

PITTSBURGH, THE STEEL

❖ *and (Once)* ❖

MOTOR CITY

By Dr. Peter C. Zubritzky



A service car in front of the Motor Car Company in McKees Rocks, just west of downtown Pittsburgh, c. 1915.

HSWP Library & Archives, GPC Box 20, Folder 3

Western Pennsylvania at the turn of the 20th century was a paradox of the old and new. Farms surrounded the coal mines and the steel mills. To the north, oil fields were producing thousands of gallons of lubricants for greasing the machinery of progress and the burgeoning automobile trade. Pittsburgh and the region had everything at their disposal to manufacture automobiles: a vast network of roads and railways; an active river transportation system to move raw materials in and finished products out; and a large, mostly skilled labor force that produced all the elements needed for the manufacture of autos such as iron, steel, glass, paint, and refined oil. Some of the largest companies of the world were headquartered in the area including Carnegie Steel, Westinghouse Electric, Gulf Oil, Pittsburgh Plate Glass, and Standard Steel Car.



This brochure for the Standard Steel Car Co. listed Pittsburgh as its home, though the cars were built in Butler, Pa.

As automobiles became more reliable and manufacturing innovations brought retail prices within the reach of most working people, Americans went car-crazy. Hundreds of auto manufacturers sprang up to build cars for the masses. Pittsburgh had at least 25 automobile manufacturing companies, with at least 50 more in the surrounding area. Many were flashes in the pan and produced few, if any, automobiles, but several had greater longevity.

The first locally built horseless carriage was the Mills Steamer. Isaac Mills built just one in 1876 to deliver his building supplies to on-the-site jobs. Vehicles of this era were more engine-powered machine than automobile. Suggestions as to the actual location have been made but there is no definitive evidence.



1928 Chrysler

Walter Chrysler

Walter Chrysler began his rise to fame in automobile manufacturing as plant manager for the American Locomotive Company, Beaver Avenue, on Pittsburgh's North Side. He lived on North Harrison Avenue in Bellevue from 1908 until 1911, when Charles Nash (who was instrumental in forming Buick Motors with brothers William and David Dunbar Buick in 1903) came to town to interview him. Buick was the cornerstone marque of General Motors; Nash (who later formed Nash Motors) was Buick's first president and general manager. Nash was impressed with Chrysler's management methods, and during a historic meeting at the Fort Pitt Hotel in December 1911, Walter Chrysler agreed to be the works manager at Buick in Flint, Mich. In 1917, he became Buick's president, and in 1919, General Motor's first vice-president in charge of production. A year later, at age 45, he retired from GM a multimillionaire, then in 1924, formed the Chrysler Corporation out of the bankrupt Maxwell Motors.

Steam, however, remained the power of choice as automobiles developed. Steam was noted for its cleanliness, plus its power source – water – was available everywhere. Even though many steam boilers were fired up by kerosene, both kerosene and water were plentiful in the country. Steam technology was also widely used in locomotives, turbines, and tractors, while gasoline engine technology was still in its infancy. Gasoline itself was only available at random general stores, blacksmiths, and drug stores, and it was not until 1913 that Pittsburgh-based Gulf Oil opened the first architect-designed, drive-in gas station in 1913 (in Pittsburgh's "automobile row" on Baum Boulevard at St. Clair Street).

The first steamer in this area was the Artzberger Steam Car. William H. Artzberger purchased the Foster Steam Car Company of Rochester, N.Y., which was in receivership, and moved operations to Cedar Avenue in Allegheny City, now Pittsburgh's North Side. Artzberger lengthened the wheelbase and produced a dual seat surrey with tiller steering. The steamer (a working model of which still exists in the Artzberger family of Pittsburgh) raced regularly in the area. In one race in Highland Park, the Artzberger steamer blew away the competition of Stanley and White steamers. Despite its racing success, production never went beyond 1904.

Around the same time, D.N. Seely, the local representative for motorcars like Oldsmobile, Locomobile, and Winton, built his Seely Steamer on the corner of Baum Boulevard and Beatty Street. He already had a large showroom to sell other autos, and in 1901 began building special-order Seely Surreys (production numbers are not known). In 1903, he sold his business to a



This 1903 brochure reprint for the Foster Steam Wagon bragged to prospective customers that the car won a silver cup in a hill-climbing contest on June 20, 1903, on the steep Serpentine Drive in Pittsburgh's Highland Park.



Autocar Type Vs in 1900, the year the company moved to eastern Pennsylvania.

