Thumbs Down: America and the Decline of Hitchhiking

by

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“The only people that interest me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones that never yawn or say a commonplace thing. but burn, burn, burn like roman candles across the night.”
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I. An Introduction

“We can’t go over it.
We can’t go under it.
We’ll have to go through it…”

1. Welcome Aboard

Hitchhiking was once a ubiquitous element of the American transportation landscape. Today, it is dead. As soon as there were cars to ride in, hopeful travelers with wide smiles and outstretched thumbs began to dot our nation’s highways. Hitchhiking’s practitioners ranged from out-of-work farmers to the likes of Bob Dylan, Janis Joplin, Van Morrison, John Waters, Ross Perot and Ronald Reagan. In 1973, hitchhikers embarked on an estimated 127 hitchhiking trips around the country. But, by 1980, hitchhiking had all but disappeared as a form of transportation.

The disappearance of hitchhiking raises a number of important issues. Much like the disappearance of the dinosaurs that roamed our planet some 200 million years ago, we are faced with the question: how can something so large and pervasive disappear so suddenly? Precisely because of its current absence, it is hard to imagine the proportions of its historic magnitude. But to dismiss hitchhiking as little more than a negligible relic of the past is to discount one of the most fascinating epochs of American history.
2. Why?

It is undeniable that a historical investigation of hitchhiking is an unconventional topic for a thesis.\(^1\) However, the apparent preposterousness of investigating hitchhiking is largely a product of its demise. In the words of Winston Churchill, “history is written by the victors.” It is self-evident that hitchhiking cannot be counted among history’s victors. As a result of its demise, hitchhiking’s once ubiquitous existence and its multitudes of practitioners have been swept out among history’s unwanted rubbish. For those too young to have experienced it first hand, it is nearly inconceivable to imagine the mile-long lines of hitchhikers that swarmed the thumbing meccas of our country.\(^2\) Now equally preposterous is hitchhiking’s once star-studded roster. Hitchhikers spanned all walks of life from factory workers to celebrities and politicians.\(^3\) Today, hitchhiking is a rarefied antic, whose few remaining practitioners are easily discounted as loonies and tramps. As those who actually witnessed or even participated in hitchhiking’s golden years are replaced by a younger generation, hitchhiking’s robust legacy will be replaced by an anemic

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\(^1\) A brief note on langue: throughout this thesis, when I refer to ‘hitchhiking’ I am referring to the entirety of the enterprise, comprised of actions on the part of both the ride solicitor and the driver. If I am addressing only the solicitor I will refer to him as a ‘hitchhiker’, ‘rider’ or ‘thumber.’ The one doing the picking up will generally be referred to as the ‘driver.’


facsimile of its former glory. It is my hope that this legacy is not entirely forgotten.

This is hitchhiking’s eulogy.

That being said, the brunt of this thesis will not be devoted to memorializing what was. Instead, I will investigate why it is no longer so. Regardless of what its past may have been, hitchhiking is now dead. Often more fascinating than a study of things that were great is a study of things once great that have since crumbled: the fall of empire, the descent from greatness, the loss of life. The focus of this thesis will be to develop an academic understanding of hitchhiking’s downfall. However, such an examination will also serve, quite fortuitously, as a lasting memorial to its former glory.

In this thesis I will aim to move past a perfunctory chronicling of hitchhiking’s decline. The hope is to go beyond the banal territory of ‘what’ and explore the nuances of ‘why.’ Why did hitchhiking lose popularity? Why has its legacy been tarnished? Why did it die? In this sense, what follows is an autopsy. Some deaths are clear-cut. Others come as the entangled result of a multitude of confounding factors. The death of hitchhiking is of the latter sort. Hitchhiking died not from one discrete blow, but rather it was slowly deteriorated by a host of different, albeit related ailments. In the following chapters we will aim to unpack this litany of infirmities.

To consider the demise of hitchhiking a death is perhaps misleading. Hitchhiking is a phrase that describes an activity. Its relevance emerges as a result of practice; only when people go out into the world and hitchhike does hitchhiking become an institution. Thus, it is only when people make an active choice not to
hitchhike that this institution disappears. Given the plurality of participation necessary for hitchhiking’s existence, it is perhaps more accurate that we refer to its demise in a similarly pluralistic sense. An extinction – the death of all entities which share a similar set of characteristics. With the exception of the occasional thumber, the hitchhiker as a species has gone extinct. What we are looking at is not a single autopsy, but rather a massive confluence of autopsies.

The ailments responsible for extinction are rarely self-inflicted or contracted in isolation. Instead, extinction is usually the result of an imposition from or a reaction to the outside world. Hitchhiking went extinct because the external environment developed in such a way as to become inhospitable, if not entirely noxious, for its continued existence. Thus, the story of hitchhiking is not merely an account of one isolated institution. Hitchhiking provides a lens through which we can look at a broader national climate. As we will discover, hitchhiking is but one casualty within a larger changing atmosphere. Much of what has been inhospitable to hitchhiking has had equally deleterious effects across a wide range of other social activities.

The plight of hitchhiking reflects a larger pattern of changes in American culture. Hitchhiking can be seen as a microcosm for increasingly pervasive trends of consumerism, fear and disconnection in America. While these trends could be addressed en masse on a superficial level, such analysis runs the risk of being blunted by vagueness. By focusing on concrete trends in hitchhiking we are able to examine many of these same factors on a more tangible level. Rather than speaking abstractly of increased consumerism, we can look specifically at changing relationships with
cars. Rather than looking at intangible trends in helpfulness, we can examine the specific likelihood that drivers will provide a lift for a needy hitchhiker.

This notion that transportation can provide a lens into American culture is by no means novel. The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard once remarked, “All you need to know about American society can be gleaned from an anthropology of its driving behavior… Drive ten thousand miles across America and you will know more about the country than all the institutes of sociology and political science put together.”4 As we will further discuss in later chapters, America has distinguished herself as a nation obsessed with automobility. In an effort to understand America, there is no better place to look than the interactions that happen in and around cars.

From 1936 to 1960, Man and the Motorcar was America’s foremost instructional manual on driving. The book was said to be not just a driving manual, but a roadmap to proper citizenship and responsibility. One historian posits that a focus on good driving “opened up a new space for the development of good attitudes – courtesy, sportsmanship, reliability, responsibility and those other personal characteristics that make for good citizenship.”5 As we will further explore, the same law-abiding drivers whose consideration of fellow drivers compelled them to stop completely at stop signs and signal their right turns, might also be more likely to participate in productive civic or political activities in hope of bettering their nation. By the same token, it is these same civic-minded drivers, who might also feel obliged to pick up a fellow citizen hoping to thumb a ride.

Around the same time that *Man and the Motorcar* went out of print, America suddenly took a sharp turn in her capacity for productive citizenship. Sometime around the 1960s, Americans stopped picking up hitchhikers, stopped voting, stopped attending civic organizations, and stopped volunteering. It is easy to disregard this parallel as mere coincidence. However, we will take our cue from Baudrillard and follow the lead of numerous historians, sociologists, and driving instructors who all believed that good driving was a mirror for good citizenship. In doing so I hope to uncover just exactly how and why we veered so suddenly off the road of camaraderie and responsibility, both as ride givers and as Americans.

The purpose of this thesis is to look critically at hitchhiking, in its own right and as a zeitgeist of American culture. To acknowledge what was and to investigate why it is no longer so.

3. A Dearth of Literature

In Robert Putnam’s *Coming Apart*, the author presents a statistically driven account of increasing disconnectedness in America. Throughout the book Putnam draws upon an utterly astounding range of statistical curios, citing everything from bridge games per-capita to the number of greeting cards sent by unmarried men. However, when Putnam briefly touches on the subject of hitchhiking, his statistical treasure chest appears all but empty. The prevalence of hitchhiking has decreased,

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Putnam avers, but it “seems to have left no statistical trace.”\textsuperscript{7} In another equally well-researched account of American culture, Charles Murray bluntly concludes, “there are no statistics on hitchhiking.”\textsuperscript{8}

Fortunately, the true state of hitchhiking literature is not quite as grim as these two scholars suggest. Hitchhiking has been addressed in the scholarly community, albeit briefly and infrequently. However, Putnam and Murray are largely correct in noting the paucity of hitchhiking literature, particularly of the quantitative variety.

Hitchhiking existed for nearly half a century before it garnered any academic attention. In 1958 JT Schlebecker published “An Informal History of Hitchhiking,” marking the first ever scholarly treatment of the activity. Another decade would transpire before any other academic publications would take interest in the subject. The 1970s were a high water mark for hitchhiking literature.\textsuperscript{9} Even still, the literature output during this period most likely numbers well under 100 publications. From the 1980s on, hitchhiking literature became increasingly sparse, garnering only occasional mentions and few dedicated investigations.

In my investigation, I will draw upon three general categories of literature. The first category is the historically comparative brand of investigation inaugurated by Schlebecker. These investigations have proven to be both the rarest and most fruitful. Although they offer little in terms of quantitative measurement, they provide a longitudinal account of hitchhiking’s development. It is largely as a result of these

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 143.
undertakings that it is possible to develop a general, albeit blurry, sketch of hitchhiking’s changing popularity over time. Furthermore, these accounts provide us with timely historical knowledge on precisely why people choose to attempt hitchhiking journeys, be it necessity, adventure or thrift.

Schlebecker’s account of hitchhiking provides one of the most detailed histories of hitchhiking beginning with its nascence in the early 20th century. Unfortunately, Schlebecker’s account extends only through the fifties. From here, other authors, including Packer, DiMaggio, Rinvolucri and Garner pick up the thread. Particularly notable is Rinvolucri’s 1974 *Hitch-hiking*. To my knowledge, this is the only book length investigation of hitchhiking’s history and culture to have ever been published.\(^\text{10}\) Although the book is nominally about British hitching, it provides an invaluable history of hitching in America as well as trenchant analysis of the culture surrounding it.

The next category of literature is works which present a more geographically overarching and largely ahistorical treatment of hitching in society. While these case studies are useful for understanding the culture or nature of hitchhiking at a particular time, they are of little use in understanding hitching’s larger evolution. Notable works in this category include Miller, O’Regan, Chesters and the California Highway Patrol (CHP). Early works, like Miller’s 1973 “On the Road,” provide a valuable portrait of hitchhiking at its heyday, but provide little insight into its later downfall. By comparison, more contemporary works like O’Regan’s 2012 “Alternative Mobility

\(^{10}\) In all exactness, *Hitch-hiking* has never been “published.” It was released by the author, without an ISBN or any formal recognition, and after a limited printing run it is now only available in digital form.
Cultures and the Resurgence of Hitchhiking” give greater insight into hitchhiking’s current state. Also notable is a report by the California Highway Patrol on “Crimes and Accidents Associated with Hitchhiking.” The report is one of the only quantitative assessments of hitchhiking’s danger ever to be undertaken. According to one scholar, it “is probably the best piece of research into the safety of hitch-hiking that exists.”\(^{11}\) The report proves to be invaluable in addressing the frequent criticism of hitchhiking as unsafe. The CHP report is also the only known study that attempts to approximate the frequency and scale of hitchhiking in America.

Although larger extrapolations can be made, all of the literature in this category is limited by its narrow time scope. This point is best illustrated by the CHP’s attempt to quantify hitchhiking’s popularity. While it is interesting to know how many people were hitchhiking in 1973, without even one other data point to compare it to, there is no way to even begin to chart a larger chronology of hitchhiking’s practitioners. If we are to arrive at a more longitudinal understanding it is necessary that these individual data points be connected together with other information to form a more comprehensive picture.

The final category of research is comprised of an assortment of psychological studies on hitchhiking behavior. Most of these studies treat hitchhiking as an academic instrument, viewing it merely as a platform through which to examine other exogenous psychological features. The majority of these studies look at specific traits among either hitchhikers or drivers in an effort to understand their effect on ride

giving or solicitation. Some of these studies have proven useful in gaining a better understand of the underlying dynamics of hitchhiking. By developing a theory of why people chose to hitchhike or offer rides, it becomes possible to understand why this behavior has become less common. Furthermore, by understanding more about the psychology of those involved in hitchhiking, it is possible to connect their behavior to larger social trends. By understanding the thought processes that motivates hitchhiking, we are able to better understand circumstances under which hitchhiking might become less appealing. Secondarily, because of their more scientific presentation and approach, many of these studies provide useful baseline data on the hitchhiking community such as median age, gender and location. Unfortunately, the vast majority of these studies were conducted in the 1970s so we are unable to extrapolate this information as a means of charting larger trends.

Much of the academic research on hitchhiking suffers from a lack of continuity and scholarly awareness. Rather than coalescing into a cohesive academic community, hitchhiking scholars have generally embarked on their explorations with little knowledge of pre-existing works. For example, until 2008 not a single academic work cited or made any mention of Schlebecker’s impeccable history of hitchhiking.\footnote{\textit{A Dearth of Research: Does Anyone Really Know Anything About Hitch-Hiking?}} This resource blindness is endemic throughout the hitchhiking literature. Rather than building a cohesive narrative that piggybacks on past literature, each author appears to start anew. This workflow has prevented greater advancement in the understanding of hitchhiking and stymied the perpetuation of what could otherwise have been a fruitful scholarly dialogue.

\footnote{\textit{A Dearth of Research: Does Anyone Really Know Anything About Hitch-Hiking?}}
Beyond the realm of academic publication, hitchhiking has been the subject of occasional writing in the popular press as well as in literature. While these sources are at times marred by capricious attitudes and unfounded bias, they nonetheless represent a valuable encapsulation of the attitudes of the American people. Newspapers and magazines in particular provide an interesting lens through which to examine hitchhiking. While hardly academic, these reports provide colorful insight into American sentiments about hitchhiking. The majority of these articles emerged only in the wake of problems in the hitchhiking community. Thus, they frequently take on a disdainful and alarmist tone. Such articles were not only a reflection of current American attitudes, but also a catalyst in the development of future attitudes. The accuracy of these reports is largely immaterial. These news reports were then and still are a window into popular perceptions of hitchhiking. And it was these perceptions that played a crucial role in dictating how people responded to hitchhiking. So while newspapers are not the best source of objective fact, they provide us with the more ephemeral “feelings” that are often lacking in scholarly investigations.

In a similar category are works of fiction and non-fiction that document individual hitchhiking experiences. A paragon for this sort of work is Elijah Wald’s Riding With Strangers. The book autobiographically chronicles Wald as he hitchhikes from Boston to Portland. While the book provides fascinatingly personal insight into hitchhiking, it is not necessarily representative of larger hitchhiking culture. The fact that Wald is hitchhiking across the country in the mid-2000s—a time

13 Wald, Riding with Strangers.
when hitchhiking was all but moribund– is more than ample testament for the non-
generalizable nature of books in this category. Nonetheless, like newspaper articles,
personal accounts allow us great insight into the feelings and attitudes of the time.
Whether the books are fiction or non-fiction is largely irrelevant. Either way, the
author is responding to her contemporary environment. Much like a thermometer, this
sort of popular writing on hitchhiking gives us a detailed read on the hitchhiking
climate at one specific time in one specific place, but it says very little about what
will come in the future or what is occurring concurrently somewhere else.

As a final addendum to this discussion on literature, it is worth noting that in
the span of less than a year that I have been working on this project, two of the most
valuable online compendiums of hitching knowledge have disappeared from the
internet. Digihitch.com was once a mecca of online hitchhiking information, boasting
a vibrant forum area as well as links and articles on hitching culture and history.
However, in June of 2014 it went offline, leaving no trace of its once fruitful
archives.14

Another similar loss is the personal website of hitchhiking historian Bernd
Wechner. Wechner was a self-professed expert in the field of hitching practice and
history. In his own words, he boasts, “[my] library of hitch-hiking material … is
beyond any doubt the largest ever amassed.” Online, he had curated an impressive
catalogue of hitchhiking resources. In addition to his own extensive writings on the
subject, Wechner also hosted digital copies of many pertinent pieces of literature on
hitching. Of particular note were Mario Rinvolucri’s Hitch-Hiking as well as the CHP

study on hitchhiking. Despite being two of the most pivotal examinations of hitchhiking, both works are long out of print and virtually unavailable in any form. Had it not been for Wechner’s website, my thesis would have suffered greatly from an inability to access these works. The disappearance Wechner’s website along with its digital treasure trove of hitching knowledge represents an unfortunate blow, both to hitchhiking’s practitioners and its scholars.

Although I have no way of knowing why these two resources went offline, I can only assume it was the result of a lack of interest and funding for the subject. In a field that has already suffered for a lack of scholarly knowledge, it is a tragedy to have the pool of available information grow even smaller. I have no illusion that my thesis can adequately replace the innumerable volumes of information that have already been lost. However, I will still count myself proud if this meager exploit can provide but one drop of knowledge to the arid landscape of hitchhiking literature or inspire just one person to take a more critical look at hitching’s history.

At times, I have been stymied by a lack of available literature. However, in one sense it has been something of a blessing. Given the relatively small body of literature, it has been possible to read nearly all of it. As a result, this thesis is able to move beyond the unfortunate bevy of disconnected hitchhiking investigations. My work has the potential to put these previously disjoint works into conversation and produce a novel and incisive summation. It is my hope that this is a conversation that does not end here, but rather is carried on by interested scholars of the future.

4. Reconnoitering the Hitchhiking Landscape
As a stopgap for certain particularly problematic holes in the literature I conducted a survey of my own. The purpose of this survey was to provide a more detailed understanding of the reasons which compelled people to either participate or abstain from hitchhiking. Furthermore, I hoped to produce a rudimentary quantitative model to chart hitchhiking’s prevalence. While there exists both overarching discussions of societal attitudes and individualized accounts of hitchhiking, no work thus far has attempted a large-scale qualitative interrogation of individual perspectives regarding hitchhiking behavior. Given that most information on hitchhiking attitudes was produced in the 1970s, it was also the aim of this survey to provide a more contemporary account of these attitudes.

In service of these ends, I designed an online survey about personal attitudes and hitchhiking experience. The survey queried subjects about their level of trust as well as prompting them for long-form explanations of their decisions to partake or not in hitchhiking, both as a driver and a hitchhiker. I disseminated the survey to a number of willing participants with ages varying from 18 to 87. In total, the survey elicited 64 responses. The average age of all respondents was 32. Of the 64 respondents 25 had hitchhiked at some point and 22 had picked up hitchhikers themselves. All but one of the respondents over the age of 40 had hitchhiked before in their lives. By contrast, just under a quarter of those under the age of 40 had ever hitchhiked before.

Throughout this thesis I will draw upon results from this survey as a source of evidence and as a supplement to other preexisting research. While I will occasionally make use of the survey’s numerical results, I will primarily draw upon the
respondents’ long-form answers. Many of these answers shed valuable light on the thought process that mediates decisions around hitchhiking. Furthermore, the contrast between younger and older respondents provides a particularly illustrative example of changing societal attitudes.

