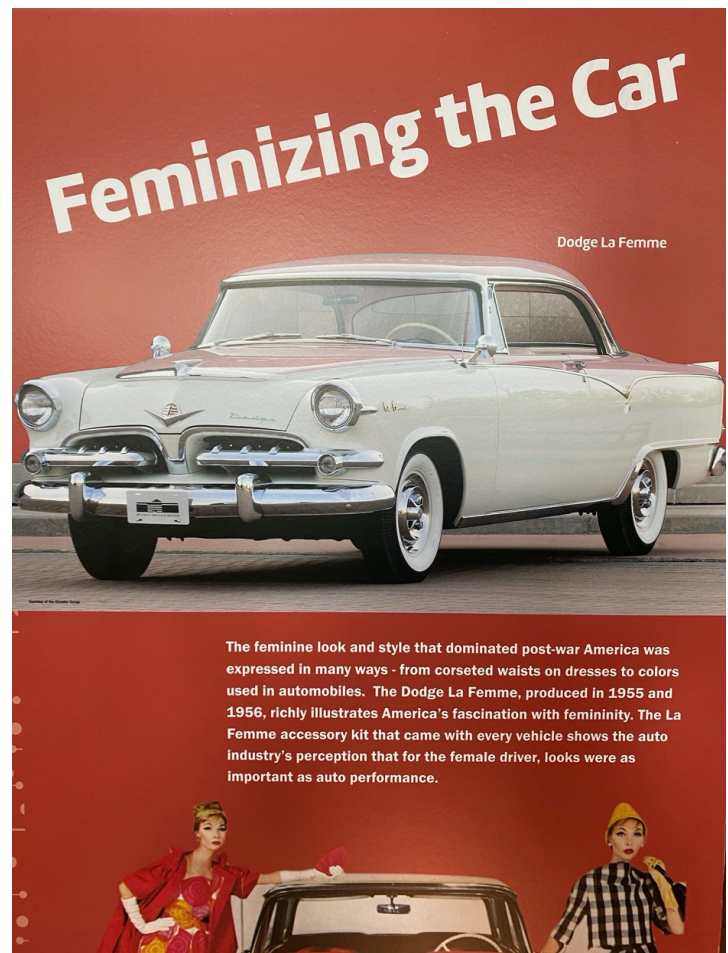


From La Femme to La Feministe

Due to the extraordinary box office success of BARBIE, Greta Gerwig's billion-plus dollar baby, America appears to have been dipped in Pepto-Bismol. Osmosis has tinted decor and clothing. Pink BARBIE accessories have been selling out nationwide. Perhaps now is the time for the automotive industry to market a full-scale Barbie Doll car. Pink was also a popular color in the 1950s. In 1955 at the newly built Edsel Ford High School in Dearborn, Michigan, the student body selected pink and charcoal gray to be their school colors. Reputedly, the football coach was not pleased and put the kibosh on the choice. Subsequently, the school colors at EFHS devolved into mere neutrals black and white.

At the same time, the Dodge division of Chrysler Motors decided to market a car specifically aimed at women. They named it "La Femme." In French-speaking nations, that effectively labeled the car "The Female," as well as something else decidedly more vulgar. The 1955 model marketed by men to women came with a two-tone paint job in pink and white and came equipped with pink accessories including a rain cape, rain bonnet, umbrella, and calf-skin purse containing a compact, comb, lighter, lipstick and cigarette cases! One can only imagine the sorts of accessories they might have generated for a macho-car roll out aimed at men only in the 1950s. A blue tool kit? A condom dispenser? A hard hat? Shaving cream? Bats and balls? The entire concept was awash in normative gender expectations. So picture male-only executives in that era sitting in a board room, puffing fat stogies while ruminating upon marketing a car aimed at the second sex. That's a gender stereotype too.



