

STARS 2013 Abstract --- John Heitmann, Department of History, University of Dayton

Title of Presentation: “The End of an Affair: Americans, Their Love of the Automobile, and Why Understanding it Matters”

Whether it is reflective of American exceptionalism or not, an understanding of the American love affair with the automobile is critical to reconstructing twentieth century everyday life. After all, it can be argued that the automobile was the quintessential technology of twentieth century America. It has been said that the automobile is the perfect technological symbol of American culture, a tangible expression of our quest to level space, time and class, and a reflection of our restless mobility, social and otherwise. The automobile transformed business, life on the farm and in the city, the nature and organization of work, leisure time, and the arts. It influenced the foods we eat; music we listen to; risks we take; places we visit; errands we run; emotions we feel; movies we watch; stress we endure; and, the air we breathe. Above all, the car became an object of desire, a thing to be loved – for a time. And while that love still lingers in the hearts of many who restore and collect cars, beginning in the late 1950s, the marriage began to sour, so much so that today some 25% of young American under the age of 25 do not even have a driver’s license!

This short presentation will explore my current research on how developments occurring after the late 1950s – the rise of European and Asian competitors, an emerging consumer movement, the hubris and complacency of the “Detroit Three,” and finally the rise the federal government and its regulations – resulted in the turning of an historical page, as the automobile became seen by an increasing number of Americans as an appliance rather than as a vital extension of themselves. Is the affair over and done with, or will it rekindle after the introduction of a new wave of technologically advanced hybrids and electric vehicles?