While this survey does provide us with valuable quantitative and qualitative information, it is important to qualify these findings in light of several potential shortcomings. First, the survey’s relatively small sample size opens up the possibility of inaccurate conclusions. Second, survey respondents were not chosen at random. In order to disseminate the survey it was sent to a number of classmates, friends and family members. As a result, a large portion of the respondents are Wesleyan students. The non-Wesleyan respondents also represent a small and specific cohort of individuals. I suspect that a disproportionate number of the respondents are middle to upper class, liberal, well-educated and living on either the East or West coast. As such, the survey does a poor job of capturing overarching American attitudes. Finally, only a portion of those who received the survey opted to take it. It would seem natural that those who had hitchhiked before would have more interest in the subject of the survey and thus be more inclined to take it. As such, the proportion of hitchhikers may be over represented within the respondent pool.

This disclaimer does not invalidate the survey’s findings. It does, however, limit the scope of its applicability. Any quantitative findings should be treated as rough benchmarks. Likewise, the qualitative responses are those of individuals and they may not be perfectly generalizable. Nonetheless, in a field suffering from a dearth of research, this survey does provide a new and valuable source of insight. It
will be an important part of a larger patchwork of information from which my arguments are culled.

5. Charting Our Journey

The remainder of this thesis will try to answer two questions, one narrow and another quite broad: why has hitchhiking disappeared? And what does it mean for America? At times my analysis will look first to hitchhiking as a microcosm of larger American trends. At other times, I will start with overarching attitudes in America and then apply these back to the context of hitchhiking. In both cases, I am hoping to cast light on the specifics of hitchhiking as well as its broader implications.

As I have already suggested, hitchhiking’s disappearance is a multi-faceted issue that engages a host of separate factors. Many of which are closely related and exhibit a synergistic interplay. However, for the purposes of clarity, I have divided the succeeding discussion among three broad subheadings.

Before engaging the core issues of the thesis, I will provide a brief history of hitchhiking. This account will provide a rough framework to supplement my later, more in-depth analysis. It will also serve as a primer for many of the themes that will reemerge throughout the rest of this work.

Following this brief history, I will look at the ways in which danger, both real and imagined, has manifested itself in our willingness to participate in hitchhiking. I begin by addressing the pervasive misconception that hitchhiking has become more dangerous. I then examine the larger societal trends that might be responsible for
fostering this misconception, foremost among them an increased societal fearfulness and the growing popularity of calculated risk reduction.

The next section will look into the role of cars in society. I will examine how society has changed to reflect our increased automobility as well as how this automobility has impacted us as citizens. Within this section I will first look at the effects of increased car ownership and its negative effect on hitchhiking. Next, I will look to the monopolizing effect that cars have had on our transportation landscape. I will note the ways in which America has been physically transformed to better accommodate cars and the deleterious effect this has had on the ease of hitchhiking. I will then shift gears and look at the ways in which individualism and consumer fetishism has impacted our relationship with our cars. I will explore the transformation of cars into privatized spaces and our resultant desire to protect these spaces from unwanted intrusion.

The final section will explore the ways in which a disconnected America is increasingly at odds with hitchhiking’s interdependent virtues. In this section I draw from a number of sources to expose the ways in which America is “coming apart.” In particular, I will explore how we, as a nation, have become less trusting, less helpful and less neighborly. In the absence of these once iconic American values, many young people are less interested in thumbing a ride, and drivers are increasingly wary about welcoming strangers into their cars.

Finally, I end with a meditation on modern transportation. Our transportation infrastructure is not merely the result of science and happenstance. The ways we choose to transport ourselves both effect and reflect the nature of our national
identity. As such, today’s preferred modes of transit provide a cogent statement about who we are as a nation. By looking at modern incarnations of hitchhiking, we can reflect on what has changed in America. In this contemporary context we are able to compare the ways in which our modern attitudes are no longer capable of fostering a hitchhiking-friendly ethos.

To hitchhike across any sizeable portion of our country is a substantial undertaking. The path of the hitchhiker is rarely a straight one. To hitchhike is to explore, to discover, to wander. Unlike transit by plane or car, hitchhiking involves an unparalleled and multi-faceted interaction with an assorted range of people, places and environments. To hitchhike is to become engaged in America. This thesis is no different. Our investigation will take us through a diverse range of intellectual territories and experiences. Along the way we will meet challenges and obstacles. To quote a traditional children’s song:

We can’t go over it.
We can’t go under it.
We’ll have to go through it…
II. A Brief History of Hitchhiking

1. Early Hitchhiking: 1910-1929

By some accounts hitchhiking has been around for millennia. When Odysseus found himself shipwrecked on the Island of Phaeacia, it was only as a guest aboard a passing ship that he found passage back to Ithaca. Similarly, the young Jesus was little more than a hitchhiker when he was carried across a river on the back of Saint Christopher. However, in its modern incarnation, hitchhiking has become commonly understood as the intentional solicitation of a ride in a motor vehicle. The first documented instance of this modern form of hitchhiking is from Tickner Edwardes’ 1910 book, *Lift Luck*. Edwardes attempts to travel some 200 miles, begging for rides aboard the conveyance of strangers. His rides range from bicycles to horse-drawn wagons. Most notably, however, one of these rides was in a passing automobile.\(^1\)

Although hitchhiking may have occurred before this time, Edwardes was the first to formally document its occurrence.

During the First World War, hitchhiking began to grow in prevalence. Lacking other transportation, many soldiers would hitchhike home while on furlough. As a result of these venerable pioneers, early hitchhiking developed a positive

\(^1\) Wald, *Riding with Strangers*, 131.
reputation. Particularly as soldiers began to return in 1917, drivers felt a dutiful obligation to pick up these early hitchhikers.  

By the 1920s, hitchhiking had reached a much larger audience and had grown immensely in popularity. At this time hitchhiking was equally a source of exciting adventure and functional transportation. In 1921, the New York Times announced that J.K. Christianson had been inducted into the Chicago Adventurers Club after hitchhiking 3,023 miles in 27 days. This commemoration of hitchhiking as sport and entertainment perfectly captures the activities’ early ethos of fun-spirited adventure. However, the extreme distance of Christianson’s trips was a bit atypical. Most sources indicate that hitchhiking trips during this period were short distance jaunts across town or into the nearby countryside.  

In this early period, hitchhiking was a means of escape for both men and women. Sometimes this was an escape from bad homes or poor jobs, but at other times hitchhiking acted as an escape from social norms and perfunctory daily activities. This care-free approach to hitchhiking was captured in a recurring Saturday Evening Post comic strip featuring Zula and Elise, two 1920s flappers turned hitchhikers. Zula and Elise were frequently pictured gallivanting across the country playing music and enticing men to join them in their amusing exploits.  

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3 Ibid., 308.  
4 Packer, Mobility without Mayhem, 82.  
5 Ibid., 81.
2. The Dutiful Hitchhiker: 1930-1950

The Great Depression of the 1930s significantly changed the face of hitchhiking. Hitching served as important form of transportation among the ranks of America’s 12 million newly minted unemployed workers. During this time, those still fortunate enough to own a car often considered it a civic duty to pick up job-searching hitchhikers.6 As a result of better roads and a need to look further afield for new jobs, long distance hitchhiking became increasingly common.7 Furthermore, the Great Depression’s indiscriminate economic influence further diversified the ranks of the hitchhiker. Hitchhikers ranged from small boys to schoolteachers to entire families. In the words of one author, “every type of unfortunate seemed to look for security or employment by hitchhiking to some place or other.”8 The practice became so common that one author estimated that at least one in ten men had hitchhiked in his lifetime.9

As the Great Depression came to a close, gallant job seekers were replaced by virtuous GIs shipping out to fight in World War II. Giving a ride to a neighbor whose fuel rations had run out or a travelling soldier became a patriotic wartime duty.10 Around this period another well-respected character joined the ranks of American hitchhikers: the “College Freshman.” Stereotypically draped in his university scarf and carrying a trunk, the college student became a central figure in hitchhiking

6 Ibid., 19.
8 Ibid., 313.
9 The author notes that this estimate may very well be quite conservative.
10 Packer, Mobility without Mayhem, 80.
The perceived naiveté and vulnerability of the college student help preserve hitchhiking’s image of safety and respectability.

As a result of its numerous well-regarded practitioners, hitchhiking retained a largely positive reputation from the Great Depression through World War II. The majority of motorists still considered the hitchhiker a “welcome traveling companion.”

Despite being held in largely high esteem, hitchhiking also began to develop a reputation of increased danger during the later half of this period. Increasingly reports began to emerge of delinquents turning to hitchhiking as a new avenue for malfeasance. A 1938 *Forum* article talks of “growing concern over hitchhiking related crime.” As a result many states began to outlaw hitchhiking. By 1938 17 states had laws on the books prohibiting hitchhiking. However, these laws did little to reduce hitchhiking’s immense popularity. In many cases the laws simply went unenforced. One 1946 article in *Time* Magazine quips, “there are almost as many unarrested hitchhikers on New Jersey roads as there are mosquitoes in New Jersey's meadows.” Despite its generally popular appeal and good reputation, it was around this time that hitchhiking began to develop its first traces of social deviancy and ill repute.

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12 Packer, *Mobility without Mayhem*, 80.
13 Ibid., 83.
15 "New Jersey: So You Won't Talk, Huh?," *Time Magazine*, Nov. 18, 1946.
3. The Death of Hitchhiking: 1951-1964

So far my narrative has followed the same generally accepted trajectory of most other accounts of hitching history. However, it is around 1950 that my history embarks on a notable deviation. The canonical account would tell us that in the fifties, hitchhiking was cast into an era of disrepute and diminished popularity. However, such accounts would not proclaim hitching’s expiry until sometime in the late seventies. These accounts prove problematic in their failure to line up with many of the arguments that actually explain hitchhiking’s demise. I will argue, instead, that hitchhiking died in the late fifties. Pursuant with this reasoning, hitchhiking’s renewed popularity in the late sixties and early seventies was not a continuation of its earlier path, but rather a surprising, albeit explainable, deviation from an already moribund trajectory. This distinction is largely a matter of semantics, but it serves an important purpose in allowing for and elucidating the important arguments of this thesis.

In a world still reeling from the tragedies of World War II and haunted by the the Cold War, the fifties were a decade where “danger [was] always imminent.” Possibly as a result of these new fearful attitudes, many Americans began to associate hitchhiking with inordinate amounts of danger. The 1950s saw the publication of numerous films and articles (both factual and fictional) elucidating the danger and crimes associated with hitchhiking. The once trustworthy and deserving hitchhiker

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16 Evidence of this standard account of hitchhiking chronology can be seen in Rinvolucri (Ch. 2), Shlebecker (327), and Packer (88).
17 Packer, *Mobility without Mayhem*, 87.
was transformed into a potentially lethal criminal.\textsuperscript{18} As a result of an increasingly tarnished reputation, hitchhiking was banned in 23 states by 1950. In 25 more states, individual towns and cities passed local anti-hitchhiking ordinances.\textsuperscript{19} In 1953 AAA launched a “Thumbs Down on Thumbers” campaign intended to dissuade drivers from picking up potentially dangerous hitchhikers. Even the FBI began to crack down on hitchhiking, fearing that it was becoming a haven for criminal activity. The increased availability of cars at this time also meant that many Americans were replacing outstretched thumbs with shiny new car keys of their own. Additionally, increased isolation and disconnectedness in the American community made hitchhiking simultaneously less enticing and less feasible. As a result of fear, automotive culture, and growing divides in American society, hitchhiking’s practitioners began to quickly dwindle in number.

In 1958 Schlebecker noted that the number of hitchhikers was quickly diminishing. He remarked that “[t]he art [of hitchhiking] seemed to be dying in the United States, even if it was not dead yet.”\textsuperscript{20} Although there exist no definitive statistics to support this point, Schlebecker and Packer’s anecdotal reports suggest that the late 1950s marked the lowest point in hitchhiking’s popularity until its final demise in 1970.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{18} Mario Rinvolucri, \textit{Hitch-Hiking} (Self-Published, 1975), Ch. 8.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Schlebecker, "An Informal History of Hitchhiking," 326.
\textsuperscript{21} Packer, \textit{Mobility without Mayhem}, 86.

As I have already suggested, the “Sixties” were not a continuation of hitchhiking’s earlier growth or a final hurrah for the activity. Instead, the 1960s represented a surprising revival of an essentially moribund practice. As is suggested by the term counter-culture, many facets of the Sixties represented aberrations from the societal norm. In this sense, to hitchhike was to reclaim something that society had declared off limits. According to many new hitchhikers of the period, part of the excitement of hitchhiking was the denial of the fear mongering of the 1950s. Hitchhiking represented a rejection of the popular societal narrative. Hitchhiking’s new practitioners were also rebelling against many of the factors – consumer culture, isolation, distrust—that had militated against hitchhiking in the first place. Along these lines, hitchhiking was anything but a continuation of the previous narrative which had all but ended a decade prior; it was a radical departure from it.

As a result of this unique social context, hitchhiking witnessed immense growth in popularity throughout the counter-culture period. According to one author, the Sixties represented the single biggest “influx of hitchhikers.” Although there is no authoritative way to track hitchhiking’s actual participation, the publication of related literature provides a meaningful proxy. By all accounts, the Sixties were the most prolific period for all manner of hitchhiking publications, ranging from

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22 I use the term ‘sixties’ loosely as a catchall for the entirety of the counter-culture period which spanned across two decades.
guidebooks to academic investigations.\textsuperscript{25} Ironically, it was only after hitchhiking’s most pronounced decline in popularity that it emerged one last time for its most vibrant finale.

5. Hitchhiking in the Modern Era: 1976-Present

By the Late 1970s hitchhiking was dead for good. Its momentary resurrection was only possible as a result of artificial support from the counter-culture movement. In the absence of this support system, hitchhiking was left to perish once again. The hitchhiking identity and lifestyle had become inextricably linked to Sixties counter-culture. When the Sixties ended, hitchhiking was destroyed by proxy. Hitchhiking had become so inextricably linked to the hippie lifestyle that it became all but impossible for the practice to persist in the absence of its cultural context. Hitchhiking had been temporarily supported by an unprecedented set of social unifying forces. However, in the absence of the love and trust atmosphere embodied by the Sixties, society was no longer capable of sustaining the hitching enterprise.\textsuperscript{26} Around 1976, when the decade of “flower power” was winding to a close, hitchhiking breathed its last tumultuous breaths.\textsuperscript{27}

From the mid seventies onward, hitchhiking made increasingly fewer appearances in popular media.\textsuperscript{28} When hitchhiking did appear it was usually in the form of crime editorials. Hitchhiking suffered heavily as a result of several well-publicized murders and rapes. Over time, rides became less forthcoming and the last

\textsuperscript{25} Packer, \textit{Mobility without Mayhem}, 93.
\textsuperscript{26} Robin Dalmas, "What Killed Hitchhiking," \textit{NBC News} 2013, 2.
\textsuperscript{27} Craig Constantine, "The Forest Prince and the Pig Man," (2011).
\textsuperscript{28} Packer, \textit{Mobility without Mayhem}, 19.
remaining hitchhikers sought out other modes of transportation. Under these inauspicious circumstances, the era of hitching was brought to a close.
III. Fear and The Hitchhiker

“There are more precious things than safety, and those things may be lost if we give way to paranoia.”

-Elijah Wald

1. Fear and Loathing in America

Whether it’s the media or individual speculation, the most commonly supplied explanation for the disappearance of hitchhiking is an increase in danger. Unfortunately, as simple as this answers sounds, it is remarkably inaccurate. From its very nascence hitchhiking has always involved some degree of danger. However, there is little evidence to suggest that hitchhiking is any more dangerous today than it was three decades prior. Even if we suppose that hitchhiking-related crime has increased to some extent, this minor increase is not nearly large enough to explain the massive decrease in the activity’s popularity.

As I have already suggested, the 1950s represented the beginning of the end for hitchhiking. However, there is little evidence to suggest that hitchhiking became more dangerous around this time. The catalyst behind this watershed transition was instead, I will argue, the emergence and intensification of risk-adverse attitudes and what I will refer to as “societal fear.” Even if the actual danger of hitchhiking remained relatively stable, increased aversion to its preexisting dangers and the errant manufacture of new dangers militated to rebrand hitchhiking as a needlessly dangerous activity. In this sense, fear itself was the true culprit. Fear cannot be seen,
and often goes unrecognized. However, its nebulous shadow is often mistaken as tangible evidence of real crime and danger.

The central thesis of this chapter is two-fold. First, I will demonstrate the relative inefficacy of increased hitchhiking danger as an explanatory variable. Second, I will develop the linkage between societal fear and increased perceptions of crime and risk-averse attitudes. The first section will include a history of hitchhiking crime as well as attempts to quantify the relative danger involved in the activity. The second section will examine the ways in which pervasive fear has tainted hitchhiking. In particular, I will examine how the media has helped intensify and spread fear-mongering attitudes towards hitchhiking as well as looking at changing patterns in individual preference for the activity.

It is important to preface this discussion with a small disclaimer on the nuanced interaction between real crime and media attention. As I have already established, there are very few longitudinal studies on hitchhiking. Of particular note is the paucity of studies dealing with hitchhiking’s relative safety over time. The best record we have of hitchhiking safety comes in the form of newspaper reports—either directly or aggregated and analyzed in a secondary source. As we will further explore, these reports are an imperfect reflection of crime levels. The capricious nature of news media meant that small outbursts of crime were often hyperbolized, while persistent incidence of crime eventually dropped out of the media purview. Nonetheless, we will consider media reporting a generally satisfactory—albeit occasionally hyperbolic—barometer for charting the evolving danger of hitchhiking.
When they do occur, occasional lapses in media accuracy represent a largely irrelevant factor. In the absence of real data, the modern historian and the hitchhiker of the past are both left with little choice but to use the media as their guide. The choice to hitchhike is generally shaped not by the objective reality of the activity, but by manufactured perceptions of it. With few other sources of reliable information, the media plays an important role in informing these perceptions. When someone alleges that hitchhiking is dangerous, what she often means is that she heard from the media that hitchhiking is dangerous. One respondent to my survey was acutely aware of this distinction. After a long diatribe on hitchhiking’s danger, she changed tack, acknowledging an alternate explanation: “Maybe I read the news too much!”

2. A Criminal History

The idea that hitchhiking only recently became dangerous is a fairly preposterous assertion. From its very beginning, hitchhiking has always incorporated a number of risking elements: meeting strangers, walking along roadways, even travel by automobile. What makes hitchhiking unique and what opens it up to a relatively nuanced type of danger is the fact that hitchhiking requires that two total strangers share an isolated, confined space together. In most instances, both parties are law-abiding, well-intentioned citizens, and the journey passes safely and uneventfully. However, as with all other interactions, there exists a small minority of people who by necessity, lunacy, or pure malevolence seek to do harm to those around them. It is an unfortunate fact that since the earliest days of hitchhiking these ill doers have
slipped in amongst the ranks of regular hitchhikers and on occasion drivers and riders have suffered as a result.

