

# Pioneering with the Automobile in Minnesota<sup>1</sup>

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IF ANY OF US had walked down the thoroughfares of the Twin Cities or made our way along the streets of any of Minnesota's smaller communities forty years ago, we might have pricked up our ears at strange sounds and shouts of "Here comes a devil-wagon," or "Get a horse." We would have recognized the vehicle which came toward us with clanking gears and much rattling and shaking, at the marvelous rate of ten or twelve miles per hour, as one of those horseless carriages which were finding their way into every city and village of our nation.

It has been estimated that in the first postwar year of full automobile production our manufacturers will turn out at least 4,500,000 new cars. Forty years ago, the entire output of passenger automobiles was 24,550.<sup>2</sup> It is, however, doubtful that any owner of one of the gleaming postwar models will experience greater elation than did the early drivers, or will attract a fraction of the attention that a car owner could count on back in the days when daring people were pioneering with the horseless carriage.

The honor of being the father of the American automobile industry has been bitterly disputed, but there seems little doubt that the first gasoline-propelled motor vehicle in America was designed and built by George B. Selden at Rochester, New York, as early as 1879. A few steam-propelled conveyances had been made earlier. The first in the series of experiments with self-propelled vehicles in Minnesota seems to have been made in 1880, when an Italian resident of St. Paul—Herman Saroni by name—built a steam wagon in the

<sup>1</sup> A paper read before the luncheon session of the ninety-sixth annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society, at the St. Paul Hotel on January 15, 1945. *Ed.*

<sup>2</sup> National Highway Users' Conference, *Report* (Washington, 1944). This item is reprinted from *Fortune* for July, 1944. See also *A Chronicle of the Automotive Industry in America, 1892-1936* (Cleveland, 1936), published by the Eaton Manufacturing Company to mark its silver anniversary. The work is arranged in sections by years.

coppersmith shop of Henry Bonn, located on the east side of Cedar Street between Sixth and Seventh streets. The body, we are told, was just an ordinary four-wheeled, light wagon, surmounting a small steam boiler and an engine, and equipped with a driver's seat. The power was transmitted to a rear wheel by a chain and gear arrangement, not unlike that used on bicycles.<sup>3</sup>

Another Minnesota pioneer in the field was Charles A. Stickney, son of A. B. Stickney, president of the Great Western Railway system. In May, 1894, young Stickney tried out a vehicle which he had decided to build the preceding February. It must have been a rather odd-looking affair, for two of its wheels were from the elder Stickney's spring wagon, and a third, from a pony cart belonging to the builder's sister. The frame, which was constructed of two by six oak timbers, was mounted over the tricycle-like arrangement of wheels. Those who saw it reported that it rather resembled a bicycle with a fork mounted over the thirty-inch wheel. The driver rode in a kitchen chair and steered his car by means of a tiller. Control of the throttle was by a rope attachment. The vehicle lacked both brake and reverse mechanism. For motive power, the youthful inventor used an eight-inch porcupine boiler, enclosed in a twenty-four-inch sheet-iron jacket, with a single cylinder, double acting engine. A ten-inch pulley carried a six-inch, flat, cotton belt, which drove the left rear wheel. Four horses were needed to haul the machine from the shop at the rear of the Stickney home, but once out, it made a successful run, which must have terrified watchers, for the Stickneys' stableboy fired the boiler with wood, and sparks flew freely, endangering the houses along the route on Portland Avenue below Dale Street. Probably to the relief of the neighbors, the elder Stickney called a halt on further trips, and the steam car was dismantled.<sup>4</sup>

In 1895 public attention was attracted to horseless carriages by two events in Chicago. One was the first exhibit of American-made vehicles; the other was a race sponsored by H. H. Kohlsaas, pub-

<sup>3</sup> These and many other incidents described in the present article are based upon Paul B. Light's column, entitled "So What," in the *St. Paul Dispatch*. See especially the issues for March 31 and April 24, 1939. See also Arthur Pound, *The Turning Wheel*, 25 (Garden City, 1934).

