

## 4. Bumper Stickers (1): A Material-Cultural History

*One of the more obvious signs and surely the most mobile scenic wonder of America is the automobile bumper strip, a 100 per cent American advertising gimmick which annually introduces millions of motorists to thousands of “natural wonders,” “historic sights,” “amazing attractions” and firemen’s bazaars.*  
*The New York Times, June 15, 1952*

*Next year, presumably, the sticker will be a national institution*  
*The New York Times, September 26, 1926*

Bumper stickers are often thought of, when they’re thought of, as a sort of dumbed-down mode of articulation, and by extension cognition: if you’ve seen it on a bumper sticker it’s probably a cliché... or worse. As a material object, bumper stickers are some of the cheapest, most throwaway stuff, and that’s really saying something in a culture of hyper-consumption and disposability. Yet there are compelling questions to ask about bumper stickers: about their commonness, more pronounced in some places than others; the sheer variety of forms and ways in which they are displayed and the subjects they address and symbols they deploy; the ways in which bumper stickers refer to and act as instances of other ideas in order to talk about the self and the wider world, and in particular their mobility, their mobilization of these discursive resources.

In what follows, I offer a selective history of car inscription on American highways. There is not, to my knowledge, a comprehensive text on the subject. In lieu of one, I have done my own historical research based on searches of the US Patent Office databases accessed through the Google Patents search engine<sup>40</sup> and the archives of the *New York Times* (accessed through ProQuest Historical Newspapers). While I acknowledge the limitations of using only these two data sources, the scope of this thesis does not permit a more comprehensive approach. Nonetheless, I think it should at minimally demonstrate that practices of car inscription have been a cultural concern of Americans for almost as long they have travelled American roads.

### **The Evolution of Car Inscription in America**

To begin, recall the early trans-continental motorist Effie Gladding (1915, 82), who observed, “[w]hole clusters of pennants are fastened about the car, and float gaily in the wind.

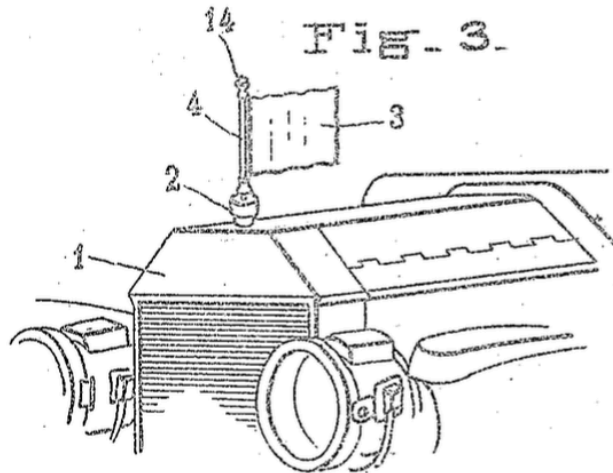
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40 [www.google.com/patents](http://www.google.com/patents)

Some carry a pennant across the rear of the tonneau, which reads, ‘Excuse my dust.’” American automobility was barely two decades old at the time of Gladding’s observation, but keen inventors and entrepreneurs had already begun to imagine— and patent— car inscription accessories. The first of these were, as Gladding suggests, related to the display of pennants.

In 1912 Oscar S. Fitzsimons patented a *Flag-Holder Attachment for Automobile-Radiators &c.* (US Patent Office #1022360), as did Frank Loungley for a *Pennant-Holder for Automobiles* (US Patent Office #1138964). In 1926 David Fliegelman and Horace M. Bridgewater invented a *Holder for Flags or the Like*, (US Patent Office #1571581) and in 1937 Kenneth Hayes patented a windsock-like variation on the theme (US Patent Office #2090121).

Figure 13: Detail from Fitzsimons (US Patent Office #1022360 1912)



By the 1920s, at the latest, decalomania and self-adhesive stickers were common enough on American car windows that the *New York Times* published an article whose title blared “Motorists Face Sticker Menace” (September 26, 1926). The article bemoans the emerging trend of automobiles “besplattered” with tourist and marketing stickers; cars “so heavily plastered on all four sides its occupants could look out with only one eye at a time.”<sup>41</sup> Its author concludes:

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41 The reported inventory of stickers on this car included:  
Black Hills, National Forest  
Days of '76, Deadwood  
Pine Crest Tourist Camp  
AYP (Atlantic Yellowstone Pacific Highway)  
Homestake Golden Jubilee at Lead, S.D.  
Wind Cave, National Park  
Black Hills Visitor  
Crystal Cave  
I Have Seen Homestake, World’s Largest Gold Mine  
Hot Springs in the Black Hills  
Custer, S.D., Scenic Hub of the Black Hills  
Spearfish Camp

Next year, presumably, the sticker will be a national institution, to be listed not only as a prime example of American lunacy but as a foremost cause of automobile accidents. Any suggestion for dealing with the nuisance may properly come from the National Park Service, which began it.

As to the issue of safety, within a few years, window sticker use was limited by law in a number of states, including New York,<sup>42</sup> although special government-sanctioned dispensations could be obtained (August 10, 1933). Two decades later, exceptions were eliminated in New York as a ban on all window decals was reported to have come into effect (December 24, 1952). This article cites municipal and state use tax stamps, auto club emblems and defence plant worker identification stickers amongst the common variations at the time.