Crime in the hitchhiking community has operated in something of a boom and bust cycle. Hitchhiking historian Paul DiMaggio ascribes this cycle to an intertwined relationship between the press, the police, and the government. According to DiMaggio, “every few years the press rediscovers hitchhiking and seems to think it’s uncovered something new.”1 With increased news coverage comes an increased awareness of crime. In response, lawmakers churn out new anti-hitchhiking laws and police crack down on hitchers. Soon, criminals learn to keep their thumbs down and crime subsides. And even if it doesn’t, newspapers eventually tire of publishing the same hitchhiking crime stories and the phenomenon seemingly disappears.2

DiMaggio’s pattern maps nicely to the reality of hitchhiking. In roughly decade-long increments from the twenties to at least the sixties, popular opinion, and to some degree the safety of hitchhiking, moved back and forth between “benign pastime” and “dangerous pursuit.” The earliest records of hitchhiking paint a picture of general safety. There were few if any reports of crime during the early teens. However, after the end of World War I and for the first bit of the 1920s, hitchhiking experienced its first descent into criminality. Reports of dangerous hitchhikers surfaced in the media, and some pundits began to warn against the activity. In response, some local governments tried to put laws in place to ban hitching entirely. However, these concerns quickly subsided and hitchhiking returned to benign

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2 Ibid.
normalcy. In the latter half of the twenties hitchhiking received minimal media attention. When reports did emerge, they were generally positive.\(^3\) And as a result, hitchhiking regained a reputation of innocent adventure.

The thirties brought a wave of crime to the hitchhiking community. The Great Depression of the 1930s made hitching a particularly appealing option among the jobless and destitute. With poverty at an all-time high, crime increased across the nation, often spilling into the hitchhiking sphere. Furthermore, more hitchhikers meant that the sheer likelihood that a few deviants might slip in amongst the herd was inevitable. Although hitchhiking-related crime was undoubtedly higher in the thirties than it had been a decade prior, the media played a significant role in further sensationalizing the issue. Newspapers and magazines focused a disproportionate amount of energy into detailing hitchhiking crime and warning against its practice.\(^4\)

Continuing along DiMaggio’s trend, the forties ushered in an era of surprisingly peaceful hitchhiking. By 1940 the media assault on hitchhiking had ground to a halt. In fact, hitchhiking became so acceptable that even Emily Post, the queen of poise and decorum, went so far as to encourage its practice among young woman.\(^5\)

Additionally, the wartime environment may have played an exogenous roll in further pacifying the hitchhiking scene. The murderous hitchhiker of the thirties was replaced by the heroic soldier hitching back home on furlough. Even non-military hitchhikers received increased support. With government rationing of gasoline and

\(^3\) Ibid.
\(^5\) Ibid., 324.
rubber tires, many respectable citizens on the home front looked to hitchhiking as a frugal form of transportation. For probably the only time in history, the American government provided a tacit endorsement of the activity when it unveiled a series of advertisements which read, “When you ride alone you ride with Hitler.” As a result of pervasive patriotism “a climate [emerged]…which made it psychologically very difficult for a driver with spare seats not to pick people up.”

The end of the war brought a swift end to halcyon days of peaceful hitchhiking. Around the turn of the decade, both the media and state governments mounted a vicious attack against hitchhiking’s purportedly dangerous reputation and high crime rates. Magazines and newspapers were littered with lurid details of hitchhiking crime. Around this time, state and local governments, as well as the FBI, began to mount a legal offensive against the practice of hitchhiking. The FBI issued stark warning against the practice and police began to ardently enforce anti-hitchhiking laws.

As we can see, for its first forty years of existence hitchhiking’s perceived danger oscillated between two poles: as soon as hitchhiking crested on the horizon as a societal peril, a bevy of media and police attention erupted and the hitchhiking wave broke, subsiding to relative safety and inconsequentiality. If danger alone was the driving variable behind the decline of hitchhiking, the practice most likely would have faded out of fashion a long time ago. However, it appears that real danger had

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7 Rinvolucri, Hitch-Hiking, Ch. 10.
8 Ibid., Ch. 8.
9 Packer, Mobility without Mayhem, 84.
only a minor effect on hitchhiking’s popularity. In fact, at times, such as the thirties, hitchhiking’s popularity was on the rise despite a concomitant decrease in its purported safety.

2. Tracking Danger

If we are to truly excise increased danger as a potential cause for the eventual demise of hitchhiking, it is necessary to show that prior to the 1950s hitchhiking was no more dangerous than it was after this period. While it is possible to anecdotally track a general ebb and flow of hitching crime, there exists no longitudinal metric across which we can compare the relative danger of hitchhiking. Thus, it is impossible to definitively prove that hitchhiking is just as safe today as it was a decade or a half century prior. However, hitchhiking’s critics, who have so confidently made precisely the opposite claim, stand on equally tenuous footing. Just as we can’t definitively say that that hitchhiking is any safer today, there isn’t a shred of concrete evidence suggesting it has become any more dangerous. This lack of evidence has done little to prevent the media from asserting that increased danger is indeed a reality. Before we embark on a more in-depth exploration of the role the media played in this whole affair, let us establish a few benchmarks for the relative danger of hitchhiking.

There are a few reliable sources we can use to gain some understanding of the relative danger involved in hitchhiking. The best source in this regard is a 1974 report

published by the California Highway Patrol (CHP) entitled *California Crimes and Accidents Associated With Hitchhiking*. According to one of the foremost scholars in the field, the report “is probably the best piece of research into the safety of hitchhiking that exists.”

In accordance with DiMaggio’s model, following the hitchhiking-friendly Sixties, the early Seventies were punctuated by wide scale negative media attention directed at hitchhiking. According to the report, “Our society has…felt that a great deal of crime is associated with hitchhiking.”

Worries about this hitchhiking-related crime were so widespread that the California Senate commissioned the CHP to conduct an examination of the magnitude of this problem. The report had two goals: first, to determine whether hitchhiking was a major contributor to highway accidents; and second, to assess whether hitchhiking was a major source of crime in California. In order to answer these questions, the California Highway Patrol culled data on all crimes and accidents involving hitchhikers from 662 law enforcement agencies across the state.

The report studied a five-month period in 1973 and found that hitchhikers made an estimated 5.2 million trips across the state. As confirmed by this impressive figure, the early 1970s were a heyday for hitchhikers in California. Despite the overwhelming popularity of hitchhiking, the report found that only .26% of traffic

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11 Wechner, "California Crimes and Accidents Associated with Hitchhiking, World Wide Web Publication".
12 Operational Analysis Section California Department of the California Highway Patrol, *California Crimes and Accidents Associated with Hitchhiking* (Sacramento: CHP, 1974).
13 The report admits that this figure is only a very rough estimate. However, it suggests that the actual number of trips may be much higher.
accident and .63% of all crimes involved hitchhikers. Both of these figures quite clearly suggest that hitchhikers, despite being a pervasive part of the California landscape, played an incredibly minimal role in its criminal activity. The report authoritatively concludes that “the results of this study do not show that hitchhikers are over represented in crimes or accidents beyond their numbers.”

The report also pays particular attention to the prevalence of sex crimes. The study found that females were eight times more likely than males to be victims of sex crimes while hitchhiking. While this is indeed a disturbing figure, it was no different than the statewide ratio for crimes of this type. Regardless of whether a woman is at the park, or out hitchhiking she is always about eight times more likely to be a victim of sexual assault than a male counterpart. By this logic, what has often been framed as a particularly pressing problem for female hitchhikers is in fact a problem that pervades all societal contexts. The point is not to dismiss the issue, but to suggest its misapplication in negative critiques of hitchhiking.

Ultimately, while the report does provide some very useful data on the degree of danger involved in hitchhiking, it is important that we remain cognizant of its context. The report draws its data from a very limited time period in a particular geographic area. Thus, we must be cautious when attempting to apply these finding to other areas or time periods. However, in some respects the particular location and time frame are a boon to the studies conclusions. The fact that the study took place in California is noteworthy for several reasons. First, California was a hub for American hitchhikers. It seems likely that drivers hoping to prey on hitchhikers or visa-versa

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14 California Department of the California Highway Patrol, *California Crimes and Accidents Associated with Hitchhiking.*
would be more common in this area. Thus, California’s relative popularity as a
hitchhiking locale would also makes its crime rates higher. Second, the mid seventies
was a period flagged by the media as one in which hitchhikers and those who picked
them up were at particularly high risk.\footnote{Packer, \textit{Mobility without Mayhem}, 19.} The findings of this report suggest that even
in a period of purportedly high risk, hitchhiking was still not particularly dangerous.

Furthermore, the timing of the report provides some particularly valuable
insight. Shortly after the publication of this report, hitchhiking began its final decline
as a popular form of transportation.\footnote{Peter Applebome, "On the Road, 1988: New Dangers and Decline in Hitchhiking," \textit{New York Times} 1988.} If the danger of hitchhiking is to be a credible
explanation for this demise, it would stand to reason that in the period shortly before
1975 hitchhiking would have been particularly dangerous. However, according to the
report, for every 2,500 hitchhiking trips, less than one hitchhiker would be victimized
by crime. This roughly equates to four crimes for every million miles traveled. As a
point of comparison, in 2007 there were over seven motorcycles accidents resulting in
injury for every million miles traveled. Despite being almost twice as dangerous per
mile, the number of bikers on the road has steadily increased while hitchhiking has all
but disappeared.\footnote{National Center for Statistics and Analysis, "Traffic Safety Facts: Motorcycles," (Washington, DC: NHTSA, 2007).} From a driver’s perspective, the figures are perhaps even more
favorable. For every 6,500 trips that hitchhikers take, less than one ride-giver was the
victim of a hitchhiking related crime. Considering that the average hitchhiker may be
in dozens of vehicles over the course of a single journey, the likelihood that a driver
would ever come in contact with a dangerous hitchhiker is staggeringly low. The vast
majority of riders and drivers never did or would experience any crime related to hitchhiking. Thus, it seems quite unlikely that a relatively small amount of criminal activity, not experienced by the vast majority of hitchhiking’s participants, would have motivated them to quit the activity.

Additionally, there is good reason to believe that as hitchhiking became less popular, particularly after the seventies, the amount of hitchhiking related crimes decreased disproportionally in comparison to the volume of its practitioners. Wald alleges that as hitchhiking became less popular, criminals who once preyed exclusively on hitchhikers or ride-givers found their preferred victims increasingly few and far between. Where robbers or rapists would have once had a multitude of potential victims, by the early 80s it would be almost impossible for these criminals to find victims in the hitchhiking community. With many of these serial criminals moving on to target other areas of society, hitchhiking may very well have become safer.  

Thus, there is very little to support contemporary fears that hitchhiking has become even more dangerous in the 21st century. The fact the hitchhiking has not grown in popularity in recent years raises further doubt about objective danger’s viability as a primary factor in hitchhiking’s death.

Of course, even with the best of odds, some hitchhikers or drivers are will inevitably fall victim to crime. However, as with most other dangerous activities, good judgment and experience can significantly reduce the chance that these dangers are ever realized. As one hitchhiking manual artfully put it, “most of the problems of hitchhiking can be avoided with a little forethought…and a modicum of common

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18 Wald, Riding with Strangers, 27.
sense.” The manual goes on to say that most robbers, murderers, and other criminals are few and far between and any judicious traveler should be able to recognize and avoid the majority of these suspicious and unsavory characters.\(^{19}\) According to statistics from the CHP report, prudent drivers and hitchhikers can easily limit their exposure to undue danger. For example, Drivers can refrain from picking up hitchhikers late at night when potential riders are hard to see and most “normal” hitchhikers have gone to bed. These cautious drivers are more than twice as likely to avoid danger, the CHP estimates.\(^ {20}\) For hitchhikers, traveling with a buddy decreases the likelihood of being victimized by a factor of six.\(^ {21}\) The fact that dangerous situations can be avoided this easily, suggests that poor decision making by a small minority has grossly inflated the perceived danger of hitchhiking beyond what would normally be encountered by a rational individual.

Just about any activity has some element of unavoidable risk; hitchhiking is no exception. However, many of the dangers associated with hitchhiking are well within the control of participant. Just because someone can act foolishly and increase their chance of danger is hardly a reflection on the overall safety of the activity. An untrained SCUBA diver puts himself in immense risk, but this is hardly an accurate reflection of the safety of SCUBA diving as a whole. Furthermore, an expert SCUBA diver is unlikely to quit the activity because a reckless beginner made a poor decision and ended up hurt. The general controllability of the hitchhiking’s safety makes it

\(^{19}\) DiMaggio, *The Hitchhiker's Field Manual*, 5, 56.

\(^{20}\) California Department of the California Highway Patrol, *California Crimes and Accidents Associated with Hitchhiking*.

\(^{21}\) Ibid.
unlikely that the unfortunate follies of a minority of foolish amateurs would be cause for the majority of prudent veterans to abandon the activity entirely.

Ultimately, there is no way to definitively answer the question “is hitchhiking any more dangerous?” The only thing that we know for certain is that we simply don’t know. Despite many seemingly confident claims to the contrary, there is simply no concrete evidence to suggest that hitchhiking is in fact any more dangerous today than it was a decade or even a half century prior. Nonetheless, our analysis has brought several crucial points to light. First, hitchhiking has always had some danger. Second, the vast majority of hitchhikers and drivers never encounter this danger. Third, if hitchhiking participation was purely a product of actual danger, many contemporary hitchhikers would have since returned to the activity as it is now much safer (probably than any time in the last 75 years.) Given that this has not happened, it seems reasonable to suspect that other factors may be at play. Finally, judicious hitchhikers can almost always avoid falling victim to unwanted crime. All of this calls into question the popular mythology that hitchhiking simply became so dangerous that it had to be abandoned wholesale by nearly all of its practitioners.

3. The Emergence of Fear

When asked why they chose to refrain from hitchhiking, 72% of respondents to my survey cited safety as a primary concern. Several respondents elaborated further, suggesting that while hitchhiking might have been safe several decades prior, this was no longer the case. Similarly, many news articles published in the last several decades have vociferously denounced the activity because of a perceived increase in
danger. Despite a lack of any solid evidence suggesting increased danger for hitchhikers, and a preponderance of reasons to suppose just the contrary, a surprising number of Americans remained steadfastly convinced of hitchhiking’s increased risk.

In light of the findings of the previous section, what we see is that the real danger of hitchhiking has most likely remained relatively constant, but the general perception of this danger has increased. As I will further explore, our national tolerance for danger has gone down: things that we previously saw as reasonably safe, suddenly appeared imminently threatening. This trend is not just isolated to the world of hitchhiking; it has become a pernicious artifact throughout the American cultural conscience.

Midway through the twentieth century, America suddenly became more fearful. Our rose tinted glasses corroded over and faded to a sickly grey. Where we once saw opportunity, we began to see risk. This fear permeated our everyday life; it changed what we saw in the world and how we responded to it. Where we had previously faced our challenges with aplomb, we now chose instead to cower in fear. While this change in attitude was a gradual process, the fifties represented a crucial turning point in the evolution of societal attitudes towards risk.

America returned from WWII gun-shy and cowardly. One need only glance at a history textbook to see the surfeit of emergent fearfulness embedded in Fifties culture: McCarthyism, the Red Scare and Nuclear Fear. Quite understandably, the risk of an American-Soviet war coupled with the daunting possibility of nuclear annihilation provided a compelling reason to be fearful. For the first time in recent history, the danger of war had been exported to America. Furthermore, the emergence
of televised news broadcasts served to magnify the immediacy of these concerns, making them omnipresent fixtures of the American household. This new attitude of fearfulness is best summed up Wechner who suggests that we now “live in a culture where it’s just downright fashionable to be paranoid and afraid of everything.”

This changing paradigm of fear is particularly evident in the words we use. Take, for instance, the frequency with which the words “risk”, “crime” and “danger” appeared in *Time* magazine. After remaining relatively constant for over half a century, in the 50s all three words suddenly spiked in relative usage. “Risk” and “crime” appeared almost twice as often in 1950 as they did in 1940. Likewise, the use of the word “danger” increased by about 20% over this same period. This sort of mass hysteria would be somewhat justified if America were actually becoming more dangerous. However, by all quantitative accounts, America was as safe as ever. The homicide rate in the US, which is generally agreed to be an accurate proxy for all other violent crime, was at an all time low throughout the fifties. In this sense, the fifties presented an interesting paradox: Americans were objectively safer than ever before but psychologically beleaguered by constant fears to the contrary.

In the following sections I hope to uncover the ways in which this emergent cultural fear colored American perception of hitchhiking, transforming it from a beloved pastime to a perilous pursuit. In fictional accounts as well as factual news reporting, hitchhiking was increasingly demonized and condemned. The totality of these negative attitudes regarding the perceived safety of thumbing dealt a

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22 Constantine, "The Forest Prince and the Pig Man."
particularly deleterious blow to the future of hitchhiking, making the activity nearly moribund by the end of the decade.

4. Fear and The Media

There exists a densely interwoven connection between individual attitudes and media portrayal. Many ideas disseminated by the media played an important roll in shaping individual attitudes on hitchhiking. For the average hitchhiker, and particularly for perspective newcomers to the activity, the media was a primary source of information. Given the almost total absence of any scholarly reports on the subject, people were forced to rely either on personal experience or media portrayal when it came to assessing the relative safety of hitchhiking. By this logic, the media’s particularly scathing perspective on the activity would have provided a flawed but understandable reason for many to stop hitchhiking or to avoid it in the future.

The media’s relevance to hitchhiking is not merely as an exogenous disincentive but also as a metric for preexisting attitudes. While the media is to some extent an autonomous entity, it is largely informed by the pervading views of society. For historians and sociologists there is often no direct barometer for societal sentiment. However, the media often acts as a reasonably accurate proxy for such data. In this respect, we will also look to the media as a means to capture the echo of America’s more private attitudes.

A few years before popular news sources began to wag their finger at the upraised thumb, popular culture had already taken a few early blows. In 1953, RKO released a horror film entitled the *Hitch-Hiker*. In the film, two fisherman, returning
from a vacation in Mexico, pick up a hitcher. It quickly becomes clear their new passenger wants more than a ride. The two men become hostages in their own car as the hitchhiker, a wanted serial killer, tries to escape capture by the police. While *The Hitch-Hiker* was perhaps the most iconic work of its ilk, it was hardly sui generis. Around this same time, many other fictionalized accounts chronicling similarly disastrous hitchhiking experiences appeared on TV, in magazines, and books.

This was, however, not the first time that the popular media had planted ideas about hitchhiking in the minds of the public. In the 1934 film *It Happened One Night*, a stranded Clark Gable hitches a ride to safety. The iconic scene played an important role in legitimizing hitchhiking as an acceptable and perhaps even fashionable means of transportation.\(^{24}\) In the 1930s with millions of unemployed Americans trying to hitch their way to economic stability, Hollywood was more than happy to cast hitchhiking in a positive light and aid America in her economic recovery. However, by 1950, Hollywood was projecting a very different message. Nothing seems to capture this message better than the tagline of *The Hitch-Hiker* itself: “Have you picked up a hitch hiker—we guarantee you won’t after seeing this picture.”

