IN MAY 1946, under the leadership of George Romney, the Automobile Manufacturers Association, descendant of the A.L.A.M.-cum-N.A.C.C., sponsored a golden jubilee to mark the beginning of the industry, the date representing the first series manufacture of an automobile by the Duryeas in Massachusetts. In 1896, too, Charlie King and Henry Ford drove their first cars on the streets of Detroit, which played to local pride, and it was the city’s sesquicentennial. Automakers were anxious to celebrate. The long war was over; the “arsenal of democracy” had returned again to the business of building cars. Nearly 90 million vehicles had been produced thus far in America. From “miscellaneous” status shortly before World War I, the industry had grown—leapt, actually—to number one in the nation.

A mile of Woodward Avenue was painted gold for the occasion, as were the hooves of participating horses. The week-long festival included expositions and fireworks and a four-mile-long parade with a Jubilee Queen, scads of elaborate flower-bedecked floats, marching bands, and more than a thousand “ancient” automobiles. Living industry pioneers were named to an Automotive Hall of Fame. Only a handful of the people we have met in this book remained. Fortuitously, one of them was a Duryea: J. Frank.

Charles Duryea’s obituary in 1938 had declared the 1895 car his solo undertaking, suggesting Charles was “the father of the automobile” and mentioning Frank only in passing. Charles’ son, who had
provided the obituary writer the biographical material, continued to work on behalf of his father’s legacy. His uncle quietly demurred that the proper pronoun was “we.”

Henry Leland had died at ninety in 1932. The following year, Albert Erskine died by his own hand as he and his beloved Studebaker Corporation careened toward bankruptcy. In 1936, pneumonia took Roy Chapin, who had taken time away from Hudson to serve as Secretary of Commerce in the Hoover administration. He was fifty-five. A decade earlier, Jim Storrow, who continued a vigorous business life despite illness, had succumbed to cancer at age sixty-two. In 1941, Harold Wills was the same age when he died in Detroit in the hospital named for his boss in Dearborn. The previous year, at his lavish estate on Long Island, Walter Chrysler had been taken at age sixty-five by a cerebral hemorrhage and years of overwork. Edsel Ford was only forty-nine when he died of stomach cancer in 1943 and, many thought, a heart broken by his father’s predilection for a bully named Harry Bennett over his own son. Henry was devastated.

Automakers who survived to join Frank Duryea in the Automotive Hall of Fame were Edgar Apperson, William C. Durant, Henry Ford, Charles B. King, Charles W. Nash, Ransom Eli Olds, and Alfred P. Sloan, Jr. Big Bill Knudsen was given a special “Oscar” for his contributions to the industry. Charlie King recreated his drive of Detroit’s first automobile.

Bygones by now were long begone. The automakers smiled broadly at each other and reveled in more attention than most of them, Henry Ford excepted, had been paid in a long time. Photos of the Charles (King and Nash), Ranse and Henry, and Ed and Frank in rapt conversation gladdened the heart. Billy Durant was too weak to attend; in ill health for more than four years, he was being quietly provided financial assistance by Alfred Sloan. The Golden Jubilee was the pioneering automakers’ last hurrah.

Ironically, the only race car driver honored, the hell-raising Barney Oldfield, who had survived in Ford’s 999 and the Blitzen Benz, was the first Golden Jubilee celebrant to die, less than four months later, of a cerebral hemorrhage at age sixty-nine. When the same malady claimed Bill Knudsen at the same age in 1948, he was acclaimed by the Detroit Common Council as “a war casualty entitled to the acclaim of every citizen of the United States.”
Within a month of each other in 1947, Henry Ford and Billy Durant were gone. Billy was first, at eighty-five on March 18 in his apartment in New York City’s Gramercy Park. Even the Durant-friendly *New York Times* obituary subtly suggested he was a has-been. “Once Motor Car Giant” was the headline of the irreverent *New York Post*. Although lower-echelon industry members with whom Billy had worked were at his funeral at Gramercy Park’s Calvary Church, none of his fellow hall of famers attended.

Henry’s death on April 7 was an event. His body lay in state in Greenfield Village as mourners waited in a mile-long queue to see him. *Life* magazine carried on its cover a photograph of a factory worker in overalls gazing mournfully into Ford’s casket. On the day of the funeral, more than 30,000 people clustered outside St. Paul’s Episcopal Cathedral. Twenty thousand were at the family cemetery in pouring rain. Henry’s death was page-one news throughout the nation.

Ransom Olds died much more quietly in Lansing, at age eighty-six, in 1950. He and his wife Metta, who had cheerfully followed behind him with a block of wood on his test drives in the 1890s, had been married more than sixty years. He was a happy man but did not die truly content because of a lingering resentment that his contribution to the industry had been forgotten in the lionizing of Henry Ford.

The two Charles died nine years apart, Nash first in 1948 at age eighty-one. In retirement, Charlie had seldom ventured far from his mountainside home in Beverly Hills. The transplanted Californian’s estate was valued in excess of $40 million. Saying “the spadework was over” in Detroit, Charlie King spent his final years in New York’s Westchester County, still experimenting, now as an artist and architect. His will, opened in 1957, revealed that Charlie had donated his $500,000 collection of antique and classic automobiles to the Henry Ford Museum.

In 1957, at age eighty-six, Ed Apperson had returned to Kokomo to cut the ribbon marking Apperson Way, which began, ironically, across the street from the old Haynes plant. He commented to a reporter that “the highway slaughter today makes me doubtful of my contribution,” and he died in a rest home in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1959. Alfred Sloan had a fatal heart attack in 1966 and spent his final hours in the research hospital he and a GM colleague had co-founded:
Memorial Sloan-Kettering in New York City. Obituaries proclaimed him a captain of industry. He was ninety.

