

The Auto Comes to Stay

By Kyle Crichton



THE selling of motorcars is now a refined and dignified profession.

Even when you go in to buy a secondhand bus you might be waited upon by a gentleman in a cutaway coat and striped pants. Subdued lighting, soft conversation, elegance. In the old days the salesman had his problems. It took more than reason to get a sensible man in one of those contraptions with the motor under the seat and a water tank hanging from the rear. The salesman had to be a promoter, a mechanic, a ballyhoo artist, a stunt performer and a magician.

The first automobile show was held in New York in November, 1900, but cars had been sold before that. J. H. McDuffee, now vice-president of the Electric Auto-Lite Corporation, represented Locomobile in New York, in 1899.

He knew what he was up against. The only real market he had was among the town dudes, who would do anything for a thrill. But even the hot sports weren't offering themselves as buffoons. McDuffee figured his best chance was to place a car in a spot where it would be preceded by a riot wherever it appeared. He centered his campaign on Fire Chief Croker.

"What do I want with the thing?" demanded Croker. "The horses are doing all right."

But McDuffee talked him into giving it a free trial. McDuffee would drive and the chief would cover the burg as it had never been blanketed before. One night they went bouncing up Fifth Avenue to a three-alarm blaze. Just as they reached Dewey Arch at Madison Square, with several thousand patrons gathered to watch the town burn down, the automobile struck a wet spot on the pavement and started going around in circles. The chief showed his confidence in science by leaping out of the chariot and landing on the back of his head.

Just as the chief arose with a bloody look in his eye, Mr. McDuffee greeted him.

"That," he cried with rare presence of mind, "was just a test to show you that under no circumstances will a Locomobile lose its balance."

That was a defeat and worse came later when both McDuffee in his steam-operated car and Arthur Lee Newton in his Wood Electric were pinched for exceeding ten miles an hour on Broadway. The disgrace for McDuffee was that he had been overtaken by a bicycle cop—not an excellent advertisement for the merits of his product. Newton could only get out of the pinch by making a confession.

The Auto Comes to Stay

"I couldn't have been going ten miles an hour," he pleaded. "This car can only make eight miles an hour."

The only cars doing well at that period were the French Panhards and the Renaults, brought over from Paris by American millionaires. That made it a class issue and helped very little in interesting the general public. With that public it was not a matter of selling them a car but in getting them to ride in one of the little death traps.

If by chance a dealer in New York should sell a car to a man in Philadelphia, he would load the thing on a flat car and then hurry down to Philadelphia to meet the automobile when it arrived. After getting the new buyer properly launched on his career as a driver, the salesman would return to New York and wait patiently for the inevitable letter asking would he be so good as to come down and make the mess run. He generally found that the driver had either neglected the formality of putting water in the boiler of the steamer or of having the batteries of the electrics recharged.

These were regular occurrences but the automobile people plugged along, stirring up publicity, shanghaiing people into riding in the cars, occasionally selling one where it would do the most good. Henry T. Ewald, now an important advertising man, was a young fellow working with the late Roy Pelletier. In a road contest sponsored by the Munsey papers for the best record between Boston and Washington, Ewald was riding through West Point. The signs were up in the military reservation: Speed Limit 8 Miles Per Hour.



America's first automobile show was held in 1900 at Madison Square Garden in New York. Manufacturers were far from in agreement as to how an automobile should be built or should look

"Turn it on as fast as it'll go!" Ewald shouted to the driver.

"We'll get arrested," protested the driver.

"Sure we will!" cried Henry, "and what a story—arrested by the United States Army. Maybe we'll even get court-martialed!"

They were arrested but when Ewald tried to file a story of the incident from the telegraph office at West Point, it was refused. He rowed across the Hudson and sent it from a little station on the east shore. It was used in all the papers, even though he had been warned that employing the Army for promotion purposes was dangerous business.

But what served to popularize the cars most rapidly was success in the races. The first was put on by the Chicago Herald in 1895 and was won by Charles E. Duryea in a gasoline car. The first Vanderbilt Cup race was run in Newport, 1900, and was won by Joe McDuffee in a Mobile. The regular series of Vanderbilt Cup races started on Long Island in 1904. Foreign drivers and cars swept the event until George Robertson in 1908 got his Locomobile across first, averaging 64.39 miles per hour.



