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The Colby Motor Company

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Iowa's Automotive Pioneers
THE COLBY MOTOR COMPANY



Road-ready Colbys receive finishing touches at the Mason City factory; (inset) racing down Sullivan Hill, 1911 (courtesy the author)

MPANY



by Paula Colby Barrett

Not even the most enthusiastic salesman in the automobile business would have predicted the speed with which the American consumer took to the motor car in the early 1900s. By 1908, just a dozen years after the introduction of automotive technology from Europe, nearly two hundred thousand Americans owned motor cars. In Iowa, there were but forty autos registered in 1900; by 1910, the figure had soared to more than ten thousand. Much of the nation's automobile manufacturing had already concentrated in Detroit by the turn of the twentieth century, but in these early years there were also dozens of smaller auto makers scattered throughout the United States. One of these, the Colby Motor Company of Mason City, Iowa, built automobiles on a par with the finest produced in America before World War I.

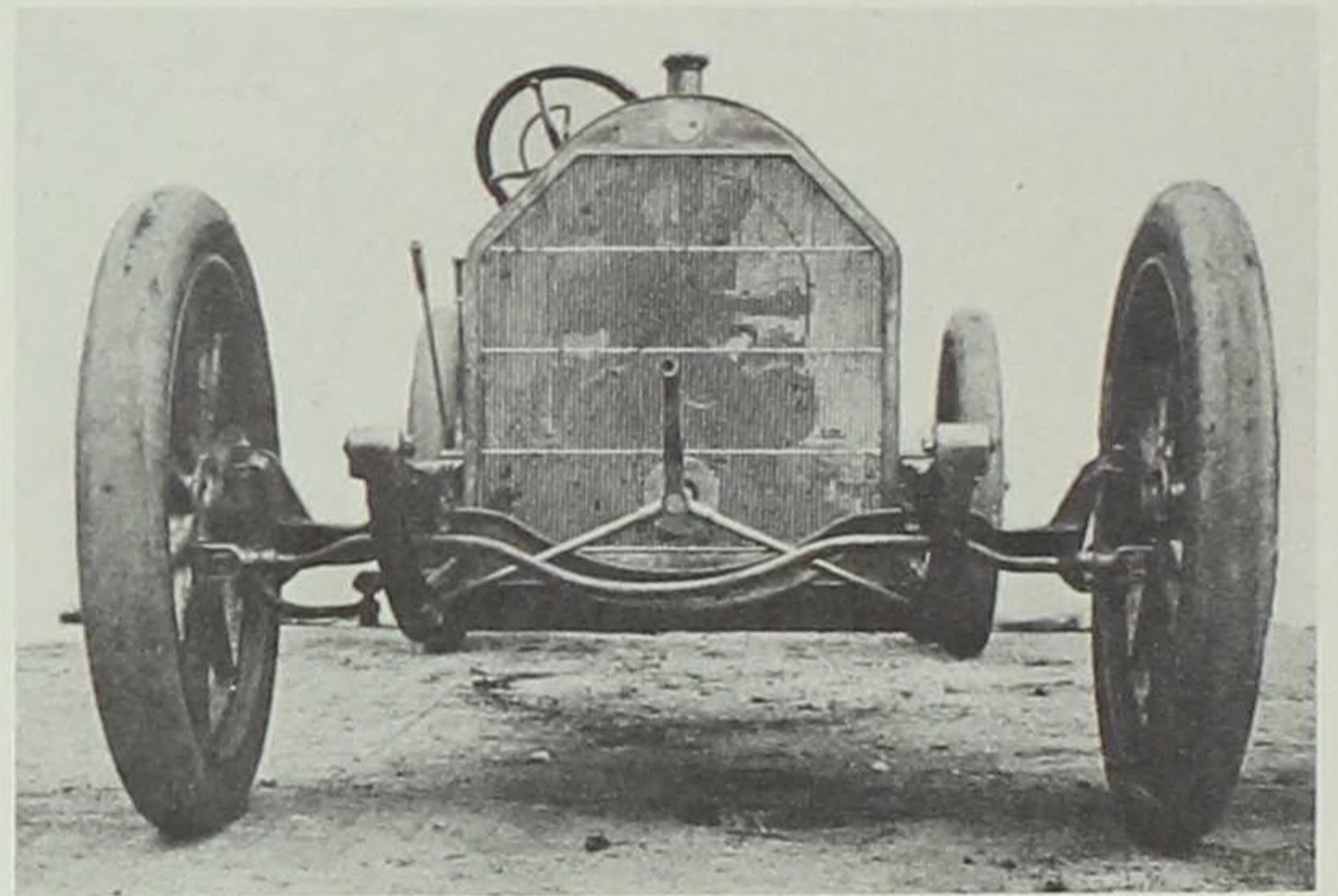
In 1910, Mason City was a growing community, and its citizens were especially receptive to any new businesses that might appear. Into this atmosphere stepped William Colby and the Colby Motor Company, which was formed in the fall of 1910. The epidemic of automobile fever was already sweeping the country and Colby, a successful businessman, worked aggressively to establish his company as a high-quality, competitive automobile manufacturing firm.

Colby was no stranger to Mason City. He had been born in Primrose, Wisconsin in 1875, the tenth child of Colbjorn and Anluag Oscar Colby, who had come to America from Sigdal Parish in Norway in 1850. But in 1876 the Colby family moved to Mason City, where Colby's father rapidly accumulated respectable holdings in land and cattle.

As a young man, William Colby had strong ambitions, but not as an Iowa farmer.

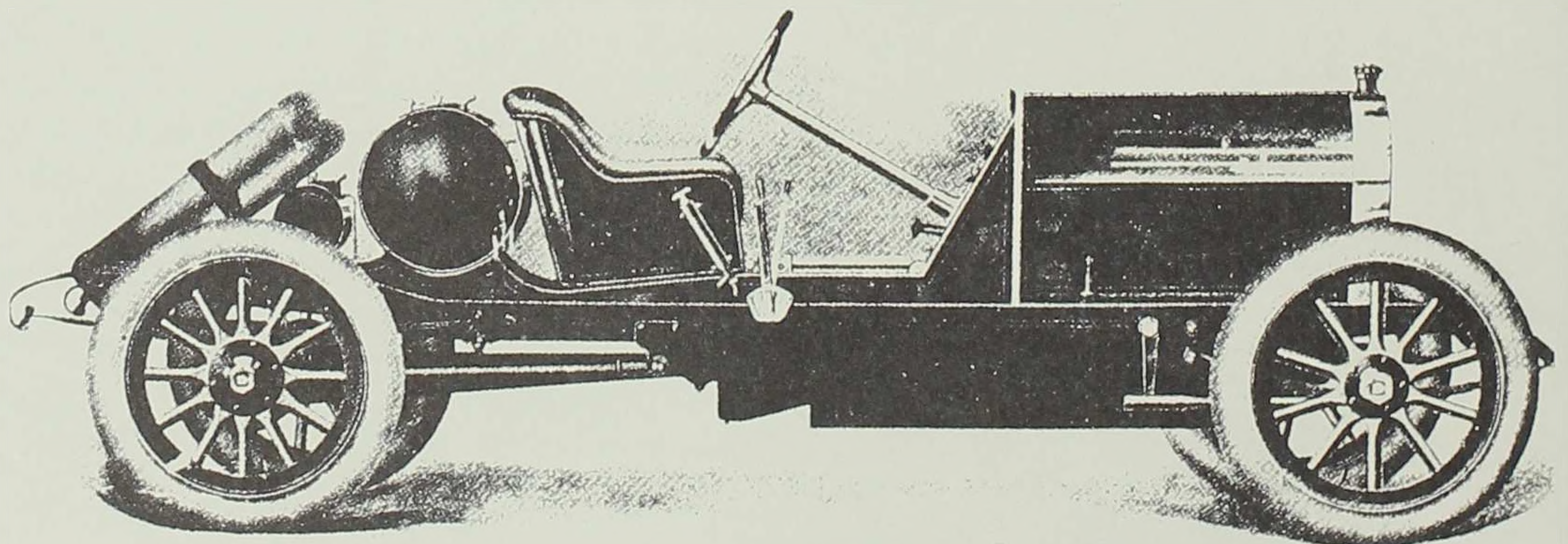
Instead, he directed his energy to becoming a versatile and successful entrepreneur, a goal well-suited to the speculative business atmosphere of the early twentieth century. Colby's training ground for this career was the Plano Harvester Company, where his older brother Oscar worked. After several years as a salesman for Plano, he turned to insurance sales, with a territory that included Minnesota and the Dakotas. Then, in 1906, he returned to Mason City, where he exercised his maturing entrepreneurial skills in promoting and founding the Northwestern States Portland Cement Company.

