

Wash AND Where

by
DAVID
HAYES

ON MY WAY TO THE ANNUAL CANADIAN CARWASH Association trade show, I noticed my late-model Honda Civic was dirty, which is its usual state. Then I conducted an unscientific study while driving north along the 427: most people drive filthy cars, and everywhere I looked

there was dirt and dust swirling around, a yellow haze of industrial pollution and invisible but omnipresent environmental fallout. Winter would soon bring pools of slush and corrosive road salt. As I pulled into the parking lot of the International Centre and found a space amid hundreds of grimy vehicles, I realized that if I were a car wash operator arriving at my own association's trade show, all things considered, the world would seem pretty rosy.

"The industry's come a long way since the days of the wino with a bucket and a sponge standing hip-deep in water," said Don Hux proudly. Hux, who organized the trade show, is vice-president of field operations for Wash World Industries Ltd., a large Canadian manufacturer of automated car wash equipment. He was talking about car washes of yore—dank tunnels filled with crude copper tubing and a gang of men recruited from local soup kitchens scrubbing the sides of cars as they passed. According to Hux, the industry is still living down that image.

Hux is a tall, late-50ish man with wavy hair and a broad, ruddy face. He was wearing a bright red sports jacket, grey pants and tan cowboy boots. He looked like a rancher or, to be more precise, the famous American actor-rancher, Ronald Reagan. As we walked past the exhibits, Hux described the three basic types of car washes: coin-ops, tunnels and roll-overs. Coin-ops are those do-it-yourselfers where you park, deposit coins and wash the car yourself. Most coin-ops also provide other do-it-yourself services, such as wax applicators and vacuum cleaners. At an exhibit of

coin-op equipment, for instance, there was a deodorizer called Magic Mist filled with scents such as Wild Cherry, Piña Colada and New Car.

"I'd say people in Toronto are most familiar with tunnel car washes," Hux said, leading me

toward one of the large exhibits dominating the centre of the trade show. A tunnel is the kind in which your car is pulled over bottom blasters and past swivelling nozzles on rinse arches through a wash bay many car lengths long.

In a "full-service" tunnel, attendants with rags and bottles clean a car's interior. But most tunnels are "exteriors," sometimes called "children's delight," in which you sit inside your car and imagine you're piloting a submarine through an attack by soapy subaquatic mop creatures. Some adults find the experience frightening, either because they're claustrophobic or afraid a piece of machinery

is going to crash through the windshield. Statistics indicate that those kinds of things don't happen very often, but even so high-profile a member of the industry as Hux admitted his wife doesn't like to go through automated car washes because once, thirty years ago, he'd left the front wheels about ten degrees off-centre, causing their car to jump free of its pulley and almost crash into a wall.

I asked Hux about those long felt ribbons that flop spastically over cars and what appear to be giant spinning hair-brushes. "They're top and side washers," he said patiently. "They provide the friction to clean a wet, soapy car. The ones that are made out of feltlike material and hang like cur-

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ILLUSTRATION

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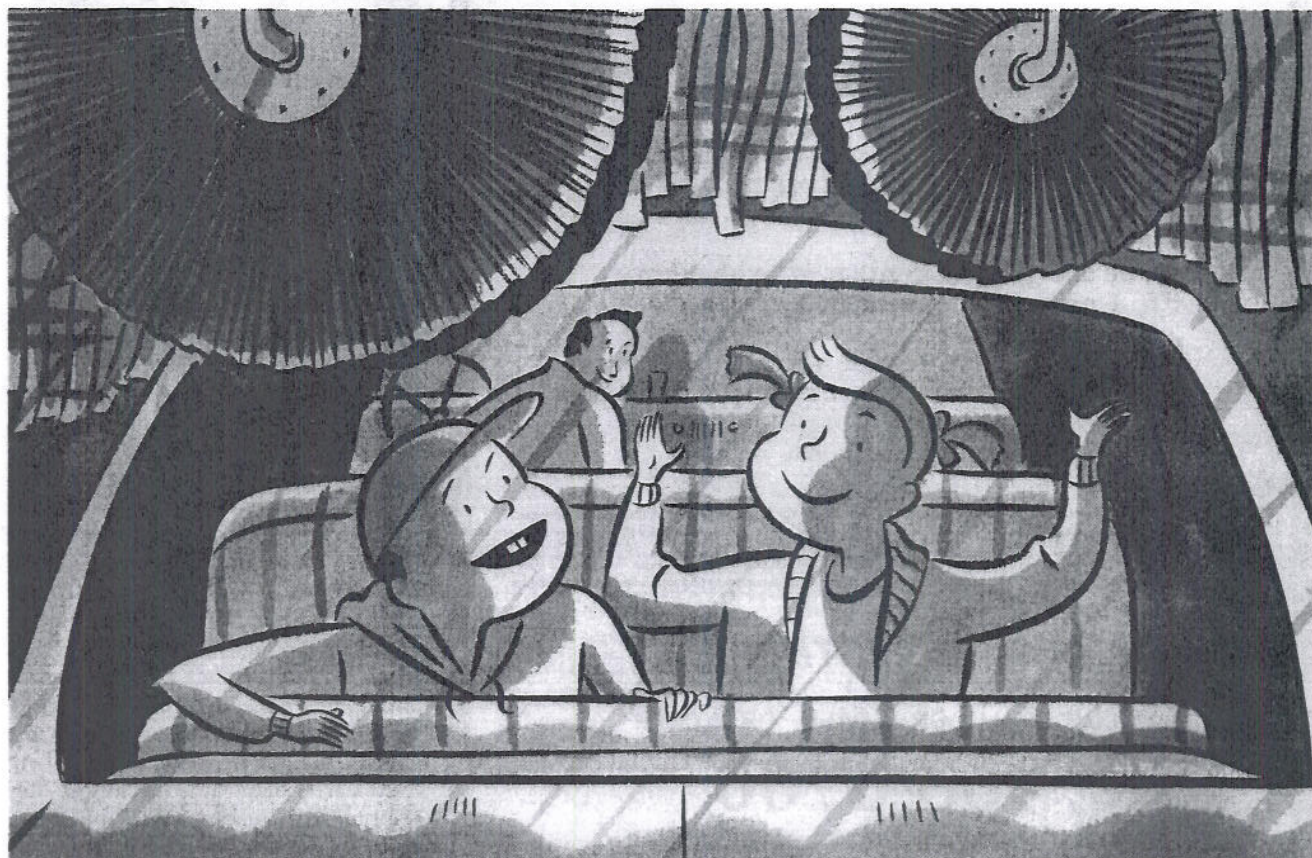
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tains are called soft-cloth washers. The ones that look like brushes are bristle washers, although they're actually made out of pex, a plastic with paraffin wax that's also quite soft."