By contrast, special emblems and bumper stickers have also been designed and affixed to cars as part of numerous state-sponsored driving safety initiatives through the 20th century. Amongst these were the Pennsylvania Governor’s Highway Safety Council initiative in 1936 (November 29, 1936), the distribution of 85,000 COURTESY IS CONTAGIOUS bumper stickers by

the Knights of Pythias fraternal society (November 17, 1955) and the 1969 State of New York “Saved by the Belt” program that recognized crash survivors who were wearing seat belts at the time of their accident (August 25, 1969). Seat belts themselves had only become federally mandated equipment in new cars in 1968 (Volti 2004).

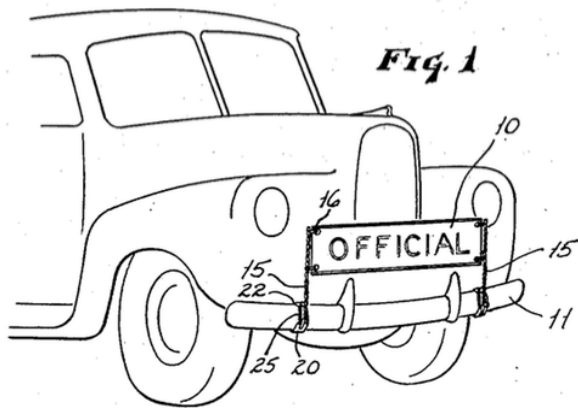


Figure 14: Detail from Carleton et al. (US Patent Office #2431108 1947)

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I Put My Campfire Out  
 Meet Me at the Homestake Golden Jubilee  
 We Travel the AYP, East, West, It Is the Best

42 Eighty years later, Part 375. (b). (i) of the New York State Vehicle and Traffic Laws states: “The use or placing of posters or stickers on windshields or rear windows of motor vehicles other than those authorized by the commissioner, is hereby prohibited” (<http://www.safeny.ny.gov/equi-vt.htm>).

Whether or not car inscriptions qualify as lunacy, or if there's a positive correlation between inscribing a car and the likelihood of having an accident— Hemenway and Solnick (1993) find there is not,<sup>43</sup> at least as far as bumper stickers and fuzzy dice are concerned— bumper stickers and other forms of car inscription have certainly become something of a national institution. Between the window sticker craze of the first part of the interwar period and the development in the 1950s and 1960s of what one would recognize as a bumper sticker today, there was a period in which the dominant form of car inscriptions was the bumper strip. For a time, these waxed cardboard strips were tied to bumpers. In 1947, Carleton et al. patented a holder that would act as a “means for supporting a card for display purposes in a vertical position above a bumper” without relying upon twine or clip fasteners (US Patent Office #2431108). While the authors of this patent do not comment specifically on the types of messages one might have encountered at the time, one of the drawings that accompanies their application indicates it might be for ‘official’ rather than personal purposes (Figure 14).

During 1950s Americans were settling in what would become three decades of post-war prosperity, and experiencing a way of life increasingly inseparable from the affordances of automobility. Armand Schwab examined the revival of car inscription culture in a 1952 *New York Times* article entitled *Bumpers Tell Tourist's Story* (June 15, 1952). In it Schwab traces the origins of the bumper strip to billboards, linking the two as a related forms of highway advertising. This is at least in part because most of the strips at that time were related to the promotion of tourist destinations, at many of which strips would be affixed to cars without the owner's permission. At the time, for example, the Royal Gorge in Colorado employed a staff of five whose job it was to tie these strips to bumpers while the owners walked across the “world's highest bridge.”

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43 The study is based on a 1989 Los Angeles Times sponsored phone survey of 1,800 drivers in southern California, which found “[m]otorists with fuzzy dice or bumper stickers do not behave much differently on the road from the typical motorist and are involved in a similar number of accidents” (Hemenway & Solnick 1993: 168). In a 1974 *New York Times* article, a spokesperson for the National Safety Council is reported to have been unaware of any lawsuits related to bumper stickers being “disconcerting to drivers” (April 21, 1974). As an amusing counterpoint, see the discussion of DIAL 1-800-EAT-SHIT stickers above (Battistella 1995).



Typical bumper signs.

Campaign materials issued by the Republicans and Democrats this year include buttons, stickers, placards, car-bumper cards. Here are some examples.



Figure 15: Bumper Strips: From 'Bumpers Tell Tourist's Story,' New York Times (June 15, 1952)

Figure 16: Bumper Strips: From 'Political Ammo,' New York Times (October 17, 1954)

The use of stickers for commercial purposes, well established since at least the 1920s has carried on up until the present day, although the types of inscription ads has widened from the tourist-oriented ones, advertising attractions and gas stations in the first half of the 20th century. In the mid-1970s, the William B. Tanner Company of Memphis for example, was reported to offer an integrated promotional package to major market radio stations, including large format, stationary billboards *and* small, highly mobile bumper stickers (November 13, 1974). Today, a reader-driver may encounter the logo of about any product imaginable affixed to a car.

