

# Altoona Mirror

## Clean sweep: Car washes flood Pleasant Valley



Angel Musselman of Hollidaysburg finishes vacuuming her car at Quick'n Easy Auto Wash at 2216 Pleasant Mirror photo by Patrick Waksmunski

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what my editor hoped would be a fun story  
Valley, I worried that I'd be subject to

perplexed and annoyed responses to my questions. I needn't have worried. At my first stop, an employee waved as I approached — not to order me away, as I thought he might be aiming at, but to greet me — and when I stated my intentions, he introduced me to his manager. Far from being puzzled about my assignment, the manager keyed right in to my purpose — cheerfully. Managers and owners of the other car washes were equally as friendly, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

**ModWash, near the former Kmart, is a scene of routine congeniality among customers and between customers and staff, according to manager Krystle McCaulley.**

Nowadays, car washes like hers function in the community like bars, barber shops or coffee houses, she said.

“Yes,” Sean Pashley, board member for the Carwash Association of Pennsylvania, wrote in an emailed answer about whether car washes can have “a coffee shop/barber shop feel.”

That is true for the same reason that car washes are proliferating, not just in Altoona, but nationwide, he said.



“In the mid-90s, about half of Americans washed their cars in the driveway,” he wrote. “Now about 80 percent are done at the car wash.”

And while “pros” do the cleaning work, there’s an opportunity to socialize.

Detail areas in facilities like ModWash turn into a “hangout area(s),” said Austin Palumbo, general manager for All Washed Up Spa, which is constructing a new car wash in the ModWash-type style at the intersection of Logan Boulevard and Plank Road.



Splish Splash Auto Bath is at 328 W. Plank Road. Mirror photo by Patrick Waksmunski /

Members can chat with one another, and car enthusiasts can talk about their rides, said Palumbo, whose regional chain is headquartered in St. Marys.

All Washed Up management “absolutely” encourages that kind of interaction, Palumbo said.

ModWash offers memberships, and some members come multiple times a

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People spend hours in the vacuum area, where there are wands that resemble octopus arms with attachments for different purposes, along with trigger-activated blowers for removing dust from interior ports.

It's the "community factor," said ModWash customer Doug Savage, whose car was pulled up to a vacuum station.

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All Washed Up Auto Spa will soon open at 104 E. Southey Ave. General Manager Austin Palumbo said it will use a tunnel-style system that can handle six cars simultaneously, moving through on a conveyor. Mirror photo by Patrick Waksmunski

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He's a delivery driver who likes to have his car looking nice, so he comes at least once a week.

You naturally get to know people when you're there that often, Savage said.

He used to be shy, but he's gotten over it, and talking to others makes him feel good, he said.

The scene is a little like a family BBQ, Savage said.

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; hanging out, he said.

Bubbles Auto Spa, a traditional-style car wash, is located at 1828 Pleasant Valley Blvd. Mirror photo by Patrick Waksmunski

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The people that come there tend to be well-meaning and responsible, with “their head on their shoulders,” Savage said.

“Nothing crazy” happens there, and the setting encourages everyone to be open and honest, he said.

“You can have a giggle,” he stated.

You can also chat up strangers.

He’s met people there from Alaska, Tennessee, Texas, Idaho and Ohio, he said.

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An employee at Superior Detailing & Accessories/Car Wash, 2802 Pleasant Valley Blvd., cleans a windshield. Mirror photo by Patrick Waksmunski

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Even management participates.

“I love hearing about their day, what they have planned,” McCaulley said. It’s not just a car wash, according to McCaulley.

## **Variety of systems**

ModWash and All Washed Up feature the new “tunnel style,” which represents modernization of the industry, in contrast to the old style in-bay automatic and self-serve facilities, Palumbo said.

Tunnel style is more efficient, according to Palumbo.

A one-bay old-style facility can handle a car every 7 to 10 minutes — or six to 10 per hour, he said.

