

It's a Guy Thing

Activity ideas especially for the men in your group.

Tailfins

Discussion and Matching Game

With all of the auto companies in the news these days, plan a discussion and matching game about car tailfins.

Props & Preparations

1. Print a copy of the PICTURES on the page, including the jet fighter (the inspiration for tailfins) to show the group.
2. Print copies of the MATCHING TAILFINS game to pass out. (Have some pencils available so people can mark their answers.)
3. If you want to do the matching game as a group activity, print large pictures of the TAILFINS PICTURES, two per sheet.
4. Check out the links in the article for additional information to bring to the discussion.
5. Use the “Points to Ponder” as an opportunity to ask questions and generate discussions.



Introduction

These are troubling times for American automobile companies with both General Motors and Chrysler either in or just coming out of bankruptcy. The newspapers are full of stories about how these companies lost their way and what they must do to once again become world-class competitors. But let's forget about bondholders arguing with workers who are arguing with management and recall a seemingly simpler time when August meant the World Series and unveiling of the new car designs for the upcoming year were just around the corner. This activity examines how the “tailfin” craze started some 50+ years ago and challenges you car buffs to identify some prime specimens of that era by their tailfins. So, slick back your ducktails and have fun!

A Little Background

The American standard of living was the envy of the world during the 1950s. Returning WWII vets had jobs, families, money to spend, and dreams of a prosperous, positive future. It was a time of rock 'n' roll, drive-in movies, hamburger stands, and the automobile.

Detroit met the demand for cars with some of the largest, boldest, and most powerful vehicles ever to roll down America's roads. The drab colors and dated designs of the war years gave way to brightly colored, chrome-covered highway cruisers, many of which sported the stylized feature of the decade – tailfins.

The tailfin era of automobile styling encompassed the 1950s and 1960s, peaking between 1958 and 1960. It was a style that spread worldwide as car designers picked up styling trends from the American automobile industry.



General Motors design chief, Harley Earl, is generally credited for the automobile tailfin, introducing small fins on the 1948 Cadillac. Harley (the father of the Corvette) credited the look of World War II fighter aircraft for his inspiration, particularly the twin-tailed P-38 Lightning. As jet-powered aircraft, rockets, and space flight entered into public recognition, the automotive tailfin assemblies (including tail lights) were designed to resemble more and more the tailfin and engine sections of contemporary jet fighters, such as the F-86 Saber Jet, and guided missiles.

Plymouth claimed that the tailfins were not just decorative fins, but "stabilizers" to place the "center of pressure" as far to the rear as possible and thus "reduce by 20% the needs for steering correction in a cross wind."



The styling of the 1948 Cadillac fin proved popular and its use spread to other models in the General Motors family of brands. Soon, other manufacturers adopted it. Chrysler's Virgil Exner in particular took the tailfin idea on board.

As confidence grew in the styling trend, the fins grew larger and bolder. The most extreme tailfins appeared in the late 1950s. Many consider the fins on the 1959 Cadillac to be the largest and most outrageous ever fitted. Those fins were too much for many customers, however, and the tailfins shrank after that point. Within a couple of years, tailfins had become much less prominent, and by the mid-1960s, they were gone on many models.

Spoilers & Wings



Today, many car manufacturers offer the option of having a spoiler or wings installed on a new car - usually smaller, sportier cars. A spoiler is supposed to improve the airflow over a vehicle for better traction and faster speed. It is attached to the trunk of the car and is painted to match the vehicle. "Wings" look similar to car spoilers but are raised on pedestals to stand higher off the trunk and are often metallic or black.

Similarly to tailfins, some people think they look stylish and others think they are "too much."

Can you match the tailfins?

1. Pass out copies of the MATCHING TAILFINS handout and ask participants to take a few minutes and try to match the pictures of the tailfins with the make and model of the car. At the end of the time, reveal the answers.
2. If you prefer a group activity, write the names of the car makes and models on a board. Pass around one of the TAILFIN PICTURES at a time and ask the group to match it to one of the makes and models written on the board.

Points to Ponder

- What do you think about the tailfin craze? Did it add fun and excitement to people's lives or was it just a waste of time and money? What do you think of spoilers and wings?
- What decade do you think had the best and most distinctive automobile styles? Can you give some examples?
- Do you think automobile makers today should place more emphasis on styling and advertising like they did in the 1950s and 1960s? Or, should all of their effort be spent on making reliable, safe, fuel-efficient cars?
- Do you remember the excitement that would build when the "Big Three" were about to debut the new models for the upcoming year? This would usually take place in September and would be preceded by weeks of advertising. What were the "Big Three"? (General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler)
- Experts say that the next twenty years will be a time of great change for the automobile. The need to be less dependent on oil has pushed research on electric cars, bio-fuel, propane, and hydrogen cars. Do you think they will be successful in finding an alternative to gasoline? If so, which of the above do you think will work and why? Have you heard about other alternative fuels?
- Can you describe the first car you ever owned (make, model, year, color)? How old were you when you bought it? Do you remember how much it cost? Did your parents help pay for it? Was it new or used?
- What are the features you would look for when buying a car? Did you have a favorite car color?
- Describe the best and worst cars you have ever owned. Why do you think they were good/bad cars?
- There seem to be two schools of thought about car ownership. Which of the following best describes your opinion on this subject?
 - a. Drive them "until the wheels fall off."
 - b. Trade them in every two or three years for a new car.
 - c. How did you rank the following when you were shopping for a car: cost, reliability, safety, style, comfortable ride, performance?
- Were you a "shade tree mechanic" or did you leave car repairs to the pros? Were you ever taken by a mechanic?
- Remember when one of the really annoying things about owning a car was tracking down rattles? Did you ever have problems with this? It seems that manufactures have worked these problems out because you do not hear much about rattle problems anymore.