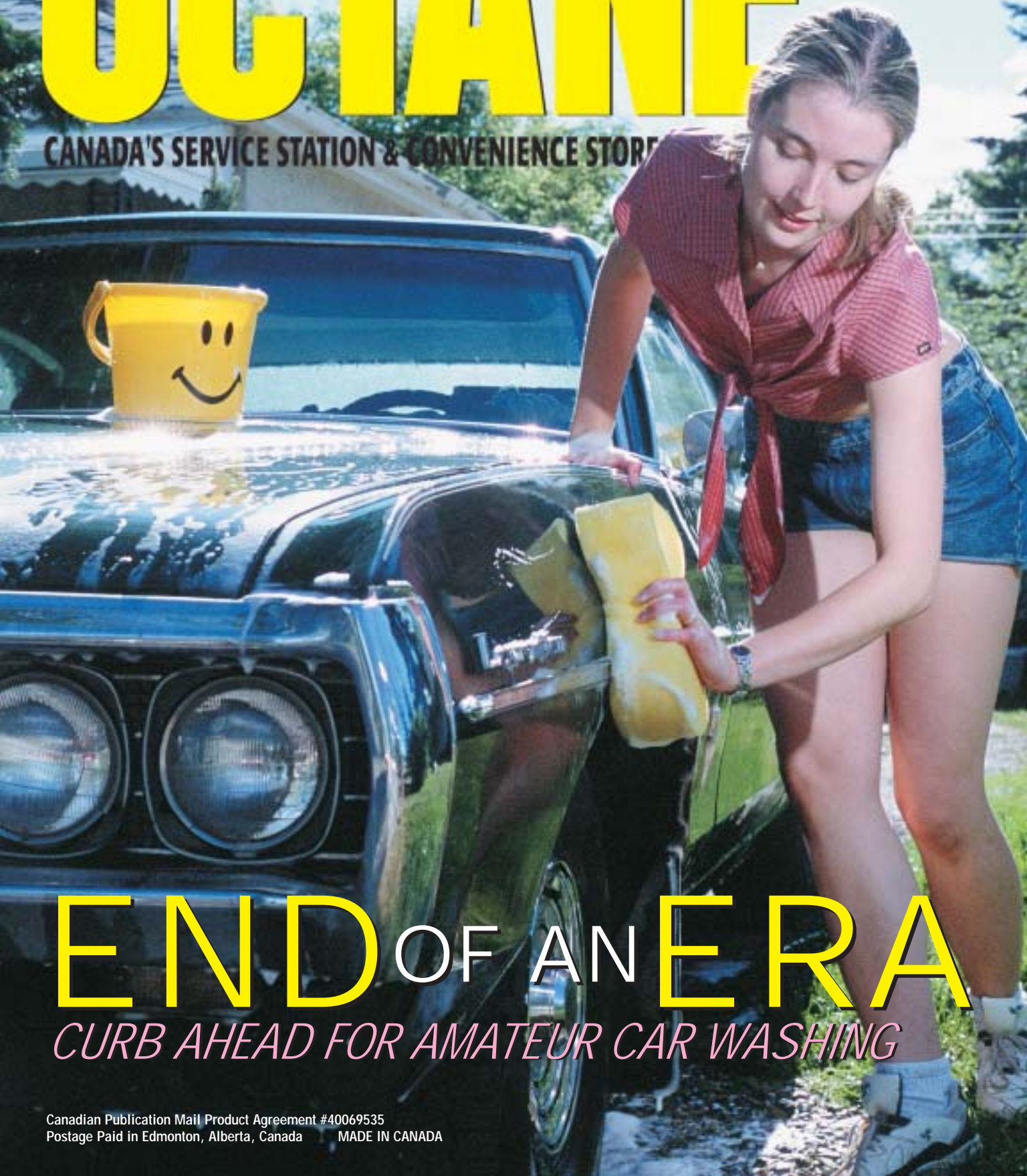


AUGUST 2002 \$8.00

OCTANE

CANADA'S SERVICE STATION & CONVENIENCE STORE

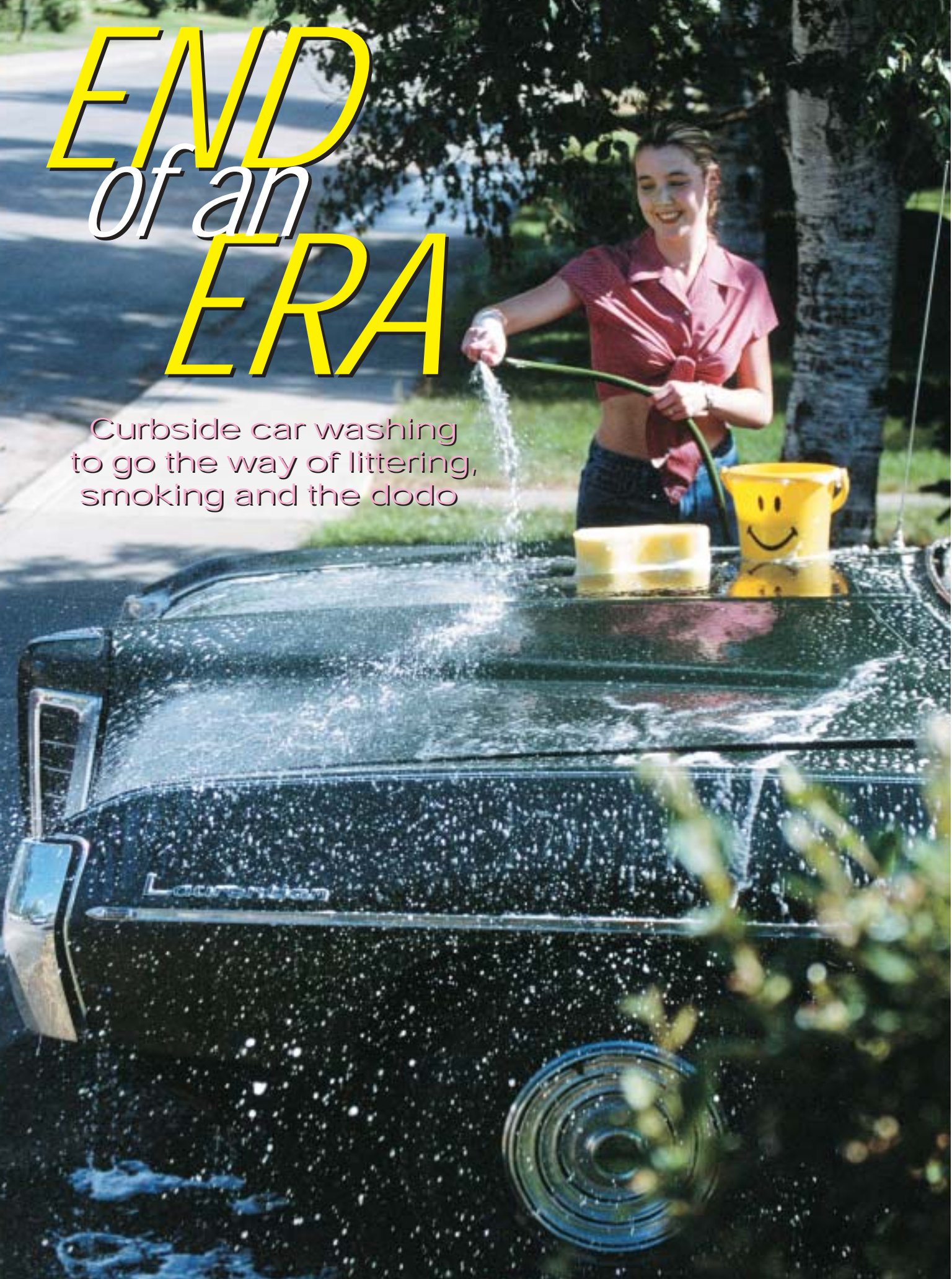


END OF AN ERA

CURB AHEAD FOR AMATEUR CAR WASHING

END *of an* ERA

Curbside car washing
to go the way of littering,
smoking and the dodo



THE WRITING IS ON THE WALL FOR AN ERA as old as the automobile. The time for fathers, daughters and sons to grab sponges and hoses to wash the car on warm, sunny Sunday afternoons is coming to an end.

From an environmental point of view, the side-effects of the tradition make it unsafe to continue. In Canada's biggest city, the results of washing thousands of motor vehicles are coming under scrutiny. A new sewer bylaw in Toronto monitors commercial carwash discharges. The approach is expected to spread across Canada.

The interests of environmentalists and industry coincide on this front. For the guardians of clean water, making sure car washes operate without causing pollution represents just the first step. Next comes making sure that vehicle owners use the clean facilities. RiverSides Stewardship Alliance and the Canadian Carwash Association have been working together to promote the RiverSafe car wash campaign. The campaign is about stopping the driveway car wash, and convincing motorists to use their local commercial operations. This is one case where the costs of family togetherness exceed the benefits.

The volumes of pollutants that enter rivers every summer due to the tradition of soaping, waxing and detailing automobiles at home has a great impact on water quality, fish numbers, and even the water temperature, according to RiverSides. Even if motorists used just plain water for washing their vehicles, damage is done by oil, grease, rust, and other debris that falls off and drains into the sewer system. By adding soap to the mix, backyard car washers add phenols, dyes, acids, and ammonia. Outside a commercial wash operating up to high standards of cleanliness, the cocktail of minerals and chemicals that comes off vehicles flows into municipal drainage systems and then into the local rivers and streams.

