What is it about parking that can raise the hackles of even the most reasonable person? Sometimes it almost seems the American ideal is a guarantee of life, liberty and the pursuit of a parking spot. Nothing ignites the internal combustion engine under someone’s collar quicker than these two words:

No parking.

Over the past decade MU, has revved up an ambitious parking program, with spaces now for 20,000 cars across campus, and more on the drawing board. That would have been almost incomprehensible back in 1955, when the 1,800 MU students who brought their cars to town jockeyed for the handful of spaces. Despite the geometric growth in spaces, a mention of parking to today’s students and professors is still liable to elicit bumper-to-bumper grumbles.

Maybe that’s because we naturally bristle at being told what to do. Seemingly inscrutable rules can send people from simmer to boil in no time. That was the case with one MU student back in the 1960s who had wrecked his car miles from Columbia. When he came into the parking office for another registration sticker he had a second collision, this time with an immovable bureaucratic wall.

The rule then was that you had to scrape the old sticker off your car and bring it in before another would be issued. “But my car is sitting in a junkyard halfway across the state,” he pleaded.

“It doesn’t matter,” a gimlet-eyed clerk told him. “We have to have the old sticker before you get a new one. That’s the rule. Case closed.” A few days later, the young man showed up again. This time he was toting a foot-long piece of bumper that he’d hacksawed off his wrecked car—with the registration sticker attached—clanged it down on the counter, and demanded a new sticker. He got one.

Ever since the first automobile putt-putted into Columbia in 1905, campus culture has been on a collision course with the horseless carriage. That June a local newspaper described the arrival of the town’s first car—“an Oldsmobile of the latest pattern”—which made the trip from St. Louis in 14 hours. A few days later, Columbia’s second car rumbled down Broadway “and now the craze is on,” the paper reported. It also offered a prediction: “It will be some time before the new machines get on speaking terms with the horses of Boone County.”

By 1923, campus administrators took a dim view of car-owning students. At an assembly that year, University President Stratton Brooks gave a ringing sermon against smoking in University buildings, swearing and betting at football games, drinking, and students with cars. “Fifty percent of the students who have automobiles,” Brooks thundered, “fail to finish school.”

Mizzou required students to register their cars for the first time in 1926, even though just a handful actually owned a flivver. Almost from the beginning, mixing academics and automobiles somehow seemed morally suspect. Across town, all-female Stephens College even decreed that its students could not ride in private cars.

That attitude hung on. The Board of Curators passed a resolution in 1956 discouraging students from bringing cars to campus. “It has been determined,” the board said, “that the quality of the academic work of a student is often materially affected by his keeping and operating an automobile.” If that seems a little silly now, just remember that at one time MU rules also prescribed exactly how cold it had to be before women could wear slacks to class.

It was just after World War II when push finally came to shove on the campus parking crunch. For the fall semester of 1946, enrollment more than doubled overnight. At the same time America’s car culture was shifting into high gear. Mizzou struggled to keep up. Expansion plans called for the University to buy and demolish a number of private homes across campus. As the boardinghouses and residences came down, MU cobbled together parking lots here and there.

Back in the 1970s, above right, daring MU students took their chances when they parked illegally in this small lot just south of Jesse Hall. Over the past decade campus green space has expanded as many of the small surface lots have been consolidated into huge parking garages that ring campus.
Circa 1973 View from Jesse Hall to the Southwest

Year 2000 View from Jesse Hall to the Southwest

Top photo courtesy University Archives, bottom photo by Steve Morse
But those lots were primarily for faculty and staff. The lack of parking close to campus has been a student complaint since cars were started by hand cranking. It still is, but most students do no more than gripe about parking—unlike the scofflaw student back in the '70s, who had tallied up so many parking tickets there was no hope of paying them off in time to graduate. He tried to negotiate with the parking office, but didn't get anywhere. A few nights later, someone broke into the parking office, dragged file drawers full of tickets out and started a bonfire. The coincidence raised a few eyebrows, but investigators couldn't turn up enough evidence to bring charges.

Most of the time, reaction to campus parking rules isn't so incendiary. It's more a guerrilla war of wit and guile, with students—and professors—pushing to see what they can get away with. Campus police usually catch on pretty quick. Take the "my-car-broke-down" gambit. An exasperated student, late for class, might circle the legal parking areas a few times. If he doesn't find a space, he'll simply pull into a no-parking area, lift the hood and leave a note on the windshield saying something about his car being broken. "We'll see people pull up their hood and leave a note," says MU's Capt. Earl Burr. "Then a while later they'll come back, put down the hood and drive off."

They get a ticket.

Or the "I'm-not-really-parking-if-my-flashers-are-on" strategy. "We've had some people park in no-parking areas and leave their flashers on so long that the battery runs down. Then they call us for a jump-start," Burr says. "Their typical excuse: 'I was just going to be in there for a minute.'"

They get tickets, too.

For years, though, students saved their most imaginative schemes to get around the rule that forbade Mizzou freshmen from having cars on campus. That fiat was inaugurated in the 1950s and lasted until the mid-70s, when several MU students challenged it in court. The most common ruse to get that old jalopy on campus was to find an upperclassman to register the verboten vehicle. But that was just the starting point, recalls Faye O'Bryan, who managed MU's parking office from its inception in 1954 until she retired in 1976. In those early days, Mizzou was filled with rooming houses, where a freshman might stash an illicit auto in a driveway for a few dollars a month.