Last of the Golden Jubilee hall of fame automakers to leave this world was Frank Duryea, at age ninety-seven in 1967. Obviously, early retirement had agreed with him. By now, it was acknowledged that he was responsible for the first Duryea. In 1959, when he was eighty-nine, Frank had been on hand for a parade of antique autos up Manhattan's Fifth Avenue from Washington Square to Central Park. Among the cars was one of the 1896 Duryeas. Peering into its engine, Frank said, “It's like a dream to look at the old fellow.”
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Index

A.A.A., see American Automobile Association
Abbott, 415
AC spark plugs, 245
A.C.A., see Automobile Club of America
Accessories, 202, 369
Accidents, 190, 195, photo section first, 18
involving animals, 199–200
Acme, the, 256
Adams and McMurtry, 130, 133
Adams Company, 368
Adams, Frederick U. “Grizzly,” 50, 53, 61
Adams-Farwell, the, 349
Adams, George, 130
Adams, Henry Brooks, 26
Addams, Jane, 393
Advertising, early, 85, 369
Aerocar Company, 185, 224
Air-cooled engines, 447
Aircraft engines, 410, 412–413, 430
Aircraft Production Board, 412
Ajax Motor Vehicle Company, 166, 308
A.L.A.M., see Association of Licensed Automobile Manufacturers
Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition, 256
Albert Champion Company, 245, 362
Alco, 292, 293, 301
Alcohol, 27
Alden-Sampson Manufacturing Company, 264, 306
Alderman, Frank R., 87
Aldrich, Fred A., 174
Alkaline battery, 368
Allen, “Punk,” 170
Allenby, Edmund, 419
Allied Expeditionary Force, 419
Alliger, Frank I., 155
Allison, James, 298
Alpena, 385
A.M.C.M.A., see American Motor Car Manufacturers’ Association
American & British Manufacturing Corporation, 426
American Automobile Association (A.A.A.), 358, 375
Blue Books, 207, 375
American Automobile Association (A.A.A. (continued))
and racing, 283, 292, 295, 297, 299

times world land speed run, 145
American Automobile, Motor & Power Company, 165
American Battery Company, 43, 56
American Bicycle Company, 81, 99
American Chocolate Machinery Company, 304
American Cotton Company, 409
American Cyclecar Manufacturers’ Association, 308
American Institute exhibition, 19
American La France, 298
American League, 345
American Liquid Air Company, 165
American Locomotive Company, 292–293, 311
American Motor Car Manufacturers’ Association (A.M.C.M.A.)
dissolves after A.L.A.M. patent victory, 258
established, 179–180
membership in 1906, 183
middle-class cars, 183
American Motor League, 96
American Motors, 408, 451
American Motors Company, 381, 385
American Philosophical Society, 5
American Populaire, 151
American Rail-Road Journal, 15
American Scout, the, 385
American Simplex, 180
American Society of Mechanical Engineers, 268
American Steam Carriage Company, 19
American Tourist, the, 385
American Traveler, the, 385
American Wire Wheel, 426
American, the, 349

Ames, A.C., 54, 64
Amphibious car, 368
Amplex, 180
Anderson, John, 141, 261
Anderson, William C., 367, 368
Andrews, A.B., 63
Andrews, Archie, 451
Annesley, Charles G., 79, 181
Anthony, Susan B., 28, 46
Anti-Saloon League, 275
Apperson, Edgar, 54, 68, 78, 216, 352, 353, 381, 449
ends partnership with Haynes, 112
death of, 455
at Grosse Point race, 101
at Indy 500, 303–304
first 1,000 mile run, 84–85
named to Automotive Hall of Fame, 454
at New York Automobile Show of 1900, 99
after Panic of 1907, 227
regarding Vanderbilt Cup, 285
represented at Selden patent discussion, 136
tests instruction manual, 203–204

Apperson, Elmer, 54, 68, 78, 216, 352, 353, 381
death of, 449
ends partnership with Haynes, 112
at New York Automobile Show of 1900, 99
at New York to Buffalo run, 106
after Panic of 1907, 227
patent infringement suit, 90
represented at Selden patent discussion, 136

Apperson Way, 455
Arabia, 419
Argo, 308
Argonne, 419
Arnold, Adolph, 199
Arrow, the, 115–117, 356 renamed the 999, 144
Assembly line, 320, 445–446, photo section
Association of Licensed Automobile Manufacturers (A.L.A.M.), 178
actions after patent victory, 257–258
approaches Ford to settle, 261
class consciousness of, 182–183
established, 137–138
exerts control, 180–181
files lawsuits, 142–143
Henry Ford attends annual banquet, 273
lawsuit against Ford, 157–159
lawsuits against independents, 226
licenses foreign car users, 157
loses Selden patent appeal, 273
makes auto show exclusive, 179
Mechanical Branch, 180n
membership in 1906, 183
sued by Velie Motor Car Company, 271–272
sues for back royalties, 255
Astor, John Jacob, 65, 66, 93, 98, 106, 168–169
Astor, Mrs. John Jacob, 93
Astor, William Waldorf, 65
At the Front in a Flivver, 419
AT&T, 443
Atkinson, Stanley D., 94
Atlas Knight, 385
Auburn Automobile Company, 443–444, 451
Auburn, the, 354, 429
Austen, W.W., 23
Austenius, W.W., 23
Austin, 359, 409n
Auto Vehicle Company, 180
Auto-Acetylene Company, 162
Autocar Company, 90, 136
Autocycle, 164
Automated controls, 169–170
Automatic Road Guide, 376
Automobile Auction Company of America, 215
Automobile Board of Trade, 273n
Automobile Club of America (A.C.A.), 97, 100, 133, 145, 292, 375
1905 annual banquet, 214
erects road signs, 207
established, 95–96
New York to Buffalo run, 105–106
New York to Seattle race, 256
Automobile Club of Southern California, 382
Automobile Company of America, 84
Automobile Fore Carriage, 156
Automobile Hall of Fame, 453
Automobile Manufacturers Association, 453
Automobile Row, 282
Automobiles
production during war, 415
use in war, 395–399, 410
Autophobia, 189–195, photo section
Avery, Clarence W., 319

