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'The Swellest Car Built'

A 1903 Cadillac

by William M. Johnson

It's hard to believe it's a Cadillac! This 1903 runabout, in the collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa, continues to be a focus of curator William Johnson's research and reflection.

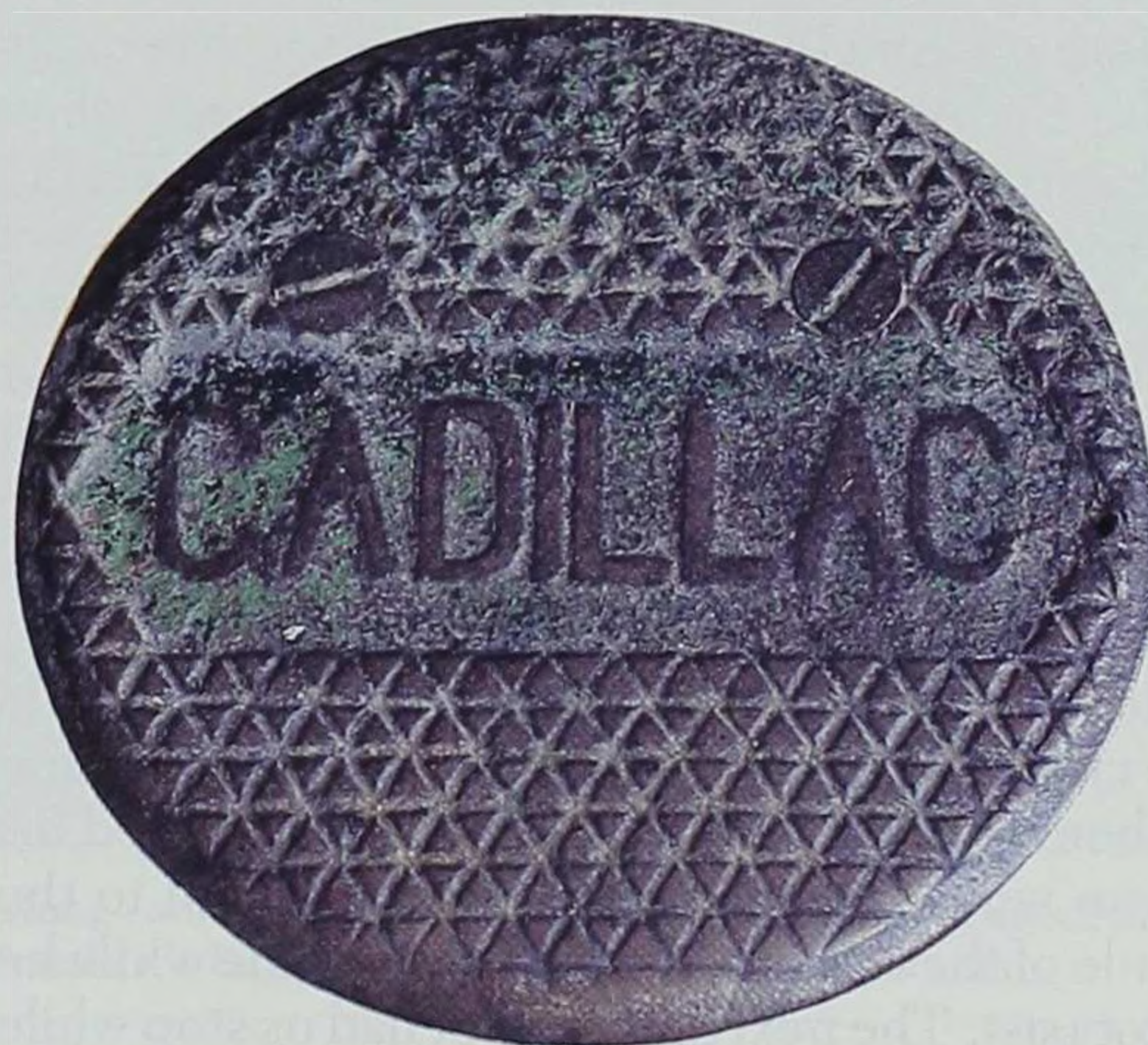
IN DES MOINES IN 1903, W. J. Riddell was advertising his business as the "Largest Automobile Dealer in the West" when a 1903 maroon Cadillac appeared in his salesroom. It was a 6.5 horsepower, single-cylinder runabout, with detachable tonneau (an additional seating compartment with a rear entrance). Its simple construction, ability to climb hills, and speeds nearing thirty miles per hour encouraged Riddell to advertise the Cadillac as "the swellest Car built" for the moderate price of \$875.00.

