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A Short History of Parking at Western

"Parking space on College Heights for cars has become a problem."

With this brief item, the October, 1925 issue of *Teachers College Heights* introduced Hilltoppers to one of the great traditions of the modern academy: complaining about parking.

The problem—also known as the "headache," "pressure," "crunch," "squeeze" or "crisis"–can be blamed partly on Western's venerable age. President Henry Hardin Cherry acquired the Hill in 1909, only nine years after the first automobile, more a curiosity than a necessity, had appeared in Bowling Green.

Over the next twenty years, landscape architect Henry Wright worked with Cherry to develop the Hill, but cars were hardly compatible with Wright's aesthetic vision. In 1925, he opposed parking in front of Van Meter Hall, the crown jewel of the campus, as both "unsightly and injurious." His 1927 plan allowed for a single parking area between Van Meter Hall and Potter Hall (what is now the Potter Lot), and suggested curbside parking for 150 cars on State Street. These and a few other scattered spaces, Wright believed, could accommodate all faculty, staff and visitors.

What about the 1,800 students then attending Western? "Student parking," decreed Wright, "should be eliminated within the campus." He called for improved perimeter roads, but only a single road or trail through the central campus for emergencies. Students would make their way to class from State Street or Russellville Road on foot, over a few "meandering gravel paths" and "convenient walks."

Predictably, the onset of the automobile age thwarted Wright's utopian plan. More and more students drove to school, until the post-World War II enrollment boom put Western under siege. In 1949, the *College Heights Herald* diagnosed vehicle congestion on the Hill as "critical." Continued growth in the 1950s forced the appropriation of every available square foot of space for parking, but only created more congestion.

In fall 1962, with 640 spaces on campus and an enrollment of 5,127, administrators focused on decreasing demand for parking rather than increasing supply. Western prohibited freshmen from bringing cars to campus and, in 1963, extended the ban to sophomores with less than a "B" average. Faculty and eligible students were required to obtain parking decals and pay fines ranging from one to five dollars for violations.

The fall semester of 1965 saw the beginning of the system in use today: zoned lots and different decals for faculty and staff, on-campus residents and commuting students. In 1972, the same year it lifted the parking prohibition on freshmen and sophomores, Western began charging a $5 fee for decals, but the issue of two decals to faculty and staff soon created unrest. Some were suspected of allowing their children enrolled at

Western to use the second one to park in a faculty space. This transgression contributed to the replacement of decals in 1989 with a single, transferable tag.

While always spirited, complaints about parking have changed in accordance with prevailing social attitudes. In the conformist 1950s, the *Herald* urged drivers to respond to the problem with patience and cooperation, and in particular to park correctly so as not to take up more than one space. Greater resentment of authority in the 1960s gave the debate its now-familiar sarcastic edge. After being ticketed in 1968, a student congratulated the WKU police for a "brilliant victory in their never-ending attempt to curtail criminal activity," while another student countered with mock sympathy for his plight. "This sort of thing leads to Fascism and the Police State thus ending democracy as we know it," he wrote, agreeing that the prospect of walking a few blocks to class was "too terrifying to contemplate."

As new residence halls brought more students to campus, their cries for parking clashed with a growing environmental consciousness. Observing the widespread construction, a dismayed junior advocated putting all the bulldozers to work "scraping off that green blight of turf and trees from our campus" to make one huge parking lot. Another junior mourned the tendency to turn every flat section of the Hill into an "asphalt disaster." Members of the 1970s "me" generation, however, still demanded the best of both worlds: an open, green campus *and* a vacant space in the Diddle Lot ten minutes before morning class. The alternative—banishment to the top level of the parking structure—was considered an insult as well as an inconvenience.

More recently, the principles of the market, in which the consumer is king, have been applied to the parking debate. Tuition-paying students, argued a Potter Hall resident in 1982, had a higher claim to convenient parking than mere wage-earning staff. Students were the "customers," sniffed a commuter denied a spot near Cherry Hall, while faculty and staff, "and especially the administration—are employees."

Whoever is to blame for the parking problem—multitudinous freshmen, lazy hall residents, parasitical staff or heartless enforcement officers—its solution will always be a work in progress. With new lots, revised fees, redrawn zones and the introduction in 1987 of the Big Red Shuttle, Western continues its battle against the only real villains in this story—the four-wheeled ones that, each morning, gobble up so much space around our hundred-year-old Hill.

Sources:

Henry Wright Correspondence, University Archives
College Heights Herald
Parking Vertical File, University Archives