

Mansfield Memories: Mansfield's first car owners recall the early days of automobiles

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MANSFIELD - The early days of the automobile in Mansfield might have been forgotten. But with the formation of the New Car Dealers Association of Mansfield in 1954, the Mansfield News sat down with long-time residents who had early experience with the automobile. These are some of their recollections.

“Who will be the first man in Mansfield to own an automobile?” asked The Observer in the Mansfield News in April 1902. “I understand that two orders have been placed by well-to-do Mansfield men for these horseless roadsters.”

The answer came later in the month when Justin L. Cobb became the first Mansfield resident to take delivery on a new Oldsmobile (although this is disputed). The next week he was joined by Mr. and Mrs. Harry T. Emmons, who picked up a new steam-powered Stanley in Boston and drove it back to Mansfield “without incident.”



Western auto, shown here in the 1920s was located at the corner of North Main and High Streets where Betty and Bill's Toy shop was located.

In May 1902, Frank M. Cobb bought an Oldsmobile. Frank was Justin's cousin and business partner in the F.M. and J.L. Cobb Jewelry Manufacturing Company on Spring Street. Their shop still stands today at 68 Mill St.

Justin Cobb's Oldsmobile was sold to Howard Paine of Rumford Avenue, who eventually sold it to Herbert Leavitt. In 1954, Leavitt recalled that he first got his license in 1906. He was asked if it was difficult to get a license back then. Herb assured the reporter you only needed "fifty cents and a letter asking for a license."



O'Malley Auto Supply used to be on South Main Street where the Café on the Common is now.

Howard Paine maintained that Justin Cobb did not own the first car in town, but that the honor belonged to Father Edward Mongan of Rumford Avenue. A Roman Catholic priest, Father Mongan owned a "Red Devil" (an interesting choice for a priest) which he used to travel around the area performing his pastoral duties. We might never know for sure who was right.

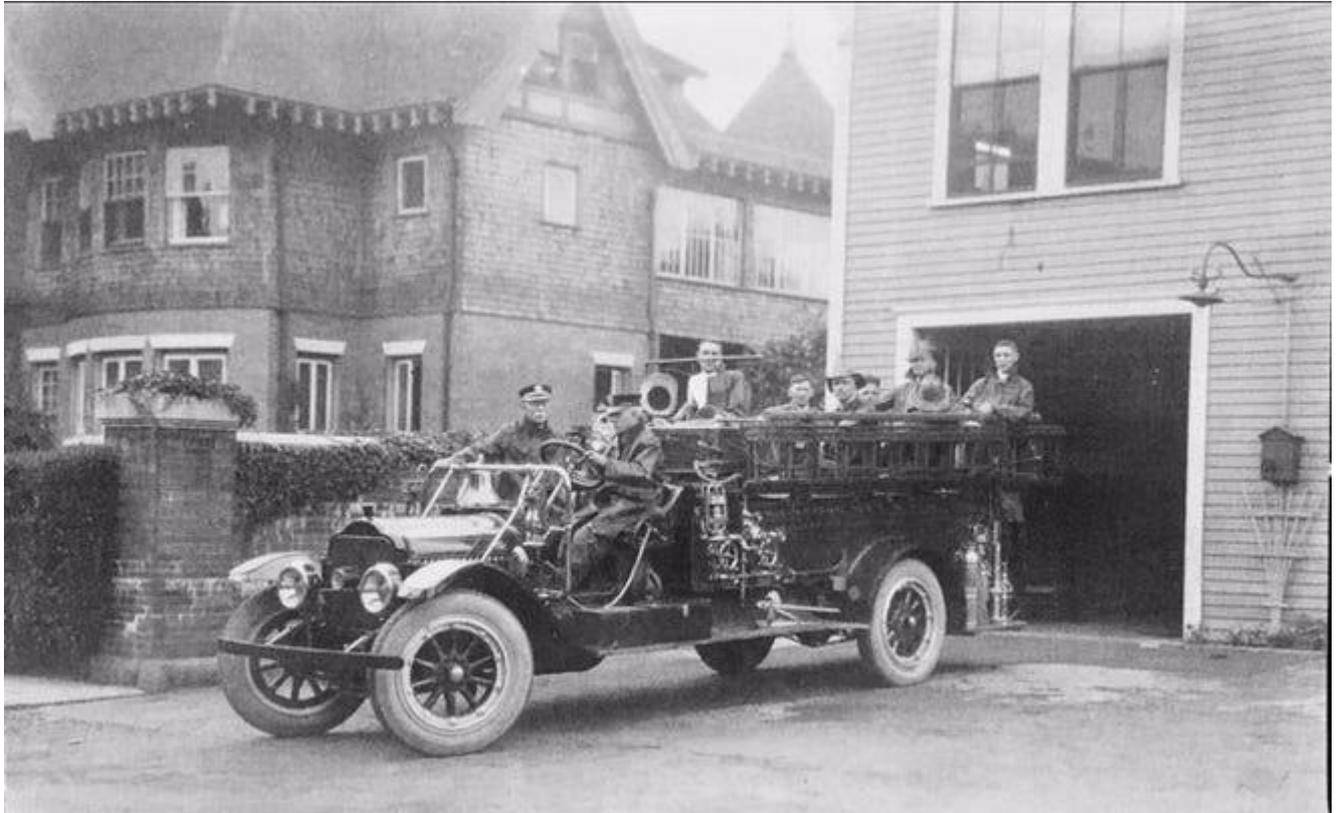
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John Cook was a well-known Mansfield physician. He was asked about the first car he bought in 1909, a Holsman that resembled a horse-drawn carriage. He said it cost about \$1,500. With no installment plans at the time a cash payment was expected at purchase. He

fondly remembered the out-of-town dealer he bought it from could “make it go like the devil without any trouble, but I had my difficulties.”

“Yes, it did look like a buggy,” the doctor recalled. “Hard rubber-tired buggy wheels—big ones in the back and smaller ones in front. Dashboard more or less like a buggy and steered with a crank something like a furnace shaker.”



Example of an early Fire Department truck

The car had a “gadget” for tightening the tension on the speed drive if he wanted to slow down. There were oil lamps in the front, which Cook once cleaned with gasoline, then burned his hands badly when he tried to light them.

He recalled it was “fast compared to a horse.” But he had trouble with one of the gears, and hills proved difficult.

“Every time I went anywhere there were hills I had to take another man along to push,” he said.

Mansfield did not have a snowplow until 1921 so Cook got around by horse and buggy or sleigh in the winter.



Example of an early Fire Department trucks

Ray Tillotson was a top-notch mechanic who worked for car dealer Arthur Keefe. It seemed that local coal dealer William Winter purchased a Model T from Keefe. Soon thereafter Winter arrived at the garage and was quite agitated at Keefe. His Model T would not run. He suspected something was wrong with the oil.

Tillotson inspected the crank case. Something indeed was wrong with the oil. Tillotson “took a taste of it. It was sweet. Nothing but maple syrup that Winter’s [employee] took for oil.” Tillotson cleaned it up, replaced the oil and the Ford started with no difficulty. Winter promptly apologized to Keefe.

These stories give us a taste of what early car ownership in Mansfield was like. We are fortunate that they were written down and survive today.