



Our Times

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THE PEOPLE, HISTORY, AND CULTURE OF LOGAN COUNTY, ILLINOIS

Winter 1998

Cars . . . and Drivers

The Lincoln Speedway

When Jim "Cricket" Levi was a boy, he earned a penny a bag selling popcorn at the Lincoln Speedway, where fans packed the bleachers and filled the aisles.

The speedway was built in 1948 as a racetrack for midget autos. A group of investors that included Harry and Bill Lessen, Howard and Virgil Langenbahn, William "Buck" Loobey, and Vince Boughan, built the one-fifth-mile track on property owned by Morgan Levi, across from the fairgrounds on 17th Street.

The track cost \$60,000 to build and had a grandstand that seated 7,000. Drivers who raced at Lincoln over the years included local talent like "Bugs" Anderson; Lloyd Caldwell, Jr.; Jim Landers; and Glen Bradley.

The track opened with midget racing, which was dangerous. The little cars had open cockpits and no roll bars, so you "didn't get but one chance," says Glen Bradley. Mel Wiggers owned three midgets that were driven in the Thursday night races—all of them "Offies," cars powered by the popular Offenhauser engines. Rex Easton, Chuck Marshall, and Red Hamilton all drove for Mel.

In May of 1949, hot rod races were added on Sunday afternoons. By August, stock cars were racing.

Stock cars were cars that were in stock, right off the street. In the early days, about all that was done to the cars was to take out the headlights and taillights and all the glass.

Accidents were frequent. In September of 1949, the *Courier* remarked that "a near capacity house was on hand to watch the slam-bang proceedings, which included an eight car crack up in the feature race with three of the eight turning flips" (Sept. 22).

Events like the pony express relay, where car doors were wired shut and team members changed places by climbing in and out through the windows, endeared stock cars to fans so much that they replaced the midgets at the Speedway in 1950.

By 1957, modified cars were allowed, so Cricket Levi fixed up a 1932 Plymouth with a Chrysler 300 motor and a Crosley body. He drove the car himself a few times, experiencing a couple of nasty flips.

"We crashed them," Cricket explains, "and we didn't have safety equipment—only a helmet and a seat belt."

Over the years, the cars racing at the Speedway became newer and safer, with roll bars and special gas tanks. Other investors in the track dropped out, leaving Howard Langenbahn as sole owner. (Jerry Langenbahn remembers spending weekends helping his dad and running the popcorn stand.) By 1965, Springfield track owner Joe Shaheen had bought

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Carlo Catalano, Glen Bradley, and John Saconie. Courtesy of Glen Bradley.

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Publisher's Notes

My first car was a truck. I bought the '39 International half-ton with \$125 I made baling hay and brush-painted it gray.

My parents wouldn't let me drive the truck to school, reasoning that it was unnecessary since the school district provided free bus service. After much prodding, however, they relented and threw me a bone: I would be permitted to drive my truck to school on the last day of my senior year. As the big day drew near, I assumed the aura of a group I had long admired—the gearheads, the hot rodders, the mechanics and body men who met in garages and tinkered with their engines, who restored pre-World War II coupes and drove Chevy four-oh-nines, who spoke their own jargon—as arcane as that of today's computer hackers.

I conspicuously thumbed the pages of *Hot Rod* magazine in study hall. I let my jeans slip down around my hips and walked with a swagger. I spotted my t-shirts with Havoline. Then I went too far. Somehow I allowed the misconception to spread that my dull gray truck harbored a massive hemi-head V-8, with

two four-barrels and a high-lift cam. The rumor got out of hand. My popularity soared! I was trapped.

I couldn't sleep the night before my last day of high school. If I arrived at school, my flat-head six chugging, my reputation as a savvy torque-master would be shattered. So I took the only honorable course of action. With an ice pick, I punched holes in my muffler and headed for school.

As I entered the high school parking lot, a thousand eyes were on ol' gray. I quickly jerked the floor shift into granny low, and the punctured muffler growled a throaty rumble. "Must have punched it out to at least 500 cubic inches," I heard a side-burned junior say to his friends as the International inched by. I parked the truck and quickly debarked, jogging to first-hour class before someone could ask to look under the hood.