<sup>4</sup> *Dispatch*, March 31, April 7, 18, 24, 1939.

lisher of the Chicago *Times-Herald*. Originally scheduled for July 4, postponed until September, and again postponed, it was at last run in November. Despite a large number of entries, only two machines finally competed. Many of those who had hoped to have their machines take part in the race were not ready. One was a man named Nichols from Owatonna, the designer of the Ames machine.<sup>5</sup>

Among those who became interested in horseless carriages was Smith B. Hall of Minneapolis. As a result of the interest generated by the *Times-Herald* race, Hall persuaded Harold G. Sturgess, an inventor and the owner of a horseless carriage, to go to Minneapolis with his machine, which speedily became a topic of conversation. Like all early models, it was copied from a carriage design and looked like a surrey. It had carriage wheels with rubber tires. The model was displayed on the third floor of the Exposition Building. There daring mortals could buy rides about the floor of the building at five cents each. As an added stimulus to interest in the new vehicle, races were arranged with "Baby Bliss," a four-hundred-pound bicycle rider, who was demonstrating a certain make of bicycle. Apparently they ended in a draw. At the conclusion of the show Sturgess remained in Minneapolis for several days to give leading citizens rides about the city.<sup>6</sup>

Another early machine that was demonstrated in the Minneapolis area was a gasoline model from Kokomo, Indiana. In reminiscences published many years later, Hall recalled its appearance in 1895, stating that it "chugged like a steamboat coming upstream." In the same year a few automobiles were driven about the streets of Minneapolis for other than exhibition purposes. Swan J. Turnblad, publisher of the *Svenska-Amerikanska Posten* of Minneapolis, had one. Another pioneer motorist was E. J. Phelps of the Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce.<sup>7</sup>

As has been suggested, many of the early models were steam powered, and for several years after the turn of the century

<sup>5</sup> *Crow Bar* (Minneapolis), vol. 4, no. 2, p. 12, no. 5, p. 7-11 (August, November, 1895). This periodical was known as the *Automotive Journal* after 1925.

<sup>6</sup> Smith B. Hall, "How the Automobile Came to Minneapolis," in *The Gopher-M* (Minneapolis), January, 1926, p. 15, 50.

<sup>7</sup> Hall, in *Gopher-M*, January, 1926.

steam cars competed favorably with electric and gasoline-powered machines. In 1898 Charles Whaley, who was a partner in a bicycle specialties manufacturing shop, constructed a gasoline car in his shop at Fourth and Exchange streets in St. Paul. Late in the fall, a tryout was made, and lest the appearance of the horseless wonder should cause runaways, the test was set for eleven o'clock at night. Despite a successful trial run in Rice Park, the vehicle proved to be unreliable, and its owner discovered that whenever he took it out he had an even chance of having to take it back to the starting point with horse power. It is claimed that Dr. I. E. Sigveland, a St. Paul dentist, was the first owner of a successful gasoline car in that city. He bought a Winton, probably the first commercially manufactured make in America, in 1899. Late in the same year H. D. West of the West Publishing Company bought the first steam automobile to be owned in St. Paul. After a few days' trial, however, the machine was shipped to California.<sup>8</sup> The first to introduce the electric carriage to the Minnesota capital was J. George Smith, who bought his machine, a Waverley, in 1900 at a cost of \$1,500. Visitors to the Minnesota Historical Society's museum may still see this machine, as Mr. Smith later donated it to the society.

The attitude of the public was not at all favorable to the new conveyances. One has only to skim through files of periodicals, even as late as 1908, to find the value of the motorcar questioned and considerable opinion expressed to the effect that the automobile was unlikely to come into general use. In 1900 there was much skepticism about all types of cars as successful competitors of the horse and the bicycle. At the end of an Elks' parade held in St. Paul were three automobiles, which proceeded jerkily along the streets, no doubt derided by many and viewed by only a very few as a portent of changes to come.<sup>9</sup>

At first the inventor was also demonstrator and salesman, but it was not long before enterprising businessmen began to take on automobile agencies. In the advertising section of the *Northwestern Lancet* for April 1, 1903, there appeared a description of the Jaxon

<sup>8</sup> *Dispatch*, March 31, 1939.

