For customers, buying a car evokes strong feelings, not only because they are spending a lot of money but also because they have to engage in the process variously known as trading, dealing, negotiating, bargaining, haggling, and dickering. The practice is both unfamiliar and fraught with symbolic meaning, which is why it is frequently described with metaphorical labels like hunt, battle, contest, and game. Both men and women say they dislike negotiating, but men understand it as part of the meaning of owning the car. An Atlanta Cadillac dealer explained that his poor male customers who realized they were being tricked into paying more than they could afford did not “even have sense enough to walk out.” By that time, he said, “the guy is so ashamed he buys it anyway and then lies in the street. He tells everybody he paid this real low price because he doesn’t want to admit he got taken.”

Getting cheated on a car purchase and losing “street cred” is a direct carryover of horse trading patterns into the new transportation market. The buyer lost status by paying too much; the seller gained status by charging too much. Early Ford dealer John Eagal took horses in trade for his Model Ts in 1909. He had a hostler on staff who not only knew how to polish up an old horse to make
it look new but was also a first-class bargainer. Eagal was conflicted about bringing horse-trading techniques over to the car side of the business. On the one hand, he said he never cut list prices, but on the other, he admitted he would give over-allowances to close a sale. The willingness to sweeten the deal by upping the allowance on a trade-in permitted customers to walk away thinking they had beaten the dealer and done better than their acquaintances. If you want to impress your friends, “talk prices,” suggested a piece in 1915. Tell them “by knowing the ropes and working one dealer against another you got a big shave.”

“The Great American Sport of Bargaining”

Consumers and dealers believed, and numerous field studies have confirmed, that buyers who bargain pay less than those who do not. For male customers, the opportunity to boast about a good price may have been as important as the money. “All men like to be called ‘shrewd,’” a Ford sales manual advised in 1926. Shrewd meant getting a better price than expected, a better price than friends, a better price than the dealer wanted to charge. Beating the dealer gave the buyer bragging rights. It did not matter if the buyer won the concession on the price of the new car or the allowance on the old one, just as long as there was the appearance of victory. “If John Smith can get 5 per cent reduction, he is pleased, not merely because he saved $100 but because he beat the game,” reported an industry study in 1932: “The chief satisfaction that he gets from the reduction is when he whispers to Henry Jones, his neighbor, that he was clever enough to get 5 per cent off.”

Dealers understood that customers perceived car buying as a contest and cultivated devices to make them think they had beaten the house. “You have to make the customer feel that he has won a victory,” said a Chevrolet salesman in 1979. “It is a cardinal sin to give the prospect an unearned concession,” advised a sales manual a dozen years earlier. “He will value it little unless he feels he has earned it. Give him the satisfaction he seeks. Let him earn the savings he wants to brag about.” Salesmen would bolster the egos of even weak negotiators by telling them they were tough customers who were beating them up, or getting them in trouble with their managers. The managers would use similar language, joking about how the customer was stealing the car or was out to ruin the salesman’s reputation.

The need to make the buyer feel like a winner was one of the incentives for price packing. By inflating the cost of the new car, the dealers could give over-
allowances on the trade-in, making the buyer believe he was a shrewd bargainer. In 1939, a West Coast dealer asked fifty buyers to whom he had just sold a car how much they had paid for it; only three knew. However, forty-eight knew exactly how much they had gotten for their trade-in. Once the customer brought up the question of his current car, what ensued was “a real battle of wits,” explained a Cadillac sales manual in the 1920s. If you showed weakness, the prospect would pounce, and if the prospect showed weakness, you had to be ready to pounce. The language of the hunt, along with the language of sexual conquest, distinguished the salesmen’s discourse, while people outside the industry usually preferred game terms. At the hearings that led to the MSRP sticker legislation, Senator Mike Monroney referred to “the great American sport of bargaining over the prices of both the new car and the trade-in.” Monroney should have said, although in 1958 it was probably taken for granted, that he meant the great American manly sport of bargaining. A study of male car buyers in the late 1950s found that men who shopped at more than one dealership (and who were presumably more aggressive bargainers) had more stereotypically masculine personality traits than those who went to a single dealer. Specifically, they were more achievement oriented, more dominant, and more aggressive. The salesman’s job, therefore, was to let these (and all other) buyers think they were winning a contest, whereas in fact, the salesman remained in control.

The contest was a game of strategy, a psychological contest, and the seller learned to dominate without appearing to be domineering. The salesperson never followed the customer around the lot but always led the way, and he did so without looking back, forcing the prospect to trot dutifully behind the alpha dog. The seller set the pace, urging the prospect to move on to the next stage in the system but forcing the customer to wait in the closing room for protracted periods while the salesperson was ostensibly consulting with the manager about a price offer. The salesperson used long silences to make customers uncomfortable and force them into verbal concessions that could be turned into price bumps. Emphasizing the need to control the prospect, one trainer bet his class of salesmen that he could make the next customer on the lot climb into a car’s trunk and shut the lid. He did so—by explaining it was the only way the prospect could appreciate how much luggage capacity it had.

Advice to buyers was often couched in combative game terminology. Typically, Michael Royce’s excellent how-to book was called Beat the Car Salesman, and the first chapter was “Understanding the Game.” Unlike the salesman who hoped he could metaphorically kill the customer, the customer just hoped
he could beat the salesman. It is a “mind game,” explained Gary Carr in his book *How to Outsmart the New-car Salesman*. Carr described strategies that could be used to unsettle sales staffers as they used each of the standard bargaining tactics. Although Carr avoided the fight-to-the-death language that salespeople used among themselves, the ex-salesman made sure his readers understood that car buying was not a transaction in which a fair price could be paid for a fair product. It was a contest, a challenge: “To be second means that you still lose. In the game of cars, unless you come in first, the dealer and his staff win.”

Both sides in the bargaining game claimed they did not want to participate. Dealers said they played only because buyers expected discounts. “We don’t want any horsetrading,” said a dealer in 1965, “but most of our customers force us to horsetrade.” The evidence is as mixed and conflicting as the attitudes. A 1986 survey done for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reported consumers were “angered by, if not intimidated by, the bargaining process which they feel they must engage in with dealers.” But a study in 1995 found that more than 80 percent of those asked knew that car prices were negotiable, and about half said they liked to bargain over prices.

The other half were presumably those described by salesman Chandler Phillips as responding to his cheerful “Good afternoon” with fear: “They were afraid they would be cheated, ripped-off, pressured, hoodwinked, swindled, jacked around, suckerized or fleeced.” “Buying a car,” said a self-confessed car-lover, “is an exercise in degradation and humiliation.” What did he find degrading and humiliating? To judge from complaints to the Better Business Bureau, it was the haggling. An unpublished summary of consumer complaints from Ford customers during the same period found that almost all buyer criticisms were related to the bargaining process. Customers objected to sharp trading, deception or misrepresentation, undue pressure, objectionable attitudes, would-you-take offers, and bushing. However, they also objected to “excessive prices” and “failure to grant concession.”

