

Hartford Historical Society

The Garipay House • 1461 Maple Street
Hartford Village, Vermont 05047

HARTFORD • QUECHEE • WEST HARTFORD • WHITE RIVER JUNCTION • WILDER

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SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

May - June 2005

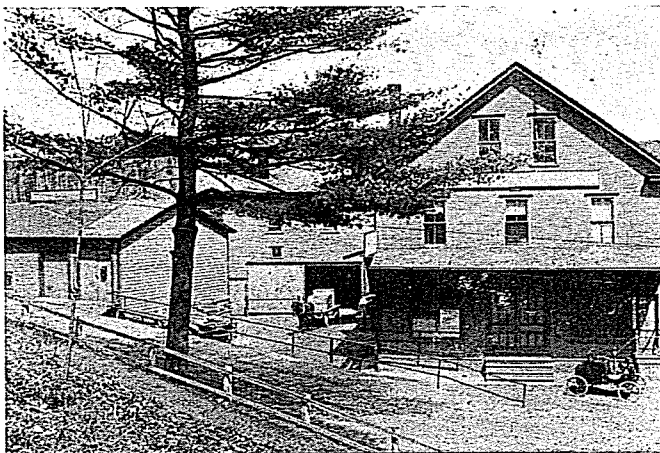
The History of Miller Automobile Company

by John A. Lutz

Today in the United States, the average life of a business enterprise has dropped to less than 20-years. How then do you account for a business which has survived for 110-years? That is the remarkable record of the Miller Automobile Company of White River Junction, Vermont. Also fascinating are the details of its founding and the unique individuals that accounted for its success.

The Founding:

In the 1880's Henry Miller constructed a building in Hartland, Vermont where he established the Excelsior Carriage Company. The showroom and workshops were on the first floor and a dance hall was located on the second floor.



The original Excelsior Carriage Company

At first, a variety of carriages were sold. Then Miller became an exclusive agent of the Excelsior Carriage Co. of Watertown, NY. This was also the era of railroad dominance, and Excelsior insisted that Miller find space in White River Junction, a regional railroad hub and a fast-developing trading center.

The move to White River Junction was made in 1895, the same year that Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show came to town with more than 200 horsemen and "wild indians" to entertain and awe a crowd of 12,000 people.

From Carriages to Cars:

In 1904 when father Henry Miller was away, his 18-year old son, Garfield "Dusty" Miller signed an order for a carload of Jaxon steam cars. Henry was aghast, then angry! But soon the cars arrived and, ready or not, Excelsior Carriage was in the car business! One of his first transactions was to exchange one of them for a one-cylinder Cadillac owned by a man in New Hampshire. A year later he made ten trips to Boston's Cadillac dealer, purchased a vehicle, then drove it home to Vermont and sold it. "Dusty" Miller then decided he wanted to become a full-fledged dealer.

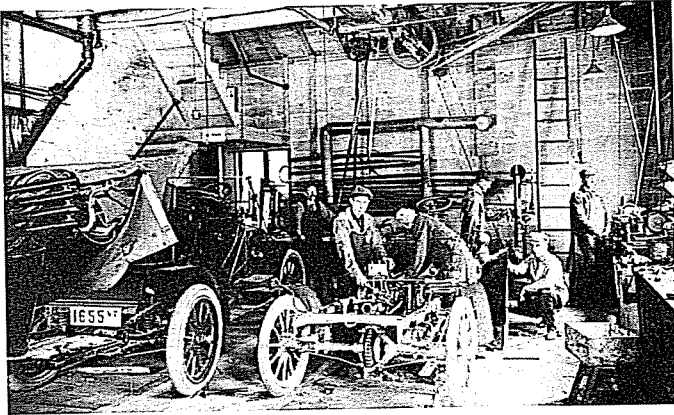
The Cadillac Motor Company was founded in Detroit by another Vermonter, Henry Leland of Barton, Vermont (Northeast Kingdom). The first Cadillac was sold in October 1902. "Dusty" Miller signed his first order for Cadillac motor cars just months after the first models had been released. Cadillac sold all cars to dealers on a C.O.D. basis.

