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### Authority in the Garage

(Winner of a Recoulley Award, Fall 2000)

With their grease-covered hands and their dingy, button-down, pinstriped shirts, the mechanics of today keep our lives running. Their unkempt appearances often earn dirty scowls, stereotypes, and snobbish remarks from others, but they have become powerful authorities with their ability to fix what is wrong with our passions, our obsessions, our transportation. This authority is not necessarily the president or C.E.O. of a large company, nor does he have a large salary. He may not have completed college, or have control over hundreds of employees, but he has acquired a rare knowledge that is desperately needed by society.

I dream of becoming an authority in the automobile industry. I have a deep desire to understand how the automobile operates, what makes it break, and what makes it beautiful. A car is like a musical duet—a harmony of art and technology. I have a need to know how an engine works and to understand how color and texture effect the aesthetic appeal of a vehicle. I want to explore the body's aerodynamics, the engine components, and learn to fix problems with cars that stop working.

To be considered an automobile authority, I need to be able to carry on a conversation with other authorities about engines, car problems, statistics, car shows, and repair techniques. I must be able to fix engines, repair electrical problems, re-upholster seats, install carpet, install, door panels, re-chrome bumpers, repair glass, and do touch-up and custom paint. I will need to know every detail about the automotive world, but I will need to be well-rounded in my education. I hope to gain this authority by using research, instruction, and experience equally.

My life has been spent around cars. My father and I share a passion for restoration projects. We go to car shows and admire the work others have done in restoring a piece of junk to a beautiful prize. I enjoy reading magazines and watching television shows about restoring old vehicles. My favorite car is The 1955 Buick Century, but I love all automobiles from the fifties. I am already gaining authority in the industry by soaking up as much information about cars as I can whenever the opportunity presents itself.

All people love cars to some extent. Our cars are our entertainment, our hobbies, our homes, and expressions of our personalities. We often take our vehicles for granted until something goes wrong. Suddenly, we are helpless creatures staring under the hood at a mass chaos of wires, belts and hoses. We will turn to a mechanic who will hopefully fix the problem, but because people need to drive, they will allow themselves to be wrapped around a mechanic's

finger. A mechanic can abuse his power by making up or creating a problem with a perfectly fine car, and charging the owner for the damage.

Peggy Schmidt is the author of the series *Careers Without College*. She wrote the *Cars* book to give future mechanics up-to-date information about the growing automobile industry. According to Schmidt, there are an estimated 771,000 mechanics in the United States today, but there will always be room for more (33). They are an essential part of our society. As long as there are cars, there will be "car accidents guaranteeing a steady supply of work" (Schmidt 34). Mechanics typically work for car dealerships, where they can specialize in one specific make or model of vehicle. Other mechanics work in repair shops, body shops, service stations, or in their own businesses (Schmidt 34). A mechanic receives training from a combination of vocational or technical schools, community college courses, and hands-on experience (Schmidt 39). A successful mechanic is good with his hands, patient, analytical in his thinking, and able to solve customer problems (Schmidt 35).

If I gain authority in the automobile industry, I will have respect from a predominantly male population. I will feel as though I have accomplished something as both a woman, and a mechanic. I will no longer be the one handing out the tools, I will be the one using them. According to a respected female mechanic, Lesley Halzeton:

I [wrote] about opening up my own repair shop [and] employing only women mechanics. To my astonishment, I had a slew of

letters from women mechanics around the country asking me to let them know when I opened shop. The reason: All-male repair shops were loath to hire women mechanics. Which is incredibly dumb of them because 44% of women in the focus groups said they'd trust a female mechanic more than a male one (260).

Many women feel that they are treated unfairly and ripped-off by male mechanics (Hazleton 260). Although there is a push for women to get into the industry, female mechanics are still hard to find. According to Hazleton, only 5,000 of the 854,000 mechanics certified in 1994 were women (261). The numbers are rising as women realize that the ability to repair cars is not found only in men. As a woman, I am tired of being harassed and ripped-off, and I am making an effort to understand how to fix my own problems so I am not at the mercy of a mechanic when my car breaks down.

Mechanics are not the only authorities in the world of automobiles. My favorite type of automobile authority is what I call an Automobile Historian. This particular authority is a walking encyclopedia of information on cars. Automobile historians are motivated by a deep, intense passion and love for the automobile. They know just by looking at a car, its make, model, year, engine type, and engine size. Some automobile historians know great deals of information including the original price of a vehicle and the total number of vehicles that were produced. Automobile historians often judge car shows, and some are employed by the automobile industry in other ways.

If I was as automobile historian, I would know that 1955 was a great year for Buick. Although Buick was still third behind Chevrolet and Ford, they managed to manufacture a record 781,296 vehicles in that year (Dammann 244). Buick produced the Special, the Century, the Super, the Riviera, and the Roadmaster. This is the first year that Buicks featured tri-tone paint, and the trendy removable hard top (Flammang 236). According to Flammang, an author and automobile historian, the Century cost \$2,991, and featured two-toned leather seats, and a 322 cubic inch, 236 horsepower V8 engine (237). The Century was the California Highway Patrol car of choice, and could accelerate from zero to sixty miles per hour in less than ten seconds (Flammang 237).

Another type of automobile specializes in customizing cars. People like to have a unique car that stands out from all of the rest. There are many different ways a car can be customized. Some customize by adding power to their car's engine. Two major ways to do this are by using a turbocharger, or a supercharger. A turbocharger makes an engine more powerful by compressing the air that goes into the engine, and it is driven by hot exhaust gasses escaping from the engine (Gaston 61). A turbocharger only turns on at high engine speeds. The turbocharger also increases fuel efficiency (Gaston 61). The disadvantage of a turbocharger is that it requires maintenance to keep it working properly.

According to Gaston:

The major benefit from using a turbocharger is obtaining more power or providing better engine performance. However, unless weight, size, and performance are extremely important, a larger

non-turbocharged engine may be less expensive to buy and maintain (62).

A supercharger, like a turbocharger, increases an engine's power, but a supercharger operates at all engine speeds, is rotated by a belt, and decreases the fuel efficiency of the vehicle (Gaston 62). To some, this is an even exchange for more power off the starting line.

Another way cars are customized is with paint. Automotive paint is a wonderful way to express personality through a vehicle. Painters work with light, shadows, lines, symmetry, design, and color to create a beautiful effect on an automobile. Many automobile competitions have "best paint" as an award.

According to Jacobs:

About the only custom auto endeavor free from rules and regulations is paint. As far as I know, you can paint any kind of design or color on your car that suits your fancy. The brightest colors and most psychedelic patterns are perfectly legal (5)

These are only a few of the many opportunities automobile authorities have in our society. The automotive industry is filled with specialty areas and endless possibilities too numerous to cover. Hopefully, I will gain enough knowledge in one or more of these fields to become one of the few females to advance into this industry. I might even become an authority in the garage.

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