Babcock Electric, 168
Babcock, Frank, 168
Baby Grand, the, 315
Baby Moose, the, 309
Bacon, Roger, 1
Baker Electric, 205, 367
Baker, Walter C., 98, 168, 171, 351
Baldwin Locomotive Works, 30
Balfour, Lord, 392
Bangs, C.L., 202
Banner buggies, 424
Barber, Amzi Lorenzo, 84, 94, 98, 109
Barber, H.L., 367
Bardwell, Hiram H., 156
Barley, Albert C., 355, 425
Barnum and Bailey’s Circus, 65
Barnum, Phineas T., 20
Barret, John P., 57
Barsaleux, Joseph, 200
Barthel Motor Company, 114
Bartholomew, J.B., 354
Baruch, Bernard, 415, 416
Bassett, Harry, 443
Batchelder, A.G., 381
Batchelder, James S., 21
Bate, James F., 57
Bates, the, 369
Batteries, 167, 368
Battin, Joseph, 23
Battis, M.G. “Mart,” 32, 35
Bausch, William, 225
Bearcat, 303, photo section
Bédélaia, 308, 310
Bedford, 265
Belger, James E., 150
Bell, Alexander Graham, 26, 214
Bell, W.L., 154
Belmont, Alva, 209
Belmont, August, 80, 287
Belmont, Mrs. Oliver Hazard Perry, 93
Belmont, Oliver Hazard Perry, 93
Bendix, Vincent, 364
Benedict, F.H., 195
Bennett, Charles H., 141, 186
Bennett Cup, Gordon, 284, 290
Bennett, Harry, 454
Bennett, James Gordon, Jr., 284
Bennett, T.T., 57
Bentley, A.M., 390
Benz, 283–284, 296, 301
Benz, Carl, 39, 40

Bergdoll brothers, 384
Berliet, 293
Besserdich, Bill, 368
Bethlehem Automobile Company, 224
Bethlehem Steel, 440
Betts, Frederic, 137
Betts, R.G., 210–211
Betts, Samuel, 256, 272
Bezner, Frederick O., 346, 347
Bicycles, 45–48, 81
Biddle family, 357, 358
Big Brown Luverne, the, 360
Bijou, the, 367
Binney & Burnham steamer, 153
Birdsall, William H., 155
Bishop, David Wolfe, 98–99, 105
Bison, the, 155
Black, Clarence A., 87, 119–120
Blakeslee, the, 155
Blanchard, Thomas, 17
Blitzen Benz, 296–297
Blomstrom, C.H., 155
Blomstrom, the, 155
Blue Books, 207, 375
Bluebird, the, 156
Board of Steam Wagon Commissioners, 31, 34–35
Boarding house gang, the, 346
Bonebrake hardware company, 149
Booth, Carlos D., 66
Booth, Franklin, 376
Borbein, H.F., 156
Borglum, Gutzon, 417
Boss Knitting Machine Works, 171
Boston, early traffic, photo section
Boston Women’s Rescue League, 46
Boston Y.M.C.A. automobile school, 203
Bostwick, Albert, 152
Boulton, Matthew, 2
Bourbeau, Henri, 308
Bowen, Lemuel W., 119–120, 223, 247
Boyce, Harrison, 369
Bradley, W.F., 395–396, 397, 412
Brady, Anthony N., 79
attempts to consolidate companies, 235
joins forces with Briscoe, 262–263
stock watering scheme, 265
oversees GM loan, 269
U.S. Motor Company in receivership, 306–308
Brady, Daniel M., 370
Brady, “Diamond Jim,” 168, 197, 370
Brady, James J., 103, 346
Brayton engine, 27–29, 272
adapted for boats, 40
Brayton, George B., 27, 182
Breakdowns, 204–208
Breer, Carl, 432, 441
Breese, James L., 151
Brew, Francis O., 156
Brewster, 426
Briarcliff, the, 358
Brietzke, Charles F., 156
Briggs, Walter O., 339
Briker, Joseph, 418
Briscoe, Benjamin, 111, 352, 357, 440
association with Buick, 121–122
association with Maxwell, 122–123
birth of General Motors, 233–241
in Glidden Tour, 374
joins A.L.A.M. after patent decision, 258
joins A.M.C.M.A., 179
joins forces with Brady, 262–263
joins forces with Reeves, 262
lands Cadillac for Morgan combine, 248
leaks consolidation talks to press, 240
meetings with Ford and Olds, 236–238
moves into oil business, 432
negotiations with Durant, 251
after Panic of 1907, 227–228
place in industry in 1906, 183
regarding David Buick, 244n
regarding earlier leak to press, 251n
regarding lawsuit, 182
regarding middle-class market, 217
regarding New York to Paris race, 288
social circle of, 183
starts Briscoe Frères, 308
starts United International Motors Ltd., 265
two engines for one car, 368
U.S. Motor Company in receivership, 306–308
war service, 432
Briscoe, Frank
association with Brush, 219–220
joins U.S. Motor Company, 263
producing Brush Runabout, 246
start Briscoe Frères, 308
U.S. Motor Company in receivership, 306–308
Briscoe Manufacturing Company, 121
Briscoe Motor Corporation, 432
Broc electric car, photo section
Broesel, Herman, 356
Brookes, L. Elliott, 204
Brown, Dudley, 156
Brown, Edwin F., 64
Brown, George H., 90, 231, 328
Brown, Joseph, 30
Brownell, Charles, 435
Bruce, Robert, 210
Brann, 444
Brush Runabout Company, 220, 246, 251, 263, 306
Brush, Alanson, 219–220, 246
Bryan, Vincent, 146
Bryan, William Jennings, 64, 79, 98, 373, 393
Buckeye, the, 354
Buckmobile, the, 155
Budlong, M.J., 258
Buffalo Electric Carriage Company, 98
Buffalo Gasoline Motor Company, 181
Buffalo, the, 155
Buffum, 357
Buggyaut, the, 225
Buick, David Dunbar
association with Briscoe, 120–122
death of, 244n
multiple business failures of, 244n
in need of capital, 173–174
overwhelmed by Durant, 176
productivity of, 178
regarding GM takeover, 244
surrenders stock, 244n
Buick, lawsuit, 258
Buick Auto-Vim and Power Company, 121
Buick Manufacturing Company, 121
Buick Model 10, 234, 245
Buick Model F, 248
Buick Model G, 248
Buick Motor Company, 374, 407, 413, 414, 428, 443
established, 121–122
control passes to Durant, 176
after Panic of 1907, 228
purchases Cadillac, 249
stock issue for new plant, 266
Bullard, Arthur, 398
Burdette, Oliver, 22

