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"The Welch Tourist"
By Miss Nina Belle Wurster*

A. R. Welch owned the Chelsea Manufacturing Company, which made novelties, which Mr. Welch invented. Among these items were a knife sharpener, flash light pistol, tea strainer, pencil sharpener, and a metal plug to mend the case of an engine, if any flaw developed in the casting, so it would not have to be re-cast.

Miss Mary Shaw of Ypsilanti told me many interesting things about the Welch car and loaned me the booklet, "The Welch Tourist." I also did a little research work on the Welch car at the Automotive Library of the Detroit Library. Miss Shaw worked for Mr. Welch for several years. She made the drawings for the Welch car, following Mr. Welch's specifications. Miss Shaw told me that some of the parts for the car were made away from Chelsea and that she was always afraid the drawings might be wrong, but they never were.

Mr. Welch thought and planned for nearly 10 years over the Welch car. Nearly everyone said "it will never run." After much hard work the car, just the chassis, engine and a seat for the driver, was ready for a test run. Perhaps fearful of the remarks of the skeptical townspeople, Mr. Welch made this test run after midnight on Jackson Street, just south of the railroad. Among those who saw this test run were Mrs. Welch, their daughter Vesta, a brother Fred, Miss Shaw, and two or three friends.

The trial run was a success and the next day Mr. Welch drove the car up the ramp at the grain elevator. This ramp was long and steep.

After two years of active testing and operation, coupled with what he had learned from both home and foreign practice, Mr. Welch felt he had developed a car second to none.

* Miss Wurster read a most interesting paper on "The History of Chelsea" at a meeting of the Society held at the Chelsea Library on May 3, 1954. Her paper added much detailed information to the general topics covered in a paper written by her under the same title and published in Washtenaw Impressions, Vol. X, No. 1, Feb., 1953. The reader is referred to this issue, copies of which are available.

One section of Miss Wurster's paper, however, introduced an entirely new feature of Chelsea's background, not previously reported upon, - the manufacture of automobiles! This section is presented verbatim herewith.

In February, 1903, a Welch Tourist was hurried to the automobile show in Chicago, before a few minor details were completed. It was a 20-horse-power, vertical, double-cylinder, four-cycle motor which propelled the vehicle, mounted just behind the front axle between two 2-inch seamless steel tubes, which extended forward from the rear axle and kept the engine and shafting in perfect line with the rear axle at all times. There was no connection whatsoever between the motor-supported tubes and the body frame, thus no vibration could be transmitted from the engine to the body. In that respect the Welch car stood without equal.

The car was equipped with a telescoping steering wheel of 14" laminated wood. The driver could regulate the position of the steering wheel to suit his physical build and it could be pushed to its lowest and most forward position to facilitate entrance to the car. Just one other car at the Chicago show had this feature. The muffler was made of aluminum.

The body of the Welch car was maroon color with black striping, and the running gear was black with maroon striping. Upholstering was No. 1 hand-buffed dark maroon leather on curled hair, and the best full-coach, oil-tempered springs throughout. Full padded arm rests were provided. All trimmings were of heavy brass, including the mouldings around the seats.

The tonneau was built on a new plan. It projected far enough to the sides to enable the occupants to watch the road. The back was very high and closed up tightly, which did away with the dust nuisance.

Laminated wood mud guards were used and did away with all the clatter. Steps were 8x10 inches, covered with rubber, and had foot scrapers. A heavy sprag was provided for hill climbing.

The car had two forward speeds, 5 to 45 miles per hour on the direct gear, and 1 to 12 miles on the low gear, and a reverse gear. Speed control was obtained by the throttle and spark. The track was 56"; wheel base 78"; length, 10 feet; height, 4 feet; weight, 1,600; tires 3½x30". The price was \$2,000, net cash, F.O.B. Chelsea. Twenty percent of the purchase had to accompany the orders, balance paid on delivery.

For \$85 extra a Canopy Top could be obtained, and it was guaranteed to stay with the rig over any and all roads. A light rubber cover was also furnished and could be put over the canopy and buttoned down to the sides of the machine and furnished ample protection in all weather.

It was planned to make 15 cars a month. Mr. Welch, when asked by his father-in-law "why he didn't make a car for the masses," replied that he wanted to make the best car in the world "with my name on it." Some of his ideas were forty years ahead of his time, and some are used on General Motors cars today.

In February, 1903, articles of partnership were filed in Ann Arbor by A. R. Welch, J. D. Watson, and Fred S. Welch, on behalf of the Chelsea Mfg. Co., Ltd., capital stock \$200,000.

The Welch Company moved to Pontiac in 1904. Mr. Welch made a special car for Nat Goodwin, the actor, which was shown at an automobile show in Detroit. In November, 1911, Mr. Welch, accompanied by his friend, Preston Strong, went duck hunting at "The Flats." A bad storm came up, their boat was capsized, and the men were drowned. The Welch Company was sold to General Motors Corporation in 1912.

I quote from an article, "I Fell For America's Craziest Hobby," by Ralph Stein, Cartoon Editor of This Week Magazine and Automobile Editor of Argosy Magazine:

"I was lucky. A friend of a friend called to tell me that he knew where an ancient car, a 1907 Welch, built in Pontiac, Mich., had been hidden for 30 years, jacked up in a dry garage on an estate in Westchester, N. Y. My wife, my kids and I rushed out to look at it. A caretaker took us to the garage and there stood the monster car. I lifted the hood and went all shaky for there was the written about, talked about, overhead camshaft Welch engine, no example of which was known to still exist.

"I bought it for \$500. It was towed to my home. After trying to restore it myself, I finally phoned the Antique Auto Shop in New Jersey that did wonderful restoration jobs, but they had a long waiting list of wealthy collectors. The name of Welch worked like magic. The car was taken to their shop and was there a year.

"When I first saw the finished Welch I was staggered by the blinding red and white and gold shine of the thing. I got behind the great, brass-spoked mahogany wheel and was baffled as to the management of the strange machine for there was no foot clutch. I soon got the hang of the thing, and drove to the Atlantic City Meet of the Antique Automobile Club and the Welch chuffed off with the grand prize on the second day of its reincarnation."

Chelsea, Michigan
May 3, 1954

QUESTION: Was "The Welch Tourist" the only automobile ever manufactured within the boundaries of Washtenaw County? It is well known that individuals would buy parts and assemble strictly "custom-built" jobs for themselves. We invite correspondence on these matters from any who have knowledge of them. Even a record of the owner-built cars would be of interest. Address Dr. F. Clever Bald, Michigan Historical Collections, Rackham Building, Ann Arbor, Mich.

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