

First automobile arrives in Watsonville in 1902



Betty Lewis
That was Watsonville

"Now comes the automobile, which claims the attention of road builders. This style of vehicle is rapidly coming into general use for business and pleasure and each owner of such a machine becomes at once an advocate of better roads. Thus does the popular demand for improved highways increase and the good work goes steadily on. In this particular Santa Cruz County is well to the front and is going forward at no uncertain pace. The cutting down of the Green Valley school house hill and other minor improvements outlined by Supervisor Linscott are commendable steps along progressive lines, but the greatest improvement of them all will be the opening up of the road along the Pajaro river below the Chittenden grade to connect Santa Cruz and San Benito counties at a point near Chittenden station. This highway will be practically level and will reduce the distance between Watsonville and Hollister by three miles." — The Pajaronian, September 3, 1903.

In 1902, when ping-pong was sweeping the country and "In the

Good Old Summer Time" was a hit song, local man "Speed" Miller was trying to work up an automobile craze along Main Street in Watsonville. The town was without an automobile but a number of men were showing symptoms of the fever. The first to succumb, according to the local newspaper, was Charles Mackrell, a harness maker by profession. "Charles Mackrell received a large and handsome Oldsmobile Tuesday, and is prepared to give sight-seeing parties a delightful spin about the valley and to surrounding towns at reasonable rates." — The Pajaronian, October 2, 1902.

This new-fangled mode of trans-

portation made little impression on most of the townspeople — it was thought to be a passing fancy — the same thing some people said about the radio, telephone and phonograph! The horse and carriage were good enough was the general opinion, along with the bicycle, as a means of transportation, and the new "horseless carriage" was merely a curiosity. Back in 1896, one had been featured in the New York Barnum and Bailey circus parade as an "oddy."

The first automobiles before 1900 were handmade to order for only the affluent. The average citizen couldn't afford one and didn't

really understand them anyway, nor had most ever seen one. Montgomery Ward purchased two cars at a price of \$30,000 each and had them shipped around the United States, stopping off at small towns for people to see and examine. In 1902 there were 8,000 cars made in the United States and Charles Mackrell's curved-dash Oldsmobile was one of the first successful commercially made autos. It had a four cylinder engine with seven horsepower and "one chug per telegraph pole" — all for \$650!

For one thing, the roads were not made for autos as shown by the following item from the local newspaper: "Street Superintendent Enos has had a force of men at work this week hauling the mud off the street that is carried in from the country on the beet wagons." Horses were scared to death of these lurching, belching, noisy contraptions. Wagons were upset and passengers spilled out of carriages as the animals rebelled.

In 1909, A.B. Gilbert drove a new Auburn car to Watsonville from San Francisco in five hours using five gallons of gas — the new car was for Peter Jensen and the auto was on view at the Watsonville garage until Mr. Jensen could learn to handle his new acquisition. At this same time, Chief of Police Albright alerted all garages and auto drivers that exceeding the 12 mile an hour speed limit would no longer be tolerated. The first to be stopped was Guy Bailey,

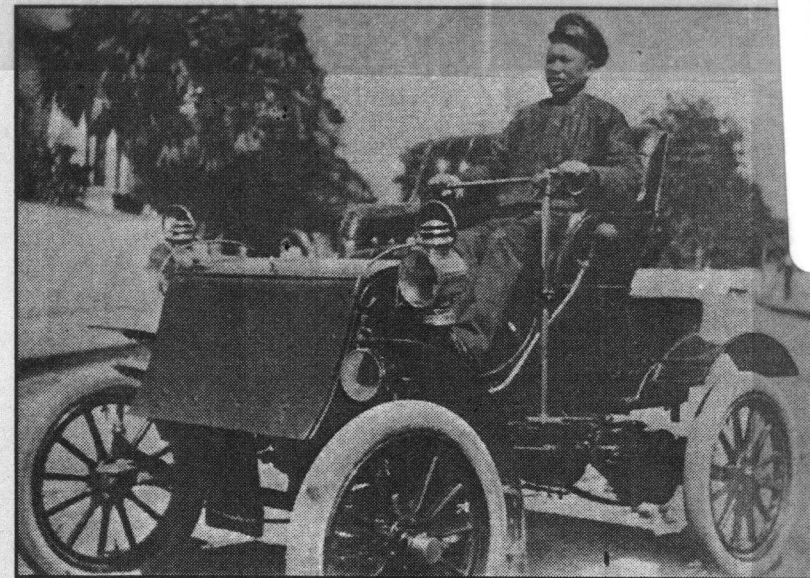


Photo courtesy George Menasco

"J.S. Menasco has placed an order for one of the latest style automobiles and there are several others who are figuring on a like departure. Within two years there will be many automobiles in the valley." — The Pajaronian, January 1, 1903. A Knox waterless, one cylinder — top and windshield were extra! Driver unknown.

from Berkeley, who paid the fine, with good humor, of \$6 for exceeding the Watsonville speed limit.

In 1910 gasoline was selling for 11 cents a gallon. By 1915, the Pajaro Valley had 337 automobiles, including 53 Fords, 37 Buicks, 33 Maxwells and two Studebakers. The first motel opened in Watsonville in 1940; the first parking meters installed in 1946 and first traffic lights in 1948.

Yes, the car with the "treacherous back-kick" was definitely past the novelty stage. These early-day

autos are now some of the highest priced cars on the road, having been lovingly restored to their former elegance by their modern day owners.

Following is the wisdom of Will Rogers — "The only way to solve the traffic problems of the country is to pass a law that only paid-for cars are allowed to use the highways. That would make traffic so scarce we could use our boulevards for children's playgrounds."

Betty Lewis, a local historian, is a contributing columnist to the Register-Pajaronian.

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This ad appeared in the souvenir program for the Appleton Theatre in 1925.

REFERENCE

WATSONVILLE
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