By 1910, when Colby became involved in automobile manufacturing, he had already established himself as a successful promoter of new businesses, a general entrepreneur. Between 1907 and 1910 he promoted and directed the construction of brick, tile, and sewer-pipe companies in Fort Dodge, Mason City, and Lehigh, Iowa, and in Spokane, Washington. Following the completion of his activity in the Spokane project — the construction of a two-million-dollar plant for the Washington Brick, Tile, and Sewer Pipe Company — Colby returned to Iowa and moved into banking. He was one of the organizers of the People's State Bank in



Mason City and was appointed to the bank's board of directors. But this was only until he began work on the firm that was to become his next venture: the Colby Motor Company.

Colby applied all his entrepreneurial skills to the new company. On September 29, 1910, the *Mason City Globe-Gazette* announced that a forty-acre site had been purchased for the firm. The site had been carefully chosen. It was located along the tracks of both the Des Moines Short Line Railroad and the Chicago and Great Western Railroad, and the Mason City and Clear Lake interurban ran just north of the land. Thus the site was already served by both freight and passenger transportation facilities.



The Colby Model G Roadster, retail price — \$1,650 (courtesy the author)

Next, Colby wasted no time in enlisting people who would work hard for the success of the company. For technical expertise and marketing experience, he hired David W. Henry of Muskegon, Michigan, who had designed and built his own automobile named, appropriately enough, the Henry Car. Considered to be one of the most knowledgeable men of his day in the field of motor transportation, Henry served as the Colby Motor Company's first general manager.

Colby then hired George W. Howland to be the new company's secretary and appointed two local men — I. W. Keerl and Senator A. H. Gale — and his own younger brother, James A. Colby, as the firm's incorporators. Beyond the company's officers, however, Colby also hoped to make every stockholder an active promoter and agent for the new automobile he planned to manufacture.

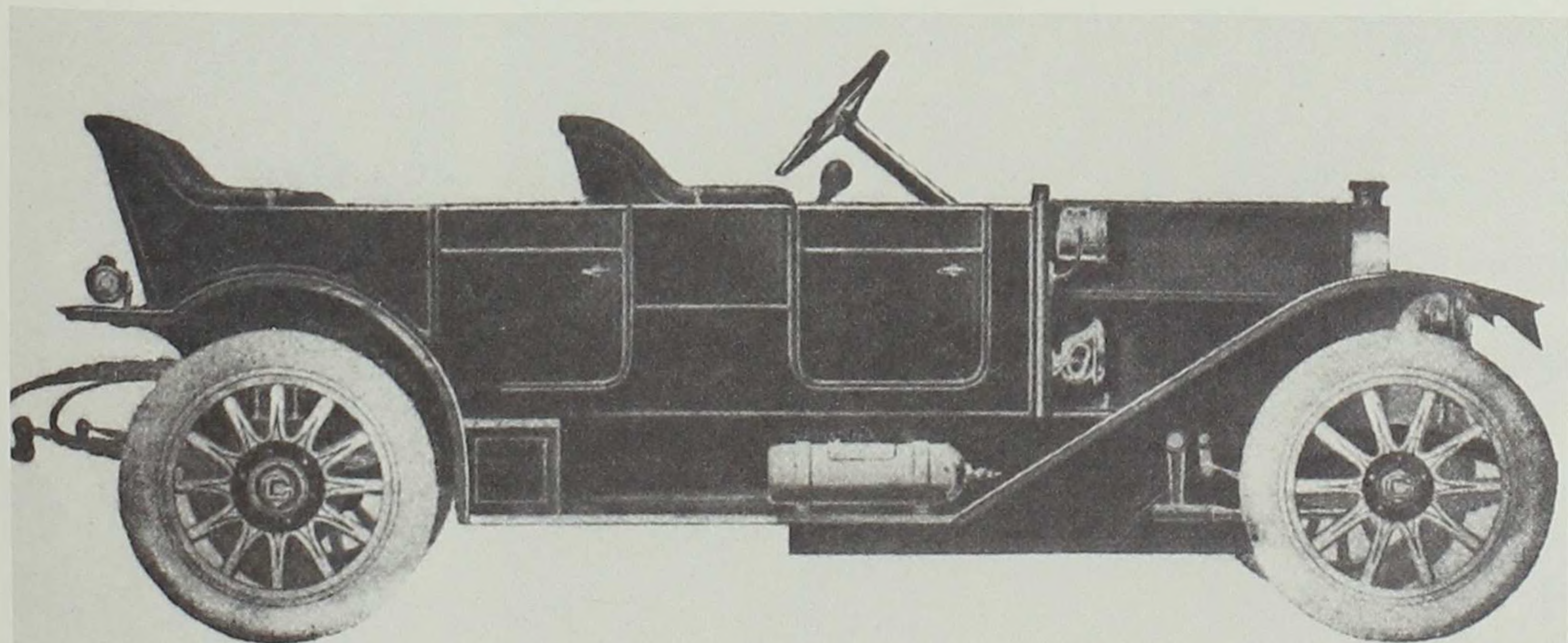
Colby and Henry envisioned the first Colby production model to be a five-passenger, forty-horsepower automobile, though they hoped later to add a runabout and a larger passenger car to the line. They agreed that the Colby should be produced only from top-grade parts and that the engine should be tested to adapt it to the rigors of the cold Iowa winters. At the same time, they wanted



(l. to r.) James Colby, Oscar Charles Colby, William Colby (courtesy the author)



Colby Motor Company officials present a display of current models at the Mason City plant (courtesy the author)



The 1911 Colby Model H, a five-passenger, four-door touring car costing \$1,750 (courtesy the author)

a car that would fare well among the competition at the new auto shows.

