

Early Automobile History

One hundred years ago, the first Model T automobile was made. The Model T automobile was not the first car to be built, but it was the first widely affordable mass-produced car. The first Model T was built for sale on October 1, 1908, at a price of about \$850. Between 1908 and 1927, a total of 15 million Model Ts were sold. By the 1920s, half of all the cars in America were model Ts. The 1925 Model T touring car cost about \$260 at a time when the average annual income in America was \$1236.¹

In January 1906, Dr. C.C. Bachman purchased the first automobile to be owned in Waterloo. His car was a 15 horsepower Pope that he purchased at the automobile show in New York City. In July of that same year, H.I. Buttery purchased a 25 horsepower Pope Hartford automobile that he drove from Syracuse to Waterloo.²

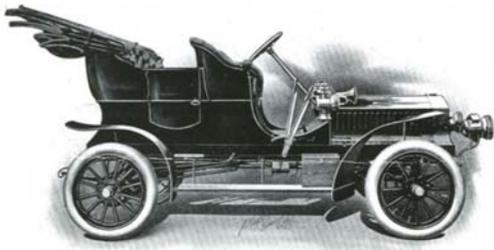


Automobiles, however, had been seen in Waterloo and Seneca County before 1906. John E. Becker in his *A History of the Village of Waterloo* states that *The Automobile Review* of August 13, 1904, gave an extended account of LaRoche's 3,314 non-stop round-trip run between New York City and St. Louis. Included in this account is this paragraph: "Between Syracuse and Rochester, at Seneca Falls I think it was, I got stuck in the mud and it took me five hours of hard work to dig the machine out and get started again. My hands are covered with blisters from the work!" This incident is said to have happened just west of the village of Seneca Falls and "illustrates one of the drawbacks to automobiling through the country." It was also reported just a few years later that the village of Waterloo was "known from coast to coast" as having some of the worst streets over which automobiles had to pass in crossing the continent.³

Becker's *History* also reports that seventy-six automobiles came through Waterloo on July 11, 1906, as part of the 1906 Glidden Tour. This was the third annual run of the American Auto Association, covering a distance of 4135 miles in sixteen days. The object of the race was to see which make of machines would last the longest and perform the best work as to endurance and keeping in repair. Becker reported that "Main Street was lined with sightseers who were well repaid for 'looking.' It took the entire afternoon for the passage of the 'Cars' through the village. Late in the forenoon came the pilot cars and finely cut strips of paper (called confetti) were thrown from them to mark the route, which through the business section was on the south side of the street. There were about 300 passengers in the whole number, of whom fifteen were ladies. The latter wore the customary veiling, while the men were generally clad in long brown linen dusters with the regulation caps and goggles."⁴

According to a 1967 *Reveille* article written by June Callahan, what is today the Peter Koch car dealership at 221-229 Fall Street in Seneca Falls was the scene of the manufacture of the Iroquois automobile. The Iroquois Type D car was a 35 horsepower touring car, with a 100 inch wheelbase and was sold F.O.B. Seneca Falls for \$2,500. The Iroquois Type E was a 40 horsepower, 7 passenger car with 4.5 by 32 inch tires and platform springs on the rear, with a selling price of \$3,000 F.O.B. Seneca Falls.

John Kaiser was the President of the Iroquois Motor Car Company between 1903 and 1909. Only thirteen cars were actually built but they were a good car. The small number of vehicles produced was largely because Mr. Kaiser's approach to building an automobile was considerably different from today's procedures. He took his technique from the carriage makers—he built his cars to last. He considered a \$3,000 automobile to be a very serious investment and he expected his customers to drive his cars for twenty years or more. Because he wanted to build durability into



"IROQUOIS" TYPE D
 TYPE "D"—32 H. P. Touring car. 100 inch wheel base.
 PRICE—With standard equipment 1.40. In Seneca Falls \$3,000. Type extra.
 TYPE "E"—40 H. P. 7 passenger car. 4 1/2 x 32 inch tires. Platform springs on rear. Body exact type of 1906
 Fordland.
 PRICE—F. O. B. Seneca Falls \$3,000.

his cars, he inspected and re-inspected every part and he and his employees assembled the entire automobile. In 1909, the company dissolved because of lack of business. Ms. Callahan speculated in her article that “had Mr. Kaiser thought the same way as Henry Ford, maybe the Iroquois Motor would be a booming industry in Seneca Falls today....”⁵

In that same article, Callahan reported that “the streets of Seneca Falls were traveled in the years that followed by many makes that are no longer in production.” These include the American Under-Slung that Norman Gould owned; Fred Fisher owned a Winton; Walter Ward, Sr. owned a Mora; Dr. Horton had an Overland; Charlie Fegley had a Reo; Harry Fredenburg had a Franklin; Paul Perkins, Sr. had a Savon; W.E. Dickey had a Page; and Mrs. Partridge had a Pearce Arrow.