All day long I played coy. No, the truck really wasn't all that fast—only took third at the Oswego track. Yes, the mileage was poor, but what the heck? No, I wasn't sponsored by Firestone . . . yet. Yes, I was a stickler for law and safety, and never raced off track. (Whew, that one saved me!)

After school, admirers hurried to the curb to watch me ease "Big Thunder" onto the street. Girls smiled and winked. Guys shook their heads in awe. I crept to a stop sign in front of the school. A sleek black GTO found its mark beside me. Its three deuces sucked air, and the little Pontiac shook like a breadbox holding a neutron bomb. The passenger held his hand out the window and pointed his fist into the air, signaling a dare I could not refuse. One finger went up. The second finger went up. Then the hand dropped briskly downward. The GTO squealed and burned, and the pungent smell of rubber rose with the smoke.

I popped the clutch and jammed the accelerator to the floor. The old farm truck leaped from the line, as if asked to haul a load of seed corn up a steep incline. It shot ten feet ahead of the GTO, which was spinning its tires, weaving and swaying and splattering rubber all over the street. My International had traction and a wonderfully low-g geared transmission, and I discovered that for ten feet it couldn't be beat.

Then I made one of the most intelligent decisions of my life. I backed off the accelerator, waved to the crowd, let the GTO fly by, and confirmed my reputation as a law-abiding, safety-conscious, mechanical genius. **SR**

(Continued from page 1, *Cars . . .*)

the speedway, and races became less frequent. The racetrack had been vacant for some years when Cricket Levi took a bulldozer to it in 1977.

Glen Bradley

Glen and Lela Theobald Bradley were married in 1951, and Glen spent those early years working and often racing six nights a week: two nights at Peoria and one each at Lincoln, Farmer City, Canton, and Havana.

Racing "helped to make a living," says Glen, "and I loved it."

Although the prize money could be as little as \$2.00, a car could be bought at the junkyard and made ready to race for about \$15.00.

Before Glen was old enough to drive, he had hung around the race track, helping "Doc" Elkins with his cars. Later he raced Doc's midget racer; he also won many races in Doc's old Hudson. It was a "good handling" car, says Glen, that ran fast "but broke a lot." Glen might be speeding along in first place, only to have a wheel fly off or the battery fall out.

In 1955, Glen won the feature at the Speedway on the first night Lela brought their baby daughter Glenna to the races. So of course she had to bring her to every Sunday evening race after that. "She was my good-luck charm," says Glen.

Those were happy times for Glen: winning all five races at the Speedway one night and all but two races in the two years he drove a 1932 Ford coupe owned by Carlo Catalano and John Saconie of Springfield.

Some of the racing crowd that Glen and Lela remember are promoter Port DeFraties; his son, Gene, the flagman for many years; track manager Vince Boughan; and scorers Harold Hagen and Stan Boughan.

Glen went on to compete in races across the country, including Daytona and the World 600. In the sixties, he raced a Dodge that he owned with Don Rohlf's. In recent years, Glen has won the Peoria Oldtimers Races in the first race car he ever owned, his restored 1939 Mercury. ■

The Lincoln Automobile

"That little engine never missed an explosion on the whole trip. It seems to improve all the time."

So W. D. Grant wrote to *The Lincoln Times-Courier* on July 24, 1908. Grant and H. Peifer had taken the Lincoln Automobile to Lafayette, Indiana, on a combination endurance and sales trip, stopping first to have a picture taken at Latham Park.

The little automobile that scampered up the hills of Indiana ("and they have hills too," wrote Grant) has no relation to the Lincoln sold by the Ford Motor Company. Grant's Lincoln auto lived out its short life mostly in Lincoln, Illinois, where it was built in its own little factory on the corner of Citizens' Avenue (now Delavan) and Limit Street by the Lincoln Automobile Company.

The enterprise was incorporated on June 27, 1906, by B. F. Coffman, R. M. Berry, and C. L. Hyde. Officers of the company were L. W. Walker, W. C. Bates, William Fogarty, and E. L. Edwards. Steve Hartnell, son of former Lincoln resident George

Hartnell, still has one of the company's stock certificates. Issued to B. F. Coffman on July 27, 1906, the \$500 of stock was sold to E. W. and W. C. Bates on September 1st of that year.

