

FROM THE POPULAR SCIENCE ARCHIVES

DUDE, WHERE'S MY FLYING CAR?

Despite nearly a century of invention and obsession, the flying car is still MIA.

The prototypes have sputtered and stalled, crashed and burned, but the dream of a flying car just won't die. And POPSCI—alternately objective, credulous and wistful—has been along for the bumpy ride. The 1917 Curtiss Autoplane, little more than a modified production car with wings tacked onto the roof, was the first serious attempt to get an automobile off the ground, but it never achieved much more than a few awkward hops and skids. Others, such as inventor Molt Taylor's Aerocar—a goofy fiberglass fuselage on wheels, equipped with removable wings and a trailer to tote them—found more success: it flew. In 1970 Ford flirted with putting the Aerocar into production, but safety regulations and concern that the Aerocar would never turn a profit ultimately caused Detroit to lose interest. Today there are some 80 patents for flying cars on file at the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, although none has yet found the route to commercial success. Still, the market appears to be there: An MSNBC poll reveals that more than 90 percent of respondents said they would buy a flying car if one existed.

Why is the airborne car such an enduring dream? There's something tantalizing about the freedom of a personal transportation device unhampered by roads or traffic, particularly in a world where gridlock and invasive airport-security checks have become the norm. If history is any guide, we'll be seeing a slew of new personal levitating devices in coming years—if nowhere else, then in the pages of POPULAR SCIENCE. —ADAM VOILAND