Friction cleaning. Soft cloth. Bristles that are also soft. Paraffin wax. The mind reels. Which is better? I asked. Hux thought about it for a while, then said, "Bristles get at small, hard-to-reach areas, especially if a car is really dirty, because they have thousands of tiny tips. But they sometimes leave faint hazy swirls on the finish. Cloth washers can't get into nooks and crannies as well but they work wonderfully on large flat surfaces and cars come out consistently shinier because of the buffing action."

I told Hux that many people, including me, use automated car washes but believe the only way to really get at the salt and other bad stuff is if you do it yourself with a hose.

Hux raised his eyebrows. "If people washed their car properly, they'd probably do the best job. But look, you've usually got a guy with a beautiful lamb's-wool mitt and a bucket of soapy water. It's noon on a blazing sunny summer's day when his car's surface is hot, which is the worst time to wash a car. He may be using whatever detergent he found under his kitchen sink instead of one formulated for car enamel. So he hoses the car down for a minute or two until it's barely damp, then starts at the roof, okay, then does the trunk and hood. Then he does the fender, okay, and washes the wheels. Now that he's picked up lots of dirt and pieces of grit, he goes up to the door before sweeping down to the rocker panel, which is the dirtiest part of a car. Then

he pulls that water all over the car from the top down, scratching it in the process...."

Hux went on describing the way I wash my car for another minute or two until we reached the next exhibit. It was a rollover, which uses similar cloth or bristle washers, but rather than being pulled through a tunnel, a car remains stationary in a structure about the size of an ordinary garage while the washers "roll" around and over it. (I was a bit disappointed to learn that it wasn't the cars that were rolled over.) I pressed Hux and some people he introduced me to for a definitive answer as to the best system. But whenever I asked anyone whether rollovers were better than tunnels, they'd look at my notebook and say things like, "Each system is designed to provide maximum performance under different circumstances." Anonymous sources, however, admit that rollovers are not as effective. The main advantage is that they're a smaller and less elaborate operation, so equipment, labour and real estate costs are much lower.

"This name is one of the legends of the business," said Hux, stopping at the Hanna Car Wash International exhibit. Dan Hanna, described as "king of the car wash" by *People* magazine, opened the first fully automated car wash in Port-

Most tunnels,
a.k.a. "children's delight,"
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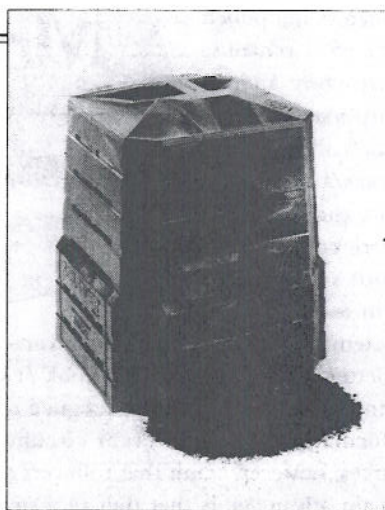
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land, Oregon, in the late 1950s. Today Hanna equipment can be found in car washes in seventy-eight countries, including the Soviet Union and China.

Dan Hanna represents a peculiarly American phenomenon. Most car wash operators in the United States are independent entrepreneurs who regard getting cars clean as their trade. In Canada the industry is dominated by service stations, most of which are owned by big oil companies that opened car washes to help sell more gas. "So quality wasn't always the most important concern," said Hux. "Of course, it's also the big oil companies that now run some of the best ones."