What had catalyzed the Hollywood machine to change tack on the issue of hitchhiking? According to a release by RKO, the primary reason for releasing the film was because of its veracity.\(^{25}\) Although the film is indeed based on a real life serial killer, this hardly provides a compelling reason for its release. If RKO were truly concerned with chronicling the average hitchhiking experience they would have been better off making a movie about a normal hitchhiker uneventfully hitching from one

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\(^{25}\) Packer, *Mobility without Mayhem*, 78.
onramp to the next. Undeniably, the truth of the matter was that uneventful, good rides vastly outnumbered the microscopic minority of bad rides ending in homicidal encounters. It doesn’t take a film historian to uncover the fact the RKO was not in the business of telling the truth, but of selling tickets. More specifically they were selling fear and America was buying. And the truth be damned; Americans wanted paranoia and RKO was more than happy to supply it. If 1930s Americans were looking for hope, their 1950’s counterparts were looking for reassurance that their irrational fears weren’t all that irrational after all. The Hitch-Hiker captured the nation’s fears and displayed them in film form.

As more and more accounts of dangerous hitchhikers emerged, the line between fact and fiction quickly became muddled. Many of the same fabricated tales about dangerous drivers and murderous hitchhikers from decades prior reemerged, repackaged as real life accounts.26 This blurring of the line between fact and fiction was emblematic of America’s newfound fearfulness. Americans were scared, and it didn’t really matter if these fears were rational or irrational. Red Fear would still be Red Fear whether or not McCarthy actually had a list. And nukes would still be nukes whether or not Khrushchev actually intended on using them. To some extent, it was this not knowing that made our fear all the more real and all the more troubling. What was scary wasn’t that every hitchhiker was a murderer, but rather the possibility that every hitchhiker might be a murderer. A 1950 article in Reader’s Digest captures this sentiment perfectly: “Driving along the highway you see the hitch-hiker standing there, thumb aloft. A college boy on his way home? Or a criminal out to rob you? An

26 Ibid., 86.
escaped convict who needs your car? A trigger happy dope-fiend? You don't know.” 27

It was precisely this unknowable risk of danger that made the danger all the more
menacing. Similarly, what kept film goers writhing on the edge of their seats during
The Hitch-Hiker wasn’t the visible danger presented by the serial killer, but rather the
lack of certainty about what he would do next.

While movies and fictionalized books may have provided adequate fodder for
America’s budding fear of hitchhiking it was newsmen who fanned these embers into
full-fledged flames of fear. Even though crime was at an all-time low, a look at the
papers would suggest just the opposite. 28 This was particularly true of reporting on
hitchhiking. While newspapers weren’t wrong to report of robberies, rapes, and
murders amongst the hitchhiking community, their selective reporting created a
biased and one-sided narrative. As I have already established, hitchhiking had its
dangers, but these dangers were no more worrisome than any number of other
potentially risky activities. Furthermore, there is nothing to suggest that hitchhiking
was any more dangerous in the Fifties than it was a decade prior, but this did little to
stop the press from mounting a libelous attack on the activity. 29

Take a 1956 article from the Washington Post. The article opens with a
graphic account of a father being held captive in his own car by a group of armed
tenagers. The article then proceeds through a litany of over a half-dozen similar
accounts. It is only in a single sentence in the last column of the last page of the two-
page article that the slightest mentioned is made to the mere possibility of well-

27 Rinvolucri, Hitch-Hiking, Ch. 8.
intending hitchhikers. The author shows no qualms about casting all hitchhikers in the same dastardly and disparaging light. The uninformed reader would get the impression that nearly every hitchhiker was either an escaped convict or a soon-to-be murder suspect. Furthermore, despite being a purported news source for residents of the Washington DC area, the paper makes extensive mention of a murder who recently escaped a Mississippi penitentiary. The relevance of this information? The man had been known to hitchhike. One cannot help but question the journalistic integrity of an article that spends five times as many lines talking about the local danger posed by an escaped prisoner almost 1000 miles away as it does acknowledging the mere possibility of honest hitchhikers.\(^{30}\)

The only remarkable thing about this article is its uncanny verisimilitude to dozens of other similar articles written through this period. All of these articles seemed more concerned with hyperbolizing a few very unfortunate incidents than they did with providing an accurate representation of the activity.

To understand the evolution of media attitudes towards hitchhiking it is worthwhile to examine an article on hitchhiking from the thirties. The following excerpt appeared in a 1931 copy of the New Republic magazine:

“With the return of summer, that curious American phenomenon, the hitchhiker, has reappeared on all the automobile highways of the United States. Automobile clubs warn their members not to pick up pedestrians who wave hopefully from the roadside; state legislatures pass laws against requesting lifts from unknown

Although this article is also something of a warning to drivers, its tone and overall construction bear little resemblance to the previous article. Take the very first sentence of the article: rather than launching into a lengthy recapitulation of a single crime, the author establishes hitchhiking as a popular phenomenon, in effect, tacitly suggesting the good-naturedness of the average hitchhiker. The article does go on to make mention of possible dangers associated with hitchhiking. But even these warnings are downplayed and presented as the opinions of others. The article almost seems to mock these worries, reframing hitchhiking as nothing more than a “curious phenomenon.” The article does not try blow the issue out of proportion or drum up undue fear. This sort of levelheaded journalism strikes a sharp contrast with the fear mongering of the 1950s.

In addition to negative portrayal of hitchhiking in newspapers, other non-fiction literature also began to vilify hitchhiking and its practitioners. Prior to the 1950s, there were a surprising number of books dedicated to providing instruction and tips for the practice of hitchhiking. Around the fifties, publication of these manuals became increasingly rare. Today the vast majority of these books are out of print and almost impossible to find.32 Similarly, many travel guides used to make mention of hitchhiking as a cheap and effective way for tourists to experience a particular area. Starting around the 50s, mentions of hitchhiking became increasingly

31 Quoted in Rinvoluci, Hitch-Hiking, Ch. 8.
sparse, with some books actively discouraging the practice. The causes of hitchhiking’s disappearance from travel literature is perhaps two-fold. First, Americans didn’t want to be reassured, they wanted literature that confirmed the truth of their fearful attitudes. Second, even publishers caught the fear bug. Many of those who had previously published these manuals worried that they might be held legally accountable in the event that one of their readers became the victim of a crime while hitchhiking. The few books that continued to make mention of hitchhiking prefaced the practice with heavy-handed disclaimers.

5. Individual Fear

Media, whether it is newspapers, TV broadcasts, fictional books, or movies, would be nothing if it were not for the individual consumer. Consumer and media operate together in an intricate cycle. The media is largely informed by and aims at catering to individual beliefs and preferences. Media sources take in beliefs and predispositions from the public and spit back out repackaged news stories to the eager consumer. It is through this cycle that beliefs are created, transformed, and transmitted. If we are to understand the growing fear of hitchhiking, we must not only look at media portrayal but also the creation and response to anti-hitchhiking sentiment on an individual level.

In the 1950s, individuals became highly attuned to a pervading sense of danger. According to one author, the typical 1950s American lived with the constant

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feeling that “danger was always imminent.” Concomitant with this belief was the notion that it was the individual’s responsibility to avoid or ward off this danger. Individuals began to recoil into their own protective bubbles of fear. The outsider could no longer be trusted. Instead it was the responsibility of the individual to protect herself. This need to self-protect further exacerbated fear and made individuals increasingly wary of people and situations they encountered. This protective isolationism was strongly at odds with communitarian values necessary for hitchhiking.

Drivers became increasingly wary of, if not totally averse to, picking up hitchhikers. Prior to the 1950s, the hitchhiker identity had largely been validated by its many noble practitioners, the college student, the unemployed worker, and most recently the venerable solider. However, with the dawn of the new decade, these positive identities were eclipsed by the specter of the dangerous hitchhiker. Compounding this fear was a belief that deviant hitchhikers might even attempt to impersonate college students or veterans in an attempt to beguile their potential victims. The idea that even the things we trusted most could be little more than danger in disguise was quintessential of the 1950s attitudes. In this new climate of fear, drivers could never be too careful.

34 Packer, *Mobility without Mayhem*, 87.
35 Ibid., 81.
In the early years of hitchhiking, popular mythology framed the hitchhiker as the perpetrator of crime and the driver as the hapless victim.\textsuperscript{37} Ironically, this disproportionate focus on the victimization of benevolent drivers by dangerous hitchhikers was something of a boon to hitchhiking as a whole. If only fellow hitchhikers were to be feared, the act of hitchhiking itself was still perceived as largely safe. For drivers, dangerous hitchhikers were a risk, but they were lurking in plain view. The wary driver need only assess his potential passengers with a keen eye and he could surely spot any potentially dangerous riders before they set foot in his car. With hitchhikers largely unperturbed by crime and drivers convinced that they were each too shrewd to be the target of crime, hitching remained a robustly popular activity.

Almost entirely novel in the 1950s was the notion that drivers themselves could be the perpetrators of crime. This increasing propensity for drivers to be criminals had some factual basis. According to the CHP report, in 1973, 72% of hitchhiking-related crimes were committed by drivers against hitchhikers.\textsuperscript{38} Although

\textsuperscript{37} This misnomer of the dangerous hitchhiker was largely the product of shoddy analysis. A good deal of data on the composition of the hitchhiking population was culled from records of police stops. Police typically chose to accost suspicious or dangerous looking hitchhikers more frequently than other run of the mill hitchers. Unsurprisingly, when police ran identity checks on these dangerous looking characters, a good number did in fact have criminal backgrounds. Take, for example, the Wichita Police Department, whose 1935 records showed that two of every five hitchhikers had a major criminal record. As we can see, this selective interview process resulted in a significant overestimation of the proportion of hitchhikers with criminal backgrounds.

\textsuperscript{38} California Department of the California Highway Patrol, \textit{California Crimes and Accidents Associated with Hitchhiking}. 
longitudinal data is spare, anecdotal evidence suggests that this shift in the role of the driver began around 1950. With this new paradigm, the identity of the driver was radically transformed from Good Samaritan to potential criminal. Even the hitchhiker, whose worst concern was previously the risk of being stranded without a ride, now had to fear potential homicide. This idea that criminals were moving about, hidden by the protective shell of the car, was particularly daunting. Danger was no longer out in the open, it was lurking in the driver’s seat of a potential ride. The only way for hitchhikers to avoid this danger was to stay off the road and retreat to the safety of isolated self-reliance.

Furthermore, the very idea of hitchhiking became less appealing to teenagers in the fifties. Adolescents in the fifties were the first generation to grow up in a world already inundated by cars, and they began to expect a higher degree of safety in their travel. In the words of one article, “compared with the seamlessness of car journeys, all other forms of travel are fragmented, inconvenient and potentially dangerous.”

Young people still had a certain inalienable restlessness that made hitchhiking appealing, but they were too scared to actually partake in the activity. This risk averse restraint wasn’t merely present in this new, younger generation. Even parents who in their own youth had hitchhiked extensively began to caution their own children against the activity. In the span of just one generation, a profound cleft

41 Applebome, "On the Road, 1988: New Dangers and Decline in Hitchhiking."
emerged regarding attitudes towards hitchhiking. In one moment it was revered and in the next it was scorned.

Around the time hitchhiking was first born, the entire nation was abuzz with the spirit of adventure, an ethos that fit hitchhiking well and stuck with it for many subsequent decades. In its nascence, hitchhiking existed almost exclusively for the purpose of adventure. It was rarely thought of as a practical means of transportation. With this mindset, inconvenience, discomfort and even potentially danger were part of the package.

In the 1940s, chiefly as a result of wartime necessity, hitchhiking became a largely practical matter. Whether it was soldiers hitchhiking home to their families or patriotic citizens thumbing a ride to save gas rations, the goal was not adventure, but rather to get from point A to point B. This more practical conceptualization of hitchhiking carried over into the fifties. Once the element of adventure was eviscerated and hitchhiking was reduced to a purely functional mode of transportation it became “organized by the logic of danger versus safety.”

In this new climate of risk management the best anecdote to danger seemed to be control. If the situation could be controlled, risk could be avoided. Unfortunately, for the 1950s American, control was antithetical to the very nature of hitchhiking. According to one young hitchhiker, “I like arrival to be something more than the result of my calculations.” Hitchhiking cannot be planned as an A-to-B trip. One

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46 Packer, *Mobility without Mayhem*, 79.
must relinquish a good deal of control. Timetables and destination become loose and fluid abstracts. The journey takes on a certain unpredictable autonomy. The very idea of adventure simply became less appealing. In one contemporary interview a young Cambridge girl explained her disinterest in hitchhiking: “I haven't got this sort of love of adventure -- I like to be certain of what I'm doing, have a sense of security.”

Historically, this lack of predictability was part of what made hitchhiking appealing to many. According to seasoned hitchhiker Elijah Wald, the joy of hitchhiking comes from the element of surprise. Hitchhiking is not just about tolerating a lack of control, it requires an active embrace and desire for uncertainty. For the fretful 1950s citizen, this unknowing and lack of control would have been uncomfortable and possibly unacceptable.

What changed wasn’t just attitudes about hitchhiking but the very mindset with which its practitioners approached it. Historically, hitchhikers had embraced, if not cherished, hitchhiking precisely because of its perceived riskiness. According to Rinvolucri, disdainful comments like “It's difficult, it's risky, you won't be able to get lifts” often served as a catalyst, sending young hitchhikers out on the road with a desire to prove themselves. In fact, some hitchhikers went so far as to expose themselves to unnecessary danger as a way to “intensify the experience.”

In an in-depth psychological analysis of hitchhiking personality types, one study found the many of the personality traits that dispose hitchhikers to the activity also make them

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48 Ibid.
49 Wald, Riding with Strangers, 8.
50 Rinvolucri, Hitch-Hiking, Ch. 1.
more attracted to potentially risky situations.\textsuperscript{52} By the 1950s, this active pursuit of danger was no longer in vogue. For many, risk became seen as categorically bad. When viewed through the sterile lens of calculated risk reduction, hitchhiking was no longer worth the risk.

The notion of hitchhiking as an adventure thatembraced or transcended danger is perhaps best summed up by Wald, who opines, “there are more precious things than safety, and those things may be lost if we give way to paranoia.”\textsuperscript{53} In large part, the fifties did precisely that: they gave way to paranoia. In a 1960s news article on hitchhiking, the author suggests, “people are risk taking a little less, you don’t go out there unless you’re confident you’re going to be picked up by somebody safe.”\textsuperscript{54} The fact is, no one can ever be totally certain. If risk and uncertainty was unacceptable, so too was hitchhiking.

Even if they weren’t actively seeking risk, earlier hitchhikers had embraced many of the perils of the road as part of the adventure. In many interviews, hitchhikers make mention of personal risks, but place very little weight on these concerns, accepting them as an integral part of the journey.\textsuperscript{55} Even for women, fear of sexual assault was acknowledged but not seen as a pressing disincentive. One young female opined that you “had better accept the possibility without concern.”\textsuperscript{56} Similarly for drivers the prevailing sentiment for most of hitchhiking’s existence was that the value of picking up hitchhikers simply outweighed or perhaps defied any

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 664.
\textsuperscript{53} Wald, \textit{Riding with Strangers}, 22.
\textsuperscript{54} Applebome, "On the Road, 1988: New Dangers and Decline in Hitchhiking."
\textsuperscript{55} Chesters and Smith, "The Neglected Art of Hitch-Hiking: Risk, Trust and Sustainability."
\textsuperscript{56} Miller, "On the Road: Hitchhiking on the Highway," 19.
notion of risk. According to Milling, “It is the American way of doing things… The average American motorist still desires, in spite of the well known risks, to help the man or woman he believes worthy.”

Today, as evidenced by the many hours that hitchhikers must often wait at the side of the road, this sentiment appears largely moribund.

Where the potential for risk had once been an intrinsic and celebrated aspect of hitchhiking culture, it was now problematized. The aforementioned 1956 Washington Post article concludes rhetorically, questioning whether the odds of picking up a dangerous hitchhiker are in the reader’s favor. A decade prior, this notion of being able to quantify and weigh the risk embodied in hitchhiking would simply not have been part of the popular vernacular. Even if it were, the prevailing answer would most likely have been, “Sure I’ll take my chances.” By the 1950s, risk was perceived as always present and generally in unacceptable quantities.

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57 Packer, Mobility without Mayhem, 80.
59 "The Tragic Experiences of People Who Were Kind to Hitchhikers Should Make Every Motorist Heed the Warning."
IV. Changing Mobilities

“*I will build a car for the great multitude… it will be so low in price that no man making a good salary will be unable to own one*”

-Henry Ford

1. Monomobility

In the words of historian John Schlebecker, hitchhiking is a “product of automobile civilization.”¹ As America has changed her orientation towards automobiles, both physically and psychologically, many of these transformations have also cascaded over to the realm of hitchhiking. Since the inception of the car in the early 20th century, the way America has conceptualized transportation has changed drastically. Travel by automobile has become a dominant force in the world of transportation, overshadowing and curtailing other forms of movement. This chapter will look at the ways in which the monopolizing influence of automobile culture has made hitchhiking an increasingly untenable activity.

Many of the changes that arose as an effect of the rising popularity of the automobile acted very much against the interests and needs of the hitchhiker. These changes, while all densely interrelated, can roughly be divided into four categories. First, the increasing prevalence and availability of automobiles affected a demographic shift: many past or would-be hitchhikers became car owners, and their desire or need to hitchhike was abated. Second, it was necessary for America to be

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reconstructed to suit the needs of automobile drivers. Many physical structures which had once been a boon to the hitchhiker were paved over in the service of automotive necessity. Third, cars became a divisive element in American culture, bifurcating the public between a car-owning and a car-lacking class. Finally, what began as a functional interest in the mobility potential of the car transformed into a fetishized subservience to them. Where once cars were effective platforms of mobility, they have since become exclusionary vessels of privatized pleasure.

2. A Brief History of American Automobility

Before delving into the intricate relationship between cars and hitchhikers, it is important to develop an understanding of American automotive prevalence and use. This framework will serve as scaffolding upon which we can hang the subsequent comparative discussion of automobiles and hitchhiking.

Over the last century, cars in America have gone from being a rare obscurity to a ubiquitous necessity. One automotive scholar avers that cars are so pervasive that they are now no different from washing machines and refrigerators in the way they have become “completely integrated into the banality of the everyday.”² The total number of cars in America has been on an almost entirely upward sloping trajectory since the turn of the 20th century. Even when we factor in population growth, the

number of cars per capita has witnessed exuberant growth for over a century.³ In 1900 there were less than 8,000 cars in the US. By 1920, this figure had increased to 8 million. This early growth in the amount and availability of cars is largely the result of advancements in assembly line technology pioneered by Henry Ford. Ford’s assembly line allowed automobiles to be produced at increasing numbers and at lower prices.

Increasing availability of automotive financing further extended the reach and scale of the car industry.⁴ By 1929, with over 23 million vehicles on the road, the car had already become an unmistakable icon of the American landscape. One historian claims that by 1929, every American who could afford a car had already bought one (or two).⁵ 1929 would stand as a high water mark for car ownership for almost two decades. By 1930 the Great Depression was gripping America and demand for automobiles plummeted perilously. Just as America was recovering from the Great Depression and car sales were once again beginning to take off, World War II began and commercial automakers were forced to switch their production to military armaments. As a result, few consumer automobiles were produced between 1942 and 1945.⁶

With the conclusion of the Second World War, the demand for automobiles came back stronger than ever before. Three years of scarcity had left Americans yearning for the opportunity to once again indulge in the frivolities of consumption.