Smarting from forty years of terrible press, the auto industry embraced the customer satisfaction movement of the 1980s. Questionnaires administered by outside monitoring agencies like J. D. Powers became de rigueur for dealers, and firms that did well would boast about their high CSIs (customer satisfaction indexes). But “happy” did not necessarily sell cars, and an article in an industry magazine in 1998 was subtitled “Making Nice versus Selling on Price.” It found
people hated shopping at big high-pressure stores, but that is where most of them bought their cars because that is where the cars were cheapest.\textsuperscript{29}

In the non-auto retail environment, large high-volume outlets attract customers with price. First referred to as “discount stores” after World War II, they kept costs low with some combination of low prices from suppliers, small numbers of low-paid staff, bare-bones stores in low-rent districts, and aggressive price advertising. Car retailers could not duplicate this cost-cutting model. Auto manufacturers fixed their wholesale prices. Salesmen were already practically free by working solely on commission. Space requirements already required “auto rows” to be on cheaper land outside of downtown. Service was a profit center to build up, not an operating cost to reduce. Like discount stores, high-volume car dealers made a little profit on a lot of sales. Unlike discount stores, they sometimes made a lot of profit on a portion of them because some buyers did not know they should bargain or how to bargain well.

Individual buyers were amateurs playing a game with professionals. The deck was stacked, the dice were loaded, the playing field was uneven, but the game could not be avoided. In 1917 the \textit{New York Tribune} published an exposé of dealer tricks and made it available as a special booklet that readers could order by mail. The \textit{Tribune’s} advice pamphlet, which covered “Contracts, Warranties, Service, Salesmen, Used Cars and Freight,” was an unusual example of car consumer education before the World War II.\textsuperscript{30} Manufacturers and dealers advertised list prices in the prewar era and tried to stick to them. The dealers disguised most discounts as over-allowances on the owner’s used car, and dickering on used-car prices was so much a continuation of the informal horse-trading market that it was taken for granted. However, when the postwar Hull-Dobbs system with its hidden retail prices rubbed buyers’ noses in the differences between buying a car and buying other manufactured goods, warnings and car-buying instructions appeared with increasing frequency.

Barefoot pilgrims were always welcome, but they did become rarer. In 1953 the NADA magazine happily reprinted a newspaper column that described how the writer had indignantly walked out of nine dealerships where salesmen began bargaining over price. Instead, this proud victim bought at a tenth store, accepting the first price quoted for the new car and the first offer for his trade-in. He said he was pleased the salesman could discuss the car’s technical characteristics and even more pleased that the salesman helped rather than pressured him.\textsuperscript{31} If the approximately 6,081,000 other people who bought cars in 1953 had acted in the same way, new-car dealerships would have operated like other retail busi-
nesses; presumably, buyers would have been happier (but poorer), and dealers would have been happier and richer.

Consumers, however, had been dickering with car dealers for fifty years, and the nine bargaining salesmen were much more typical than the laid-back one. Anxious to make up for lost sales during the war, car dealers in the 1950s intensified their negotiating system. Consumers reacted with anger, and consumer advocates responded with advice. The defensive tone of one Better Business Bureau’s counsel was typical of postwar advice: “The majority of automobile dealers are legitimate,” the Bureau warned in 1958. “However, there is an unscrupulous element using dishonest sales practices coldly calculated to fool and cheat the buyer.” The steps the BBB suggested were classic advice to the consumer venturing into a hostile marketplace of get-rich-quick schemes and other snares for the unwary. They were not the recommendations given in a retail environment where the customer was always right. Don’t allow yourself to be rushed or pressured, the bureau advised; don’t sign contracts with blank lines; watch for price packing; stay with your trade-in and guard the keys to prevent car-napping; get proof the car you are buying is really new; and check out the dealer’s reputation.32 The 1958 Monroney law was supposed to protect the customer from these abuses, but consumer advocates continued to issue similar advice through the end of the century.33

Before the 1960s there were few if any suggestions of how to bargain for the best price. Rather, consumers were warned about sellers who violated the conventions of the one-price marketplace. However, no such marketplace existed in the automobile industry. The advisors recommended that customers shop carefully and compare prices but implied that marketplace haggling was unseemly and alien. Between the wars, industry critics of price negotiating invariably used the same imagery to condemn the practice. It was, they said, like an Oriental bazaar. The implication was that arguing over prices was not only un-American, it was un-Western, and quite possibly un-Christian. The locations invoked in this image were almost always Middle Eastern, with the insinuation that the metaphorical marketplace was populated with Muslims (or, perhaps, Jews).

The few American markets in which there was regular price dickering in the 1920s and 1930s were in predominantly Jewish urban neighborhoods like Manhattan’s Lower East Side, or Chicago’s Maxwell Street. Moreover, the verb “to jew,” which had been used as a pejorative to characterize hard bargaining since early in the nineteenth century, was still in wide use. The car-buying public was caught in a cultural trap. Purchasing a new car required them to negotiate the
price, something for which they had no training. It was, moreover, something that suffered from the taint of foreignness and impropriety. Bargaining was not playing the shopping game by the regular rules, but for cars it was the only game in town, and people had to learn it. By making the Hull-Dobbs system the industry standard after World War II, the dealers created a new cohort of customers tutored in the methods of aggressive bargaining. Faced with a larger number of knowledgeable buyers, salesmen had to work even harder to make up from innocent buyers what they were forced to concede to more sophisticated consumers.

This distinction between the knowledgeable and unconstrained buyers on the one hand, and naïve or culturally bound buyers on the other, expressed itself very clearly in the way women and minorities were treated in the postwar market. Women felt intimidated and uncomfortable shopping for cars, because even as their numbers increased, cars continued to be male-gendered objects and buying them was framed as a contest. As we shall see, the evidence on whether or not women were taken advantage of when they ventured into the car market is unclear, but there is no doubt that a century of one-price retailing had eliminated bargaining from the standard set of female skills. And while men were not exactly trained from childhood to haggle over prices, they were generally more comfortable with adversarial negotiations.

Ethnic and racial minorities also expressed the belief that they were discriminated against in the automobile marketplace. Here too the evidence is unclear. No reasonable observer doubts that there is a history of economic discrimination against African Americans, but the ways in which racial prejudice expressed itself can be hard to pin down. Economic class and geographic factors complicate analyses that seek to describe racial discrimination. Although he did not address race, ethnicity, or gender, Allen Jung did demonstrate in a series of studies that salesmen charged naïve buyers more than those who bargained and that urban dealers charged less than those in outlying areas. Everything else being equal, lower prices in cities should have helped black buyers, so that finding does not fit the expected pattern. However, Jung’s second conclusion, that non-bargainers pay more, does provide some evidence for understanding racial price differentials.