I'd visited several facilities run by oil companies accompanied by Cam Graham, a member of Petro-Canada's car wash team. "Our business is mainly about marketing," Graham said cheerfully, explaining that Petro-Can owns and operates over 150 car washes, more than any other oil company in Canada. Consumers, for instance, don't believe their car is being washed unless they see bubbles. Since modern phosphate-free detergents don't foam up, air is pumped into them to create the effect. Similarly, many of us doubt car wash operators apply wax on our cars, even though we've paid for it. Thus, the flashing blue, green or yellow lights are not bombarding cars with special wax-baking rays, they're just signalling that all that blue, green or yellow goo really is wax. (The efficacy of a waxing is a matter of some contention. Critics point out that wax must be left to dry to a haze before being carefully polished to a shine. This clearly does not happen in an automated car wash, but operators insist the wax coat lasts about a week.) If this all sounds like a triumph of style over substance, market research also reveals that consumers care most about convenience, followed by damage to their car's finish and, finally, price. Apparently most respondents were unconcerned about the central purpose of a car wash: getting a car really clean.

The industry, understandably, is sensitive to the lingering suspicion that automated car washes are likely to damage cars. Operators admit that accidents occasionally happen, but they insist the perception is based on crude washing techniques employed decades ago. Although officials at the Canadian Automobile Association and some of the major automakers are less sanguine, it's probably true most of us don't notice when a gas-bar attendant

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Wash and where continued

with keys on his belt leans against the car...or realize the number of times that we rest a heavy box of groceries on our cars before dragging it across the surface as we lift it off...or catch the kids jumping around on the hood...or bang the finish loading skis or bicycles onto a rack...or fail to notice that someone grazed us in a parking lot...until we admire our freshly cleaned car after a wash.

All of which leads to the latest twist in car wash technology, a marketing-driven solution known as touchless. In Wash World's exhibition area at the trade show, Hux's company had on display a system it distributes for American-based PDQ Manufacturing, Inc. It looks like a tunnel, except there are no soft-cloth washers or bristle brushes, only an elaborate latticework of gleaming steel tubing. A touchless (or frictionless) car wash uses only strong chemical detergents and high-pressure blasts of hot water. In Canada, Sunoco Inc. is leading this trend with its Aquashine car washes, promising that "no brushes touch your car," presumably absolving the operator of all responsibility for damage. There's no question that Aquashine facilities look marvellously high tech without all those big cloth curtains and brushes, but there are also plenty of people within the industry who think it's a fad, and believe that a combination of strong chemicals and huge quantities of hot water is neither the most environmentally sound nor consistently effective way to clean a car.

"A lot of operators are moving toward a hybrid system," Hux told me. "You use some cloth or bristles on the dirtiest parts, like the rocker panels or wheels, and to buff and polish the cars. But you also incorporate some touchless equipment. That's the future."

On my way home I resolved to visit a car wash. Unfortunately, the first one I spotted was a rollover, and the second was across a median and three lanes of rush hour traffic. By then I was nearly home. I'd have washed it myself, but I've decided I'll only subject my car to that as a last resort.

TUNNEL VISIONS: A SELECTION OF RELIABLE CAR WASHES

A car wash, like love, is a subjective thing. Prices range from as low as \$1.99 (with a fill-up at the gas pumps) to \$14.99 for some of the deluxe full-service spots. The facilities below are a

random sampling of some of the better car washes in the city.

Avenue-Lawrence Car Wash
1537 Avenue Rd., at Lawrence
(789-1814)

Albert Geller's 35-year-old car wash has seen some changes. A visit in the 1950s meant watching 40 men scrub your car by hand. In 1961, about the time Moe Schwartz started working there, it was automated. Today, Schwartz is the general manager and proud of the "feather-pex" bristle washers he designed. Schwartz still displays a 1971 *Toronto Life* survey in which our expert then called it "by and large the best car wash I've come across." Is that still true? "Doug Bassett's chauffeur comes in twice a day with his Mercedes limousine," Schwartz says. "I guess he wouldn't come back if it wasn't good."

Esso Car Wash
Don Mills Road and
Sheppard Avenue East
(494-6000)

Yonge Street and Steeles Avenue
(889-7661)

These flagship locations are the busiest of the 12 company-owned and -operated washes in the Metro area. They're exterior tunnels using exclusively soft-cloth equipment and fresh water.

Kar Kare Centre

1401 Matheson Blvd., near Dixie Road
(624-8841)

Bill Barber operates this full-service tunnel car wash using cloth and some bristles, and it's regarded as a consistent and effective facility. The same goes for his 655 The Queensway and 5555 Kennedy Rd. locations.

Parkway Car Wash

2055 Sheppard Ave. E., east of the DVP
(491-3244)

When asked where they would take their own cars, just about everyone in the business named veteran Al Pandell's Parkway Car Wash. Nothing fancy about it; this is an old-fashioned full-service operation using mainly bristle washers and a lot of soap. It does the job consistently and well. When asked whether he'd thought about going touchless, Pandell drawled, "I don't need the aggravation."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 101

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