

Canada on Wheels

Once upon a time, Canada had wheels of its own

by Jenny Pearson

For enthusiasts of early motoring history, Canada has its own special chapter.

Pioneers of internal combustion were at work in Canada way back in the middle of the last century. Beginning in 1851 with a three-wheeled wagon built by a New Brunswick carpenter, Thomas Turnbull, Canadians were inventing and in due course marketing their own cars up to the early thirties, when the giant American corporations completed their takeover of the market.

Canadians were, however, extraordinarily slow to realize the value of their early motoring inventions. In 1867, the year of independence, Henry Seth Taylor, a watchmaker in Stanstead plain, Quebec, built a "steam pleasure carriage" and told the local paper it would run against any trotting horse that could be produced at the local fair. Afterwards the paper commented: "This mechanical curiosity is the neatest thing of the kind yet invented". But nobody took much notice and the machine was forgotten. It was rediscovered in 1960 and has since been on display at the Ontario Science Centre as one of the oldest self-propelled vehicles in the world.

When they took to the roads at the turn of the century, the early Canadian cars had a rough ride in competition with horses and fierce conservative prejudice. Horses became very frightened at the shuddering and banging noises they made. Lawmakers, newspaper editors and farmers piled into the attack. In 1910, a Mr. Carleton, on the Ontario Legislature's municipal committee, described motorists as "scoundrels" who "should be shot."

In Newcastle, Ontario, the *Independent* newspaper said: "We can compare (motorists) to nothing but a lawless gang of hoodlums and stop they must." Restrictive speed limits were imposed: Prince Edward Island banned motor cars altogether for four years, then relented in 1913 to allow them on the roads for three days out of seven. A few of the diehards went physically to war, spreading tacks and glass on the roads and stringing wires across them at neck level. But progress and the car sailed on more or less oblivious.

This progress is beautifully illustrated in two calendars put out by the McLaughlin Carriage Company of Oshawa in 1906 and 1908 respectively. The first shows a handsome couple spinning along a country road in a horse-drawn carriage and looking down in haughty astonishment as a doctor feels the pulse of a stricken motorist at the roadside, while his car lies abandoned in a

nearby stream and his passengers struggle to safety. The second shows the *belle monde* on the road, with horse-drawn carriages and automobiles side by side on a Saturday afternoon. The explanation is too easy: the McLaughlin Company had realized the error of their ways in the intervening years and decided to jump on the horseless wagon, producing their first automobile in 1908.

These and many other old advertisements are gathered together by John de Bondt in an evocative study of early motoring in Canada, published under the title *Canada on Wheels*.* It is a fascinating study, not only for the car historian but for any student of the manners, attitudes and dreams of past decades. For the car has always been seen as something far more than a useful machine to get you there. It is the gateway to your dreams, the key to the life you want, the extension of the personality you want people to recognise as you.

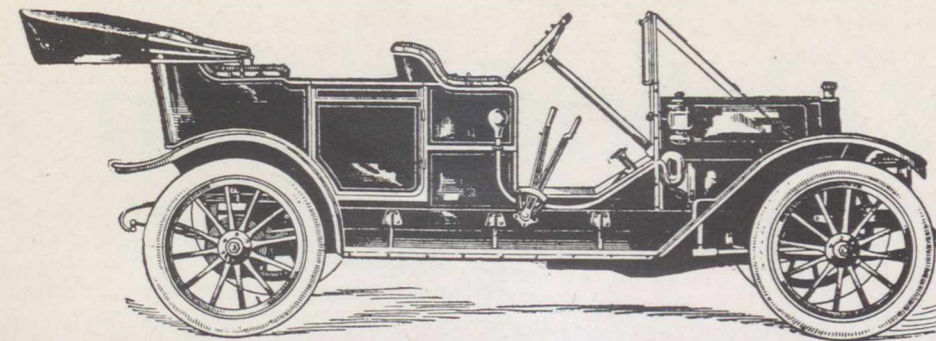
Cars have been advertised in Canada since the first decade of this century. The Canadian Cycle and Motor Company urged people to "get a Russell and enjoy our glorious open air and sunshine," Willys-Overland enticed buyers with a vision of green meadows glinting with mottled gold: "Summer air stirs the fields of growing grain. All nature sets you yearning to drive this perfect summer car."

That the early advertisements harped on the joys of fresh air is hardly surprising, since many of the cars were without wind-screens or doors. The "Every Day" car of the Woodstock Automobile Manufacturing company was advertised in 1911 as "fully equipped" with neither windscreen nor doors, but merely a hood.

