

The Horseless Carriage Rolls into Oklahoma



*By Gene Allen with Don Boulton and Ted R. Davis**

Everyone knows that the automobile was invented in Detroit while our pioneer ancestors were busy producing surreys, with and without fringe. But as with many "facts" that "everyone knows," most of that information just is not true. The first internal combustion engine automobile was not invented in Detroit, but in Germany in 1886 by Karl Benz, later of Mercedes-Benz fame. The first auto that was invented and subsequently serially produced in the United States was created by Frank and Charles Duryea of Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1893. And while there were quite a few surreys on Oklahoma's roads in that period, Oklahomans also were producing automobiles even before statehood. By 1907 there were six companies getting into the business in El Reno, Enid, Manchester, Muskogee, Oklahoma City, and Tulsa.¹

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That was a full year before Henry Ford started rolling out his Model T in Detroit.

Some of those companies were announced with much fanfare but managed only a few cars, or in a few cases, no cars at all. There was one notable exception: the Pioneer, first manufactured in El Reno.

Edward Wright and Roy Roberts were in the farm implement business in 1907 when the automobile virus hit them. Their first car, labeled the "WRC" presumably after their initials, was a two-cylinder, twenty-horsepower vehicle. Its thirty-six-inch wheels made it look more like a horse-drawn buggy, but the extra clearance was no doubt an advantage on the primitive Oklahoma roads.²

On July 30, 1907, the *El Reno American* newspaper reported that Roberts was in Chicago purchasing machinery to be set up in their new factory. "As soon as it is installed the making of the little runabout will begin in earnest for the company has already booked a bunch of orders. The first car to be sold by this company was purchased by the Catholic priest at Kingfisher."³

In October 1907 Roy Roberts and his partner Roy Compton set out on a demonstration trip to acquaint potential buyers with their car, now named the Pioneer. Their plan was to drive through western Texas and New Mexico and return by way of southern Oklahoma. Given the state of roads at the time this was certainly an ambitious undertaking, but the car apparently performed well. On October 25 Roberts wrote from Walters, Oklahoma, "It poured down rain last night and this morning. At Lawton the streets were worked to a mire. They dared us to try them. We did so without a bobble, then drove twenty-one miles to this place in two hours. Never been hitched to yet."⁴ He meant they had never had to call on some farmer's team to pull them out of the mud, a common method of rescue in 1907.

By 1909 the company had a four-cylinder, thirty-horsepower model in addition to their original, smaller runabout. The buyer had an option of either pneumatic or solid rubber tires. The pneumatics provided a softer ride, but given road conditions and the state of tire technology, all but guaranteed flats. There were no flats with the solid rubber variety but the ride could be bone jarring at best. The Pioneer was priced at \$750.⁵

Dr. F. H. Clark bought one of those first automobiles, and the *El Reno American* wrote, "Perhaps no automobile ever brought to El Reno has been given harder or more constant usage than Dr. Clark's little red wagon." The paper observed that this early model was "not of the noiseless type" and you could always tell when Dr. Clark was coming

Newspaper clipping about the Pioneer Car Company, December 12, 1909 (El Reno Daily American, The Gateway to Oklahoma History, OHS).

**PIONEER CARS
ARE POPULAR**

GET TO WICHITA AUTO SHOW
LATE BUT MAKE GOOD.

FIFTY CARS ARE SOLD

**W. R. Roberts Wires That He Has
Sold Fifty Cars in Kansas**

The Pioneer Car Company is an institution of which El Reno should be justly proud. That the Pioneer cars are making good is evidenced from a telegram received here from W. R. Roberts who had charge of the Pioneer car at the Wichita auto show. Mr. Roberts arrived at the show in time for the last two days only and yet so favorably was the Pioneer car received that he booked over fifty orders in Kansas for the next season. This is certainly going some, and speaks volumes for the Pioneer Car Company.

even at a distance of several blocks. But the good doctor was a satisfied customer and in 1909 he was back for one of the four-cylinder models.⁶

