



My Bumper Is Stickier Than Your Bumper

In which we examine American culture according to the information presented at the extremities of its automobiles, and conclude that, what with enraptured frogs and the mysterious disappearance of the United States Air Force, things are not as bad as they could be. Have you read a good bumper lately? By RALPH KEYES

WALTER PRONATH, a Spokane sausage salesman, recently drove down the coast to Southern California. Just above Santa Barbara, he saw his first HAVE A NICE DAY sticker on a bumper. "I thought that was really nice," says the 40-year-old German immigrant. "Up in Spokane all you ever see is THE CZECHS REGISTERED THEIR GUNS. When I saw 'Have a nice day,' it made me want to wave and say, 'Same to you.'"

Same to you. Same to you! SAME TO YOU!!!!

Derek Beckner, a Del Mar bumper sticker maker, chuckled and rolled the phrase on his tongue several times when he heard Pronath's story. Beckner scribbled it on a pad, then drew a border around. SAME TO YOU. He ripped the sheet off the pad and threw it on his desk, then looked up. "Same to you. Think it'd sell?"

Probably it would. It's the kind of thing people might say to each other on the street if they dared say in person what they'll paste on their bumper.

STICK IT IN YOUR EAR SAME TO YOU

HAVE A NICE FOREVER
GOOD DAY SAME TO YOU
GREAT NIGHT
CLEAR

It's almost like talking. We used to mumble pleasantries, passing each other on foot; Or declare our political preferences sitting around a stove at the general store. Or threaten each other hanging out on street corners.

But now we live in cars.

In his book *The Hidden Dimension*, anthropologist Edward T. Hall points out that "the automobile not only seals its occupants in a metal and glass cocoon [but permits] only the most limited types of interaction, usually competitive, aggressive and destructive. If people are to be brought together again . . . some fundamental solutions must be found to the problems posed by the automobile."

Like bumper stickers.

HONK IF YOU LOVE JESUS
WAVE I'M LONELY
IF YOU LIKE ME GRIN

One couple put a COURTESY IS CONTAGIOUS SMILE sticker on their bumper before taking a trip. They promptly forgot it was there and for hundreds of miles couldn't figure out why people kept grinning and waving from passing cars.

It's estimated that a bumper sticker on the average urban car will be seen by 2,000 to 5,000 other drivers daily. There aren't many other forums which can claim such exposure at anywhere near the price. As a result, bumpers are being forced to carry a heavy load, and the stickers on them have to play many different roles. Messages on the bulletin board. Commercials. Rolling graffiti. Commentary on the issues. Conversation.

But no matter how many new roles they're being forced to play, the basic purpose of bumper stickers

remains: Identity. There's just no better way for a bleary-eyed commuter to say, Hey, that's not your ordinary shlepp you see basting in sweat behind the wheel there, that's: a patriot, dissenter, cynic, Jesus freak, dooper or whatever else.

What bumper stickered drivers may not realize is that identity doesn't come cheaply. Take a John Bircher. At his local American Opinion Bookstore he can buy a bumper sticker which reads: CAUTION: DRINKING FLUORIDATED WATER MAY BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH

For years that's been a right-wing obsession, and sticking such a sticker on your bumper put you right in there with General Jack D. Ripper in *Dr. Strangelove*, paranoid about Commies tampering with our "precious bodily fluids."

But when a group of 15 California policemen were asked to write down their reaction to the anti-flouridation message, and estimate who would be driving a car with such a sticker, the responses included: health nut, vegetable person, a hippie; misinformed nut; right on; ecologist worrier; health warning; cynical about advertisements; middle-aged or older person; student.

The policemen were at a training institute held this year at San Diego State College. They were presented with a series of bumper stickers in order to uncover prejudice against drivers with particular stickers. What was actually discovered was the utter confusion about the meaning of the stickers themselves.

HE'S YOUR UNCLE, NOT YOUR DAD, for example, was distributed last year by the Republicans. It's in red, white and blue and has a big picture of Uncle Sam. One cop thought such a sticker would be on the car of a "war protester," and added, "don't let him dictate to you." Another

Illustrated by Ed Sorel

wrote, "good sticker, makes good point, get out and get a job." Although one policeman thought it identified a "right winger," another said, "driver young, long hair." One honest cop admitted that he "never did understand that one."

