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DAWN OF THE AUTOMOBILE AGE:
A PHOTO ESSAY

by Cheryl Farnell

The automobile has always held a special fascination for Americans. Regardless of age or class, few people have escaped being enraptured by some motorized dream machine. The gleam of the chrome, the mirror-like finish and the aroma of leather that gave every car its own personality found a place in the American imagination. While some people have longed for the slower pace of the horse-and-buggy era, most have preferred the speed, comfort and convenience of the horseless carriage.

The first commercial automobiles in the United States were produced by Pope, Stanley and Winston, beginning in 1897. Ransom E. Olds founded the Olds Motor Works that same year, but it was several years before his cars could be purchased (and people could sing, “In My Merry Oldsmobile”). Automobiles were a novelty at first, but they quickly found their way into the hearts and garages of many Americans, beginning with some of the more wealthy and adventurous. Edward Manrara, one of the founders of Ybor City’s cigar industry, brought the first automobile to Tampa in 1900. The vehicle was a Locomobile; run by steam, it could reach the speed of ten miles per hour. In 1902, Tampa got its first dealership when Benjamin & Owens began selling Locomobiles. The following year, Fred Ferman of Tampa opened his Oldsmobile agency. By 1910, automobiles plied the streets of most south Florida communities. Five years later, a Tampa newspaper reported that the city had 1,707 registered automobiles.

Automobiles came to Florida long before suitable roads existed, especially for travel from town to town. To emphasize the need for passable roads, a trek from Tampa to Jacksonville to Tampa was held in 1909, sponsored by the Tampa Daily Times, the Tampa Automobile Club and the Coca-Cola Bottling Company. Eighteen cars participated in the Great Endurance Run of 1909, which was won by Horace Williams who drove an EMF. The point was made, and improvements in Florida roads soon began. (The Great Endurance Run has been reenacted the past seven years by the Great Endurance Run Chapter of the Veteran Motor Car Club of America. Each Thanksgiving weekend, eighteen cars follow approximately the same route, although the roads have been vastly improved. Participants wear period costumes. The automobiles, dating from 1929 or earlier, leave from the Esplanade in downtown Tampa on Thanksgiving morning, reach Jacksonville the following day and return triumphantly to Tampa’s Plant Park on Sunday afternoon. The cars no longer actually race; instead, a log is kept, total travel time is tallied and the car with the best average time wins the coveted Tampa Times Cup.)

Henry Ford was principally responsible for making the automobile accessible to masses of consumers. He did this by concentrating on a single car, the Model T, which he introduced in 1908. His use of the moving assembly line made it possible to produce a Model T in one hour and thirty-three minutes by 1914. Mass production helped reduce the price of the Model T from $725 in 1910 to only $345 six years later. By 1920, half the cars in the entire world were Model T’s.
The automobile helped give the 1920s much of their roar. By the end of the decade there was one automobile for every five Americans as compared to one for every forty-three people in Great Britain. The demand for cars in this country not only fueled the economy, but it also stimulated profound changes in American patterns of residence, education, work habits and leisure. The personal car made Florida a mecca for tourists who traveled to the Sunshine State in greater numbers than ever before during the 1920s. The car culture also made possible sprawling industrial cities and their accompanying residential suburbs.

Eventually, the automobile changed the way Americans gauged themselves and their neighbors. A person’s car became one of the criteria by which wealth and social status could be readily identified. The automobile dealership was a magnet that drew those who longed to own a car or “trade up.” The used car salesman joined the Yankee peddler and the horse trader in the pantheon of archetypal American figures. Like their compatriots around the country, Floridians were caught up in the motorization of America, and they left considerable evidence of the impact of the automobile on their lives during the early decades of this century.
The first automobiles deserved the name “horseless carriage.” Fort Myers businessman Gilmer H. Heitman posed as the proud owner of this early Oldsmobile which was the first automobile in Lee County.

Photograph from *Yesterday’s Fort Myers* by Marian Godown and Alberta Rawchuck.

Automobiles quickly represented a certain danger to pedestrians as shown in this 1904 photograph taken on Bradenton’s Main Street.

Photograph courtesy of Manatee County Historical Society.
Sarasota’s first automobile, a Reo roadster, was bought by Dr. Cullen B. Wilson in 1909. The name “Reo” was taken from the initials of its developer, Ransom E. Olds, who left Oldsmobile to start the new company in 1903.

Photograph courtesy of Sarasota County Historical Archives.

By 1910, automobiles figured prominently in this photograph of Palmetto’s Main Street, but they still competed with the horse-drawn carriages parked to the right and the horse shown on the left.