The May 30, 1913, issue of the Seneca Falls *Reveille* noted that people in Seneca Falls had auto fever. There were 89 Model Ts, plus a number of other car makes in the village. In January 1921, there were 2,073 autos and trucks in the county and by September of that same year the number had increased to 2,945. On October 27, 1922, Fred L. Huntington leased a building at Fall and Mynderse Streets for auto sales.⁶



picture of a car in Seneca Falls about 1915

Getting an early automobile started, especially once it stalled out, was not an easy task. Virtually everyone knows of the necessity of “cranking” the motor. Not everyone knows, however, of the “runaway automobile” incident on September 17, 1917, in Waterloo. Just as the crowd was dispersing from the New York Central Railroad Station after seeing off a large contingent of Seneca County young men entering the army for war duty, William Redfield's big Studebaker car became stalled at the main village intersection. When it wouldn't start, a number of helping hands gave it a push. The car was still in gear and there was no driver in the seat. The runaway car struck another car and then took to the sidewalk where it tore down awnings along the street. In front of Semtner's tailor shop the car struck and killed H. Eugene Van Buren who was repairing the sidewalk. The auto then struck two little girls and then a tree in front of John C. Shanks' residence on the corner of Church and Main Streets. The runaway car then bounded across the street and crashed into the house of Edward Conant just east of the Presbyterian Church. Becker summarized the incident with the comment, “Every part of the auto's driverless trip down the street was a freak occurrence.”⁷



If you want to see this well-preserved 1903 Ford Model A car, you simply have to go to the N.R. Boyce car dealership in Ovid. They have had this car on display since about 1949. To clarify why it is called a 1903 Ford Model A, early Ford cars were simply



lettered model A, then model B, etc. until the Model T proved so popular that Ford kept producing that Model T for several years. Then Ford went back to producing a new Model A. As the picture at right shows, the 1903 Ford Model A was chain-driven. The car often had the problem of mud, etc. clogging up the operation.⁸

As automobiles were increasing in number, our villages were changing as well. Waterloo, for example, erected its first street signs in late 1910.⁹ In June 1913, a five year contract was made with Central New York and Electric Co, providing for all night street lighting in Waterloo. This lighting consisted of five ornamental cluster lamps of 60 candlepower each to be placed on each side of Main Street, 100 feet apart.¹⁰ Also in 1913, the village of Waterloo designated street numbers for houses and business places so that free postal delivery could be instituted in the village of Waterloo on September 1, 1913.¹¹ The Waterloo village board on May 6, 1914, resolved to have East Main, Washington, and River Streets, paved as part of the new state Highway Law, by which the state, the county, the village and adjoining property owners would pay for the improvement.¹²

The rapid increase in the number of automobiles led to the development of many auto-related businesses such as gas stations and tourist cabins. One of the most interesting examples in Seneca County was the Windmill Tourist Camp just west of Seneca Falls. The windmill itself was built in 1929. The Camp had a total of 15 cabins, as many as nine gas pumps, and a



restaurant and gift shop. It should also be noted that the rise of the automobile helps to explain the demise of streetcars and railroads in our county and nationwide.¹³

In 2007 there were 28,143 registered automobiles in Seneca County for a population of about 33,000, and a total of 24,758 driver's licenses.¹⁴ Seeing a really old car like a Tin Lizzie while driving along on a highway today prompts strong reaction and for good reason. Maybe it's simply because cars today are

just so different in appearance from those old cars. Or perhaps those old cars give us pause to think nostalgically of a time when life itself and the very pace of life were so different.

¹ David Casstevens, "Ford Model T Full of Memories," *Finger Lakes Times*, October 5, 2008.

² John E. Becker, "The First Automobile," *A History of the Village of Waterloo*, page 341.

³ John E. Becker, "Our Roads," *A History of the Village of Waterloo*, page 334.

⁴ John E. Becker, "The 1906 Glidden Tour," *A History of the Village of Waterloo*, page 343.

⁵ Information and photos provided by the Seneca Falls Historical Society from their documents collections.

⁶ *Seneca Falls Reveille*, May 30, 1913.

⁷ Elizabeth Auten, "Tin Lizzies," *Seneca County History Newsletter* Vol. 1 No. 4, June 1985, page 14.

⁸ Information provided by Dennis Kenyon of N.R. Boyce car dealership in Ovid, NY, on October 31, 2008. Photos taken by Seneca County Historian Walter Gable.

⁹ John E. Becker, "Street Signs," *A History of the Village of Waterloo*, page 351.

¹⁰ John E. Becker, "Street Lighting," *A History of the Village of Waterloo*, page 354.

¹¹ John E. Becker, "Street Numbers," *A History of the Village of Waterloo*, page 354.

¹² John E. Becker, "East Main and Washington Street Paving," *A History of the Village of Waterloo*, page 359.

¹³ Readers are encouraged to see the full article on The Windmill, and additional photos, in the county historian's portion of the Seneca County website: www.co.seneca.ny.us.

¹⁴ <http://www.nydmv.state.ny.us/Statistics/statli07.htm>.