

Your Favorite Toy Began Life 100 Years Ago

BY MARJORIE MEGIVERN

If there is one indispensable product in our lives today, it is surely our automobile. As family transporter, status symbol, and general work-horse it is our pride and joy. We are so accustomed to its services, most families now house at least two of them in specially-designed places of residence.

Despite the glamour and usefulness attached to our cars, a book about their history doesn't sound particularly compelling. After all, the automobile is just a pile of metal, rubber, plastic and fabric. What's to say about it?

Robert Ireland, a freelance journalist, has plenty to say, focusing particularly on North Carolina, in his new book, *Entering The Auto Age*, published last year by the Division of Archives and History of the N.C. Department of Cultural Resources.

With the subtitle, *The Early Automobile in North Carolina, 1900-1930*, this 137-page paperback book is chock full of automotive history and its social and economic significance to our state.

It is also liberally illustrated with fascinating photographs of the earliest "buggybodies," steam boilers that powered them, car dealerships and their products, advertisements, parades, races and the attire required for women drivers. One of the most interesting sights recorded was a roadway where about a dozen early automobiles were mired in Orange County mud.

Ireland does more than trace the development of the auto from its steam-powered beginnings to the 1930s models of truck and Cadillac. He explores along the way how powerfully this development affected the way North Carolinians lived and how the state's economy changed as a result.

His sources include newspaper accounts, registration records, state laws and, most telling of all, people who experienced the early days of the state's auto age. Quotes from these people bring the whole subject vividly to life.

America's first road-tested vehicle emerged as early as 1857 in New York. It was not until 1880, however, that a North Carolina man, a Sampson County farmer, mortgaged his cotton crop to raise \$200 for a steam engine and boiler. From this he built a road vehicle whose remaining parts are now housed in a private museum in Turkey, N. C.

It was another decade before the horseless carriage powered by an internal combustion engine appeared in the state. And still another ten years passed before car ownership was accepted by Tar Heels.

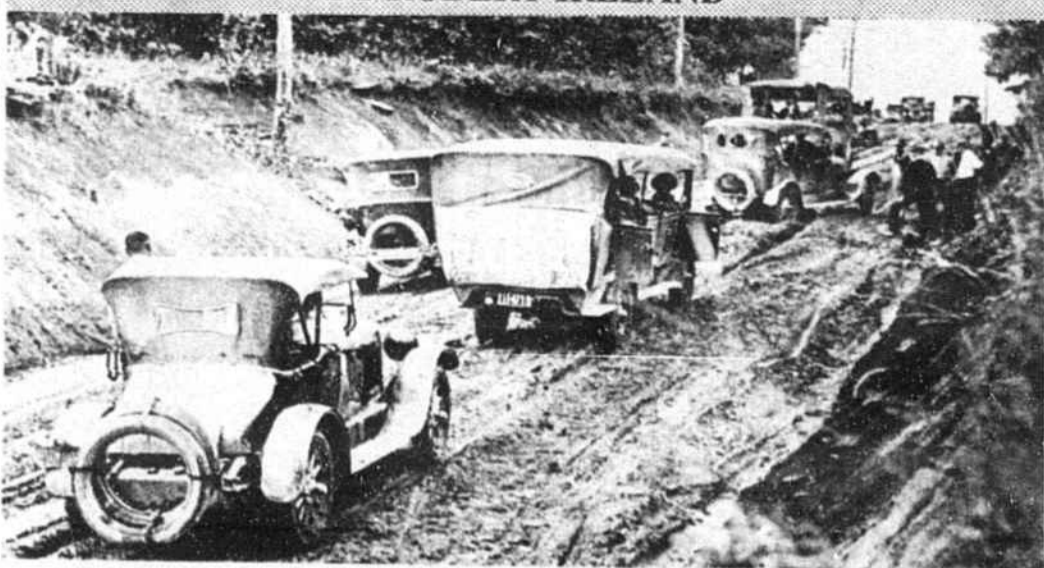
Overcoming public indifference, if not hostility to the mechanical monster, was not easy. Though the "horse culture" had pretty much disappeared by 1929 nationwide, North Carolina did not readily abandon its dependence on horses as transportation. As late as 1913, the town of Thomasville bought a new horse fountain and watering trough despite the existence of 70 autos and two garages in the community.

After all, the state's population was less than two million and there were only 50-100 automobiles in

BOOK REVIEW

The Early Automobile in North Carolina, 1900-1930

BY ROBERT IRELAND



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY NORTH CAROLINA COLLECTION, UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA LIBRARY, CHAPEL HILL

AUTOMOBILES mired deeply in the mud were a common sight along North Carolina roadways in the early 20th century. These vehicles were trying to climb a hill near Asheville.

use at that time, while 147,000 horses were available, as well as 135,000 mules.

People largely distrusted the new machines and feared the disruption of their tranquility by the noise and dirt they created.

In 1904, when a Cadillac ventured forth on the streets of Newton, N.C., the local newspaper used this front-page headline: "Horseless

Carriage Comes to Town." The story noted that "horses bolted, ladies screamed and children ran to their mothers." It would be some time, the editor commented, before folks would swap a quiet, safe Sunday buggy ride for a trip in that dirty, noisy contraption that "careens around faster than a horse can gallop."

The transition was made, of

course; the auto age arrived, bringing with it a more comprehensive roads system, toll roads, and eventually regulation of the automobile.

North Carolina became known as the "Good Roads State," leading the South in road construction. In 1907 it took its first regulatory step, requiring that "all persons riding on bicycles, tricycle, tandem bicycle, locomobiles, automobile or other motor vehicle" keep to the right side of the highway and travel at no more than six miles an hour in "business or closely built-up areas." In other areas, ten-15 miles an hour was permitted.

This era was not entirely rosy. By 1920 the problem of automobile safety had reared its head, as higher speeds led to a mounting toll of fatalities, injuries and property damage.

Remedies included higher insurance rates, law enforcement's speed trap, and in 1922, organization of the Carolina Motor Club.

Another outgrowth of this state's entry into the auto age was the cre-

ation of a new state-level bureaucracy capable of collecting tax revenues. Indeed, as the automobile became a leading tax producer, the structure of state government was forced to change.

Traffic congestion mounted from 1920 to 1930 as state highways became major arteries of trade. Local businesses were no longer confined to railway access for supplies, but at the same time, their customers could travel almost anywhere in the state to shop. Trucks, tractors, taxis and buses, all offsprings of the car, were transforming the way North Carolinians carried out agriculture, commerce and recreation.

Ireland presents in this book a balanced view of what the auto age brought us: new freedom, status, economic progress and pleasure, but also increased bureaucracy, new taxes, greater debt and violence on the highways.

It's a mixed legacy and one whose history is relevant to everyone who has sat behind the wheel of a car. *Entering the Auto Age* is illuminating social comment and good reading, as well.

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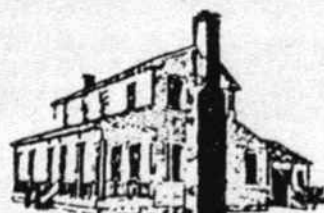
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