For African Americans, buying a car became a particularly ironic historical exception. Early in the twentieth century, African Americans had demonstrated a clear preference for shopping at department stores with their posted one-price-to-all, even though they risked being treated discourteously by the white
sales staff. They may have been discouraged, for example, from using the fitting rooms, but when they did buy something, they paid the ticket price and did not have to worry that a prejudiced store owner was hiking up the price of the goods. Because they could never be sure how they were being perceived by white sellers, blacks may have been more reluctant than others to violate the retail rules that called for paying the posted price. The rules were what protected them from price “discrimination”—in both the social and economic senses of the term.

A survey in 1991 found contemporary evidence for this historical pattern. Two-thirds of black respondents—double the white rate—did not know that automobile sticker prices could be negotiated, and among whites the rate for women was higher than the rate for men. Because the pattern of overcharging holds true for both non-white and female sales staff, researchers Ian Ayres and Peter Siegelman have suggested that sales staff who quoted higher prices to blacks and women may not have been manifesting racial or gender prejudice but may simply have been taking advantage of people they assumed would not demand lower prices. Whatever its causes, the pattern of discrimination continued after the sale when blacks were charged more for financing. Anecdotal evidence suggests that ethnic minorities from bargaining cultures in East and South Asia do not suffer from the same price discrimination—and are heartily disliked by cars salesman for it.

Accustomed to paying the price on the ticket for all their other purchases, the buying public first had to be assured that negotiating over car prices was socially acceptable and a “fair game” to play. Next they had to be told how to play it. Although the Hull-Dobbs system had been around since the late 1940s, it took almost thirty years for consumer advocates to give car buyers specific instructions on how to bargain. Before the 1960s even Consumer Reports refrained from providing negotiating advice. In a 1955 article titled “How to Shop for a New Car,” the magazine recommended that car buyers test different brands and different models of the same brand on all kinds of roads and in various parking situations. It suggested that all the drivers in the family go over dozens of details—from the size of the trunk and the glove compartment to the location of the cigarette lighter—and it said not one single word about negotiating for price or even comparing prices, though the latter may have been taken for granted.

Reader’s Digest was an exception to the no-bargaining advice position, perhaps because it did not accept any advertising (a policy that also allowed it to be the first national publication to expose the dangers of cigarette smoking). In
1957 the magazine ran a pre-Monroney article called “The Art of Buying a New Car,” illustrated by a cut of a farmer buying a horse from a flashily dressed horse trader. Most of the article explained how dealers inflated the value of new cars with a pack, but there was also an underlying message that prices for new cars were as flexible as prices for used cars.\textsuperscript{41} Aggressive shoppers took this kind of advice to heart, and reports in the late 1950s indicate that some had started asking for written price quotes at each of a series of dealers to provoke a bidding war for their business.\textsuperscript{42} This approach required a high degree of buyer discipline and was an open invitation to lowball offers, at which point the buyer would be back to one-on-one bargaining.

Until the 1960s consumer advice was either defensive (watch out for shady operators), or traditional (compare prices). After that, however, there was a slowly growing recognition of the long-established reality of new-car price negotiation. Writers began to use the words “haggle” and “horse trade” when describing how to get the best price on a new car. Just a year after the window sticker became law in 1959, \textit{Popular Science} (which did carry automobile ads), told its readers, “The price sticker that legally must be posted on new cars is not a firm figure. It is subject to discount. The dealer expects you to haggle.”\textsuperscript{43} For its part, \textit{Consumer Reports} reminded its readers in 1963 that the sticker price was not the selling price but merely a “uniform starting point for bargaining.”\textsuperscript{44} However, it did not give any suggestions as to how that bargaining should be carried out. A few years later, the magazine did offer a confused description of the bargaining process in which it suggested that the dealer “trades up from the tissue [wholesale price], not down from the sticker,” exactly the opposite of what actually occurred.\textsuperscript{45} The magazine’s advice was finally straightened out by 1973, when its annual auto issue opened with an essay on “Dealing with the Dealer” that explained, “Most dealers start with an inflated price because they expect you to bargain.” The article gave some general advice about getting a fair allowance for the trade-in but no specifics on the closing-room combat that hammered out the final price.\textsuperscript{46} Not until 2002 did \textit{Consumer Reports} get explicit about bargaining techniques, and even then it was quick to recommend non-negotiating alternatives for its readers.\textsuperscript{47}

Customers eager—or at least willing—to duke it out in the closing room could follow the lead of Denny Armstrong, a Kansas City area auto salesman turned car broker who wrote one of the first of a genre of lurid exposés that not only described the system but also provided detailed instructions on how to win the fight. Writing under the pen name “Joe Car” in 1977, Armstrong’s self-pub-
lished typescript I’m a Legal Hold Up Man; I’m a Car Salesman was both an account of the tricks of the trade and an advertisement for his business that promised to get any car for $150 over invoice. Armstrong’s book was followed the next year by another with an equally unrestrained title, Getting Screwed. In 1981 they were joined by L. J. Brun’s How to Beat the Car Dealer at His Own Game, which was also privately published. Brun’s book abandoned any pretense at ethical restraint and recommended that the customer match the salesman lie for lie. For example, he not only explained how to solicit competing bids from several dealers, but he instructed the buyer to tell the lowest bidder that he had another offer for a hundred dollars less.

The vast majority of how-to-buy titles after 1970 adopted this confrontational tone. These pieces offered the same suggestions that had been first set in print by Denny Armstrong and were later popularized by Remar Sutton, who wrote the first how-to-bargaining guide for a mainstream press in 1982. Sutton’s book, Don’t Get Taken Every Time, opens with a fictional scenario in which a couple buy a car, thinking they have gotten a good deal, but then explains how they were taken advantage of by the salesman. Over its four hundred pages, the book describes how the retail automobile business works and suggests strategies for dealing with its sales techniques. It is an excellent book, better written than most. Would-be car buyers could shell out Viking’s MSRP of fourteen dollars for Sutton’s SUV-sized tome (one-price to all) and get extensive detail, or they could save themselves 80 percent by picking up Michael Royce’s subcompact Beat the Car Salesman at the supermarket checkout stand for two and a half bucks. Both give the same advice: do your homework; comparison shop; bargain hard.