<sup>9</sup> Hall, in *Gopher-M*, January, 1926.

and the Shelby touring cars, which were advertised by the K. C. Hay Press and Machinery Company of Minneapolis. These details were offered about one of them: "Light Touring Car," with "French design" body, "Dunlop detachable tires," and "Seven horsepower gasoline motor." In the issue of the same publication for May 1, 1903, an advertisement of the Waterless Knox, "the Ideal Doctor's Carriage," was accompanied by an illustration of this paragon of motor-cars. A catalogue and testimonials were offered by the Northwestern Motor Vehicle Company located on South Sixth Street in Minneapolis.

Other cars once seen and advertised have long ago joined the also-rans. Nevertheless, in 1908 one could read in the Pence Automobile Company's two-column advertisement, which extended for almost a third of a page in a Sunday edition of the *Minneapolis Journal*, of "The wonderful Buick, \$1250.00. . . . Minnesota, North and South Dakota fairly swarm with Buick cars," the advertisement continued, "and there will be more of them sold in the Northwest this year than all other makes combined. People are tired of buying questionable cars and junk—buy a Buick and take no chances."<sup>10</sup> For those who could not contact a dealer and who wanted an inexpensive car, the Sears followed the Sears and Roebuck Company's catalogue into remote areas, as many people recall.

Just as the price of used automobiles is now regulated, so in 1907 an attempt was made to control prices of used cars when Minneapolis dealers tried to set up a plan for their regulation. In one remarkable deal, a car was traded for about fifty bushels of oats. The owner of a machine was unable to stop it as he drove into his barn and went through the rear wall, wrecking both the car and the building. A neighboring farmer exchanged the grain for the machine as it stood, extricated it, repaired it, and used it successfully for some ten years.<sup>11</sup>

No one today pays any attention to the woman driver who is not blocking traffic, but forty years ago she was a figure no less amazing than the machine which she drove. A writer contributing to the

<sup>10</sup> *Minneapolis Journal*, January 5, 1908.

<sup>11</sup> *Chronicle of the Automotive Industry*, 1906; *Dispatch*, March 31, 1939.

"Public Opinion" column of the *Outlook* was most uncomplimentary. He declared that "The natural training of woman is not in the direction to allow her to properly manipulate an automobile in emergencies. She is not trained to think of two things at once." One staunch champion who wrote in behalf of the ladies was Mrs. Andrew Cuneo. Under the title, "Why There Are So Few Women Automobilists," she defended her sex. She explained that she had successfully owned and operated seven cars, at least one of which she had also successfully serviced. Between 1902 and 1908, Mrs. Cuneo related, she had driven her various cars a total of eighty thousand miles. Among the reasons she advanced for the scarcity of women drivers were that cars were poorly adapted to use by women; that women lacked the strength necessary to attend to tire troubles which beset all drivers, regardless of sex; that other drivers, especially cab and truck drivers, took delight in unnerving the woman behind the wheel; and that women lacked confidence. Mrs. Cuneo's method of repairing her car offers an interesting sidelight on some of the work done by both men and women owners who relied on their own efforts to keep their machines on the road. She revealed that when she changed tires, she spread a two-yard square of rubber sheeting or a lap robe on the ground and worked without ruining her clothes. If she had a tank of compressed air a woman could inflate tires, Mrs. Cuneo contended, and it was possible for her to change a tire or a tube "almost as well as a man."<sup>12</sup>

Minnesota, of course, was not without its intrepid ladies. Many people can still remember the first woman driver in their locality. In letters to the *St. Paul Dispatch*, Mrs. John Grove, a one-time resident of St. Paul who later lived in Morris, told of her experiences as a pioneer driver in St. Paul in 1900 or 1901. Her husband, a real-estate dealer, accepted a gasoline car as a first payment on a farm. As everyone at the real-estate office was too busy to run the machine, Mrs. Grove had Charlie Joy, another early motorist, teach her how to drive it. In Mrs. Grove's own words, "My gasoline car was almost a steam engine. We had to generate the gas by lighting