Burdick Motor Car Company, 164
Bureau of Road Inquiry, 48
Bureau of Standards, 163
Burman, "Wild Bob," 283, 296, 297, 299
Burroughs Adding Machine Company, 381
Burrowes Company, E.T., 149
Busse, H.F., 210
Bust, following postwar boom, 429–437
Byrider, the, 155

Cabot, George E., 41
Cadillac Automobile Company, 118–120
Cadillac Motor Car Company, 313, 407, 412, 413, 442–443
backers’ social circles, 183
established, 120
joins A.L.A.M., 138
standardization test of, 247
Caffrey, W.G., 165
Calkins, Ernest Elmo, 356
Caloric, the, 165
Cameron, Everett S., 155
Cameron, the, 349
Campbell, Edwin "Doc," 278, 390, 400, 407, 414
Campbell, Margery Durant, 278, 303, 314, 390, 410, 433
Canals, 14–15
Caproni seaplanes, 432
Caps, the, 155
Carbonic acid, 165
Carbonic gas, 28
Cardenas, Julio, 398
Carey, William, 151
Carhartt Automobile Corporation, 271–272
Carhart, H.S., 30
Carhart, John W., 30
Carriages
  horseless, 1, 2
  propelled by sails, 2
  steam, 1, 3–9
Carter, Byron T., 251, 364–365
Carter, Howard O., 165
Carter Motor Car Corporation, 165
Cartercar Company, 251
Carton, John, 265
Case, J.I., 31
Case Threshing Machine Company, J.I., 302, 359
Cassini, Marguerite, 191
Catton, Bruce, 244
Cave, Henry, builds Selden patent engine, 181
Centaur Motor Vehicle Company, 166
Centennial Exposition, 25–26
Central Park, automobilists protest, 192
Chadwick, 358, 396
Chadwick, Lee, 376
Chalmers-Detroit, the, 345
Chalmers, Hugh, 325, 334, 344–347, 408, 409
  industry spokesman during war, 416
  prepares for war, 388
  regarding war production, 417
Chalmers Motor Company, 345, 408–409, 424, 440
Chamberlain, A.W., 90
Champion, Albert, 245, 333
Champion Company, Albert, 245, 362
Chandler, Frederick C., 351, 451
Chandler Motor Car Company, 350–351, 359
Chapin, Roy D., 287, 344–347, 408, 434, 443, 451
  death of, 454
  at Grosse Point race, 101
Joins Lincoln Highway Association, 38, 381
Meets Henry Ford, 114–115
At New York to Buffalo run, 106–108
Prepares for war, 388
Proposes freight trucking for war, 413–414
Regarding flood of new makers, 151
Chassis, tubular, 78
Chatham & Phenix National Bank, 314
Chauffeurs, 209–210
Chevrolet, Arthur
  becomes Durant’s chauffeur, 283
  races at Indianapolis Motor Speedway, 299
Chevrolet Four-Ninety, 336
Chevrolet, Gaston, joins Buick race team, 283
Chevrolet, Louis, 279
  in 24 hour grind, 296
  association with Durant, 303–306
  joins Buick race team, 282
  meets Billy Durant, 279
  races at Indianapolis Motor Speedway, 299
  racing history, 282–283
  at Vanderbilt Cup, 286
Chevrolet Motor Company, 388, 392, 443
  “buys General Motors,” 399
  Durant expands, 313–316
  merged with United Motors Corp. and GM Corp., 414–415
  reorganization of, 447–449
Chevrolet, the, birth of, 303–306
Chicago
  elevated railway, 44
  eyeglasses law, 192
  highwheeler capital, 218
Chicago (continued)

*Inter-Ocean* automobile exhibition, 96
*Times-Herald* automobile contest, 50–60
World’s Columbian Exposition, 42–44, 48–49

Chicago Automobile Club, 190
Chicago City Railway Company, 50
*Chicago Inter-Ocean* automobile exhibition, 96
Chicago Motorcycle Company, 165
Chicago Times-Herald automobile contest, 50–60

*photo section* contest to rename horseless carriage, 91–92

*Chicago Tribune*, 402, 446
Child labor laws, 384
Christie, J. Walter, 282, 290, 298
Chrysler, 440–441
Chrysler, Della, 431, 437
Chrysler, Walter Percy, 414, 452
becomes president of Buick, 400
buys Haynes factory, 450
death of, 454
departs Willys Corporation, 436
eyearly life, 311
joins Buick, 311–313
joins Willys Corporation, 431
joins Maxwell-Chalmers, 437
loses bidding war to Durant, 440–441
regarding Billy Durant, 389, 428
regarding copper-cooled engine, 448
regarding Maxwell-Chalmers, 440
regarding war production, 413, 414
streamlines production, 318
Churchill, Winston, 336