Dr. R. F. Koons also was becoming an automobile enthusiast. On a test drive with a factory representative for the Pioneer, the doctor was allowed to pick the roads on which they traveled to see how the automobile handled bumpy roads. The newspaper reported, "Now Dr. Koons claims to know something about all the roads in Canadian county, good and bad, and of course it was the bad he was looking for. After a run over sand hills and through sand valleys, hills and hollows, Dr. Koons decided that the Pioneer is good enough for him and the company booked his order, delivery to be made as soon as possible."⁷

El Reno citizens who made their living on the roads were quickly finding advantages to the Pioneer. J. H. Bolton, a letter carrier and daily traveler on Canadian County's Route 4, put the car to a test in August 1909. He left the post office with a driver from the Pioneer

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Andy Binns (1917, Virginia Sutton Collection, OHS).

Company and completed his deliveries in two hours and twenty minutes, a run that normally consumed his entire day. According to the *El Reno American* reporter this feat “is creating favorable comment from letter carriers all over the state.”⁸

Having made believers of doctors and mail carriers it was time for the little Pioneer to look for acclaim on a larger stage. That chance came when the *Daily Oklahoman* announced an endurance run for automobiles from Oklahoma City to Kansas City and back. Some of the most prominent big touring cars of the day were entered. The Pioneer was the only Oklahoma-built car in the race and was generally given little chance of even finishing.⁹ Promptly at 6:30 a.m. on Monday, September 7, 1909, the ten contesting automobiles were lined up in front of the *Daily Oklahoman* building at Fourth Street and Broadway in Oklahoma City. First in line was an Oldsmobile that was to serve as the pilot car. The others were a Franklin, a Marion Flyer, another Oldsmobile, a Sellers, a Pullman, a Mitchell, a Ford, a Velie, and the Pioneer. Andy Binns and A. C. Campbell were selected to assist in starting the cars, perhaps because of their skills at hand cranking cars of that era, a task that could be difficult at best and dangerous at times. Then, with the drivers moving out at two-minute intervals, the great endurance race began. Several local drivers followed along behind until all were well past the city limits. There were more than

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Above: Oklahoma Motor Car Co. in the Labor Day parade, Oklahoma City, c. 1908 (2097, Oklahoma Historical Society Photograph Collection, OHS).

Below: The first automobile in McAlester (7417, Lee Roberts Collection, OHS).



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Women with an automobile in the vicinity of Wanette, Oklahoma, c. 1920 (21193.49.1, Mary Taylor Album Collection, OHS).

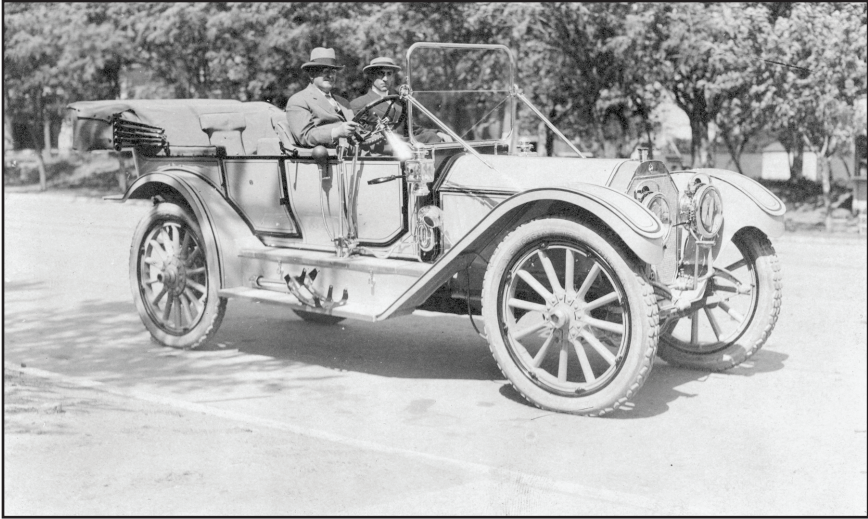
six hundred automobiles registered in Oklahoma City at the time and the parade of vehicles was quite impressive.¹⁰