The broad advice on strategy was generally consistent, but for buyers who wanted step-by-step tactical instructions, it could sometimes be contradictory, and nothing was as inconsistent as the advice on when was the best time to buy a car. The assiduous reader could find quite definitive statements both that cars should be bought at the beginning of the model year and on weekends when the dealers were busy and that the end of the model year and during the week when business was slow was the best time. They were told to shop early in the day and to walk in at closing time. Shop in good weather said one; shop in bad weather said another. And finally, they were told that it did not matter when they shopped, as long as they knew how to haggle. For the record, however, the consensus was that slow periods of the day, week, and year were probably better than other times.
By the last decade of the twentieth century, the concept that the retail price of new cars should be bargained for had become more or less conventional wisdom. A 1994 how-to book on negotiating for all kinds of products was titled *How to Outnegotiate Anyone (Even a Car Dealer!)*. The parenthetical phrase emphasized that the author thought his techniques were so good that readers would learn to best even the superstars of hard-nosed marketplace haggling. Magazines whose target audiences were as varied as African-American women, stay-at-home wives, working-class men, and members of the lower-middle class and the upper-middle class all ran similar articles on how to play hardball in the world of lowballs and highballs.

**Brokers**

Before the arrival of the Saturn and its smattering of copycat one-price dealers, car buyers who refused to participate in the bargaining game had only one alternative to overpaying: to use a third party, an agent, to do the negotiating and buying for them. Some early car owners employed their chauffeurs in that capacity, although as mentioned earlier, chauffeurs, like grooms before them, often took kickbacks or demanded bribes from dealers. In any event, chauffeurs became increasingly rare after 1912.

Brokers, who would match a buyer with a seller of secondhand cars and facilitate the negotiating, appeared on the scene very early. In 1910 a consignment dealer in New York City had a lot on West 44th Street where he displayed cars with the sellers’ posted prices. Buyers could examine the cars at the Manhattan Storage Company and then submit a counteroffer, which the broker would present to the owner. “Frequently, when hard pushed for cash, [the seller] accepts several hundred dollars less than the consigned price,” he said. The broker’s fee was 5 percent. Variants on the consignment-broker used-car lot continued on and off for the following century. In 1980 there were several attempts to establish such brokerages on a larger scale, and at least one, National Autofinder, franchised its approach. Yet the system was never sufficiently widespread to challenge trade-ins and their sale on new-car lots or independent used-car dealers who bought and resold vehicles.

New-car brokers also appeared before World War I, and they promised to provide cars for less than list price. A man calling himself an “automobile broker” set up shop in 1908 in New York’s Algonquin Hotel, where he said he would sell a variety of makes and models, claiming to have “many bargains.” In 1914
another enterprising New Yorker, also calling himself a broker, offered to get any car on the market at a discount. New-car brokers like these constituted a gray market that got its automobiles from franchised dealers at less than list price and resold them at a small markup. For buyers who did not want to bargain, or, in the earlier period, for buyers who did not know they could negotiate prices with the new-car dealer, buying through a broker could mean a significant saving.

Sellers calling themselves brokers continued to operate on the edges of the retail automobile business, though they never had much impact on the basic negotiating model. Supply may have been a limiting factor. Factories sold only to franchised dealers, and dealers who wholesaled their cars to brokers risked the ire of the factory and their fellow franchisees. One group of “brokers” who emerged during strong sellers’ markets were, in fact, gray marketers. They sold scarce cars at above, not below, list price—at least if they had an ounce of business sense. In 1947 one particularly inept broker was arrested because he took deposits to deliver new autos at list price but wound up paying dealers thousands of dollars over list to get the promised cars. He then found himself short of the money needed to fulfill his remaining contracts. Manufacturers, franchised dealers, and some states sued at various times to stop brokers, but those situations usually involved brokers who sold below, not above, market price.

In the 1980s, however, as part of the general realignments prompted by the women’s movement, there was a flurry of interest in using intermediaries to negotiate deals. Buyers who did not live near a dealer trying out one of the short-lived experiments in no-haggle selling could hire a broker who would find the car they were interested in at a price that was below the MSRP. Broker customers appear to have been disproportionately female. Stories about them appeared in women’s magazines and always emphasized how buying through a broker eliminated the hassle of bargaining. Because the broker had to charge a commission and the dealer who sold the broker the car also needed to make a profit, buyers who used a broker might have been able to get a better price if they had been willing to do the hard bargaining themselves. Nevertheless, broker clients thought the slight additional cost was worth not having to go through the hell of “the system.” A northern Virginia professor called her previous buying experience “very painful,” as she and a male “shopping buddy” went from dealer to dealer, haggling at each stop and never being sure if they could get a better price somewhere else. So in 1993 she was happy to pay a fee to have a broker collect the bids for her and, she believed, get a better price than she could have gotten by herself.
Seeking a way to capture the non-negotiating segment of the market from the brokers, dealers established special arrangements with membership discount stores like Costco and Sam's Club, large employers, credit unions, the American Automobile Association, and other affinity groups. These agreements provided members with discount prices for new cars that were supposedly not available to the public. By the mid-1990s, there was an extensive variety of such pseudo-insider deals. Sometimes the brokers promised the “fleet price” (the price paid by large-volume buyers). Other times they would charge a specific amount, like $100, above the invoice price. Still others offered to beat any deal the buyer had found elsewhere. As this last promise indicates, these no-haggle discounts were often no more than a way to lure customers into the showroom. The prices were seldom lower than, and often not as low as, could be negotiated by a knowledgeable walk-in. As one sales manager noted, “With a good trade and some financing, it’s a pretty normal deal.” If the buyers were averse to bargaining, they could get a decent price; however, they still had to sell their current car, and for that, there was no way to avoid a round of negotiating. Where they had previously given away profit on the trade-in and made it back on the list price, dealers were now giving away profit on the list price but making it back on the trade-in. It did not matter which end of the balloon was squeezed; the volume remained the same.

Cars and Masculinity

The masculinized culture of car selling would have been harder to maintain if cars themselves had not resisted being neutered in the marketplace. The steadily increasing role of women in auto sales has toned down auto gender, but the male bias remains. About fifteen years ago Joseph Corn, an historian of technology, breathed a sigh of relief that academics had finally moved beyond the use of Freudian symbolism to describe the meaning of automobiles and had begun to use more contemporary interpretive tropes. He was no doubt happy to leave behind the kind of heavy-handed sexual innuendo with which John Keats opens The Insolent Chariots, his 1958 attack on American automobiles. Keats spins out a three-page metaphor in which the libidinous male driver with “an adolescent tightening in the groin” is seduced into a marriage with the automobile that he lives to regret. Musing about the termination of the Edsel, the comedian Mort Sahl expressed his own distain for the ubiquitous sexualization of cars by noting that critics said it failed because its vulviform grill was too
female. Sahl said he personally thought it was because the Edsel cost more than a Pontiac and was not as good a car. (Sometimes a car is just a cigar.) It is not, however, retrograde to observe the extent to which car owners and car sellers have historically understood their vehicles to be sexualized. To do so is not the imposition of an observer’s psychoanalytic bias but a simple exposition of the quite conscious meaning that men attributed to automobiles.

