

Early Iowa Automobiles

BY JOHN ZUG

The horseless carriage came to Iowa on a wave of jokes and jeers, but underlying these jokes were hidden hatred and hostility. The horse vs. the automobile made for endless and often heated debate.

An early car-owner returned to his auto which he had parked near a hitching post and watering tank. He cranked for dear life, but nothing happened. "Hold some oats out in front," a spectator would yell. This was the sure way, learned by many a village wit, to provoke a throng to instantaneous, ribald laughter.

Men who today are still youthful and active remember how farmers were irate at the approach of a gas buggy, with its put-put, clackety-clack, and squawking bulb horn. Horses were scared to high heaven, teams bolted and runaways were common. Men, women and children were injured and some were killed. Less alert liverymen and horseshoers, refusing the path of gradual conversion to garages, held the motorist in contempt, and they delighted in giving him the wrong directions to the next town. For many, there was the great satisfaction that came when a horse had to rescue a car from the mud—for a fee of course.

Iowans in 1890 got a look at a Locomobile steamer bought in Chicago, Illinois, by Jesse O. Wells, Des Moines liveryman. After leaving his steamer at the curb but a few minutes, Wells would often have to force his way through a crowd of the curious to get back to it. The year of 1890 also saw William Morrison of Des Moines develop a method of "storing" electricity in a battery. Onlookers were skeptical and hinted that he was a wizard at concealing electrical connections. Morrison decided to prove that he was concealing nothing by causing his batteries to power a buggy. The motor was made in a small jewelry store at 419 E. Walnut Street. He installed it in a buggy with seats for nine people and powered it with twelve storage batteries. Steel tires were installed, with steel studs on the rear wheels for traction. Morrison drove his electric buggy through the streets of Des Moines in 1890, and with Dr.

Lew Arntz, took it to the Columbia International Exposition at Chicago in 1893 and gave sight-seers free rides. Driving through Chicago streets, they "took a header into a shop on State street, demolishing the plate glass and display."

In 1899, someone showed up in Davenport with a Locomobile and sold it for \$1,000 to Willis G. Haskell of Cedar Rapids, former state senator. A man experienced with its operation helped Haskell drive it as far as DeWitt. This gas-fueled, two-cylinder steamer, its rear wheels powered by a chain drive and with front wheels steered by a tiller, can now be seen on display in the basement of the museum of the State Historical Department.

About the same time, Col. William G. Dows, of Cedar Rapids, returned from the War in Cuba, driving a Haynes car. Although Haynes had been manufacturing gas-propelled cars since 1893, the one Dows bought was only No. 16. Dows arrived with fanfare. Rural schools along his route were dismissed. Men were sent ahead of him to help farmers to restrain their horses, but even so, there were runaways. Hundreds flocked to see the spectacle. Haskell and Dows "raced" at the Linn county fair at Fairfax in 1899. It was the first of thousands of Iowa races in a day when automobiles were thought of as a novelty and not expected to become much more.

Speed racing and manufacturing were later to bring to Iowa such motor greats as Fred S. Duesenberg and Eddie Rickenbacker. Duesenberg, later a famed motor engineer, came to Des Moines in 1900 and operated a bicycle shop. He made the two-cylinder engines for the popular Mason automobile manufactured here in 1907 and 1908. Two hundred Mason cars a year were turned out, in two models, selling for \$1,250 and \$1,350 each. F. W. Maytag bought the factory and moved it to Waterloo before turning his attention to washing machines. Eddie Rickenbacker came to Des Moines as a lad. He soon became a skilled mechanic and drove the Duesenberg racers at the Indianapolis, Indiana speedway. Four years before he became America's World War I ace, Rickenbacker won \$10,000 at the Sioux City 1914 speedway races where he drove his Duesenberg a distance of 300 miles

at an average speed of 78.8 miles an hour, missing the world record by just 13 seconds. Barney Oldfield was among the losers.

Iowa passed its first law regulating the automobile in 1901. Legislators defined motor vehicles as "all vehicles propelled by any power other than muscular power, excepting such motor vehicles as run only upon rails or tracks." They ruled that if the operator of a "restive horse or other draft or domestic animal" should raise his hand, any motor vehicle operator was required to stop immediately. If the car and the horse were going in opposite directions, the car had to remain at a stop until the horse had passed. If the car were to overtake and pass the horse, the motorist was to "use reasonable caution." The law specified that "the operator and its occupants of any motor vehicle shall render necessary assistance to the party having in charge said horse or other draft animal."

First licenses, costing \$1.00 and good forever, were aluminum seals about the size of a silver dollar. They carried not only the number but all these words: "Registered in the Office of the Secretary of State for the State of Iowa, under the Motor Vehicle Law." The car owner was required to tack on his license number in metal numerals or to paint on the back of his auto his license number in figures three inches high. Nailing the metal numbers on the back was no problem. One of the more common current jokes described the typical car as one which had "wooden frame, wooden wheels, wooden body—and wouldn't run."