O'Bryan also suspected that a few service stations on the edge of campus supplemented their grease monkey income as a haven for contraband cars.

She remembers one case that took the cake. A freshman managed to spirit his spiffy, red sports car onto campus to impress his fraternity brothers. He got caught after a few months, and showed up at the parking office to see if there was any way he could hang onto his pride and joy. "He told me his family were farmers and that he had to drive home a lot to help his parents with the farm," O'Bryan says. "Well, I asked him a few questions about farming. I doubt he knew a rake from a plow, but he insisted that he had to drive his shiny, new sports car home to help plow the north 40." It took a while to get her message across: Nice try, but either the car goes or you do.

Generally, O'Bryan says, there were no fireworks on the first offense. When a student kept flouting the rules, it was time for a talk with Dean of Students "Black" Jack Matthews and the student conduct committee. No matter how severe the reprimand, the miscreant student received a letter from Matthews a few days later. The letter always ended with: "I want to wish you the greatest success in your overall academic program."

There were other avenues to skirt the no-freshman-car rule. Some students got off-campus jobs as an excuse to keep cars. They had to have a note from their boss that listed their work hours. If they were caught driving any other time it could mean a ticket and a visit to Black Jack.

Another detour around the rules allowed freshmen who went home on weekends to keep their cars at Mizzou. During the week those autos were embargoed in a padlocked storage lot across from the power plant. A watchman unlocked the gates every Friday afternoon, and the cars had to be back by 9 p.m. Sunday. There were legends about freshmen who managed to break their cars out for a hot date or a road trip, then sneak them back in the lot with no one the wiser. Those were probably more campus folktales than fact.

Here's a fact, though. Over the past decade, parking at MU has turned the corner. Any student—including freshmen—can bring a car to campus and get a University parking space. The available spaces are in surface lots on the south edge of the University, and students can ride a shuttle bus to the heart of campus from 6 a.m. until 2 a.m. each day.

Also, a new parking garage across from the journalism school between Ninth and Hitt streets opened in 1998 with 1,000 metered spaces dedicated to student use.
Counting other spaces in garages, surface lots and residence hall parking lots, there are nearly 11,200 student parking spaces.

With all those spaces, "The parking issue on our campus is one of convenience; it's not one of capacity," says Jim Joy, director of MU's parking operations.

"With some people's schedules, lifestyles and desires, even parking a block away from work or class is unacceptable."

What's more, Columbia has grown so much that everything isn't within walking distance anymore. And more and more academic programs at MU require students to get off campus for student teaching, internships or community service.

If Mizzou were a municipality instead of a university, its population of 33,000 students, faculty and staff would make it one of the top 20 largest towns in the state. Just like any mid-size city, MU has its own housing, food service, police force, radio and TV stations, power utility—and its own parking authority.

MU has been more successful than most universities in battling the insatiable demand for parking. Since 1987, Mizzou has built five giant parking garages on campus. Another parking garage is planned for the southeast section of campus near the Agriculture Building. Three more areas have been identified as possible locations for additional garages.

This dramatic parking expansion has been paid for with monthly parking fees incurred by everyone who parks on campus. Faculty and staff pay $15 a month to park in a lot and $18 to park in a garage. Students pay $60 a semester for round-the-clock parking and $30 a semester to park during the day in a commuter lot.

That funding mechanism was hardly the norm when first inaugurated at MU, but more and more universities around the country have adopted the model as demand for parking has exploded.

It's allowed Mizzou to build a parking infrastructure that has one of the highest ratios of spaces to the total campus population of any university in the country. •

A Place to Park

MU is used to rolling out the welcome mat for lots of visitors every year—from the 30,000 or so Missourians who descend on Mizzou each summer for the Show-Me State Games, to mom, dad and the kids taking a campus tour as they weigh college choices.

But it didn't happen by accident. Ever since the mid-1980s, planners have been committed to solving a long-term parking crunch. One solution has been a construction program that's added five parking garages to the campus skyline: Conley Avenue Garage, 1987; University Avenue Garage, 1987, metered spaces available; Turner Avenue Garage, 1991, metered spaces available; and Hitt Street Garage, 1998, metered spaces available. On football Saturdays, fans can park for $5 a car in the Maryland Avenue Garage, built in 1996, across Stadium Boulevard from Faurot Field.

Patients and visitors to University Hospitals and Clinics can park in a garage adjoining the hospital to the east. Next up will be an 1,800-space garage between Virginia Avenue and Hitt Street. Construction might get under way by early next year.

Surface lots are set aside for visitors at the corner of Hitt Street and Rollins Road; and behind Memorial Union between Stewart and Waters halls. Metered parking for visitors is 50 cents an hour. In garages, visitors park in numbered spaces. Use the number to pay the machine located at exits.

Visitors spending the day on campus can stop by the Parking and Transportation Services office, southwest entrance of Turner Avenue Garage, and pick up an all-day parking permit for $2. Parking staff will help visitors find a spot that's close to where they need to be. Visitors also can call (573) 882-4568 to make arrangements in advance.