Automobiles inherited the double-gendered symbolic role that horses had held. As possessions, they were feminized, but as representations, they were masculinized. Once owned, men’s cars, like men’s horses and wives, were symbols of their wealth and status, so choosing the right one was particularly important. There were more nice girls than nice cars, so choosing a wife was harder, observed Robert Slofs in 1909, but there were enough attractive choices in both categories “to quite bewilder anyone who approaches the array of them for the first time with serious intentions.” Having chosen one of each, the fortunate young man he was writing about was able to spin “along the level New Jersey roads with the exhilaration that can be felt only by a man in love with a girl and an automobile at the same time.”

The obvious love affair between men and motors struck early car buffs as particularly droll. “Who gives this automobile away?” asks the minister at the front of the congregation in a 1912 cartoon. The salesman responds that considering “our well-known guarantee, the low price asked, decreased vibration, rich black body, sweet running qualities, increased power, and unsurpassed flexibility. . . . for all intents and purposes, I am giving her away.” The groom then vows to love, honor, and repair his flower-bedecked bride, so the minister pronounces them “One.” The salesman’s allusion to the great bargain the buyer was getting (“giving her away”), and the buyer’s promise to be only temporarily faithful (“till the secondhand dealer do you part”), mocked both the sales system and social meaning of a new car. (See fig. 5.)

If cars were possessions, whether or not they were female, then controlling them was an essential masculine skill. Early car salesmen were advised to get the male prospect into the driver’s seat where he would get “the pleasure of knowing that the machine beneath him will respond to his touch. There is a sort of enchantment in being able to control so easily a thing so powerful.” However, suppose he could not control it? When the husband in a 1910 short story found he could not drive the car he had just purchased, he decided to sell it back to the dealer even though he would lose half of his $2000 investment. His wife, however, refused to allow him to be defeated by a machine. She insisted he go to the
garage where he bought it and have somebody teach him to drive. At the end of the story he gives her credit for finding her nerve when his failed. It may have taken the woman to give this man the courage to drive, but in the end it was he, not she, who did the driving.

A few years earlier, in 1904, when the writer Louise Closser Hale and her husband took a motor trip through Europe, the sex of the car became a rather more pointed issue. The proposed trip was a difficult enough undertaking that Mrs. Hale playfully predicted that the car would lead to a divorce. Louise Hale viewed the car as a competitor for her husband’s attentions and began to refer to it as “Girlie.” When her husband heard this appellation, rather than being amused by his wife’s pet name, he became highly indignant because that would make him a girlie man. “My beautiful big car,’ he kept groaning over and over. ‘My beautiful big car a Girlie! Oh, Lord! A Girlie!” Not wanting to undermine her husband’s masculine self-esteem, she agreed not to feminize the car. To her the auto was a silly little plaything; to him it was an emblem of self. It was, after all, a “big” car, and size most definitely mattered. Explaining how to use a car to enhance one’s reputation with passengers, a 1915 article suggested that the driver “give passing cars a lightening look of critical superiority. . . . If the car is smaller than yours, emphasize the fact; if larger, don’t see it.”

Historian Virginia Scharff has pointed out that almost every innovation designed to make a car more convenient to drive was coded as feminine in the discourse of automobility. Moreover, she notes, despite the increasing presence of women in the driver’s seat, society has “tenaciously preserved those attributes of the automobile regarded as masculine.” Beginning with electric starters and continuing through seat belts and speed limits, innovations that made cars easier to drive or safer were dismissed as an insult to the driver’s manhood. Detroit designed cars for men even when they were sold to women because, as a female Ford marketing executive explained in 1981, “Masculine cars will appeal to women, but feminine cars usually will not appeal to men.” Men were not attracted to a car’s safety or convenience; they wanted a display of bright plumage. A young clerk arrested for embezzling in 1909 explained to the judge that he stole the money to buy a new car, even though he already owned one. “Why were you not satisfied with your first machine?” the judge asked. The financially and grammatically challenged youth replied, “Because it did not look as well as the others. It did not have as many lamps.”

Men’s close identification with their cars created opportunities to take advantage of the masculine desire for speed and power. Manufacturers, of course,
often adopted aggressive names and advertising images for their cars.\textsuperscript{80} It was not a car; it was the virile antithesis of killjoy bourgeois responsibility. An article on the “psychology of a sale” in 1920 suggested that the salesman should make the idea of owning a car drive everything else out of the prospect’s head: “The about-to-be-ravaged bank account, the heart-rending burden of up-keep, the mortgage on the house, last year’s unpaid coal bill—all must be forgotten.”\textsuperscript{81} Used-car buyers tended to be younger and less frequently married than new-car customers, so secondhand car sellers too could tap into the desire to be the alpha male on the road.\textsuperscript{82} A used-car salesman in 1914 boasted of how he transformed a run-of-the-mill sedan into an ersatz “racing car” by stripping off various body parts and painting it bright red with yellow racing numbers. To sell the automotive sizzle rather than the mechanical steak there had to be sizzle, which the seller achieved by installing an oversize exhaust pipe coated in oil that produced both a satisfying roar and a cloud of smoke. He also added a speedometer calibrated to read high so that the rich young man who was buying the car thought he was going much faster than he was.\textsuperscript{83}

By the same token, salesmen were reminded that even when men were trading in their cars, they thought of their vehicles as extensions of themselves and bridled at negative comments. During the negotiations over the value of the trade-in, a salesman’s natural inclination was to explain that a low allowance was due to the various shortcomings in a customer’s current vehicle; it was old, had high mileage, was in poor mechanical or cosmetic condition, was not in high demand, and so forth. To the extent that the customer identified with his car, each of these observations became a criticism not only of the car but also of the owner. Denigrating a customer was always a bad sales tactic, and car salesmen were warned that criticizing a customer’s trade-in would be taken as a personal insult and a challenge, causing him to fight even harder for victory in the negotiating arena.\textsuperscript{84}

While buyers focused on the meaning of the car, sellers focused on the meaning of the buyers. In her study of automobile retailing, Helene Lawson cataloged the sales staff’s “aggressive and violent” language that routinely veered between physical and sexual conquest.\textsuperscript{85} Salesmen often depicted themselves as hunting for the prey that was their customers, even as their customers were hunting for Mustangs, Impalas, and Barracudas.\textsuperscript{86} The “top gun” salesman at a Bethesda, Maryland, dealership said he lived for the “home-run deals.” Going on to explain what he meant, he switched from sport to hunting imagery: “The trick is to go for the jugular and ask the top figure.”\textsuperscript{87}
Fighting to maintain his masculine integrity in his uneven battle with the professional salesman, there was a strong temptation for car buyers to assume an unwarranted air of confidence about matters automotive. Like their forefathers who pretended to know more about horses than they did, amateur car experts were an easy mark. Salesmen took advantage of the gendered meaning of the sales process by challenging the prospect’s manliness. If he hesitated to commit to the sale or expressed doubt, the salesman was advised to “try to awaken a spark of manhood in him” and force him to decide by saying, “I’m going to leave this office for a few minutes, and when I return I would like to know what your decision is,” and then walking out. If the prospect said he wanted to think it over, the salesman should ask, “Are you the kind of man who needs your wife’s, or your credit union’s permission to buy a new car?”

