

"Mac" The Designer



Wally Triplett and family in McKinley Thompson's "Warrior" vehicle he designed for the overseas market.

McKinley Thompson, a gifted designer, emerged on the automotive scene in April 1956 at Ford. In fact, his hand prints are on the original Ford Falcon, Ford Mustang, and Mercury Cougar. He designed big tractor trailers and a lot of products used abroad.

Thompson graduated from the Art Center College of Design in California in 1956, four years after winning a scholarship in a competition for *Motor Trend* magazine. He designed a vehicle called the Typhoon that caught the judges' attention.

"On my first day, George Walker (Ford's vice president of design) said to me, 'Now you are a member of the Ford design team, you can go as far as your talent can take you,'" Thompson, 78, recalled in a recent interview from his home in Phoenix, Ariz. "He also told me that if anyone gave me a problem to let him know. So, if anyone objected to my being there, I never knew it or they kept it to themselves." Thompson retired in 1984 as manager of Ford's appearance development department. Though a designer by training, he also had an eye for practicality, and was capable of collaborating on products that were both stylish and functional. When Ford created the appearance development department in the 1970s to create an environment for designers and engineers to optimize style and function, Thompson was brought in as a supervisor, and later promoted to manager.

"I do have a very broad understanding of the importance of design and its relationship to function," Thompson explains. "It helps a great deal to increase collaboration between designers and engineers to understand their capabilities. Lots of times engineering

wanted to make changes that adversely affected and offended the design part of the operation. We had to handle the modification in such a way that it was not detrimental to the overall design."

Thompson is enjoying retirement but his legacy continues. Today's African-American auto designers recognize Thompson as a trail blazing pioneer in the field of automotive design.

The Perry Inroads



Lowell Perry

With Levi Jackson shaking things up at Ford, Lowell Perry, a law school graduate, was doing similar things at the old Chrysler Corp. He joined Chrysler in 1963 as a corporate relations representative, making him the first African-American executive at Chrysler.

In 1973, Perry earned another "first" when he was promoted to oversee operations for Chrysler's Gear and Axle plant, the first African-american plant manager at any U.S. auto company. He was responsible for 3,800 employees.

His 17-year career was interrupted when then-President Ford invited him to chair the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission in 1975.

Perry died at the age of 66 on Jan. 7, 2001 but his legacy lives on, too.

Jackson, Thompson and Perry were turning points for African Americans in the auto industry, says Tate. They represented a marked departure from merely looking at African Americans as a source of labor, only good for heavy lifting.

"There was a total change of thought," Tate said. "African Americans were now looked at as talent as opposed

to people to move boxes."

The Civil Rights movement opened more doors, and during the 1970s more and more African Americans were given management and executive-level positions in the auto industry.

Where were the Women?

African Americans, overall, didn't have an easy time expanding their presence in the auto industry. Black males, however, were several steps ahead of Black females. Women of any color in the early 1900s were never thought of as managers or executives, and African-American women were certainly not considered as secretaries or administrative assistants.

It wasn't until much later that Black women began to show up in automotive assembly plants, and that was to assemble armaments for World War II. During the 1940s and 1950s, Tate's research found that Cadillac hired Black women as housekeepers to clean executive offices.

It wasn't until the 1960s that African-American women began to break ground in the secretarial ranks. One of those early Black secretaries was Dorothy Walker, hired in 1963 as secretary to a powertrain group's personnel manager at General Motors.

Things have changed considerably for African-American women in the auto industry. Over the years, they have gained positions as managers and senior managers in various departments. They are designing cars, engineering products and managing assembly plants.

But a big breakthrough came in 1999, when two African-American women shattered the glass ceiling. Deborah Stewart Coleman was named president, CEO and chief operating officer of AutoAlliance International Inc., a joint venture between Mazda and Ford, and Veronica Pollard was named vice president of external affairs at Toyota Motor Sales USA Inc.

These are just a few women that have advanced in the auto industry, there are many more. That's because trail blazing by Jackson, Thompson and Perry continues to create opportunities for men and women alike who were previously excluded from the white-collar corridors of the automotive industry. ●