

The Model T once ruled Chatham's roads

Chatham's Historical Heritage

by Fred J. Vatter



As I drove south on Route 15/501, heading for Pittsboro on a bright, sunny morning, it was hard to visualize the pretty two lane road it was about 16 years ago. It became even harder to visualize when I arrived at Pittsboro and couldn't find a parking spot.

Prior to the end of World War I few automobiles took the challenge of driving over Chatham's treacherous roads. Most roads were clay or gravel and pitted with ruts and holes.

The earliest motor vehicles looked like buggies with a steering tiller up front. The driver's seat was mounted on top of the gas tank, with the engine below. It is no wonder they were referred to as horseless carriages.

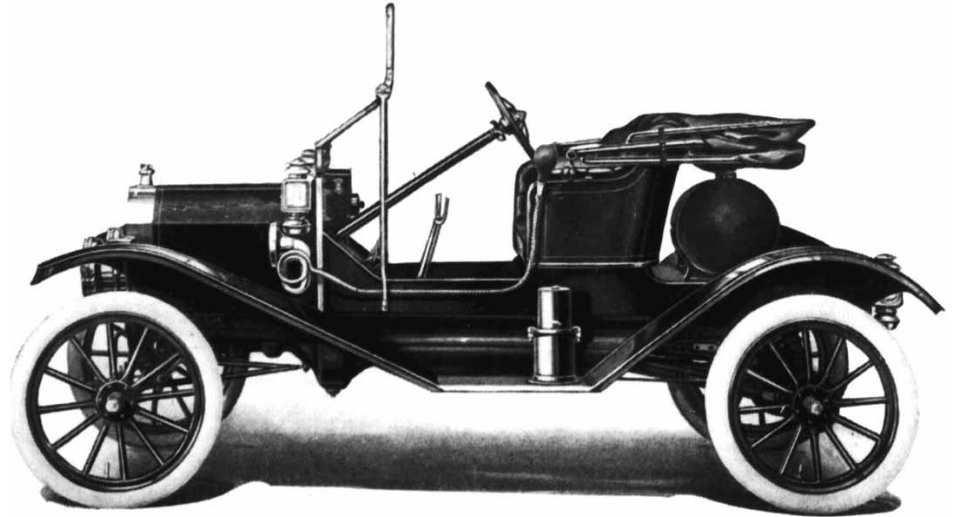
Automobiles in North Carolina did not have to be licensed until 1909 and there were only 1,600 vehicles in the entire state. By 1912 the statewide total was 6,000 and by 1919 it had increased to 109,000.

In 1915 sales of the Model T Ford caught on in Chatham County. A local newspaper, "The Siler City Grit" reported a visit to Henry Ford by a county Ford agent, J. C. Gregson. The Ford Motor Company had announced a year earlier that if their total sales reached 300,000 cars between August

1, 1914 and August 1, 1915 each purchaser during that interval would receive a refund of \$40 to \$60. Mr. Gregson was anxious to know what to tell his potential customers. He was told by Henry Ford that the 300,000 goal would be achieved in eleven months. Business was good, with 1,800 cars being sent out daily, even with the factory running 50,000 to 75,000 cars behind orders. Gregson then told Ford that if he could make a definite refund statement he could increase local sales by 500 cars. Henry Ford replied that each purchaser in that time period would receive a \$50 rebate. That meant the price for Ford Touring Cars would be \$490 – less the \$50 rebate and Ford runabouts would sell for \$440 – less the \$50 rebate. This promise was printed in a back page advertisement in the Grit signed by B.M. Poe, Pittsboro Salesman and F. W. Hadley, Siler City Salesman.

The same issue of the paper reported that the latest purchasers of Ford cars in Chatham were Rev. G. E. Spruell, John Marley and John Cheek of Siler City, C. N. Justice of Hadley Township and J. W. Hobby of Baldwin Township.

Vehicle ownership was big news, but also had some restrictions. A notice in The Grit on June 2, 1915 reminded owners that state law required two front lights and a red light in the rear when running at night. The North Carolina speed limit



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was 25 mph in the country and 15 mph in the residential section of town, and 10 mph in the business section. In August of that year, Chief Bradshaw stopped a vehicle for exceeding the 10 mph speed limit. The driver said that he was hurrying home before his gasoline ran out, and his excuse was accepted. I don't believe that the Highway Patrol would fall for that one today!

The Ford sales promotions apparently worked, because in 1923 Ford accounted for 904 of the 1,202 passenger automobiles registered in Chatham County. The remaining 298 autos were represented by 42 different brands. Second place was shared by Dodge and Overland, with 50 vehicles each; and Chevrolet came in third with 34.

Other names were Buick (28), Briscoe (17), Dort (11) and Studebaker (11). Remember comedian Jack Benny's old car – a Maxwell –; we even had seven of those in the county in 1923.

Ford also led in truck sales in 1928, with 78 registered in the county. Reo and Kissel accounted for three trucks each. The 104 registered trucks in Chatham that year were represented by 17 different brand names.

In June 1916 the Odell cotton mill in Bynum replaced the wagons which hauled their product to the railroad depot in Pittsboro with a two-ton Corbett motor truck. This was made possible by the newly graded 4 1/2 mile road between the communities. The Corbett was not shown on the 1923 list of registered trucks. I wonder if it wore out or was destroyed when a lightning strike burned the mill a month after the truck was acquired.

The late Wade H. Hadley used to visit the Siler City Railroad Depot as a boy and remembered shipments of Model T Fords arriving from time to time. They were packed six to a boxcar. The chassis was unloaded and the wheels were put on. Then the motor was started and a man sat on the bare gas tank to drive the vehicle to the dealer. The shiny black bodies were loaded onto a wagon or truck and delivered to the garage for installation on the chassis.

An issue of the *Chatham Historical Journal* dated December 2001 published an interview with Johnny Odom and James Watson. They described the Cape Fear Power Plant village in Moncure in the 1920's-1930's. It was built because the roads were so bad that they precluded an easy commute from any distance by the workers. Messrs. Odom and Watson mentioned that each house had a garage for a Model T.

Today driving is a relatively simple and comfortable experience. We sometimes grumble at traffic jams but no longer worry about the possibility of routinely experiencing tire punctures or blowouts, or having to patch inner tubes and inflate tires with a hand pump, or putting on chains to navigate deep, muddy roadbeds.

We've come a long way since the Model T Ford was King of the Road in Chatham.

Fred J. Vatter is Past President of Chatham County Historical Association and a Board Member.

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