For the salesman, the customer, not the car, was the trophy, and the conquest was framed in the locker-room language of sexual domination. A favorite car salesman’s joke tells of the beautiful woman who was included as part of the deal on a new car. She would stay with the car for the first twenty-four hours. The delighted buyer asks her to participate in a series of increasingly intimate activities. Each time she responds, “Of course, that’s part of the deal.” Finally, he leans over and whispers the ultimate request. At which point she turns and says, “Absolutely not. You got that when you bought the car.”

Women as Buyers and Sellers

The paucity of female drivers before World War I was more than a transposition of the cultural meaning of horses onto cars. It is hard to argue that the continuity between the culturally gendered male horse and the masculine automobile was inevitable when so many women participated in the bicycle craze that linked the era of horses to the era of horsepower. Bicycles may have been perceived as more difficult for women to ride, but automobiles, like horses, were even farther outside the female comfort zone, perhaps because they both were powerful forces that needed to be controlled. Louise Hale recounted an incident in her 1904 trans-European motor tour when her husband suddenly shoved her aside as she was trying to crank-start the engine. She was upset both by the rough treatment and by what she heard as a muttered threat to break her arm if she ever did it again. He restored her emotional equanimity by describing “the funny way crank handles have of flying back and breaking the arms of the inexperienced unless they are grabbed away most unceremoniously.” Though she
was not allowed to start the car, Hale was mollified by her duties as “the Drop- 
per of the Sprag, the Official Timekeeper, the Watchdog of the Odometer, and 
the Royal Pathfinder.”  

(A sprag was a pointed rod dropped and dragged on 
steep hills to prevent the car from rolling backward if it stalled.) Except for the 
sprag drop, these were all essentially secretarial skills.

The woman’s role in early motoring was primarily as a passenger, and that 
is how the vast majority of early advertisements depicted them. When Edith 
Wharton motored through the Northeast gathering background for her novels, 
neither she nor her husband drove. Well-bred people like the Whartons did not 
drive themselves, either in carriages or cars—that was the job of coachmen and 
chauffeurs. Nevertheless, automobile manufacturers did not automatically as-
sume that only men would drive their products. A 1907 Winton ad featured a 
head-on illustration of a determined woman gripping a steering wheel.  

A few 
years later the aggressively named Chalmers Torpedo, a small two-passenger 
roadster, presented itself as “an ideal car for a lady” because it was “so easy to 
handle and control.” In the same hopeful vein, Heald College, a vocational 
school in San Francisco, offered driving and maintenance lessons in 1909 to 
“car-owners and prospective car-owners (ladies and gentlemen).”

A small number of women accepted the challenge of driving these early auto-
mobiles. Some of the most adventurous of them drove coast-to-coast at a time 
when doing so was a stunt worthy of newspaper coverage. A male mechanic usu-
ally accompanied them, but that was also true for many early male cross-country 
drivers.  

Historian Martin Wachs notes that driving a car was an assertive act 
for a woman, which was why suffragists made a point of having women drive the 
speakers to their rallies.  

Virginia Scharff and Georgine Clarsen have both ar-

gued persuasively that scholars have been too quick to dismiss the role of women 
as drivers in the pre-electric-starter era.  

Although their studies restore female 
visibility to the world of early motoring, they also confirm male hegemony both 
in the cultural discourse and in cultural practice. Driving women were admired 
more than they were emulated.

Just as women took up the bicycle once the safety bicycle made it practical 
for them (and for most men), women were more willing to drive once cars were 
invented that did not require them to be mechanically inclined speed-demons. 
Electric cars, which started instantly, ran quietly and slowly, and were light and 
ey easy to steer, found an appreciative market among early women drivers. “The 
electric . . . is a woman’s car,” a car salesman’s manual explained in 1915. It was 
not practical for over-the-road travel, but was used exclusively by “society” for
getting about in town. Remember, said the book’s author, “a woman is more interested in the cushions, lights, upholstery and finish than she is in the motor. Practically all electric cars are enclosed cars, and these points should be played up well.” Unfortunately for the electric car companies and for women drivers, internal combustion engines were sufficiently superior to electric motors that they dominated the market despite the problems involved in starting, driving, repairing, and maintaining them.

Once electric starters had replaced hand cranks, and enclosed bodies had become the norm rather than the exception, manufacturers began to market more aggressively for women, but not always to them. The 1912 Cole, for example, introduced itself in an imagined dialogue with the male buyer. The ad copy quotes the man as saying, “When I find a gasoline motor car my wife can start every time from the driver’s seat by simply pressing an electric button—I’ll buy it then and there.” Husbands did buy cars with electric starters for their wives. “Look for the man in the Moon car,” urged a 1916 advertisement, “and the woman too.” The woman pictured was not a passenger but the driver “who drives him to the station [and] meets his returning train.” Even before World War I, women had assumed the task of chauffeur for their commuting husbands, and on the weekend the couple who owned the Moon would “quarrel about the seat behind the steering-wheel” because “their Moon is more like a fascinating pet than a family conveyance.”

After World War I, women drivers became commonplace as even low-priced Fords came equipped with electric starters. Along with electric headlights, easier steering and shifting, and increased mechanical dependability, cars in the 1920s were less demanding for any person to drive. Had that Jordan Playboy pictured in the frontispiece been an electric car, the woman driver might have purchased the car herself. There is some indication that women bought as well as drove electrics, but not at high speed on unpaved Wyoming roads. Ned Jordan’s daughter had been the inspiration for the lively young woman behind the wheel of the Playboy. Did she buy the car herself, or, as in the Chalmers ad, was it bought for her by her father or some other male? For virtually the entire twentieth century, automobile marketers assumed the latter. Women may have been the presumptive buyers of almost all other consumer goods, but not of cars.

