

# *The Steering Wheel “Suicide” Knob*



***Harrington  
Driver  
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*The "Steering Wheel Spinner Knob" was invented by Joel R. Thorp of Wisconsin in 1936. The Brodie name is a reference to Steve Brodie and was meant to describe all manner of reckless stunts. The device is often called a "suicide knob" because of being notoriously useless for controlling the wheel during an emergency. It is also called a "knuckle buster" because of the disadvantage posed by the knob when letting go of the steering wheel after going around a corner, the wheel spins rapidly and the knob can hit the user's knuckle, forearm, or elbow. If the driver is wearing a long-sleeved the protruding accessory on the rim of the steering wheel can also become caught in the open cut by the button. Other names include "granny knob", "suicide knob", and "wheel spinner." This article looks at the Suicide/Brodie knob and its uses since it was invented in 1936 and its advantages and disadvantages as a driving accessory. Rarely, seen on motor cars today, it is still widely used on disabled vehicles, forklifts and tractors. So, if you were a driver in the good old days when Necker knobs were prevalent you could steer with one hand, leaving the other hand/arm free to provide romantic attention to your female/male companion.*

# *The Steering Wheel “Suicide” Knob*

*Tom Harrington LL B F Inst. MTD (June 2020)*

**W**hen your grandfather was courting your grandmother, he probably drove his car with one arm around her and his other hand on the car's steering wheel. He kept the car on track with a gadget that attached to the steering wheel called a "suicide knob" or "necking knob." Its proper name is the "Steering Wheel Spinner Knob". Also, called a suicide knob, it is a steering wheel attachment that allows you to steer a vehicle with one hand. The device is a small, independently rotating knob (similar to a U.S. classic door knob) facing the driver that is securely mounted on the outside rim of a steering wheel. The protruding knob is an aftermarket accessory. The free rotation is intended to help make steering with one hand easier or faster. Brodie knobs were popular on trucks and tractors before the advent of power steering. Their main use today is still in trucks, particularly semi trucks, where they allow simultaneous steering and operation of the radio or gearshift. They are also used on forklifts, riding lawnmowers, and ice resurfacers, where frequent sharp turning is required. In the US, the knob is also standard equipment on most modern farm and commercial tractors, its main purpose being to ease one-handed steering while the driver operates other controls with the other hand or is traveling in reverse.

## *Etymology and Disadvantages*

As mentioned above, the Steering Wheel Spinner Knob was invented by Joel R. Thorp of Wisconsin in 1936. The Brodie name is a reference to Steve Brodie and was meant to describe all manner of reckless stunts. The device is often called a "suicide knob" because of being notoriously useless for controlling the wheel during an emergency. It is also called a "knuckle buster" because of the disadvantage posed by the knob when letting go of the steering wheel after going around a corner, the wheel spins rapidly and the knob can hit the user's knuckle, forearm, or elbow. If the driver is wearing a long-sleeved shirt, the protruding accessory on the rim of the steering wheel can also become caught in the sleeve's open cut by the button. Other names include "granny knob", "suicide knob", and "wheel spinner." Brodie knobs are legal on private vehicles in most U.S. states. U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration regulations restrict use of auxiliary devices for specific construction vehicles. OSHA prohibits modification of industrial equipment without the approval of the equipment manufacturer.

### *Have Various Names*

Spinner knobs are frowned on as it is considered less safe than gripping the steering wheel directly with both hands. They are called "suicide knobs" because a sleeve, glove or jewelry could get caught and cause a loss of control of the vehicle. Also, they were so-called because some thought they should have a scary name to discourage their use. Using a knob allows a person to manouvere the steering wheel quickly. Before power steering was standard, it was much easier to turn the steering wheel using one of these knobs. At the height of their popularity, there were many decorative knobs available in different shapes and designs. Today, suicide knobs are still popular with lawnmowers, boats, and forklifts for making sharp turns. On cars, they function as a steering aid for disabled persons. For normal drivers, some people like driving with one hand using the knob as well as for its memory of the good old days.

### *Also Called a 'Knuckle Buster'*

The "Steering Wheel Spinner Knob" was invented by Joel R. Thorp of Wisconsin in 1936.<sup>1</sup> The Brodie name is a reference to Steve Brodie and was meant to describe all manner of reckless stunts. The device is often called a "suicide knob" because of being notoriously useless for controlling the wheel during an emergency. It is also called a "knuckle buster" because of the disadvantage posed by the knob when letting go of the steering wheel after going around a corner, the wheel spins rapidly and the knob can hit the user's knuckle, forearm, or elbow.

