



The Boom in Auto Air Conditioning

Americans like cool com-
fort in their motoring;
the result: an estimated
500,000 sales in 1958.

by Jack Ryan

LAST SUMMER a Midwestern family visited in-laws in Southern California, just as they had every other year since 1947. As usual they drove and, except for minor variations, followed the same routes.

There was one major difference, however; their new auto was air conditioned.

"For the first time," the wife told a consumer survey team, "all of us enjoyed all of the trip. Even when we covered 500 miles a day, we weren't exhausted, tense, or covered with dust and grime."

Her enthusiasm largely concerned the effects of air conditioning on her three children. Being cool, they were less susceptible to fatigue and temper. And because windows are closed in air-conditioned cars, they could be amused without the wind upsetting their cards and games.

For the father, who did about 80 percent of the driving, the benefits centered on the fatigue factor and safety. The escape from Summer heat, of course, helped keep his driving efficiency high. But he also noted that closed windows shut out highway noises and city exhaust fumes which used to tire him and cause carelessness and dangerous impatience while behind the wheel.

These comments give a key to the increasing popularity of the auto industry's most daring accessory in recent years. In high-priced lines, at least 30 percent of 1958 cars will be sold with factory-installed air conditioning, and Chrysler and Imperial expect to go over the 40 percent mark.

In lower-priced lines, the percentage is smaller (2 to 8 percent), but the increase in sales remains impressive. Ford, for example, sold 8,000 air-conditioning units in 1955; 25,000 in 1956; and an estimated 40,000 in 1957. The entire industry estimates its total 1957 sales of air-conditioned cars may top 350,000.

About 85 percent of the sales are made in the South and Southwest, although the proportion in other regions is gradually increasing. In northern areas, people who drive a great deal or whose health is poor consider car air conditioning a good investment even for its few months of use.

Yearly improvements assure an increase in popularity in all price lines and regions. Manufacturers have eliminated unsightly air ducts by concealing vents under the dashboard or within the body structure. Most units are thermostatically controlled—you set the conditioner at the tempera-



Cadillac's air conditioning eliminates drafts with three dashboard outlets which slowly move large volumes of air.



Lincoln cools the rear seat area with vents concealed in arm rest of front door panel.

ture you want and it turns itself on and off automatically as interior conditions require.

Factory-installed units circulate fresh, dehumidified air rather than recirculating and cooling stale air, as in some old models. And equally important, all the new designs place the refrigeration unit in the engine compartment, eliminating trunk installations which wasted valuable luggage space.

On new cars, air conditioning adds from \$350 to \$600 to the cost, depending on the auto model you're buying. Formerly, all air conditioners averaged around the current top price.

Air conditioning can be installed on most old cars, too. These units are vented under the dashboard. They are efficient but usually do not use fresh air in cooling; and some require trunk or passenger space for the evaporator.

So far, relatively few "bugs" have been reported in the new accessory. Like any mechanical device, the car air conditioner needs periodic attention, of course, but engineers say it operates with minimal drain on gas consumption and engine efficiency. One unit drains about 2½ horsepower from

the engine, or about 1 percent of the total power.

In the case of the Midwestern family who traveled some 6,000 miles last Summer in air-conditioned comfort, the only complaint concerned car handling. The husband noted a tendency for the car to "nose down" in quick braking and steer a little heavily.

The extra 120 or 130 pounds of equipment added to the front of the car caused these difficulties. The driver added, however, that he was able to compensate easily for the imbalance. He concluded that benefits in comfort far outweighed any extra driving effort.

Auto experts believe satisfied customers like the Midwestern family will help them sell 500,000 air conditioners in 1958; by 1960, they foresee between 2,000,000 and 2,500,000 sales. If they are right, the future resale value of today's new car will depend considerably on whether it has air conditioning.

Just as today's driver has become accustomed to the roomy design, smooth ride, and efficient performance of American cars, tomorrow's driver will expect—and get—cool comfort on the hottest driving days, no matter the part of the country.