Cadillac Automobile Co. was still only a year old, having been founded in 1902 by Henry Leland and Robert Faulconer of Detroit. Their first car appeared in January 1903 at Madison Square Garden to a favorable response, and production began soon thereafter. The Cadillac's reputation was enhanced by its interchangeable parts and planetary transmission, described in *Scientific American*. By the summer of 1903 Cadillacs had found their way into salesrooms across Iowa.

Shortly after its arrival in Riddell's Des Moines showroom in 1903, the maroon Cadillac had a buyer. Tradition holds that the first owner was a Des Moines banker. (The actual owner has not been traced. Vehicle registra-

tion did not begin until the following year, and then only by generic descriptions such as runabout, buckboard, touring car, and so on.)

In 1906 the owner was driving the Cadillac to Lamoni when he hit a rock, which burst the low-slung radiator. The disgruntled owner was unwilling to wait for repairs and preferred to dispose of the machine. Lamoni restaurateur

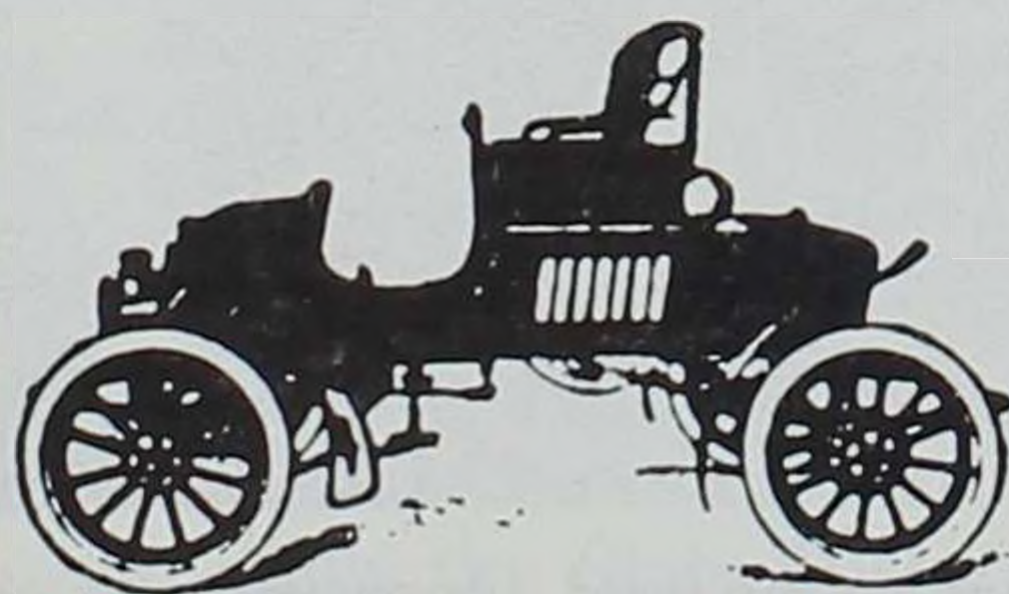


Above: The metal step up to the driver's seat bears the name CADILLAC. Below: *Des Moines Register and Leader* ad, August 20, 1903. Riddell also sold "sparking plugs, Coils, Batteries, Tires, Goggles, Gloves, Horns, Bells."

