

# LIVERMORE HERITAGE GUILD

"Help Save Yesterday For Tomorrow"

May-June 2007 Newsletter

## The Automobile Comes to Livermore

by Gary Drummond

Little did the people in Murray Township realize what the future would bring when in July 1899 the Herald reported, "It is rumored that the valley is soon to have an automobile. Mrs. [Phoebe] Hearst is said to have purchased one; if true, ours will be the first rural community in the state to have one of the marvelous vehicles." In September of that same year, a local doctor ordered an automobile from the Best Works in San Leandro, which previously had primarily manufactured threshing machines. It was the beginning of a social revolution.

In early 1901 a salesman for Locomobile Autos came through Livermore on his way to delivering a machine to a Bakersfield customer. It was a magnificent machine - steam-powered, gas-fueled at the cost of one and a quarter cents a mile, with a double cylinder reversing engine. The salesman "favored a number of local citizens with a spin over the model roads of the valley, and all were delighted by the experience." By the time the salesman departed, H. R. Crane, a local bicycle dealer, had been named Locomobile agent.

But there was a downside to this new innovation. Automobiles never failed to produce panic among wagon and buggy teams. As a remedy, the Automobile Club of California offered a "horse familiarization" course where, by locating one or two automobiles at some convenient place in the community, horse owners could bring their animals close to a vehicle with its motor running.

Local farmers constantly railed at inconsiderate drivers who failed to slow down when passing a team on the road. A petition addressed to the County Board of Supervisors asked that automobiles be banned in Livermore Valley, insisting that "most drivers are of an irresponsible class who have only recently joined the ranks, as they appear to have little knowledge of their machines except to drive them at their full speed." The Board pointed out that automobiles have an equal right to the roadway. The Murray Township Supervisor argued that "automobiles of San Francisco do thousands of dollars of damage to our roads and do not contribute one cent to their support. This problem will never be settled until the State takes over the main highways."

Early day automobile manufacturers multiplied like today's dot.com companies. It was reported that a company had been formed in San Francisco to take over the old Bilz Buggy and Wagon Works in Pleasanton for the manufacture of automobiles. "...the company already has orders for several large machines and [the principals] are confident that the industry will assume large proportions." Nothing more was ever reported about this venture.

Meantime, locals were becoming comfortable with the automobile. In July 1904, Dr. J. K. Warner purchased a 10-horsepower Cadillac automobile. It was said to have been fitted with

the latest improvements, "including a powerful searchlight which will be valuable for use on mountain roads at night. The machine is a heavy runabout, but the tonneau cover is so arranged that a second seat and canopy top can be used where needed." Three months later, Dr. Warner traded the Cadillac in for an Oldsmobile, as "he found it too heavy a machine for his purpose." H. R Crane bought Warner's Cadillac and rented it out for excursions complete with chauffeur.

Crane, the Locomobile agent, took on sales of other automobiles. In 1903, it was the Oldsmobile line; in 1905, the Autocar, Rambler, and Pope-Hartford lines; and in 1907 he became the local Ford agent.

Law enforcement was another issue brought about by the automobile. Pleasanton citizens were outraged when the town fathers raised the speed limit from 10 to 20 miles per hour within the town limits. The Town Marshal was, however, instructed to see that the ordinance was strictly enforced.

A new state law became a source of some confusion when three local citizens were cited one evening when they left their automobiles standing in front of the Bell Theatre on Livermore's First Street without their lights on. The confusion: the law used the term "in use". The law stipulated that automobiles will have two lights in front and one red in back burning from a half hour after sunset until a half hour before dawn when a vehicle was "in use". Some drivers interpreted this term to mean only that time when they were actually traveling from place to place. The County District Attorney, however, interpreted the law differently and ruled that a vehicle standing on the street "awaiting the owner's pleasure was in use. It cannot be said to be out of use unless housed in a shed or garage." The Legislature clarified the language shortly thereafter.

Automobiles had become a common sight on local streets by 1905, and horses no longer shied at them. That same year the first taxi service started up when John Lassen purchased a 10-horsepower Pope-Hartford touring car and proposed to do a general passenger business around Livermore and throughout the valley.

And so it went. Horses became accustomed to passing automobiles; drivers became more or less conscious of traffic regulations; and pedestrians became more adept at avoiding aggressive drivers. The situation hasn't changed in a hundred years.

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