In the early 1950s, however, Schwab notes bumper strips were having what he called an “adjustment problem.” Their proliferation meant new ways had to be devised to make one stand out from the pack— he cites the use of newly developed Day-Glo fluorescent inks on some strips— and perhaps more importantly getting them to last. At the time, the effective life of cardboard bumper strips was limited to a few weeks, after which time they would become untied and fall off, or simply disintegrate. Schwab identifies a new form of strip:

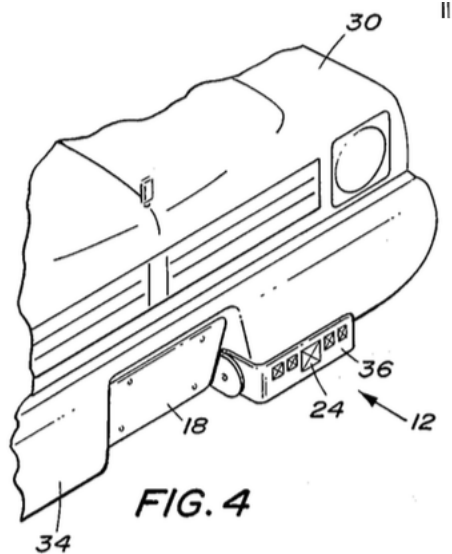
the trend these days is to melt them into the car body [...] So more and more strips are being printed on an adhesive-backed paper that can be neatly stuck to the bumper and this will presumably keep bumper strips in business long after bumpers themselves have completely disappeared



Figure 17: Durability. Quebec (Walter Goettlich, 2013)

Issues of durability would eventually be addressed by the development of more resistant plastic and paper laminated self-adhesive label stocks, such as that created by Frank Avery in the mid-1950s (US Patent Office #2783172). A decade later, a type of polymer film laminate was developed whose intra-layer tensile strength is lower than that of its adhesive to substrate bond (US Patent Office #3623944); it is, in effect, tamper-proof. As a consequence, many a car owner who has since tried to remove a bumper sticker only to have it shear into little bits has Irwin J.

Davis, the inventor of this type of laminate to thank. Numerous other inventors have tried to solve the problem the durability / unwanted permanence dilemma by designing various sticker



holder accessories that attach mechanically so that a sticker would not be directly adhered to a car (US Patent Office #s 3350805[1967]; 237250 [1975]; 3908296 [1975]; 4453328 [1984]), and the first magnetic bumper sticker was patented in in 1990 (US Patent Office #D308544 S).

Figure 18: Detail from Method and Apparatus for Displaying Decals (US Patent Office #3908296)

## Bumper Stickers in the News

Car inscription emerges as a discursive concern in the post-war era, most dramatically in the 1970s and later. Figure 19 demonstrates this trend, showing the number of articles mentioning bumper stickers and related car inscriptions appearing in the *New York Times*, by decade, since 1900. In the period beginning with the 1950s, relatively few of these articles feature bumper stickers as their object *per se*. Most, rather, use a sticker message as a lead-in device or parting thought, an indicator of the prevalent mood— political, cultural and emotional— the story means to capture.

Here bumper stickers began to be treated as an epiphenomena, corollary to wider socio-cultural struggles and experiences, including political elections, the Civil Rights Era, the Vietnam War, as well as what it meant, and who was allowed to be an *American*. This corresponds rather well to the beginnings of the counter culture in America: the Beats in the 1950s (Kerouac’s *On the Road* was first published in 1957); the hippies and the emergence of second-wave feminism in the 1960s; the increasing visibility of LGBTQ culture in the 1970s and the consequences that have come from these events and passages.

