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THE MORRISON ELECTRIC: IOWA'S FIRST AUTOMOBILE

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At times it was so quiet in the laboratory below the Lumbar Jewelry store on the west side of 5th Street between Locust and Grand Avenues in Des Moines, that it was almost eerie. Mr. Morrison liked silence when he thought, and he found ample reason for thinking during those summer months of 1890. Not only was he in the process of building Iowa's first automobile, but he was a long way from his native Scotland and the new world about him was not as tranquil as it could have been.

On June 28, 1890 William Morrison's only child, William Earl, died of what the doctor called "congestion of the brain." The shock must have been great, as the boy was only 15 months old. A modern physician might well have seen a connection between the baby's "congestion of the brain" and its mother's coughing of blood and pronounced loss of weight, but physicians of 1890 knew little about tuberculosis and even less about its proper treatment. Not only was his child gone, but William Morrison was still faced with watching his young wife become bedridden and die before the coming winter was out.

Morrison was a chemist by trade and an inventor by interest. It was said that he had been educated in a Scottish University and became interested in electricity at an early age. He

was a "quiet, mysterious" man, who didn't eat meat like most folks—only nuts, vegetables, fruits and puddings. He was a tall, dark haired, husky man and was always clean shaven. He didn't marry until he was in his early thirties, and then to a girl not yet twenty-one. The people of Des Moines who remember him, say he was "quiet, eccentric," and even a little "pompous" at times. But most of all, they remember him as an electric battery genius, who, when asked for advice on making batteries, sometimes fooled others into doing experiments for him.

The application of electrical energy was a fresh, booming field in 1890, but by three years later the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago featured awing displays in which electric current was being applied in ways undreamed of even by Jules Verne. In February, 1891, the *Western Electrician* of Chicago stated:

"The rapid development of the electrical trade in this country has been the marvel of the age, and the position occupied by the West as compared with other sections of the country gives evidence of its enterprise and business sagacity. It is undoubtedly true that the electrical industries have done more for the West in developing it, and attracting the attention of energetic and enterprising men, and bringing capital to it than any other agency, and it is equally true that electrical industries owe much to this section. It has provided an excellent field for explorers of electrical enterprises . . . It has become a recognized fact in the West that a complete system of arc and incandescent lighting, motor service, street railways, and a telephone exchange are quite as necessary as the 'general store' of the Eastern village."

The people of Des Moines shared the enthusiasm of the editors of the *Western Electrician*. Electric lights had been introduced by 1886, and on December 19, 1888, the city's electric railway system went into service.* By the summer of 1890 elaborate plans were underway to make the second annual *Seni Om Sed*** celebration the best lit parade the nation had ever seen. The Pumpelly Storage Battery Company of

* As further proof of early Des Moines interest in electricity, it might be noted that "On the 25th of June (1888) the new Hotel Savery was thrown open . . . The entire structure was brilliantly lighted by electricity."

** It was claimed at that time that "Seni Om Sed" was an old Indian name. In truth, it was merely Des Moines spelled backward. The celebration, aimed at advertising Des Moines, was begun in 1889 and continued until 1891. In 1897 it was revived, but lacked the luster of the earlier years and was discontinued.

Chicago was contacted and arrangements were made to light the floats of the parade by means of electric storage batteries.