An express tunnel can handle up to 150 cars an hour, which means  
usy days, he said.

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The facility that All Washed Up is building in Altoona has a 125-foot tunnel that can handle six cars simultaneously, moving through on a conveyor, Palumbo said.

Washing is done in stages — soaping, scrubbing the front, then the top, etc., he said.

Depending on the exigencies of the situation, conveyor speed can be adjusted, so that a pass-through can take from 1.5 to 10 minutes, he said.

For investors, tunnel-style facilities can be attractive, because it takes less land and a smaller overall facility to get the same level of production, he said.

In-bay facilities don't necessarily lend themselves to socializing, conceded Don Brown, owner of Quick and Easy Car Wash, one of which is located near Bishop Guilfoyle Catholic High School — along with others nearby in Greenwood, Wehnwood and Duncansville.

“We're a little more old-fashioned,” Brown said.

The one near BG is a double in-bay automatic.

Some customers don't get out of their cars when they visit his sites, he said, noting that many prefer the quick, uncomplicated wash.

His Bedford County-based regional chain includes some hand-wash bays, which some car owners prefer, Brown said.

One of the car washes on the Pleasant Valley strip is neither the newfangled tunnel type nor an old-fashioned, unmanned in-bay.

It's Superior Detailing & Accessories, which has an automatic wash slot, but employs lots of people who do all the other work by hand.

“We do everything,” said owner Tony Evangelisto.

Thus, Superior is especially suited for those who can't do the work  
said.

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But his setup, too, permits socializing — not while working on one's car, but while relaxing in the lounge, where coffee is provided, Evangelisto said.

“We have people who come in and hang out,” like they do at McDonald's, Evangelisto said.

Seniors comprise a significant part of his customer base.

But getting a car washed at Superior isn't necessarily quick, he said.

“We're like a dinosaur,” he said.

### **‘Dirty car capital’**

It's hard to pinpoint what the proliferation of car washes says about Altoona, said ModWash customer Pam Snyder of Duncansville, who signed up for a promotional deal at the facility recently because her family, including four kids, was planning to travel in the Midwest.

The area is also full of mattress and CBD stores, she said.

Altoona must be the dirty car capital of the world, said Blair County Chamber of Commerce CEO Joe Hurd, trying to answer the same question.

“It sounds crazy” that there are eight car washes in the 3.6 miles between Bubbles Auto Spa at 17th Street and Splish Splash Car Wash at Convention Center Boulevard, Palumbo admitted.

But it's not so crazy if you consider that there are multiple grocery stores, multiple restaurants and multiple hotels along similar stretches — or in similarly small areas — in lots of places, he said.

There have been arguments that in some cases, concentrations of one kind of business in a confined locale can help all those businesses, by piquing interest in that business among prospective customers and by making it convenient for them.

Conversely, it's a common assumption that intense business competition

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In the case of car wash proliferation, it might be a little bit of both, according to Palumbo.

There are lots of vehicles to be washed in the Altoona area, and there are varying customer preferences for the various types of car washes, he said.

But there's also a tipping point — beyond which a town's capacity for car washes is exceeded, he said.

In Altoona, the Pleasant Valley strip has a high traffic count — about 40,000 vehicles a day, so the capacity for successfully absorbing facilities is significant, he said.

For now, Altoona still has “a good balance” among the types of facilities available, he said.

But there are cases where new, modern-style facilities can begin to push older ones out of business, if the older ones are too numerous and aren't maintained well, Palumbo said, citing a city in the region.

Proliferation has tended to “raise the bar in the wash industry overall,” according to Pashley.

“However, Mom & Pop washes have been squeezed out in (some) areas,” he said.

Still “with the resurgence of ‘buying local,’ plus smaller washes stepping up their game and using membership to secure loyalty, they are competing,” he added.

“We try to be fundamentally strong,” said Brown, whose family business has a total of 18 locations, developed steadily over two decades. That means good quality equipment, “high-end” soaps and keeping his facilities and grounds clean and appealing, he said.