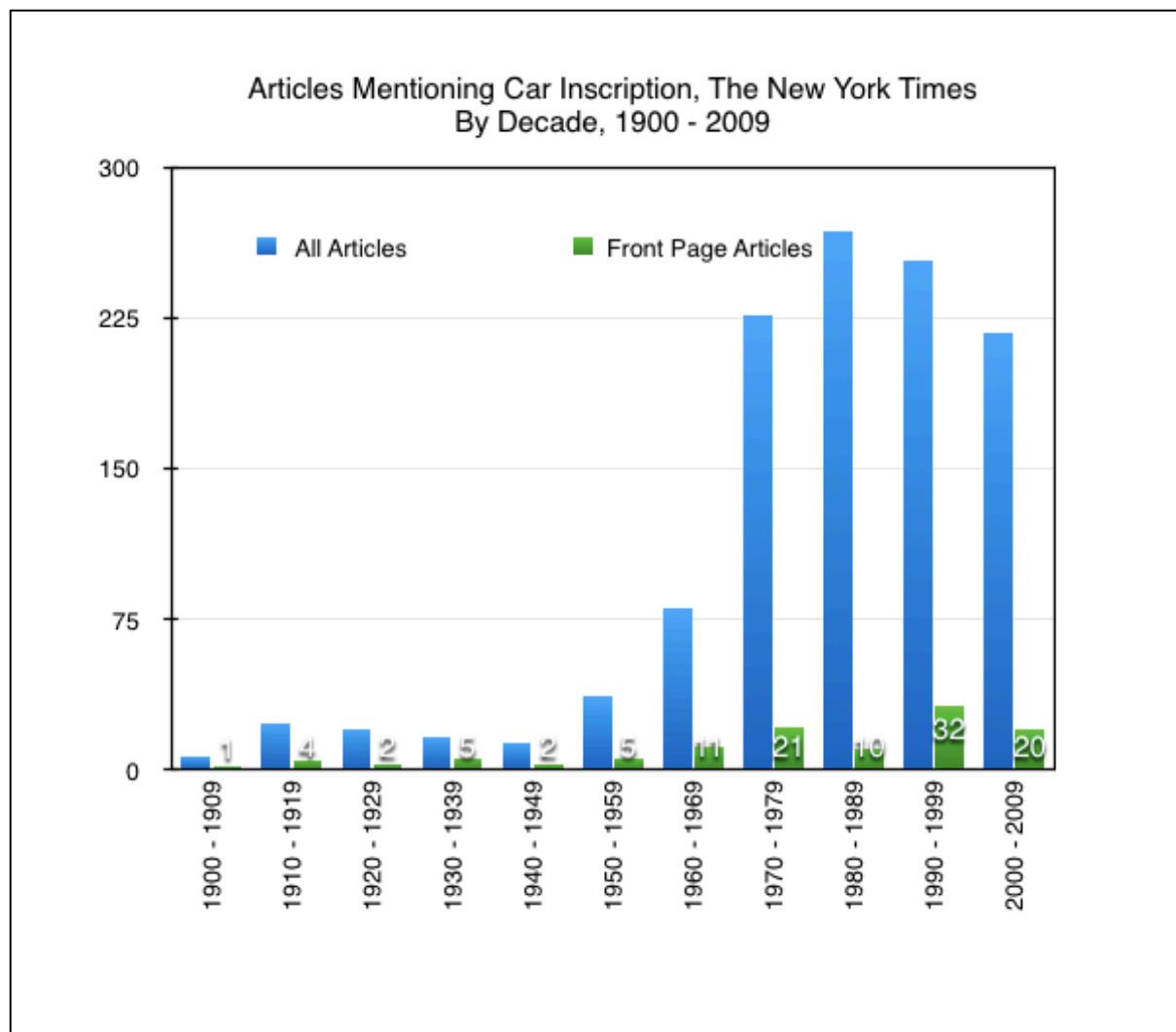


Figure 19: New York Times Articles Mentioning Car Inscription Terms, 1900 – 2009

Writing in the New York Times, Robert Dunphy notes an increase in bumper sticker message types and production dating to the late 1960s, both by large-scale printing companies and “underground” producers (April 21, 1974). Nearly two decades earlier, though, the importance of the automobile as a mobile campaign text corresponds with the rise of post-war, suburban car culture: A 1954 article (Figure 16) displays the variety of campaign stickers then available voters, including CARRY ON IKE’S CRUSADE and DON’T BLAME ME—I VOTED DEMOCRATIC (October 17, 1954). Along these lines, a 1956 article observes:

The automobile, heretofore nonpartisan, is clearly going to be mobilized in the Republican cause this year. Stickers of every variety (“Stick With Ike”) have been provided,



not to mention a wide range of rubber bumper guards that carry the legend: “Don’t Bump a Good Man Out of the White House. (April 17, 1956)

For sheer campaigning chutzpah, an August 8, 1968 (dateline August 7) dispatch from the Republican Party National Convention notes Nixon aides had already begun distributing RE-ELECT NIXON '72 stickers... a day before Nixon had received the G.O.P. Nomination for the 1968 election. Nixon would go on to be re-elected in 1972, but the consequences of the Watergate scandal stemming from that election would ultimately result in his resignation in 1974.<sup>44</sup>

As Bloch (2000c) discusses, politically/culturally (and by consequence, *emotionally*) intense passages in a nation’s history may result in a flourishing of bumper stickers. The Watergate scandal and Nixon’s subsequent resignation proved thus, with stickers ranging from IMPEACH NIXON (March 8, 1974), HONK IF YOU THINK HE’S GUILTY, JAIL TO THE CHIEF and NIXON FOR EX-PRESIDENT (April 21, 1974) to PROTECT OUR PRESIDENT FROM LIBERALS AND TRAITORS (April 21, 1974), NOBODY DROWNED AT WATERGATE<sup>45</sup> (September 25, 1974) and IMPEACH CARTER<sup>46</sup> (February 15, 1977).

Elsewhere, stickers were cited as reflecting the mood in Little Rock, Arkansas, following the Little Rock Crisis of 1957,<sup>47</sup> which saw sticker texts ranging from OCCUPIED LITTLE ROCK and WE LIKE FAUBUS to the more moderate BOOST THE CENTRAL HIGH TIGERS (December 15, 1959). In 1965, in an article discussing tensions in Mississippi over the recently passed Civil

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44 A directly linear and undisputedly unbroken chain of events that clearly demonstrates the existence of bumper sticker karma, which in this case most certainly ran over Nixon’s dogma.

45 This is in reference to the roadway death of Mary Jo Kopechne in the so-called Chappaquiddick Tragedy of 1969. The former U.S. Senator Edward Kennedy (now dead), brother of John F. and Bobby Kennedy (both assassinated in the 1960s), drove a car in which Ms. Kopechne was a passenger off a bridge connecting Chappaquiddick to Martha’s Vineyard, MA. Kennedy subsequently left the scene of the accident. The episode has subsequently become metonymic of Kennedy’s putative irresponsibility and unfitness for the office of president; and Kennedy himself metonymic of a wider lack of moral fibre in the Democratic Party at large, at least as far as its politically right-leaning critics have been concerned.

46 Jimmy Carter was the first Democratic Party candidate elected President (1977-1981) after Nixon’s resignation. Gerald Ford, Nixon’s Republican Vice President at the time of his resignation, served as appointed President in the intervening years (1974-1977).

