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ACROSS THE ISLAND

New Details Heard On McKay Automobile

By NEIL A. MATHESON

I HAVE some further information on the McKay automobiles which I discussed several months ago here after talking with Reg McKay, Poplar Point whose people were involved in the manufacture.

John de Bondt, Ottawa was one of those who wrote to me about the old car – he writes about old cars for MacLean's and the Globe and Mail – and his following correspondence with Mr. McKay brought an interesting article on the McKay Car written by William H. McCurdy, which Mr. McKay has kindly passed on to me. The McCurdy story appeared in "Reflector", bi-monthly magazine of the Antique and Classic Car Club of Canada, Toronto.

Mr. de Bondt, incidentally, is now working on a book "Early Canadian Automobiles". His address is 235 Somerset Street West, Apartment 1201, Ottawa 4, Ottawa, in case any old car buffs here want to get in touch with him.

Though the McKay brothers, John and Dan, and later Stanley, who came from Bridgetown, P.E.I. were the central figures, a number of Nova Scotians were involved in the car manufacture and in financing the automobile building venture.

It's interesting to me that the financing in the early 1900's involved raising of some \$2,000,000, and that would be a tremendously large amount in those far-off years.

It All Began In 1868

IT ALL began, Mr. McCurdy's research indicated, when in 1868 a group of Kentville, N.S. businessmen formed the Nova Scotia Carriage Company. The goal was the manufacture of horse-drawn carriages, sleighs and slovens of all sizes, shapes and models. Business began to slacken off, after early successes, when more and more cars were coming onto Nova Scotia roads.

Jack and Dan McKay were living in Kentville in 1908 when they rented the facilities of the carriage company. They hired Archie Pelton, A Berwick, N. S. native who had learned something about internal combustion engines in the U.S.A. How he learned about the insides of an automobile engine is a story in itself.

In 1904 he and a Kentville merchant, Mr. Porter, went to the first automobile show in New York. They bought two curved-dash Oldsmobiles and then had them shipped to N.S. The cars were brought to Halifax and sold, but first Pelton took one completely apart to learn what made it tick.

It was about 1910 though, that the McKay brothers finally got to the serious business of automobile manufacturing. They fashioned their car after the Penn automobile – it was built in Pennsylvania – with local modifications.

Pelton bought Buda engines, Bendix rear ends and other parts that made up the chassis for a car. He bought enough for 25 automobile chassis assemblies.

At first the bodies were built onto wooden frames. Later the frames were also made of steel. Stan McKay had joined his two brothers at Kentville, his previous experience had been as a blacksmith.

Car Prices Are Cited

SOME CARS were built at Kentville. But in 1912 a group of Amherst businessmen interested McKay brothers in relocating their automobile manufacturing in that little border town.

The new company was the Nova Scotia Carriage and Motor Car Company Ltd. and a large plant was built. The 240 by 60 foot plant was four stories high.

The new building sagged badly at one corner and it was not until the winter of 1912-13 that the machinery was moved to Amherst.

The intention at Amherst had been to build "hundreds of automobiles". They looked forward to the day when they would be building 1,000 cars a year, with 1,500 employees. They had built only about 65 cars at Kentville with some 50 employees, McCurdy reports.

At Amherst the company produced two models. It ceased operation in 1914 and the outbreak of war was a contributing factor. There was the 130-horsepower H.P. torpedo coupe sold for \$1,450 and the larger model for \$2050 FOB Amherst. The cars were expensive, "too expensive for the majority of the motoring public in N.S.", McCurdy suggests. There were about 125 cars in all, at Kentville and Amherst, McCurdy estimates.

But I note with interest the effort made to distribute the McKay cars across the country.

In 1911, Dan McKay, sales manager, had driven a McKay car 2,600 miles from Kentville, N.S. to Regina, Saskatchewan. The aim was to set up McKay dealerships across Canada as they travelled. The car that made the trip was purchased in Saskatoon and later used as a service car in Medicine Hat.

Archie Pelton who travelled to Regina with McKay used to boast later that they carried Kentville air in their tires to Regina. They carried three spare tires and did not require any more changes on the long journey.

That must have been a real accomplishment back in the days when tire changing was much a part of a motorist's life.

Problems Cropped Up

THERE WERE many problems in the early days of car manufacture, Pelton told of some of them, McCurdy reports.

After the first batch of McKay cars had been assembled, the engines mounted and the rear wheels put in place it was found that the drive shafts were too short.

A local foundry was called in to get the company out of that predicament.

When the first three cars were assembled the wheels were found to be the wrong size. The cars sat on blocks for about three weeks until new wheels arrived.

Tires for the roadster were 32 by three and one-third inch, quick detachable type. Tires for the touring car were 35 by four inch, quick detachable.

The dash was fancy – it was made of mahogany. The clutch was “leather cased, pressed steel cone”.

The ignition was “High tension system batteries and Briggs magneto, guaranteed for life, one set of wiring and spark plugs, very simple”.

There are many details that would be interesting to a car mechanic, or an antique car buff. There were two gas-lamps as headlights.

The magazine story says the McKay cars won a number of races in which they participated. One race from Halifax to Yarmouth was sponsored by the Halifax Herald, 210 miles, and return via the South Shore which was 215 additional miles. Open to all cars, it was won by a McKay car driven by a Mr. Beacraft.

Kinkora CWL Visit Enjoyed

IT SEEMED like a visit with old friends when the five ladies from the Kinkora CWL visited Mrs. Matheson at the “Special Care” section in the Provincial Sanatorium building recently. The ladies were too young for me to know personally – ladies are always young, it seems – but I knew their kinfolk in some cases, and in others enjoyed a chat with them anyway. Mrs. Matheson also enjoyed their visit. It was lucky for me that I happened to be visiting her when they arrived.

The visitors were Mrs. G. M. Trainor, Shamrock, Mrs. James Hammil, Bedeque, Mrs. John Roberts, Middleton, Mrs. John Johnson, Middleton and Mrs. Charles Murphy, Newton.