



I've been giving a lot of thought to steering wheels lately. This may seem an odd pastime but understand that since my last diatribe I've spent about 3000 miles behind one. That in and of itself is enough to make one a little weird. The subject of steering wheels themselves doesn't eat up too much time. They are all round; they all have within their design a place to push to activate the horn (unless you're in a few strange Ford products); and they are all usually color coordinated with the rest of the car's interior decoration. Pretty bland stuff and even on a bad day it only takes 6 or 7 miles to figure all that out. What I had to come up with was something a bit more sustaining, something that was a variation on the theme. Ah ha! Hands. It's not the steering wheel that is fascinating, it's how people hold on to them. Since I've had more than ample opportunity to observe John Q. Public at the wheel I declare myself and authority on the subject. I am happy to report that no two people hold their steering wheel the same way and am less happy to report that at least two travelers were using their feet!

Now, before I go too far astray, let me offer a few guidelines:

- 1) No set of hands (on the same person) necessarily match.
- 2) Steering grip is usually contingent upon the vehicle's transmission (do I need to explain this?).
- 3) Long distance driving is basically a boring pursuit that gives rise to this type of contemplation. I have this need to make the experience meaningful.
- 4) If all this is just too esoteric, quit here. It gets worse.

For those of us who have endured Driver's Education as a way to shave a few months off the age requirement to earn a license, we learned that the accepted standard for hand placement on a steering wheel is at the 10 o'clock and 2 o'clock position. The inevitable PM/AM - AM/PM dilemma was usually left to personal preference accompanied by a dirty look from the instructor. Having seen every type of car racing on ESPN I can attest that professionals subscribe to this positioning method but they don't make a big deal out of it. I suppose there is something oddly correct about the 10-2 scheme, something textbook about it. I guess that explains why I have been known to consciously grasp at the 11-1 position when I am angry or feeling particularly uppity about something.

Well folks, there are lots of drivers out there that were absent the day that the subject of

hand positioning came up. I have observed so many aberrations that I thought I should warn you about a few of the more bizarre. Forewarned is forearmed (Yes, I saw that technique too!).

The first example is something I call the reverse lift hook. It looks very similar to a golfer getting ready to slice the ball backwards. Actually, it just looks painful. This is purely a left hand operation since the right hand and arm are carelessly draped along the top of the bench seat. The left hand grips the steering wheel, fingers facing the driver at the 12 o'clock position. The thumb sort of stands at attention or twitches up and down. The ferocity of the twitching action is usually commensurate with the emotion being generated by the conversation the driver is holding with himself.

Driver #2 is the guy I call the Lost Soul. He is driving a company car equipped only with an AM radio. I know this because he is wearing a Walkman on his head and from the way it is moving from side to side he is listening to a tape of the Greatest Hit of the Grass Roots. The Lost Soul also uses the one handed approach to vehicle control but the hand keeps changing. Right at 3 o'clock - left at 9 o'clock, left at noon/midnight with fingers pointed to the windshield, right at 6 o'clock. You could go off the road keeping track of this one.

Driver #3, and my personal favorite, is the guy who obviously lives in his car. He is barefoot, wears jeans, a tee shirt with writing on it and an unbuttoned flannel shirt over the tee. One could be reasonably confident that his cowboy boots are airing out on the floor of the car. His posture is a chiropractor's dream. Left leg and foot are either propped up on the seat or, weather permitting, hanging out of the front window. He holds the steering wheel in one of two ways, either with the pinky of forefinger of his right hand at the 4 o'clock position or with his right knee. Do yourself a favor and give this guy a wide berth; he swerves a lot.

Sweet little blue haired ladies are out there in astounding numbers and all of them subscribe to the 10 - 2 method. They also subscribe to a maximum cruising speed of 45 MPH, use both hand and mechanical signals to let their fellow travelers they are

going to make a move . . . sometime. They all patronize the same beautician and they all wear dresses with floppy bows at the collar.

I have three more months of traveling to look forward to. It's either going to result in a book or serious psychotherapy. I'll let you know when I've found a publisher!