47 Briefly, in 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*, struck down the ‘separate but equal’ basis of Jim Crow-era racial segregation the American south. The Little Rock Crisis followed when Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus refused to abide the ruling by enforcing access by black students (the Little Rock Nine) to the previously white-only Central High School. Several black students were prevented from entering the school by protesters and the Arkansas National Guard, which had been mustered by Faubus. In response, President Dwight Eisenhower took control of the Arkansas National Guard (normally under the purview of the Governor) and deployed soldiers of the U.S. Regular Army to escort and protect the students during their integration.

Rights Act, DON'T BLAME ME— I VOTED G.O.P. stickers were reported as reflecting anti-integrationist sympathies (March 3, 1965).

Around the same time in California, some cars bore IS BROWN PINK?<sup>48</sup> stickers in response to Governor Edmund Brown's plan to cut taxes for the state's lowest income bracket (August 26, 1962), a war-veteran bearing a RID RUTGERS OF REDS sticker protested outside a Marxist-professor's teach-in (April 20, 1966), and wall-of-sound producer Phil Spector's limo was reported to have a SEND BATMAN TO VIETNAM sticker on its rear bumper (July 10, 1966). At the height of the Vietnam era tensions, satirist Russell Baker made a number of references to bumper stickers in his column *Observer*, particularly on the theme of the ever popular AMERICA—LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT:

Carruthers has a related problem. He saw a bumper sticker the other day that shouted, "America!" and then commanded him to "Love It or Leave It!" Carruthers says he is very fond of America but is too egocentric to love anything but himself, and therefore must leave it. Now Carruthers does not know where to go (October 1, 1968)

What a strange city. Cars everywhere and not a single one in all London seems to have a Union Jack decal on the windshield or a bumper sticker making hortatory noises in traffic. No "Love Britain or Leave It." No "Free Oscar." No "Boycott France." (August 9, 1970)

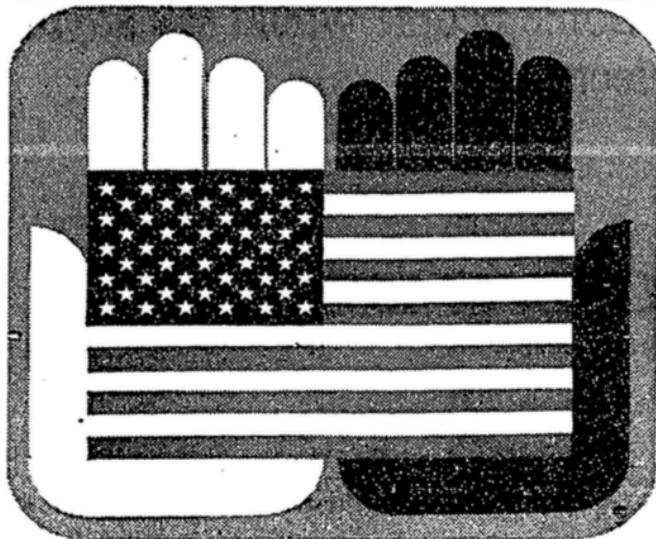
Harry realized that due to the incomplete state of his emotional relationship with America, there was nothing he could do in good conscience but leave it. Unless, of course, he wanted to be in contempt of bumper stickers (August 25, 1970)

As if to capture two of the most problematic issues in American culture and history in a couple of short phrases, a dispatch from Wheatland, Wyoming (ostensibly about an impending US Postal Service workers strike) reported stickers reading THERE ARE NO BLACKS IN WHEATLAND and THE WEST WASN'T WON WITH A REGISTERED GUN (March 22, 1970). Later that year, President Richard Nixon was reported to have received a bumper sticker from the Cheektowaga, N.Y. Rotary Club which read I'M PROUD TO BE AN AMERICAN (April 25, 1970),

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48 This article was published at the height of the Cold War and pink, in this case, is used as an epithet against perceived communist sympathizers. McCarthyism, a period of high-profile U.S. Congressional and Senate hearings on purported communist and 'un-American' activities during the 1950s had ended only a few years earlier, and the escalation of American involvement in Vietnam was imminent.

while GOD, GUNS AND GRITS MADE AMERICA GREAT (November 2, 1986) expresses a certain— certainly not universal— version of what it means to be American and great.



*Interracial Americanism—A bumper sticker by Save Our Flag, Inc.*

Figure 20: Image of a bumper sticker that accompanied “An Open Letter to the Ethnics,” *New York Times* (October 16, 1970)

Other, more local, issues of control and identity have also been reported to play out across car bumpers. Stickers like VOTE TO STOP OLYMPIC TAXES and DON'T CALIFORNICATE COLORADO commented on the proposed 1976 Denver Olympic

Games and fears of California-like development in the state (November 6, 1972 and March 11, 1973, respectively). KEEP CALVERT COUNTRY stickers appeared in Calvert County, MD in support of higher local gas taxes as a means to prevent suburbanization of the area (April 25, 1977).<sup>49</sup> In my home state discourses of “authentic” Vermonter identity played out as part of a political campaign against the legalization of civil unions,<sup>50</sup> which produced the ubiquitous TAKE BACK VERMONT bumper stickers and signs of the time (September 3, 2000).