Everything was going perfectly until the cars reached Kingfisher, where a heavy rain set in. It was September after all, a time in Oklahoma when rains are almost inevitable. Soon all the autos were mired in mud with the drivers and mechanics sloshing around putting on chains. The *El Reno American* reported that the Pioneer arrived at the first overnight stop in Enid thirty-five minutes ahead of schedule with a perfect score.¹¹

The second day's destination was Wichita and the *Daily Oklahoman's* correspondent reported that "besmeared with black soil of Kansas from head to foot, their cars resembling huge piles of mud, ten contestants and a guest car arrived here [Wichita] tonight ending the second stage of the endurance run for the Daily Oklahoman trophy."¹²

The Pioneer suffered its first mishap near Pond Creek when its rear fenders were ripped from the back of the body. Driver Roberts solved the problem by bending the fenders up over the step, but this subjected the occupants of the car to a constant barrage of mud. Nevertheless, they pressed on.

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H. A. Bump at the wheel of a grey Oldsmobile, the biggest car in Oklahoma City, 1912 (9369, Marie Bump Basore Collection, OHS).

Upon arriving in Kansas City the *El Reno American* reporter wrote, with considerable civic pride:

The Oklahoma autoists rolled in here [Kansas City] this evening on time with the Pioneer leading the bunch. . . . Since breaking a fender the Pioneer has had no trouble and other contestants have almost given up hopes of the car from El Reno losing its present splendid standing. This machine, which was unknown to many before the race, is now the terror of all contestants. The result of the trip will be that the Pioneer Company in El Reno will have to enlarge their factory.¹³

The return trip to Oklahoma City was uneventful except for one accident when the Marion Flyer hit a buggy and dumped six cans of milk and the driver into the road. No one was hurt and the loss was small. As the drivers neared home four machines were tied for first place: the Franklin, Velie, Mitchell, and Pioneer. Then with the finish line almost in sight, disaster struck the little Pioneer. A connecting rod in the engine snapped and the car's race was over. "When the Sellers which towed the Pioneer from its stranded position five miles from town, arrived at Britton with the news of the accident, there was gloom in the tourist's camp. Had it not been for the mishap the Pioneer might

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have been one of the leading contenders for the trophy, having three consecutive clear scores to its credit since leaving Kansas City.”¹⁴

The Pioneer had lost the race but it achieved an even more important goal: regional and national attention. The city fathers in Wichita had noticed and quickly offered a \$40,000 bonus if the Pioneer Company would locate its new plant there.¹⁵

The *El Reno American* wrote that the endurance run had given the Pioneer a national reputation and “orders have come in such numbers to fairly swamp the factory and show the proprietors that the capacity of their plant will have to be increased one thousand percent in order to supply the demand.”¹⁶

In December the Pioneer Company ran an ad in the *El Reno American*:

We have contracted with out of town parties for practically our entire output for the coming year. Our deliveries to them will commence in February. There are those in El Reno who have told us they wanted to buy one of our cars. We take this means of notifying them . . . they will have to make up their minds and place their order at once.¹⁷

Then, as now, there was heavy competition from cities to entice factories to relocate. The Pioneer management rejected the Wichita offer saying they preferred to stay in El Reno. That city then offered a \$10,000 bonus to keep the booming factory, but Oklahoma City promptly offered \$15,000 and won the contest.¹⁸

The Pioneer did not fare well in its new home for reasons not understood and in February 1912 the owners sold out to the Tulsa Automobile and Manufacturing Company. One reason might have been the fact that by 1912 Henry Ford was producing one Model T about every three minutes, would soon be selling them for just over \$500, and, to add insult to injury, would be rolling them off an assembly line in Oklahoma City. There was no way Sooner state car makers could keep up with that.¹⁹