Pick your winner. This is an Official Economy Test to answer the raging question of Horse and Buggy vs. the Automobile. It was held on September 26, 1910. But don't ask us who won. History doesn't say

Quite conscious of what publicity meant in the way of sales, Henry Ford baited Alexander Winton into meeting him in a match race. Ford drove his specially built racing car and licked the Winton on the Grosse Pointe dirt track in 1901. It was much like Corbett's triumph over John L. Sullivan or David finishing off Goliath. After that he hired Barney Oldfield as his driver and Oldfield and the famous 99 became sensations. The success of the Ford enterprise is attributed to these early triumphs.

Chris Sinsabaugh reports the legend about the meeting of Henry and Barney years later, with Henry remarking: "Well, Barney; you made me and I made you."

"The only difference," Barney is reported to have said sadly in reply, "is that I did a better job than you did."

But the event that did even more than the races to popularize the motorcar were the Glidden Tours. Charles J. Glidden made his money in the telephone business, retired and began to enjoy life. In 1905 he made a world tour in a British Napier, bringing the first sight of the automobile to many countries and covering 46,528 miles. Later he offered a \$2,500 trophy for an annual road tour and the first was held in 1905, starting at New York and returning to that city via Boston, Bretton Woods and Worcester.

The automobile companies saw the value of this for publicity and jumped in with both feet. The tests were to prove reliability and stamina rather than speed and the cars proceeded sedately from control station to control station, the landscape being filled with ladies and gentlemen in linen dusters and mud-bespattered countenances. A penalty was charged for each stop for repairs en route and no car was allowed to enter the control station until the appointed time. Accordingly, the faster cars were compelled to wait for the slower at the station, with the motor running. The outcome of that was generally that they became overheated, boiled over and burned out parts. At night the cars were locked in the station so no repairs could be made. Since most of the roads were mud bogs interspersed with boulders a car that was able to finish at all was considered a success.

Repaired by Magic

The Glidden experiment ended in an atmosphere of loud screams and recriminations in 1910, when Hugh Chalmers filed suit to keep the award from going to Ray McNamara in a Premier, on the ground that the Premier was not a stock car coming within the provisions of the tour. He won the decision but it ruined the tour idea. Previous to that there had been constant suspicions about cars which had been locked up overnight in the control station with a pair of bum tires and came out next morning good as new.



The automobile racing cars were not scientifically balanced in those early days, so, as the car careened wildly about the track, the mechanic hung on the side to prevent it from capsizing on the turns

"Humph," said the other contestants. "Magic, I suppose?"

But the Glidden tours were of inestimable help in promoting the automobile and the general popularity of cars dates from that period. The job previously had been to prove that the cars would not explode; the task now was to get possible buyers to ride the little wonders and be convinced that they could both go somewhere and come back. The Brush \$550 Runabout was advertising in 1907: "Seats Two—That's All. Goes Fast Enough—That's All. Costs Actually Less than a Horse. Speed Range up to 26 Miles per Hour. It Goes and Keeps Going."

Henry Ford was advertising in 1903 that his car "has overcome all drawbacks such as smell, noise, jolt, etc., common to all other makes of Auto Carriages." By 1905 he was modestly saying "Don't Experiment—Just Buy a Ford." The Olds was urging purchase in 1902 on the slogan of "Nothing to Watch But the Road."

The Conrad promised in 1903 that it could be "instantly converted into a comfortable four-passenger vehicle by raising the disappearing seat as here shown, at a trifling additional expense of \$100." This sales talk seems to have won young Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., because he selected the Conrad as his first car. The only trouble he found was that the thing wouldn't run.

The early battles in the industry were between the respective merits of the steam car, the electric and the gasoline-operated vehicle. The steam car gave smooth acceleration but before you could start you had to get steam up in the boiler and were later compelled to stop every thirty or forty miles for water. The electrics were quiet and easy of operation but a lot of time was spent waiting for the batteries to recharge. The early gasoline cars started quickly but they were complicated to handle and in operation sounded something like a wagonload of rocks falling down a hill. The early gears were called crash gears and with justice. You simply took the lever in both hands, gritted your teeth and jammed it into place. The noise resembled a layer of platters falling off a pantry shelf.

When Alf Reeves, now secretary of the Automobile Manufacturers Association, started selling Maxwells in New York, the standard test was going up Fort George Hill. The climb was bad enough but even worse was the ride over the cobblestones.

"We solved that by taking half the air out of the tires," says Mr. Reeves. "They wouldn't have lasted a hundred miles with that treatment but they lasted long enough for a sale. It took

The Auto Comes to Stay

a couple of weeks till our rivals got wise to that."