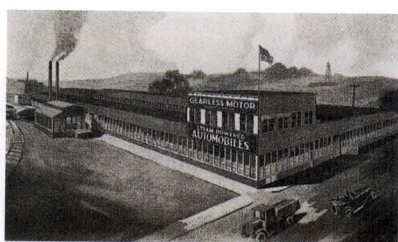
partner and the Seely became the Standard Steamer of Pittsburgh. Standard Motors likewise built special-order steamers and sold other brands of autos.

Another steamer of note was the Gearless, which began production in 1919 by Gearless Motor Corporation. Beautiful styling with a pair of 2-cylinder steam engines made for a powerful ride. However, with prices beginning at \$2,500, the Gearless never quite reached production quotas. Just a handful were built as prototypes to entice investors and potential dealers. In a bad turn of events, several of the company's officers were indicted on stock fraud, and Gearless closed its doors in 1922. By then, steamers had overcome some of the problems of complex plumbing and long start-up time, but were doomed by the cheapness of gasoline and the easy operation of gasoline engines.

A major drawback of steam cars was the long heat-up time – sometimes 45 minutes. Electric cars started instantly and usually went farther for a recharge than a steamer before needing a refill (though, like today, had their own drawbacks due to weight and usable distance). Electric sales peaked at the turn of the century, outselling all other types of cars. They were marketed primarily towards women as easy to operate, pollution-free, and needing little maintenance. Most were beautifully appointed with feminine touches like flower bud vases, vanity mirrors, and luxurious upholstery.

Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company of East Pittsburgh entered into the foray of automobile manufacturing in 1901. The company built battery-powered electric carriages and buses until 1905, when it began building gas-powered cars. They were designed in Pittsburgh specifically for the hills and mountains, but were built in Westinghouse's LeHavre, France, facility. Production ceased in fall 1907 due to the cost of shipping the completed vehicles across the ocean.

Another local electric car was the Synnestvedt, the idea of transplanted Chicago attorney Paul Synnestvedt. The rugged little car was built on Liberty Avenue from 1904 to 1905. Synnestvedt stopped building cars in 1905 to switch to commercial trucks and buses, continuing until 1907. His cars and trucks had a top speed of 20 miles per hour and a charged distance of about 50 miles. Tests proved his claims that they could climb the hills of Western Pennsylvania as well as any gas-powered vehicle of the time. Even Thomas Edison tried to design a better battery for electric cars, testing them by ascending Mount Washington.



Gearless Motor Corporation, headquartered at 115 – 127 Flavel St. in Pittsburgh, built its cars in Washington, Pa.



Henry Clay Frick's steam carriage parked at the Pittsburgh Country Club. In 1908, the club voted to provide parking behind the clubhouse because too many automobiles were being parked at the front entrance.

HSWP Library & Archives, PSS4-B1-F14

Autocar, a manufacturer of tractor-trailer trucks, can trace its beginnings to Pittsburgh. The Pittsburgh Motor Vehicle Company began manufacturing gasoline-powered, three-wheeled and four-wheeled buggies on Ferry Street in 1897. The Clark brothers – Lewis, James, and John – built autos and delivery trucks using the trade name of “Pittsburgh.” In 1900, they moved the company to Ardmore in eastern Pennsylvania and concentrated on building heavy-duty trucks with shaft drives (versus unreliable chains) to power the rear wheels. The Clarks changed the company name to Autocar. That plant closed long ago, and ownership has changed numerous times, but Autocar trucks hold the distinction of having the oldest vehicle nameplate in continuous production in the United States.

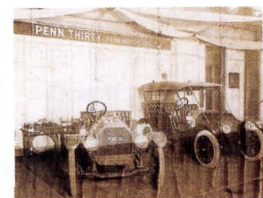
The introduction of Henry Ford’s Model T in 1908 and its mass production forever moved the auto industry away from numerous, smaller, local producers. But the Model T, too, had a Pittsburgh connection. To keep up with demand and to more efficiently spread the car across the country, Ford Motor Company opened satellite assembly plants where knocked-down cars were shipped and built for local distribution. In late 1913, a building was constructed as a Model T assembly plant on the corner of Baum Boulevard and Morewood Avenue, an area known as Pittsburgh’s

“automobile row” for the many dealerships and manufacturers there. Ford assembled cars in this four-story building until 1932, when the facility closed due to lagging sales.

A few local manufacturers shined briefly in the teens. Penn Motors made the Penn 30 and Penn Comet from 1911-1912; from the ashes of its bankruptcy came the Pennsy (1916 to 1918), powered by several variations of Lycoming engines manufactured in Lycoming, Pa. Horsepower ranged from 30 to 45 in four- and six-cylinder versions respectively. The “Pride of Pittsburgh,” as it was advertised, became a victim of cheap-er competition and was out of production by January 1919.