At first, Iowa law set a "reasonable and proper" rural speed limit, provided the "average rate" was under 20 miles an hour." In "closely built-up portions," vehicles could travel up to one mile in six minutes (10 miles an hour) elsewhere in cities and towns the limit was one mile in four minutes (15 miles an hour). The law required a "suitable bell, horn or other signal," "good and efficient brakes" and at least one white light in front and red light behind, visible for a reasonable distance at night. Cities and towns were given power of "excluding or prohibiting any motor vehicle from the free use of such highway."

By 1905, most Iowans had seen a gas buggy. Licenses

totalled 799 for the state, or an average of eight per county. The cry for suitable roads was now becoming stronger. It had been heard from pioneers in the 1850's, who laid plank roads for the covered wagons and stage coaches and from the bicycle enthusiasts of the 1890's, who dreamed of smooth riding. Now it came from motorists too, for they found Iowa's roads slippery when wet and often given to mud-holes and deep ruts. Roads became rough when dry, as each successive driver avoided the ruts already made. Gumbo soil was fine for corn, but not much good for roads.

In early auto days only sportsmen and physicians took to the roads when they were wet. The average car remained in the livery stable and the brass was polished before a pleasure jaunt in good weather. For these drivers, the main problem was dust. Standard equipment, when you bought a car, was the long khaki "linen duster" which buttoned closely about the neck and draped to the ankles. It was worn by both men and women, as were gauntlet gloves, with cuffs to the elbow. The ladies were partial to large hats. They accomplished the double purpose of holding the hat on the head and keeping dust out of the face by tying a large veil under the chin. Men wore caps and goggles.

The Stanley and White steamers, with their whistles for horns, died away in public favor because wind would snuff the flames which heated the boiler. This made the gas buggy and its problems the center of interest—and jokes. No motorist would pass a stranded fellow. Tool kits were mounted on the running boards—with inner tubes, handy vulcanizing sets, wrenches and tire tools inside.

The first transcontinental auto trip was made in 61 days in the summer of 1903 by a single-cylinder, nine-horsepower Packard which passed through Council Bluffs, Des Moines and Clinton. Five years later, the first round-the-world auto race started at New York, New York, in February. Crowds lined what is now the Lincoln highway as the racers crossed Iowa in deep slush. The Thomas Flyer, the only American entry, was laid up overnight at Belle Plaine for repairs but then went on to win the race.

By 1908, there were 3,156 autos in Iowa. The *Register and*

Leader reported: "The toot of the automobile horn is no longer an awe-inspiring or dreadful sound. The horse has accepted them as a companion and no longer objects at the approach of the puffing vehicle." But the car was still a novelty for years. Dean Schooler, Des Moines auto dealer, entered business in 1908, selling the Oakland. An early customer came back after a few days to report, beaming: "Well, I made my trip. I went to Oskaloosa!"

Don McClure, Oskaloosa dealer, set out to race the "Great White Way" (Davenport-Oskaloosa-Des Moines-Omaha) against Pete Peterson, Davenport, driving the "river-to-river" (R-to-R) road, most of which is now Highway 6. Robert N. Carson, Iowa City roads booster, sponsored the contest and G. Decker French, of Davenport, was the starter. McClure won, Peterson having had tire trouble and a 25-minute delay by a freight train at Guthrie Center. When McClure arrived in Des Moines, his hands were puffed and swollen from holding the wheel against the ruts. Goggles protected his eyes, but otherwise his face was black. Police kept Grand Avenue open. Thousands lined the route, with 3,000 at Seventh Street and Grand Avenue. Idea of this race was to prove it was possible to cross Iowa in daylight. The cars started at 6:30 a.m. and both were in Omaha, Nebraska by 5:00 p.m. Average speed was 41 miles an hour.

The "Little Glidden" tours had been under way for three years. Auto owners gathered annually together to drive cars over the state, and be graded as to the performance of their car. The 1912 tour started at Des Moines, and made these night stops in the next six days: Omaha, Sioux City, towns in north central Iowa, Dubuque, Keokuk and Des Moines.

By now it seemed the car was here to stay. A prominent Des Moines blacksmith conceded in 1912 that "the hour for the retirement of the horse was near." He said he took little stock in stories that the horseshoeing business had declined because of the replacement of much of the hard, brick paving with softer asphalt. "So many of these machines are in use," he observed, "that it is not unusual to see ten or a dozen lined up along the curb and not a horse or wagon in sight."—From the *Des Moines Sunday Register*, April 21, 1946.

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