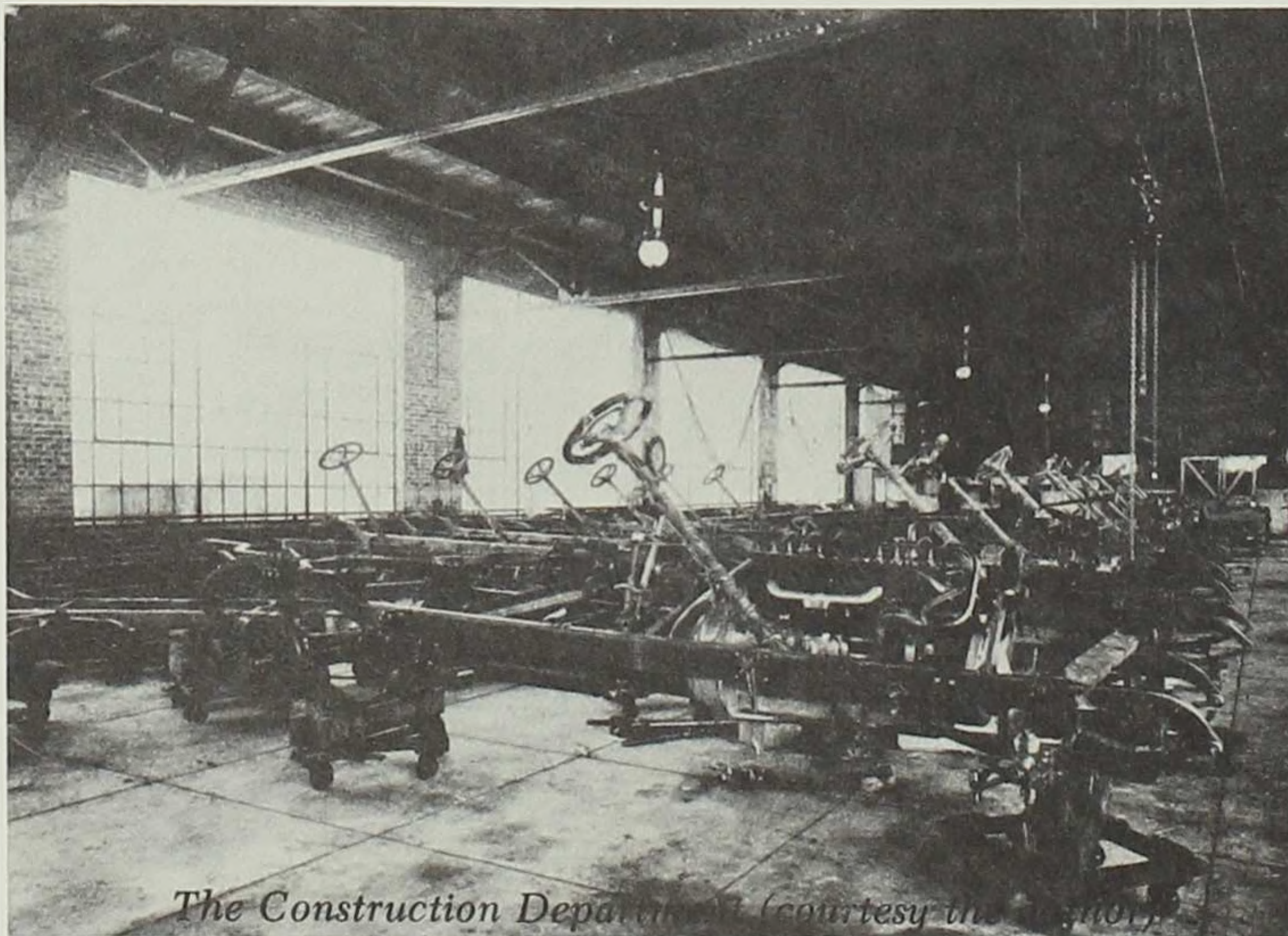
Since company officials hoped to have the first Colby ready for an auto show in Chicago in February 1911, they had to begin work immediately on the new factory. Plans for the factory included a single five-story-high assembly building four hundred feet long and one hundred feet wide. It was to be constructed of concrete and steel and was designed to make maximum use of natural light. Initially, the cars were to be assembled at the factory from parts produced by other firms, but Colby planned eventually to manufacture many of the automobile's components at the Mason City site.

In the early morning hours of November 1, 1910, machinery experts from Chicago installed the machinery necessary to produce the first Colby automobiles. While the factory was under construction, the firm had leased the Catlin Building in Mason City as a temporary site. Huge lathes and other machinery soon filled the once-vacant building. With the new equipment installed, Colby enthusiastically predicted that the

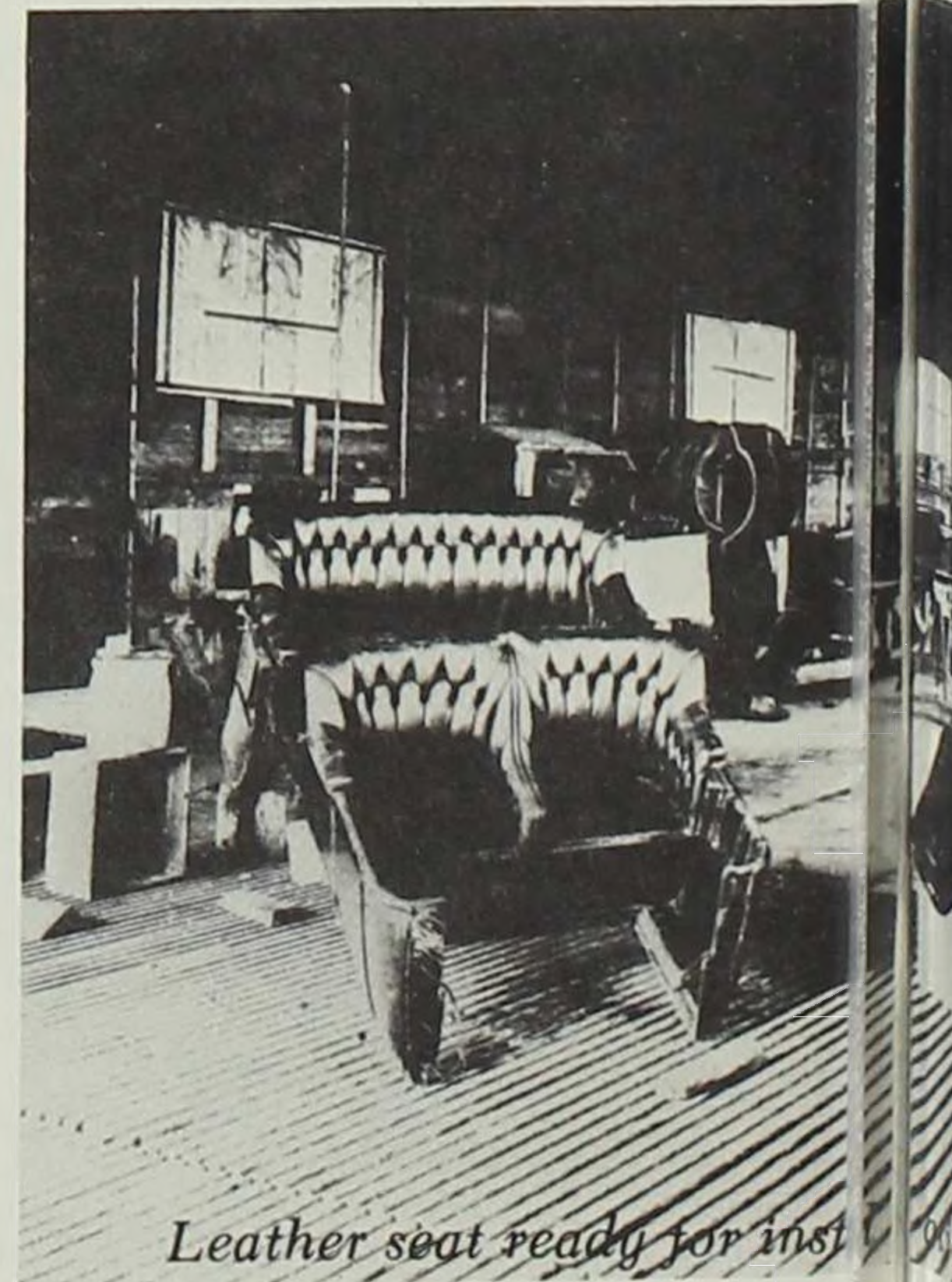
company's first motor car would be driven along the streets of Mason City within three weeks. Since the firm had already contracted to build two hundred and fifty Colbys, company officials were understandably eager to begin assembling the new cars.

Sales agents were quickly interviewed, hired, and trained to fill the orders for the spring factory output. Plans were completed for the permanent building on the city's south side, and local newspapers reported daily on the progress of the new company. The first Colby was completed on November 12, 1910, a full week ahead of Colby's own optimistic estimate.