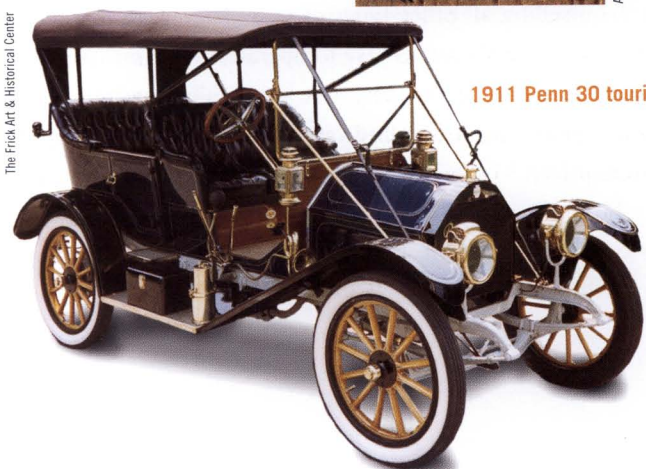
Other local firms of this era did little more than organize to build autos, among them Iron City Motors (1904), Iverson (1908), Alpine (1912), and Dixon (1917). A few like the Duquesne Motor Car Company (1912-1913) produced assembled cars with parts from other manufacturers. Employee Frank Morse then produced his own car from 1914 to 1916. The Morse Cycle Car was little more than a slim body around a motorcycle engine. It carried only two passengers front to back, but, powered by a two-cylinder, 9-horsepower engine, it achieved some success.

Penn-brand autos at the New York Auto Show in the Commodore Hotel, 1912



Author

The Frick Art & Historical Center



1911 Penn 30 touring Car

1931 American
Austin coupe



The Frick Art & Historical Center, photo Rob Long

The Standard Steel Car Company of Butler, maker of railcars, was one of the few makers to survive the teens with the production of a luxury automobile called the Standard from 1914 to 1922. These finely-appointed vehicles were powered by either an inline six- or eight-cylinder engine. Large and powerful, the Standard was touted as the “Monarch of the Mountains” in company advertising. Production topped 2,500 in 1917, but sales fell due to competition from other luxury makers like the three “P’s” – Packard, Peerless, and Pierce-Arrow. Standard divested its car business; its expensive manufacturing facility was sold 10 years later to the American Austin Company.

By then, the most popular car in Great Britain was the compact Austin Seven. When Austins were licensed to be manufactured in America, the leaders of Butler convinced the British firm that their town had the necessary skilled laborers and proximity to Pittsburgh’s steel mills. American Austins were manufactured in Butler from 1930 to 1934. The beautiful styling by Count Alexis de Sakhnoffsky, 15-horsepower engine (claiming 30 miles-per-gallon), and 75-inch wheelbase made the Austin a favorite of celebrities like Al Jolson, Buster Keaton, the Our Gang children, and Ernest Hemingway. Circuses also purchased Austins for use as clown cars. Today, these cars would be classified as sub-compact and would be embraced by the public, but 1930s America was not ready for these tiny, fuel-efficient autos. In addition, at \$450, the cars were priced \$5 more than the larger Ford Model A, relatively cheap but still quite a lot in the Depression. As a result, the American Austin went the way of hundreds of other independent automobile companies in the 1930s: into bankruptcy.

Frick Car and Carriage Museum

The Car and Carriage Museum at the Frick Art & Historical Center houses an impressive collection of carriages and more than 20 automobiles made or used in Western Pennsylvania. Many of the vehicles are from the collection of the late local automobile collector and historian G. Whitney Snyder.

A special show through year’s end celebrates the 100th anniversaries of Ford and Buick and includes a 1904 Ford touring car, a 1906 Buick Roadster Model G, a 1953 Buick Roadmaster Skylark convertible, a 1959 Ford retractable hardtop, and a display of vintage toy cars.

Open Tuesday – Saturday 10-5,
Sunday 12-6. Admission free.

www.frickart.org/features/ccm
(412) 371-0600.