### *"Suicide Knobs"*

The fist-fitting knob, which arrived on the automotive scene during the Great Depression in the USA, was the favorite way of turning the wheel or acting as an adjunct to the driver when he was using both hands. "The knobs did provide the driver with extra strength to turn a wheel," said Phil Dickson, second-generation chairman of the family-owned Ohio Auto Supply Co. in Canton. *"They were especially helpful in trying to Parallel Park in hot weather, and power steering was still in the future."* Dickson also noted that until the '50s--the heyday of the knobs, when millions of the devices were sold--most steering wheels were made of shiny wood, and a spinner could help a driver keep his or her grip.

*"Power steering probably did as much as any one thing to slash wheel-spinner sales,"* he said.

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<sup>1</sup> Brodie Knob. en.wikipedia.org

He added: *"We bought them in gross lots and never had trouble selling them. They were ball-shaped, oblong-shaped and, if you wanted a solid grip, T-shaped. The knobs came in a variety of sizes and designs. Some owners put their girl's picture in the knob top but most went along with a conventional star in a circle image."*

Safety played a role in the decline of spinners. Early versions also tended to break or crack, which could send a car out of control. (Safety didn't play a role in the automotive consciousness until the early '60s, when famed consumer crusader Ralph Nader challenged the carmakers.) A couple generations ago, the spinners sold for no more than a few dollars. Today they range from \$4.99 to \$30 in the J.C. Whitney Company Catalogue. Whitney, an 80-year-old Chicago firm and a major force in the do-it-yourself automotive market, offers spinners made of everything from chrome with a die-cast body and a clear plastic top (on sale for \$3.99 through February) to onyx (the \$30 model). Whitney also markets a fold-away spinner, which tucks under the steering wheel. Gene Geiger, vice president of merchandising at the mail-order house, estimates that men buy 97 percent of spinners. The company offers a variety of automotive accessories from portable toilets to car-seat covers, and frequently participates in old-car meets. The spinners also come in wood, leather or vinyl--or, for connoisseurs, walnut-stained and varnished wood, genuine black leather or leather-grained vinyl. The company describes the knobs as "not only looking at home on any wheel but also fitting comfortably in your hand and easy to use." Most are 1 3/4-inches in diameter and will fit a wheel up to 1 1/4-inches thick. Brackets and screws, plus a mounting tool and installation instructions, are included. The firm warns prospective buyers to be sure the knobs are legal in their area. Certain localities prohibit their sale or use. Illinois State Police Master Sgt. Don Murphy said he is not aware of any state laws barring the sale of spinners. *"They are produced in various shapes and sizes and not easily addressed,"* he said, pointing out that disabled people may need them. Other markets include owners of heavy-duty trucks and forklifts with the motoring romanticist still accounting for a share.

### **Necker Knob**

The term for Necker knob came about from a benefit of being able to drive with one hand. With one arm driving, the other arm was free to put around your date. Necking is 1960 slang for caressing your partner on and above the neck. Sometimes also meaning to kiss and make out. Then *Lay a Brodie* was a term for doing a half donut with your car.

By turning rapidly while accelerating, the car would spin the tires and do 180 degrees. There were safety, liability issues, and law enforcement problems that lead to the disappearance of steering wheel spinners. Driving instructors in the driver education courses taught in high schools (US) taught that the spinners were inherently unsafe because they both prevented the desirable hand-through-hand method of turning the steering wheel and more importantly there were reported cases where accidents had been caused by people getting their sleeves caught on the spinners when turning. Their involvement in accidents leads to liability issues for manufacturers and installers. In some US states, examiners would not allow spinners to be used or fitted to a car used in a driver's test. Some jurisdictions made spinners illegal. But in many more, police deemed them illegal under broad "unsafe equipment" statutes. But their demise has greatly diminished the pleasure of driving and the ability of females to earn a living by artistically exhibiting themselves.<sup>2</sup> But, aside from the art thing, steering wheel spinners served a real purpose. In those days, way back in the 1940s and early '50s, cars did not have power steering. To compensate for this the steering gear was set up to multiply force. It did this by increasing the number of turns you needed to turn the wheel from lock to lock, that is, from the maximum right position of the front wheels to the maximum left position of the front wheels. It might require five full rotations of the steering wheel to bring the wheels from full right lock to full left lock. That greatly reduced the steering effort when parking the car. But it meant that going down a curving the road you were spending a lot of time winding the steering wheel from left to right. Now that may not seem to be much of a problem from the perspective of 2020. But in 1951 it created a real problem. You drove with your left hand on the wheel with the window down and your right elbow resting on the window sill and your hand on the upper door frame.