AUTOMOBILE EXHIBIT

I wish you to come to my store today and see, examine construction. Let us take you for a demonstration over city and country roads. In a **RAMBLER** \$650.00 or \$750.00 Gasoline Car. A **WAVERLEY** Electric Runabout, \$750.00 and \$850.00. **TOLEDO** Steam Runabout, heaviest built, more Horse Power, best hill climber made, \$775.00; regular price \$900.00. **CADILLAC** Gasoline Touring Car with detachable tonneau—the swellest Car built \$875.00. The second carload arrived August 20. Place your order now. **TOLEDO** Gas 15 Horse Power Touring Car. The French Type of Car.

Come to us for reliable Automobiles. We will not sell you a poor car. We have our pick of American built cars to handle and the above lines embody simplicity in Construction, Reliability, Durability; that's what you should have. A good many red color Automobiles are seen upon our streets. Well their owners have selected them on account of their superior construction. They are satisfied owners. Why not come in and let us sell you a **RAMBLER, CADILLAC, TOLEDO, WAVERLEY**. We carry sparking plugs, Coils, Batteries, Tires, Goggles, Gloves, Horns, Bells, etc. Everything for automobilists. A few second hand automobiles for sale. The largest dealers in Automobiles in the entire west.



W. J. RIDDELL
STATE AGENT. 8th & Locust
STORAGE. SALES. REPAIRS.

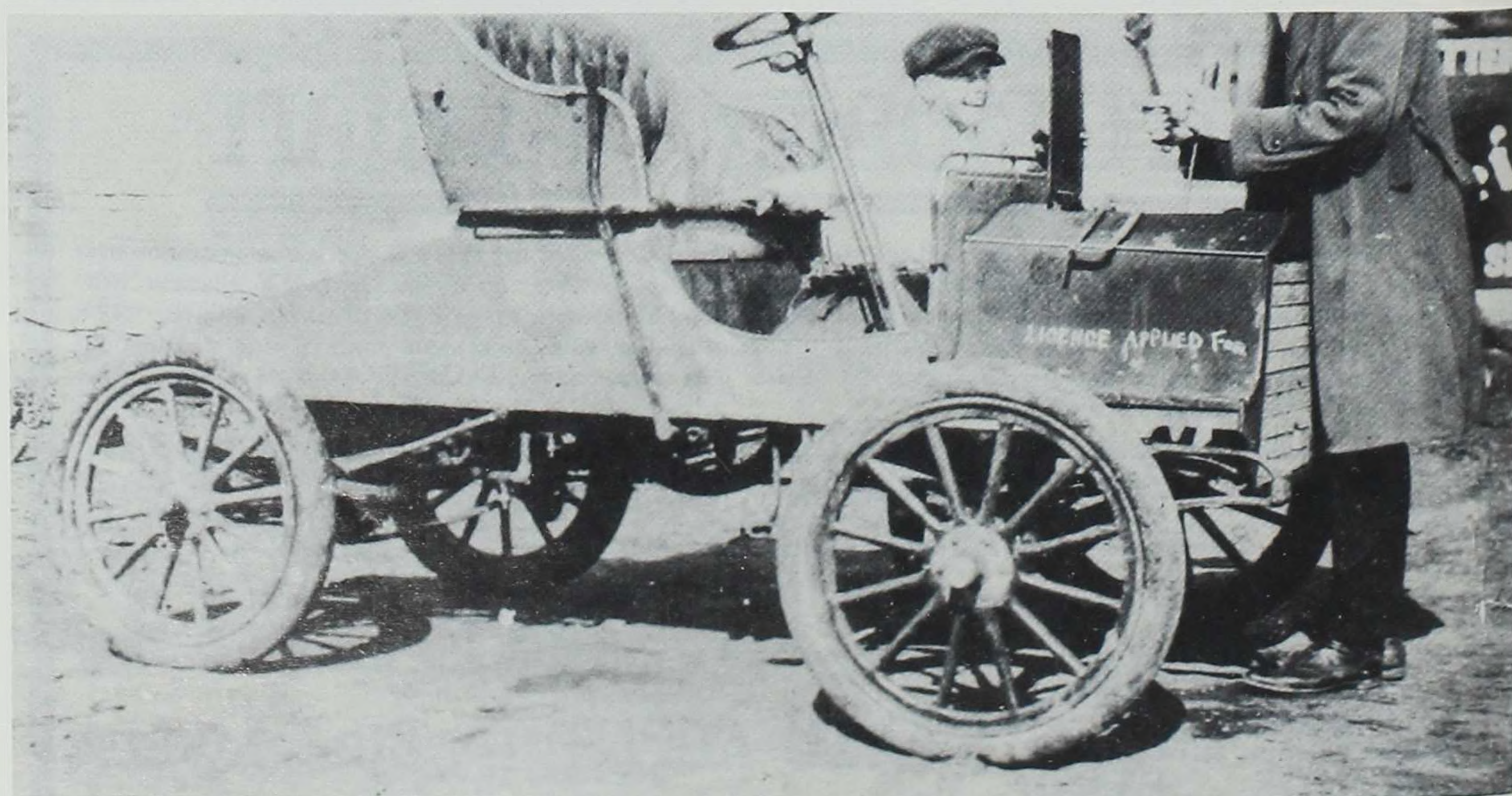
Joseph T. Silver offered his primitive, two-cylinder Orient Motor Buckboard and a few dollars in trade for the Cadillac, and a deal was made.