The favorite test of the car salesmen was to run the machine up the front steps of the courthouse or the Elks Club and back down again. Going up was to prove power, coming down was to test brakes. The police began to object to that but arrangements could generally be managed with a friendly lieutenant and a five-buck note.

The greatest stunt of all was pulled by Joe McDuffee at the first Madison Square Garden show. John Brisben Walker, owner of the Mobile, had a row with the show managers and was refused space on the floor. He therefore hired the roof of the Garden for his own show. That was all right but it was realized that it would be difficult to get people on the roof to see one car when there were dozens of cars downstairs.

McDuffee solved this by having a wooden runway built from the roof to the statue of Diana, fifty-three feet above. He ran a ramp up to that in three sections, two hundred feet in all with three slopes, the maximum grade 42 per cent. He then proceeded to drive the Mobile up and down this incline and the crowds flocked to the Mobile show.

William Randolph Hearst was interested in motorcars and also in the New York Journal and the feat on the roof was something the Journal circulation could use. Hearst thought it would be a beautiful thing if Lillian Russell made the trip up the incline with Mr. McDuffee. Mr. McDuffee thought so too and the publicity raged until the police stepped in and said that since there was a good chance that a car would leave that rickety scaffold and land on the spire of the Rev. Dr. Parkhurst's church in Madison Square, there would be no trip for Miss Russell. If Joe McDuffee wanted to kill his fool self that was all right, but not Lillian.

They Couldn't Scare a High Diver

This didn't stop the Hearst crowd, who arranged that on the last trip Saturday night Miss Russell would be bundled into the car and driven up the incline before the police could interfere. The only hitch was that Lillian, being much brighter than her press agent, failed to show up. This was awkward for the Hearst people because the papers were already on the street with pictures of Miss Russell *making* the ascent. This was easy enough for a good photographer but it was essential that somebody in skirts go up to keep the record clean.

McDuffee saw a young lady in the crowd.

"There's no danger," he said in his suavest tone. "Wouldn't you like to go up with me?"

"With pleasure," said the young lady and got in.

They went up and backed down again and she seemed perfectly at ease.

"You're really a brave person to take it like that," he said.

"Who—me?" she answered. "If there'd been a bucket down there on the Square with two feet of water in it, I'd have jumped just for the fun of it. I'm a high diver by trade."

Some of the early developments grew out of necessity. Chris Sinsabaugh out in Chicago was automobile editor of the Tribune and the Daily News simultaneously. Those journals wouldn't stand for the usual publicity bunk so it was up to Chris to create news. From this grew the hill climbs at Algonquin, Crown Point and later at Elgin. At the Crown Point road race in 1909, W. C. Durant entered his crack racing team of Louis Chevrolet, Lewis Strang and Bob Burman, on which he spent \$100,-

The Auto Comes to Stay

000 that year. Chevrolet won the race in the Buick and that established the car. The Chalmers Blue Birds swept the light-car events and Sinsabaugh is convinced that Hugh Chalmers would have successfully challenged Ford in the lower-priced field if he hadn't been obsessed with the desire to make the big ones.

The Algonquin hills at Elgin provided a severe test for cars and an important one because it fitted more nearly into the needs of the public than the more spectacular Vanderbilt Cup affairs. Barney Oldfield got his start at Elgin, where there was one long hill and one short, steep one. What designers learned in those races was invaluable in establishing models that would stand up to the roads of that period. The cars were built like battleships not because the factories preferred armor plate to tin cans but because a journey from Detroit to New York, such as Roy D. Chapin made in an Oldsmobile in 1901 in seven and a half days, was a matter for such endurance that only men who in other circumstances would have been with Peary at the North Pole could attempt it.

But cars were catching on with the public and it became a problem of supplying them. Joseph E. Fields, now vice-president of the Chrysler Corporation, was then a Buick dealer in Fargo, North Dakota.

"I could only get about twelve cars a year," says Mr. Fields. "So people would pay me a deposit a year in advance—a thousand dollars paid in 1906 to get a car delivered in 1907, I keeping the money all that time."

Why Use Up the High Gear?

But it was not all easy sailing because the cars themselves often couldn't perform up to promise and the drivers were not too efficient. On a trip through the South, a salesman saw a car coming down a long hill. It was creeping down, steam was belching from the radiator and there were signs that the driver would be nicely barbecued by the time he reached the bottom. When the salesman came up he noticed that the gentleman was driving the overheated Searchmont in low.

"And why do you drive down the hill in low and get yourself boiled alive?" he inquired.

