

A VENT WINDOW VIEW – **CAR SHOPS & CARHOPS**

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In the Fifties, most Midwestern towns with 400 or more inhabitants featured automobile showrooms as a main attraction. Strategically located alongside the burg's main drag, those establishments with their monstrous windows were bread and butter for the plate glass industry. More important, those firms were a huge draw for the towns. Automobile showrooms were second only to movie houses (small towns seldom had more than one theater but often boasted as many as three auto dealerships) in overall popularity, especially when the new car models began to appear each fall.

Isolated on a farm 20 miles from any town with automobile dealerships, my main source of information about new cars was the Saturday Evening Post. Car ads in that weekly generally illustrated scenes in full color of a happy family having fun adventures somewhere far from the hinterlands where I slavered over those pictures while reading Madison Avenue's effusive praise of the new Kaiser or Studebaker.

Then came the summer of 1954 and a grand stroke of luck; I got a job in the "BIG" city of St. Joseph, MO, a metropolis with six or eight buildings more than five stories high. The work was not terribly different from farm labor for it involved dirt, a wheelbarrow and 90 degree heat, but it was an escape from rural boredom. The job lasted only a month at which point without warning I was "laid-off."

The following day I set out in search of new employment; otherwise, Dad would haul me back to the farm. With the downtown area within walking distance from where I was staying with an older sister, and since that was where most part-time jobs might be found, that is where I began my job quest. Downtown was a thriving milieu of theaters, department stores and other commercial firms.

Keep in mind that this was years before the boom in suburban shopping malls. And, it was well before Ike's interstate system bypassed downtowns rather than follow routings laid out for US highways back in the Model-T era. US 36, the main route west and east wandered down Frederick Avenue into the city's heart before angling down 8th Street to the MO River bridge. US 71 ran north and south, but it had been already been rerouted to the east side beltway due to the city's expansion. (My favorite place in that world was the Snow White Drive-In located where US 71 crossed US 36. Jukebox connections at every booth; neon on every wall and carhops on skates—the Snow White could have been copied from a Hollywood studio set.)

My first day's job search ended up being spent in various new car showrooms that were established alongside US 36. Salesmen in these "stores" were sometimes less than welcoming. My questions about employment were answered with a brusque "head on back to the shop. They may have something." Young as I was, I knew their intent was to get me off the sales floor before I left fingerprints on the merchandise. Swafford Motors (the Mercury/Lincoln dealer) and Hanson-Meade Motors (the Desoto/Plymouth dealer) were the only two places that treated me as a "someday" customer.

By pure chance, two days later while I stood peering at a new yellow Plymouth convertible parked just inside the Hanson-Meade service facility, the shop foreman yelled "Hey, Kid! You here about the carwash job?" I stuttered "Y-y-yes" about as fast as I could get it out and ended up with a job that lasted long enough to keep me in town until pre-season football practices began at my high school.

Sadly it turned out that I was better at washing cars than playing football.