What on earth made these folks think they could manufacture automobiles in Lincoln, anyway?

It happened this way. Back in February of 1906, an experimental automobile had appeared on the streets of Lincoln. Made locally, it was both cheap and simple—two qualities that made investors think it might just sell. Really just a motorized carriage, it had a simple, air-cooled 15 horsepower gasoline engine; a unique direct drive that did away with differentials, transmissions, chains, and sprockets; and high wheels with solid rubber tires.

The solid rubber tires would always be a selling point, for, according to the *Times-Courier*, they did away with "all troubles of a pneumatic tire such as punctures, blow outs, slow leaks, trouble of taking tires off and putting the same in [sic] and the

pleasure one looses [sic] as one always fears the troubles" (Feb. 27, 1906).

In December of 1906, the company advertised in the *Times-Courier* that it was ready to book orders for spring delivery.

In April of 1907, the Citizens' Coal Mining Company had donated a tract of land about 150 feet square on the corner of Limit Street and Citizens' Avenue, with the stipulation that a two-story brick factory, 40 by 100 feet, be built on the property.

While the owners of the auto company were busy soliciting notes from local people for sums from \$25 to \$300 to help finance the factory, Herman Wilkie (a machinist who had helped build a sample automobile in Chicago for the company) had moved to Lincoln to become superintendent and oversee construction of the autos.

On May 2nd of 1907, the editor of *The Lincoln Daily News-Herald* reported on his ride in the first runabout built by Mr. Wilkie, pronouncing it "a decided improvement on all the sample machines yet turned out. . . . Mr. Wilkie expects to make even better machines in the new shop than is possible with the limited conveniences at hand in the present location."

No factory yet but several sample machines. One was built in Chicago, but where were the others built? There are three possibilities.

First, the August 13, 1907, edition of the *News-Herald* states that "a number of parts are being shaped for the completion of machines" in the temporary quarters in the block south of the German American National Bank (corner Kickapoo and Pulaski).

Second, local tradition has held that at least the body of the Lincoln auto was made in Richard Georgi's blacksmith and wagon-making shop on the corner of Logan and Clinton streets (present location of Joe's Auto

(Continued on page 6, *Automobile* . . .)



The Lincoln Motor Runabout as seen in Cycle and Automobile Trade Journal, 1908.

Have I Got the Car for You!

When Bob Graue returned from the Marine Corps in 1953, he went into Augspurger and Pleines Buick-Chevrolet to buy a car. Instead, the manager, Jim Thornton, sold him a job—as a salesman.

When Bob told his mother he would be working on commission, her response was, "Oh, Bobby!" But from that first month's commission of \$47 has grown a family business that includes Bob's sons Mark and Chris at Graue Inc. and son-in-law Brad Nikles at Nikles Chevrolet-Buick Inc. at Mason City.

In the old days, Bob sold a lot of cars and trucks sitting at the customer's kitchen table or out in the farmer's field. One of the first cars he sold was a two-tone white and beige '53 Buick to Harry Van Hook. He had an appointment in the evening to take the car out to Harry's home, change the plates, and bring the old car back to town.

When it came time to pay, out came Harry with a paper sack filled with \$800 to \$900 in cash and coins. Bob stopped by his own house and told his mother, "You can take care of this for me." She did, too: she hid it under the bed.

Bob remembers lots of interesting customers, like Billy Randolph, who owned more than 50 Chevrolets over the years. He was so particular that



Gene Partlow with Billy Randolph.
Courtesy of Bob Graue.

he would pay the mechanic a quarter to leave the auto up on the rack so he could use a screwdriver to take the rocks out of the tires. Another customer, Pete Zouganellis, put 250,000 miles on a truck driving between Lincoln and Decatur—selling pies and cakes.

Those were also the days of "shade-tree mechanics," young men like Dick Damarin, who could be hired right off the farm, where they had learned their skills tuning up tractors or old trucks.

Bob says part of the fun of being an auto dealer has been the sales promotions: the stuffathon, where 26 high school students were stuffed into one car, "laying them in there like cord wood"; the annual meal where farmers exchanged their worst old caps for new Chevy caps; and the auto training schools "for women only."