Cino, 351
Clapp, Henry W., 52
Clark, Albert F., 155
Clark, Emory, 381
Classic Six Chevrolet, 315
Clay, Eleanor Lowthian, 403
Clemens, Samuel, 46
Clerk, Dugald, 272
Cleveland Athletic Club, 108
Cleveland, Grover, 42, 51
Clifton, Charles, 137, 261, 356
Climax, the, 150
Clough, Enos Merrill, 22
Club Car Company of America, 370
Clymer, Floyd, 330
Coal gas, 27, 39
Cobb, Ty, 345
Coffin, Howard Earle, 287, 345, 412
joins Hudson Motor Car Company, 346–347
chairs Council of National Defense, 397
prepares for war, 388
regarding wartime auto production, 415
Colby, 361, 385
Cole Motor Car Company, 353
Cole, Joseph J., 302, 353, 450
Coleman, Clyde J., 43
Collins Six, the, 442
Collins, Richard H. “Trainload,” 442, 447, 450
Colt, Samuel, 247
Columbia Automobile, 81
Columbia Perambulator Company, 52, 55
Columbia, the, 74–75, 349
Columbus Buggy Company, 352
Columbus Electric, the, 352
Commercial, 138
Compound, the, 161
Compressed air engine, 63, 165
Comstock, Anthony, 424
Conference of Governors, 383
Congress, requests information on foreign laws, 193
Consolidation of the industry, 233–241
Continental engine, 424
Conversion kits, 156
Cook, William, 419
Coolidge, Calvin, 372
Cooper, Peter, 15, 94
Cooper, Tom, 113–114, 116–117
Copeland, Lucius D., 48
Copper-cooled engine, 447–448
Corbin, the, 369
Cord, Errett Lobban, 451
Cord, the, 451
Corliss steam engine, 26
Cosmopolitan Power Company, 165
Cosmopolitan Race, 65–66
Coudert, Frederic, 195, 272
jokes about Selden car, 256
regarding Selden patent engine, 181
Council of National Defense, 397
Courier, the, 352
Couzens, James, 115, 140, 318, 319, 338
appointed senator, 422n
attends Selden patent appeal, 272
at consolidation meeting, 238
departs Ford, 392–393
Ford Motor Company’s first sale, 142
Ford wage raise, 323–324
joins A.M.C.M.A., 179
meeting after Panic of 1907, 226
negotiates with GM, 259–260
regarding early ignorance, 202
regarding Flanders, 186–187
regarding Ford production, 184
regarding industry funding of road building, 380
regarding price of Model T, 233
Selden patent lawsuit, 143
sells out to Ford, 422
takes Durant on factory tour, 260
Cowles, E.P., 32–36
Cram, James, 360
Crapo, Henry Howland, 174
Crawford, 349, 362, 415
Credit, 429–430
Crest Manufacturing Company, 156
Cricket, the, 309
Crocker, Sewall K., 128–129, 132
Croesus, the, 153–154
Croker, Frank, 292
Crompton, 149
Cross-licensing agreement, 273n
Crow-Elkhart, 349, 409n
Crowell, Benedict, 397–398
Crude petroleum, 29
Crystal Palace, 19–20
Cugnot, Nicolas Joseph, 2, 13
Cummings, Clarence, 157
Cuneo, Joan Newton, 374
Cunningham, 349, 357
Cuntz, Hermann F., 81–82, 135, 235
Curtis, Francis, 22
Curtiss Publishing Company survey, 336, 448
Curtiss, George W., 154
Curtiss, Glenn, 431
Cutler, Elihu H., 137, 159
Cutler-Hammer electric transmission, 353
Cutting, 385
Cyclecars, 308–310, photo section
Cycleplane, the, 309
Dagenhardt, Fred, 43
Dahlinger, John, 394
Daimler, 357
Daimler, Gottlieb, 27, 39, 44
Daisy Air Rifle Company, 140
Daisy, the, 309
Daley, M.H., 64
Dare, Dorothy, 56
Darracq, 283
Davenport, Thomas, 40
Davies, Clarence, 441
Davis, George W., 354
Davis, John D., 205
Davis, Louisa, 205
Davis, Samuel T., Jr., 97, 291–292
becomes president of Locomobile, 109
meeting with Whitney, 137
Dawley, Herbert, 356
Day, George, 74, 81, 126
death of, 226
meeting with Whitney, 137
orders Selden patent engine built, 181
regarding licensing enforcement, 159
Selden patent licensing, 135
Day, Joseph P., 441
Dayton Engineering Laboratories Company (Delco), 365, 408
Dayton, Helena Smith, 209
Dayton Motor Car Company, 263
De Causse, J. Frank, 396
De Dion, 282, 288, 289
de Dion, Albert, 289
De Dion, American, 151
De La Vergne, John Chester, 65
De La Vergne Refrigerating Machine Company, 56, 60, 64–65
De Loura, H.E., 152–153
De Palma, Ralph, 298
de Tocqueville, Alexis, 14
de Vaux, Norman, 315
de Wolf, Elsie, 396
Dealers, 322, 361–362
Deere, Emma, 302
Deere Plow Company, John, 302
Degener, Gus, position at Ford, 231
Delamare-Debouteville, Edouard, 39n
Delco, 365, 408
DeLuxe Motor Car Company, 342
Demarest, 426
DeMars, the, 155
Demonstrator models, 276
Department of War, 163
Depew, Chauncey, 66, 108
Desberon, the, 369
DeTamble, 385
Detroit
automobile show of 1901, 118
Detroit's "Crystal Palace," 318
industry's golden jubilee celebration, 453
Olds Motor Works factory, 88
the motor mecca, 334–335
Detroit Athletic Club, 334, 345, 358
Detroit Automobile Company, 87, 100
Detroit Automobile Show of 1909, 335
Detroit Common Council, 454
Detroit Electric, the, 367, 368
Detroit Street Railway Company, 101
Devine, William, 30
Dewar, Thomas, 247
Dewar Trophy, 247
DeWaters, Enos, 178
DH-4, 417
Diesel engine, 449
Diesel, Rudolf, 449
Dixie Flyer, the, 349, 409n
Dixie Highway, 387
Dixie, the, 150
Dodge, Anna, 439
Dodge Brothers, the, 337, 398, 434
Dodge, Horace, 333
  death of, 439
  joins Ford & Malcomson Company, 139–140
  produces engines for Oldsmobile, 111
  regarding Ford wage raise, 325
  regarding Malcomson, 184
  sells stock to Ford, 422
  stock in Ford Motor Company, 141
  sues Ford, 402–405
  supplies engines to Olds, 118
  wins lawsuit against Ford, 421

Dodge, John, 333
  death of, 439
  joins Ford & Malcomson Company, 139–140
  meets with War Industries Board, 415–416
  prepares for war, 388
  produces engines for Oldsmobile, 111
  regarding Couzens’s departure from Ford, 402
  regarding Ford wage raise, 325
  regarding Malcomson, 184
  regarding Model T Ford, 337
  regarding rationing, 416
  sells stock to Ford, 422
  stock in Ford Motor Company, 141
  sues Ford, 402–405
  supplies engines to Olds, 118
  wins lawsuit against Ford, 421