⁵ Ibid., 460.
Furthermore, the general period of affluence that followed World War II made buying cars all the more appealing and accessible for millions of Americans. In 1912 Henry Ford had pledged to make cars so affordable that every hard-working American would be able to own one.\textsuperscript{7} By the mid-1950s this goal had come true. In 1955 there were 3.18 Americans for every car and a median American household size of 3.33, virtually a car for every household in America. The car was became a centerpiece of American culture.

In 1953 GM CEO, Charlie Wilson announced, “What’s good for the country is good for GM, and vice versa.”\textsuperscript{8} Mr. Wilson’s words weren’t too far from the truth. Automakers made up the largest industry in America as measured by total product value.\textsuperscript{9} America had become a nation officially (Charlie Wilson later went on to become US secretary of defense under Eisenhower) and unofficially run by automakers with the sole interest of catering to the auto consuming public.\textsuperscript{10} The birth of America into the age of automobile saturation was not merely marked by a car in every driveway, but by a physical, economic and psychological reconfiguration of the American landscape. Gas stations, freeways, drive-in-movie theaters, and parking lots all became part of the quotidian backdrop of American life.

The hitchhiker wouldn’t exist were it not for the automobile. And for a long time it was possible for the former to metaphorically and literally hitch a ride on the rising popularity of the latter. For the first half-century, automotive popularity was highly beneficial to the hitchhiking community. During this initial period, every road

\textsuperscript{7} P. U. Jayaraman, \textit{Management Icons} (Excel Books, 2007), 1.  
\textsuperscript{8} Packer, \textit{Mobility without Mayhem}, 10.  
\textsuperscript{9} Flink, "Three Stages of American Automobile Consciousness," 463.
paved for cars was a road paved for hitchhikers. However, by mid-century this symbiotic relationship came to a tipping point. After 1950, the automobile became the dominant form of mobility in America. The word *dominant* in this context is no accident. The power of the car arose precisely because of its ability to dominate and subsequently marginalize all other forms of transportation. The combined clout of the automotive industry and its associated partners, as well as the millions of American car owners, was so powerful that they faced little trouble reshaping America to best suit their needs. Much in the same way that monoculture farming has swept across the heartland, reducing what was once a diverse and fluid supply of agricultural products into a list of just two or three perennial staples, mono-mobility had a similarly toxic effect, allowing one form of transportation to dominate at the expense of all others. Hitchhiking withered under the monolithic influence of growing automobile culture.

### 3. Changing Demographics

By the 1950s, as a result of decreased cost and increased necessity, many Americans who had never before had access to a vehicle of their own became proud car owners. In particular, many groups that had once relied on hitchhiking as a form of transportation now owned cars. Hitchhiking’s once burgeoning ranks were slowly decimated as more and more Americans turned to cars as their primary form of transportation.

The college student provides a particularly illustrative example of these changing demographics in car ownership. Historically, college students made up an
important portion of the hitchhiking population.\textsuperscript{11} College students often lacked money for more expensive modes of transportation, and frequently relied on hitchhiking as an easy way to get to and from school on breaks. Hitchhiking was so embedded in collegiate culture that, according to one historian, many college students in the thirties would have “considered any other form of transportation as slightly reprehensible.”\textsuperscript{12} These trends were intensified by a wave of magazine articles in the late forties and early fifties, that touted hitchhiking as a cheap and exciting form of transportation for college students hoping to go on a thrifty vacation.\textsuperscript{13} The popularity of hitchhiking amongst “college [men]” was such that Schlebecker goes so far as to refer to them as “the backbone of the hitchhiking fraternity.”\textsuperscript{14}

However, as cars became more affordable, this dependable “backbone” began to atrophy as more college-age students substituted travel in their own cars for travel by thumb. The post-war economic boom created a generation of teenagers who could suddenly afford to buy vehicles of their own.\textsuperscript{15} Furthermore, car ownership became an important element of teenage culture. As a result, college age students increasingly sought out cars as a way to take part in a new wave of automotive activities. Having a car provided access to now popular teenage hangout spots like drive-in movie theaters and fast food restaurants.\textsuperscript{16} This increase in car ownership among college students

\textsuperscript{11} Packer, \textit{Mobility without Mayhem}, 80.
\textsuperscript{12} Schlebecker, "An Informal History of Hitchhiking," 312.
\textsuperscript{13} Packer, \textit{Mobility without Mayhem}, 90.
\textsuperscript{14} Schlebecker, "An Informal History of Hitchhiking," 326.
was so significant that many college campuses began to face parking shortages.\textsuperscript{17}

More students owning and driving their own cars to campus meant less hitchhikers on the road.

Even for students who did not own a car of their own, the need to hitchhike may still have diminished. Many well-to-do American families owned multiple cars. In 1960, 20\% of American households had two cars.\textsuperscript{18} A significant proportion of college students at this time would have fallen into this wealthier set. Thus, the college student returning home for a break or going on vacation might very well have been given access to a family car.

Another noteworthy demographic was military servicemen. Throughout, WWII, GIs had relied on hitching as an easy form of transportation to and from bases.\textsuperscript{19} Active serviceman made up a large and well-respected portion of the hitchhiking population. With the war over, the total number of GIs moving around the country was significantly diminished. Furthermore, after the war ended many of these veterans settled down and bought cars of their own.

College students and veterans provide two examples of groups that gave up hitchhiking and entered the car owning class. Between 1945 and 1960 the number of cars per capita nearly doubled.\textsuperscript{20} With this rapid rise in automobile ownership, a large portion of the population suddenly became unlikely candidates for hitchhiking.

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\textsuperscript{17} Schlebecker, "An Informal History of Hitchhiking," 326.
\textsuperscript{19} DiMaggio, The Hitchhiker's Field Manual, 47.
\textsuperscript{20} McGuckin, "Journey to Work Trends in the United States and Its Major Metropolitan Areas."
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According to a survey conducted by one researcher, the number one reason for a person to give up hitchhiking was the acquisition of a car.\textsuperscript{21} It bears noting that this may not necessarily be a causal relationship. It seems plausible that in some cases age and natural maturating may have been the primary variable which precipitates the purchase of a car and the cessation of hitchhiking.

However, there are a number of compelling reasons why car ownership might reduce the likelihood of hitching. Cars undeniably provided a quicker and more dependable form of mobility. In situations where speed was desirable, many potential hitchers might instead have chosen to use their car. Furthermore, the very allure of hitchhiking may be diminished for car owners. Hitchhiking had often been viewed as a source of autonomy and self-subsistence. However, a car often satiates these same needs. With a car sitting in the driveway, it might seem perverse and unsatisfying to walk past it only to stick out one’s thumb.

Even for those who did not own a car, the sheer volume of vehicles on the road meant that access to a car had become easier and more affordable. Those in need of transportation could borrow a car from a friend, or rent a car from one of the numerous rental agencies that had recently emerged across the country. For some people, hitchhiking had once represented the only feasible or affordable form of transportation. By the mid-fifties only the most destitute of Americans would still have seen hitchhiking as a necessary option. Those who continued to hitchhike more likely did so out of personal desire as opposed to actual need.

\textsuperscript{21} Rinvolucri, \textit{Hitch-Hiking}, Ch. 1.
The number of cars per capita has only continued to increase since 1960. Today there are 786 cars on the road for every 1000 Americans. If we count only licensed drivers, America boasts an astounding 1.2 cars per person. This extreme prevalence of automobiles further intensifies the ease of car access and decreases the need for hitchhiking. Furthermore, as we will explore in subsequent sections, the pervasiveness of automobiles has also played a pivotal role in shaping other aspects of American culture and lifestyle which have later militated against hitchhiking.

4. The Changing Transportation Landscape

By 1955, the car was king of the road. In service of this new automotive monarchy, large swaths of American transportation infrastructure were remodeled, adapted, and expanded. In the spirit of Charlie Wilson’s earlier pronouncement, the general sentiment seemed to be “what’s good for the car is good for America.” Millions of taxpayer and corporate dollars were spent building more roads, parking lots, and an assortment of other infrastructure to promote car travel. As the country was reconfigured to better facilitate automotive transportation, owning a car not only became more rewarding, it became more essential. New infrastructure built for cars didn’t merely add to the preexisting transportation system, it was often built at the expense of other forms of transportation. As a result of these new developments, hitchhiking became harder, less effective, and more dangerous.

McGuckin, "Journey to Work Trends in the United States and Its Major Metropolitan Areas."
In many respects the Interstate Highway Act, signed by President Eisenhower in 1956, represented the coronation of this automotive monarchy. The bill’s primary function was to create over 41,000 new miles of toll free expressways across America. While individual states would be in charge of construction of these new roads, the federal government would pick up 90% of the 25 billion dollar tab. The end result was that by 1965, America boasted one of the most extensive and advanced networks of high-speed roadways in the world.

While this new road system made cross-country travel much easier by car, it had adverse effects for those hoping to thumb their way across the nation. Eisenhower’s new superhighways offered far fewer suitable locations from which hitchhikers might be easily picked up. Many of these new roads went through more remote areas and had fewer onramps. Historically, onramps had been a popular place for hitchhikers to enter freeways and solicit rides from slower moving traffic.\textsuperscript{23} Without onramps, hitchhikers were functionally barred from accessing these new super highways.

Wider, multi-lane roads also proved particularly troublesome for would-be hitchhikers. As any hitcher can attest, the ability to make eye contact with drivers as they pass, and in essence solicit each individual driver for a ride, is of immense importance. On a single lane road, cars are forced to drive right past the hitchhiker in a single-file stream, making it relatively easy for a hitchhiker to have a moment, however brief, to visually connect with each motorist. On multi-lane freeways, it is all but impossible for a hitchhiker to make eye contact, let alone any sort of impactful

\textsuperscript{23} Garner, "Risk and Reward: The (Lost?) Art of Hitchhiking," 4.
connection, with a driver four lanes over. With multiple lanes of traffic, the helpless hitchhiker is reduced to a single speck amongst a sea of fast moving cars.

Eisenhower’s new roads, which were often straighter and better paved, allowed motorists to cover vast distances at much greater speeds. As a result, faster-moving cars were less likely to notice and stop for hitchhikers. On old country roads of yesteryear, slow moving cars could easily spot potential hitchers, slow down and invite them aboard. The likelihood that a car whizzing by at 70 MPH will even spot a hitchhiker is significantly diminished. Furthermore, assuming our motorist does spot a hitchhiker, it would be much harder for her to safely bring her vehicle to a stop in time.

Along with their purely physical limitations for hitchhiking, these new roads were often accompanied by new laws which often proved troublesome impediments to hitchhiking hopefuls. Speed was the name of the game on the freeway, and the elimination of anything that might interfere with this high-speed travel became essential. Out of fears that hitchhikers or their generous ride givers might slow down the flow of traffic, hitchhikers were banned from setting foot on most interstates. Every state east of Mississippi explicitly banned hitchhiking on interstate freeways, as did the majority of states to the west.\(^\text{24}\) Actual enforcement of these laws varied substantially by state but, regardless of legal enforcement, the emerging picture is of a new system of roads that was neither inviting nor encouraging of hitchhiking.

The completion of the interstate highway system in 1966 was only one milestone in the ever-increasing network of automotive dominant roadways. For the

last half century, the automotive monarchy has only continued to claim an expanding swath of territory for itself. Every year roads continue to get longer, wider, faster, and less friendly to hitchhikers. Hitchhikers are not the only casualty of this increasingly automotive dominant environment. Horses, bikes and pedestrians, all previously popular forms of transportation, have also been adversely effected by the increasing scale and speed of American freeways.

Cities have also been rearranged to better suit our growing automotive needs. By 1973, over half the land in many US cities had been paved over for purposes directly relating to automobiles. While some of these changes, like parking lots and gas stations, have not necessarily been detrimental to the hitchhiking community, many other reconfigurations have served to further limit where and how hitchhikers are able to get rides. Nearly every city in America has seen a rise in the amount of overpasses, bridges, tunnels, and roundabouts. While all of these features play essential roles in ensuring the easy movement of cars in, around, and through a city, each one poses a problem to hitchhikers. Many overpasses and tunnels are often totally inaccessible to hitchhikers. Similarly, bridges, roundabouts, and many tunnels offer no pedestrian walkway and are too narrow to accommodate a place for a hitchhiker to stand, let alone for a car to pull over and let him in.

5. A World Outside The Car?

When a driver sees a hitchhiker, she is forced to make a decision: stop and pick up the hitchhiker or keep moving. While this decision is usually made in a matter of seconds, a myriad of different things may impact the driver’s decision. Do I want him in my car? Will I enjoy his presence? Is he deserving of a ride? Given the particular driver and the small amount of information she can gleam about the hitchhiker, she may answer these questions in any number of ways.

In large part, the driver’s decision to pick up or not pick up a hitchhiker is a product of her own identity vis-a-vis that of the hitchhiker. When the driver perceives a good deal of similarity between herself and the hitchhiker, she will be more likely to pick him up. This behavior is confirmed by a 1975 study by David Alcorn which found that drivers almost exclusively offer riders to hitchhikers who they perceive to be in their same social group.27 Hippies mostly picked up hippies. And non-hippies, “straights,” mostly picked up straights. Alcorn attributes this behavior to balance theory, the natural proclivity of people to group themselves according to similar “thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and behavior.” While there is immense potential for varying categories and importance of group identities, the results of this study demonstrate that rides will be considerably more forthcoming when the driver identifies core commonalities between herself and a hitchhiker. The problem arises when the modern hitchhiker is perceived as being part of a distinct and non-car owning subset.

The increasing prevalence of cars has not only changed the physical identity of cities, it has also changed how drivers perceive their own identity and the identities of those around them. The vast prevalence of automotive ownership has made it such that those who don’t own cars are perceived as living foreign and unfamiliar lifestyles. American life has been so profoundly reconfigured that to lack a car is to be excluded from many everyday activities. The 1950s became a decade of drive-in and drive-through everything, from movie theaters to carwashes, to restaurants. To lack a car was to be excluded from these activities. Furthermore, as cities became more geographically divided between residential areas and commercial areas, car ownership became increasingly essential. In many areas, cars became the only viable mode of transportation between residence, work, and other activities. “Automobility had become a fundamental right, a precondition of participation in modern social life; those ‘not-in-cars’ [were] disenfranchised and excluded.”

In the words of Sheller and Urry, pedestrians, cyclists and public-transport users were “confined to small slivers of the urban public, …disenfranchised and excluded from full citizenship.”

This is to say that automotive ownership became so normalized that those who lacked access to it were unable to perform the basic functions that made them American citizens. America was bifurcated into two classes: one that owned cars and another that did not. This first class represented true “citizens” and the latter were aliens, relegated to the fringes of American public life.

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29 Sheller and Urry, "The City and the Car," 754.
The notion of a driver’s license further enforces this cleft between driver and hitcher. The license is symbol of proven competence to operate a vehicle. It is also proof of membership amongst the vaunted ranks of American drivers. It is notable that by the 1950s the most common form of ID in America was the driver’s license. Quite literally, a driver’s license was proof of citizenship. To partake in automobile culture is to be American. To hitchhike is to be foreign, to be different.

Historically, many drivers picked up hitchhikers out of sheer boredom and loneliness; they were looking for someone with whom they could talk and connect. If the hitchhiker is believed to be of their same ilk, the driver may assume the hitchhiker will prove to be a worthwhile and enjoyable companion. As I will further develop in chapter 4, this connective desire plays an important role in motivating both hitchhikers and drivers to seek out each other’s company. If, however, the hitchhiker is part of a dissimilar out-group, the driver may believe that there is little potential for connection. If they feel their identities are too dissimilar to be compatible, they may have little interest in fostering a meaningful connection. Thus, drivers may have less incentive to even consider picking up hitchhikers in the first place.

This sort of bifurcation between hitcher and driver also plays out on a class-based level. Increasingly, from the 1950s onward, the car began to be seen as a symbol of status. The car was no longer an object of purely utilitarian functionality. The availability of increasingly diverse models of cars meant automobiles became personalized representations of their owner’s identity. Many ads framed having the

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31 Alcorn, "Who Picks up Whom: The Fleeting Encounter between Motorist and Hitchhiker," 60.
right car as a way to prove one’s worth and wealth. Second to the house itself, a car was the largest tangible indicator of affluence. Even when not being driven, the car sits outside the driver’s home as permanent advertisement of its owner’s wealth. Those with cars become part of a privileged status group. By contrast, the hitchhiker’s lack of a car implicitly positions him in a lower class. It is not just that the hitchhiker is on a lower economic rung than the driver; he has chosen (or failed) to even set foot on the economic ladder. Particularly in a world filled with alternative travel options, the decision to hitchhike is an active choice not to participate in the market economy. To travel free of charge. This choice to eschew conspicuous symbols of monetary wealth sets the hitchhiker very much apart from the status-conscious driver. Drivers, perceiving this lack of similarity, might be reluctant to pick up a hitchhiker.

In the eyes of the driver, the hitchhiker’s choice to abstain from the market economy may even make him less deserving of a ride. In a set of interviews conducted by Mario Rinvolucri, some car owners equated hitchhiking with begging. These car owners felt that they had worked hard to earn their vehicle, and that the hitchhiker was freeloading off the hard-earned products of their labor. In the words of one man, “I'm inclined to think of them as beggars, not the sort that sit on the corner of the Kasbah displaying their 'woes', but a more sophisticated type, say a 'con-man'.” Along these lines, the provisioning of rides is transformed from a beneficent civic duty to a mistaken submission to opportunistic trickery.

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33 Sheller and Urry, "The City and the Car," 738.
34 Rinvolucri, *Hitch-Hiking*, Ch. 5.
The more common cars become, the more abnormal the hitchhiker becomes by comparison. The simple paucity in the number of hitchhikers serves to make them an abnormal breed. In periods when hitchhiking was more common, the hitchhiker was normalized. However, as the number of hitchhikers decreases, the practice itself is seen as being more bizarre. There is a natural response among humans to fear that which is different. Once the hitchhiker has become a rare sight, he is by extension different. Taken one step further, the hitchhiker can be seen as potentially malevolent and dangerous.  

This notion of the hitchhiker as being inherently abnormal and dangerous emerged often in response to my survey. One subjected responded that she “would be skeptical of people who don't have cars themselves.” According to one scholar, “people who needed or chose to hitchhike became, by definition, deviant, suspect, disreputable, risky, abnormal, and potentially dangers as criminals or people with a mental disorder.” In this sense, the division between driver and hitchhiker was not merely a benign lack of similarity. It was an active split between safe and unsafe.

In the extreme, the hitchhiker’s out-group identity may marginalize him to an extent that he may become entirely invisible to the driver. As the number of cars on the road continues to increase, they become the sole object of focus for the driver. Everything else fades into obscurity. One scholar of hitchhiking remarks, “with the triumph of the car the ‘other’ – anyone not in a car – becomes invisible.”

Alternatively this illusion of invisibility may be a product of expectation. All we

37 Ibid., 6.
expect to see on the road is other cars, so we are simply not looking for anything but
cars. Either way, the car has become such a dominant element in American culture
that the hitchhiker, by comparison, becomes figuratively, and to a large extent,
literally, invisible.