Nevertheless, several tried. The Tulsa Automobile Corporation was organized in February 1917 and took over the plant of the Tulsa Automobile and Manufacturing Company, former owners of the Pioneer. There was a race car called the “Tulsa” in the 1913 Indianapolis race and the new owners planned to adapt that vehicle to a Tulsa production car. They soon realized, however, that building the car from scratch would be prohibitively expensive and decided instead to assemble their car from existing parts brought in from various factories across the

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D. M. Witt (9704, William Finney Collection, OHS).



country. Production on the 1918 model began in 1917 with four models listed at “under a thousand dollars.” Production figures are unknown, but perhaps several hundred cars were produced each year. In 1921 the company was sold to D. M. Witt of Oklahoma City. The last few automobiles were finished and the company subsequently shifted to producing and distributing auto parts.²⁰

The Geronimo was one of the more successful Oklahoma-produced cars. It was assembled in the first sizeable manufacturing plant in Enid, Oklahoma. The first model was introduced in 1917 with a four-cylinder Lycoming engine. That was followed by a six-cylinder model with a Rutenber engine. The company also produced a worm-drive, one-ton truck priced at \$1,195 and a four-wheel drive tractor that “will do the work of six horses.” Worm drives were used mostly in trucks because it allowed a lower gear ratio and therefore more power at slower speeds.²¹

One of the advertising slogans was “Power you’ll never dare use,” which was perhaps overstating the facts slightly since the Geronimo’s top speed was fifty miles per hour, but it was a durable car and a classy looking one, too. All Geronimos were open cars, colorfully painted, with some models sporting wire wheels (a \$55 option). About one hundred Geronimos were exported to France, but most stayed home.

THE ENID EVENTS, ENID, OKLAHOMA.

(REPRINTED IN PART FROM EDITORIAL PAGE OF CHICAGO AMERICAN, AUGUST 18, 1917.)

Do You Mean to Own an Automobile in the Course of a Year?

If you Do, Get it NOW. Machines Will be Scarce, and the Price Much Higher if You Wait.

The family without an automobile is like the poor Dodo—a bird that recently became extinct. It had little wings, but could not fly.

The man who lives without an automobile, if he can afford it, is as foolish as that Dodo would have been if real wings had been offered to him and he had declined on the ground that he preferred to walk—and be knocked on the head by the sailor landing from the Arctic ship.

The automobile gives wings, not to the selfish individual, but to the WHOLE FAMILY. It gives youth to the old father or mother, strength to the child too young to walk and, above all, UNITED pleasure to all the family group.

The man who MIGHT own a car, even by sacrifice in other directions, and who does not own a car, is neglecting an opportunity, neglecting his family and friends.

Do not economize ON LIFE TRIFLES. The automobile takes you into the air, into health, into the beautiful country. It makes you acquainted with this earth, which is our inheritance.

Do not go down into a dark cellar to count your pennies, or let concentration on false economy keep you at home, far away from the beautiful world, in order to save the small amount that it costs to keep up the good automobile of today.

This is not written, however, to urge the value of the automobile. That is demonstrated.

It is written to impress facts upon our readers. It will soon be difficult to get, at any reasonable price, the automobile that you want.

If you intend to get a car soon, or in the course of a year, get it NOW—and be sure that you have it.

Many of the most important plants have stopped manufacturing pleasure automobiles—absolutely because the government has ordered them to work on flying machines, or government trucks. When cars on hand are sold they will make no more.

The automobile plants find it extremely difficult to get material required, and will soon find it impossible, with increased cost of labor and everything else, to continue the present prices for automobiles.

You read in the papers that the recent terrible heat wave was complicated by the fact that the supply of electric fans had run out—they could not be had.

That is a small and passing difficulty.

The great fan of the human race is the automobile—the machine that takes you flying through the air, and fans the whole family.

Do not let the supply of AUTOMOBILE fans disappear while you are making up your mind as to just WHEN you should get the machine that you have been thinking about, and ought to get NOW.

If you should offer one hundred thousand dollars for a NEW Rolles-Royce machine—the well known English machine—you could not get one here or in England. You can buy an old one rebuilt, and pay as much as ten thousand dollars for them in England—because the government is using the factory for making trucks, and new machines cannot be bought at any price.

