

TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY PROJECT

Lesson Title – Levittown, automobiles, and Cultures of the 1950s

By Tina Conetta

Grade – 9-12

Length of class period – 55 minutes

Inquiry – (What essential question are students answering, what problem are they solving, or what decision are they making?)

How did the implementation of the interstate highway act affect towns and cities in the 1950s?

What impact did automobiles have on the culture of the 1950s?

How do towns and cities of today compare to the Levittown system of the 1950s?

Objectives (What content and skills do you expect students to learn from this lesson?)

-Students will analyze the emergence of suburbs in the 1950s.

-Students will compare and contrast suburbs in the 1950s to their own towns today.

-Students will analyze how progress in the 1950s reflects upper, middle, and lower class values.

-Students will analyze how the automobile industry affected the culture of the 1950s.

Materials (What primary sources or local resources are the basis for this lesson?) – (please attach)

Resources-

Song “Splish Splash” by Bobby Darin

Information on song “Splish Splash”: <http://www.popculturemadness.com/Music/The-50s.html>

Information for Levittown Worksheet at: <http://www.levittownhistoricalsociety.org/> and

<http://tigger.uic.edu/~pbhales/Levittown.html>

McDonald’s History: http://www.mcdonalds.com/corp/about/mcd_history_pg1.html

Automobile Industry Lesson Plan:

http://www.historychannel.com/classroom/admin/study_guide/archives/thc_guide.0001.html

Information on the Interstate Highway System:

<http://www.tfhr.gov/pubrds/summer96/p96su10.htm>

Other Materials-

-A copy of the song: “Splish Splash” by Bobby Darin

-CD player

- Automobile industry handouts

-3 pictures of cars from *The '50s Photographs from Magnum Photos*

-Overhead copies of Levittown pictures and McDonalds

-Copies of the Levittown Worksheet Overview

-DVD/VHS copy of *Grease*

-TV with VHS/DVD capabilities

Activities (What will you and your students do during the lesson to promote learning?)

-Teacher will play “Splish Splash” by Bobby Darin as students enter the room.

- Teacher will review the song and tell its background giving example of popular music in the 1950s (5 minutes)

-Teacher will then introduce how a new concept in the 1950s was the establishment of suburbs and more specifically Levittown. (20 minutes)

Teacher will then show a series of pictures of Levittown on the overhead (see resources)

- Teacher will pass out a handout on information about Levittown to students and read aloud with volunteers
- Teacher and students will have a brief informal discussion about the characteristics of Levittown based on pictures and handout seen from overhead projector.
- Have students jot down a few informal notes comparing towns today and Levittown. What are the similarities? Differences? How are towns and cities defined today?
- While having the discussion, the teacher will then ask students for comparisons from their hometown to Levittown.
- Teacher will discuss the Interstate Highway System and why the suburb system came into play.
- Teacher will define *Interstate Highway Act* (President Eisenhower signed in 1956, building of nationwide highway network of 41,000 miles of expressways. This encouraged the growth of suburbs and the rise of the automobile industry). What does this mean for the railway and waterway transportation systems?

- Teacher will take out another series of pictures of automobiles and discuss the automobile industry in the 1950s (20 minutes)

- Teacher will show a 3 minute series of clips from *Grease*, the Motion Picture: tell students that *Grease* is a film about seniors in high school in the 1950s: the scene entering the drive in, where you see teenagers in cars, the scene where Danny Zucko and his competitor are about to race, and the scene where they are working on the new car in the garage.
- Teacher will talk about how the car was a not only meant for driving in and out of the city but an American icon. It was a status of wealth and popularity, it served many functions: often teenagers would spend nights “cruising”, and going to the local diner or “drive in” the emergence of the fast food industry was created in the 1950s with the drive thru meal. Mention that McDonalds was first created in 1954 as a hamburger stand in California
- Discussion on consumer culture in America based on automobile industry. Define Consumer Consumption in terms of how much more prominent it was in the 1950s.
- Teacher will then read an excerpt from history channel classroom on automobiles, form students groups of 2-3, and answer a set of questions based on information just discussed in class and pictures seen. (See worksheet)

- Bring Class back together and have a larger discussion on automobiles, Levittown, and the emergence of Suburbs. (10 minutes)

How will you assess what student learned during this lesson?

There will be a rubric style grading system for the Worksheet as well as informal assessment based on various class discussions.