Less overtly political stickers also feature. Fundraisers in Westchester County, NY were reported to have sold stickers promoting the Olympics in order to raise money for US athletes travelling to the Games later that year (August 11, 1956). An article on the upcoming NFL season noted “[w]herever you see a Wisconsin license plate you’re likely to find a green and yellow bumper sticker saying: ‘The Pack be Back’” (August 9, 1969); another in a review of new Chrysler models a decade later read IF YOU AIN’T A SPRINT-CAR FAN, YOU AIN’T NUTHIN’ (September 16, 1979).

<sup>49</sup> Ironically, the one of the organizers of the campaign, Peter Vogt, reportedly commuted 100 miles every day to his Washington D.C. area job.

<sup>50</sup> Civil unions were a precedent to the more recent legalization of same-sex marriage in many states in the U.S.

A 1985 article describes a recently formed Freeway Singles Club, whose goal was to “to help single commuters recognize each other by a club decal on their car windows or bumpers” (December 22, 1985; August 31, 1986), while another on aging and sex cites a septuagenarian whose cars sports the tag I’M NOT A DIRTY OLD MAN, I’M A SEXY SENIOR CITIZEN (January 20, 1974). Other articles from the late 1980s describe the act of reading another car’s stickers (October 24, 1987 and May 21, 1989). The relatively new phenomenon of IN LOVING MEMORY stickers was profiled in a December 11, 2005 article (see Figures 21 and 47), while another piece published under the write-in gripe feature called “The Complaint Box” bore the snarky title You Vacation. And Have Kids. Must You Advertise It? (March 21, 2010).



Figure 21: In Loving Memory / Williston, Vermont (Walter Goettlich, 2011)

The mention of bumper stickers has also been used in various crime and *faits divers* reporting, to varied effect. A report on a carjacking in Times Square that left one dead and twelve

injured notes the car displayed a “University of Vermont fraternity sticker” (December 6, 1977). In this account, the UVM sticker reinforces the characterization of the owners of the car as being young (honeymooning), rural and college-educated— in sum, a bit naive— all of which contrasts sharply with the mean-streets account of the carjacking and murderous joy-ride that followed.

Another report that year, on a multiple murder and suicide notes that the shooter, who was also a purported neo-Nazi, had an IMPEACH CARTER sticker on his car (February 15, 1977). This had been interpreted by friends and neighbours, before the crime, as “another one of his harmless eccentricities,” but its mention in the conclusion of the article serves to emphasize the apparent uncertainty of contemporary life: *Yeah, sure, the guy had a sorta crazy bumper sticker, but who woulda guessed?*

More recently, events around the Boston Marathon bombings of 2013 were sensationalized by reports that the bombing suspects had carjacked an SUV bearing a COEXIST bumper sticker (see Chapter 6), with the implication that both liberals in general, and a philosophy of tolerance in particular, are jejune in an era defined in so many ways by conflict; including the so-called culture wars, the clash of civilizations (Huntington 1993) and the war on terror.

The fires of the culture wars discourse were stoked by recent reports of a soldier who has filed a lawsuit against the US Army, claiming to have been wrongfully punished for refusing to remove anti-Obama stickers from his car.<sup>51</sup> A sense of generalized distrust and insecurity was only further encouraged by recent reports of police warning against the display of stick figure family stickers.<sup>52</sup> In one interview,<sup>53</sup> an officer states:

Our stance, or our view is that the least amount of information that you advertise about yourself, your personal life, your family, the least opportunity that, you know, something is going to occur, by someone stalking you or a predator out there.

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51 An Army Times article (<http://www.armytimes.com/article/20140807/NEWS/308070079/Lawsuit-Master-sgt-kicked-out-anti-Obama-religious-views>) lists these as including: NOBAMA, NOPE 2012, THE ROAD TO BANKRUPTCY IS PAVED WITH ASS-FAULT (including a donkey, the animal symbol of the Democratic Party) PRAY FOR OBAMA - ECCLESIASTES 10:2 (cited in the article as “a wise man’s heart tends toward his right, but a fool’s heart tends toward his left”). See also: <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/aug/7/us-soldier-army-tossed-me-opposing-obama/> <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2014/08/06/lawsuit-soldier-forced-out-army-for-serving-chick-fil-reading-hannity-book/>

52 For example, see: [http://www.theweathernetwork.com/news/articles/police-advising-families-to-remove-popular-stick-figure-car-decals/28558/?cid=social\\_20140530\\_25013446](http://www.theweathernetwork.com/news/articles/police-advising-families-to-remove-popular-stick-figure-car-decals/28558/?cid=social_20140530_25013446) <http://www.indystar.com/story/life/2014/06/10/stick-figure-families-on-cars-dangerous/10283741/>

53 [http://1079ishot.com/police-stick-family-decals/?trackback=fbshare\\_top](http://1079ishot.com/police-stick-family-decals/?trackback=fbshare_top)

And in another, the Harrisburg, PA Chief of Police was quoted:

The stick figure family may divulge too much information as to how many children are home, what ages they are, if you have a dog, if you don't [...] Be cautious about what you're putting on your vehicle. Be aware of what the ramifications may be.<sup>54</sup>

The second article concludes, “[p]olice also warn that parking stickers can give out information, like when you're not at home and where you work.”