Photograph courtesy of Manatee County Historical Society.
Participants and spectators gathered in front of the *Tampa Times* building for the start of the Great Endurance Run of 1909, in which drivers raced automobiles from Tampa to Jacksonville and back to Tampa.

Photograph from *Tampa: The Treasure City* by R. Mormino and Anthony P. Pizzo.

This 1912 Cadillac provided plenty of room for the Bradley family of Palma Sola, in Manatee County, but the road looks ill-suited to the new technology.

Photograph courtesy of Manatee County Historical Society.
Advertising for early automobiles stressed technological advances such as “magneto ignition,” “hydraulic governor” and “forced feed oiling” in this ad for the 1913 Packard. Anyone in doubt could, “Ask the man who owns one.”

St. Petersburg’s first Festival of States parade in 1913 featured a procession of decorated automobiles, shown here on Central Avenue.

Photograph from *Yesterday’s St. Petersburg* by Hampton Dunn.

The winner of the contest for the best decorated car in the 1913 Festival of States parade certainly set a precedent for later floats.

Photograph from *Yesterday’s St. Petersburg* by Hampton Dunn.
By the 1920s, car dealers used “antique” models to demonstrate the quality of their products. This 1906 Maxwell, a four-cylinder runabout, sits in front of United Motor Company on Tampa’s Franklin Street. The car and building were decked out for a 1923 holiday.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.

This 1908 Buick gave its own testimonial in 1928 as it sat in front of Joe B. Johnson Autos in Tampa.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
Dubois F. Owen of Tampa’s Owen Franklin Motor Company stood beside a classic in 1928. Franklins had no radiator, and the engine was air-cooled so the cooler the weather, the better they ran.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.

Located on the southwest corner of Marion and Madison Streets (with Tampa City Hall in the background), Beman Beckwith Company displayed the Hudson, the Essex and the Packard in 1922.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
The advertising of Dodge Brothers in 1921 clearly appealed to economy-minded consumers who also had enough class to appreciate “Il Trovatore.”

Despite the glowing claims of manufacturers and dealers, cars obviously could break down. Cane & Van Huben, located at 805 Florida Avenue in Tampa, provided a “service car” for those automobiles that could no longer run under their own power.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.

In 1920, curbside service was available at Atlantic Tire Service in downtown Tampa.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
A wrecked Buick made its way to a Tampa body shop in 1927.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.

Two cigar manufacturers, Manuel Corral and C. Sierra, posed in 1921 with their Wescotts, highly regarded six-cylinder cars made in Springfield, Ohio.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
The Plant City branch of Peninsular Motor Corporation advertised new and used cars in 1925, including the Studebakers under the cover in the center of this picture.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.

The 1923 Florida State Fair attracted throngs of car owners to the fairgrounds in Tampa and undoubtedly created one of the massive traffic jams that became increasingly familiar.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
A 1924 “auto camp” in St. Petersburg where so-called “tin-can tourists” pitched tents over their cars which were thereby turned into cheap sleeping quarters.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.

Several tin-can tourists visiting the Tarpon Springs sponge docks in 1924. Their car carried their camping equipment strapped to the outside.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.
Automobiles, along with the “green benchers” shown on the left, had become a prominent feature of St. Petersburg, “the Sunshine City,” according to this postcard from the 1920s, which shows the intersection of 4th Street and Central Avenue.

Photograph courtesy of University of South Florida Special Collections.

In 1926, things were on the move, including this group of women posing in an Oakland which stands in front of the Davis Islands Coliseum in Tampa.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
The rakish José Luis Avellanal, a Tampa entrepreneur, with his Studebaker in the 1920s.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.

Model-T cars and trucks being unloaded at Port Tampa in 1926, after a cruise from Detroit aboard the Ford-owned freighter, “East Indian.”

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
For people who could not afford a new car, the used car salesman stood ever ready to cut a good deal. Although the round signs display the Studebaker motif, quite a variety of “Late Model Used Cars” were available in 1925 at the Peninsular Motor Corporation’s lot on Tampa’s Franklin Street.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.

The annual show of Tampa auto dealers at the Davis Islands Coliseum featured the new models. Shown in this spectacular display are the 1927 models.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
The 1100 block of Tampa’s Florida Avenue, viewed from south of Harrison Street, was quite an “auto alley” in 1927 with a variety of businesses that catered to the automobile.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.

Eli Witt posed as the proud owner of a 1930 Lincoln in front of his Tampa cigar company. The look of this $4,300 car clearly distinguished it as a symbol of wealth.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
The 1930 “Parade of DeSotos” in front of the Tampa Theatre gave no hint that the economy was in a nose-dive. Billed as “the world’s cheapest eight-cylinder car” and selling for under $1,000, the DeSoto—like so much else—suffered badly as a result of the Depression.
Selected Bibliography


