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The Automobile Grows Up with Northwest Ohio



◀ This Willys-Overland car, licensed in 1924, retains the spoke wheels and cloth top reminiscent of its horse-drawn predecessors. By this time, the company was the second-largest automaker in the United States. CAC General Photograph Collection.

Between 1890 and 1910, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of individual mechanics around the country began making automobiles in their workshops, many with the hope of producing models for a mass market. The tinkers and engineers of northwest Ohio were no exception—their was an idea whose time had come. Both electric and internal combustion engines powered the horseless carriages manufactured in this region, and today, the automobile industry and its related concerns continue to be an important part of Ohio's economy.

Automobile manufacturing businesses rose and fell rapidly during the first decades of the 20th century. Over a half-dozen companies began and almost as quickly ended business in Sandusky before 1920. In 1902 the Sandusky Automobile & Manufacturing Company produced an electric runabout which made a favorable impression at the New York Automobile Show. Boasting that it would run for 150 miles on one charge, the company guaranteed their product for one year. President James J. Hinde made a trip in the car from Cleveland to Sandusky in three and one half hours. Yet by 1904, the company was bankrupt. Several firms which opened for business in the coming years produced innovative engines and transmissions for their cars and trucks, at prices ranging from \$700 to \$1250. The need for a large capital investment and a long wait for a return on that investment, however, spelled the doom for these small companies, most of which did not survive for five years. (Frohman, *Sandusky's Yesterdays*, pp.145-149) The Elmore Manufacturing Company of Clyde and the "Yale" and "Pope-Toledo" of Toledo were similar enterprises.

◀ Pictured here in Fremont in 1920, the White was manufactured in Cleveland, Ohio and featured a right-side steering wheel. CAC General Photograph Collection. ▶

When John N. Willys brought the newly-reorganized Willys-Overland Company from Indianapolis to the old Pope-Toledo plant in 1909, it might have been another short-lived manufacturer. Instead, Willys-Overland quickly became the second largest builder of automobiles in the country, producing the Willys Knight, the Whippet, and the Americar. By 1916, one-third of Toledo's workforce was employed in the automobile industry, either at Willys-Overland or one of the many small companies which provided parts or supplies. The Toledo plant was the largest single automobile factory in the world, employing 15,000. The end of World War I saw disagreements between labor and management about compensation and a longer work week which led to a violent strike in 1919, closing the plant for several weeks.

The 1920s were a prosperous time for the company, with peak production reached in 1928 (314,437 cars). In fact, Willys-Overland, like many manufacturers, had produced more cars than it could sell, forcing a lay-off of thousands of workers, months before the stock market crash of October 1929 which heralded the Great Depression. Although this company did not close, many others did and labor negotiations continued to be difficult throughout the automotive industry. In 1934 union workers called a strike at the Electric Auto-Lite Company. The strike turned violent and two men were killed during one disturbance. Willys-Overland, meanwhile, had gone into receivership in 1933. Despite the introduction of a new model car and a contract to produce trucks, the company made only 70,000 vehicles during the next three years.





◀ Nash produced a 2 1/2 ton truck in 1918, used in town and in the country to make deliveries. CAC General Photograph Collection.

By the late 1930s the company's fortunes were beginning to turn around, and a lucrative government contract was worth pursuing. With war clearly on the horizon, the army was in the market for a light weight vehicle that could handle difficult terrain. The jeep was born in 1940. By war's end, the Toledo company had produced some 360,000 vehicles. During the following decades, production of civilian model jeeps as all-purpose utility vehicles continued to be a mainstay of the company, even as it was purchased by a succession of owners, including Kaiser, American Motors, Chrysler, and Daimler-Benz.

Today, Jeep continues to thrive in Toledo, accounting for 15,000 area jobs and twenty percent of the city's income tax revenues. In response to a groundswell of local support, in 1998, Chrysler (now Daimler-Chrysler) broke ground for a new production facility in Toledo, making the city the site of the newest automotive assembly plant as well as the oldest continuously operating plant in the United States.

—Lee N. McLaird

Related Collections at the CAC

The CAC holds a number of collections documenting the rise of the automotive industry in northwest Ohio. Several United Auto Workers publications document the organization's constitution through the years, as well as contracts with automakers, and union news. The Central Labor Union ([MS 28](#)) includes a circular letter and a workers' relief ledger from the time of the 1919-1920 Willys-Overland strike. The Raymond Spitulski Collection ([MS 396](#)) reflects the former Jeep employee's extensive experience at the Toledo Jeep Plant and as a United Auto Workers, Local 12, official between 1935-1983. Also included in the collection are materials from the Society of Designing Engineers for which Spitulski was the national president.

Other businesses flourished as well. Advertising brochures for automobiles and accessory products are available. The Auto Hospital Car Repair Company ledgers (MMS 52) document the business expenses of a Tiffin garage in 1921-1924, while the expense record of an individual 1923 Ford is recorded in MMS 360.

Researchers interested in the effect of the automobile on municipal businesses and government can consult Toledo regulations regarding traffic, parking and its attendant problems, as well as county and municipal records of road and street construction. The register of all motor vehicles owned in Ohio between 1908 and 1910 provides a unique snapshot of what was on the road in the years before World War I.

The Robert Dodge Collection ([MS 157](#)) includes photographs and brochures documenting the Put-in-Bay sports car races held during the middle 1950s. Bowling Green State University's Electric Falcon (pJA 1379), brings the racing tradition into the future using an alternative to gasoline power.

The Automobile in Northwest Ohio, 1900-1930

The Automobile in Northwest Ohio, 1900-1930



◀ The Glenwood School District used this bus to transport children to school in 1918. Photograph gift of Paulette Weiser

Members of the Stover family take in the sights from a bridge near Waterville, Ohio. Automobiles were a common sight by 1915, and no one doubted that the horse had been replaced as a means of transportation. Gift of Helen Lyon Spafford. ▶



◀ The classic Ford Model T seen here in 1915 made automobiles affordable for the average family. It was said that "you could have any color you wanted, as long as it was black." CAC General Photograph Collection

Two cars meeting on a typical country road in 1918 show the hazards of early driving. CAC General Photograph Collection. ▶