<sup>12</sup> *Outlook*, 92: 859 (August 7, 1909); *Country Life in America*, 13: 515 (May, 1908).

a small quantity in a metal pan. We always had to carry a leather pail for water, and I remember once on the Sixth Street hill when the car stopped and Mr. Grove had to get boys to carry water. He never did learn to run the car, as it was an engineer's job. When I went out in the car and stopped, a crowd always gathered to watch me start the engine again and to see a woman drive. We have had many cars since but none so attractive to the public, young and old." To dwellers in Red Wing, Mrs. T. B. Sheldon in her fine carriage car was a familiar sight in 1908.<sup>13</sup>

Probably all of us have seen pictures similar to those which filled the women's magazines and other publications in the first decade of the motorcar era. They depict proper feminine attire for motoring, with long motor veils of georgette or chiffon to swathe head and face, motor bonnets, billowing dusters of linen or other dust-repellant material, and gloves. For the men, too, a special outfit was recommended if they would be well dressed. From one writer we learn that the costume might include a three-quarter length coat of corduroy. A really costly model might be reversible and waterproof. For wet weather, a longer coat equipped with rubber yoke and body or a kidskin coat was suggested. For mild days, single-breasted dusters with Eton collars and patch pockets were approved. These might be made of linen, pongee, chambray, or mohair. Regarding caps, it was stated that "Recent models are so constructed that by pulling the visor downward, the goggles, attached to the crown, adjust themselves over the eyes."<sup>14</sup>

The motorist might observe or ignore fashions in clothes, but he soon found that he could not ignore the many differing suggestions, laws, and licensing regulations that appeared to govern his activities. It was not until after the beginning of the twentieth century that the status of the motorcar was seriously considered by state lawmakers. The problem of licensing early reared its head. In Minnesota a regulatory act provided that automobiles, as well as motorcycles, must be licensed by the state boiler inspector in the county

<sup>13</sup> *Dispatch*, April 7, 1939. Information about Mrs. Sheldon's car was received from a former resident of Red Wing, Miss Miriam Compton of Minneapolis.

<sup>14</sup> F. T. Frazer, "Auto Clothes for Men," in *Country Life in America*, 10: 700-702 (October, 1906).

where the automobile was owned, and that the license should be painted on the back of the car in figures at least four and a half inches high.<sup>15</sup> Those who wish may see license number 1 for Ramsey County in the museum of the Minnesota Historical Society. It was made out in May, 1903, to R. C. Wright, owner of a Packard car. The Kandiyohi County Historical Society has in its possession a license issued, under the authority granted to Minnesota "Inspectors of Steam Vessels and Steam Boilers," to Lars Halvorson of that county on October 21, 1903. In a letter to the writer, Mr. Martin Leaf of Willmar, president of the society, says that the license was never on the car, but was made of cardboard and could be attached to the vehicle if necessary.

State automobile licenses were first issued in Minnesota in 1907. The fee was a dollar and a half for a three-year period. Prior to 1907, when metal plates were first issued, the owner of a car often went to a harness shop, got a piece of heavy leather, procured some house number numerals, and, combining the two, made his own license plate. When state licensing began, there were only about five hundred automobiles in the entire state.<sup>16</sup>

Those who traveled from state to state complained of great variation in laws governing motorcars. Michigan was rated, in 1905, as having "probably the most satisfactory automobile laws in the United States," while Missouri was said by one writer to have "the most unfair, obnoxious, and absurd laws for the regulation of automobiles."<sup>17</sup>

In common with those of other states, early Minnesota laws for motor vehicles prescribed a very slow rate of speed in settled communities and a higher rate in rural areas. The regulatory act mentioned previously permitted a speed of eight miles per hour in cities and twenty-five miles elsewhere. Any motorist on a public road was required to halt his machine whenever the driver of a horse-drawn rig signalled. When there was danger of collision, the motorist was instructed to ring a bell or blow a horn. The first of a long, long line of American motorists to be arrested on charges of speed-

<sup>15</sup> Minnesota, *General Laws*, 1903, p. 647.