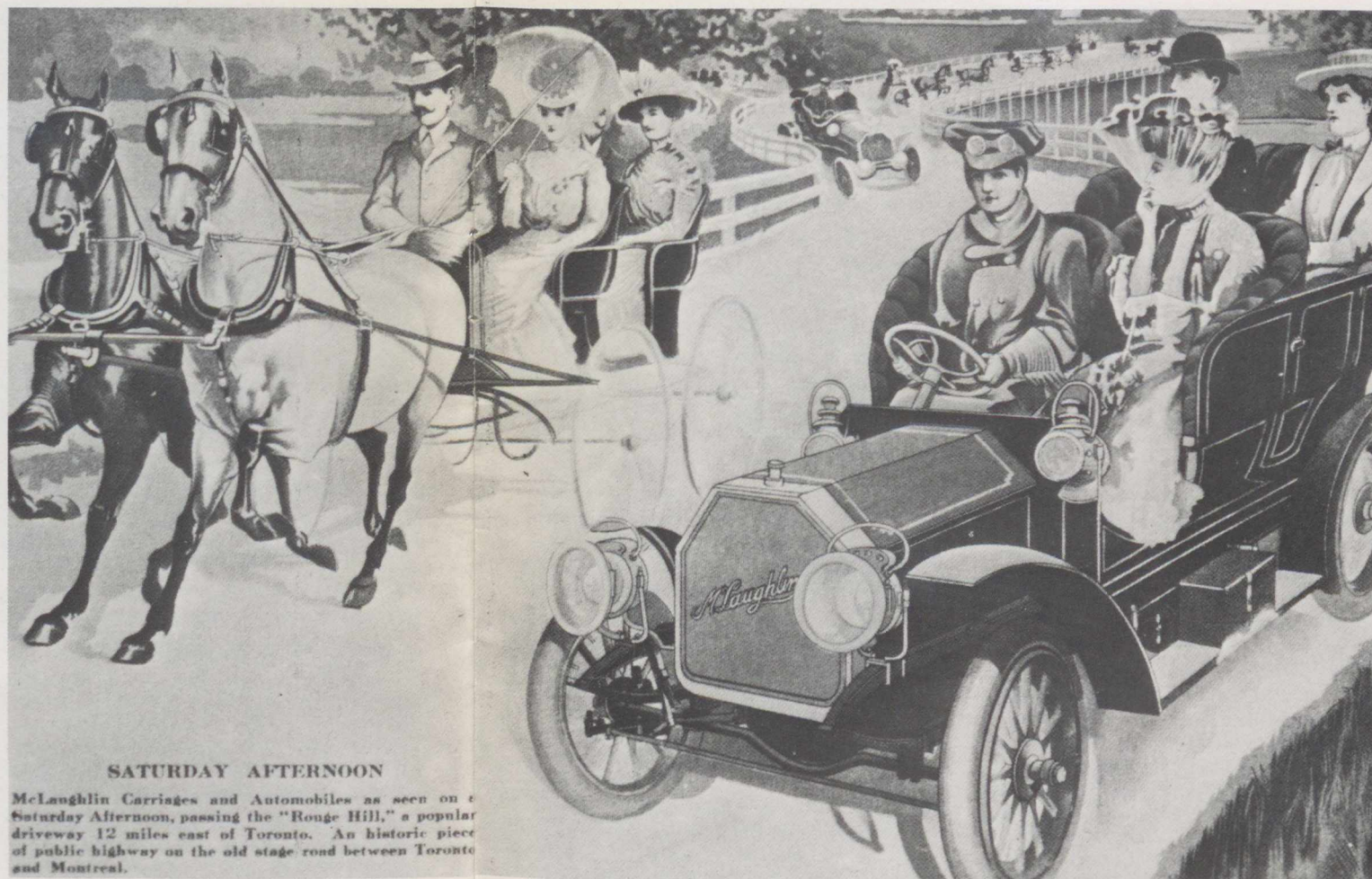
However, the manufacturers did recognize a special appeal that motoring could have to women: not outdoor appeal in this instance, but the more sheltered, cosy convenience of little glass-framed boxes on wheels to convey them easily from place to place, rather in the style of a sedan chair. Small electric cars were popular in this context, relatively slow and simple to operate, and in some models the driver sat on the back seat - "with instead of in front of her friends."

A stylized advertisement of 1914 in the *art nouveau* manner illustrates the appeal of the Tate Electric, a car designed specially to attract women and produced in Walker-

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Left
The Dominion delivered a road speed of more than 50 miles per hour with a full load of passengers. It was introduced in 1910, first as the Dominion Thirty, and later as the Dominion Limited.