As the new owner, Silver made the appropriate repairs and began to use the vehicle for business and family outings. Ralph Silver, Joseph's son, remembers driving the car to pick up Sunday newspapers at the rail stop at Bethany Junction, three miles away. Normally the Cadillac shortened the trip, except when the road had turned to mud and driving became an exercise in pushing.

The Cadillac also transported the Silver family to picnics and fishing spots. Ralph Silver recalled a thirteen-mile trip to Missouri that took four hours: "Three families decided to go to Eagleville for a Sunday dinner. Arrangements were made and we all got our goggles, dusters and scarfs and started out about nine o'clock. Our first encounter was a farm wagon about three miles south. The farmer raised his arm which was the signal for us to pull to the side of the road and shut off the engine while he got past. The next one we met had us stop while he opened a gate and drove into the field. The next one was a young man and his girl. He got the horse and buggy tied to the fence and

motioned us to proceed but the horse reared up and I heard afterwards the man got a broken nose. . . . On the way home we had gotten about [four] miles from home when we had trouble. We were almost up the McNelly hill when the engine stopped on our car. It was nearly dark by this time and I remember Allie Smith running up the hill waving her handkerchief and saying not to back down because [their car] was stalled in the middle of the road. . . . My father cut back into the steep bank and the car proceeded to dump all of us in the road. No one [was] hurt however. We arrived home about ten o'clock and thought we had had quite a day."

About 1906 Lamoni could boast of only a few automobiles—including a single-cylinder Oldsmobile, a two-cylinder Buick, and the Silvers' Cadillac. Dubbed the Lamoni Auto Club by the local paper, the owners were justifiably proud of their machines. When Cadillac offered an appearance upgrade about 1907, Joseph Silver could not resist. He ordered the fifty-dollar modification. The change was substantial. Raising the radiator above the lower frame and adding a hood gave the appearance of newer models. (Although the modification made the automobile look less like the smooth-



The Silvers' reconditioned Cadillac in 1921 has "LICENCE APPLIED FOR" painted on the hood. (Apparently the automobile, not the man, was the focus of this photograph.)