As the first auto rolled off the line, Merle Armstrong, the company's chief mechanic, was anxious to test its performance, so he took it for a test drive through Mason City. It performed well and proved to be a speedy automobile — too speedy, in fact, for the local police. Armstrong planned to hold the car down to a sedate eight miles per hour, but he found that it easily leaped to twenty-four. A policeman also noticed this, and he nabbed the Colby mechanic for speeding. In court the next morning, the judge fined Arm-



The Construction Department (courtesy the Colby)



Leather seat ready for inst

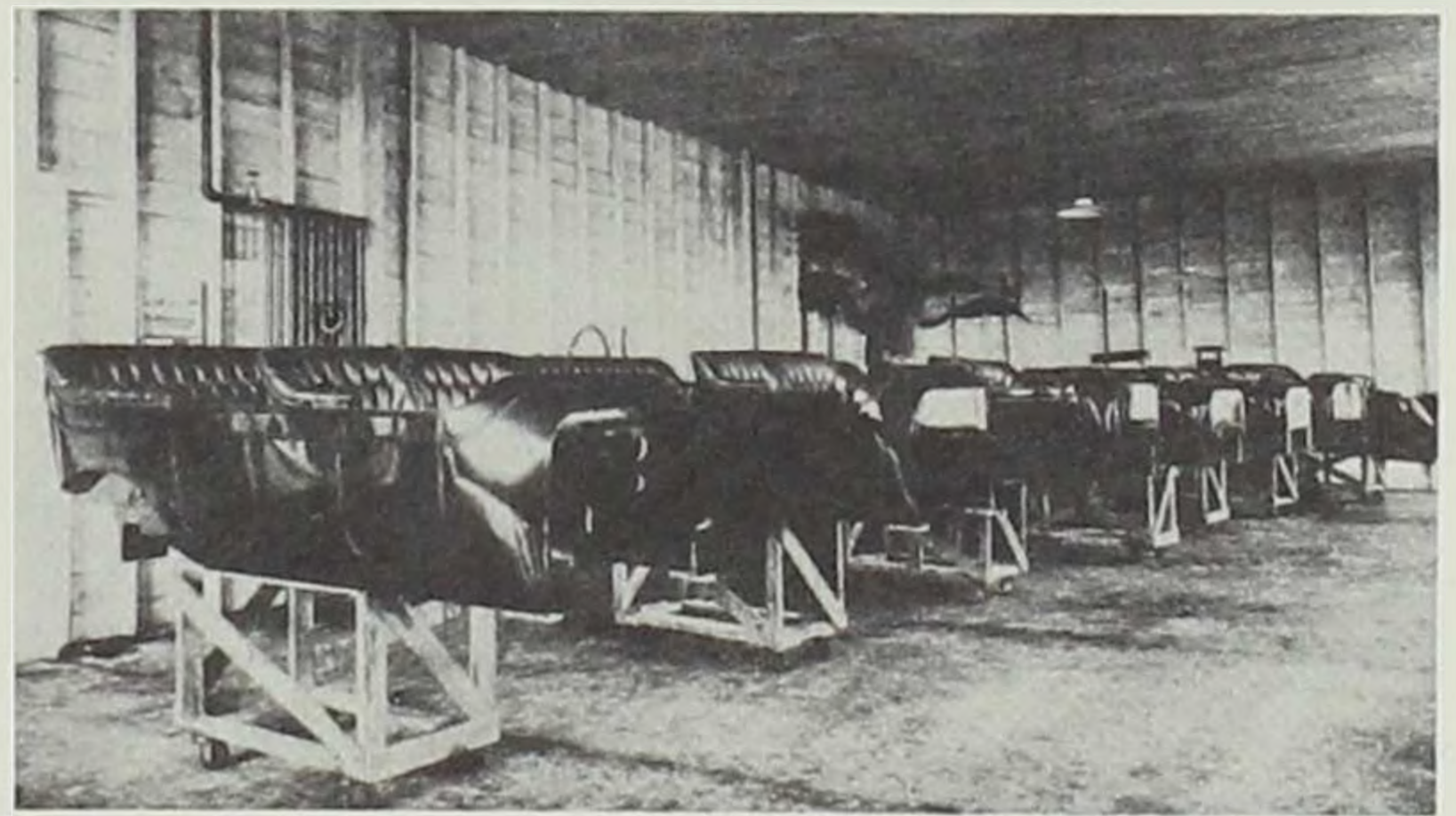
strong ten dollars. The Colby Company immediately apologized to the city for breaking its ordinances, but, privately, Colby officials rejoiced over the performance of their first production model.

By January 24, 1911 the factory's forty employees had readied three automobiles for the coming auto show in Chicago, and they had nearly a hundred more ready for final assembly. The date also marked the beginning of construction on the company's permanent factory building, with a crew of from fifty to seventy-five men assigned to the project by the Nelson Construction Company. Their work also included the construction of an office building to the east of the factory and a power house to the south.

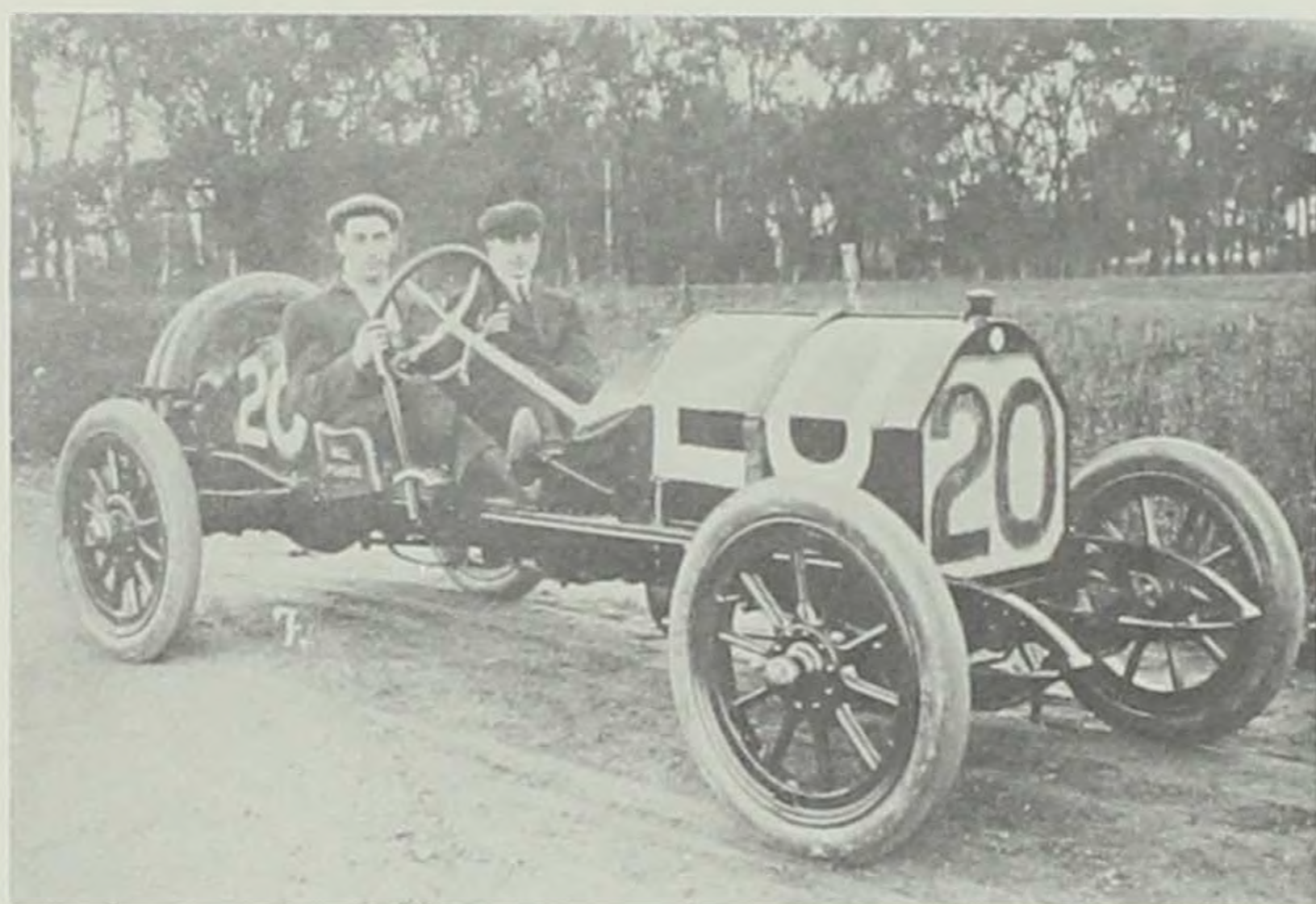
When the first production model — the Colby 40 — began to appear in quantity in the spring of 1911, it proved to be very popular with the public. In an article in the *New York Globe and Commercial Advertiser*, Arthur R. Tator of the Empire City Automobile Company reported that he had tested the Colby on an endurance run of his own design. "Talk about your endurance tests, Glidden