There is no way to know whether or not the following is apocryphal, but according to one post on the internet: "Supposedly these cars were popular amongst the sporting men who employed women and also among the transvestites of the day, who simply ADORED them....most of the young women of the day were hauling kids and groceries in a 4-door station wagon. And the

working women were generally secretaries or nurses driving a used business coupe or perhaps the more liberal drove a Volkswagen Beetle or a small Plymouth or Chevy coupe. —
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In 1956, the second and final year of production, Chrysler coupled new colors for La Femme: “misty orchid” and “regal orchid.” Corporate marketing made conscious allusions to royalty in an apparent effort to complete the little-girl-as-princess conditioning so many girls experience growing up in the United States of America. Ironically, this nation is the colony that revolted against monarchy but has never stopped obsessing over it.



Valerie Murphy-Goodrich and Stephen Goodrich have one of these rare beauties in their classic-car collection. Valerie is the longest serving president of the American Association of University Women-Dearborn Branch (2015 to 2021) and worked as the Human Resources Director for the City of Dearborn for seventeen years. Prior to that she served as HR Director at the University of Michigan-Dearborn and Mystic Seaport Museum in Connecticut. Now she mediates special-education cases through the Wayne County Dispute Resolution Center. Steve retired as a lawyer at Chrysler Motors but worked as an engineer specializing in cooling and safety before that in the same corporation. Little wonder that he is an automotive enthusiast!

He recalls fondly that “In June 2006, the St. Ignace car show displayed over a thousand classic vehicles. We were looking at the cars when Val stopped and pointed to a La Femme. She wondered what it was. Even though I had worked for Chrysler much of my life, I didn’t know. Never even having heard of it, I thought it might be a Canadian version of the Dodge Royal Lancer. Encouraged by Val’s enthusiasm, I determined to find one. We eventually took a trip to Seattle to see a fellow who had two, but we couldn’t agree on a price. After returning home, I received a call from the Seattle fellow saying he knew of another one owned by an old farmer in Iowa. So I called him. After establishing my own old-farm boy credentials and discussing the merits of John Deere tractors and Yorkshire hogs, we arrived at a price. Ironically, the La Femme Val had spotted in St. Ignace was the one I bought in Iowa! The farmer had driven it to St. Ignace in 2006. In December 2007, a buddy and I hauled an enclosed trailer to Iowa where I purchased the vehicle. Then I brought it home and presented La Femme to Val as her Christmas gift. Needless to say, she was tickled ‘pink’! We are both interested in history and take satisfaction in preserving pieces of the Detroit Automotive legacy. Taking this particular car to shows and talking to people about it, as well as other old cars, is great fun.”



When they purchased La Femme it was actually in very good shape. Steve recalls that “The interior was original. It might have been repainted in the original colors of Misty Orchid over Regal Orchid. The mechanicals were original, though I installed a modern oil filter to replace the oil cartridge.” Cars fascinate and keep boredom in check for Steve and Val. They provide this married couple with challenges in problem solving and a way to share adventures. Classic cars provide many with a sense of excitement. Who isn’t fascinated by rare mechanical/historical artifacts that have survived without succumbing to decay and decrepitude?

“Things wear out but so far so good. Parts still exist, and there are a number of people who can work on them, especially on things

that are beyond my ken. Insurance is inexpensive,” explains Steve.

To understand some of the fascination old-car enthusiasts enjoy, imagine how excited Motown locals get when classic cars are on display or cruising down Telegraph Road or Woodward Avenue. For Steve and Val, cars are a family affair. To restore La Femme, they turned to Val’s brother Chris, who works at Pratt & Miller of Chevy Racing fame, to do excellent detailing and to correct an imperfection in the paint.

“I have always been a car guy as have Val’s brothers. Her son Evan is the ultimate car guy. Evan can take apart and put together an engine. In fact, he can do anything on a car! He’s meticulous. Right now he’s working on restoring an iconic 1969 Dodge Charger for us. And while some people invest in retirement accounts, we have accounts with tires on them.”

