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## The Dirtiest Dozen From Automotive History

• The 12 greatest screw-ups in American automotive history? Everyone's got his own nominees: Bricklin owners may never live down that gull-winged ego-feed; anyone with the complete works of Pat Boone on 16 $\frac{2}{3}$  rpm records (remember them?) will not soon forget the 1956 Chrysler with its *under-dash* record player.

There is probably no way to draw up a definitive list of industry mistakes, but don't try to tell that to Professor David Lewis. Lewis teaches business history at the University of Michigan and is a noted auto industry scholar. He bases his personal list on the economic results of the blunders—face lost, pants lost, etc. Herewith, the professor's dirty dozen:

1/Failure by early auto makers to recognize the potential of the gasoline engine. Criticizing the gas-

burner as noisy, smelly and dangerous, these far-thinkers bet on the wrong horses and went broke.

2/William C. Durant's irresponsible wheeling and dealing, which twice crippled the fledgling General Motors. Durant organized the corporation in 1908, lost control in 1910, regained it in 1916 and lost it for good in 1920—leaving him nothing but a Flint, Michigan bowling alley on which to hang his name.

3/The Wills Sainte Claire (1921–1927),

a car so advanced it self-destructed. Designed by ex-Ford genius C. Harold Wills, this "perfect car" was so complicated it took a Ph.D. in physics to maintain it.

4/Henry Ford's anti-Semitic propagandizing, which between 1920 and 1938 effectively alienated American Jews against any product bearing his name. Post-war attempts to mend fences have only resulted in the alienation of the Arabs.

5/Ford's failure to have the Model A ready when the Model T finally went out of

portantly, it biased Chrysler management against innovative design just when styling was becoming a major factor in sales.

8/The Edsel, now a household synonym for *blunder*. Squeezed into the tiny marketing gap between Ford and Mercury just as a recession was taking hold and buyer interest was shifting to smaller cars, the Edsel set an industry non-sales record. It lost Ford \$350 million and acres of face.

9/The domestic industry's tardiness in getting smaller cars to market to counter the imports' first surge in the late 1950s. Only Rambler and Studebaker's Lark were at the front to do battle, and European products gained a toe-hold they have never relinquished.

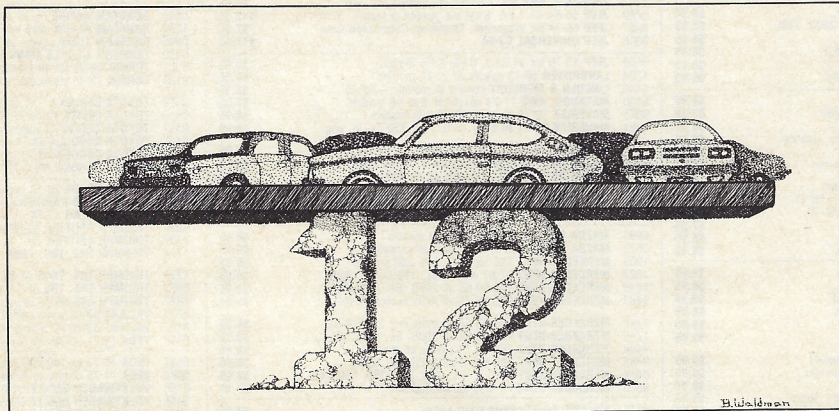
10/The industry's refusal to budge on safety and emissions de-

spite growing criticism. The car makers now find themselves down on credibility and hopelessly entangled in regulation.

11/The Corvair, a pleasant and popular little car until Ralph Nader took aim. A lack of corporate commitment in the face of bad publicity killed the innovative car.

12/GM's investigation of Nader, which gave credence to the mistrust Nader had planted in the public mind.

You disagree with Lewis's choices? Well, nobody's perfect. —Gary Witzenburg



production in 1927. Dealers went without cars for months, the nation suffered a slight recession and Ford lost \$100 million and its 15-year sales leadership.

6/Studebaker's over-expansion before and over-optimism during the Depression. Convinced hard times couldn't last, the firm paid dividends out of capital, driving the company to the brink of bankruptcy.

7/The Chrysler Airflow of 1934–1937, so revolutionary in styling and engineering it was doomed to early failure. More im-

## Gas Pains

- Despite industry claims to the contrary, the Presidential Task Force on Motor Vehicle Goals Beyond 1980 has concluded that the domestic car makers can meet the proposed 27.5-mpg **fuel-economy standard** for 1985. The task force acknowledged, however, that meeting the gas-mileage average would mean greatly reduced acceleration, widespread use of Diesels and a higher plastic and aluminum content in body structures.
- According to a recent survey of urban areas, **gasoline prices** have risen almost six percent since last April. The highest average prices were found in the East, with lead-free gas costing 69.2 cents a gallon in New York City and 67.2 cents in Washington, D.C.
- Bureaucrats are preparing for another attack on **performance**, this time in the name of fuel economy. Eric Stork, an Environmental

Protection Agency official, recently asked: "Do the American people really need automobiles capable of laying down a strip of rubber from here to the next block? If they don't, then autos can operate much more efficiently than they do today. The consumer will have to choose between fuel economy and performance that exceeds social needs."

## Justice, Etc.

- A federal court has ordered GM to pay a **\$400,000** fine for refusing a NHTSA order to recall certain mid-1960s Chevroleets and Buicks because of a possible carburetor defect. GM had contended that the faulty carburetor plugs were not a "safety-related" defect. The judge ruled otherwise.
- Even though it plans to go ahead with its **antitrust** probe of the domestic auto industry, the Federal Trade Commission has cautioned that "the existence of an investigation

does not imply that violations of the law have occurred." Sources close to the investigation say that it is an even bet that no antitrust litigation will result.

- It seems that a Japanese man loved his aging Mercedes-Benz so much that in his **will** he asked to be buried in the car. With cemetery space at a premium, officials are at a loss as to how to comply with the last request. One enterprising ward officer, however, may have the solution: He suggested loading the dear departed and his Mercedes aboard a ferry, heading out to sea and then driving both car and corpse off the rear deck.

## Quotes

- **Dr. Ernst Fuhrmann**, the president of Porsche, on what makes sports cars different: "Large American cars . . . react softly to the driver's orders. They are voluntarily built to correct the driver's mistakes. It is the road

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