ANOTHER AMERICAN FOR PEACE is somewhat confusing because it's also done in red, white and blue. One policeman thought it identified a "youthful liberal," one predicted a "Bircher type person," another thought, "parent of serviceman."

In the summer of 1969, a group of California state college students whose cars had **BLACK PANTHER** stickers complained to a professor that they were being harassed by traffic patrolmen. To test this allegation, the professor set up an experiment. Recruiting a racially mixed group of students with clean driving records, she put lurid orange and black **BLACK PANTHER** stickers on their back bumpers. Then all 15 participants agreed in writing to observe traffic laws and do nothing to attract police attention for the duration of the experiment. Within 17 days the 15 had collected 33 moving violations and the experiment had to be halted because there was no money left for bonds.

JUST MARRIED of course was the first, and for a long time the only bumper sticker around. Beginning with Coolidge in 1924, metal bolt-on attachments advertised political candidates.

It wasn't until after the war that Harold Feinstein—president of Los Angeles' Aldine Printing Company—got the idea for paste-on stickers from the adhesive product used to mark airplane fuselages.

Feinstein, since deceased, printed up some sample stickers in 1948 and sent them to the major political candidates. But the idea was novel, the cost high, and it wasn't until the 1952 election that bumper stickers began to catch on. (Richard Nixon had been an early user of stickers in his 1950 campaign for the Senate.) Today, of course, you're not really considered a sincere candidate until your bumper stickers begin to show up on cars.

The surest tip-off to Robert Kennedy's intentions late in 1967 was the fact that he was ordering **KENNEDY IN '72** bumper stickers.

Aldine's composing chief Johnny Mandina re-

members working on that sticker, just as he remembers working on most of their bumper stickers since the beginning. In that time he's seen the product grow more artistic (sometimes being signed by a designer), colorful and varied in size to fit foreign bumpers.

And—since Vietnam—slogans have become the thing in stickers. "First it was just Vietnam," says the 55-year-old Mandina, "both sides. Then we got orders for 20 or 30 different slogans about guns. Then the dope scene came in and we got all the dope ones. Anything in the news."

Just after Daniel Ellsberg confessed leaking the Pentagon papers, Aldine got orders for:

**SUPPORT ELLSBERG, NOT CALLEY
ELLBERG'S OK
VOTE NO ON ELLSBERG**

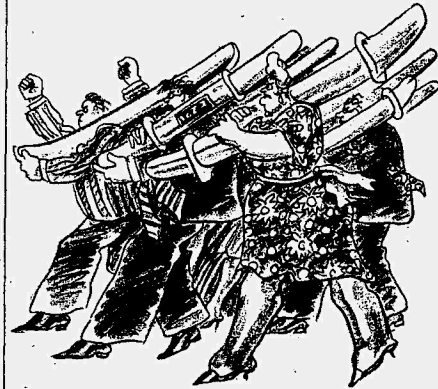
"People come in here with clippings right out of the paper and ask us to write bumper banners for them," says Mrs. Dale Borgos, Feinstein's daughter and administrative assistant at Aldine. "Though we won't actually write slogans, we do give advice: keep it short—you've only got three seconds to read a bumper banner—and keep in mind who you're trying to reach."

"There was one lady who came in with a slogan several lines long," adds Mandina. "I tried and tried to persuade her to shorten it so the letters would be bigger. But she wouldn't budge." He pulls out the sticker:

**I BELIEVE IN THE PARAMOUNT
SANCTITY OF INTELLIGENT LIFE,
AND IN THE LESSER SANCTITY
OF BARELY APPERCEPTIVE LIFE,
AND IN THE NONAPPERCEPTIVE LIFE:
REGARDLESS
OF RACE, SPECIES OR PHYLLUM
ABOLISH ALL ABORTION LAWS**

Mandina says his all-time favorite is **GOOD NEIGHBORS COME IN ALL COLORS**. "That one was really nice."

Aldine is the nation's leading bumper sticker maker, claiming well over half the market. In recent years a considerable market has grown up for distributors who get a variety of slogans printed up, then peddle them outright. Competition has become



stiff in this field, especially in Southern California. Bumper sticker makers steal each others' slogans shamelessly. Some have taken to offering cut-size and cut-rate stickers.