RiverSides is a four-year-old Toronto non-profit organization with aspirations to become a national force. It has declared intentions to "carve out a niche as one of the leading research and advocacy organizations in the field of clean water quality and watershed regeneration." The outfit serves as the leader in delivering programs for a coalition called the Water Information Network, a collaborative effort with the Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy and the Toronto Environmental Alliance.

The RiverSafe Carwash campaign, a national effort supported by federal environmental authorities, does not mince words about cumulative effects of washing cars by the thousands without controlling the sludge that comes off them. "Carwash run-off degrades overall water quality treatment. It threatens river habitat and the entire food chain, including fish, insects, frogs, mollusks and other species that eat them."

RiverSafe warns, "Washing your car in the driveway or parking lot creates a small but toxic flow of detergents, surfactants, oils, rust, engine grime, wax and degreasers." It does not take much of such potent materials to do damage. For instance, "detergent concentrations of only two parts per million strip away a fish's protective coating, causing it to absorb double the amount of chemicals it would normally. Detergent concentrations as low as five parts per million will kill fish eggs. Significant fish kills occur when detergent concentrations near 15 ppm." A chemical ingredient of detergents, NPE or nonylphenol ethoxylate, has been identified as a hazard under the Canadian Environmental Protection Act and by the United States Environmental Protection Agency.

By the standards of contemporary commercial car washes, doing it the old way by hand at home is also a highly inefficient waste of water. RiverSafe's research finds that home washes use up to 440 litres, while a commercial car wash takes less than half that much.

Kevin Mercer, executive director at RiverSides and RiverSafe campaign organizer, joined forces with the Canadian Carwash Association for a five-year effort to promote washing vehicles in controlled commercial facilities and breaking the old habit of lathering them up in private driveways. As he builds the campaign, Mercer hopes to recruit all owners of community car washes.

The target for change is big. An estimated 50% of car owners in Canada do their own soaping and rinsing at home. The first big step for the effort is to spread awareness about the scale of the habit and its environmental consequences. Within the industry, Mercer says "the message has to get out to all independents."

The marketing strategy for RiverSafe is straightforward. It seeks to raise awareness with billboards, local car wash fundraisers and events. There is a plan to encourage motorists by giving them a way to display environmental virtue: identifying stickers for vehicles cleaned the safe way, at a car wash. The sticker will convey the message that the driver has helped to prevent river pollution.

"The key to clean water starts with your car," says Mercer. "The community campaign encourages groups and residents to drop the buckets and sponges in favour of clean-water pollution prevention."

Along with promoting the use of commercial car washes, RiverSafe has begun a national car wash education campaign that uses a Latimat Containment Pad System, donated by Environmental Cleaning Systems of Rexdale, Ontario. The effort demonstrates a



Kevin Mercer

pollution-free car wash to promote safe practices, while also demonstrating how much pollution can enter the public drainage system with every wash.

The environmental campaign is catching on. It has already spread to Calgary, which declares itself to be one of the cleanest cities on the planet with considerable civic enthusiasm. The city has taken steps to curb discharges from any and all types of car washing into its principal waterway, the Bow River. A Calgary bylaw bans harmful discharges from a property to the storm sewer system. Fines can be up to \$300. As with virtually all civic ordinances, enforcement remains an issue. So far, the Calgary law relies on the snitch system - complaints by neighbours offended by glaring cases of pollution.

Toronto's new sewage bylaw focuses on commercial car washes. ►



The bylaw, a first for Canada, monitors and helps prevent releases of toxins into the sewage and drainage systems by commercial car wash companies. This program includes full-time staff, who monitor the amounts of discharge from car wash companies. Failure to comply with the set standards may result in fines of up to \$25,000. The Ontario government is also thinking of incorporating the standards into provincial legislation.

The environmental campaign is a five-year plan because the old habit of washing vehicles on driveways, bred into generations of North Americans, is expected to die hard. Mercer and the Canadian Carwash Association know they face a long hard battle, akin to decades-old efforts to stamp out littering and smoking.



Such cleanup drives work. But they take time. The car wash effort is starting from scratch. Curbside car washing still figures in advertising as a symbol of pleasant summer days and is considered a bonding experience of fathers and children which can be fun to boot. Even boy-scout troops and other civic groups that raise money with car washes will have to improve their methods or find environmentally safer ways to make money.

The RiverSafe campaign intends to reach out across Canadian communities and show them how they can make a difference. Mercer says "the next time you see a dirty car in the parking lot, don't write 'wash me' on it, write 'Take me to the Carwash.' Your local river will thank you." ■

WHO WOULD YOU RATHER HAVE PROTECTING YOUR BUSINESS?



For 50 years, Culligan has been supplying and servicing Canada's Car Washes and Service Stations from Coast to Coast!

Softeners • Filters • Reverse Osmosis • Parts • Service • Equipment Upgrades

Culligan

Call Toll Free 1-800-265-8173

www.culligan.com

Trust the Experts!