Women were not, however, irrelevant to automobile retailing. From the teens of the twentieth century onward, marketers assumed that women would have a say in most sales. Instructions to salesmen invariably reminded them that cars were a family purchase and that wives would both veto cars (and salesmen) they
did not like and lobby for those that they did.105 Children, especially sons, were also brought into the equation, because they were assumed to be knowledgeable early-adopters of new technology. “The man who is ashamed to admit to himself that he made a wrong selection in a motor will confide weak points to an inquisitive boy. The boy is apt to be a storehouse of information on makes and models,” wrote an author giving advice to car salesmen in 1916.106 Up through the 1930s, when salesmen were supposed to go canvassing house to house, the initial sales pitch might well be to a wife who was home during the day. If she could be persuaded that the car was right for her, she would influence her husband to make the actual purchase.107

The auto industry psychoanalyst who first asked, “What do women want—in a car?” was no more successful than Freud himself in finding an answer. Manufacturers regularly announced that they had conducted this or that study to find what women preferred. Then they introduced this or that feature that was supposed to appeal to female buyers. These studies and features usually focused on color, ease of operation, and comfort. Size, power, speed, and mechanical innovation continued to be male-oriented selling points.108 The almost universal assumption that men and women looked for different qualities in a car created a dilemma not only in the manufacturing and the marketing departments but on the sales floor as well. Emphasizing the masculine might diminish the feminine and vice versa. In the mid-1920s this emphasis on appearance became something of a problem for Ford, whose Model T was almost twenty years old and distinctly unstylish. The company acknowledged this problem when its marketing manual told salesmen to compare their car to a watch: it was an expensive movement in a silver case, not a cheap movement in a gold case.109

By asking which the customer would prefer, a good watch or a good-looking watch, Ford was appealing to the presumed male propensity to focus on the technical elements of a car. However, all too often neither the wife nor her husband knew anything about automobile mechanics. A check-list article for new-car buyers in 1917 described such a couple thus: “He takes his wife on his arm, and the pair of mechanical imbeciles paddle off down automobile row to pass judgment on something about which they know rather less than nothing at all.”110 They might well have been the pair depicted in a 1915 cartoon. The salesman speaks to the wife, who is accompanied by a timid-looking husband: “I appeal to you as a woman of taste and judgment; the static lag of the motor is as the square of radius impulse.” She responds, “Oh, of course!”111 The cartoon does double duty by having the technologically ignorant wife agree with a line
of pseudo-mechanical nonsense and by having her husband, who as a man should know better, stand mutely at her side. Whatever their real degree of mutual ignorance, salesmen were usually advised to sell differently to each half of a couple.

Ultimately, the new “emphasis on women” might not amount to anything more than advice to “greet all lady prospects cordially [and] be courteous, well-groomed and understanding.”112 Such basic advice was necessary because before the 1970s, women buyers were relatively rare, and salesman usually dismissed them. A female reporter who went to Macy’s in 1939, when it briefly experimented with selling the tiny new Crosley, was pointedly ignored by salesmen, who rushed up to any man who appeared even vaguely interested. On the other hand, when she went to a local New York Ford dealer, the salesman treated her promptly and politely, and assumed she was both knowledgeable about automobiles and would be doing the buying herself.113 The Ford salesman’s attentiveness was unusual in 1939—and in 1999 when another female reporter walked into a showroom. The salesman who showed her a car said, “Well, I guess we’re really not going to do any business today. Your husband will have to come back to drive it.” Shocked that thirty years after the women’s movement a salesman could still make such sexist assumptions, she firmly informed him that she was buying the car for herself and by herself. Despite her assurances, he later repeated, “But we’re not going to talk numbers, right? I’m sure your husband will have to come back and do that.”114

The women’s movement of the 1970s may have increased industry awareness of women as a distinct market segment, but the message often failed to percolate down to the showroom floor. In 1978 a J. D. Powers marketing consultant told a Department of Transportation hearing that women believed they were treated differently from men. Women buyers thought they were quoted higher prices, got fast-talk rather than clear answers to their questions, and were ignored, especially if they were shopping with a male companion.115 Every time industry leaders described their efforts to welcome women as customers, the press would run another story of boorish salesmen offending female shoppers.116 Even the syndicated etiquette columnist Judith Martin (“Miss Manners”) was moved to comment on a positive car buying experience in 1996 because it was in such contrast with the shabby way she had previously been “hustled and insulted” by car salesmen.117

To some extent, women’s continuing complaints about objectionable treatment from salesmen derives from the difference between men and women when
buying cars. What women perceived as discriminatory treatment may have been, in some cases, an evenhanded application of an historically gendered system. Women who bought cars were playing an established game. If they were ignored, it was because they were not considered serious buyers. Male looky-loos, flakes, and be-backs were also given short shrift. If women were brow-beaten or taken advantage of, it was not only because they were women but also because everybody was brow-beaten and taken advantage of whenever possible. For cultural reasons, women were less likely to fight back and more likely to be uncomfortable with a system so at odds with the conventional retail experience.

Bargaining was not anathema to women so much as it was alien. While vacationing in Nova Scotia in 1930, Patience Eden was overcome with the desire to own a little blue roadster with red wheels (à la Nancy Drew). Although she knew she could buy one for less back home in Connecticut, “a man acquainted with the guile and wisdom of the breed suggested that, in order to make a sale, an agent could sometimes be induced to whittle down his commission.” Convinced she could bargain as well as any man, Eden summoned a salesman to her home, where he sold her a coupe, not a roadster, without whittling down the price at all.118

Negotiating women remained rare but not unheard of, and in 1966 Ford salesmen were told they could sometimes clinch a deal with a woman buyer by adding a little boot at the end of the negotiating, which worked because of the “feminine compulsion to ‘get something extra.’”119 When Paula Ganzi Licata went shopping for a new car in 2003, she encountered the standard catalogue of salesmen’s slights: they assumed she knew nothing about cars; they talked to her husband even when she asked the questions; they high-pressured her, and so forth. She, however, was the bargainer in her family. As her husband stood by and recommended compromise, she offered no quarter. She wanted to “eviscerate” the salesman, and she took delight in recounting the final insult. The dealer had made an error in her favor on the signed contract and asked her to allow him to correct it. She refused; “A deal’s a deal,” she said, even when the deal was in fact not the deal to which she had agreed.120

Ganzi Licata’s story was newsworthy because it inverted the gender stereotypes (woman bites dog). As a rule, American women disliked bargaining even more than men did, and both sides in the sales transaction sought to take advantage of this fact. When they were not being accused of ignoring women car shoppers, salesmen were charged with taking advantage of women’s reluctance to negotiate.121 In reporting that the proportion of women who bought their
own cars had risen to 13 percent in 1978, the *Wall Street Journal* quoted a salesman who said women were more profitable because “they won’t haggle over price if you can assure them they’ll get good service.”