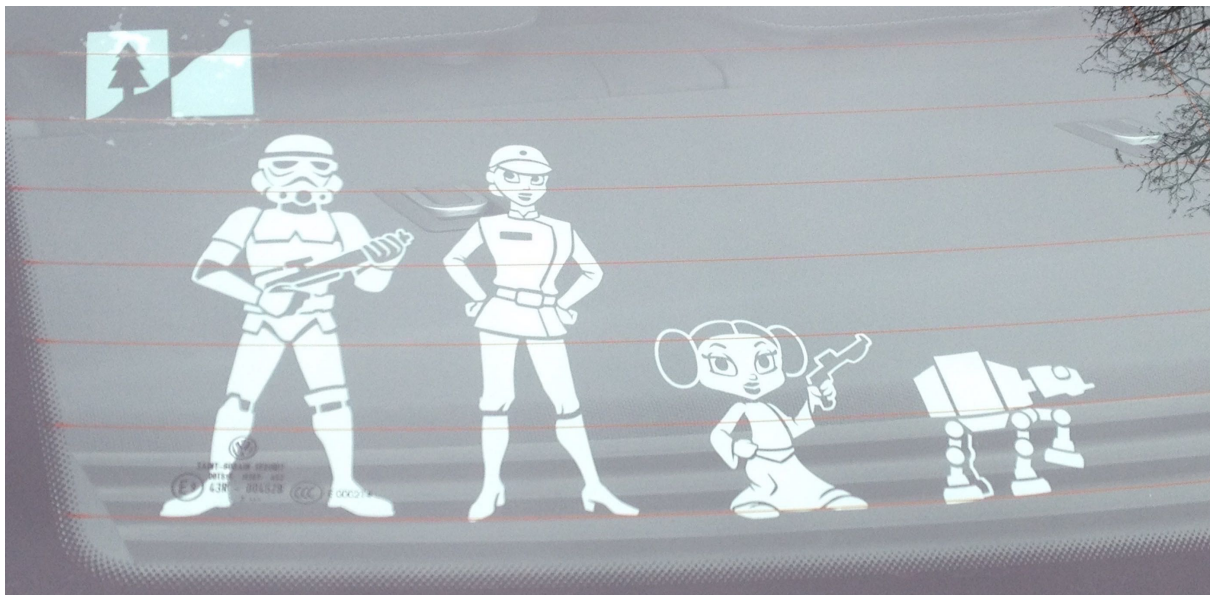


Figure 22: Looks Like the Bad Guys Got there First / Williston, Vermont (Walter Goettlich, 2014)

I conclude this section by returning to the issue of car inscription and safety, nearly a century after the 1926 Times article that first identified the “sticker menace” facing contemporary motorists. That article, however, was written at a time when mass-automobility was still a new feature of American culture and it reflects a certain relationship to the safety of a relatively novel technology that had not yet been fully exploited as a means of self-expression.

By contrast, concern over stick figure family stickers— whether it is real or imagined— has a particularly early 21st century inflexion. For, while one report notes,<sup>55</sup> it is still illegal to put stickers on a car’s windshields, for the most part the police are no longer concerned with this

54 <http://www.wdrb.com/story/25225588/penn-police-warning-drivers-about-family-members-car-stickers>

55 <http://www.weau.com/home/headlines/Family-stick-figure-decals-could-lead-to-danger-police-say-261175581.html>

‘safety issue’. Rather, they are preoccupied with the fidelity of a sticker set’s representation of a real family: its members, interests, patterns of movement, etc., and the possibility that a dangerous character could use that information to aid in the committing of a crime against the family.

Similar to earlier periods, as I’ve outlined above, when stickers were used as a short hand, as a sign of the times, the reflection of a prevailing cultural mood or social tension; so too, now are a host of concerns, ranging from what it means to be a contemporary family to a generalized fear and distrust of the *other* played out through these seemingly insignificant objects. Of course, the perceived fidelity of the figures as representations is due in large part to customizability of the stickers themselves, which brings me to the next section.

### **Bumper Stickers in the Age of Mass Individuality**

Gartman (2004) theorizes the period of automobility between 1965 and 2004 as the *era of subcultural difference*, pointing up what he argues are its dominant, post-modern/ post-Fordist characteristics. Gartman’s analysis is limited to the interrelations of car production and culturally conditioned consumer expectations about the car as manufactured object. However, widening the scope to include the various car inscription adornments produced and used during this period (and indeed its antecedent, *the era of mass-individuality*), as well as in the decade since Gartman proposed this theoretical temporalizations, may also be an instructive analytic.

Through the 20th century, bumper stickers and other related car inscription accessories were produced in large enough quantities to achieve justifiable economies of scale. As I detail below, mass individuality was achievable through the combination of a large number of pre-fab options (pennants, window decals, bumper strips and eventually stickers and other accessories). Sub-cultural difference, similarly, was made possible through the widening of the range of messages, themes and subjective positions and that appeared on a stickers, reflective of wider socio-cultural transformations.

But, by and large, they were still limited to pre-fab options<sup>56</sup> and as a consequence, the types of these items available to consumers have been limited to those that would have been appealing, and meaningful, to mass, or in any case relatively large segments of the driving public.

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<sup>56</sup> This continues to be the case, however the advent of mass-customization production techniques developed in the last decade and further expansion of intra-auto communicative possibilities entailed by the smart-car connectivity and social networking have begun to change this. I discuss these ideas more fully below.