Dodge, Matilda, 439
  ends association with Durant, 305
  meets with Mott, 176, 178
  partners with Durant, 174
  regarding Charles Nash, 311

Dort Motor Car Company, 450
Dort, the, 305, 335
Douglas Motors Corporation, 409n, 424
Dow, Alexander, 106
Draft dodgers, 412
Dragon Automobile Company, 223
Dragon, the, 223
Drake, Alfred, 26
Drake, Edwin L., 39
Dreiser, Theodore, 376
Drexel, Mrs. John R., 93
Driver licensing, 371–372
Drummond, Charles, 153
du Pont de Nemours and Company, E.I., 389
du Pont, E. Paul, 425
du Pont, Pierre S., 389, 391, 399, 427, 447, 448
  acquires GM stock, 414
  praised by Durant, 422
  reorganizes GM, 442
  takes control of GM, 433
du Pont, the, 425
Dudgeon, F.P., 97
Dudgeon, Richard, 19–21
Duerr, C.A., 143
Duesenberg, Augie, 425, 426
Duesenberg, Fred, 425, 426
Duesenberg, Model J, 451
Duesenberg, the, 425
Dunbar, the, 244n
Dunham, George W., 346, 347
Dunlap, Lee, plans for GM factory, 246
Dunlop, John Boyd, 48
Dunn, D.D., 155
Duplex, the, 165
Duquesne, the, 154
Durant, Catherine, 238, 278, 314, 399
Durant-Chevrolet, 303
Durant, Clara, 176, 238, 278
Durant, Cliff, 278, 315
Durant-Dort Carriage Company, 174–177, 267
Durant Four, the, 443
Durant, Margery, 175, 176
see also Campbell, Margery
Durant
Durant Motors, 442, 451
Durant, Rebecca, 314
Durant, William Clark, 174
Durant, William Crapo “Billy,” 353, 357, 366, photo section
approaches Lelands for GM, 246–249
association with Louis Chevrolet, 303–306
attempts to acquire Cadillac, 248
becomes president of GM, 400
becomes VP of GM, 391
birth of General Motors, 233–241
builds the Star, 446–447
builds up Buick, 178–179
builds up General Motors, 243–253
buys block in Manhattan, 306
buys out Heaney, 265–266
buys up GM stock, 388
Chevrolet Four-Ninety, 336
consolidates United Motors Corporation, 407–408
death of, 455
divorce and remarriage, 238
early life, 174–175
ends association with Dort, 305
enlists Hardy to sue A.L.A.M., 259
expands Chevrolet, 314–316
eyes E.R. Thomas Motor Company, 290
feted by Flint, 278, 422
financial woes, 266–268
forecasts saturation point, 370
in Glidden Tour, 374
GM postwar boom, 427
incorporates Chevrolet Motor Company, 392
Lelands resign for war work, 412
loses control to du Ponts, 414
meets Louis Chevrolet, 279
meets with Couzens, 259–260
meets with Mott, 177–178
meets with Stetson, 239
meets with War Industries Board, 415–416
meets with Ford and Olds, 236–238
meets with Willys, 277
named to Automotive Hall of Fame, 454
negotiates with Storrow, 391
objects to new GM headquarters plan, 428
organizes a race team, 282
outfits rail car as machine shop, 283
after Panic of 1907, 228
pays back royalties to A.L.A.M., 258
plans comeback, 279
receives assistance from Sloan, 454
regarding Nash and Storrow, 390
regarding Pierre du Pont, 422
regarding race car, 285
rejects airplane engine factory, 410, 412
resigns from GM, 432–433
seeks GM proxies, 390
Duran, William Crapo “Billy” (continued)

sells the Buick to America, 175–177
starts Durant Motors, 441–442
starts Frigidaire, 427
stops royalties to A.L.A.M., 255
terms of GM loan, 269
testifies in election fraud case, 422n
tireless worker for GM, 250–251
tours Ford factory, 260
trades Chevrolet stock for GM stock, 399
watches Louis Chevrolet race, 283
wiped out in crash of 1929, 451
Durocar, the, 86n
Duryea, Charles E., 409n
builds the Buggyaut, 225
in Chicago Times-Herald race, 52–54
 colaboration with King, 69
company in receivership, 224–225
in Cosmopolitan Race, 66
death of, 456
entry at Grosse Point race, 101
first gasoline car, 48–49
joins A.M.C.M.A., 179
in London race, 67–68
in Narragansett Park race, 67
at New York Automobile Show of 1900, 99
patent infringement suit, 90
produces the sylph, 47
quarrels with brother, 78
regarding brother Frank, 397
regarding Edison, 168
regarding Ford’s Selden patent victory, 274
regarding highwheelers, 218, 219
regarding the self-starter, 363
testifies in lawsuit, 182
Duryea, J. Frank, 357, photo section
association with Knox, 99
auto club hill climb, 169
in Chicago Times-Herald race, 52–54
collaboration with King, 69
complaint about car owners, 205
in Cosmopolitan Race, 66
death of, 456
first gasoline car, 48–49
at golden jubilee celebration, 453
introduces Stevens-Duryea, 216
joins A.L.A.M., 138
in London race, 67–68
member of A.L.A.M., 179
in Narragansett Park race, 67
after Panic of 1907, 227
retires, 397
produces the sylph, 47
quarrels with brother, 78
Stevens-Duryea, 112
Duryea Motor Wagon Company, 52, 65, 66, 130
Duryea Power Company, 90, 179, 225
Dyke, Andrew Lee, 156