<sup>16</sup> Mike Holm, Minnesota secretary of state, to the writer, October 13, 1944.

<sup>17</sup> "Unjust Automobile Laws," in *Outing Magazine*, 46: 639 (August, 1905).



ing was Thomas H. Shevlin of Minneapolis. In 1902 he was fined ten dollars for allegedly driving more than ten miles per hour.<sup>18</sup>

The need for safety signals was discussed rather early in the century, as observers pointed out that the mere tooting of a horn was confusing. It was recommended that signals should be standardized and made known to pedestrians as well as to drivers. Part of a code based on trolley bell warnings, proposed by one writer, follows: "One blast of a horn, 'I will stop. You go on'; two blasts, 'Stop. I am going on'; three blasts, 'I am about to back up. Get out of the way.'" Various combinations of long and short blasts were to indicate left turns, passing, right turns, and the like. A signal for another driver to stop and give aid or advice also was suggested.<sup>19</sup>

With the gasoline shortage and tire rationing the chief problems of modern highway users, it is hard to realize that every trip beyond city limits, and sometimes even those within cities, was something of an adventure forty years ago. Roads were generally bad, and city streets often were little better. Filling stations, repair shops, and eating places did not dot the countryside; no convenient American Automobile Association service was, at first, available. In a Minnesota publication, the *Crow Bar*, we can read: "Blacksmiths are the only auto-repairers in many towns. It's up to you." And again, "The country blacksmith who is out after the elusive, almighty dollar has taken to automobile repairing to a greater or less degree, just as a few years back he took on bicycle repairing."<sup>20</sup>

In addition to the likelihood that the automobilist would have to carry out the popular cry of the day, "Get out and get under," he faced the possibility of getting stuck on muddy roads or streets. In 1908 the street railway company operated its cars on many unpaved streets in Minneapolis. In stormy weather, most motorists preferred to drive along the car tracks, for if they were stalled the transport company would have to aid them. One Minneapolis physician frankly told an engineer for the company that he always carried in

<sup>18</sup> *General Laws*, 1903, p. 646; *Chronicle of the Automotive Industry*, 1902.

<sup>19</sup> Harry B. Haines, "Standardizing Safety Signals for Automobiles," in *Country Life in America*, 8: 285 (July, 1905).

<sup>20</sup> *Crow Bar*, vol. 14, no. 9, p. 15 (September, 1905); vol. 16, no. 2, p. 16 (February, 1907).

his automobile a length of rope that the motormen could use in extricating the machine from the mud when necessary.<sup>21</sup>

Trips of any length took on something of the nature of an exploring expedition, for until well into the twentieth century road guides were not published for the Midwest, and even when they were, highway markers and signboards were lacking. Typical of the directions the pioneer motorist had available — when he had any — are those given with a Minnesota road map of 1914. For a twenty-six mile trip from Red Wing to Hastings, the driver was instructed to set his mileage gauge at zero upon leaving the Goodhue County Courthouse, and to go northwest on East Avenue, past the post office on the left and the library on the right. Upon reaching Main Street he was adjured to “bend right,” cross the railroad, and thence be guided by a series of landmarks, including factories, bridges, railroad tracks, cemeteries, forks in the road, churches, and schools — all at stated distances on his gauge — until, with good luck, he should reach Hastings.<sup>22</sup>

In its pioneering days, motoring was truly a sport. A fraternity based on mutual assistance seems to have grown up among the drivers of the early years. But with the increase in their numbers it has almost vanished, never to return.

<sup>21</sup> P. W. Gerhardt to the writer, November 18, 1944.

<sup>22</sup> *Scarborough's Road Map and Motor Guide of Minnesota* (Indianapolis, 1914).



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