Automobile Worksheet: The automobile worksheet will be based out of 20. The first question will be worth 10 points (5 points for each sub-question, and questions two and three will be worth 5 points each. See rubric for specific details

	5 points credit (excellent)	4 points Credit (Very Good)	3 points credit (Good)	2 points (Average)	1 point credit (Poor)
Responses to each of the questions including question 1A and 1B	Students will have followed directions on the top of the worksheet and filled in complete sentence response for all questions. They will have considered a sufficient response that cites examples from the text on the worksheet, class discussion, the movie <i>Grease</i> , and their own opinions.	Students will have followed directions on the top of the worksheet in complete sentences for some of the questions. They will have considered a response for 3 of the 4 criteria listed in the 5 points category	Students will have followed directions on the top of the worksheet but not in complete sentences. They will have fulfilled 2 out of the 4 criteria listed in the five points category	Students will have had some evidence of following directions but not completely. They will have successfully completed at least 1 out of the 4 criteria listed in the five points category	Students will have written some form of a response to the question but did not follow direction and only cited one example. Did not meet question standards

Connecticut Framework Performance Standards –

- Formulate historical questions and hypothesizes from multiple perspectives, using multiple sources

- Explain the multiple forces and developments (cultural, political, economic and scientific) that have helped to connect the peoples of the world
- Give examples of the visual arts, dance, music, theater and architecture of the major periods of history and explain what they indicate about the values and beliefs of various societies
- Analyze the causes and consequences of major technological turning points in history, e.g., their effects on people, societies and economies

Name _____ Date _____ Period _____

Automobile Industry Worksheet

Please Answer the Following Questions with your group based on the paragraphs below and discussion in class, complete paragraphs and proper grammar required.

Automobiles

Automobiles is a series that chronicles America's love affair with the car. The story of the manufacture and development of the automobile and its social and cultural impact is one of the principal historical narratives of the twentieth century. Each episode of *Automobiles* presents a different vehicle and the historical story and impact of that vehicle. *Automobiles* would be useful for classes on American History, the History of Science and Technology, Cultural History and Economics. It is appropriate for middle school and high school.

1955 Chevrolet

1955 Chevrolet In 1955 Chevrolet introduced its newly designed car that Chevrolet hoped would capture the burgeoning youth market. Designed by the legendary Harley Earle, with a new V8 engine created by engineer Ed Cole, the 1955 Chevrolet was wildly successful and became the prototype of car design for the next half-decade. With its powerful V8 engine and its unique design that suggested the speed of a fighter-bomber, the 1955 Chevrolet became an American icon, and representative of an America in the throes of unparalleled prosperity. Today the 1955 Chevrolet remains a symbol of America in the 1950s and is one of the most sought-after cars by collectors. It is an American classic.

1. Cars are Americans' basic form of transportation. But they are much more. What is the symbolic value of cars in the United States? How can a car convey status and prestige?

2. America experienced a post-war baby boom in which the birth rate rose to levels higher than ever in American history. Many of these baby-boomers came of age in the 1950s. What was the impact of this expanding youth market on the development of the suburb, the automotive industry, and American Businesses?

3. The 1950s was one of the most prosperous eras of American history, an era characterized by consumer consumption. What was the role of consumer consumption in automobile manufacturing?

*Source: History Channel Classroom Study Guides: Automobiles
http://www.historychannel.com/classroom/admin/study_guide/archives/thc_guide.0001.html

Levittown: An Overview



William Levitt who used up-to-date of building methods and capitalized on the housing crunch of the immediate postwar years built Levittown. He offered affordable housing to returning GIs and their families, in the form of small, detached, single-family houses for people to get away from the city life and move to surround suburbs. Thus, suburbia life was discovered. The first Levittown area was built in Long Island, New York in the late 1940s and reached success well into the 1950s. The primary feature of this early Levittown house was its low, low cost-- under \$8,000 to purchase.

This was presented as a new form of ideal American life, one that combined the idealized middle-class life of the prewar suburban communities, with the democratized life of younger, mainly urban-raised GIs and their families. The nature of Levittown as a *community* was a major attraction



Over time, Levittown houses changed character, as their occupants rose in status and in economic wealth, and as families expanded and community standards of innovation and growth trickled from the home-improvement seminars at the Community Center and later the High School, out into the Saturday projects and summer vacation plans of Levittown residents.

*Credited Information from: **Levittown: Documents of an Ideal American Suburb @ <http://tigger.uic.edu/~pbhales/Levittown.html>**, and The Levittown Historical Society: www.levittownhistoricalsociety.org

Levittown: an Overview in Pictures