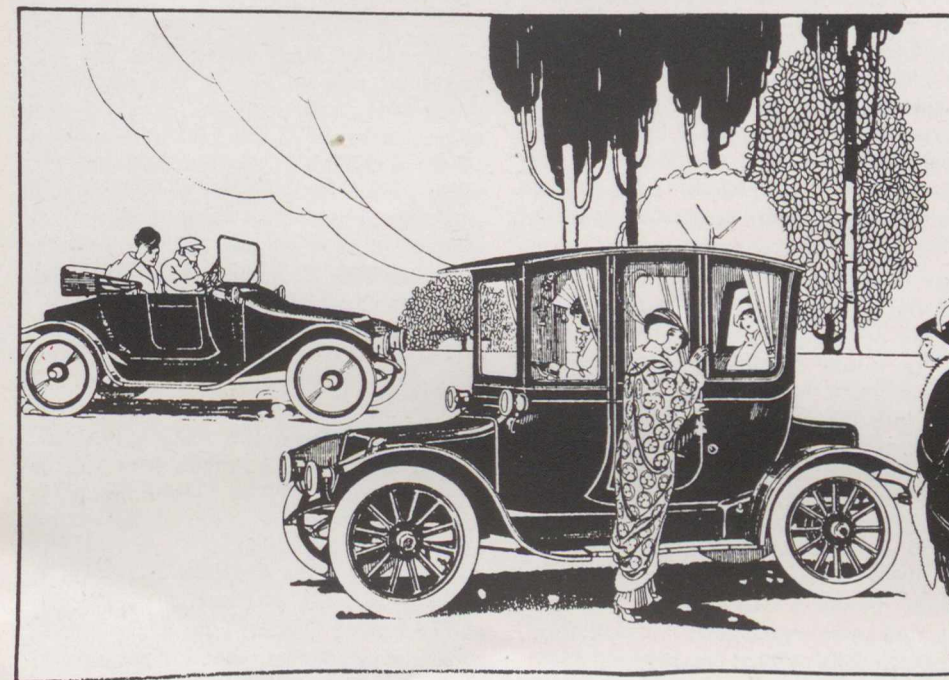
SATURDAY AFTERNOON
McLaughlin Carriages and Automobiles as seen on a Saturday Afternoon, passing the "Rouge Hill," a popular driveway 12 miles east of Toronto. An historic piece of public highway on the old stage road between Toronto and Montreal.

Above
The McLaughlin Carriage Company of Oshawa presents its products in 1908 in a calendar, showing a procession of McLaughlin carriages and automobiles out for a drive near Range Hill, east of Toronto.

Right
The 1914 Tate Electric came as a roadster, and as a coupé, ideal for women 'after five minutes' instruction.

ville, Ontario, between 1913 and 1915. Three ladies attired in long patterned dresses and feathered hats are taking their places in an elegant little car with curtains at the windows, the inevitable poplars beetling over the road, and two gentlemen are spinning past in the opposite direction, enthroned in a large open tourer, the one bent over the wheel in cap and goggles while his passenger raises a windblown bowler to the ladies.

Here the appeal to the reader's self-image is subtly and charmingly suggested. By 1921 it is more blatant: a McLaughlin Master Six Roadster is pictured before the towers of Toronto University, with textual



reference to its "racy appearance that is extremely pleasing."

In 1924 the Model T Ford was advertised in Canada with a touch designed to make every woman picture herself as the competent and charming wife to whom that particular car was an indispensable tool. The driver is stopping to give her friend a lift in the rain:

"Not even a chilly all-day rain need upset the plans of the woman who has a Ford closed car at her disposal. Knowing it to be reliable and comfortable in all weathers, she goes out whenever inclination suggests or duty dictates. The car is so easy to drive that it constantly suggests thoughtful services to her friends. She can call for them without effort and share pleasantly their companionship. All remark upon the graceful outward appearance of her car, its convenient and attractive interior, and its cosy comfort. And she prides herself upon having obtained so desirable a car for so low a price."

In the same way, the 1924 Ford Sedan was advertised to appeal to any woman who wanted to see herself (and be seen) as an efficient and companionable mother.

By contrast, there was a splendid 1927 colour advertisement for the luxurious and stylish Canadian Hupmobile, its beautifully proportioned lines and curves downstaging two fashionably bobbed and short-skirted ladies who gaze at it in silent awe from the foreground of the picture. There was something solid to a car then, something which commanded respect, something akin to architecture: a quality that in these days of speed imagery is quite, quite gone.

The Hupmobile - a Canadian car with a style and class all its own - was one of the last truly Canadian automobiles. The very last car of Canadian design was the Frontenac Six, introduced in 1931, which lasted just two years. Competition from America proved too strong and since 1933 branch plants of the big American corporations have been responsible for all cars produced in Canada. As John de Bondt sadly remarks: "Canadian cars no longer have a distinctive identity."

But his book is ample evidence that once upon a time they had: the lines and details of the old cars, the drum headlights, overhanging hoods and gently curving windows, together with the old lamps and flower vases and the upright dignity of the older models, serve even more powerfully than the more obvious fashion details of the advertisements to conjure up the perfume of time past.