This group division between car owning drivers and car-less hitchhikers may
have an equally potent effect on potential hitchhikers. It is quite possible that as cars
have been given increasing societal importance both in terms of practical use and
demonstration of personal value, the hitchhiker may internalize this sort of lacking.
The hitcher may feel lesser or not worthy precisely because he lacks this crucial
component necessary for American participation.\textsuperscript{38} Previously those without cars
were a robust and formidable group; to stick one’s thumb out and openly proclaim
membership to this group was not a problem. In the current era of pervasive
automobility, there exists a certain stigma in admitting one’s lack of a car. Thus,
rather than stand in the open and advertise this lack, the potential hitchhiker may
choose to disguise this lack by seeking other forms of more acceptable transportation.

6. Car Fetishism: The Rise of the Private Car

Beginning in the fifties, Americans began to take on new attitudes about
automobiles. Many of these attitudes made drivers less comfortable inviting others
into their cars. In large part due to propaganda by the car companies themselves, cars
were transformed from functional modes of transportation to idolized objects and
expressions of individualism.

\textsuperscript{38} Sheller and Urry, "The City and the Car," 739.
In the earliest years of their mainstream existence, cars were viewed largely in terms of their functionality; they had no particular aesthetic value. This strict utilitarianism embodied by the early automobile is captured well when Henry Ford joked that “any customer can have a car painted any color that he wants, so long as it is black.” For many decades customers were more than satisfied with this simple functionality and auto manufactures happily continued to churn out cookie cutter cars.

However, the market eventually reached a point where everyone who could afford a car already owned one. Those with cars were unlikely to buy another one until their first car became totally defunct. Risking market stagnation, GM realized that the only way to increase car sales was to change the automotive paradigm by transforming the car into an appealing consumer item. GM began redesigning their cars and producing new styles every year. Furthermore, GM radically expanded their inventory, offering many different models of car across all price ranges.\(^{39}\) The car became more than a means of transportation; it was an expression of individual style and trendiness. Cars became outlets for what sociologist Max Weber would refer to as “conspicuous consumption”: the need to spend money on luxury goods as a way to demonstrate wealth and class. One couldn’t simply own a car; you had to own the newest, hippest model. One need only look to the large, gas guzzling space-age cars of the fifties to see the extreme to which people allowed a need for fresh style to overshadow practical use. In the words of one observer in the 1950s, “motorists pay homage to and pamper their cars.”\(^{40}\) This description suggests an almost deistic relationship between car and owner. People became addicted to their cars. According


to one LA mechanic interviewed in the 1960s, people “go hungry at night so that their automobiles can get the care they deserve.”\textsuperscript{41} When the car was elevated to such an extent, it was no longer the owner driving the car, but the car driving its owner.

By the 1960s this bizarre fetishism also began to make anecdotal appearances among the hitchhiking community. According to one source, some drivers picked up hitchhikers merely so they could show off their car to someone, often driving excessively fast so as to demonstrate the power of their cars.\textsuperscript{42} In the extreme, some hitchhikers themselves, Huttman claims, began to suffer from this auto-obsession, only accepting rides in fancy cars, and refusing all others.\textsuperscript{43}

Concomitant with this obsession with cars arose the notion of cars as a means of expressing and preserving one’s individualism. The notion of individualized transport is a relatively recent idea. The bike, which first gained popular traction around the turn of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, was the first time that people were able to travel long distances by themselves.\textsuperscript{44} Prior to this, all transportation had been en masse on ships, trains, trolleys, etc. With the exception of the fabulously wealthy, private ownership of these means of transportation was all but impossible. The automobile provided a capacity for individual transportation previously unimaginable. In terms of speed, comfort and autonomy, the car afforded a radical expansion of the previously existing methods of self-transport. This capacity for individual travel is even captured in the word itself, automobile: self-movement.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{42} Rinvolucri, \textit{Hitch-Hiking}, Ch. 6.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} Flink, "Three Stages of American Automobile Consciousness," 453.
\textsuperscript{45} Sheller and Urry, "The City and the Car," 739.
Not only did the connection between car and driver allow the latter an unparalleled degree of individual expression and control, it allowed him the ability to retreat from society. The car both physically and mentally provided a space where the driver could exclude the outside world. On public transportation, the passenger was forced to contend with the world surrounding him: people, rules, and interactions. Within the private confines of the car, the driver could be truly alone and in control. According to one automotive scholar, the motor car gives the average man “control over his immediate environment to a degree probably not equaled anywhere else in his daily routine.”\(^{46}\) The very structure of the modern car, with its metal frame and and windows provides the perfect enclosure for the increasingly reclusive driver. Unlike the open-air cars of the early 1900s, the modern car provided total protection for the driver. He could confront the world on his terms, and when he did, he was still insulated by a thick layer of glass and metal.

It isn’t merely that the car provided an opportunity for individualism and withdrawal from the outside world; perhaps more importantly, the modern car became a “private bit of moving space.”\(^{47}\) This distinction is framed even more poignantly by O’Regan who describes cars as “portable territory.”\(^{48}\) The driver was not confined to an individualized locale; rather, he could experience the whole of society, but always from the controlled comfort of his own privatized bubble. The car wasn’t merely private; it offered a supreme level of homely comfort. Japer explains,

“cars are enclosed spaces, little homes you can take with you, where you can play music as loudly as you want, eat dinner, spend the night, even have sex.”

This vision of the car as home is by no means accidental, nor a construction of the overzealous consumer. A 1949 Ford advertisement shows a family of four lounging in a luxuriously provisioned living room with the caption, ‘The ’49 Ford will be a living room on wheels!’ Another author describes the car as “an additional mobile room in the house, a place in which to escape, a den into which a man can creep for peace.”

This notion of the car as an extension of the house is a reoccurring trend throughout automotive literature of the period.

The car as a house metaphor is not merely illustrative of the car’s capacity for comfort, individual activity, and customizability; it also casts the car as a location of excludability. In American society, no place is more private than the home. The homeowner is legally and socially given full control of who enters his home and on what terms. Likewise, car owners are given total control over the passengers they allow to enter their private car.

This lengthy genealogy of the norms and attitudes associated with automobile ownership should provide a good deal of insight into the increasing reluctance with which modern drivers have invited hitchhikers aboard their private moving homes. The average homeowner opens her home only to well-known acquaintances, and generally only after extending a prior invitation. If the car is nothing more than an extension of the home, the modern driver might have good reason to feel hesitant.

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50 Rinvolucri, Hitch-Hiking, Ch. 4.
about inviting a total stranger inside on only a few seconds notice. Rinvolucri echoes this sentiment: “if a car is such an intimate place, a kind of extension of the home, taking in a hitch-hiker must appear hazardous and unnatural.”

There arises an interesting inverse relationship between the safety and comfort of the car and the perceived safety of the outside world. As cars became both physically and psychologically more protected and homelike, the outside world, by comparison, took on an increasingly disconcerting and dangerous character. To let in this outside world is to not only let in the unknown, but to soil the safety of the protected automobile. People are familiar and comfortable with the contents of their cars. Letting in a hitchhiker adds an unknown and potentially dangerous element to an otherwise sterile and safe environment. This safeness of the car strikes a stark contrast with the uncertainty and potential danger of the hitchhiker.

In addition to representing a foreign intrusion into the safety and privacy of the car, the hitchhiker also threatens to violate the intimacy of the car. On trains and buses, people are willing to tolerate the banal pleasantries that they might have to exchange with strangers. However, in one’s own home, the expectation is that social interaction will only occur with invited guests. To have a hitchhiker suddenly plunked into one’s passenger seat is to be suddenly immersed in an unnaturally intimate relationship. As many hitchhikers can attest, entering a stranger’s car generates an almost unexpected degree of closeness. It is precisely because of this frank candidness that many hitchhikers enjoy the activity so much. But many drivers, particularly today, are exceptionally wary of putting themselves in such a situation. In

51 Ibid.
this vein, one respondent to my survey remarks on her decreased “willing to share my travel space with others these days.” Over time, Americans have become increasingly accustomed to the seclusion afforded by the private motorcar. A 1995 survey of young drivers found that 61% viewed driving as “time to think and enjoy being alone.”\textsuperscript{52} We have become less willing to share our travel space and more intolerant of the unwanted invasion of strangers into our mobile sanctuaries.

\textsuperscript{52} Putnam, \textit{Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community}, 213.
V. Coming Apart

“In an ever more isolated and paranoid world… hitchhiking [is] a perfect antidote to alienation”

– Elijah Wald

1. A Stranger Nation

It is an undeniable reality that America is coming apart. We are less connected, less trusting, less helping and less neighborly than we have ever been at any hitherto existing point in our history. This atrophy of the connective tissue that holds us together as a nation has had a litany of far reaching effects on our national institutions and behaviors. The decline of hitchhiking is but one illustrative example of this national catastrophe.

Hitchhiking is an expression and confirmation of togetherness. The outstretched thumb of the hitchhiker holds with it two implicit promises. First, it is a vow of trustworthiness. It suggests that the hitchhiker means no harm and can be trusted to act decently within the confines of the driver’s car. Second, there is a promise of connection. The itinerant hitchhiker has little more to offer than his companionship. A tired, lonely driver is often more than happy to invite aboard a hitchhiker who can keep him entertained by stories of the road and of the world. In large part, the hitchhiker himself expects some reciprocation of these same two promises. The hitchhiker expects that he can trust the driver to safely deliver him further down the road. And he may hope that the driver will be willing to connect and
engage him in conversation. In the absence of these two fundamental pillars of trust and connection, hitchhiking becomes a largely untenable pastime. For these reasons it is all the more unfortunate that both connection and trust have become increasingly scare commodities in the United States.

After briefly introducing two frameworks for our inquiry, the remainder of this chapter will be devoted to dissecting several symptoms stemming from our growing lack of togetherness. First we will examine our increasingly prevalent individualism and its deleterious effects on our capacity and desire to connect with and help one another. Second, we will discuss trends of declining trust in America. Although this chapter will generally look at how macro-changes in America’s character have effected hitchhiking, it is worth noting that the fate of hitchhiking runs parallel to that of dozens of other national activities and institutions. And perhaps more cynically, the fate of hitchhiking may be a reflection of larger degenerative changes in our national character as a whole.

2. On Social Capital and Neighborliness

Political Scientist Robert Putnam defines social capital as the “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.”\(^1\) In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam uses a lens of social capital to chart the rise and fall of civic participation in America. In large part Putnam focuses on participation in associations, ranging from PTAs, to

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church groups, to bowling leagues. Putnam avers that communities with higher levels of civic participation are more connected, more trusting, and more helpful. In totality, the result of this connectedness is what Putnam refers to as social capital.

The connection between participation in a local chapter of the Lions Club and hitchhiking is not immediately apparent. However, like hitchhiking, group membership necessitates social encounters, often with strangers. Furthermore, a core aspect of many associations is some sort of community service or pro-social volunteerism. Even non-community service oriented groups frequently get involved in community projects. Likewise, hitchhiking is entirely dependent on this sort of helping behavior. This linkage between social capital and hitchhiking is surprisingly strong. In the appendix of a 1970s hitchhiking manual is a map charting the ease of hitchhiking in each state. As you can see below, Putnam’s map of social capital by state shows an impressively high degree of similarity to this earlier hitchhiker’s road guide.
Fig. 1 Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, Social Capital in the American States

Fig. 2 Paul DiMaggio, *Hitchhiker’s Field Manual*, A Hitchhiking Map
As a prerequisite for a fertile hitchhiking environment, members of a society must be willing to socialize and be willing to help one another. For centuries, America was a paragon of this sort of civic exceptionalism. This marriage of dutiful service to the community and compassionate social interest is perhaps best colloquially described as neighborliness. Sociologist Charles Murray identifies this sort of neighborliness as a uniquely America trait.² What made us unique wasn’t merely our willingness to loan a proverbial cup of sugar but the genuine interest to strike up a conversation at the doorstep. In large part Putnam’s “social capital” and Murray’s “neighborliness” are two sides of the same coin. It is precisely these virtues that made America the perfect breeding ground for nascent hitchhikers.

Both Putnam and Murray have noticed a startling trend in terms of social capital and togetherness. Both authors argue that sometime in the late fifties things started to fall apart. Putnam found that in the last third of the 20th century social capital went into a sudden slump, as suggested by association membership, voter turnout, and a host of other factors.³ Despite looking at a totally different range of factors such as neighborhood composition and cultural attitudes, Murray charted a nearly parallel collapse in American togetherness. As we have already established, the 1960s also mark the beginning of the end for hitchhiking in America. Given the remarkable similarities both in social nature and chronological occurrence between the demise of hitchhiking and Murray and Putnam’s models of American collapse, it is my hope that these two critics may provide a meaningful framework for our preceding exploration.

3. Connection

A large portion of this thesis has been devoted to looking at factors that have made hitchhiking less appealing and caused many of its practitioners to seek alternate forms of entertainment and transportation. However, I have given very little attention to the reason that people actually choose to hitchhike in the first place. Besides being a functional means of transportation, hitching has often been lauded for the unique sort of connection it affords between passenger and driver. As I have already addressed, the confines of the personal automobile represent a highly personal space. But once these confines have been breached, there is a potential for intimate connection. Because of the privacy and intimacy of the car, both driver and passenger assume a more familiar relationship. In this relationship, both driver and hitchhiker feed off a symbiotic connection. Drivers often represent permanent and stable fixtures in the world, often with real jobs, families, and “adult” identities. Youthful hitchhikers are often eager to learn about the real world through their more established driver. In turn, drivers are able to break out from within the more limited confines of their perfunctory lives and vicariously enjoy the more adventurous escapades of their hitchhiking counterpart.4

One Cambridge student explains her passion for hitchhiking as follows: “I like hitch-hiking because it brings me in contact with people I wouldn't meet otherwise, because I was brought up in a very sort of upper middle-class atmosphere where you

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didn’t meet anybody who did an ordinary working job or drove a lorry.” Hitchhiking is unique in that it allows, if not forces, frank interactions between people from potentially wildly different lifestyles. To this point, DiMaggio argues that the very best rides occur when rider and driver come from two drastically different backgrounds. These interactions can be both entertaining and edifying. It is precisely this potential for novel encounters and vibrant learning experiences that has encouraged millions of hitchhikers to hit the road. In fact, according to an extensive 1973 psychological study of hitchhikers, the vast majority list a desire to “understand themselves and the world around them” as a major motivation for hitchhiking.

For much the same reason that hitchhikers are excited to hop in a car with a total stranger, many drivers are equally hungry for new encounters. The simple desire for company is a predominant factor in motivating drivers to invite a hitchhiker aboard. According to a 1968 survey of 186 hitchhikers, nearly three-quarters believed that a primary reason drivers stopped was because they wanted some sort of company. In Rinvolcri’s words, “the intimacy and privacy of the car can become too much for a driver and he will decide to alleviate his isolation by sharing it.” This idea of the lonely driver is further confirmed, according to Rinvolucrì, by the fact that the most likely vehicles to stop for hitchhikers are those with a single driver. By contrast, couples or families rarely stop to pick up hitchhikers. The combination of lonely driver and information-hungry hitchhiker forms an ideal pair. The once-lonely

7 Franzoi, "Personality-Characteristics of the Crosscountry Hitchhiker," 666.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., Ch. 4.
driver will happily entertain the hitchhiker with all manner of life stories and the hitchhiker can contentedly absorb this new information, perhaps interjecting some conversation of his own.

In many ways, hitchhiking provides a largely unprecedented form of social encounter. On the one hand the privacy and intimacy of the car can produce surprisingly candid and intimate discussions. But at the same time, the transiency of the hitchhiking relationship means that driver and hitchhiker will most likely never cross paths again. Historically, the desire for connection was so great that, even if the two would never meet again, the value of this one-time connection was sufficiently great to motivate both parties to seek each other’s company. However, such connection is by no means guaranteed. If fruitful conversation is to prevail, both parties must have a common groundwork upon which conversation must form. Even if they have different jobs, and are from different places, they must find a common point of reference. As I will further explore, beginning in the second half of the century, the problem of finding areas of connection between driver and rider became increasingly difficult issue.

Well into the 1960s, one could quite reasonably speak of an “American way of life.” Through the sixties most areas in the country had access to the same four TV stations. There existed a single top forty chart encompassing all musical genres from pop to country to rock & roll and radio stations played almost all of it. The vast majority of drivers owned either a Ford, GM or Chrysler. Even moral beliefs were confined to a much thinner margin. All of this is to say that in the 1960s any two

individuals were bound to have at least a few similarities, and even their differences could only be so far apart. Even the lifestyles of the rich were only marginally different from the rest of middle class America. They might have a nicer car and their food might be slightly fancier. But the rich banker and the factory worker both could have reasonably driven home in Fords and shared a round of hamburgers with their family. As history progressed the clefts between rich and poor, liberal and conservative, urban and rural and black and white became increasingly large.

To illustrate this point, Murray describes two fictionalized towns: Belmont and Fishtown. Belmont is crafted to represent the average upper-middle class neighborhood while Fishtown represents a typical working-class neighborhood. Using representative census data, Murray outlines a startling array of differences between the lifestyles of those living in these two towns. In Belmont 63% of adults hold at least a BA and the average family income is $124,000.\textsuperscript{12} In Fishtown many have not graduated from high school and only 8% hold a college degree. The average family income is $41,900.\textsuperscript{13}

While the economic composition of these two neighborhoods has changed only minimally over the past half-century, in a number of other regards Belmont and Fishtown have undergone a radical divergence. In 1960 around 90% of the adult residents of both towns were married. By 2000, this figure had changed little for Belmont, but sat at a paltry 45% for Fishtown residents. Similarly, in 1960 respectively 2% and 5% of Belmont and Fishtown residents were unemployed. By 2000, unemployment in Fishtown had doubled, reaching just above 10%. In the same

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 148.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 149.
\end{itemize}
time period unemployment in Belmont had increased by only a single percentage point.\textsuperscript{14} Perhaps the single most striking example comes the composition of our prisons. In 1960, for every 100,000 residents of Fishtown, just over 200 were in prison. By 2000, this number had skyrocketed to just under 1000. By contrast, the percentage of Belmont residents in prison had scarcely changed at all during this same period.\textsuperscript{15}

What we see from these examples is a growing divergence between the Fishtowns and the Belmonts of America. Admittedly, Belmont has always been better off the Fishtown—slightly higher rates of marriage, more employment, and less prisoners. But for the first half of the century these differences remained minimal. Starting around 1960, differences began to explode, creating two towns with radically different populations. While the aforementioned statistics are illuminating, they only begin to capture an underlying cultural cleavage. Having a higher level of unemployment is one thing, but it is in the type of community created by these differing employment levels that certain cultural differences become more radically evident. When unemployment is high, people are going to seek out cheaper forms of entertainment, different food, and have different types of interactions. Similarly, it is one thing if a large portion of Fishtown is in prison, but this statistic doesn’t capture the vast cultural differences that would enable or encourage criminal activity in Fishtown but not in Belmont. It is these sorts of core differences that began to pull America apart.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 177.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 195.
The totality of this pre-1960s similarity provided a sort of connective tissue for America. Whether they were hitchhiking, at a PTA meeting, or at a coffee shop, Americans were bound together as a nation. Under these conditions, it is no surprise that hitchhiking was an activity enjoyed by people of all levels of society.\(^\text{16}\) A hitchhiker could be sure that even if he were jumping into a car with a complete stranger, he would still be in the company of a fellow American.