A lot has happened since Bob brought his wife, Jody, by the dealership the day the sign for Partlow and Graue went up in 1964. In 1978, Bob was named one of 55 *Time* magazine Quality Dealers of the Year. He's proud of that honor—but just as proud of being named *Courier* Citizen of the Year in 1990.

Dan Row Remembers

When Duane Row died in 1974, Chrysler gave his son, Dan, two years to prove he could run his dad's dealership. Although Dan's mother, Evelyn Huffman Row [Fulkerson], thought the company was treating the 23-year-old heartlessly, she now says it was the best thing they could have done.

Of course, Dan had followed his father around ever since he was a little boy, and "he knew cars," says Evelyn. "He could tell whether a car had been wrecked [and repaired] when he was eight years old."

As a youngster, Dan says he spent his summers as a "lot boy": painting the

overhead doors, washing, waxing, and delivering cars and "doing what everyone else didn't want to do."

Not that there weren't a few perks—like driving a new convertible to school when he was sixteen and attending the Chrysler conference in Detroit for sons of Chrysler dealers.



Danny Row always loved cars.
Circa 1956. Courtesy Evelyn Row.

Dan's father, Duane, had gone to work at the Hudson-Packard dealership in Lincoln in the forties and was named a member of the Packard Motor Sales Club as top salesman for the St. Louis area in 1951. He bought the dealership from D. J. McMullen in 1952, when "we didn't have a dime to our name," smiles Evelyn.

In 1960, when Duane moved the dealership from 116 Hamilton to the present location at 222 S. McLean, Dan helped his dad tear down the Wilmert livery stable that was still on the lot.

Dan remembers the muscle cars of the 60's, when "a car wasn't a car unless it was a V8 and had a huge engine" and customers who were considered "part of the family," like Jeanne Gerard, who bought a new car every year with only one stipulation—it had to be red.

Today, twenty-four years after Chrysler set a deadline for him to prove himself, Dan Row is still following in his dad's footsteps—and making his own. ■

Wheeling Around

When Maxine Amberg [Seggelke] was sixteen, she didn't worry about passing her driver's license test. After all, she had driven a deuce-and-a-half truck to the grain elevator from her farm home west of Atlanta when she was just thirteen years old.

Maxine had learned to drive on a Model A Ford, her dad turning her loose in a bean field, "so I couldn't hurt anybody," she laughs. Driving over the hills and through the ditches was good practice—which she needed.

Once, while driving on a country road with her father, she suddenly came to a turn in the road at the bottom of four hills. Hitting the brake, she pulled down on the throttle and careened around the corner on two wheels.

"What are you doing?" her father cried. "I didn't want to kill the motor," explained the young driver.

By the time of the driver's test, though, Maxine had plenty of confidence in her driving. Her father had less confidence in his model A; he thought it would be better if Maxine took the test in her Grandpa Amberg's gray Pontiac.

She passed, of course—but the car didn't! Her grandpa was "very, very annoyed with me," says Maxine, when he got the repair bill for all the things that had been found wrong at the driver's license facility.

Maxine had fun driving her dad's Model A to high school. He had fixed the car so it didn't require keys, so she would remove the rotor to the distributor cap and keep it in her pocket to put on when she was ready to go home.

She had to be a bit of a mechanic to drive that car anyway. As she drove along the country roads, the spark plug wire would jiggle off the spark plug; and Maxine would have to reattach it. Once, when she didn't turn the motor off before she reat-

tached the wire, the car gave her quite a jolt, kicking her "across the road and into the ditch!"

It was wartime, and Maxine was driving on recapped tires; so she "could change a tire pretty quick." She wasn't quite as prepared to lose a wheel—which is what happened one night when she was all dressed up and driving into the prom.

She was in walking distance of the neighbor's house when the right front wheel suddenly came off. The neighbor looked up to see the wheel rolling down the road, with Maxine trailing behind it. He took Maxine to the prom, came home and put the wheel back on, picked her up at the end of the evening, and let her deliver him home.

More Car Talk

Marge Coogan Blanford remembers her dad's philosophy about automobiles: he didn't think kids needed them, "especially female kids," says Marge. That changed after Marge and her brother, David, started attending the new high school on the edge of town in 1958.