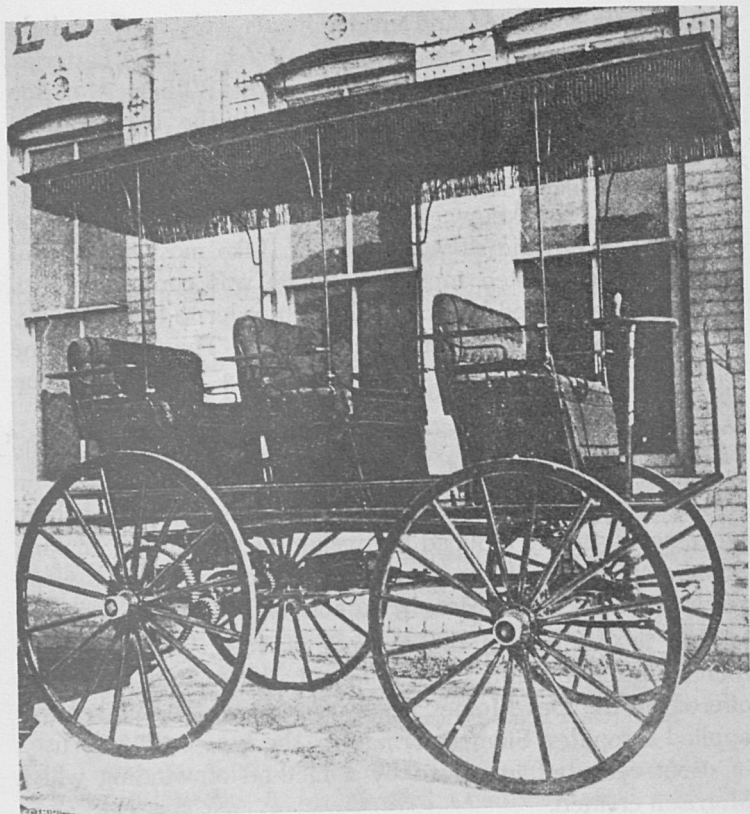
We do not know exactly what brought William Morrison to Des Moines. Perhaps it was through the enterprise of Messrs. Marquart and Lumbard, who supported, financially, much of Morrison's work. Perhaps he came to Des Moines by pure chance. It is known that his primary interest lay in the chemistry of electric storage batteries. Like most of his contemporaries interested in that field, he was concerned with the necessities forced by practicality. In order to be very practical, a storage battery must be portable. Thus, it must be relatively small and light, with a premium being placed on power.

By 1890 Morrison had applied for patents on an automatic regulator for electric current and, along with L. Schmidt, on an improved way of making storage battery plates. His improvements greatly reduced the weight of the battery, making it more powerful at the same time. Morrison knew the importance of his discoveries, but others had to be convinced.

Thus it was that in the summer of 1890, "Bill" Morrison found himself installing his storage batteries into a carriage offered by the Des Moines Buggy Company. The power was applied through a Siemens armature, the type ordinarily used in street cars, but improved by a method of winding which Morrison created.

He also found it necessary to invent a steering device. At first he tried keeping both wheels on one axle as they were originally pivoted on such horse-drawn carriages, but later found it advisable to pivot each wheel separately. He developed a steering device based upon this principle.

Progress on the electric vehicle was apparently irregular during the summer of 1890. It was anticipated that the carriage would be completed in time to show it at the Iowa State Fair during the first week of September, but it was never shown at the fair. In fact, it took feverish activity on the night of September third to complete the automobile for the *Seni Om Sed* Parade. According to the *Des Moines Daily News*, September 5, 1890, "The intention was to have had it exhibited on the fair grounds, but owing to the want of time did not have it ready until the night of the parade."