Today the singular American lifestyle has been replaced by a wildly divergent patchwork of ideologies, interests, and living styles. This sort of diversity is generally met with unequivocal applause, and in many respects it should be. However, this loss of similarity has made it increasingly hard for Americans to connect. Radically more so than ever before, Americans now live in neighborhoods segregated by levels of education and wealth.\(^\text{17}\) Even our tastes in music and movies have become increasingly individualized. These highly specific, personalized lifestyles, preferences, and experiences make it increasingly hard for us to connect with people different from ourselves.\(^\text{18}\)

As I addressed in the preceding chapter on cars, there has always been some degree of selectivity in who picks up whom. Drivers will always seek out passengers who they believe to be somewhat similar to themselves. What has changed, however, is that identity groups have become increasingly nuanced and selective. For example, many drivers may historically have preferred to only pickup drivers with whom they

shared a common race. But to today drivers have much longer litany of preferences which their ideal passenger must uphold. Previously, America’s divergent identities created powerful pro-social intragroup hospitality. But today the compounding of personal differences has created an environment of hyper-specific identities and isolation.

For the hitchhiker and driver, sharing a number of similarities acted as a valuable lubricant. The two needn’t be identical but it helped if they could find a few salient commonalities. Having similar religious beliefs, liking the same TV shows or simply both being married could provide a valuable bridge for further connection. Historically, the vast majority of American adults were both Protestant and married; today it is more likely than not the average American is neither. Even our taste in TV has radically expanded. In 1963 the most popular TV show, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, was watched regularly in over a third of all American households. By the 2000s, even the most popular shows were watched in less than 8% of households.¹⁹ Without these sorts of commonalities to fall back on, strangers may remain distant and inaccessible.

For a long time, what brought us together and made hitchhiking possible was the small differences between people. Americans willingly hopped into cars with strangers precisely because they were curious about the lifestyle of someone different from themselves, but undergirding all of these differences was a larger web of commonalities. Today, the once fascinating gap has widened to a gaping chasm that few dare attempt to cross. The young hitchhiker who once might have set off in an effort to find himself in his country may now feel alienated by the sea of differences

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he encounters. The divide between hitchhiker and ride giver has become so large that it is often difficult to begin to understand or learn from their lifestyle. Similarly, the lonely driver may open his door to a potential companion only to find himself stuck with a perennial stranger. Many respondents to my survey cited a potential lack of connection as an important reason to abstain from hitchhiking. One survey respondent remarked that she would feel “socially awkward” to be in a car with someone she didn’t know.

Some hitchhikers may have stopped hitchhiking because they found the act of connection no longer engaging or feasible. The problem also lies in the fact that a younger generation simply never bothered to get out on the road in the first place.\textsuperscript{20} The notion of “stranger danger” is a relatively new phenomenon. Many are simply too scared to risk interaction with total strangers. According to one young survey respondent, “We are taught repeatedly from the youngest of ages- don’t talk to or get in the car with strangers.” This was not always the case. Americans were not always strangers to one another.

This story of decreasing connective desire closely parallels Putnam’s more institutional narrative of collapsing social capital. This account of decreased connection can be seen as adding a more tangible, humanizing layer to Putnam’s impersonal institutional explanation. Alternatively, it is possible to see the general movement away from civic life as another example of the pruning of the possible venues for American commonality. The wide appeal of civic organizations meant that they brought together people from all walks of life. Rich and poor or urban and rural

\textsuperscript{20} Dalmas, "What Killed Hitchhiking," 2.
could all take common solace in their shared membership in a Veterans Association or the NRA.\textsuperscript{21} It is impossible to know if Americans stopped showing up because they became too different or if they became too different because they stopped showing up. What matters is that across a wide spread of issues and in a number of different capacities, Americans began to choose more frequently to remain isolated from one another. People simply stopped socializing in the same ways they used to. Whether it was group meetings or hitchhiking, the vast majority of the American population developed a decreased appetite, if not capacity, for socialization. Although authors have presented a diverse range of often contradictory theories for this anti-social behavior, there is a consensus that Americans have become increasingly reclusive.

As Americans became more individualized and disconnected, they became progressively more selective of who they wanted to spend their time with. By the mid-70s, DiMaggio found that fewer and fewer rides were coming from people of different backgrounds, with drivers often preferring to pick up people who looked and acted like themselves.\textsuperscript{22} A recent examination of carpool dynamics reveals that the majority of Americans vastly prefer to carpool with people of the same race, sex and job level.\textsuperscript{23} As these preferences became more developed, the fear of sharing a ride with someone “different” became more pronounced and the slim likelihood of finding a suitably similar companion made hitchhiking increasingly difficult.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item DiMaggio, \textit{The Hitchhiker's Field Manual}, 16.
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Rinvolucri colorfully describes hitchhiking as an opportunity for people to “meet, mix, talk, argue, [and] think beyond their own little pool.” Rinvolucri might just as well have been describing a lively bar. The problem is that Americans have become more hesitant to partake in precisely these types of situations. From 1970 to 1990, Americans spent 50% less time going to bars and clubs. Why? Because Americans have become increasingly hesitant to enter social situations with strangers. According to one study, in the last quarter century Americans have become one-third less willing to socialize with new people. On a similar note, the car is quickly becoming one of America’s favorite anti-social locales. In a 1997 survey, 61% of drivers between eighteen and twenty-four agreed that “driving is my time to…enjoy being alone.” This is compared to only 36% of drivers aged fifty-five and over. So while older drivers still enjoy socializing in the car, they are quickly being replaced by a new crop of drivers who would prefer to drive alone than invite in company. Although there are no statistics to support it, I suspect that this is part of a much longer trend. Probably for the last half-century drivers have become increasingly protective of their individual car-time. As a result of decreased social capital and an increased preference for similarity in a world of growing differences, Americans’ desire to connect with one another has taken a significant hit. While this problem has far-reaching national implications, hitchhiking has been a significant causality. Where hitchhiking’s main appeal was once an opportunity for novel social contact, this same aspect has now served as an important impediment to hitchhiking’s popularity.

26 Ibid., 110.
4. A Helping Hand

In addition to seeking company, another subset of drivers may choose to offer a hitchhiker a ride because they were at one point hitchhikers themselves who benefited from the generosity of other drivers. A 1974 study showed that roughly a third of all ride-givers fell into this category.\textsuperscript{28} Putnam suggests that this sort of reciprocity manifests itself far more frequently in connected communities.\textsuperscript{29} When people know they are going to have repeat encounters, they may feel more compelled to pay a favor forward because down road they may be the recipient of a similar favor. As communities become detached, drivers may feel more comfortable accepting the generosity of others without carrying out good deeds of their own.

The chance encounter between hitchhiker and driver represents the antithesis of a connected community. In all likelihood, the two will never meet again and there will be no opportunity for the future exchange of favors. In this case it is necessary to develop a model of what Putnam calls “generalized reciprocity.” One doesn’t expect the same hitchhiker who we pick up to one day pick us up. But rather, there is a more general understanding that, in a community of do-gooders, everyone will dole out and receive his fair share of favors. Although this reciprocity often takes the form of one hitchhiker helping another, it does not have to be localized in this fashion. In a connected community, people may feel indebted for a host of favors they themselves

\textsuperscript{28} Rinvolucrì, \textit{Hitch-Hiking}, Ch. 4.
\textsuperscript{29} Putnam, \textit{Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community}, 200.
have received. As such, picking up a hitchhiker may be just one way to pay back a myriad of other favors.

With regards to hitchhiking, this means that either the communities along the road, or the hitchhiking population as a whole, must adopt this ethos of generalized reciprocity. As is apparent by the number of past hitchhikers who willing pick up their modern counterparts, this notion of generalized reciprocity is a central tenant in the hitchhiking community. According to my survey, 74% of those who have hitchhiked have also picked up hitchhikers. The 26% that didn’t were all under the age of 25. This lack of reciprocity among the younger generation of hitchhikers seems to perfectly capture the emergence of this problematic phenomenon. Furthermore, the problem seems to lie less in the hands of the hitchhiking community than in the surrounding communities of America. In 1992 three-quarters of Americans reported that the ‘breakdown of community’ and selfishness were serious concerns.30 Thus, even if a would-be-ride-giver feels an obligation to her fellow hitchhikers, the general lack of connection in the community at large may have eroded her sense of reciprocity.

A further problem lies in who drivers choose as the benefactors of their reciprocity. Rinvolcuri notes that drivers often choose to stop for the particular category of hitchhiker with which they once associated themselves.31 In a connected community these categories might be quite expansive and generous. However, as society becomes increasingly individualized, a driver’s preferred category might be reduced down to an infinitesimally small subset of the hitchhiking population. In this

30 Ibid., 25.
31 Rinvolucrì, Hitch-Hiking, Ch. 4.
case, even though the driver intends to extend a reciprocal favor, the opportunity to do so may never arise.

Problems of reciprocity plague not only drivers, but hitchhikers themselves. In disconnected communities, potential hitchhikers may feel uncomfortable receiving a ride from a driver for fear that they may be burdened with a favor they cannot repay. One respondent to my survey noted that she has avoided hitchhiking because felt as though she “was inconveniencing a driver.” This response is emblematic of a society where freely offered favors are turned down because we lack the connective framework to repay one another for their help. In a community where social interactions abound, individuals should have no fear of accepting aid because they know they will be able to repay it at some future date. Ultimately, if drivers and riders are going to continue to participate in the hitchhiking enterprise, communities must remain connected in constant cycles of reciprocity.

The idea of altruism shares a number of similarities with reciprocity. Although in its strictest form, altruism is the decision to offer aid even when no reciprocation is expected, altruistic behavior may be more common in communities with high levels of generalized reciprocity. Even if they are not expecting specific reciprocation, people may act benevolently because they have often benefited from the unsolicited benevolence of others in the past. Many drivers may make the choice to pick up hitchhikers as a result of more altruistic motives. In his history of hitchhiking, Shlebecker talks about hitchhiking as a testament to the kindness of American motorists.32

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In one study looking at which hitchhikers motorists choose to pick up, the author asserts that members of like-minded groups generally feel a much greater compulsion to help one another.\textsuperscript{33} Several decades ago, a large portion of Americans would have self-identified as a largely like-minded group. Today this is much less the case. Putnam expands that in a close-knit community, where repeat encounters and mutual friends are the norm, people have a greater incentive to be helpful.\textsuperscript{34} Decades of living in small towns and supportive neighborhoods had conditioned Americans to work together and help each other out. Even when driving far outside of town, this same kind-hearted mentality prevailed. But as community bonds have decayed, helpfulness has also been on the decline.

According to Putnam, the most common predictor of giving is involvement in community life. He found that people who are involved in groups volunteer ten times as often as those who aren’t. Thus, as social capital has atrophied, volunteerism, whether spontaneous or in a formal setting, has decreased substantially. The same goes for donations. In 1960 the average American gave $1 to charity for every $2 she spent on personal recreation. By 1997 that number had been halved to less than fifty cents.\textsuperscript{35} While donations to charity are by no means equivalent to stopping to pick up a hitchhiker, they suggest a similar spirit of goodwill. In the last half century this sort of goodwill has taken a nosedive in America. Both the decline of community service as well as the significant reduction in donations suggest a new generation of Americans who are simply less concerned with helping one another. Helpfulness is

\textsuperscript{33} Alcorn, "Who Picks up Whom: The Fleeting Encounter between Motorist and Hitchhiker," 136.
\textsuperscript{34} Putnam, \textit{Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community}, 136.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 123.
not a finite resource, it's an attitude. Thus, the same person who chooses not to volunteer and donates less will also be less likely to help out a hitchhiker.

It is no surprise that if Americans are increasingly less interested in making friends and socializing they would be equally disinterested in helping one another out. If we cannot relate to someone else or we feel disconnected, our desire to help them will be severely diminished. Prior to the sixties, most drivers would have considered a man standing by the road a fellow American and by that token alone he deserved to be helped. Today, that sense of togetherness and the resulting compulsion to aid one another is increasingly absent.

5. Trust

As I have already stated, for hitchhiking to feel safe, a strong element of mutual trust is required between rider and driver. The rider must trust the ride-giver to drive safely and provide a safe environment as she delivers him down the road. In turn, the driver must trust the hitcher to be a safe and respectful passenger. One hitchhiking scholar refers to this as an “active trust relationship.” These expectations set forth a relatively low threshold of trust, but in today’s increasingly disconnected society even this minimal level of trust may be hard to come by.

A number of respondents to my survey expressed apprehension about hitchhiking because they felt they would be unable to trust any driver willing to pick them up. In the words of one female respondent, “Someone driving a car has power

and getting in makes you very vulnerable--this requires trusting the person's intentions and even driving ability.” As we become more disconnected, our perception of those around us becomes increasingly grim. Rather than seeing a world of potentially helpful neighbors, many would-be hitchers and drivers alike see “a world of risky strangers.”\textsuperscript{37} According to one study, in 1960 55% of American held the belief that most people could be trusted. By 1995 this figure had plummeted to a paltry 35%.\textsuperscript{38} As Americans have become increasingly unwilling to trust one another, hitchhiking is increasingly perceived as a dangerous activity.

The problem isn’t just a waning of trust between individuals, it’s a more systemic lack of trust in the world as a whole. Hitchhiking requires a particular kind of trust. Given the sudden and capricious nature of hitchhiking, one often doesn’t have time to formulate judgments about each individual encounter. Instead, hitchhiking requires a widespread trust in society as a whole. When a driver passes an outstretched thumb or a hitchhiker is offered a ride, both parties must make a snap judgment about whether or not they feel they can trust one another. Both driver and rider may defer to a number of heuristics, but ultimately there is very little they can learn about one another by just a few brief glances. Instead the overwhelming determinant is simply each person’s overarching worldview and their general trust of their fellow citizens.

After conducting a thorough review of the literature, Putnam was able to chart general trends in trust for most of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. What he found was that from the

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
mid-1940s through the mid-sixties, general trust in society was on the rise, peaking around 1964. However, from the late 1960s on, general trust has been perpetually in decline. It is likely no coincidence that trust was peaking right around the same time that hitchhiking was reaching a high water mark for popular appeal. When trust is high, it is easy for drivers and riders to put faith in one another. As trust wanes, both parties may become increasingly cautious and perhaps seek other forms of transportation and recreation.

Putnam’s explanation for these changing trends in trust dovetails nicely with his larger theory of social capital. Putnam avers that in connected societies where dense networks of friends and acquaintances are the norm, “gossip” is more frequent and reputation is held in much higher regard. This has two implications. First, people place a high importance on being trustful so as to bolster their reputation. Second, being connected to one another means that even if we can’t trust somebody directly, we are willing to trust his or her reputation as it has been curated by a network of mutual friends. Furthermore, as Americans have become less civically engaged and have withdrawn into their individual quarters, there simply arise less opportunities for socialization. Trust is, to a large extent, a learned skill. It is only through repeat encounters that we condition ourselves to trust the world around us. If we are deprived of these social experiences, trust may never develop and we are left feeling as if we are “surrounded by miscreants”.

With this world view, it is hard to imagine sharing a car with a stranger to be a comfortable experience.

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40 Ibid., 137.
The future of trust in America, and by extension, hitchhiking, is looking particularly bleak. The general consensus of those who study trust is that in the future America will be even less trusting.41 People who feel untrustworthy are in turn less trusting of others.42 If drivers, say, begin to distrust hitchhikers, the hitchhikers will begin to feel less trustworthy himself and, as a result, will feel less willing to trust other drivers. This progression engenders a pervasive downward cycle of distrust.

As trust decreases, it does not do so homogenously across all of society. Rather, trust is, among other things, a generational phenomenon. People born around the same time generally tend to have similar levels of trust and they maintain that level of trust for the entirety of their lives. For example, surveys have shown that about 80% of those born in the first third of the century agree with the statement “most people can be trusted.” Among this cohort, this level of trust has held steady for over half a century. By comparison, only 40% of those born in the 1970s hold this same belief. The intermediary generations represent a clear gradient between these two extremes.43 The implications of this generational effect becomes all the more alarming when we realize that a generation of 80% “trusters” is dying off and being replaced by a generation with less than 40% trust.

Although this trust is important for both driver and rider, the decline is most evident on the part of the hitchhiker. Because most hitchhikers are between the ages of 18 and 25, it is possible to imagine the progression as each successive generation

41 Robertson and Jackson, "Is Trust in Others Declining in America? An Age–Period–Cohort Analysis," 139.
43 Robertson and Jackson, "Is Trust in Others Declining in America? An Age–Period–Cohort Analysis," 127.
passes through this small time frame.\textsuperscript{44} With clockwork regularity, general trust within the hitchhiking community consistently decreases as each successive generation passes through its hitchhiking prime. In the fifties and early sixties the majority of hitchhikers were a trusting bunch. As the seventies faded into the eighties, the average hitchhiker became increasingly suspicious and cynical. It is understandable how these changing attitudes could affect the overall enjoyability of the hitchhiking experience. Perhaps more important is the fact that as young adults become less trusting, they are simply less likely to even attempt to hitchhike in the first place.

According to Wald, the greatest danger to hitchhiking and America as a whole is that “we will isolate ourselves in cocoons of mistrust, unable to get together with other who share common needs and interests.” After being buffeted by generation after generation of increasingly distrustful hitchers and drivers, the active trust required for two individuals to voluntarily share an enclosed space together may have finally become too thin to remain sustainable. There will always be outliers still willing to place their trust in strangers. However, for the vast majority of Americans, this sort of connectedness and trust is a relic of a past generation.

\textbf{6. The Sixties: A Case Study in Togetherness}

I will conclude this chapter with a brief case study exploring the power of community in fostering connection, reciprocity and trust. As I have already

suggested, hitchhiking was largely dead by the end of the fifties. However, after its initial death, hitchhiking underwent one final and particularly energetic explosion of popularity. During the period from 1965 to 1975 the number of hitchhikers on the road grew substantially.

As I have already suggested, by the time the Sixties were underway, American connectedness was already in decline. However, there was one community that was experiencing sudden growth in its connectivity: the hippie community. Many teenagers of the Sixties began to join what was colloquially referred to as “The Movement.” The Movement encompassed a wide range of beliefs and ideologies including ideas about war, drugs, sex, gender, and civil rights. However, at its core, The Movement was about freedom of expression and opposition to mainstream culture. In antithesis to the disconnectedness of the rest of America, The Movement represented a highly connected group of individuals espousing shared beliefs and culture. The active pursuit of these beliefs produced “enduring bonds of solidarity.” According to Rinvolucri, “The hippy anti-community emerges as a pretty structured society. It has its own uniform, hair style, vocabulary, travel habits, cultural orientation and practical philosophy.” These shared traits help mend many of the divisions being perpetuated in mainstream American culture at the time. As a result, this tight knit community of similarly minded people was able to avoid America’s larger epidemic of community disintegration. Even though it struggled elsewhere, hitchhiking was able to thrive in the hippie community.

