

Women Drivers 1940s-60s: The Menier-Briscoe Families

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From its inception, the automobile has had a large impact in North America. Whether a student or a doctor, a farm hand or an urban dweller, or anything in between, most lifestyles changed dramatically because of the automobile. My nana and my mother grew up in Canada in the 1940s and the 1960s, respectively: my nana in a rural environment, my mother in an urban one. While their childhoods and early years were incredibly different, both of their lives were heavily impacted by the existence of the automobile. Louise Menier, a farm girl from Alberta, experienced a new kind of existence when, as was happening all over North America, the car could be used to get to church, to more easily bring produce to market, to visit the big city, and to engage in social functions. Kathy Briscoe-Gordon, my mother, grew up in Vancouver as a part of the baby boomer generation. Similar to the rest of North America, she experienced the mass expansion of the post-war era, and used the automobile to adapt to a new world in which physical boundaries were being pushed, the racial divide was strict, families could afford luxury, and the automobile was a tool of entertainment and practicality. My nana and my mother had experiences with the automobile that definitely fit the patterns of the rest of North America in the 1940s and the 1960s.

Louise Menier grew up in a small town near Edmonton, called Morinville, which boasted a population of roughly three thousand people. She was the oldest of seven children, and was pulled out of school before completing grade eight because her father believed that education was important only for boys. Similarly, the decision to buy a car

was entirely her father's "because women had no idea about business outside of the home, nor should they."<sup>1</sup> They purchased a Model T, and life changed significantly for the Menier family. While the kids still rode in the horse-and-carriage to get to their one-room schoolhouse, the car was used to transport the family to church on Sundays, and to social engagements. Before having the car, "squeezing seven cold, cranky children into a tiny horse carriage was very uncomfortable and tedious," said my nana.<sup>2</sup> It was only made bearable when their father installed a heater in the carriage to stave off the ruthless Alberta weather. With the car, family outings were much easier and could be made more often because the trip became so short. After all, all aspects of their lives existed within an incredibly small range and the maximum distance the Menier family traveled, for any reason, was less than twenty kilometers. My nana recalls that the furthest her family ever went was to church, to school, and to the market for her father to sell produce or buy new animals. "Isn't that unfathomable today!" she exclaimed, shaking her head.<sup>3</sup>

With the car, the Menier women would sometimes travel to the big city to shop. Edmonton was the closest city, and it was a rare treat to drive there to purchase new clothes, or new appliances for the home. When they got a bit older, the kids attended a multi-room school further from the farm. They also moved to a bigger town when my nana was a teenager, the name of which she cannot recall. Her father's farm had "become much more profitable since having the car," she remembers, because work on the farm was much easier and selling was more efficient with the use of the automobile.<sup>4</sup> As a result, Louise's father sold their farm in hopes of buying a bigger one in a bigger town, where more opportunity for markets, education, and the future existed.

The car did not directly affect the work my nana did on the farm. Despite the convenience it would have meant for her father, my nana was not taught how to drive, because as a woman the skill of driving was considered inappropriate and unnecessary. That did not stop her from sneaking away with the automobile once in a while without her parents' permission, though. Sometimes, Louise and her sisters "would go on drives just to escape, or to go to the drive-in movie theatre". The children would do anything to get away from the domineering and strict household of their parents, and with the addition of the car to their lives, escape was made much easier than it ever had been before. The Menier parents were religious, believed in hitting their children, and controlled every decision made. My nana explained that just being able to drive down an open road without the authoritarian eye of their parents was "the most incredible independence we had ever known".<sup>5</sup> The automobile was the answer to their prayers, and they took advantage of it whenever possible.