THE MORRISON ELECTRIC

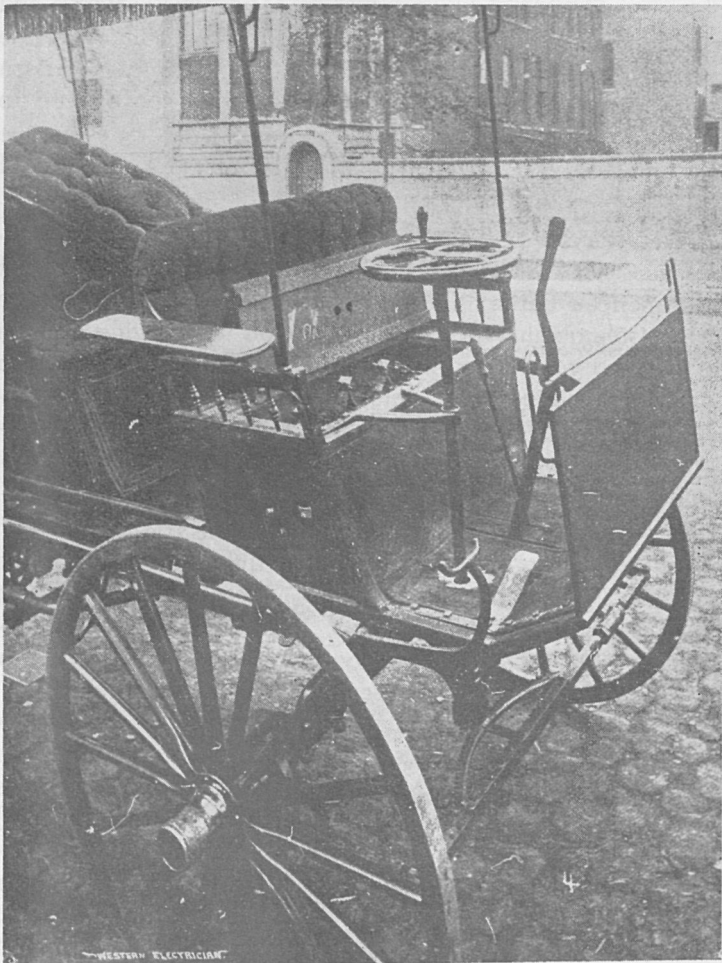
The *Des Moines Leader*, September 5, 1890, states: "The electric buggy met with great applause as it came along. It had just been finished yesterday and had been put through some pretty hard tests . . . In some of the tests made yesterday the gearing was broken, so last night it was hard to get along. In consequence of the break the buggy will not be exhibited at the fair, as anticipated." The State Fair ended September 5th.

Between 75,000 and 100,000 people had seen the Seni Om Sed Parade on the night of September 4, 1890, just three days after the nation's first Labor Day. The "novel sight" of seeing a horseless carriage had "attracted much attention." The on-lookers were "greatly pleased" to see the vehicle they had

heard so many rumors about. The varied use of electricity had made the parade a complete success. Many compared it favorably with the Mardi Gras.

That winter William Morrison went to Chicago to discuss with businessmen the sale of his batteries. His wife accompanied him and on April 9, 1891, she died there of tuberculosis.

Harold Sturgis, John A. Qualey, George T. Barroughs, and



THE MORRISON ELECTRIC — FRONT VIEW

J. B. McDonald were the principal parties involved in discussion with Morrison. They made up what later became the American Battery Company. It appears that J. K. Pumpelly, of the Pumpelly Storage Battery Company of Chicago—later known as the Pumpelly-Sorley Storage Battery Company—may have had something to do with negotiations although there is no real proof of this point.

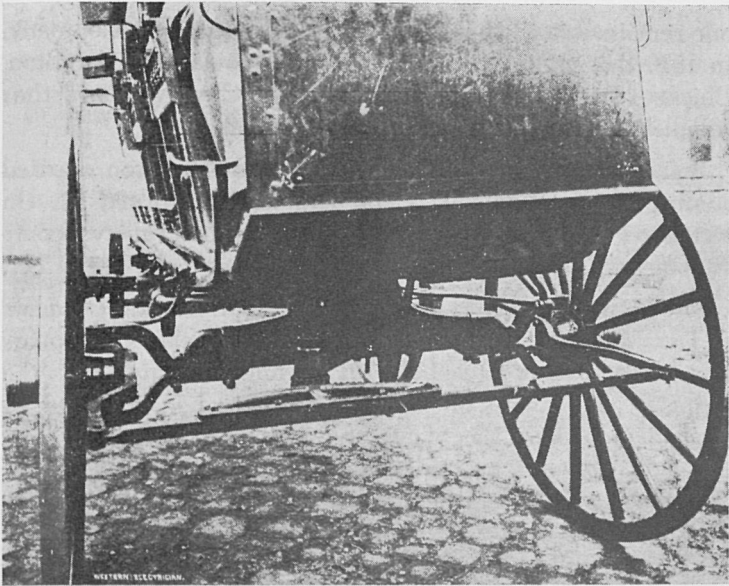
Late in 1891 the terms of a contract between William Morrison and American Battery Company were agreed upon. The Chicago concern would manufacture Morrison's batteries and would be given the Morrison electric carriage to illustrate the practicality of the batteries. On August 11, 1892, the Morrison electric carriage became the first automobile so powered to travel Chicago streets and laid its strong claims of being the first automobile of any power to be driven on the streets of Chicago.