"It was a good medium for a while," says John Peter Abt of Abt Enterprises in Costa Mesa, "but I think it's been played out. It's been oversaturated." Abt, a 36-year-old longhair who used to work for Chase Manhattan, started out selling posters, went to bumper stickers last year and now is heavily into nostalgia. He calls the Los Angeles bumper sticker scene "a big rip-off. If one sticker seems to make it, then 15 people are rumming them off. Also people are beginning to realize how cheap it is to manufacture bumper stickers [about four cents each in quantity] and are just getting their own printed up."

Freed from the need to appeal to a wide market, bumper stickers are getting increasingly esoteric, intended less to say something than to identify one "in" driver to another. Take **I'M OK, YOU'RE OK**. That might seem like just a nice, simple-minded slogan. Actually it's a guiding principle of a new form of psychotherapy called Transactional Analysis, and the title of a book by a Transactional Analyst.

A variety of specialty houses across the country service their customers' need for biased bumper stickers. There are several conservative companies, for example, which include among their patriotic wares a full line of red, white and blue bumper stickers. Religious houses are putting out more and more Christian stickers, including some of the best designed and most colorful ones on the road.

In Dallas, Al Minsky is fighting hard to retain the notion of a diversified line. Minsky, who calls his three-year-old bumper sticker operation The New Humor Company, tries to keep his products unique. He carries a tape recorder and pad with him to jot down slogans as they occur. Mainly out of his head has come a line of 60 stickers—mostly original and mostly corny.

**KEEP YOUR CITY CLEAN
EAT A PIGEON**

and

**BE KIND TO ANIMALS
KISS A FROG**

Just to cover himself, Minsky puts out both

**CUT GRASS
DON'T SMOKE IT**

and

**SMOKING GRASS
IS BETTER THAN CUTTING IT**

Continued



Cream of the Bumper Crop

The author's selection of the best of the stickers. Some of the most interesting candidates were omitted for obvious reasons (this is a family newspaper). Those chosen are offered with this in mind: Love them or leave them.

RIGHT WING:

Greatest impact:

AMERICA LOVE IT
OR LEAVE IT

Most original:

IF YOU DON'T LIKE COPS
NEXT TIME YOU NEED HELP
CALL A HIPPIE

Funniest:



FOOTPRINT OF
THE AMERICAN CHICKEN



LEFT WING

Greatest impact:

MAKE LOVE NOT WAR

Most original:

WAR IS GOOD BUSINESS
INVEST YOUR SON

Funniest:

NIXON IS ROSEMARY'S BABY



RELIGIOUS

Greatest impact:

MY GOD ISN'T DEAD
SORRY ABOUT YOURS

Most original:

HONK IF YOU LOVE JESUS

Funniest:

GOING UP?



HUMOROUS

First prize:

APPLE PIE
MAKES YOU STERILE

Second prize:

DON'T EAT YELLOW SNOW

Third prize:

BEWARE: THIS CAR
RUNS ON EX-LAX



CYNICAL

First prize:

STICK IT IN YOUR EAR

Second prize:

DON'T BUG ME

Third prize:

TOMORROW IS CANCELLED



INDIVIDUAL AWARDS

Public service:

DRIVE CAREFULLY
DR. BARNARD
IS WAITING

Wishy washiness:

NO COMMENT

Sweet unreason:

FLYING SAUCERS ARE REAL
THE AIR FORCE DOESN'T EXIST

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"So there you go," admits Minsky, "we're on both sides of the fence."

Del Mar's Derek Beckner was one of the first out last summer with HAVE A NICE DAY, the all-time bumper sticker best-seller. This was his first sticker, and it sold more than the rest of his line combined.

But what do you do for an encore? Beckner worried and experimented.

He tried HI and that wasn't too bad—sold 5,000 or so. REMEM-

BER WHEN AIR WAS CLEAN AND SEX WAS DIRTY? did pretty well, but other manufacturers had picked it up within two weeks and cut into his market.

Beckner, 27, is a former waiter with an original mind. "I sometimes think I hold a fantastic amount of power in my hands," mused Beckner after last summer's demand for HAVE A NICE DAY outpaced what he could silk-screen by hand. "It's an amazing form of communication. I worry sometimes

about the government getting ahold of it."

Advertising got it going, then politicians needing a plug. Vietnam fueled it and now ecology. Then HAVE A NICE DAY reminded us that mostly what we were trying to do with bumper stickers was just exchange little courtesies like we used to before cars came between people. The HAVE A NICE DAY stickers are faded and peeling now, but the hunger for human contact remains.