The fact that Miller sold all the cars purchased indicates that "Dusty" Miller was no ordinary salesman. Even before the business became Miller Auto, he actively promoted sales of accessories and add-ons with catalogs and printed pricelists.

Today it is hard to imagine how bold a step it was to sell automobiles in 1903. At the turn of the century, there were few paved roads, no gas stations, and a small num-

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ber of drivers. Each time the Millers sold a Cadillac or Pierce Arrow (the luxury car of its day) they also had to instruct the new owner on how to drive the car.

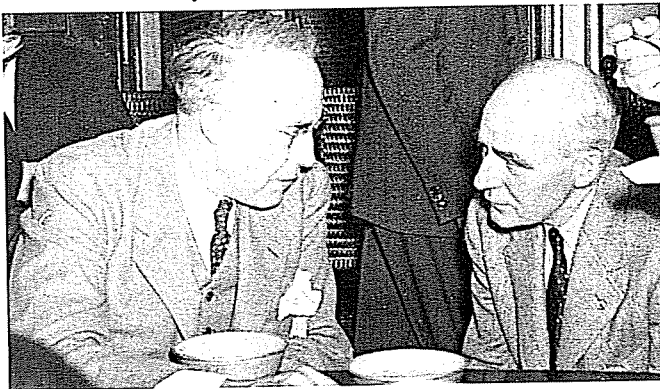


Since electric starters did not arrive until 1910, a driver had to learn how to crank, stoke (the Millers also sold steam cars), adjust and repair these mechanical novelties.

By 1910, the business was going well enough that the decision was made to construct a new building especially designed for auto sales and repair. It had 28-employees and was New England's largest Cadillac dealer.

Dusty Miller, master salesman:

According to William "Bill" Miller (3rd-generation operator of the Miller firm) his father "Dusty" Miller was a "people person" and a "master salesman". At the beginning he was not only selling automobiles but a new innovation and lifestyle.



"Dusty" Miller and Vermont Governor John Weeks

Old-timers would recall how "Dusty Miller knew everyone". He had repeat customers who purchased car after car, not only in New England but even to the mid-west.

"Dusty" Miller was proud of his life-long relationships with his customers. John Bennett held the record for the total of 22 Cadillacs he purchased over the years, but there were scores of devoted clients. And then there was the sale that "almost" happened.

Calvin Coolidge first met "Dusty" Miller when local hotel operator Than Wheeler learned that former president Calvin Coolidge had accepted his invitation to visit the Junction House which had been newly renamed in honor of Coolidge's father, Colonel John Coolidge of Plymouth, Vermont.

Coolidge wanted to go fishing but Than Wheeler was no angler. Wheeler asked "Dusty" Miller to host the president's fishing outing at the well-stocked waters of the exclusive Lakota Club in Barnard, Vermont. Miller rowed the boat and Coolidge fished. They had excellent luck and Coolidge expressed interest in "the fine automobiles that Mr. Miller sold". During a later summer visit, "Dusty" took a sixteen cylinder Cadillac to Plymouth for the former president's use. Calvin and Grace took a "nice long drive up and down the hills" and Coolidge asked Miller to contact him in Northampton between Christmas and New Year.

Coolidge wrote Miller near Christmas saying "don't come down. I'll see you in Plymouth next Spring." However, Calvin Coolidge died just two months later.

During World War II very few new cars were available for sale. In the eight years immediately after the war, there were waiting lists for cars and one had to wait as long as a year to take delivery. The Millers accepted \$25 deposits, on which they paid interest.

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Hartford Historical Society

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Newsletter Printing and Mailing: John Lutz



Miller Automobile Company in 1946

The Miller Auto tradition continued when Bill Miller passed the management responsibilities to his stepson, Cam Eldred. Like Bill Miller before him, Eldred grew up very interested in automobiles. However, after graduation from Williams College and the Amos Tuck School of Business Administration, Eldred worked as a manufacturer's representative for Frito Lay in Texas.