### **Anything Else Was Just Not Cool**

And in the '40s and '50s looking cool was a quintessential aspect of driving. You needed your right hand free for smoking. If you were a man you smoked you kept your pack of unfiltered Lucky Strikes or Chesterfields in the rolled up left sleeve of your t-shirt. You needed a free hand to take the cigarette from the pack, tap it on the metal dash to settle the tobacco, light the cigarette, with the dashboard cigarette lighter, and flick the ash out the window. Every car had a cigarette lighter. High end cars had separate lighters and ashtrays for each passenger. You could only do this if your right-hand was free thus, the usefulness of the steering wheel spinner.

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<sup>2</sup> *"Are spinner knobs on the steering wheel illegal?"* Quora.com

In the era of bench seats you could use the spinner with your right hand, leaving your left hand free to make out with your date who practically sat on your lap while you drove.<sup>3</sup> (*Remember the bench seat in Ford Zephyr Zodiac, Consul, Humber etc. The bench seat has been replaced by the bucket seat as more 'sportier'. Smaller cars have made the position less viable. The front bench seat also declined due to safety concerns as airbags could only protect two front seat passengers. Ed.*) A Brodie knob (alternative spelling Brody knob) is a knob that attaches to the steering wheel of an automobile or other vehicle or equipment with a steering wheel. Other names for this knob include: suicide, Necker, granny, knuckle buster, and wheel spinner. The protruding knob is an aftermarket accessory. The free rotation is intended to help make steering with one hand less difficult or faster. Brodie knobs had popularity on trucks and tractors before the advent of power steering. Their main use today is still in trucks, particularly semi trucks where they allow simultaneous steering and operation of the radio or gearshift. They are also used on forklifts, riding lawnmowers, and ice resurfacers, where frequent sharp turning is required. The knob is also standard equipment in most modern farm and commercial tractors – like the John Deere models - its main purpose being to ease single-hand steering while the driver operates other controls with his/her other hand or is traveling in reverse. Some boats are equipped with a helm featuring a stainless-steel wheel with a Brodie knob.

### **Brodie Knob**

Steve Brodie was a New York man in the 1800's that became famous for supposedly jumping off the Brooklyn Bridge and surviving. He did this to win a bet, a saloon, and gain fame. Although people have disputed his jump, it was published in the New York Times, and his saloon became a museum for his jump. His famous jump coined the terms "taken a Brody" or "did a Brody" to describe someone jumping off a high structure. The Brodie knob was named after him since misuse of the knob could lead to loss of control. Very few have survived jumping off the Brooklyn Bridge. Hence, by association, the slang suicide knob was coined.

### **Disabled Drivers**

It is very challenging to manouvere a vehicle with a single arm using a car steering wheel.

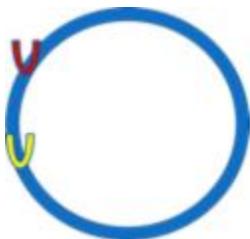
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<sup>3</sup> “Are spinner knobs on the steering wheel illegal?” Quora.com

A steering knob is a tool that will enable you to keep a hold of the wheel and move in a smooth motion with less stress with the right or left hand. The large, gear shift like knob offers plenty of surface space if you drive with a physical disability or health issue. Some health problems, such as multiple sclerosis, arthritis, tendonitis, or nerve damage, may make seemingly simple tasks difficult to perform. Steering wheel knobs can improve your hand control and quality of life by making driving easier since you can move the wheel with less strength. If you suffer with limited mobility in your arms, you'll find a range of steering wheel attachments an indispensable addition to your vehicle. Designed to help take the physical strain out of driving, steering wheel knobs are easy to fit. In most cases, it's a case of simply clipping the knob to the inner rim of the steering wheel, then tightening a screw and nut. With the steering wheel knob fitted correctly and securely, the driver will be able to turn the steering wheel through a full 360 degrees without having to take their hand away. This makes driving, parking and general manoeuvring in your vehicle become effortless, and safer. Steering wheel knobs for disabled drivers make driving so much easier. You can take the strain out of driving by investing in one of these small, convenient and inexpensive devices.

