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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Islanders Built Cars At Amherst

By NEIL A. MATHESON

I'VE HAD several references to the McKay automobile which was built by Prince Edward Islanders more than one half century ago.

Thanks to R.S.(Reg) McKay, Poplar Point, I now have some details on this automobile and the men who built it. The builders were Reg's father and uncles.

"My grandfather, Lauchie McKay, an old-time carriage builder came to Bridgetown as a young married man and taught the carriage building trade to practically all the builders in Kings County at the time," he said. This would be in the middle 1850s, Mr. McKay believes. (A picture of the McKay car will be seen elsewhere in this issue.)

It was his sons who became the makers of the McKay car. Jack and Stanley were the car makers and "my father, Stanley McKay, was the plant superintendent". Stanley had learned his trade as a blacksmith, the other boys were carriage builders like their father.

The brothers first opened a carriage building shop at Souris. There they built driving wagons, jaunting sleighs, wood sleighs, bob sleighs, express wagons and truck wagons. They did not build carts as their father was building them at the time in Bridgetown.

After perhaps three years in Souris the three McKay brothers went to Kentville, Nova Scotia where they set up a carriage building plant and started to build carriages and sleighs.

Several years later they moved to Amherst where they built the McKay automobile. Reg thinks that perhaps one of the brothers remained behind at Kentville, though he is not sure of that.

First Cars Built Around 1910

THEY STARTED to build the cars in 1910 or in 1911 and closed down the plant when war broke out in August of 1914. Meanwhile they had kept the carriage building plant going in Kentville.

The McKay car was an assembled automobile, Reg told me. They purchased the engine from Minnesota, U.S.A.

The McKay brothers build the body and the framework at Amherst but they purchased the transmissions and differentials, for example. These items were purchased from people who specialized in such things. The same thing is done to some extent by modern motor car manufacturers.

Touring And Sport Models

MCKAY BROTHERS built two models. A touring car was built in the first year. The second year they built a sports model.

There was a big, round gasoline tank in the rear, he recalls. The car carried four to five spare tires. The problem of keeping tires on the car was a very real part of the early difficulties of motoring.

The McKays built about 250 automobiles in the three years. Reg does not recall what the prices were, but he thinks they were somewhat comparable to the McLaughlin cars that were built about the same time. McLaughlin also had been a carriage builder prior to the days of automobiles.

Following the close down of the McKay car plant, Dan went to work with the McLaughlin people as Maritime sales manager. Jack McKay went to Kentville where he had a carriage and automobile distributorship for the McLaughlin Company. There was no manufacturing done there.

Stanley McKay had enlisted in the Engineers after war broke out. He was in that first German gas attack, like many other Canadians, but he survived it.

Shell Hit Barrel Of Spikes

STANLEY WAS wounded later when a German shell hit a barrel of railway spikes and drove one of them into his hip.

Following the war, Stanley went to Adanac in Saskatchewan, which is 40 miles south of North Battleford. He was there for about 10 years before his hip started to give him real trouble. He went to Christie Street veterans hospital in Toronto where he died.

The first car Reg McKay recalls having seen in this province was a Pope-Hartford. The driver stopped the car once at Bridgetown school and asked if someone could bring him some water for the radiator. A number of the scholars, including Reg went to the spring - it was over a hill from the school, perhaps 100 yards away – got the water and filled the radiator.

The first automobile repair shop, Reg remembers on the Island, was run by a man named Herman. He also had the agency for the Model-T Ford, or someone had it in Mr. Herman's building.

Black Friday Was COLD

LINCOLN DEWAR has been told that the Black Friday in this province's history was on February 8, 1861. The temperature was 38 degrees below zero and there was a strong wind blowing, the old story says.

The "Black Friday" reference reminds me of the day back in 1934, or 1935, I believe, when E.T. Higgs, a Charlottetown businessman walked into the old Patriot Office holding a copy of that day's Patriot at arm's length in front of him.

In the strong and deep voice Mr. Higgs possessed, he said: "This will go down in history as the Black Friday of Prince Edward Island."

The Stewart-MacMillan government was in power and the Patriot had reported the year's deficit in screaming headlines. Mr. Higgs was adding just a bit of emphasis to the debt story. I cannot recall, now, what the debt increase was at the time, but it would be insignificant to the \$77 million which Premier Campbell listed as the present debt in a television talk this week.