

The Gaylord Utility Car

(Editor's Note. The following story of the Gaylord car is comparable to the history of many other home town makes that sprang up and as quickly died in the early days of the automobile industry in America. Ivan Polus, the author and also the owner of the only known surviving Gaylord car ferreted out the background of this almost forgotten make by interviewing surviving residents of the town of Gaylord where its namesake was made. We are fortunate to have this first hand account of how one small town in Michigan hoped to be a little Detroit but failed — Dr. A.S. Lewerenz.)

BY IVAN POLUS

Of those people who walk down the Main Street of Gaylord, today a flourishing resort town, very few of them know that Gaylord once built an automobile. It all started in the early spring of 1910. Gaylord was then a center between a number of logging camps and a stop-off of the Michigan Central Railway.

Though a comparatively young town, having been founded twenty-five years earlier, the residents realized that the beautiful pine logs were going down the black river. It was clear to all that the logging boom was coming to an end. The business men knew, as did every one else in town, that Gaylord could very easily become a dying town. However, as assets, Gaylord was by now a good sized town with homesteaders pouring into the Gaylord and Otsego County area.

A.B.C. Comstock, the local banker and business man, found the answer they were looking for on one fine spring day, when a well known machinist of Detroit named Guy Hamilton came to Gaylord on a fishing trip. Shortly after Hamilton got off the train he and Comstock met over a cup of coffee in a cafe quite by accident.

Mr. Comstock, in the course of conversation, remarked that it was "Too bad that we can't build a factory or do something to create more jobs" as he knew that the local logging sleigh company, the only factory that Gaylord then had would soon be out of business. Guy Hamilton then spoke up and said "Why not build an

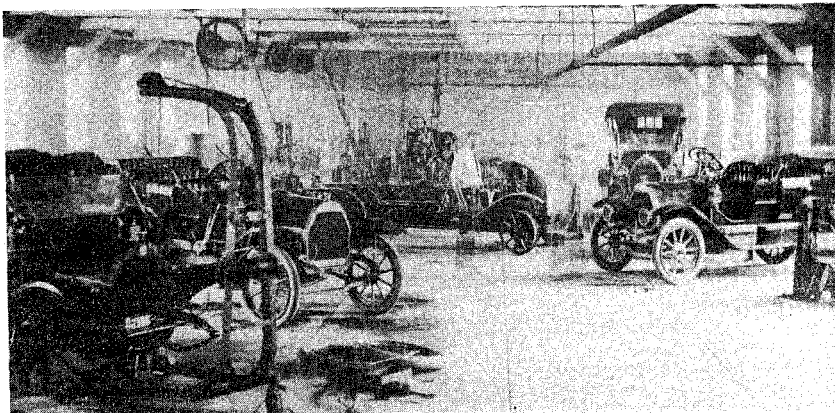
automobile factory?" Because of the fact that there were many farmers living in the area, the idea of selling them a locally made automobile sounded like a good idea and beside would provide additional employment for the townspeople.

So with production ideas in mind as well as a worthy civic purpose, Mr. Hamilton and Mr. Comstock got together with local business men and a committee was formed almost overnight. All participants in this planning thought that it was very good idea. A.B.C. Comstock was appointed President and a few thousand dollars were raised between them. The committee then decided that A.B.C. Comstock and Guy Hamilton should go to Detroit and there assemble the first automobile by buying the necessary parts from the outlets there. Then the two would drive their creation back to Gaylord where the local inhabitants could see the new car and thus be encouraged to buy stock in the new company. So this is the very thing that Comstock and Hamilton did.

The very first Gaylord car was actually born in Detroit, Michigan. Of course the new vehicle was given the name of the town to which it soon returned being called the 1910 Gaylord Model 30. The organizers went right to work and began selling stock. Soon over fifty thousand dollars had been subscribed by eager investors.

The Gaylord Motor Car Company immediately began building an assembly plant. Guy Hamilton was appointed General Plant Manager. A.B.C. Comstock who was quite brilliant with facts and figures as well as with pen and pencil as named Company President. Guy Hamilton, as chief designer, decided what was needed was a good durable town and country touring car for the townspeople and a sturdy pickup utility vehicle for the farmers.

So it was that the Gaylord Motor Car Company during that first production year of 1910 offered two models, i.e., the Gaylord 30 Touring Car named after the 30-horse power engine used and the Gaylord 20 a Utility Car with a 20-horse power motor. It is believed that



ASSEMBLING ROOM of the Gaylord Motor Car Company about 1913.

around fifty cars were sold that first year. In 1911 the public was offered the D-S 30 Touring Car and Roadster and the Model R-20 Utility Roadster. For 1912 several improvements were made in the two types of automobile.