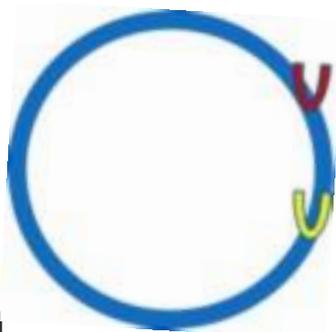
### Common Locations & Weak Zones

The most common positions on the steering wheel for a spinner are as follows:



**Left hand**

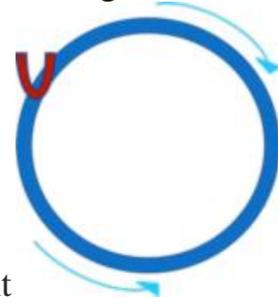
8 o'clock and 10 o'clock



**Right hand**

2 o'clock and 4 o'clock

Strong and weak steering zones are created as a result of not being able to move



the hand into a different position on the wheel while turning it e.g. for a left hand driver, when moving between 12 to 2 turning clockwise or between 8 to 6 while turning in an anti-clockwise direction, they will find that these are ‘weak zones’. The opposite applies for drivers who steer with their right hands. Where the driver has shoulder weakness, they may find that when turning the steering wheel slowly, they can get stuck in the weak zones, creating a safety problem. It is preferable for them to move their hand back into their stronger zone where they can use their optimum strength to provide a positive steering action. Unfortunately the spinner does not allow the grip position to move as it is limited to one a single point. <sup>4</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The steering wheel spinner (“suicide”) knob was attached to the steering wheel of a vehicle, especially before the widespread availability of power steering, helping the driver steer with one arm and leaving the other arm free to provide romantic attention to a companion. The fist-fitting knob, which arrived on the automotive scene during the Great Depression in the USA, was the favourite way of turning the wheel or acting as an adjunct to the driver when he was using both hands. The knobs did provide the driver with extra strength to turn a wheel. Power steering probably did as much as any one thing to slash wheel-spinner sales. They were ball-shaped, oblong-shaped and, if you wanted a solid grip, T-shaped. The knobs came in a variety of sizes and designs. Some owners put their girl's picture in the knob top but most went along with a conventional star in a circle image. But, aside from the art thing, steering wheel spinners served a real purpose. In those days, way back in the 1940s and early ‘50s, cars did not have power steering. To compensate for this the steering gear was set up to multiply force. It did this by increasing the number of turns you needed to turn the wheel from lock to lock, that is, from the maximum right position of the front wheels to the maximum left position of the front wheels.

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<sup>4</sup> Spinners. Auto-mobility. auto-mobility.co.za

It might require five full rotations of the steering wheel to bring the wheels from full right lock to full left lock. Safety played a role in the decline of spinners. Early versions also tended to break or crack, which could send a car out of control. (Safety didn't play a role in the automotive consciousness until the early '60s, when famed consumer crusader Ralph Nader challenged the carmakers.) But in 1951 it created a real problem. You drove with your left hand on the wheel with the window down and your right elbow resting on the window sill and your hand on the upper door frame. Anything else was just not cool. You needed your right hand free for smoking. The "suicide" knob greatly reduced the steering effort when parking the car. But it meant that going down a curving the road you were spending a lot of time winding the steering wheel from left to right. Now that may not seem to be much of a problem from the perspective of 2020. That greatly reduced the steering effort when parking the car. But it meant that going down a curving the road you were spending a lot of time winding the steering wheel from left to right. Now that may not seem to be much of a problem from the perspective of 2020. But in 1951 it created a real problem. You drove with your left hand on the wheel with the window down and your right elbow resting on the window sill and your hand on the upper door frame. Anything else was just not cool. And in the '40s and '50s looking cool was a quintessential aspect of driving. Finally, you needed your left/right hand free for smoking or risking a "Brodie" and the other hand/arm free to indulge in other pleasurable pursuits with your favorite companion whilst endeavouring to keep your vehicle on the straight and narrow on the wide open freeway. One of the only times where driving gets problematic, it's challenging to move a car or truck around a parking lot or other areas with limited space. A steering wheel assist knob makes the job less difficult by turning the wheel more quickly with a single hand than with two. Steering knobs make it simpler to make U-turns on single-lane or gravel roads. They're also a great aid on country roads where steering may be strenuous. Sticking your fingers through the spokes of a steering wheel can be uncomfortable, especially if you routinely drive a large truck. A steering wheel knob can help you avoid sore digits by keeping your hand in front of the wheel at all times. Finally, if you want to roll back the years when your grandfather was courting your grandmother, and he kept the car on track with a gadget that attached to the steering wheel called a "necking knob," however, with today's voluminous traffic it may well turn out to be a 'suicide knob' as the driver may lack full control of his 'pride and joy' and may end up getting an unwelcome ticket for distracted driving or even worse, in the event of an emergency he may be unable to respond quickly and correctly to avert the danger. Therefore, two-handed steering is always preferable except for a person with limited mobility in their arms.

