



staff photo by Gary Dorsey

# Folks still buy Chevies in Mebane

## Hard times come, go for C.M. Ray

by Gary Dorsey  
Staff Writer

MEBANE — There aren't any saints out here. The closest to sainthood around here might be some old bachelor Methodist preacher or kindly grey-headed elementary school teacher, but they're special types and they'd be out to the country if they're around here at all.

Because here there are just a lot of regular folks. Good old boys crowd the downtown, wheeling their watermelon stomachs and big-kneed gals around in their '75 Caprice Chevrolets, and giggly secretaries drive between work and home in their Vegas, and the young people, why they're about as indistinguishable as their elders, with fluffed and curled hair and K-Mart jeans, driving used Malibus.

Old C.M. Ray is no saint. "Don't go calling me a saint because I'm not. And don't go telling anyone I'm a saint either."

So people call him a workhorse because that comes a lot closer to describing the real man who owns Melville Chevrolet and has been selling cars since 1923. He's sold a lot of cars to the farmers and young folk and the secretaries, and yes, trucks with gun racks to the good old boys, and Caprices to them to wheel their darlings around town in. Most everybody knows him.

He saw his first automobile when he was about seven or eight years old, back in 1905 or '06, as a farm boy in the Alexander-Wilson community not far from here.

"You could hear those cars a mile away

back then," he says. "We'd hear it and go running down to the road to see, me and my friends."

They were sure damn funny things. They'd get stuck in the ditches along the dirt roads from Hillsborough to Mebane, and somebody would have to get out and go get a farmer to bring a team of horses to pull them out. Lots of times you'd see cars being pulled by horses.

By 1917, though, old C.M. was driving a T-Model on the same Hillsborough-Mebane road which he'd go out courting on Saturday night. His brother-in-law had taught him how to drive and would let him sometimes borrow the car. He never figured he'd wind up selling the things for a living.

But come 1923 he needed a job. He tried to get through school at Carolina but couldn't make it — a combination of poverty and a thick head that wouldn't take to learning, as he tells it now.

"I needed a job and my cousin in Burlington told me about a job in Mebane selling Chevrolets," he says. "That was in 1923 that I drifted into the car business, April 5. I was 25 years old."

"It was just right for me," he says. "I just figured I could sell some so I went out and sold 'em. Did well with it. Figured that was my calling."

During the next seven years he worked for Ford twice. "I repented though," he says, and in 1932 he and three other salesmen went into business for themselves.

Him and Dr. Willie Goley, and Alexander-Wilson High principal George Robbins bought a Chevrolet dealership in Mebane.

Mr. Robin and Dr. James wanted to call the place Will-Rob-Ray Chevrolet, but C.M. didn't like it. "They wanted to put the names

together. No, no, I liked Melville. We're in the Melville township here and there is a dairy in Burlington named Melville Dairies so that's what we decided to call it. Melville Chevrolet."

So Melville Chevrolet was born, right in the midst of the Great Depression, with C.M. running the showroom. C.M., who never really had any money and now he was married and his wife had twins and a son was on the way. He worked and worked.

His wife Annie went to work in a mill office to keep them going. He knows he never would have made it without her. Her and Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

"Our great president Franklin D. Roosevelt pulled me through. He pulled us all through. I've always thought since he died that we ought to dig him up and apologize to him for the way we treated him."

C.M. thought he'd go broke in 1938. Things were so bad. But somehow he was saved by 1940. He did it by being friendly with his people and working hard.

"During the early days the cars were cheap but the work hard. I'd sell a car for \$326 and deliver it full of gas. Some farmer would buy a T-Model and I'd go out to deliver it and he'd be building a shed for it. He'd tell me to take it back until he was ready for it. He had to get that old shed built first."

The '40s and '50s were good years for C.M. He did good enough to send his two daughters to school and buy two new buildings for his business. The credit could go to honesty and clean living, because he certainly held to those virtues.

"I've always taught my salesmen, if you talk to the people tell them the truth. Don't tell them everything. But if they ask you about something tell them the truth. Lies are hard to back out of."

He used to smoke cigarettes during the

early days when the pressure to survive weighed on him, but he gave it up when he got heart flutters. As for drink . . . "You could put all the liquor I've had in a quart bottle and it'd still be half empty. I had a little beer before World War II but it gave me the shivers. I just don't like the stuff."

He almost won a trip to Europe in 1959 because he sold so many new cars. He came in second place, though, when some dealer threw in some sales at the last minute he'd been holding back to make the contest exciting.

But in 1965 he won a trip to Jamaica and went. He and Annie were down there for a few days. He was surrounded by blacks down there and he couldn't understand what they were saying most of the time and they couldn't understand what he was saying, so the trip was confusing for him. He liked the trip but doesn't want to go back. In Mebane at least he can understand the language.

C.M. doesn't work much anymore. He comes to the showroom every morning at nine and leaves about noon to go home for lunch and a nap. But there's no doubt he still belongs there. People know him and still come there to buy because he's there. He's the Mebane auto salesman, one of the original workhorses pushing cars.

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**DOONESBURY**

F: Henry, it seems the invasion option is no longer viable. My budget people tell me there's no way we could pay for it. Too much money involved.

K: We could get the money. It could be arranged. I know where it could be gotten. It is not easy, but it could be done!

P: Hmm...

P: No, it is wrong — that's for sure.  
K: What's that got to do with it?!