In the Colby Company's main office (l. to r.): Aline Colby Griffin, niece of William and James Colby; James Colby; and Hugh S. Murphy, general manager of the Colby Motor Company. Trophies won by Colby drivers line the walls of the office. (courtesy the author)



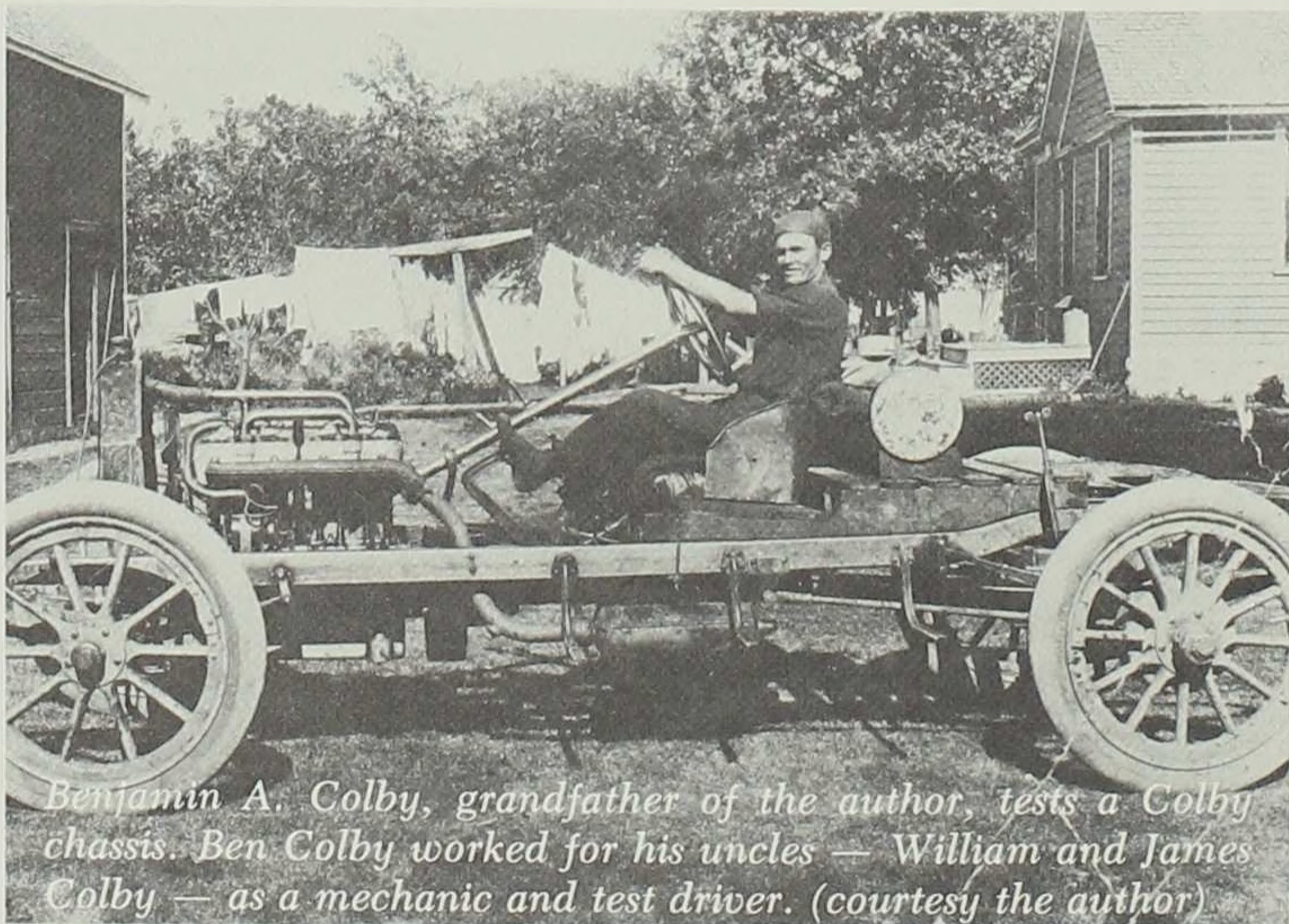
Colby automobile workers. Max Schmitt (bottom row, extreme left) was the Colby Company's first employee (courtesy the author)



Billy Pearce (left) in his Colby Red Devil. Pearce left this photograph with a Sioux City Journal reporter on the morning of a race at Woodland Park; he died on the race track that afternoon. (courtesy the author)



A Colby car races past the judge's position (courtesy the author)



Benjamin A. Colby, grandfather of the author, tests a Colby chassis. Ben Colby worked for his uncles — William and James Colby — as a mechanic and test driver. (courtesy the author)

Tours, and twenty-four hour struggles," he declared, "we certainly had almost everything on that trip that is ever coming to a motorist." Tator had taken his Colby on a 275-mile trial, and he arrived home with no trouble, despite the fact that the car had sometimes been up to its hubcaps in mud. He concluded that "I am so pleased with the work of the car that I am going to enter it in many of the official tests during the coming summer."

As letters of praise began to arrive at the company offices, Colby and Henry became convinced that their high standards of materials and workmanship had been rewarded. They began work on a new Colby 40 roadster, which was built along the lines of the original Colby 40, and the firm's mechanics began testing new motors and a new carburetor for the 1912 models. On April 25, 1911, Merle Armstrong and B. A. Hubbard (an expert from the Stromberg Motor Devices Company) made a test run on the new designs, driving the 130-mile route from Minneapolis to Mason City in four hours and fifty-five minutes. The new Model L Colby was finished in time to be presented to the



The Colby car arrives in Mason City, Minnesota in 1911.

world in the August 1911 issue of the *Cycle and Automobile Trade Journal*. It carried a thirty-horsepower engine, a new underslung body, and a price tag of \$1,250.

The year 1911 also brought improvements in Colby's Mason City factory. In early May a new electric trolley line connected the company with Mason City. The line originated at the factory and merged with the main trolley line at the intersection of Huntley and Main. The streetcar began running at 7:05 in the morning, in time to bring the factory's employees to work, and continued throughout the day at thirty-minute intervals, so that town visitors had a ready opportunity to tour the factory site.