Eagle, the, 411, 417–418, 446n
Eames, Hayden, 257, 341
Earl, Clarence, 432
Earl Motor Car Company, 224
Earl, the, 432
Earle, Virginia, 109
Eastman, George, 28, 37
Eaton, William, M., 244, 248
Eck, James L., 171
Eckhart brothers, 354
Eclipse Automobile Company, 164
Economy, 409n
Econometac, the, 309
Edison, Thomas, 61, 71, 167, 261, 368, 376, 380, 392, 393, 403
Edwards, Gus, 146
Eisenhuth, John W., 161–162
Elcar, the, 443
Electric Auto-Lite Company, 277, 408
Electric cars
charging stations, 207
demise of, 366–368
on the East Coast, 125–126
license requirements in New York, 94
Morrison's, 41, 43
pros and cons of, 165–169
superiority of, 65
Electric motors, 40–41
Electric Storage Battery Company, 77, 80
Electric Vehicle Company, 77
at New York Automobile Show of 1900, 98
builds Selden patent engine, 181
decline of, 88
enforcing Selden patent, 90
in receivership, 226–227
scandal in, 89
Selden patent licensing, 135, 137
Electrical Exposition, 96
Elcictd, 52, 55, 60, 67
Ellicott brothers, 4
Elmore Company, 138, 251
Elston, Robert W., 63
Emerson & Fisher Company, 69
Emerson, the, 336
Emerson, Victor, 39n
E-M-F, 338–343
Emise, Charlie, 358–359
Empire Motor Car Company, 298, 302, 381
Employers Association of Detroit, 384
Enger, Frank, 351
Enger Motor Car Company, 351, 409n
Engines
see also Internal combustion engines
air-cooled, 447
aircraft, 410, 412–413, 430
Brayton, 27–29, 272
adapted for boats, 40
compressed air, 63
Continental, 424
copper-cooled, 447–448
Daimler's, 39–40
diesel, 449
four-stroke, Otto, 27
gasoline, early, 40
Lenoir, 27
Liberty, testing, photo section
Olds' gasoline, 40, 68
Otto, 272
Otto & Langen, 27, 29
rotary, 368
Sintz, 55
sleeve-valve, 276
spring, 63
three-cylinder, 29
two-stroke, Otto, 27
V-8, 313
valve-in-head, 121
England, repeal of Locomotives on Highways Act, 67
Erie Canal, 13
Erskine, Albert R., 325, 343, 409–410, 423, 440, 454
Essex, the, 443
Ettinger, Everett, 58
Eugene Meyer & Company, 264
Europe
early internal combustion engines, 27
early races, 50
Evans, Oliver, 1–9, 317
automated grist mill, 3, 4, 8
**Index**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evans, Oliver (continued)</th>
<th>Feminist movement, see Women, emancipation of</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dogged pursuit of automobile, 3–7, 13</td>
<td>Ferris, 425, 430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>early life, 2</td>
<td>Ferris, George W.G., 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patent Right Oppression Exposed; or, Knavery Detected, 9</td>
<td>Ferris wheel, 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>petitions for legal protection, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8</td>
<td>Ferris, William E., 425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>steam carriage, building of, 5–6</td>
<td>Fetch, E.T. “Tom,” 131–133, photo section</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>steam dredge for Philadelphia, 7–8</td>
<td>Fey, Lincoln H., 156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>steam engine, high-pressure, 4–6</td>
<td>Fiat, 282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Mill-wright and Miller's Guide, 4–5</td>
<td>Financing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Steam Engineer’s Guide, 8</td>
<td>Credit, 429–430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evans, Sarah, 3, 4–5, 9</td>
<td>Studebaker assists with installment purchases, 276, 409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everitt-Metzger-Flanders, 338–343</td>
<td>Fire engines, Maxim, 430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everitt, the, 343, 344, 364</td>
<td>Firestone, Clinton, 352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ewing, the, 251</td>
<td>Firestone Columbus, the, 352</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Factories, distribution among states, 349–350
- designs of, 317–318
- Fair, Tessie, 93
- Fairbanks, Douglas, 425
- Fairie Queen, 22
- Fairmount Engine Works, 8
- F-A-L, 385
- Falcon, 152
- Farmer, Moses G., 40
- Farmers Anti-Automobile Association of Pennsylvania, 200
- Farrand, A.W. “Ans,” 32, 35
- Farwell, Fay Oliver, 368
- Faulconer, Robert C., 117, 119
- Federal Aid Road Act, 387
- Federal Reserve Board, 429
- Fisher Body, 427
- Fisher, Carl, 208, 282, 297, 377
- builds Indianapolis Motor Speedway, 298–300
- at Indy 500, 301
- leads Hoosier tours, 381–382, 387
- organizes industry funding for road building, 379–383
- promotes Miami Beach, 302
- tour promotes Lincoln Highway, 381
- Fisher, Charles, 354–355
- Fisher, Frederick, 339, 354–355
- Fisher, John Kenrick, 19
- Fisher, Lawrence, 354–355
- Fitch, John, 4, 12, 13
- Flaming Coffin, 417
- Flanders 20, the, 342
- Flanders Manufacturing Company, 343–344
- Flanders Six, the, 344
Flanders, the, 342
Flanders, Walter E., 318, 319, 333, 409, 436, 450
streamlines Ford plant, 186
U.S. Motor Company receivership, 307
departure from Ford, 337–338
E-M-F, 338–343
Flanders Manufacturing Company, 343–344
purchases United States Motor, 344