MARCH 1926

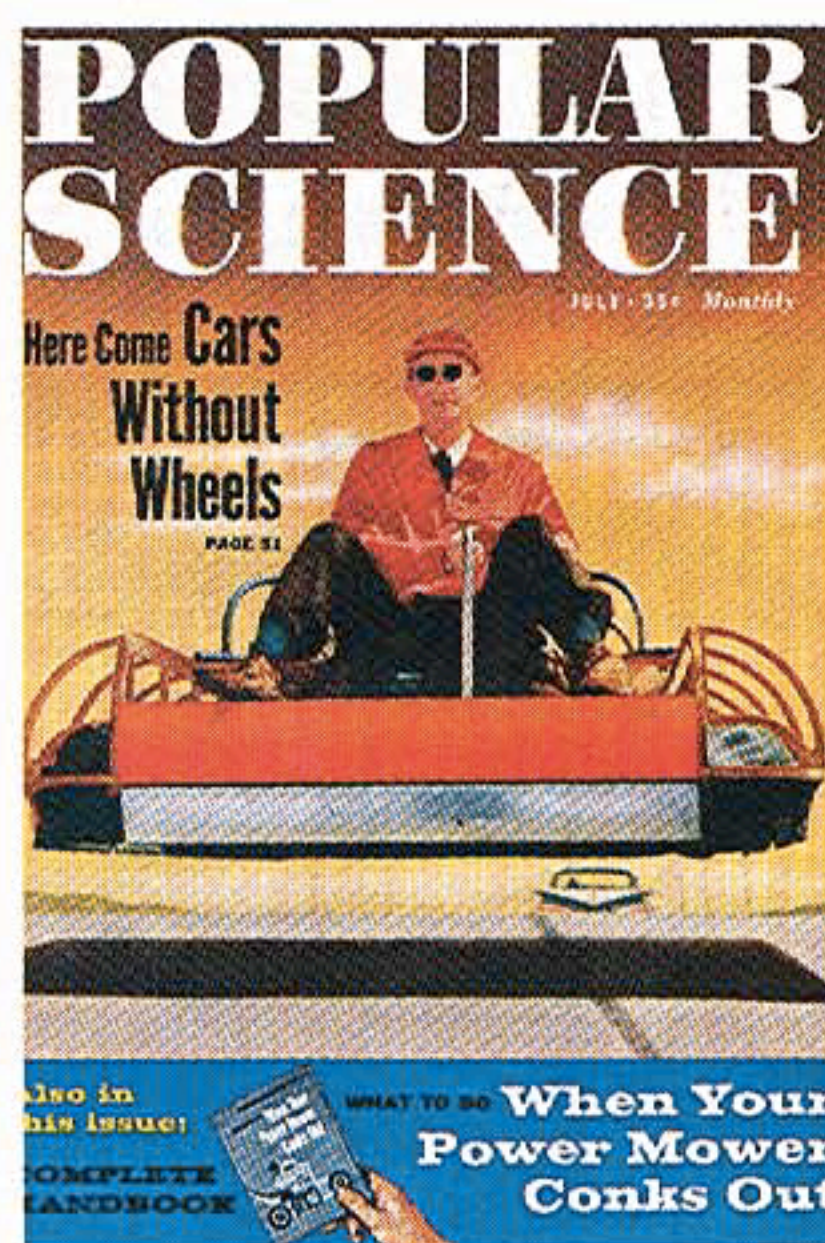
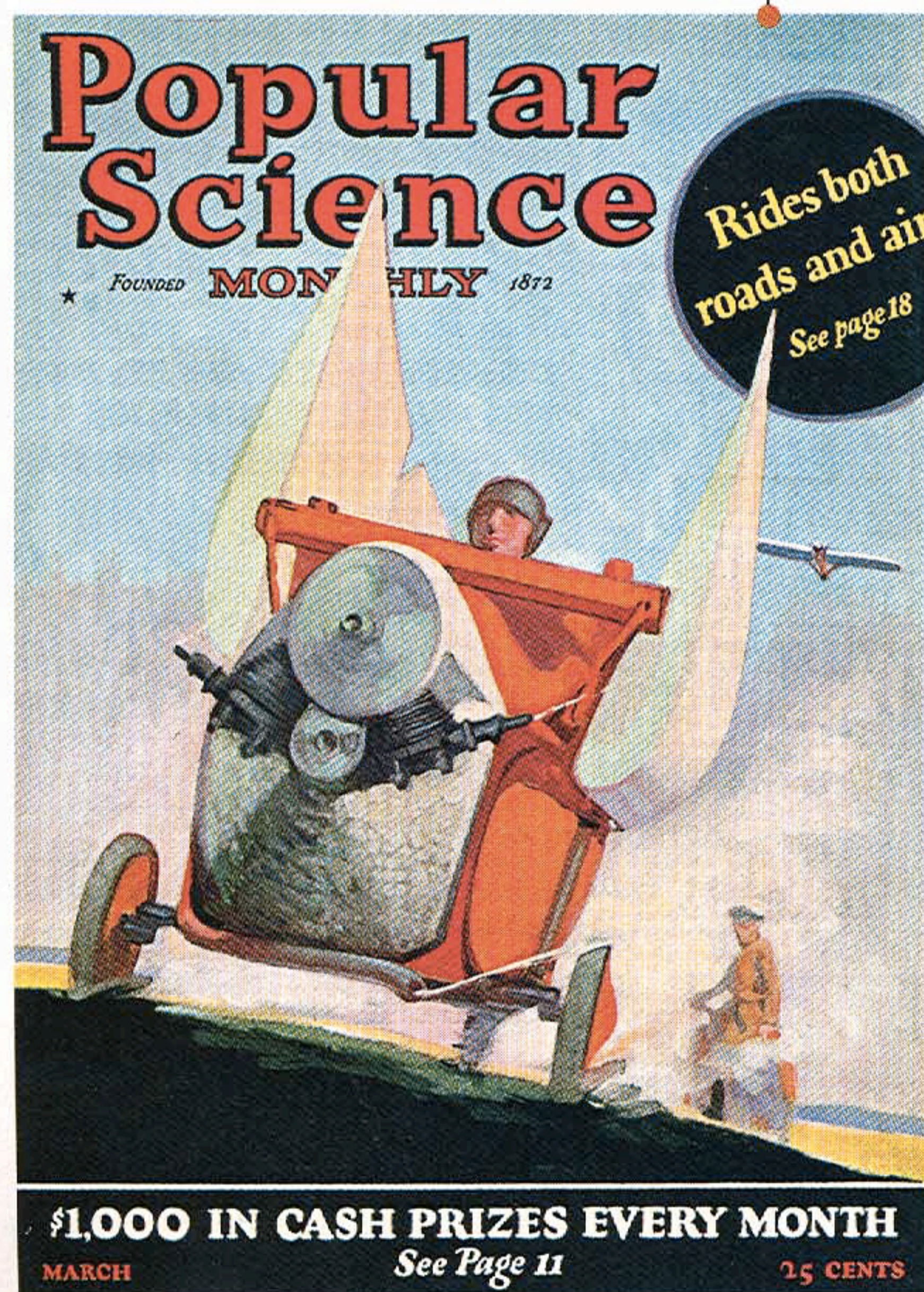
It's the ultimate convertible: a flivver plane boasting folding wings and a lever that redirects power from the wheels to a removable propeller. The inventor, German civil engineer J.H. Maykemper, claimed that his vehicle was capable of a 100-yard takeoff and a five-hour flight—but suspiciously, all the available photographs of the craft show it resting staidly on terra firma.

MAY 1937

This novelty-car prototype wasn't designed for flight, but it employed technology from airplanes to realize a somewhat less liberating vision: zipping around town in a perpetual wheelie. At high speeds, the propeller-driven "kangaroo car" would balance on its hind wheels, steer by rudder, and stabilize itself with plane-like tail fins.

JULY 1959

In 1959 Illinois physician William Bertelson's homemade hovercraft upstaged the military's miniature lab models and fueled POPSCI's speculation. We anticipated a bold future of cheap, unrestricted travel over land and sea at speeds of up to 500 mph. Alas, hovercrafts have some vexing drawbacks: The air that is blasted downward to produce lift kicks up dust and spray, and no wheel-to-ground contact means no grip, making hill-climbing a decided challenge. These unresolved issues have so far consigned hovercraft mostly to high school physics projects. —DAN CLINTON



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