Meanwhile, the company continued to test the limits of their new car's performance. On July 29, Colby received a telegram from Helena, Montana from his mechanic, Armstrong, announcing his latest success:

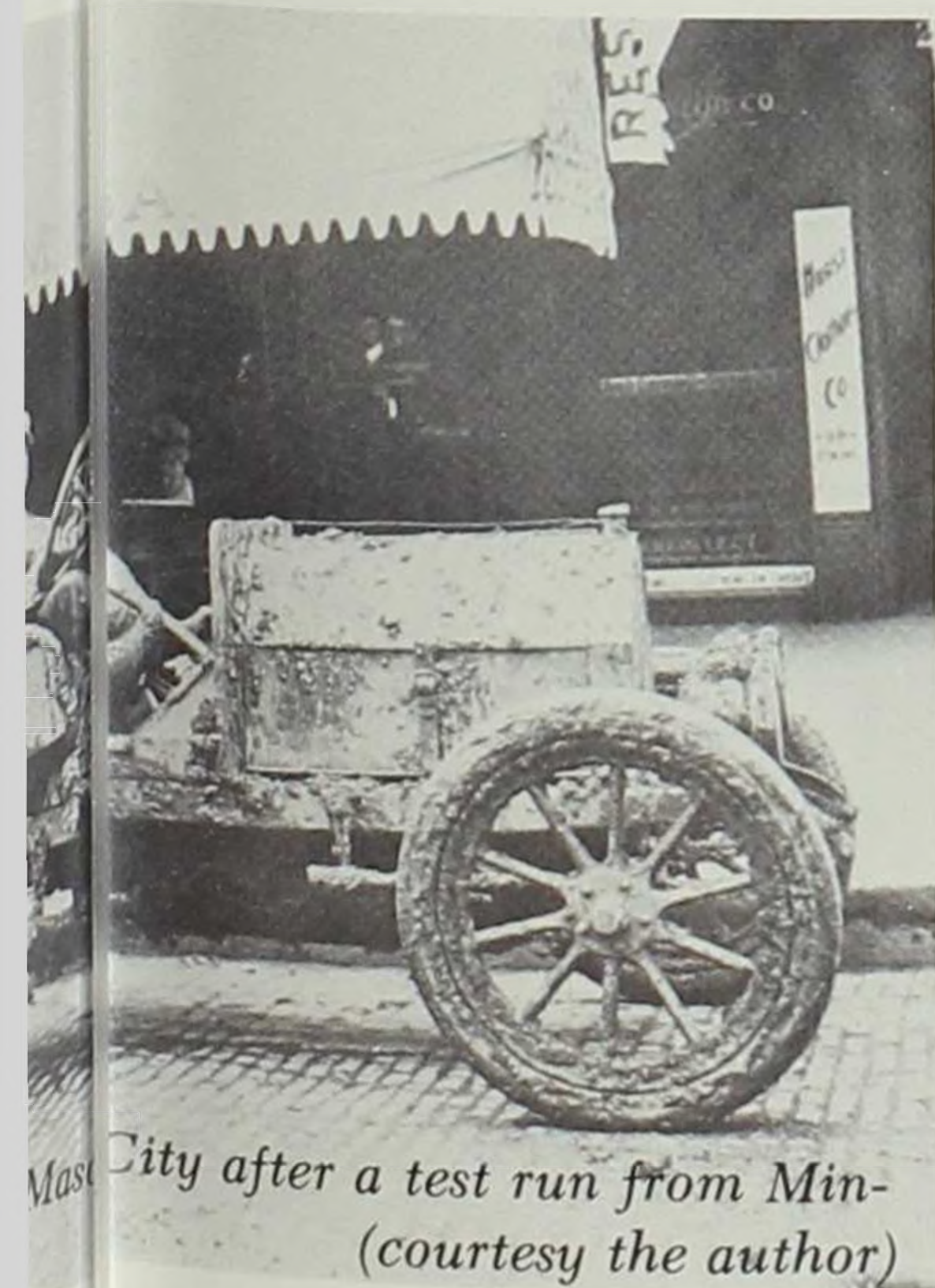
I HAVE TROPHY FOR SECOND PLACE FOR THE FIVE PASSENGER TOURING CAR. THE MARMON FINISHED FIRST. I CARRIED THE PILOT AND PACEMAKER FLAG

FOR ONE DAY. HAVE LOADED THE CAR AND WILL BE HOME WEDNESDAY.

This latest trial had been a rough one. A hundred autos had entered the 658.5-mile endurance run from Minneapolis to Helena. Road quality was often poor — paved highways were a dream of the future — and Armstrong admitted that the car had encountered some problems, but none of them had been serious. Armstrong's second-place finish brought the Colby the Warner Trophy and, more important, proved the car's endurance capability. One of Colby and Henry's most important goals had been met.

When Armstrong returned to Mason City, he was invited to be the guest of honor at a large banquet attended by everyone from the Colby factory workers to state and federal officials. The one hundred and fifty guests toured the factory and were later entertained at the Cerro Gordo Hotel. The banquet speakers praised Colby's persistence and Henry's genius as a winning combination.

Colby then set out to prove that the new car possessed speed as well as endurance by entering the world of dirt-track auto racing. The company sent several of its automobiles



A Colby racing team at the track in St. Cloud, Minnesota, 1911 (courtesy the author)

Mason City after a test run from Min- (courtesy the author)

to the August 1911 races in Elgin, Illinois. As one of the drivers, Colby sent William "Billy" Pearce, an experienced driver who had already demonstrated his ability at the Indianapolis Speedway before coming to work for Colby. In his brief career with the company, Pearce proved to be its best driver.

The Elgin races, held on an eight and a half mile track and attended by a crowd of 80,000 people, were considered to be among the best in the world at the time. They were especially important for small auto companies, like the Colby Motor Company, because they brought with them publicity — and business — that the small companies might otherwise have found difficult to attract.

The first day of the Elgin races included three important contests: the Illinois Cup, a 200-mile race; the Kane County Cup, a 170-mile race; and the Aurora Cup, a 130-mile race. Three Colbys were entered in the Kane County Cup race, with Armstrong and Pearce as two of the drivers. The day was one of catastrophe in many ways; one hundred spectators were injured when the grandstand collapsed, and two drivers were killed in accidents on the track. But the races continued,