Hard evidence on this point is mixed, but academic studies indicate that women may not, in fact, have paid more for cars than men, even if they thought they did. Whether or not they were taken advantage of, women preferred to avoid the game, and they could sometimes use that fact to get better prices. By not challenging the salesman but instead appealing to his presumed expertise, some female shoppers have done quite well. In other words, women shoppers could occasionally take advantage of a chivalrous salesman who believed women deserved kinder treatment than men.

Chivalry, however, was not a quality that abounded on the showroom floor, and the woman who counted on it was simply announcing her status as a bare-foot pilgrim and praying that the salesman extended dispensations to the faithful. Women car shoppers regularly received two pieces of advice: One, learn how to bargain; and two, take a man with you to do the bargaining. From *Better Homes and Gardens* to *Seventeen*, the recommendations were the same. Do what men do. Do your homework so you know what you want. Shop at more than one store. Do not be embarrassed or intimidated by the haggling process. Hold your ground, because if you don’t, you will pay more than a man would. Finally, if you are not sure of yourself, shop with a man whom you can use to back you up.

Even though only 13 percent of women bought their own cars in 1978, more than half of them were accompanied by a male family member or friend. The men may have provided advice on other matters, but the main reason women brought them along was to help in the bargaining.

The concept of a “bargaining buddy” or “purchase pal” turned up quite frequently in the how-to literature and appears to have been widespread among women—as well as among men suffering from showroom performance anxiety. The advice could be quite specific, for example, giving each partner a particular role in the retail psychodrama. While many women buyers might have abdicated the bargaining role completely, those who followed the scripts would usually have the friend play “bad cop” to their own “good cop.” The friend (the buyer’s equivalent of the sales manager in the back room) would continually turn down the seller’s offers and find fault with the car in order to keep the sales team off-balance and on the defensive.

According to J. D. Powers, by 2006 almost half of all cars sold were sold to women. Presumably, that means that women’s names appeared on the registra-
It is much less clear who actually did the car buying. Several surveys by the finance company Capital One indicate that three-quarters or more of women who planned to buy a car said they would bring along a man to help them. The women did not feel they needed a man to help them choose a car, but they did need someone to help them do the bargaining. “It’s troubling to see that women still do not feel empowered to manage the car-buying process on their own,” commented a Capital One spokesperson.

Troubling, perhaps, but not surprising; a woman walking into a dealership was invading alien territory, and it made sense to take along somebody who was supposed to know how to speak the native language. Women who did not want to joust brought along a knight. Sometimes, albeit rarely, the seller turned out to be a woman. Helene Lawson, a sociologist who did an extensive analysis of automobile saleswomen, concluded that virtually all male car sellers are what she calls “tough guys.” As a type, tough guys are competitive hunters who view their customers as opponents or prey that have to be defeated or killed. The urge to kill rather than cooperate spills over into male relationships with each other even when it works to their disadvantage. A California firm that brokered exchanges among dealers so that they could locate available cars for customers in the 1970s found that it had to use women intermediaries. Male brokers could not deal with the constant sniping and petty cheating that salesmen in one store tried to put over on their cross-town rivals. Women, on the other hand, could defuse the tension and get the exchanges done more smoothly. If women could soothe the savage beasts at the wholesale level, it seemed reasonable that there might be a role for women sales staff at retail, where they would be less offensive to female customers and non-combative men.

Women drivers were rare in the early days of automobiles, and women sellers were rarer. There are almost no references to automobile saleswomen before World War II. Florence Emdee was one of the exceptions. In 1914, the twenty-four-year-old music teacher and self-taught auto mechanic sold cars in Lafayette, Indiana. She made her first sale after demonstrating to the buyer’s twelve-year-old daughter how easy it was to drive. Emdee refused to increase her trade-in allowance offer when the buyer tried to negotiate a better deal and was able answer all the questions he asked about the technical aspects of the car. The other car sellers in Lafayette accepted Emdee without “a ripple of disturbance,” presumably because she played the game by their rules.

Playing the boys’ game by the boys’ rules was the norm until the 1970s, but saleswomen had to be careful not to play too hard. Lois Light agreed to sell
Chevrolets in Charleston, West Virginia, in the 1950s. When she first asked the staff to help her learn about the cars, they sent her on the proverbial search for a left-handed monkey wrench. In this case, the fellows on the floor explained she could tell which model had six cylinders and which had eight by looking up the tailpipe. Whether because she was simply a green recruit or because she was a female green recruit, the existing staff made it clear she would have to earn her place in the showroom. She went home and read everything about cars she could get her hands on, and in three weeks she knew so much that the men were coming to her for technical information. Light gave away her own commissions to quiet the men’s fears that she would steal their customers. When her male colleagues were off the floor and their “be-backs” actually returned, she completed the sale but gave the commission to the original salesman. On the other hand, by being more sympathetic to prospects, she could sometimes score when the others refused to play. For example, when the men scorned a poorly dressed customer as a looker but not a buyer, she approached him, and he bought a brand new car for cash and “didn’t ask for a discount or anything.”

It occurred to more than one dealer that women customers might be more comfortable dealing, not with a salesman, but with a saleswoman. Published reports say that peers and employers viewed such “salesgirls” positively. As in the case above, the women were more willing than men to work with “unqualified” customers, a trait that led some dealers to dismiss them because they “couldn’t distinguish the buyers from the talkers.” Despite positive press stories about female success on the sales floor, there is little evidence of long-term participation by women in car sales.

In the mid-1980s, just before the fixed-price Saturn appeared on the market, dealers began to hire more saleswomen. The number of women sales personnel appears to have increased over the next twenty years, but it never reached 10 percent of the total except at Saturn, which at one point had almost 20 percent female sales staffers. The careers of most saleswomen were short, even by the standards of an industry that turned over sales agents faster than manufacturers introduced new models. Those women who did well and stayed in the profession for any length of time usually attributed their success to their empathy with women customers and to their low-key style that worked with some men as well. They succeeded, in other words, not by being better than men at their own game, but by playing a somewhat different game. Some admitted that their success was due to their willingness to take a smaller commission on each sale,
that is, to give away more than men did. The proportion of women customers increased much faster than the proportion of women sales agents.

Even as larger numbers of women moved into traditionally male high-commission selling, cars sales remained dominated by men because aggressive bargaining had become an alien process to most American women. Whether they were inside sales clerks or outside sales representatives, non-car sales people sold value—a good product at a good price—and women were comfortable with that principle. Automobile sellers, however, sold the deal, and the deal had to be negotiated.

More than a century of single-price retailing had eliminated bargaining as part of the retail process for customers of both genders under most circumstances, but the tradition of horse trading had preserved it for men as they bought and sold cars. A process that was part of the retail experience of all people in other societies became the domain of men in twentieth-century America. Most women participated in it only reluctantly and resentfully as buyers and almost not at all as sellers.