

# The First Auto School

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Boston's Auto School, circa 1909, trained mechanics, chauffeurs and "lady automobilists." (Northeastern University Libraries)

Car sales in the United States jumped 166 percent between 1900 and 1903, the year Frank Palmer Speare opened an automobile school in Boston. Speare, educational director of the Evening Institute of the Young Men's Christian Association, realized that the mobility and status promised by the new contraptions came with a need for special skills to keep them running. (*Horseless Age* magazine recommended never leaving home without baling wire and a ball of twine, and *Diseases of the Gasoline Automobile and How to Cure Them* listed a wide assortment of wrenches, pliers and files that every motorist should carry, along with "a roll of sticky tape.") A lecture series on cars was open to women and men, but hands-on shop classes were for men only. More than 250 students flocked to the YMCA that first year, and the school continued to grow, adding driving instruction and courses in auto finishing. During World War I, shop classes were opened to women preparing to take over for male drivers and mechanics who'd gone off to war. But as cars became more reliable and service stations more commonplace in the 1920s, enrollment in do-it-yourself repair classes fell sharply. The school closed in 1926.

-There were more horses than cars in the U.S. until 1930, when autos outnumbered equines for the first time—23 million to 13.5 million.

-In 1903, Massachusetts and Missouri became the first states to issue drivers licenses. Neither state required a test of road skills. Rhode Island was the first state to require a driver's test, in 1908; South Dakota was the last, in 1959.

-In 1904, the nation had 2.2 million miles of public road—only 154,000 miles were surfaced.