In the new Model "U" they fitted a larger 35-horse power motor. Also the transmission was no longer under the seat but changed to a rear end transmission type unit combination such as the E-M-F car used. The "U-40, a 40-horse power touring car also was given the new rear end transmission. Most of these cars ranged in price from one thousand to fifteen hundred dollars. Because of financial difficulties the Gaylord Motor Car Company was reorganized under new management in 1912.

The production year of 1913 saw the new Model "D" Runabout and Touring Car roll out of the Gaylord assembly plant. It was a 30-35 horse power car which featured either right or left hand drive. This series sold for only a thousand dollars and it was the last model built by the Gaylord Motor Car Company.

Though it is uncertain as to what firms supplied the engines it is believed that many chassis parts such as axles and wheels were obtained from the makers of the E-M-F car. It appears that the bodies, frames and fenders were built at the Gaylord plant. Headlamps were supplied by the E & J Company.

By 1913, sad to say, it was realized that fifty thousand dollars was insufficient capital to operate an automobile factory, a prediction that had been

made by the local logging firm when Gaylord operations were first started. Still, the logging firm would have invested heavily at a later date if they could have had assurance that stock would also have been sold in large amounts elsewhere. Not being able to raise more capital, sometimes in 1913 the last Gaylord motor car was built. Thus passed into history the dreams of the Gaylord Motor Car Company to supply both cars and jobs for the people living in the area.

A great deal of the above information about the Gaylord automobile has been obtained thanks to Mr. Herbert Hutchins, an old timer and a great historian who has been engaged in business in Gaylord for many years. Accounts differ but it is believed that as many as four or five concerns may have built motors for the Gaylord Company. Some of the old timers claim that the Gaylord firm used REO motors.

However, unfortunately, I never did exactly find out what engines they did use as the records are gone and no one seems to know. Of the 350 or more cars that were supposedly built the majority were probably painted either black or navy blue.

In the 1930's there were still two or three surviving Gaylord cars in use in the town of Gaylord. By the time I was old enough to become interested in antique automobiles these survivors had been junked. I remember telling some of my friends "It is too bad that we cannot find an old Gaylord car some place." "Yes", one friend replied.

"All the Gaylords are gone unless one is stuck away in some old barn, perhaps in another state. However, this is not too likely even though some Gaylord cars were shipped to Chicago and other states."

On May 2, 1963, my wife and I were up in a remote area around Ocqueoc, Michigan, an almost abandoned town about sixty miles from Gaylord, searching out an old Port Huron Steam Engine. While inquiring as to just where we were, a young man and I got to talking. He told me about an old Gaylord 30 in a barn not far from where we were. I was so surprised that I couldn't talk. He said that he was only interested in hot rods. He had looked the old bomb over a short time ago but wasn't interested as any speed past thirty miles per hour would be disastrous. Moreover, the car was partially dismantled.

I went right over and found an old half-abandoned farm with a huge barn and old fashioned house. There was no one at home so we went for a drive and came back later. By this time I was a nervous wreck. However, the owner was now home. I went up to the house, knocked on the door and introduced myself. Then I asked about the car. The old fellow replied "Yip. I have her in the barn but I don't think you want it." I replied with the question "Why?" The farmer said "It is a pile of junk for one thing and you would have to be nuts to want to mess with it. Besides I'm asking more than you would want to pay." I asked, "Well, how much?" He said "Fifty dollars." By this

time I thought that I was either losing my mind or hearing. So I asked over again, "How much did you say that you wanted for that car?" He said "Fifty bucks." So I said, "Well let's have a look."

When we opened the huge barn door there she sat. I had a feeling that I will never forget. The motor and frame were in one place. The body was on top of some boards. Lamps and car parts were scattered all over the barn. The fenders were out of doors behind the barn. The steering column was under the wood shed. The windshield was in the hen house. Most of the car was still there. I paid the farmer and I could tell by the look on his face that he thought I was nuts. I rounded up all the parts and headed for home.

The farmer said that his father had bought the Gaylord new. As far as he could recall, the car had been a 1911 model with a 1911 REO engine in it. The motor went out in the 1920s and they tried to replace it with a 1914 REO motor. But they found that the larger manifold would not fit past the steering column so they gave up. A junk dealer had tried to buy the car in the 1940s for \$3.50. He got run out with a shot gun. In the 1950s a fellow got wind of the car and tried to buy it. No one was at home and the neighbor told him that he thought the car had been junked so the would-be buyer looked no further. As far as I know, I have the only Gaylord automobile that has survived to the present day. I now live in Whitefish, Montana, where I plan to finish the restoration of this car.