"It didn't take long to discover," says Marge, "that the bus would haul me and would haul David to school but would not haul his sousaphone. It took up a whole seat." Marge's dad bought "an old clunker that couldn't go out of town" to transport the horn—and Marge as well.

Cruising was the main attraction for high school kids, says Marge's husband, Fred. After splitting a ham pizza and two large glasses of milk each at the Blu-Inn, Fred and his friend Luther Dearborn would drive by about twenty-eight designated homes to touch base with friends. They even had a map of their route.

Fred remembers bushwhacking (driving out to Hoot 'n Holler to honk and holler at their friends who were "billing and cooing" in their parked cars) and attaching car bombs

to spark plugs, causing the cars to emit a long whistle, a lot of smoke, and a loud bang when started.

Another trick was to find an unsecured car, put it in neutral, and push it somewhere else. Hank Spellman's 1947 Plymouth, the Blue Goose, often disappeared while he and Jane Fuesting [Welch] were saying good night. One night, he looked all over town in the rain before finding it in his own driveway.

For that matter, sometimes car keys were interchangeable. When Marge was a senior in high school, she worked part time at St. Clara's hospital. Because she came home after dark, she drove a turquoise-and-white, four-door Mercury to work.

On her drive home one night, she reached around to lock the back door—and couldn't find the lock. Looking around, she realized with horror that there *was* no back door! She had hopped into someone's two-door of the same model, same color. Afraid she'd be arrested as a common criminal, she drove the car back, reparked it in the same place, and slunk off to her own car. ■

Material for this issue comes from *History of Logan County, Illinois, 1911, 1982*; Georgano, G.N. (Ed.). (1968) *The Complete Encyclopedia of Motorcars 1885-1968*. New York: George Rainbird Ltd.; Kimes, Beverly Rae, and Clark, Jr., Henry Austin. (1996). *Standard Catalog of American Cars 1805-1942*. Iola, WI: Krause Publications; The Lincoln Motor Runabout. (1908, July 1). *Cycle and Automobile Trade Journal*, pp. 75-76.; Lincoln Gasoline Cars. (1909, March 1). *Cycle and Automobile Trade Journal*, p. 114.; the *Courier* under its various names; *The Lincoln Daily News-Herald*; legal records; Lincoln, IL city directories; Logan County people who act as research detectives; and the memories of our friends.

Correction: The caption under the picture on page 4 of the last issue should read Illinois Traction System depot, not Illinois Terminal System depot. Sorry!

(Continued from page 3, *Automobile . . .*)
Air). Joan Georgi Graue says that her father, Walter, showed her parts of old buggies in the wheelwright area upstairs and told her that was where the auto was made.

Third, the *Standard Catalog of American Cars* lists George Kate as the owner of a machine shop on Clinton and Logan Streets where the first autos were made in 1907. In 1906, "Coffman-Cherry" automobiles had been advertised by the firm of Cherry and Kates. Their shop was on Clinton and Logan, and Coffman was one of the incorporators of the auto company.

How are we to reconcile these bits of information? Very possibly, the buggy part of the autos was made at Georgi's, then wheeled across the street to Cherry and Kates to be completed—with parts that had been made at a third location. Probably not an unusual way for an early auto to be made.

At any rate, by September of 1907, the factory on Citizens' Avenue was almost complete; and a type "T" touring car had been sold to a real estate man at Holdrege, Nebraska (home of the brother-in-law of Lincoln Automobile's Mr. Coffman).

A setback to the company occurred in November of 1907 when foreman and stockholder G. F. Phillippe was arrested for allegedly stealing tools from the factory. Phillippe had loaned \$3,000 to the company, so this was a serious matter. In February of 1908, however, a jury found Phillippe not guilty.

On July 17, 1908, the *Times-Courier* reported that "the Lincoln Motor Vehicle Co. has changed hands. . . . The manufactory in this city has taken a new lease of [sic] life . . . with four or five cars in stock and inquiries coming in daily from all over the country . . ." Because there was only one auto factory and one Lincoln auto in town, we can assume that the Lincoln Automobile Company had been reorganized as the Lincoln Motor Vehicle Company.
The officers of the Lincoln Motor

Vehicle Company were J.A. Tabke, L. W. Walker, William Fogarty, and Dr. F. C. Houser.