All of our automobile machinery, all the facilities of the big companies, will not be able to supply government needs alone if this war runs for two or three years, as it promises to do.

At present you can get your machine without interfering with the government's wants, without selfishly putting your family needs ahead of the government needs.

Don't wait if you want a machine, and at the present low prices. BUY YOUR CAR NOW.

Things Worth Knowing

Tennyson or Longfellow could take a piece of paper, write a poem on it, and make it worth \$5,000.00.

THAT'S GENIUS.

Rockefeller or Carnegie can write a few words on a sheet of paper and make it worth millions of dollars.

THAT'S CAPITAL.

The United States can take an ounce and a quarter of gold and stamp upon it the American eagle and it is worth \$20.00.

THAT'S MONEY.

A mechanic can take material worth \$5.00 and make it into watch springs worth \$1,000.00.

THAT'S SKILL.

A person can buy an automobile which is all built up of special parts. Some one man's idea and fancies.

THAT'S FOOLISH.

Any man can buy a Geronimo automobile that is built complete of Standard parts, not a single piece used being an experiment.

THAT'S WISDOM.

A Geronimo car can travel 50 miles per hour.

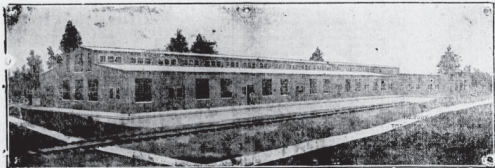
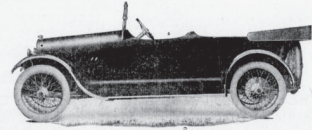
THAT'S SPEED.

A Geronimo car will pull any hill that can be pulled by any automobile.

THAT'S POWER.

The material is the best, the workmanship good, the lines beautiful; when you buy an automobile choose Geronimo.

THAT'S ADVICE.



Home of the Geronimo Automobile.

We wish to announce that we are now ready to do a general automobile repair work. Your car troubles will cease to worry you when you let us look after your car. We will quickly put in first-class condition. Overhauling and general repair work when performed in our shop is guaranteed to give satisfaction.

Geronimo Motor Co.

Phone 1457.

ENID, OKLAHOMA.

West Oklahoma Ave.

Newspaper advertisement for the Geronimo Motor Co., December 6, 1917 (The Enid Events, The Gateway to Oklahoma History, OHS).

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Above: Used car showroom at Fred Jones Ford Company, 220 South Harvey, Oklahoma City, 1926 (23137.7, Jane May Collection, OHS).

Below: Fred Jones Ford Company's automobile fleet lined up outside (23137.13, Jane May Collection, OHS).



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Total production may have been as many as six hundred. Production was halted in 1920 by a fire in the paint shop. It was thought that no Geronimos had survived, but in 1972 the remains of one were found in a pasture near LaCrosse, Kansas. It was subsequently restored and currently belongs to the Enid Antique Automobile Club.²²

In 1914 T. E. Buckles of Manchester, Oklahoma, announced his entry into the automobile business. The auto was powered by a two-cylinder Spacke engine and featured a friction transmission and vee-belt drive. This was an early form of transmission that was used by some manufacturers because it was cheaper. In January 1914 the owner reported that the car was in the experimental stage and he had not had an opportunity of testing it thoroughly. No company was ever formed for manufacture and one can assume the Buckles never strayed far from Buckles's backyard.²³

Muskogee was the location for the Midland automobile. H. A. Von Unwerth was the proprietor of the Midland Machine Works, the principal product of which was the Muskogee Water Filter, but a few cars were built for local customer orders as well. This was strictly a sideline activity and had been discontinued by 1913.²⁴

The Midland Motor Car and Truck Company, on the other hand, was a million-dollar corporation just a year old in 1918, located in Oklahoma City. According to an article in the *Daily Oklahoman* the factory "expected to be turning out trucks for the U.S. government at the rate of twenty a day within thirty days and battle planes within a year in all probability."²⁵ Whether any battle planes resulted is not known but no Midland automobile appeared on the market. The company did build a two-and-one-half-ton truck into 1918, however.²⁶