Nonetheless, a certain concern with personal customization is evident in a number of bumper sticker related inventions. The problem is summarized neatly by Norris and Wasserman in their 1976 patent application:

Notwithstanding the popularity of bumper stickers, it has heretofore not been practical to use bumper stickers for the display of custom messages. This is because it has been necessary to use on the various printing processes in order to make bumper sticker. As is well known, whenever printing is involved it is necessary to amortize relatively high set-up costs over a large number of copies if the total cost per copy is to be kept within reasonable limits. (US Patent Office #3959906 A)

By way of addressing this limitation, both Jorgensen's 1967 patent (US Patent Office #3350805 A), and the Norris and Wasserman design combined a bumper sticker backing template with a set of removable letters and numbers that could be affixed to the template:

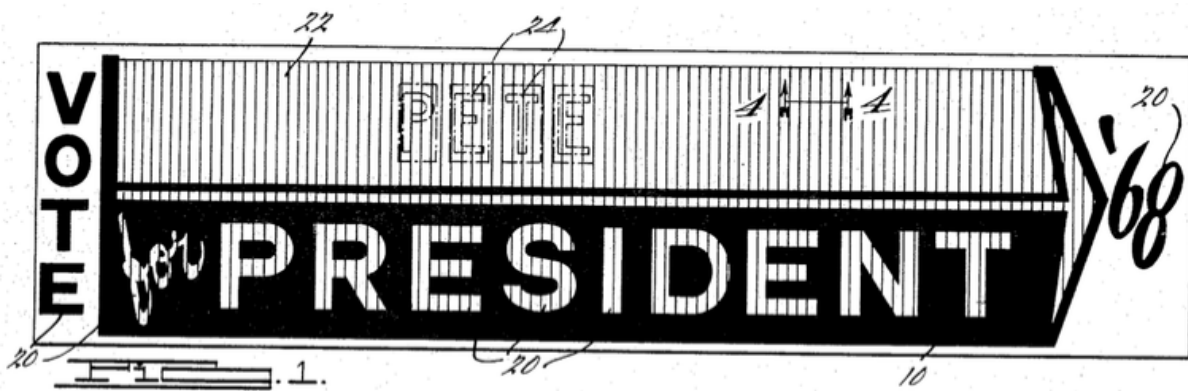


Figure 23: Detail from Jorgensen (US Patent Office #3350805)

As late as 2004 Hudgins had patented a similar customization device to those of Jorgensen, and Norris and Wasserman, although it would have employed a stencil and felt marker instead of a set of self-adhesive letters. This device is somewhat anachronistic, however, as far as bumper sticker customization is concerned. For, as micro-electronic technologies made huge advances in the last decades of the 20th century, the modalities of bumper sticker customization would become increasingly virtual.



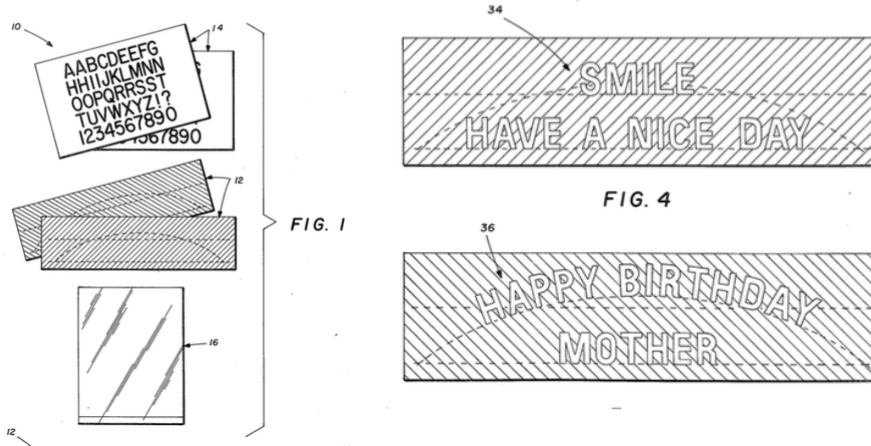


Figure 24: Detail from Norris & Wasserman, *Message Display System* (US Patent Office #3959906)

In 1996, Drake et al. patented a video arcade game style console that would allow a consumer to print their own custom stickers. This was also the dawn of the internet-era, or network-mode (Urry 2007), at least as far as much of the American population was concerned. Mainstream broadband internet access not only allowed individuals to browse the ever-widening web, it also began to open new possibilities for online-enabled consumption. The Dotcom boom and bust of the late 1990s attests to this (and, of course, the limits of those possibilities).

But more important, the early 21<sup>st</sup> century also saw the development of new forms of web-enabled, mass customized production and consumption. Vistaprint and CafePress, two leading online mass customization retailers, were founded in 1994 and 1999, respectively. The production models of these companies, and others like them such as zazzle.com and shapeways.com (a 3D printing service) are oriented to small- and single-item runs. The largely virtual mass-customization model of sticker printing has therefore rendered obsolete the kind of material customization devices discussed above (if they were ever actively produced or used), while at the also opening new possibilities for the individualization of car inscription. At the same time, the move away from shared cultural references to increasingly individual and/or obscure ones poses new interpretive problems for the contemporary reader of stickers. I am, however, getting ahead of myself. First, I will attempt to more clearly delineate classic, pre-internet era and contemporary bumper stickers.