Courtesy The Lincoln Daily Courier.

At this point, superintendent Grant and stockholder Peifer went on their trip, stopping at every town to show off the car, giving a demonstration ride to a postman, and putting extra miles on by getting on the wrong road several times. One happy result of that trip was the sale of an auto to L. O. St. John of Bethany, Illinois.

Even more important, the roadster was being featured in the July, 1908, issue of *Cycle and Automobile Trade Journal*. The opening paragraph sums up the Lincoln auto:

The makers have not tried to imitate the automobile either in price or design, but have put forth their best efforts to construct a neat, stylish, simple and inexpensive car, in appearance very much like the horse-drawn vehicle, yet possessing all the desirable qualities of the automobile. The makers state that the construction is so simple that it is not necessary for one to be a mechanic to run one of these rigs or an adventurer to ride in the same.

By this time, the Lincoln auto had acquired differential gears. It had a right-hand drive and traveled at speeds of four to twenty-five miles per hour in high gear and two to eight miles per hour in low gear and boasted a five-gallon gas tank.

The auto's standard finish was jet black with striped red or brewster green gear. Wheels were made of second-growth hickory, and the

body was trimmed with buffed-leather, tufted cushions with springs. The auto sold for \$550, including the removable top, lamps, horn, and tools.

The March, 1909, issue of *Cycle and Automobile Trade Journal* listed three models. A 10-12 horsepower chassis was used for the buggy, which was priced at \$550. The 16-18 horsepower chassis could be fitted out as a run-about that seated two for \$700, or as a surrey that seated four for \$800.

But the days of this particular horseless carriage were numbered. The Wasson Company was bringing carloads of Fords and Buicks into Logan County on a regular basis. Did the Lincoln auto look dated by comparison? Whatever the cause, the Lincoln Automobile Company defaulted on its loans; and the land and factory were sold on May 20, 1909, to David H. Harts, Jr., for \$4,000.

From 1913 until 1935, the building was home to the Love Manufacturing Company, a firm which was incorporated to produce agricultural machinery; sell lumber, grain and coal; and operate a slaughterhouse on the site.

The little building became the Lincoln Foundry after Ralph Weaver bought it in 1942. In 1972, Ivan and Elaine Ray bought the property. History buffs who are looking for the old Lincoln Automobile Company factory will find its brick walls hidden inside the steel walls of the Firestone building, in front of Modern Brake.

As for the Lincoln auto, Art Gehlbach reports that Paul Molloy, of Molloy's restaurant, told him that about six Lincoln autos were made; several were stored in the garage behind the Molloy house, being torn up for parts and scrap during World War I. ■

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Oh, Those Old Cars!

No discussion of automobiles would be complete without a few memories of the cars of long ago. Herb Alexander has lived all his life in Lincoln, and he remembers:

- A blue light glowing every night in T. L. Blackburn's garage as he charged his electric car.
- The Spellman big black Locomobile sedan with jump seats, the chauffeur, Frank Buckstegge, driving Jane Spellman and Dorothy Duff down College Avenue to Central School, picking up other kids along the way.
- The robin's-egg blue Nash convertible that belonged to Lucile Richards, with the rumble seat where she used to let the kids ride.
- The old Hudson with the spotlight in the windshield that belonged to Charles Woods.
- Lots of Model T's that spent their winters on blocks in their owners' garages because the narrow tires weren't much good on snow.
- Homer Alvey, Sr.'s garage underneath the sun porch. Because of the driveway's slope, Mr. Alvey often couldn't get the car out in the winter. In the summer, however, he used to take Herb's folks for an evening ride to cool off.
- A yellow Stanley Steamer on Ottawa Street that was run by a steam engine, like a threshing machine.
- The Model T delivery car that Herb learned to drive on as a boy, driving every chance he got when delivering groceries for his dad.

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The People, History, and Culture
of Logan County, Illinois

Inside This Issue

The Lincoln Speedway

The Lincoln Automobile

Have I Got the
Car for You!

Wheeling Around

Oh, Those Old Cars!

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