W. E. Nation was an Oklahoma businessman who apparently bragged a lot, first that he was the proprietor of the largest retail harness and vehicle business between Kansas City and the Gulf of Mexico, second that he had come up with "a new development that works for efficiency and economy" and would revolutionize the manufacture of automobiles worldwide. What he apparently did come up with was a single prototype of a gasoline engine automobile especially designed "for the mixed prairie formation of Oklahoma," although he did not come up with the capital to put it into production. As for his secret new development, it apparently died with him.²⁷

The Northwest Motor Car Company was organized in Oklahoma City during the fall of 1910 with a capital stock of \$100,000 to manufacture and deal in automobiles and engines. There is no record of a car being produced.²⁸

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Caterpillar and tractor building a new highway in Canadian County.

Caterpillar and tractor building a new highway in Canadian County, WPA project (21486.A.46, Ray Sheehan Collection, OHS).

The McCool-Mercer Motor Company also was organized in Oklahoma City in 1910, a very busy year for the car business. It was much smaller than the Northwest Company with a capital stock of only \$10,000 that, apparently, was not enough to actually produce a prototype.²⁹

Early Oklahoma automobile companies were not unusual. Literally hundreds of companies were in business in practically every state in the early 1900s. They failed for a variety of reasons: poor management, limited capital, faulty engineering, but most of all from the manufacturing and marketing juggernaut coming out of Detroit. Even the best of the Oklahoma cars, the Geronimo for example, stood little chance in that environment, though they gave it their all.

Endnotes

* Gene Allen is a documentary writer and producer and a freelance writer in Oklahoma City. Don Boulton is a retired businessman, past president of the Horseless Carriage Club of America, a collector of brass-era American autos (1900–12), and an amateur auto historian. Ted R. Davis is a native of Oklahoma with an engineering degree from Oklahoma State University. He is the founder of Ted Davis Enterprises and holder of numerous electronic patents.

¹ Beverly Rae Kimes and Henry Austin Clark Jr., *Standard Catalog of American Cars, 1805–1942* (Iola, WI: Krause Publications, 1996), 1555.

² Ibid.

³ *El Reno (OK) American*, July 30, 1907, 1.

⁴ “For the WRC Factory,” *El Reno American*, October 26, 1907, 1.

⁵ *El Reno American*, March 22, 1909, 4.

⁶ “Delivering the Goods,” *El Reno American*, August 17, 1909, 1.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “Pioneer Car Makes Good on Route 4,” *El Reno American*, August 22, 1909, 1.

⁹ “Pioneer Automobile is Surprise of Trip,” *El Reno American*, September 9, 1909, 1.

¹⁰ *Daily Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City), September 7, 1909, 1.

¹¹ “Trophy Chasers Guests of Wichita Cordially Received,” *Daily Oklahoman*, September 9, 1909, 8.

¹² *Daily Oklahoman*, September 9, 1909, 9

¹³ “Pioneer Is Center of Interest,” *El Reno American*, September 11, 1909, 1

¹⁴ *Daily Oklahoman*, September 17, 1909, 1.

¹⁵ Kimes and Clark, *Standard Catalog*, 1153.

¹⁶ “Pioneer Co. Wants to Enlarge Factory,” *El Reno American*, November 4, 1909, 1.

¹⁷ “Announcement,” *El Reno American*, December 19, 1909, 6.

¹⁸ Kimes and Clark, *Standard Catalog*, 1153.

¹⁹ Ibid., 547.

²⁰ Ibid., 1434.

²¹ Ibid., 609.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 147.

²⁴ Ibid., 932.

²⁵ *Daily Oklahoman*, June 9, 1918, 45.

²⁶ Kimes and Clark, *Standard Catalog*, 900.

²⁷ Ibid., 989.

²⁸ Ibid., 1004.

²⁹ Ibid., 906.