The Frick Art & Historical Center

1963 Corvette Stingray

The 1963 Corvette Stingray was another car with a Pittsburgh connection. William T. (Bill) Mitchell, who worked under the famous Harley Earl as a car designer and later became vice-president of design at General Motors, majored in engineering at Carnegie Institute of Technology in the mid-1920s. Born in Cleveland but raised in Pennsylvania, Mitchell's father was a Pennsylvania Buick dealer and Bill loved to draw automobiles. He dropped out of Carnegie Tech to attend the Art Students' League in New York to learn automotive

styling. He was hired by GM in 1935 to work as a designer in the newly formed Color and Art Department under its first

vice-president of styling, Harley Earl. A year later Mitchell was the chief designer at Cadillac. He succeeded Earl as GM's second vice-president of styling in 1959 and held that position until 1977 when he retired. Mitchell was instrumental in the design of the 1938 Cadillac, the 1963 Chevrolet Corvette Stingray, the 1963 Buick Riviera, the 1967 Eldorado, and many more GM cars of the 1960s and '70s.



Corvettes Unlimited

1940 Bantam
Convertible



The Frick Art & Historical Center

In 1938, the American Bantam Automobile Company emerged from receivership and was purchased by Roy Evans. Production of the new Bantam began in September 1937 with a fresh restyling by de Sakhnoffsky. The Bantam line included attractive coupes, convertibles, delivery vans, and a woody station wagon, but Americans were not buying compact cars. To help sales, the company diversified in 1938 by building Supercargo trailers. They were well-made and very popular in the trucking trade, but it was still not enough to bolster revenues into black ink. Bantam was in serious trouble.

In 1940, with war clouds looming in Europe, the U.S. Army sent a request to American car manufacturers for a light, four-wheel drive, general-purpose reconnaissance vehicle. American Bantam was the only company to complete their design requirements and deliver a prototype on time for field-testing. The Army invited other car companies to view the test and literally tried to break the tough little car. The Army was so impressed that it placed an order for more Bantams, also known as the Jeep, the beloved car that arguably helped the Allies win World War II and started the sport utility vehicle craze.


Because the Bantam facilities were small, the Army also contracted Ford Motor Company and Willys Motors to produce the Jeep. These two companies built the majority of the Jeeps. The few Bantam Jeeps built were lend-leased to the Soviet Union and almost none survived the war. As a consolation to Bantam Motors for its lost manufacturing rights, the military had it build trailers

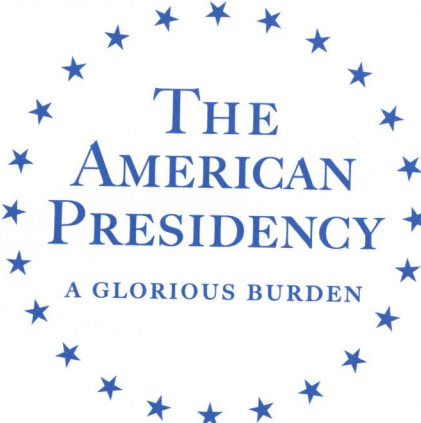
for the Jeeps. After the war, Willys trademarked the Jeep name and claimed design rights. Civilian versions were made too, but the basic design was actually attributed to the Butler-based car company in a lawsuit initiated and won by Bantam. But it was a hollow victory, and after the war, Bantam never produced autos again. The company continued to build the Supercargo trailers until closing all manufacturing in 1956, when Armco Steel purchased the plant. Vehicle production had finally ceased in Western Pennsylvania. Its connection to the auto industry would continue as a supplier of raw materials, and like dozens of other cities, would look to its auto manufacturing days as a footnote to Detroit's dominance. *

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MONDAY, FEBRUARY 9
7:30 - 8:30 p.m.
*The American Presidency:
The Challenge of Interpreting
the Presidency*
Lonnie Bunch, President and CEO,
Chicago Historical Society and
co-curator of *The American Presidency:
A Glorious Burden*

MONDAY, MARCH 1
7:30 - 8:30 p.m.
*Where History Lives: A Tour
of the White House*
Peter Argentine, Pittsburgh filmmaker,
and Neil W. Horstman, President,
The White House Historical Association

 Smithsonian
National Museum of American History
Programs, with the exception of Robin Gerber's program, are free with admission to the History Center, and free for members. This series is sponsored in part by generous support from Dominion.

TUESDAY, MARCH 16
7:30 - 9:00 a.m.
*Leadership the Eleanor Roosevelt
Way: Timeless Strategies from the
First Lady of Courage*
Robin Gerber, senior scholar, Academy
of Leadership, University of Maryland
*This program, co-sponsored by Lee
Hecht Harrison, includes breakfast.
Cost for this program is \$10 for
members, \$12 for non-members.

TUESDAY, APRIL 20
7:30 - 8:30 p.m.
*Four Decades on the Trail of
Kennedy's Killers*
Dr. Cyril Wecht, Allegheny County
Coroner, nationally acclaimed forensic
pathologist

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