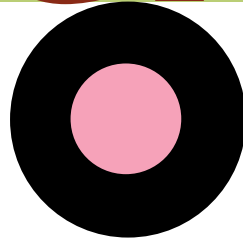
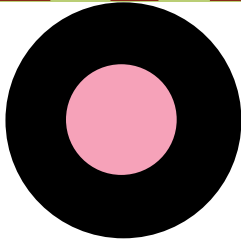
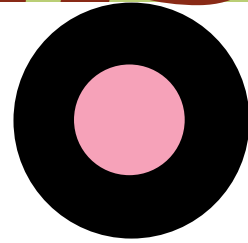
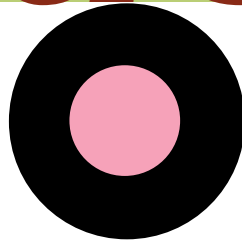


wheels &



deals



What suburbia cries for are the means for people to gather easily, inexpensively, regularly, and pleasurably – a “place on the corner,” real life alternatives to television, easy escapes from the cabin fever of marriage and family life that do not necessitate getting into an automobile.

Ray Oldenburg
Sociologist and author of
The Great Good Place

Los Angeles is the undisputed car capital of a car-loving country. And even though the Big Three aren't as big as they used to be, Detroit is still the Motor City.

But who would have guessed that Quincy has a valid claim to being the birthplace of America's car culture? That's right. Quincy, Massachusetts!

It all goes back to the 1920s, when cars were just beginning to change the way Americans

lived, worked, shopped, and played. Howard Johnson, a young Quincy go-getter, was on the verge of developing a new business model for the automotive age: a chain of franchise restaurants that offered motorists a standard menu.

The name “Howard Johnson” no longer carries the instant recognition that it did in the mid-20th century, but years before the golden arches made their appearance, the orange-tiled roofs of Howard Johnson's roadside restaurants were “The Landmark for Hungry Americans.” Aside from Henry Ford, it's hard to think of anyone who was more instrumental in shaping America's roadside culture. Ford put Americans on the road in affordable, mass-produced cars, and Johnson provided hungry, tired travelers with a nationwide chain of clean, predictable restaurants and hotels.

He started in 1925 with a \$2,000 loan and a corner drugstore in Quincy's Wollaston neighborhood. According to hojo.com, the drugstore “sold candy, newspapers and patent medicines – but Howard quickly noticed that the real action was at his old marble soda fountain. He figured that if he could invent a better tasting ice cream cone, the world (or at least Wollaston) would beat a path to the Howard Johnson store.”



And that is exactly what happened. Customers were soon lining up to buy his vanilla and chocolate ice cream, which, according to legend, was made from his mother's secret recipe. (In fact, the only real "secret" was that it contained double the usual butterfat content.) Within a few years he had opened a handful of beachfront stands that offered 28 flavors of ice cream, and in 1935 he licensed his first Howard Johnson's franchise to a friend in Orleans on Cape Cod.

By the 1950s there were hundreds of full-service Howard Johnson's roadside restaurants in 32 states. Most were franchises that adhered to Johnson's strict standards. He insisted that they use high-quality food prepared according to standard guidelines so that roadside travelers could enjoy the same, predictable dining experience regardless of whether they were in Maine or Florida. He also developed a chain of company-owned and franchised Howard Johnson's Motor Lodges, and eventually the company logo appeared on 500 motor lodges, which may not have rivaled the great hotels of Europe but did provide tired motorists with clean sheets, air conditioning, and free parking, all at a reasonable rate.

Franchising, cleanliness, high-volume sales, predictability, standardization, and distinctive

buildings that were easy to spot from a speeding car: today that's the norm – a standard formula for success in the roadside food and hospitality business. But before Howard Johnson came along, no one had really put all the pieces together.

Timing helped, too. Car ownership was expanding, the government was making a massive investment in highways, the U.S. population was booming, and the economy was growing. For anyone with the right vision, all these changes presented new opportunities, and in 1950, as Howard Johnson was beginning to hit full stride, another Quincy entrepreneur was just getting started.

