

BLACK HISTORY MONTH PROFILE

Auto Hall of Fame Inducts First African American

By Reginald Larrie

Edward Davis, the nation's first African-American auto dealer, was inducted in the National Automobile Hall of Fame in November 1996, becoming the organization's first black member.

For more than 50 years, the Automobile Hall of Fame has honored the contributions of those who have helped make the motor car one of man's greatest inventions. Many African Americans have contributed to the development and distribution of motor vehicles but, until now, their efforts have largely gone unrecognized.

As an inductee into the National Automobile Hall of Fame, Davis joins the likes of Gray Wolf, the youngest, successful auto dealer in the country;

The National Automobile Hall of Fame has put together a team of historians to consider inducting C.R. Patterson, an African American, who founded the Patterson-Greenfield Motorcar Company in the early 1900s. If selected, Patterson would become the second African American to be inducted in the Automobile Hall of Fame. (The Patterson story was featured in *AAOW's* Winter '96 issue.)

George Romney, president, American Motors and Robert McNamara, a vice president of Ford Motor Car Company and a member of the infamous "whiz kids." Davis' story begins in Shreveport, LA., where he was born on Feb. 27, 1911, the first son of Thomas and Hester Davis, who eventually had 10 children. Although his father owned some 500 acres of land, young Ed, like so many African Americans of his day, dreamed of a better life for himself. After his mother died, he packed up and moved to live with an aunt in Hamtramck, a town near Detroit.

In the "big city" Davis did

well in school and, at age 16, received an auto mechanics certificate from Cass Technical High School, one of the highest rated educational institutions in Michigan.

His attempts to get a job as a mechanic was hampered by his lack of experience, so Davis turned instead to auto manufacturing, securing a job at the Dodge Brothers Main Plant in Hamtramck.

One day his superintendent, who knew of Davis' interest in cars, asked if he would like to work as a part-time salesman at his son's new dealership. Davis, though surprised at the offer, jumped at the chance and quickly began selling cars at Merton Lampkins' newly-opened store and service center on Woodward Ave., in downtown Detroit.

Filled with enthusiasm and dreaming of one day owning his own dealership, Davis tried to learn every facet of the business. After years of struggle, his dream finally came true. In 1939, Studebaker Motor Car Company of South Bend, IN, awarded Davis a franchise, making him the first African-American automobile dealer in the United States. Davis located his dealership in the heart of the African-American community and quickly became a leading dealer in the Detroit area.

Davis' desire to own a dealership didn't die when Studebaker went out of business in 1956. He continued to pursue other franchise opportunities in the auto industry. In 1963, his persistence paid off. Chrysler awarded Davis a Chrysler-Plymouth dealership, making him the first African American to be granted a franchise by a Big Three automaker, according to the National Association of Minority Automobile Dealers.

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