“Old Calamity” probably looked like this in 1903. Note the low-slung radiator and its exposed coils, the sloping hood, and the rear tonneau. This 1903 Cadillac runabout is owned by Donald C. Burnham of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

front buggy types and more like Model Ts, it didn't help the car's performance.)

Despite upgrades, age slowly began to take its toll on the car. Eventually the fenders and lights were gone, and the detachable tonneau stayed detached (replaced by the wooden tailboard). Green paint covered all remnants of the original maroon color. Nevertheless, the Cadillac's role in the family was endeared by the name “Old Calamity,” and its usefulness was insured as it continued to transport the Silver children to the local swimming hole. World War I found the car resting in the backyard awaiting Ralph, who was in the service. On his return “Old Calamity” was tuned up for the 1920 Armistice Day parade.

By the 1920s, however, the car had lost its importance to the family. Joseph Silver traded it to David Kruidenier of Des Moines for a 1919 seven-passenger Cadillac phaeton with a jump seat in the rear.

The travels of “the swellest Car built” came to an end in 1939 when Kruidenier donated the machine to the State Historical Department museum (now the State Historical Society of Iowa). For forty-five years in the old museum,

“Old Calamity” remained on exhibit, unchanged except by the additions of dust, chewing gum, and the slow oxidation of its paint. Today the 1903 Cadillac is being studied and cared for in climate-controlled storage in the new State Historical Building in Des Moines. The Cadillac will again be brought out for the public as new exhibits are planned. Our museum exhibits focus on specific time periods or issues in Iowa history. Each exhibit is designed to tell a story to the public, and each artifact selected helps illustrate that story.

Automobiles restored to their original form and beauty show us how they may have looked brand new. But this Cadillac reveals something equally interesting about the past: that people alter their possessions because of needs and desires, and that those needs and desires often reflect social and technological change. We witness a vivid example of change—directed by style, use, and age—when we consider the evolution of a 1903 Cadillac from “the swellest Car built” to “Old Calamity.”

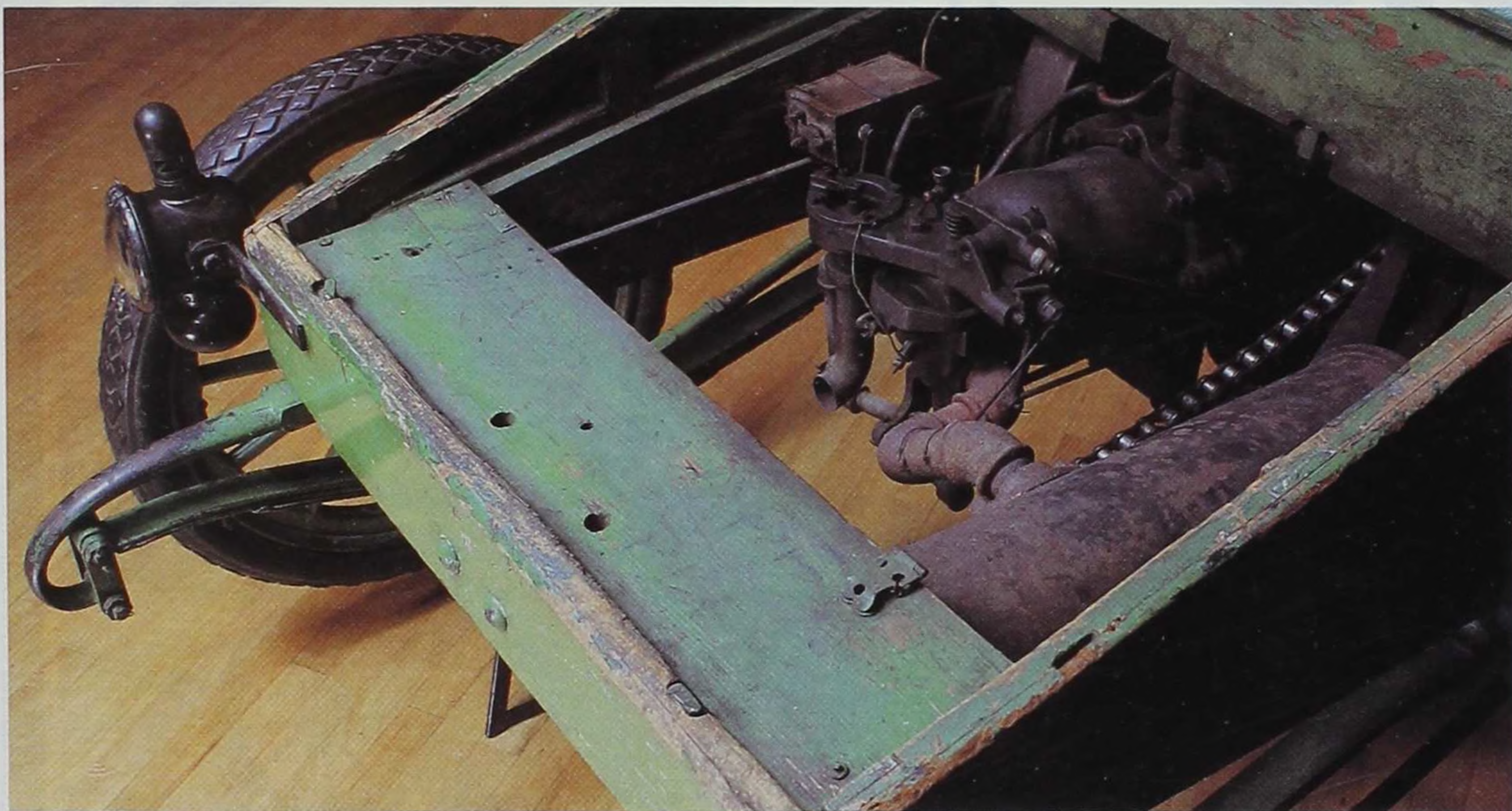
[Turn the page for more Cadillac photos.]



