems for the moment to be transmuted.

The discoveries of science and in particular the insights of artists and architects have made us familiar with changing concepts of space and matter and motion; without always understanding the theories we accept them as best we can. But what is our reaction when the man in the street tries in his own way to explore the same realm? We profess sympathy with the uncertainty, the inability to communicate of the contemporary

artist; why do we express little or none for the hot-rodder and his colleagues? Because his unconventionality comes too close to home; the artist and the physicist can be left to themselves (or so we think) whereas the more modest variety space-explorer lives next door, and what we notice in particular about his activities is the rubbish-strewn landscape, the disregard of time-honored esthetic values, the reckless driving. Still, even these things should not blind us to the fact that the world around us, for the first time in many generations, is being rediscovered by the young, and being enjoyed. What will eventually come out of this headlong flight into space we cannot as yet predict; for my part I see no reason why it should not in time mark the beginning of a very rich and stimulating development in our culture.

Farewell to Mother Nature

Certainly here in America there can be no denying that the new attitude is evolving with bewildering speed, and producing fascinating forms worth studying for their own sake. The search for some contact with abstract nature is if anything more strenuous here than anywhere else. The European sportsman-excursionist still derives a great deal of inspiration from traditional landscape features: the picturesque village, the prosperous countryside, the glimpse of an older way of life. His American counterpart, on the other hand, seems increasingly bored by such pleasures. What he wants is the sensation without preliminaries or any diversion; what he wants is, in a word, abstract travel. Even the road is replaced by an abstraction, starting and ending nowhere in particular in space—a drag-strip in the desert or on a beach, a marked course on a snowy mountain slope, a watery path between flags and buoys. And just as the contemporary artist or architect tends to simplfy his medium to its essentials, to reduce the masonry elements in order to increase the flow of space, the hot-rodder strips his car to a nubbin, the diver divests himself of his heavy suit, the boat becomes little more than a shell. For the more drastically we simplify the vehicle (or the medium) the more directly we ourselves participate in the experience of motion and space. One feature of the familiar world after another is left behind, and the sportsman enters a

world of his own, new and at the same time intensely personal; a world of flowing movement, blurred light, rushing wind or water; he feels the surface beneath him, hears the sound of his progress, and has a tense rapport with his vehicle. With this comes a sensation of at last being part of the visible world, and its center.

How general is this sort of experience? The answer, I suspect, is that it is not general at all, that it is confined to a very small minority. But this does not mean that there is not a very widespread interest in it, nor an equally widespread desire to participate. "The universal activity of racing sports cars is growing rapidly," (I quote from a letter which recently appeared in the *Christian Science Monitor.*) "This growth is no doubt attributable to the fact that the winding, sometimes hilly, often beautiful road-courses offer a challenge to many of us automobile drivers who must do 99 percent of our driving on relatively uninteresting highways and at restricted speeds. . . . The sports pages go on valiantly devoting half their space to trying to bolster attendance at the old sports instead of playing up contemporary interest in competitive automobiling (hot-rod, drag and sports car), skin-diving, water skiing, swimming, outboard-motorboating and racing, yachting, motorboat cruising, and flying . . . One reason for favoring these newer sports," (the writer adds) "lies in the element of participation . . . It may require some new reporting talent and some editorial policy changes to modernize our sports pages, but I believe the time for this advancement has long since arrived."

In other words, the change in sports has caught the sports editors napping. It could very well be that it has also caught some of our sociologists and recreationists napping just as soundly.

But to return to Average Citizen and his Sunday or holiday excursion. How, it will be asked, can he even remotely share in this new experience? Indeed, how can he know that such an experience exists? His free time is increasingly circumscribed by mechanized civilization and massed humanity. Each year his new car isolates him a little more completely from his surroundings no matter where he goes. As Paul Shepard wrote in an earlier number of *Landscape,* "The day is here when the air-conditioned automobile carries us across Death Valley without discomfort, without disturbance to our heat perceptors, and without any experience worth

mentioning." Nor does the design of our foolproof, sleep-inducing highways, or of our cars allow us to sense the surface under the wheels or to feel the exhilaration of a steep climb, a sharp curve, or a sudden view. We are compelled to move at a uniform speed, and we no longer even have that earlier, Model T sense of participating in the functioning of the automobile—one obvious reason for the popularity of European sports cars. Like our grandparents, we are passively conveyed through a complex, well-ordered, admirable world—only now technology substitutes for Mother Nature in distributing the bounty.

Even so, from time to time, Average Citizen catches a glimpse of a different kind of environment; brief, but enough to make him want to see more of it. From the idiotically small window of a plane he manages to see the wondrous, free, non-human, abstract landscape of clouds and limitless sky; on a clear stretch of road, provided no state trooper is lurking, he can step on the throttle and know the thrill of speed produced by his own will; sun baths in the back yard give him a direct bodily contact with air and light and sun, and on his vacation he sees the desert and the open sea. Furthermore, his consciousness is constantly assaulted with the new ideas of space and movement whenever he opens the morning paper or looks at a specimen of modern art. His children wear space helmets and addle their brains with science fiction and interplanetary comics. The new world impinges on the old in even the best regulated of American homes. These are all fragments of a much wider experience, to be sure, but in the long run they make him discontented with the familiar, and drive him out onto the crowded Sunday highway in search of some kind of release.

Participation through Movement

And that is where Average Citizen is still to be found: out on the crowded highway. How is he to be freed, I wonder, to discover for himself the new reactions to nature, the new nature that awaits him? More highways? Faster highways? Newer, simpler means of locomotion, newer and more spacious sports areas, more remote vacation sites? Certainly no more pretty parks or carefully preserved rural landscapes or classical perspectives; limited though his choice is, he still has to be on the move one way or another, and he has to be made to feel that he is part of the world, not merely a spectator.

I confess, however, that this is a problem I am content to leave to others. The man who interests me is the excursionist or sportsman or part-time adventurer who has already found his way to the other world, and is already at home in that abstract preternatural landscape of wind and sun and motion. Because it is he, I think, who will eventually enrich our understanding of ourselves with a new poetry and a new nature mysticism. I would not go so far as to say that the Wordsworth of the second half of the 20th Century must be a graduate of the drag-strip, or that a motorcycle is a necessary adjunct to any modern "Excursion"; but I earnestly believe that whoever he is and whenever he appears he will have to express some of the uncommunicated but intensely felt joys of that part of American culture if he is to interpret completely our relationship to the world around us.