Ultimately, La Femme, pronounced 'la famm,' can help illuminate the advances women have made defeating gender expectations over the course of the twentieth century. AAUW-Dearborn was founded ninety years ago. Historical events in the twentieth century kept changing the dynamics around what it was to be a female. In 1903, Madame Marie Curie became the first woman to win the Nobel Prize. She gained a second one in 1911. In 1912, the Girls Scouts of America was founded to promote community service and outdoor activities. In 1920, upon ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, white women gained the right to vote. In 1932, Amelia Earhart flew solo across the Atlantic Ocean. World War II literally upended the world. Women manned manufacturing jobs, created armaments and took on increasing responsibilities for global outcomes. In 1942, women were allowed to serve in the armed

forces. In 1966, the National Organization for Women (NOW) was founded “to bring women into the mainstream of American society.” In 1972, Title IX became the law barring women from discrimination in education. In 1973, in what was labeled the “battle of the sexes” Billy Jean King defeated Bobby Riggs in three straight sets of tennis. Until then it was commonly believed a woman could never defeat a man in a sporting event. In 1974, the Equal Credit Opportunity Act allowed women to get their own credit cards. Surely, the automotive industry must have taken note of that shift in their marketing! In 1983, Sally Ride became the first American woman to orbit the earth. In 1994, Congress passed the Violence Against Women Act to improve responses to domestic violence and sexual assault.

One-by-one once-locked doors have opened to women. Occasionally one gets slammed shut again. It is increasingly common that women work in academia, gain careers as lawyers, doctors, research scientists, executives, get elected to public offices, and become appointed as Cabinet Members and Supreme Court justices. No one can deny that women made extraordinary gains toward fuller freedom as societal perceptions expanded. Ninety years ago, would anyone ever have imagined that Michigan would have four women in the upper echelons of this State’s political arena? Governor Gretchen Whitmer, Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson, Attorney General Dana Nessel, and Solicitor General Fadwa Hammoud, a member of AAUW-Dearborn serve in those key roles at present.

So this unique automobile, “The Female,” will be parked outside Park Place in West Dearborn, on Saturday, September 16, 2023, as a symbol of women’s mobility in America. This particular car is a great reminder of the long journey women have been traveling and continue to travel toward gender equity. Perhaps even the Equal Rights Amendment will be adopted before another ninety years passes! Anniversaries are great reminders for us to look back at accomplishments and to look forward to new possibilities. Like Janus, this car serves as a similar reminder to consider the progress of



women by looking to the past and the future simultaneously. Steve and Valerie view their job preserving this material link to women’s history as being as much about giving as getting. They both see “its care and maintenance as a duty, akin to taking care of children or aging parents.”

As for Val, the car and her affiliation with AAUW-Dearborn are in alignment. Marriages are enhanced by shared interests, and the couple’s storytelling about La Femme is entertaining. Steve credits Val’s enthusiasm for her ability to persuade others about her beliefs. When she’s explaining the AAUW mission “to advance equity for women and girls through advocacy, education and research,” she recounts how cars have provided women more personal freedom

by furthering access to jobs, leisure activities, and societal interactions. The invention of automobiles altered the course of human history in numerous ways.

Val explains, "As women took their place 'at the wheel' transportation became transformation. Driving offered a new kind of freedom, as cars made possible the mobility women sought but also introduced them to the lure of the open road."

The automobile eventually changed the individual lives of women and how they navigated American society. It facilitated their efforts to make change through new opportunities and interactions. The involvement of cars in such activities can be traced all the way back to Nell Richardson and Alice Burke. They set out on a cross-country roadtrip in 1916, to advocate for women's suffrage. Before leaving, they decorated the car with banners seeking "votes for women," and the two determined women traveled the nation while advocating for change with strength and purpose.

Val is equally determined to bring the remarkable story of La Femme into greater awareness. She can offer a convincing sales pitch about colors and design choices while explaining La Femme's distribution was an inflection point in the progress of women. Steve believes Val may have missed her calling in automotive marketing. However, members of AAUW-D know she found the perfect calling as president of their organization for many years! Val sums it up by saying, "Today, steering our lives toward our futures is enriched by the resources that AAUW-Dearborn offers amidst the rich and singular automotive history of this community."

AAUW-D's 90th Anniversary Luncheon, which is open to the public, is scheduled from noon to 3:30 p.m. on Saturday, September 16, 2023, at Park Place Banquet Center, 23400 Park Street, Dearborn, MI 48124. Tickets are \$30, and a cash bar will be available. Contact Judith Buck, <jarcuck@sbcglobal.net> or at 4 Woodbury Lane, Dearborn, 48120, to reserve a seat by Wednesday, September 6, 20