In fact, it was because my nana and her sisters snuck away from home one night with the automobile to a drive-in movie, that Louise met her future husband, my grandfather-to-be, Dermot Briscoe. He had finished his service for the British army in World War II and settled in Alberta, when he went to a movie. My grandparents met and married a few months later (they had their sixtieth wedding anniversary this year!) Due to the freedom my nana found with the (illegal) use of the car, she found love and happiness that she might not have. After getting married she learned how to drive. With four kids by age twenty-five, she relied heavily on the use of the car in the town of Devon, Alberta, to maintain her household and run a small hairdressing business.<sup>6</sup>

In almost all ways, my nana's experience with the automobile is typical of a farm girl's experience with the car in North America in the 1940s. First of all, her, and her mother's, existence as women on the farm in the 1940s mirrors the general trend in the world. Farmer's wives and daughters were loyal and obedient, and their only business was to take care of the home and the children. It was strictly the man's job to make the money and financial decisions for his family. Because women were excitable, nervous, and emotional, the only place for them was in the safe, unthreatening domestic sphere. With industrialization, wherein machines replaced men in the work place, and with an increased number of women attaining higher education, men felt that their masculine position was being taken from them.<sup>7</sup> In response, men made the automobile out to be the machine that they could now be in charge of, and by doing so, reclaimed their masculinity. In the process, women were excluded and even ridiculed for not having the necessary "masculine" traits needed to be good drivers, including aggression, strength, coordination, and more.<sup>8</sup> In many cases, women had to have permission from their husbands or parents to drive.<sup>9</sup> My grandmother and great-grandmother were certainly subject to such trends of male dominance and ridicule when living on the farm in Alberta.

In terms of farm life and productivity, my nana's experience was also very similar to the general trends. For many rural families, before the widespread use and ownership of the automobile, their lives existed in a fifty-mile radius. They relied on animals, bicycles, railroads and steamboats in order to work their land, sell products, buy supplies, and go to social functions. These were all quite impractical and inefficient modes of

transportation.<sup>10</sup> The car led to increased farm productivity because it was easier to work the land and to bring products to the market.<sup>11</sup>

While many rural dwellers opposed the automobile, many farmers were very much in favor of it, not only for increased efficiency on the farm, but because of the difference it would make in health care. Before the car, farm families were forced to use home remedies and amateur treatments, because a doctor or hospital was too away.<sup>12</sup> Doctors could get to more patients, and faster. Eventually, the nature of health care changed because farmers could bring their sick families to the doctor, instead of a doctor making house calls.<sup>13</sup> The use of the motorized ambulance was also very instrumental in improving the quality and efficiency of healthcare.<sup>14</sup>

The car was also exciting for farmers, like the Meniers, because it broke them out of rural isolation. Boredom brought on by long, hard, repetitive hours of work, bad weather, and meager economic returns could now be interrupted by activities made possible by car transport. Until the invention of the automobile, farmers were doomed to a life of drudgery and isolation from progress, with inferior public services and few opportunities.<sup>15</sup> Social visits, shopping, school, and other interesting activities could now be enjoyed more easily and with more frequency than ever before.<sup>16</sup>

Like the Meniers' experience, rural education was transformed from one-room schoolhouses within walking distance to consolidated schools, which had higher attendance, more funding, and better materials. The use of the bus furthered this development.<sup>17</sup> With the use of the car, students could work at home on the farm in the morning, and make it to classes in the afternoon. It no longer had to be a choice between

getting an education and working on the family farm. Increased school attendance meant a big difference in the future careers of students as a whole.<sup>18</sup>

Use of the automobile also altered religious life. Country churches were far smaller before the use of the car, because people could only come from small distances, weather permitting. The car made church an easier activity for the elderly and the young. The Meniers seldom missed church, once they had access to a car. With the car, there was now no excuse to miss church services on Sundays, and many smaller churches folded in favor of bigger ones with better resources and more attendance.<sup>19</sup>

The car was also held accountable for negative effects. It was blamed for splitting up the family and for the rebellious behavior of young people. The widespread use of the car encouraged youth to skip church, in favor of spending their Sundays on drives or on excursions with friends. The split of the family was blamed on the car because it was easy for kids to get away, and intergenerational conflict increased as a result.<sup>20</sup> The car was also held responsible for the devious behavior of kids because they could easily get away from the watchful eyes of their parents, and could indulge in romantic activities without being caught.<sup>21</sup> It had been hoped that the car might bring the family closer together but, in reality, it probably did the opposite, and undercut parental supervision and authority.<sup>22</sup> My nana and her siblings certainly used the car for such excursions whenever possible.