As a boy, Bill Rosenberg had worked in his father's neighborhood grocery store and went on to drive an ice cream truck before taking a defense job at Quincy's Fore River Shipyard during World War II. While at the Yard, he saw firsthand that coffee breaks and lunch were important events in the typical workday at an industrial plant. When the war ended, he bought a few surplus trucks and began making regular coffee runs to the shipyard and other worksites. In 1950, he opened a coffee and donut shop in Quincy, with the colonial-sounding (and forgettable) name of "Open Kettle." Before long he changed the name to Dunkin' Donuts, and in 1955, after opening a few more donut shops, he followed Howard Johnson's example and entered into his first franchise agreement. But unlike Howard Johnson's, Dunkin' Donuts always seemed able to keep up with changing times and tastes. Fifty years after the first shop opened in Quincy, Dunkin' Donuts had 5,000

outlets worldwide, and the brand has continued to thrive.

Ironically, the changes that made it possible for Howard Johnson and Bill Rosenberg to build franchising operations that extended well beyond Quincy also created the conditions that led to the decline of downtown Quincy. Not that it's a ghost town, or even economically depressed. Far from it. But anyone who knew the place that once billed itself as "Shopperstown U.S.A." also knows that it's nothing like what it was.

During the holiday shopping season in the 1950s, downtown Quincy looked and felt like Oz. The mechanical window displays at Remick's department store were a marvel. Shoppers laden with bundles packed the sidewalks. Many of the stores were small, locally owned specialty shops: Jason's for records, Milton's for fine men's clothing, Barker's for office and school supplies, Westland's or Colman's for sporting goods, and the Bargain Center for great deals on just about anything. Even some of the department stores – Remick's and Sheridan's were locally owned. National chains were part of the mix – Sears, Kresge's, Woolworth's, Grant's – but they were not the dominant players that today's giants have become.

Quincy's commercial district thrived on innovation and marketing. It was among the first shopping areas in Greater Boston to attract customers by building a large municipal parking area that allowed Quincy to position itself as an alternative to the congestion and inconvenience of downtown Boston. But in a twist of fate, it was cars and parking that ultimately took business away from Quincy.

In the early 1960s, a large regional mall opened in neighboring Braintree, at the convergence of two new highways that had bypassed downtown Quincy. With acres of free

parking and bright, modern stores, the South Shore Plaza soon eclipsed downtown Quincy as the major shopping destination south of Boston.

City officials tried their best to bring shoppers back to Quincy. They lobbied for connector roads to the main highways and built additional parking, but in the end, people kept driving to the mall.

Today, there are signs of a retail shopping revival in Quincy, but if it happens, it will probably have more to do with market forces than municipal planning. Quincy is one of the few places near Boston where retail space is still relatively affordable, and it's also a place where the boom in condo construction is creating a larger pool of potential customers. And unlike the old-time "Shopperstown" customers who spent their shipyard payroll checks to buy groceries and school clothes, many of the new customers are empty-nesters or young professionals with more disposable income to spend at shops that once might have seemed out of place in Quincy – high-end bakeries, a gourmet food store, a wine and cheese shop – shops that aren't necessarily competing head-to-head with stores at the mall.

All in all, if the revival happens, it will be a net plus for the city. Still, if you remember the way things were, you probably can't walk past the old Remick's building without feeling a sense of loss. Main Street U.S.A. may not always have lived up to the romantic ideal, but there was something special about walking the streets of a bustling downtown – something special that you just can't find at the mall, no matter how many times you wander the climate-controlled corridors.

That's not necessarily a knock against shopping malls. Or, then again, maybe it is. Either way, it probably doesn't matter because malls and online shopping seem to be what people want.

We may look at those syndicated TV shows from the 1950s, 60s, or 70s and get nostalgic for Main Street, Mom-and-Pop stores, and Made-in-the-U.S.A. products, but when it comes to how we actually choose to live our lives and spend our money, our actions show a preference for something quite different.



Image courtesy of PLAN59.com