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This closely-knit, similar minded network of hippies served as fertile ground for hitchhiking’s revival. According to one historian, “[t]o be part of the radical youth scene was to participate in the hitchhiking enterprise.”47 Because of the similarity of its practitioners, hitchhiking was transformed from an activity to an identity. To hitchhike was not merely to engage in a certain form of transportation, it was to become part of an exclusive clique.48 Much in the same way that bikers of the 1960s were not merely men who road motorcycles, to hitchhike was to inhabitant a much larger identity that extended beyond the symbol of the outstretched thumb. This hitchhiking identity further unified the hippie scene and facilitated greater ease of transport among the hitchhiking community.

Knowing that they could find fellow hippies across the country, 1960s youth were far more comfortable and excited to go out and explore their country. Hippies struck out hoping to “escape suburbia and find authentic humanity.”49 In his manual on hitchhiking, DiMaggio provide extensive lists of hippie-friendly “crash pads” across the country as well as other resources intended for members of The Movement.

Furthermore, the connectedness of the hippie community created in microcosm the sort altruistic framework that had disappeared from society as a whole. It is unsurprising that as a result of its connectedness, the hippie community placed much greater emphasis on sharing and helping one another.50 Largely because of their distinctive style of dress and clothes, fellow hippies could easily spot one another and were happy to offer support to those of their same ilk. This sort of limited

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48 O'Regan, "Alternative Mobility Cultures and the Resurgence of Hitchhiking," 133.
49 Packer, *Mobility without Mayhem*, 89.
altruism is best captured by a 1975 study which found that 93% of the time hippies only picked up other hippies.\textsuperscript{51} Where previously most Americans felt compelled to help another fellow American, by the Sixties this intense loyalty was only visible within specific groups.

Furthermore, within their own group, hippies were able to avoid many of the factors which had previously been detrimental to the hitchhiking community. First, members of the Movement were less likely to buy into the fear mongering that had taken hold across America. By virtue of their counter-cultural ideals, hippies were more skeptical of the mainstream need to been fearful or cautious. The very idea that hitchhiking was perceived as dangerous made it even more appealing as a form of rebellion against the dominant social narrative. Furthermore, the fact that hitchhiking was largely localized within the hippie sub-group help reduce fears of criminal victimization by ill intentioned strangers.

Members of the Movement were also able to avoid many of the pervasive problems of automobility that hindered effective hitchhiking. First, hippies neither ascribed to nor feared the social stigma attached to carless-ness. The few hippies who owned cars were more than happy to share their transportation with their fellow brethren.\textsuperscript{52} Furthermore, threaded throughout hippie culture was a strong emphasis on communal living. Thus issues of privatized automobile spaces had less traction among counter-culture adherents.

\textsuperscript{51} Alcorn, "Who Picks up Whom: The Fleeting Encounter between Motorist and Hitchhiker," 57.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 58.
The sort of selective hitchhiking that emerged in the Sixties is still largely in line with our previously established pattern of community deterioration. There was no cross-cultural exchange. There was no bridging of cultural gaps. Hippies were almost exclusively picked up by other hippies. And many those not involved in the movement harbored a great deal of resentment towards hippies and actively avoided picking them up.\textsuperscript{53} America was still coming apart, but for a brief moment The Movement emerged as a particularly resilient and sizeable anecdote to an otherwise fractured country.

\textsuperscript{53} Rinvolucrì, \textit{Hitch-Hiking}, Ch. 2.
VI. Concluding Remarks

“For better or worse, we rely increasingly on formal institutions...to accomplish what we used to accomplish through informal networks.”

-Robert Putnam

1. Transport As Identity

The way we choose to transport ourselves provides remarkable insight into our national character. Although it is often forgotten, the existence of specific transportation infrastructure and technology is not merely a case of happenstance. Instead, every mode of transportation is the direct outcome of our particular predilections. The modes of transportation that we have chosen to erect are a direct reflection of our specific preferences, whether they are for speed, comfort, adventure, exploration or connection. The ways in which we transport ourselves have not merely emerged, but rather have been chosen because they fit our preferences. Furthermore, as our preferences have evolved, so too has our choice of transportation. Thus, the given modes of transportation available and regularly selected in any period present a bold statement about the denizens of that epoch.

Furthermore, our choices of transportation exert a sometimes unanticipated and continued reflexive effect long after they have been chosen. That is, the way we move from point A to point B actually changes the way that we interact with and conceptualize of our country, our selves and our fellow citizens. If our chosen transportation puts us in regular contact with one another, it will inculcate greater
socialization. By the same token, if our transportation alienates us from tangible landscapes, we will eventually lose touch with the nature of our country. In this sense, our transportation is not merely shaped by us, but it can go on to shape us, often in unanticipated ways.

Throughout this thesis we have examined the ways in which the demise of hitchhiking was a reflection of larger trends in American culture. However, we have done little to situate this demise within a larger history of transportation in America. Hitchhiking is but one evolutionary step along a much larger transportation genealogy. While we do not have the space to explore the entirety of America’s transportation history, in this final section I will attempt to further contextualize hitchhiking within this genealogy. In doing so, we can further understand hitchhiking’s particular evolutionary era, and thus illuminate the unique cultural milieu that may have led to its demise. Only by adopting a more macroscopic look at transportation history is it possible to construct a comprehensive view of how and when American culture changed and how such changes may have impacted the desirability of hitchhiking. In order to situate hitchhiking in a larger historical context, we will compare it to a similar mode of transportation that has emerged more recently: the modern carpool.

Carpooling and hitchhiking share a number of similarities. In both cases private citizens offer rides, generally free of charge, to others, using their own personal car. Furthermore, the relationship between driver and riders is generally not one of particular intimacy. In the case of carpooling, the driver most likely knows his passengers, but this relationship may be informal and limited. In the larger scope of
individual transit, this sort of ride sharing between individuals is fairly uncommon and isolated almost entirely to hitchhiking and carpooling.

To be clear, carpooling is not a modern replacement for hitchhiking. Most hitchhikers did not merely pocket their thumbs and join a carpool. However, the two activities do share a number of similar characteristics. In light of these similarities, it is illustrative to look at the divergent trends of these two mobilities. Through this comparative examination it may be possible to better pinpoint the aspects of hitchhiking that were no longer appealing to contemporary Americans.

Carpooling first emerged during World War II as a way to conserve scarce resources. After the war, when hitchhiking was encountering its first major hiccup, carpooling continued to gain traction among businessmen and regular travelers.¹ Today, carpooling remains a popular source of transportation for regular commuters. Second to solo-driving, carpooling is the most popular form of commuter transportation. 18% of all trips are completed via carpool. In fact, carpooling is twice as popular as all other non-solitary commute options.

Carpooling can come in a number of forms. Some carpooling happens on an organized daily basis, such as co-workers sharing a ride to the office. In 2001, 20% of adults reported carpooling to work.² Formalized carpooling can also happen on the way to school or sporting events. At other times carpooling can happen on a more informal basis. So-called Casual Carpools are the most common manifestation of this latter sort of carpooling. Some metropolitan areas have designated Casual Carpool

pickup areas where riders can congregate. Drivers looking to form a carpool, either for environmental reasons or as a way to take advantage of specialized high occupant vehicle (HOV) lanes, can pick up riders at these designated areas. A 2011 report estimates that Casual Carpools now accounts for 18,000 daily rides.\(^3\)

An analysis of carpooling’s increased popularity provides an illustrative example of the changing currents in American transportation preference. More specifically, by looking at what makes carpooling popular, it is possible to understand the specific trends that were no longer hospitable to hitchhiking. This concluding discussion of carpooling will serve two purposes. First, it will provide us a platform to analyze contemporary American culture that has emerged in the wake of hitchhiking’s demise. Second, it will serve as a summary of the previously discussed reasons responsible for hitchhiking’s decline.

2. Riding Safe

As addressed in chapter 3, beginning in the second half of the 20\(^{th}\) century, Americans placed an increased emphasis on the importance of safety. Despite a lack of evidence of any quantifiable increase in crime, many people believed today’s world to be more dangerous than it was a generation prior. Many modern Americans have shied away from activities which have developed a reputation for danger. The American flight towards safety has been further magnified by an alarmist media who

place greater emphasis on catchy headlines than accurate reporting. With Americans more skittish and risk-averse and the media increasingly willing to trumpet tales of crime and violence, many once-accepted activities like hitchhiking have lost popular appeal.

Although carpooling is probably marginally safer than hitchhiking, the two activities have received drastically different appraisals of their perceived danger. As history and the American popular conscience would have it, hitchhiking has been demonized and carpooling glorified. The difference between hitchhiking and carpooling seems to be largely a matter of context. As we will explore in greater detail later in this chapter, carpoolers simply feel more comfortable around one another. Carpoolers are typically going to the same sorts of places to do the same things. This similarity affords a great deal of peace of mind. By comparison, the unknown hitchhiker brings with him an aura of mystery. To the over cautious American, this lack of information is often misread as a sign of danger. In an era when many American’s want to minimize their exposure to danger, riding with co-workers simply feels much safer than hazarding a ride with a stranger. While there is a small degree of truth behind this logic, the magnitude of this response is wildly disproportionate to the actual differences in danger. As established in chapter 3, hitchhiking is no more dangerous than riding a motorcycle.

Hitchhiking’s reputation also suffered heavily as the result of several highly publicized crimes. The simple fact that hitchhiking has been around for nearly a century greatly increased the likelihood that some amount of problematic crime might have transpired. When such crimes did occur, the media took particular interest in
lambasting hitchhiking’s safety. One need only compare headlines to see the
difference in media attention. On June 12th of 1977, the Los Angeles Times ran a
piece on carpooling entitled “Saving Plus Sociability: The Joys of Carpooling.” The
article went on to extol the numerous financial and social benefits of participating in a
carpool group. A little over a month later, on June 25 the Los Angeles Times ran
another piece titled “Rape and The Hitchhiker.” And three days after that, another
headline: “Hitchhiking Girls: They Follow a Dangerous Road.” Through lurid prose
and tantalizing legal excerpts, both articles call attention to the potential dangers of
rape and violence in the hitchhiking community. The Los Angeles Times could quite
reasonably have penned an article touting the financial and social opportunities
afforded by hitchhiking. However, its writers found it more expedient to glamorize
carpooling and ignore hitchhiking’s similar benefits.

Newspapers weren’t the only ones to slap hitchhiking with a bad rap. The
government was another key player in hitchhiking’s unfair treatment vis-à-vis
carpooling. In the 1970s, many state governments were faced with increased pressure
to mount an environmental offensive. Despite several proposals to enact a program of
government-sanctioned hitchhiking, such programs were rejected by state
lawmakers.4 In its place, several states did create new systems of incentives, roads,
and special parking lots to encourage carpooling. Although the program could just as
easily have stimulated both carpooling and hitchhiking, most likely with even more
efficacious results, the political climate did not support this sort of action. Carpooling
was given the green light largely because it was an activity of businessmen and

4 Packer, Mobility without Mayhem, 105.
respectable housewives. By contrast, senators were too cautious to gamble on a law that would involve purportedly “risky” hitchhikers. Government sanctioning of carpooling helped further carpooling’s squeaky clean reputation, while implicitly maligning that of hitchhiking.

Carpooling’s increased popularity vis-à-vis hitchhiking goes beyond selective treatment by the media and government. Hitchhiking’s unpredictable timetables and fluid routes have always made it as much an adventure as a functional mode of transport. For the majority of its existence, it was this potential for adventure and exploration that gave hitchhiking much of its appeal. However, as risk management and control became increasingly important, hitchhiking’s daring appeal diminished. Many of the same factors that made hitchhiking unappealing served to motivate others to consider carpooling. Unlike hitchhiking, travel via carpool presented a far more predictable and stable method of transit. Carpools by their very nature rely on clear planning: precise pickup times as well as set pickup and drop-off locations. Carpooling-specific infrastructure, like HOV lanes and dedicated parking areas for carpoolers, further insured that unpredicted events like traffic and parking would not encroach on the carpooling routine. As a result, the daily carpooler knows precisely what to expect, without having to worry about unanticipated contingencies. By comparison hitchhiking was unable to effectively cater to this newfound need for control and predictability.

America’s newfound risk mitigation and hyper-rationality can even be seen in the reasoning behind people’s choice to carpool. A series of time-use studies revealed that most carpoolers applied a cost-benefit-analysis framework and chose carpooling
primarily because they believed it was the most rational and efficient way to travel.\textsuperscript{5} Furthermore, one study revealed that gas prices were responsible for 30% of the variation in carpool travel frequency. When gas prices were high, many more people made the calculated choice to carpool. But when they were low, other factors were brought into consideration.\textsuperscript{6} By contrast, it is hard to imagine hitchhikers making decisions along this same hyper-rational framework. The decision to hitchhike was a whim. The hitchhiker struck out with a vague destination in mind, and eventually he arrived, perhaps even to his initially planned destination. This need for calculability and predictability was a boon for carpooling, but it made hitchhiking an increasingly unappealing option.

\section*{3. An Automotive World}

As we have seen, cars have become an increasingly important fixture in American culture. Americans reconfigured both their cities and their lives to better accommodate the modern automobile. These changes stretch from physical transformations of the American landscape to perceptual reconfiguration of the American psyche. Although both hitchhiking and carpooling use cars as their underlying platform, only the former has suffered as a result of these changes.

One particularly troublesome aspect for hitchhiking has been the redevelopment of our nation’s highways to better facilitate quick and easy travel in cars. Many areas that once served as ideal thumbing spots have become inaccessible.

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 106.
or illegal to occupy. Furthermore, faster roadways with fewer exits mean that drivers are less able to pick up hitchhikers.

By contrast, carpooling has been unaffected, if not aided, by structural changes in American roadways. More in line with American desires for order and efficiency, carpooling relies on designated pick up and drop off areas. These areas often include personal homes, office buildings, and schools that had already been designed to accommodate regular single-occupancy car traffic. Hitchhiking represents an awkward hybrid between travel by car and travel by foot. America’s roadways have become increasingly unfriendly to such non-car travel. Carpooling, by contrast, strictly confines itself to the standard norms of automotive travel. Thus, it is easier and more acceptable in our modern context.

Furthermore, some infrastructure has actually been created to better facilitate carpool travel. In an effort to promote environmentalism and curb traffic, many areas have created designated HOV lanes. These lanes encourage travel by carpool by drastically cutting down on travel times. Similarly, many cities have created Park N’ Ride lots which are often used as carpool staging areas. These sorts of government sanctioned infrastructure have been a particular boon to carpoolers. By contrast, very little, if anything, was ever constructed to help hitchhikers.

An additional hitchhiking problem fueled by increased car travel was the binary formed between car-owners and non-car owners. In the 1950s, cars became an increasingly normal, if not essential, aspect of the American life. As a result, those without cars were frequently considered outsiders and or even delinquents. Ownership of a personal automobile became an important aspect of one’s identity. As
quasi-second class citizens, car-less hitchhikers often went unnoticed. And when they were noticed, drivers were more hesitant to pick them up.

Carpooling does not perpetuate this sort of divide between those with and without cars. First, the fact that carpoolers are usually travelling to a shared location means they have a mutual identity attached to this location, such as co-workers or schoolmates. This shared identity supersedes or mitigates the question of car ownership. Furthermore, carpoolers can go out of their way to select a group with whom they feel they have a shared identity. This pre-selection is not available in the case of hitchhiking.

Additionally, carpooling is often thought of as a matter of ease, and thus riders are not necessarily presumed to be car-less in the way hitchhikers are. In fact, many carpools operate on a rotating schedule where each person takes a turn driving. Even in the case of casual carpools, many of those involved may alternate between being drivers and passengers. Thus, all participants are believed to be members of the car-owning class. Where hitchhiking was stymied by an increasingly divisive cleavage between car-owners and non-owners, carpooling avoided these social impediments by remaining localized within the car owning community. While both hitchhiking and carpooling rely on cars, the former deteriorated in the face of pervasive automobility, while the latter thrived.
4. Catching a Connection

Connection plays an important role in our choice of transportation. It is a desire that drives people into the world looking to socialize and meet one another. It is connection that catalyzes the formation of communities. But in the absence of this connection, we can be equally driven to solitude. Without this connective tissue, we fall apart. We stop trusting, we stop helping, and we lose the will to socialize. For decades, America was a nation brimming with this sort of connective energy. To an extent that is now unthinkable today, there was a genuine American identity. This wasn’t an identity based in exclusion; rather it was a sort of least common denominator that united Americans. In spite of differing class and race-based cleavages, there was a sense of commonality that flowed throughout the country (often overpowering these social divisions.) It was an energy that brought friends together, but it also a force that made strangers not so strange.

Under these conditions, hitchhiking was not only tenable, it was appreciated. As a nation of connected individuals, we only wanted to further strengthen our national bonds. And what better way to do it than to journey out into the world and meet scores of new Americans across the country? Teenagers felt comfortable hoping into cars with strangers because they really weren’t that strange. No matter where in the country you were, people were listening to much of the same music, watching the same television programs and knew the same things. The hitchhiker could enjoy learning about subtle regional variations without being intimidated by a chasm of difference.
Today we fear the strangeness of strangers. They are simply too different from us. We have become too withdrawn into our own individualism to reach out a hand. Not only do we not want to connect, we don’t want to help. Hitchhiking was an exercise in relying on the kindness and generosity of strangers; it was to float in a common stream of American goodness. Today it is an exercise in futility.

Carpooling is able to adeptly circumnavigate problematic encounters with strangers. As we have already seen, it is all but impossible to carpool with strangers in the truest sense. Those in a shared carpool have an intrinsic shared identity. The carpooler need not open herself up to the gaping differences of Neo-American identity; she is always in the company of those like herself. Even in the Casual Carpool line, just about everyone can be assumed to be on the way to some sort of office. This restrictive community recreates the similarity that used to bind all of America. Because of its limited context, carpooling creates in miniature what used to pervade throughout America.

Furthermore, the carpool avoids the issue of organic generosity. The carpool is a rule-based institution. The driver is obligated to pick up his passengers. Thus, his passengers need not rely on a now moribund spirit of natural generosity. The driver need not see his passengers as worthy or deserving, he must merely see them as part of a perfunctory daily obligation. In today’s disconnected world, we are much more able to function in response to obligations than we are to the vagaries of reciprocity or altruism.
Where hitchhiking was free, organic, and natural, carpooling is organized and artificial. It is a synthetic panacea for our apartness. It brings us together, but under manufactured pretenses and for ultimately individual purposes.

5. Looking Forward, Looking Out

As I wrap up this autopsy-cum-eulogy of hitchhiking, it becomes apparent that what has died is not the masses of outstretched thumbs along American roadways, or the millions of helpful drivers. What has died is a way of life, a way of life that extends well beyond our means of transportation. Hitchhiking was emblematic of a much larger cultural consciousness that embraced openness, adventure, and togetherness. To pick up a hitchhiker was to affirm this way of life. Every ride was a confirmation of the trustworthiness of strangers. It was an affirmation of our national togetherness. And it was an affirmation of our desire to help one another. America was a nation based on shared experiences and a nation that valued sharing experiences.

Hitchhiking’s death captures in microcosm a much larger endemic that has swept across the American consciousness. It is an epidemic of individualism, of fear, of distrust, and of isolation. The carriers of the epidemic have been cars, governments, and newspapers. But now it has infected America at her core. America is coming apart and hitchhiking is but one small thread.
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