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The Cruising Tradition

I have lived near two different towns, Providence and Madisonville, growing up in Kentucky. Cruising was a popular and important tradition in both towns. It promotes social cohesion within young people. It helps to provide an atmosphere in which high schoolers can socialize with one another without parental supervision. There are two traditional elements of cruising. The first is very obviously the route. If you are going to cruise you must know the traditional or popular route which differs from town to town. The other is a place along the route in which you can stop and talk to other people. The subjects of the conversations vary only slightly over time. The traditional routes may change over time but the traditional elements will not. The main force for changes in the cruising route is linked to economic growth which brings newer businesses into these areas that attracted high schoolers .

When my father was in high school, he and his friends would go to Providence, Kentucky to cruise. The traditional route was on Main Street. It ran along the down town area and was largely a hill with a stop light at the top. At one end there was a car wash at which you turned around to go back down town. After passing the stop light and going down the long hill, you would have to cross the rail road tracks. The area next to the tracks was very important for it was the place to park and talk. If you kept going passed the parking area, you would come to a church in which you would turn around in the parking lot or turn down the street across from it and circle the block. While

cruising, it was customary to listen to music. Since it was the sixties, most listened to country music and some to 'beach' music and rock 'n roll. It was always a good idea you weren't old enough to drive to make friends with someone who was. If one passed a friend in another car, they could stop to talk to each other at the parking place. The parking place was important for social interaction. The topic of conversations depended on who you were talking to. Guys would talk about hunting, world and school events, and of course girls. The parking place gave people a chance to interact with the opposite sex in a neutral setting without parents. Guys could meet girls and ask them out on dates. Couples could go cruising to reaffirm their relationship.

When I was in high school, I also cruised in Providence. Over time the traditional route and parking area didn't change. We still followed the same route for lack of a better one. Of course, we listened different music. The type of music we listened to was mostly rock n roll and country. In the late eighties and early nineties, 'beach' music had lost its appeal long ago. We parked in the same place as when my father cruised. We also talked about the same subjects. I think the main reason there wasn't any change is that there has been little economic growth. Providence has largely been a coal mining community and economy. Since mining is on the decline some what in that area, there hasn't been much growth. Although, a few small factories have moved in to add balance. Without growth or newer places that interest young people, there has been little need for changing the route. It should be pointed out that this is not the case for some towns.

The other town that I have live near, Madisonville, Ky is an example of this. Some of my father's friends talked to me about the route and parking place they followed when they were in high school. The route they followed was along 41 A. It is a long stretch going out the south side of the town. At one end was the Sureway Store and a skating rink at which you could turn around to go back towards town. While cruising, the music of choice was the same as was listened to in Providence. From what I have been told the main parking area was at the Dairy Queen. It was at a good location and

you could always get some ice cream. It was especially good when you were with a girl. It was always a good idea to stop and buy her some ice cream. It was the place to stop and talk with friends and you could always find friends to cruise around with if you weren't old enough to drive. The subjects of the conversations were also the same as in Providence. If you got bored with driving you could stop and go into the skating rink.

When I was in high school, we cruised Madisonville also but it had changed. The economy was increasing. Coal mining was still important but there were several factories in the area. As a result in the early eighties, there was a mall constructed near the Pennyroyal Parkway. So, the cruising route was moved to the mall area. Along the new route is a movie theater, and on the other side of the road is several stores in which you turn around in their parking lots to go back towards the mall. When you get to the mall, you cruise in front of the store entrances. The mall is also the place to park and talk to friends and meet people. The subjects of conversations were traditional. Most of the younger high schooler that either didn't have their own cars or could not find someone to ride around with usually stood around inside or outside the mall entrances. The music was also an important traditional element of cruising. Many cars had been fixed up with extra speakers so that the bass would boom. About my senior year, there was an effort to stop or at least cut down the cruising. Because it was a business area and the problems with traffic, the police would block off part of the mall parking lot. This only slowed traffic down more and caused a small drop in the number of people cruising but cruising is still alive.

In conclusion, economic changes may change the traditional routes and places to park however they can not change the elements of cruising. Music of that generation is a vital part of cruising. Although the type of music listened to may change, cruising just wouldn't be the same without it. The subjects of conversations vary very little over time. Cruising has become an American rural tradition. It helps young people to develop social skills which in able them to communicate and develop their views. It also helps to

reduce tension between the opposite sex by giving them a neutral setting which to meet or talk. Even when the police get involved, it does little to stop what become an important part of the teenage experience. It can even be looked upon as a rite of passage. Cruising will remain a popular tradition in Kentucky and the United States for as long as adults let young Johnny or Susie borrow the car keys on the weekends.