

Photo of the Month

Early Cars



Cars on First Street, Rogers, Arkansas, c.1910
Neg. # N020485

A new vehicle often causes excitement, but never so much so as at the turn of the twentieth century. The photo at right illustrates some of the first automobiles in the city of Rogers. The proud owners of these vehicles posed for the photograph in approximately 1910 on South First Street. Please note that the streets in Rogers were not yet paved at the time of this photograph.

Even before this image was captured, automobiles were worthy of news. A car first appeared in Rogers in 1898 as a marketing event staged by Montgomery Ward and a crowd gathered to witness the spectacle. It was an electric car delivered on the Frisco rail line (consumers and manufacturers had yet to make the commitment to gasoline engines over electric or steam power) and dignitaries such as Mayor Adamson and Professor Scroggs of the Rogers Academy toured around town in the vehicle. By July 1903 the Arkansas Gazette published a list of the 50 horseless carriages owned in the state, but none yet were in Rogers.

Many, however, believe that W.H. McMullin owned the first local car at about this time. He apparently built it in September 1903, just missing the Arkansas Gazette survey, and eyewitness accounts described the machine as a modified, noisy buggy with a chain drive—unfortunately the car was lost in a shed fire. In 1909, the first production vehicle owned in Rogers also met an untimely end. Owned by Charley Miller, the car was described as a large, two-seat automobile of unknown model. While driving through town, Mr. Miller was unable to avoid colliding with a freight car at the Poplar Street railroad crossing. The passengers fortunately escaped serious injury by jumping clear of the collision. His wife amazingly leaped from the wreckage on impact and clung to the ladder on the side of the freight car until the auto was shoved off of the tracks by the train.

Animals also often had dramatic introductions to automobiles. The 1908 story of Dr. A.C. Smith illustrates quite well the culture shock between drivers, farmers, and equine victims. Dr. Smith and his wife set out from Springdale in his new 40-horsepower Buick to visit friends in Rogers. While the car was touted as being able to reach forty miles per hour or more, it was not able to avoid causing much consternation to a team of mules. Upon meeting this team and their driver, the driver became frightened and abandoned the rig leaving the mules to fend for themselves. The mules bolted and Dr. Smith was obliged to pursue them in his new 40-horsepower Buick. No serious damage or injuries were reported, aside from the jangled nerves of the mules and the unlucky farmer.

This type of uproar was not uncommon as people and animals alike gradually became accustomed to the sight of automobiles as they chugged, smoked, and rattled their way into our daily lives. It is certainly interesting to imagine how shocking the appearance of automobiles may have been to people accustomed to the pace of horses. More automobiles continued to be purchased and by 1924 there were 3,021 cars in Benton County. The emergence of automobiles heralded new possibilities in life and changed the way communities functioned. New businesses would emerge to support driving and the road network would undergo unheard of improvements as people were able to look beyond town centers for their homes, goods, and livelihoods.