After Bill Miller married his widowed mother Kathryn Eldred, Bill encouraged Cam to consider operating Miller Automobile Company into the next century.

Eldred accepted the offer and Bill Miller, now 87 years young and still very interested in everything automotive, acts as an advisor.

Today, Miller Automobile Company remains one of the oldest General Motors franchises, nearing 100 years of continued association since the original 1906 contract signing that established it as the exclusive Cadillac dealer for Vermont.



Bill Miller, shown above, will attend our June 8th meeting and, after the showing of the historical photographs, will make comments and answer questions.

Please plan to attend this interesting meeting!



Mary's Message

By Mary Nadeau, *HHS Board Chairman*
chairman@hartfordhistory.org

At our I'd like to encourage everyone to attend our next program meeting, to be held on Wednesday, June 8th, 7 p.m. at the Greater Hartford United Church of Christ.

Local history buffs will enjoy learning the history of the Miller Automobile Company in White River Junction, which holds the record as the oldest Cadillac dealership in the country! Read more about this interesting upcoming program in this newsletter's lead story.

Afterward, there will be a short business meeting. Elections of officers and members of the board of directors will be held. Remember that nominations from the floor are always welcome! Please consider offering your time and talents to the society by serving on its board. Membership involves one meeting a month, which usually lasts about an hour, and pitching in to help staff open house events, fundraising, serving on committees, distributing posters and assisting with the nuts and bolts of keeping our society in good working condition.

The business meeting will also give you the opportunity to voice your opinions on the direction you'd like to see the society take during the next year. For example, a suggestion has been made to rotate our four annual program meetings around the five villages. How do you feel about that? Give us your "wish list".

Think about bringing along a non-member. This has proven to be a very effective way of expanding our membership base. Hope to see you there!



Curator's Corner

By Pat Stark, *HHS Archivist*
archivist@hartfordhistory.org

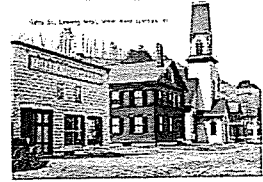
WELCOME to our newest archival volunteer Roberta Smith from Wilder. She is learning the process of describing our donations and numbering them, and is a great help in getting the backlog caught up!

Between her and Dorothy, great strides are being made and all of us may have a more relaxing summer.

I AM still looking for someone who can help with computer work using Excel [THAT is back-logged back to 2003!]. Many thanks to you both!

Hartford Historical Society

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NEXT MEETING:

The History of Miller Automobile Co.

Wednesday, June 8, 2005 • 7 PM

PAT STARK
PO BOX 44
HARTFORD VT 05047-0044



HHS Calendar

- Tue., May 24, 2005 HHS Board Meeting: Garipay House, 1461 Maple Street/Route 14, Hartford Village, VT, Meeting begins at 7:00 pm.
- Tue., June 7, 2005 Open House - Garipay House, 1461 Maple Street/Route 14, Hartford Village, VT, 6:00 - 8:00 pm. Come and see our collection.
- Wed., June 8, 2005 June Program - *The History of Miller Automobile Company*. Greater Hartford United Church of Christ, 1461 Maple Street, Route 14, Hartford Village, VT. The meeting begins at 7:00 pm.

Come enjoy this special program followed by a short business meeting and refreshments.

- Sun., June 12, 2005 Open House - Garipay House, 1461 Maple Street/Route 14, Hartford Village, VT, 1:30 - 4:00 pm. Come and see our collection.
- Thur., June 16, 2005 Book Committee Meeting - Garipay House, 1461 Maple Street/Route 14, Hartford Village, VT, 7:00 pm.
- Sat-Sun, June 25-26, 2005 2005 Vermont History Expo, Tunbridge Fair Grounds, Tunbridge, VT. 10 am - 5 pm