Left: The 1903 Cadillac Model A runabout was a primitive automobile mechanically but sported elegant details such as the tufted leather upholstery and brass lamp and horn on this restored model, owned by Donald C. Burnham of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Cadillac did not become a luxury-car manufacturer until decades after production began in 1903.

Right: Ralph Silver remembers that when he was thirteen he offered a cousin a ride in the Cadillac: "She said, 'You don't know how to drive a car.' I said I had watched how they put the brass key in the hole under the seat, set the spark lever at the back and turn the crank. She got in, I got it started and drove two blocks north, west two blocks and back to the café without any trouble. There was quite a crowd there to see if I would come back safely." As Ralph must have known—or learned that day—the lever on the steering wheel is the throttle, the left foot pedal is for forward, and the right for backward. The crank is left of the round step. The hand brake is beside the seat.





CHUCK GREINER

Above: The water-cooled engine is chain driven. With the gravity-fed engine in the back, and the gas tank under the seat, going downhill could pose problems.

CARS & PARTS MAGAZINE



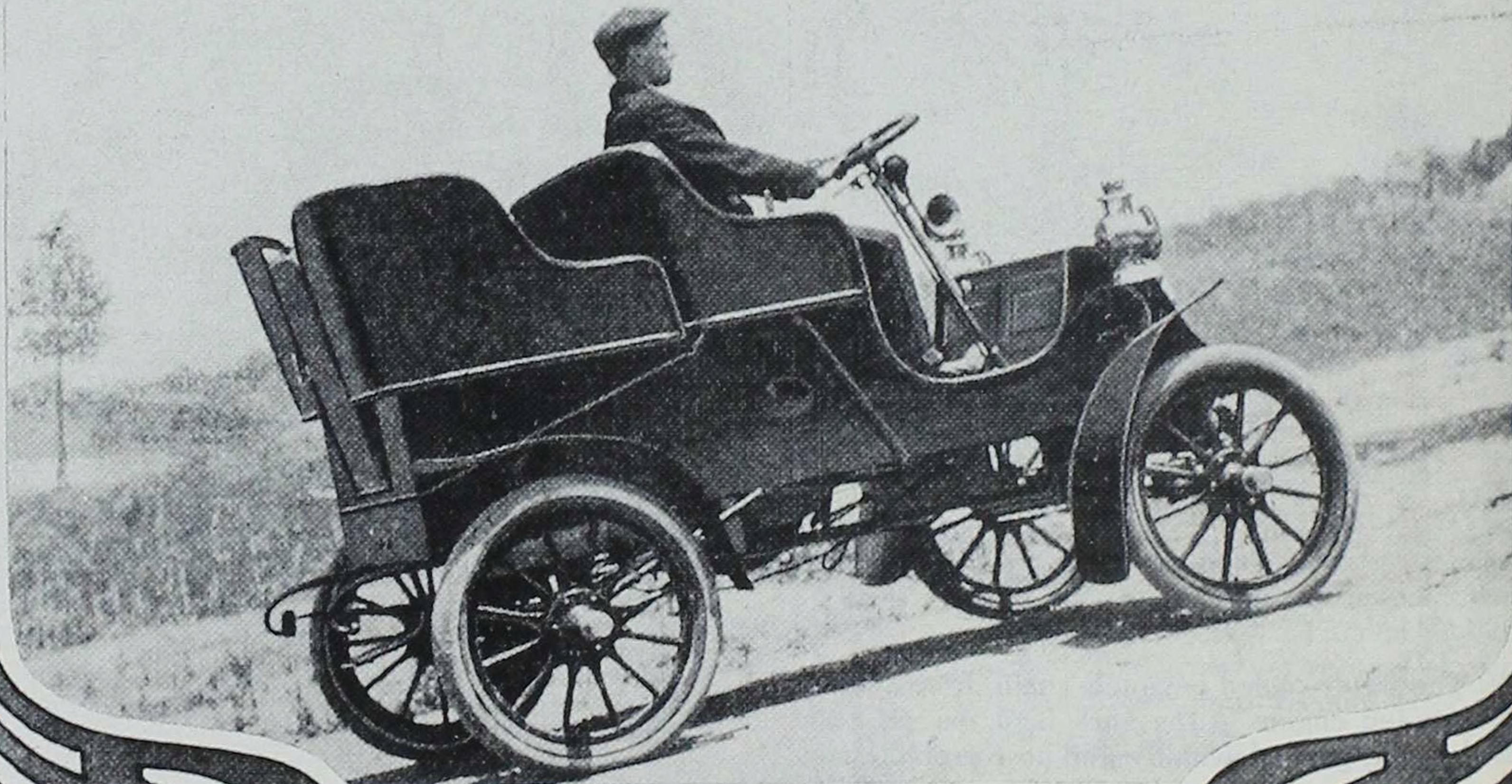
Above: The rear-entrance tonneau seated two. Detachable at four bolts, it was replaced by a wooden tailboard.

Right: In 1904 license plates were small aluminum discs tacked to the back of the auto. On this disc, 3772 is both the license number and the number of registered cars in Iowa to date. In 1906 larger, leather rectangles were required. Auto owners used aluminum house address numbers tacked on the leather plate to indicate assigned license numbers. Driving attire: gloves and linen duster.