"Because I don't want to drive it in high," answered the gentleman, who by now looked like a lobster. "I don't want to use it up."

One of the most inventive minds at the early auto shows was E. Ralph Estep, Packard advertising manager who was responsible for "Ask the Man Who Owns One." At the New York show in 1910 Estep decided that the Packard would show off better if it rested on a mirror. He tried six mirrors before he could find one that held the car without breaking. Each break was another press story and the final triumph got space in all the papers. Estep covered the first World War for Collier's Weekly as a European correspondent and was killed in a dugout in 1918, one of the few journalistic casualties of the war.

Another great triumph was the show put on in the lobby of the Hotel Commodore in New York by Joe Fields to launch the first Chrysler line. Since a company can't get into the regular show until it has had a year in the business, Fields was up against it for a show place. He paid the Commodore a thousand dollars a day for ten days to show the Chrysler and almost lost his job with Walter Chrysler for squandering the firm's money. It was only when Chrysler had seen the show with its spectacular lighting and display that he entered into

The Auto Comes to Stay

the spirit of the thing.

"Couldn't keep him away from the place after he saw it," says Fields. "He would come down at eight in the morning and stay until two and three the next morning, meeting the public, talking about the car. Before that he hadn't believed in advertising, thinking if a car was good enough it would sell itself. After that we had to curb *him* when it came to spending money."

Chris Sinsabaugh, now editor of *Automotive News*, maintains that there were four developments which made the general acceptance of the motorcar inevitable:

1. The electric starter in 1911.
2. Balloon tires in 1922.
3. Four-wheel brakes and ethyl gas in 1924.
4. Safety glass in 1926.

After the battle was won to get men into cars, there came the need of convincing the women that it wouldn't be undignified to drive. That was done by getting well-known actresses and other celebrities to pose in cars and on the racing side it was aided by Mrs. Cuneo, who held her own with the men dare-devils on many a dirt track. The problem of selling cars to women in South America was even harder because of the social stigma attached to manual labor among the upper classes.

"We licked it in part by selling open cars, which a woman can drive in the Latin countries without losing face," explains Alf Reeves, "but they still won't drive a closed car. They buy them but they won't drive them; that's a job for a chauffeur."

Out of thirty-one models shown at the first automobile show in 1900 only the Packard and Autocar, which is now made as a truck, still remain. Between 1898 and 1903 approximately \$35,000,000 was invested in motorcar companies. The mortality in that field is astonishing, considering the popularity of cars once they were established. The Automobile Manufacturers Association lists 534 makes of cars which were once on the market and are now no longer made.

Here are a few of the "firsts" in the industry:

1. J. M. Murdock of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, drove from Los Angeles to New York in 1898 in thirty-two days.
2. Charles B. King, the famous designer, made and operated the first car to be run over the streets of Detroit. That was 1894 and its top speed was twenty miles an hour. Mr. King was also responsible for the left-hand drive and vacuum-clutch control.
3. The first car sold commercially in America was a Winton, on April 1, 1898, to Robert Allison, a mechanical engineer of Port Carbon, Pennsylvania.
4. The first gasoline car was made by Charles B. Duryea at Springfield, Massachusetts, in April, 1892.
5. Thomas M. Galey, Owensboro, Kentucky, claims to be the first boy in the United States to own his own gas carriage, a Winton purchased in 1899.
6. According to the records of the Smithsonian Institute, the first automobile license in the United States was given to Harold T. Birnie of New York City on May 15, 1900.
7. Cannonball Baker drove from Los Angeles to New York in a Graham in fifty-three and a half hours in 1933.
8. "Diamond Jim" Brady used to buy four cars at a time from Arthur Lee Newton because only in that way could he be sure of having one of them fit to run. Also the bodies had to be made with the glass coming down to the floor. "I want 'em to know who's riding back there," said Diamond Jim.

The Auto Comes to Stay

They're Prettier Now

But the day when only the daredevils rode motorcars has given way to a mass of owners which grows with the years. Stunts are no longer needed and nobody has to be sold on the ability of a car to run.

It's a question now of streamlining and improvements and beauty. The New York show continues to be the flash part of the automobile business, the first publicity blast. The Chicago show is where the dealers gather and where sales are made.

In giving a testimonial for a Haynes in 1904, Simeon Ford, the late hotel man, said: "An automobile must be very good or it is no good." R. E. Olds was advertising his Reo in 1912 in the following words: "The car represents the best I can do—down to the smallest detail. Men will never build cars much better."

Well, they're prettier now, anyhow.

Collier's

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