It's what the company has been doing all along, according to Brown.

“We're not a giant operator.” like firms with hundreds of locations, he said.

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There's nothing he can do about such companies coming into the area, he said.

"We just keep doing what we do," he said.

## **'Second chance' employer**

Evangelisto bought Superior five years ago from an owner who was having legal problems.

A staple in the community since 1957, the facility was in bad condition by then, Evangelisto said.

He's been detailing cars since he was a kid, he said.

A retiree from the state prison system, he has made Superior into a "second chance" employer, he said.

People "get into some things," they go to prisons or halfway houses and then come out, or they have issues — personal or health-related — and he gives them a chance to work, he said.

"A lot of people have a hard time finding jobs," he said. "They need second chances."

He helps turn such people "into great employees and great citizens," he said.

It's worked out well at Superior, he said.

Wes Park is one of the managers there.

A military brat born in Washington, D.C., and raised in Bellwood, Park has led a bit of a transient life, he said.

He's been at Superior for three years — a long stop for him.

"We're treated with respect," Park said. "And the compensation is reasonable."

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It's an interesting place to work, he said.

One of the challenges for him is to keep people content and solve interpersonal conflicts, sometimes by moving people from one duty to another so “egos are not brushing up against each other” — or to ease potential frustrations or better align skill sets, Park said.

He tries to be sensitive to what people like to do and what they do best, he said.

Working at a car wash can be “fun and unique,” according to Pashley. “It is the opposite of the office, in that you get to be outside but (are) still covered,” he said. “It pays pretty well too. And with all the corporate car wash locations, there is room to grow and careers to be had.”

Car washes tend to be very profitable, which has drawn private equity, Pashley said.

The presumed value of such an operation took Hurd by surprise when he learned that the prime corner at Logan Boulevard and Plank Road would be occupied by a car wash.

“It's kind of mind-boggling,” Hurd said.

He'd previously thought of car washes in terms of putting 50 cents in a machine and “waiting for the foamy brush to fill up,” he said.

## **Keep investments shiny**

Most Americans don't wash their cars enough, given that the average owner does it just three times a year, according to Pashley.

Those who do it enough, however, tend to recognize the importance of keeping “their investment shiny, clean and protected,” he stated.

The recommended “sweet spot” is once every seven to 10 days, he said.

It helps to prolong the life of vehicles to wash off salt and road debris,

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Today, vehicles cost from \$40,000 to \$80,000 and it makes sense to preserve the investment, he said.

His company tests equipment on its own 2016 Toyota maintenance vehicles, washing them frequently, and “there’s not a speck of rust,” he said. “The frames look brand new.”

Getting one’s car washed at a commercial facility is also better environmentally than washing on the street or in the driveway, where chemicals can run into storm drains, and potentially into nearby streams — rather than into the sanitary sewer system, Palumbo said.

Getting it done commercially is also quicker, he said.

And it provides an emotional benefit, he said.

“It makes you feel good having a clean car,” he stated.

Mirror Staff Writer William Kibler is at 814-949-7038.

## **Sudsy sites**

There are eight car washes in the 3.6 miles on the Pleasant Valley commercial strip between 17th Street and Convention Center Boulevard:

- Bubbles Auto Spa at 17th Street
- Sheetz at 17th Street
- Quick and Easy Auto Wash at 22nd Street, near Bishop Guilfoyle
- Superior Detailing and Accessories, across from Van Zandt VA Medical Center
- All Washed Up Auto Spa at Logan Boulevard, opening soon
- Splish Splash Auto Bath, across from Martin’s
- ModWash, on the former Kmart property

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| Center Boulevard

A car uses the in-bay Sheetz Car Wash at 1915 Pleasant Valley Blvd. Mirror photo by Patrick Waksmunski

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Splish Splash Car Wash is at 2341 Old Route 220 North in Duncansville, near Convention Center Boulevard. Mirror photo by Patrick Waksmunski

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