In order to attend UBC, my mother, Kathy Gordon, moved to Vancouver with very little financial support. Consequently, she held two jobs and was a full-time student. In Vancouver in the 1970s, all the components of my mother's life including friends,

workplaces, school, and social life, were physically distant, and difficult to access. Using a car to transport herself to and from her daily responsibilities meant that as she could quickly, and safely, make the most of what little time she had. She owned a used Mazda, which was a car that she bought for its small size, dependability, and utilitarian value—fancy design or luxury were of no interest when purchasing the car.

My mother lived mostly in the Kitsilano or Dunbar areas of Vancouver. She “would have rather died than live in the ‘burbs! They were incredibly boring and the commute into the city was way too long to do every morning.”<sup>23</sup> Not that Vancouver was as bustling and exciting as it is now, my mother described, but as there was still much more to do than in the suburbs. With much less traffic than there is now, driving to work and school took roughly fifteen and twenty minutes, respectively. While the bus was an option, the routes and frequency were very inconsistent, making it very impractical and unreliable.<sup>24</sup>

Having a car was also worth it for my mother because British Columbia “was so incredibly beautiful. The hikes and the beaches were to die for,” especially having come from a place as cold barren as Alberta.<sup>25</sup> Driving up to Whistler for the day to experience the scenery and the nature, or the ability to easily get to the Sunshine Coast where her fiancé lived, was priceless for my mom, who had always loved to travel and explore.

My mother witnessed a large migration from the city to the suburbs from the city to the suburbs while she lived in Vancouver. In her opinion, white Vancouverites responded to ongoing Asian immigration by creating their own areas to live in the countryside. Because automobiles were so easily accessible, gas was inexpensive, and

land outside of the city was cheap, expanding to new areas of the Lower Mainland seemed to many like an obvious step. Divides along racial lines became quite notable: Chinese neighborhoods were almost exclusive to Chinese families, and Indian neighborhoods were almost entirely Indian. In a similar fashion, white people took their “neighborhoods” completely away from the city. The size and success of the suburbs that emerged encouraged more white people to move out of Vancouver and into the new developments, thus draining the city of white people and creating a vicious circle: the more successful the suburbs were, the more white people moved out, in turn creating more money and more success in the new developments. However, this phenomenon was not on a very large scale in Vancouver—my mother had many friends who lived in the city, and many friends who lived in the suburbs.

My grandparents, and the parents of my mother’s friends, had lived through World War II and the Great Depression. In my mom’s experience, their parents were so happy to be able to provide for their families that they did so in conspicuous ways. However, the youth in my mom’s socio-economic group were still taught definite lessons about the importance of working hard to receive expensive items— gifts were generally much smaller than they are in the twenty-first century, and youth had to “work very hard to get new items, even though parents had more money than they had had in a long time. They still wanted to impress upon their kids the importance of working hard, in case of another depression. They wanted us all to be prepared.”<sup>26</sup> Car ownership was not considered lavish or expensive. Gasoline’s environmental and economic consequences were not part of youths’ consciousness, because they were all driving inexpensive, used

automobiles. Drive-in theatres and restaurants became very popular: my mom and her friends would socialize and spend their free time doing activities in the car, and going on road trips. My mother went on a number of weeklong road trips with friends, which appealed to them because driving was so exciting and an activity in itself. People really enjoyed automobile-related pastimes.

