

Automobile innovations a reflection of society

by MARK PAVILONS

The automobile has become one of our most important tools of the modern era.

It's hard to believe just how far we've come in the last 100 years or so.

Credit for early automobiles goes to German designers Karl Benz and Gottlieb Daimler. The 1901 Mercedes, designed by Wilhelm Maybach, is considered to be the first modern motorcar. Henry Ford's Model T and the introduction of the assembly line changed history forever.

It's also hard to believe that early automobiles didn't have breaks, seatbelts, or horns. Like the early days of flight, you had to be very brave to get behind the wheel or stick of one of these newfangled machines.

Today, we take things like ABS, back-up cameras and power seats for granted. Heck, when I started driving, we only had lap belts and crank windows. One of my cars, a 1973 Dodge Dart, had standard steering and brakes. But it also had nice large chrome bumpers.

Muscle cars of the late 1960s and 1970s have had a huge following in recent years. But today, totally restored beauties command huge price tags.

I had a 1970 1/2 Camaro RS with split bumpers. I bought it from someone in Brampton for \$900 while I was in high school. It needed a bit of TLC, but I loved it. I got rid of it when I went to college and have been regretting it ever since.

Now, all I do is look at photos online of beautiful versions of this, and other models. And I weep, silently, to myself.

My son asked why I got rid of it in the first place. I said at the time, these weren't particularly rare or sought-after muscle cars. They were merely cars of the day.

If everyone who had a Camaro, Corvette, Mustang or Challenger growing up put it away in a barn, we'd all be rich.

When I discussed finding an older model car with my mechanic a few years back, he suggested just getting the brand-new version. They're safer, have all the bells and whistles and even cost less!

Can't argue with that logic, but since when did logic dictate a person's taste in classic automobiles?

Automotive innovation is a tell-tale sign of society's progress.

The Automobile Journalists Association of Canada (AJAC) awarded a trio of technologies with its Automotive Innovation Awards for 2023.

The winner for Best Safety Innovation was Subaru's EyeSight Wide-Angle Mono Camera and pre-collision braking system.

I believe that any visual assistance the driver can have is great. Rear, back-up cameras are pretty much standard today, and enhanced rear-view mirrors, warnings and lane correction options can all be life-saving.

The award for Best Technical Innovation went to Range Rover and its Adaptive Off-Road Cruise Control.

This new technology helps drivers to navigate tricky terrain by maintaining steady progress according to the ground conditions. When one of four comfort settings is selected using a steering-wheel switch, the system will intelligently adjust the vehicle speed, allowing the driver to focus on steering.

Sensors monitor every aspect of the vehicle and its movement to understand the terrain, whether it's on a gradient, ice, uneven rocks or in deep snow. The system then modulates the speed accordingly.

Yes, our cars have come a long way since the bare bones sedans and coupes of the days of chrome and carbs.

And that's a good thing.

I thought ABS and skid correction were amazing when they came out.

But I'm a simple guy. Sticking my arm out the window in the summer for that driver's tan makes me smile. That, and some cool tunes from the 1970s and 1980s and I'm in my happy place.

As we bid farewell to the fossil fuel burning vehicles and say hello to our newfound electric buddies, more will change.

Almost daily, I see internet posts about the newest concept car and most modern technology. I suppose that when you remove the engine and transmission, designers can spend more time and apply creativity to the interiors and exteriors of the vehicle.

What we're seeing are futuristic cars with more technology than the space shuttles.

That's all well and good, but what's not so appealing is the \$100,000-plus sticker price on these modern marvels.

Hopefully, when all the major manufacturers settle in and complete the transition, consumers will be able to choose from some reasonably priced EV cars and vans. And yes, before too long, they will drive themselves, park themselves, even take themselves in for a check-up. It will be weird.

I do agree that life's too short to be driving boring cars. But alas, I've turned into that guy that my kids admit, with head down, 'yes, that is my dad's Buick.'

I don't need to monitor the galaxy through my sunroof or flip on the infrared to see if any Sasquatches are roaming the woods. Hey, I loved James Bond's vehicles as much as the next man, but at some point we have to apply the brakes.

If our engineers and designers could only apply such marvels to other aspects of society, we'd be in much better shape. An ejector-type lawn chair, now that's something I could use. Or a robot that paints the house and refinishes the kitchen cabinets, now that's worth its weight in gold. They already have intelligent mowers that roam the back yard, cut the grass and even pick up dog poop. That's cool.

I'm also hoping that our tech prowess filters its way into modern medicine. We need that more than ever. Heck, I'd gladly pay \$100,000 for a 'sick bay bed' at home that monitors, diagnoses and treats all illnesses.

Enjoy the automotive eye-candy folks, but keep it all in perspective.