

The Beaver was to be Gresham's challenge in cars

by SHARON NESBIT
of The Outlook staff

For a while, Gresham really thought it was going to give Detroit a run for its money.

Gresham residents dreamed of thumbing their noses at Henry Ford every time they saw P. A. Combs drive up to the city's brand new automobile manufacturing plant in his gleaming Beaver 6 car.

Yessir, Gresham was going to build automobiles. Just as soon as the six-cylinder Beaver was off the line, by golly, the world would see a four-cylinder Beaver that would make Henry Ford and his Model T sit up and take notice.

But a number of things got in the way of that dream — World War I, for instance. Today, all that is left is a building near Northwest Division Street in Gresham and a fading brochure which offered a home grown auto.

"It is a long way across the mountains to where cars are now being made," the brochure declared in 1914.

It still is a long way to Detroit — so far that Detroit probably never knew its existence was threatened by Gresham, Oregon.

Automobile enthusiast Dan Larrowe of Corbett researched the Beaver 10 years ago. His findings, coupled with material from the Oregon Historical Society and news stories from early-day Outlooks, tell the story.

The Beaver State Motor Company's automobile plant was completed in March, 1914, a 204-foot long factory of reinforced concrete with brick curtain walls costing in the neighborhood of \$7,500. The building is still used by Olympic Manufacturing Co. Jim M. Vaughan, general manager of the veneer plant, says it is a constant headache replacing glass in the huge windows of the original structure.

Just two months after the plant was built, Beaver State president P. A. Combs announced the factory would be completed in time to put seven automobiles in the Portland Rose Parade line-up. Material for 500 machines was on hand, he said, and it was already apparent that the new structure would be inadequate.

Experts forecast that 500 men would be working in the new plant by 1916.

But the dream started to go sour. Because of war shortages, it was difficult to get parts like the Daimler-Lanchester worm drive gears from England. The firm abandoned plans for a large car and began to re-pattern to meet public demand for a smaller vehicle.

But optimism was still high. In 1915 when the executive offices were moved to Gresham a Portland paper bragged, "Beaver sixes... will become an everyday spectacle on Portland's streets within the next 90 days."

That spring saw six employees casting four and six-cylinder engines in a foundry which was once the woodshed of Gresham pioneer Dr. John Parker.

"A continuous hum of industry will be heard at the Beaver factory from now on," the Outlook editor prophesied. But this time H.L. St. Clair was wrong and it would cost him. Members of his family say the editor, like many other local residents, had invested in the new motor firm.

After a long summer of silence on the subject, St. Clair reported that the factory had turned to other profitable work, the building of drag saws, while waiting for conditions to change in favor of the manufacture of cars.

In January, 1916, he wrote a near-desperate story reasserting his faith that the plant would, indeed, build automobiles. "Listen here," he said and then pointed out all the prominent and monied people who had bought stock in the firm.

Hope continued to flicker for two more years but an April, 1918 story reported there were 40 men at work in the plant making nothing but saws.

In 1970, Larrowe learned from former Beaver State employee Charles Raney, now dead, that part of the firm's problem was a law suit by the Overland Car Co. over infringement of engine patent rights.

It was Raney's recollection that only one Beaver, "a very good car," was ever built. But there the stories diverge. Oregon Journal accounts tell of a car that sat on blocks in the Beaver plant awaiting results of litigation.

"My brother and I cast covetous eyes on it and our father (a lawyer) bought it for us," says Ralph Coan, 67-year-old Portland realtor.

Coan recalls he was about 13 at the time and he and his brother drove the Beaver until the tires gave out. Tired of looking at the useless vehicle, Coan's father shoved the chassis (the motor had been taken out) into a giant bonfire in the fall of 1929.

"The chassis was aluminim. There was almost nothing left," Coan recalls.

The punchline to the story is that a month later a representative of Harvey Firestone approached the elder Coan offering \$5,000 for the automobile known as the Beaver.

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