My mom's experience with the car when she lived in Vancouver in the 1970s is reflective of many of the general trends that were hitting North America. In the United States, the growth and mass expansion of "suburbia" was a direct result of the widespread use of the automobile, as it was in Vancouver. However, the creation of suburbs was on a much larger scale in the United States than in Vancouver, and there were many more factors leading up to its inception. In the post-war years, Americans wanted the best of both the urban and the rural worlds: medical services, entertainment, economic opportunities and education that existed in urban America, while living in the clean, open, beautiful countryside of rural America. The car would turn out to be the ultimate instrument to make that American dream come true.<sup>27</sup>

The stage was first set when American veterans of World War II needed housing after the war ended. With such large numbers, it was obvious that the cities were not going to be big enough—they were overcrowded already. To solve the issue, large loans were given by the government to create huge housing developments outside of the cities, which were dirt-cheap because land was inexpensive outside of cities. The price of land was kept low in the new developments, or suburbs, to ensure that veterans would move there instead of into congested cities.<sup>28</sup>

Congested and unpleasant cities were another factor that encouraged Americans to move to the suburbs. They were crowded and aesthetically unpleasant. In an effort to decongest cities, worthless buildings were turned into parking lots, and the Housing Act of 1949 was implemented to remedy housing ills by initiating urban renewal. However, the plan backfired so that working-class communities were sacrificed and neighborhoods were obliterated. In comparison to the cities, the new, cheap, unoccupied, countryside developments looked incredibly appealing to wealthy white people, and the derelict cities were left to poor immigrants, African-Americans, and other minorities.<sup>29</sup> The “inner-city” was born, in which poor American inhabitants were ghettoized.<sup>30</sup> This process turned into a vicious circle as more whites left, and more poor immigrants moved in, and the inner city became less and less desirable for the wealthy. The suburbs expanded at an immense speed.

Improvement of roads was a necessary step to the expansion of the suburbs. This happened through the Federal-Aid Highway Act, which was passed in order to create a system of highways that ran through cities, and encouraged movement to the suburbs by making cities less desirable to live in and access to the suburbs very easy. In the context of the Cold War, roads and highways improved even more, because evacuation in the case of a nuclear attack was deemed important. Consequently, The National System of Interstate and Defense Highways was passed in order to make highway access even easier, and by default, access to the suburbs even easier.<sup>31</sup>

Inexpensive gasoline secured through World War II made mass exodus to the suburbs inexpensive and worthwhile: as in Vancouver, gasoline was easily accessible and

not considered a great expense for drivers. The consumer appetite of Americans, which had been stifled for decades during the Great Depression and World War II, was the final piece of the equation. People were eager to consume and spend on luxurious items like houses and cars. As it was in Vancouver, the age of consumption was in.<sup>32</sup> So, with cheap housing, easy road access, inexpensive oil, aesthetically-unpleasant inner-city dwellings as the alternative, and a desire to buy, suburbia exploded. The motorized exodus had begun, and would continue to expand for decades.

As my mother experienced in Vancouver, the suburbs that were developed were monotonous and devoid of character, but were functional and practical.<sup>33</sup> A drive-in culture followed as my mom encountered, full of supermarkets, motels, drive-in restaurants, and improved highways.<sup>34</sup> Industries followed, since nobody remained in the cities to sell products or services to.<sup>35</sup> Vancouver had much less of a suburbia phenomena, though, because people like my mother still remained living in the heart of Vancouver. The city thrived and grew, rather than shriveling away and turning into an empty shell.

The automobile has had an immense impact on the world. For the lives of my nana and my mother, the car meant a great deal and changed the ways in which they ran their lives. Their experiences with the automobile as a farm girl and a city girl reflect a greater change on society and the world. The use of the automobile will continue to have huge consequences for everyone, and will continue to dictate the ways in which we live our lives.

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Ibid., 162-3.

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Rae, *The Road and the Car in American Life*, 155.

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