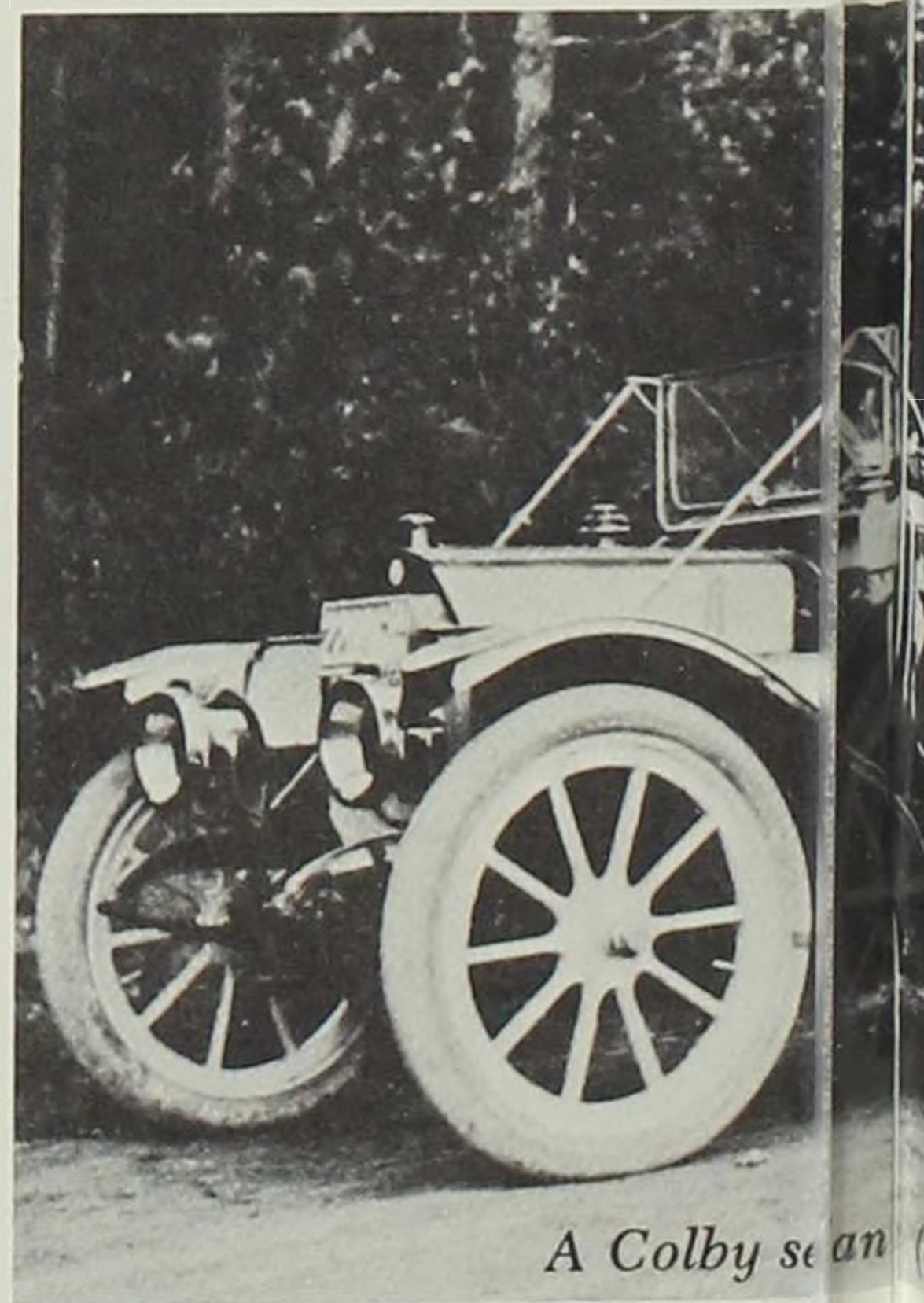
and Pearce captured third place in the Kane County Cup race. The race proved both the Colby's speed in relation to the competition and Pearce's own skill as a driver.

Colby officials were proud of their new driver, who seemed to be a natural at bringing out the speed of their vehicle without bringing on the problems that plagued so many racing cars. Pearce was a true racer at heart; he played what he called "the game" with cool calculation, but he always took the mile in a minute or less.

Billy Pearce continued his success on the racing circuit throughout the remainder of the 1911 season. At the Omaha AK-SARBEN celebration in October, Pearce and the Colby 40 he was driving broke many of the track records and won the Silver Trophy awarded by the Omaha Speedway Association. The *Omaha Bee* reported that "with the indomitable Billy Pearce at the wheel, the Colby Car cleaned up almost everything in sight Wednesday afternoon on the Omaha speedway, when the first day's racing of the three day meet was held." On the third day of the races, the *Bee* noted that Pearce "was pushed in the fifty-mile race by Eddie Rick-



A group of happy passengers in a 1913 Colby owned by T. C. Ryan of Daugherty, Iowa (courtesy the author)



A Colby seen from the rear

enbacher in a Firestone-Columbus '30,' but at no time was in danger of losing the fifty-mile run."

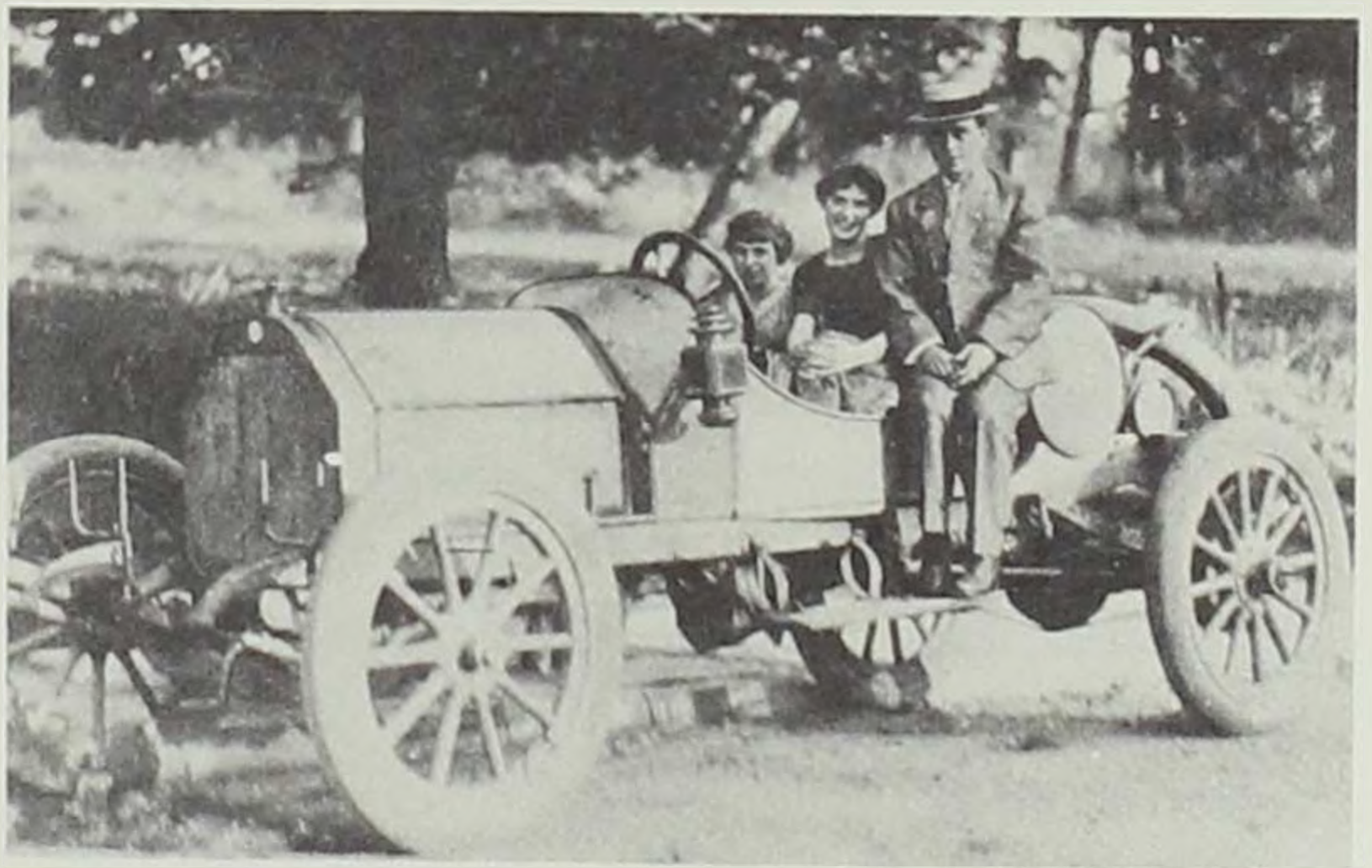
After his victory in Omaha, Pearce took the Colby to the Woodland Park races in Sioux City. With his successes in the 1911 season and an earlier appearance at the Sioux City race track — in which he had trimmed a second off Barney Oldfield's track record for the ten-mile race — Pearce was rated as the favorite in the Woodland Park races.

On the morning of the race, Pearce stopped by the office of the *Sioux City Journal* to deliver pictures of himself and the "Colby Red Devil" — his two-seater race car. "I don't expect to be injured," he remarked, "but the pictures may be of use." That day, however, his cool control over the Colby Red Devil failed him — he swerved in a hairpin turn, crashed into the fence, and died instantly in the impact.