The history of William Morrison's electric powered automobile does not end here. In 1893 Harold Sturgis, Secretary of the American Battery Company, exhibited Morrison's vehicle at the Columbian World's Fair and won world wide acclaim for it. Two years later Sturgis used the Morrison electric to advertise America's first automobile race which was sponsored by the Chicago *Times-Herald*, a newspaper whose editor, Herman Henry Kohlsaas, was interested in those new-fangled "motocycles."

After trying, unsuccessfully, to build an electric "motocycle" of his own, Sturgis decided to put a different motor in the Morrison vehicle and race it in the "Times-Herald" race. On Thanksgiving Day, November 25, 1895, the Morrison "motocycle" moved through the heavy snow of the Midway, near what is now the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry.

It carried three people, although under ordinary conditions it was capable of carrying seven without difficulty. The deep snow compelled Mr. Sturgis to stop frequently to keep his batteries from burning out. "At the north end of the [Lincoln] park the hopelessness of the race was apparent, and the machine was pulled off the course."¹ Only one of six automobiles in the entire country to start the race, the "Sturgis Electric Motocycle" was awarded \$500 for its showing. Of the two

¹ *Motocycle*, Vol I, No. 2, November, 1895, p. 15.



THE MORRISON ELECTRIC — REAR VIEW

electric vehicles in the race, the Sturgis* Motocycle had gone the furthest—13 miles.

The week of April 6, 1896, found Harold Sturges and the Morrison electric in Minneapolis, Minnesota, at that city's Cycle Show. The Hartford Rubber Works Company equipped the vehicle with solid rubber tires, and "the third floor of the Exposition made an ideal track with six laps to the mile. During the afternoon and evening the capacity of the vehicles were taxed to their utmost, and many were forced to wait their turn, as everyone wanted to be among the first to ride in the motocycle." After the show, the motocycle was run about the streets to give those who had not attended the privilege of seeing the coming vehicle.²

In the summer of 1897 "Harold Sturges deserted the motocycle field for the gold fields of the Klondyke."³ Many years later it was said that the Morrison electric was still operating successfully in Kansas City, Missouri. One might speculate that when Harold Sturgis left for the Klondyke, the automo-

* Spelled either Sturgis or Sturges in printed articles.

² *Ibid.*, Vol. I, No. 3, December, 1895, pp. 5 and 15.

³ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, No. 10, July, 1897, p. 20.

bile remained in the hands of the American Battery Company. In 1910 that organization was moved from 1132-1134 Fulton, Chicago, to 2000 McGee Street, Kansas City, Missouri, thus completing the journey of Iowa's first automobile.

Before the turn of the century, William Morrison married another young lady, who again had not yet turned 21. On October 7, 1902, he lost his second son who this time was only 16 months. Later a girl was born and she survived her father.

Mr. Morrison grew to be a wealthy man. Several residents of Des Moines recall his carrying about thousands of dollars in a black, leather satchel. In 1917, while associated with the Vesta Accumulator Company of Chicago, he "developed a method of locking the plates of a battery which it . . . [is claimed] prevents warping under heavy electrical loads." This along with several other innovations made by Morrison, gave the Vesta Battery Company one of the best batteries of the time.*

William Morrison died in 1927, and was buried in the Woodland Cemetery in Des Moines on March 11. His second wife, Elsie N. Morrison, died at the age of 70 on September 5, 1950.

In 1947, Samuel Diller, who once worked for Mr. Morrison and later designed his own batteries (The Diller Batteries), suggested that his late employer and friend had never been particularly interested in automobiles. Morrison had designed his automobile, it was said, to prove the worth of his batteries. Subsequent events in the story bear out this theory. Still, there is the possibility that Des Moines might have become the automobile capital of the world if it had possessed the foresight of William Morrison.

* Morrison patented more than twenty devices connected with electric storage batteries. In 1917 he was issued six patents; in 1918, eleven more. Much of the time, during those years, he shuffled back and forth between Des Moines and Chicago. While in Des Moines he resided at the Victoria hotel.

Pictures of the Morrison Automobile from the "Western Electrician."

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