CHUCK GREINER

*There is no
Prohibitive Grade
for the **CADILLAC***



The Cadillac Automobile will go up any grade of any well-traveled road, without balk—most-time without change of gear. The Cadillac does more than overcome grades—it is a machine for all roads and all seasons. Mr. I. L. Atwood, an auto novice, drove a Cadillac containing three passengers from New York to Waterbury, Conn., 93 miles, at an average speed of 13 miles an hour without a stop. This is a typical

CADILLAC

performance—
no accident, no repairs
—but perfect satisfaction. No gas-
kets to burn or blow out: new sparking de-
vice endorsed by all gas-engine experts; same copper
water jacket as used in latest French machines; speed range
4 to 30 miles an hour; only two places to oil—against 10 or more in
others; interchangeable bronze bearings; mechanically operated valves.
Model A, 1904, with the Detachable Tonneau seating four facing forward, \$850. With-
out tonneau, the smartest of Runabouts, \$750. Our free illustrated booklet N gives
address of agency nearest you where the Cadillac may be seen and tried.

CADILLAC AUTOMOBILE CO., Detroit, Mich.

Member Association of Licensed Automobile Manufacturers.

Specifications, 1903 Cadillac Runabout

Production: July 1903, #1318

Color: Maroon. (*Known modification:* Green, hand-painted)

Weight: 1370-1450 pounds

Engine: 6.5 Hp., one-cylinder, 98.2 cubic inch

Transmission: Planetary, 2 forward, 1 reverse, 34-sprocket chain drive

Seating: 2, 4 with detachable tonneau. (*Known modification:* Tonneau removed)

Lights: Kerosene or acetylene lamps. (*Known modification:* 3 Ford Company kerosene lamps added after 1914)

Steering: Rack and pinion

Wheels: Wood, 22-inch, 12-spoke Hartford tires, single-tube. (*Known modification:* Goodyear single-tube)

Wheelbase: 71 inches

Length: 108 inches

Body: Wooden, by Wilson, curved dash, low radiator, leather seats, fenders. (*Known modification:* Squared hood and dash, no fenders, raised radiator)

Speed/MPG: 30 MPH/25 MPG



Above: Street scene from Lamoni, showing Silvers' 1903 Cadillac parked in front of their café.

Opposite: The 1903 Cadillac was advertised as a strong hill-climber. Nevertheless, steep inclines challenged "Old Calamity" as it aged. Ralph Silver recalled how he adapted the auto: "We used to have trouble on a hill and sometimes the brakes would fail so I concocted a spud (made of a wagonwheel spoke with a metal spike in the end). Let down, it stuck in the ground and kept the car from rolling on a hill. It fastened to the box axle and was operated from the seat with a sash cord." Below: *Des Moines Register* ad.

NOTE ON SOURCES

References for this article include Maurice D. Henry, *Cadillac: Standard of the World*, 2nd ed. (1977); the Cadillac Roadside Service of the Cadillac Company in Detroit; Floyd Claymer, *Those Wonderful Old Automobiles* (1953); "Cadillac Planetary Gear Transmission," *Scientific American* (Jan. 30, 1904); "The Cadillac Gasoline Runabout," *Scientific American* (April 11, 1903); James Homans, *Self propelled Vehicles*, 6th ed. (1907); Beverly Rae Kimes and Henry Austin Clark, Jr., *Standard Catalogue of American Cars, 1805-1945* (1945); and interviews with Ansel Sackett of the Le Sal Club of Detroit, Ralph Silver and Jacqueline Silver Flowers of Lamoni, and David Kruidenier of Des Moines. Also see Bob Stevens, "1903 Cadillac Model A Runabout: A New Marque Debuts," *Cars & Parts* (Sept. 1985), in which more photos of a restored Cadillac appear.

THE CADILLAC



\$875.00

With Detachable Tonneau....

Ramblers, \$650 and \$750

The Hill-climbing, Strong, Dependable Car.

Toledo, Gasoline Touring Car and Steam Autos. A French constructed type of car. See its engine.

Waverly Runabouts and Chelsia Models

The Acknowledged Standard, Made in the U. S.

Over Five Carloads of the above new cars in stock to select from. Won't you come in tomorrow and allow us to show you their construction and give you catalogs? I carry in stock Automobile Tires, Lamps, Plugs, Battery Caps and Hoses. Everything for Automobile use. SEE US.

W. J. RIDDELL

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