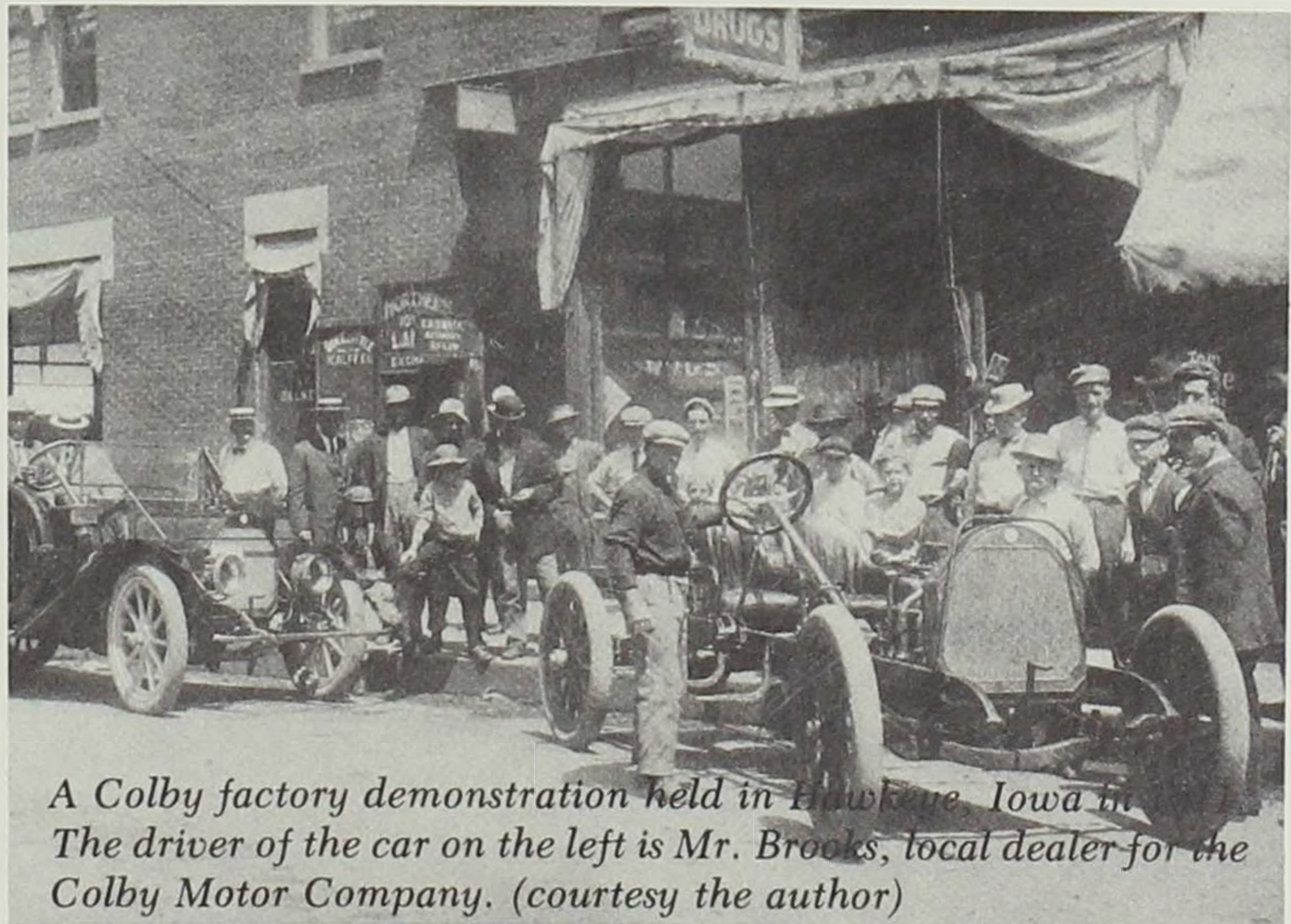
The news of Billy Pearce's death shocked both the Colby Company and his many fans. The Red Devil was repaired and would have been able to race again, but with the death of its driver, an era had ended for the Colby Motor Company.



New excitement: touring in a Colby (courtesy the author)



(courtesy the author)



A Colby factory demonstration held in Hawke, Iowa in 1911. The driver of the car on the left is Mr. Brooks, local dealer for the Colby Motor Company. (courtesy the author)

On December 7, 1911, the Mason City *Globe-Gazette* announced that important changes were underway at the company. Under an arrangement with the National Cooperative Farm Machinery Company of Davenport, the two firms would be merged. The new firm's name would continue to be the Colby Motor Company, and William and James Colby would retain their positions, but many Colby employees (including general manager David Henry) would not.

With H. S. Murphy as the new general manager, the wide-open promotional tone that entrepreneur Colby had set changed to one of financial conservatism. Concerned mainly with the economic stability of the company, Murphy kept a tight rein on expenditures. He restricted the company to the realistic production figure of one thousand automobiles for the 1912 season. After taking inventory, he strictly controlled the company's stock to avoid the irresponsible ordering procedures that he had found. To balance the company's expenditures, Murphy required purchasers of Colby cars to pay for their new automobiles on delivery.

Despite Murphy's efforts to stabilize the firm's finances, on October 29, 1913 the company underwent more extensive changes in its structure. William Colby was replaced by C. H. MacNider of Mason City. MacNider represented the Standard Motor Company, which had already merged with the Minneapolis Motor Company. The Minneapolis Motor Company, in turn, announced plans to construct a new three-million-dollar factory in the Twin Cities that the *Minneapolis Journal* called the "largest automobile manufacturing plant in the west and one of the largest in the entire country." The Minneapolis firm planned to continue producing Colby automobiles at the Mason City plant until completion of its new factory.

Although the Standard Motor Company announced that it planned to add a line of tractors and trucks to the Colby production lines, only a few of these vehicles were manufactured. In May 1914 the equipment in the Mason City plant was sold, and the building went on the auction block soon afterward. By the summer of 1914, the Colby Motor Company had ceased to exist.

Today, the only known extant Colby automobile is on display at the Kinney Pioneer Museum in Mason City. It is a 1911 Model D Semi-racer that was renovated by M. S. "Hap" Cherney of Cedar Falls. As recently as fifteen years ago, traces of the Colby Motor Company's test track could still be seen adjacent to the former factory building, which now houses the Associated Milk Producers plant. As is true of nearly all the small automobile firms from the early years of this century, very little now remains of promoter William Colby's experiment in automobile manufacturing. □

Note on Sources

M. S. "Hap" Cherney of Cedar Falls, Iowa provided invaluable help on the research of the Colby Motor Company. John Martin, of Associated Milk Producers, Incorporated in Mason City provided pictures of the factory that once housed the Colby Company. The *Helena Independent*, July 28 and 29, 1911; the *Minneapolis Journal*, October 8, 1913; the *Elgin Daily Courier*, August 24, 25, and 26, 1911; the *Sioux City Journal*, October 16, 1910, and October 20, 1911; the *Omaha Bee*, October 6, 1911; the *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, Centennial Supplement of June 1, 1953, and issues from September 1, 1910 through August 1915, were used in the study. Periodicals that were of help included: *Cycle and Automobile Trade Journal*, August 1911; *Motor Age*, August 31 and October 26, 1911; and the *Automobile Trade Journal*, February and March 1913. The *History of Cerro Gordo County*, by J. S. Wheeler (Lewis Publishing Company, 1912), provided family information on William Colby. The federal censuses of 1860, 1870, and 1880 were consulted for additional Colby family information.

The public libraries of Sioux City, Mason City, Omaha, and Minneapolis were a great help, along with the Lewis and Clark Library of Helena, Montana, the Gail Borden Public Library of Elgin, Illinois, the Free Library of Philadelphia, the Detroit Public Library (National Automotive History Collection), and the museum library of the Indianapolis Speedway.

The editor wishes to thank Ben A. Colby of Rock Rapids, Iowa for his help in preparing photographs of the Colby Motor Company for publication.