Flash boiler, 169
Fleetwood, 426
Fletcher Paper Company, 450
Flint Automobile Company, 259
Flint Roadster, 259
Flint, the, 446n
Flint Varnish, 177
Flint Wagon Works, 122, 173–174, 304
Flivver tanks, 411
Flivver, see Model T Ford
Florida, speed carnivals in, 281–282
Flying Roadster, the, 183
Flynn, Walter F., 152
Ford, Clara, 70, 113, 324, 403
at Grosse Point race, 102
regarding Peace Ship, 394
Ford, Edsel, 70, 328, 393, 402, 444, 445
becomes president of Ford, 421
contributes to Lincoln Highway fund, 380
death of, 454
educated at Ford Motor Company, 310
Henry keeps out of war, 411–412
introduces Henry to Avery, 319
marriage of, 403
summer job at Ford, 318
Ford, Henry, 187, 453, photo section
see also Ford Motor Company;
Henry Ford Company
accepts deal with GM, 260
after Panic of 1907, 228
agrees to new model, 449
announces buyer rebate, 332
assistance from Maybury, 86–87
attitude toward disadvantaged, 327
becomes folk hero, 274
building of assembly line factory, 318–321
builds Fair Lane, 325
builds scale model, 310
buys Lincoln Motor Company, 444
buys out Dodies and Couzens, 422
buys out Malcomson, 184–186
car for the common man, 189–190
cheered at A.L.A.M. annual banquet, 273
commitment to low cost car, 184–185, 187
condemns the war, 388, 392
cuts costs in postwar bust, 433–435
deal with GM fails, 260
death of, 455
death of Edsel, 454
at Detroit auto show of 1901, 118
development of first car, 70–71
development of two-cylinder engine, 70
discovers vanadium steel, 229–230
doubles employee wages, 323–325
employee relations, 322–323
Ford, Henry (continued)
ends war production, 419
establishes Ford & Malcomson Company, 139
expands for patrol boat production, 411, 417
first car sale, 79
Ford Manufacturing Company incorporated, 183–184
Ford Motor Company’s first sale, 142
forms A.M.C.M.A., 179
at Grosse Point race, 100–102
Henry Ford Museum, 455
Henry Ford Trade School, 327
irate about Model T redesign, 328
lawsuits
_Chicago Tribune_, 402, 446
Dodge brothers, 337, 402–405, 421
Lelands, 445
Selden patent, 143–144, 158–159, 257, 259
Selden patent appeal, 261, 272
loan due, 433–435
loses Couzens, 392–393, 402
loses senate election, 422n
meeting after Panic of 1907, 226
meetings with Durant and Briscoe, 236–238
named to Automotive Hall of Fame, 454
organizes Peace Ship, 393
ousted from Henry Ford Company, 113
plans vertical integration, 329
proposes war machines, 410–411
prospects as mechanic, 86
refuses to sign cross-licensing agreement, 273n
regarding horses, 199
regarding Hupp and Hastings, 335
regarding jokes about Model T, 331–332
regarding mass production, 317
regarding Walter Flanders, 337, 338
rejects industry funding of road building, 380
requests license from Smith, 142
responds to A.L.A.M. ad, 142–143
in Seattle for race finish, 257
sells race car interests, 116
sets up metallurgical lab, 230
sets world land speed record, 144–145, 296
superintendent at Detroit Automobile Company, 87
support from Thomas Edison, 71
takes Durant on factory tour, 260
at Vanderbilt Cup race, 291
visits Olds Motor Works, 115
watches Louis Chevrolet race, 283
writes article for _Harper’s Weekly_, 229
Ford, Henry, II, 412
Ford, Margaret, 71
Ford Manufacturing Company, 183–185, 422
Ford Motor Company, 413, 444
assembly line factory, 318–321
backers’ social circles, 182–183
branch assembly plants, 321–322
cuts dealer share of profit, 332
dealer policies, 434–435
Ford Motor Company (continued)
display amalgam patent car, 182
diversity of workforce, 326, 327
doubles employee wages, 323–325
Educational Department, 326–327
employee relations, 322–323
employees protest layoffs, 434
fights lawsuit alone, 179
first sale, 142
Henry Ford Trade School, 327
incorporated, 141
knocked-down shipping, 321–322
meeting after Panic of 1907, 226
merged with Ford Manufacturing, 186
Model T, 229–233
National Guard service policy, 401–402
place in industry in 1906, 183
predates first experimental car, 182
reaches deal with GM, 260
reaction to Selden patent victory, 259
relations with employees, 327
Sociological Department, 326–327
standards for dealers, 322
temporary injunction restrains expansion, 403–405
Ford tractor, 260
Ford, William, 70–71, 87
death of, 260, 330n
Fordism, 321
Fordmobile, 141
Fordson tractor, 394
Foster Automobile Manufacturing
Company, 162
Foster steamer, 98
Foster, Stephen, 7
Foster, William, 7
Fournier, Henri, 101
Four-Ninety, the, 315
Four-stroke engines, Otto, 27
Four-wheel drive, 368
Fox, the, 447
France
Cugnot’s steam tractor, 13
early car sales in, 40
early roads, 44
Franchising, 362
Franklin Company, H.H., 355
Franklin, Herbert H., 257, 355, 434, 447
after Panic of 1907, 227
joins A.L.A.M., 138
list of owner errors, 204
promoting A.L.A.M., 158
Franklin, the, 185, 429, photo section
Frantz, Hiram, 150
Free School of Crippled Children, 190
Freeman, Walter K., 162
Freight trucking, 413
French Grand Prix, 290
French, John L., 223
Friedman, Oscar J., 150
Frigidaire, 427
Frisbie, Russell Abner, 180
Fritchie, Oliver P., 367, 409n
Frontmobile, the, 155
Front-wheel drive, 282–283
F.R.P., 358, 426
Fry, Vernon, 141, 186
Fuels, early, 27, 28, 29
Fulton, Robert, 12
Gadabout, the, 309
Galamb, Joseph, 231, 338
Gallinger, Alexander, 32, 33, 35, 36
Garages, 208
Gardner, Fred, 424
Gardner, John C., 22
Gardner, Russell, 315, 424
Gardner, Russell, Jr., 424
Gardner, the, 424, 451
Garford Company, 277, 341, 342
Gary Motor Car Company, 361
Gasmobile, 84, 106
Gasolene Motor Company, 90
Gasoline, 39, 207
Gasoline automobiles
  Daimler’s, 39
  first, 39
  pros and cons of, 170–171
Gasoline engines, early, 40
Gawley, T.R., 63–64
Gearless Transmission Company, 225
General Electric, 350
General Motors, 388–392, 407–408
  see also General Motors Corporation
  acquires interest in Weston-Mott, 244
  acquires Oakland Motor Car Company, 245
  acquires Olds Motor Works, 245
  bankers’ trust meeting, 391
  birth of, 233–241
  board expanded, 391
  Durant builds up, 243–253
  final loan payment due, 389
  initial reception of, 243
  layoffs, 267
  Northway Division, 353
  purchase of Ford fails, 260
  reaches deal with Ford Motor Company, 260
  reorganization of, 268–269
General Motors Acceptance Corporation, 427
General Motors Corporation, 399, 422, 441, 442
  Executive Committee, 447, 448
  merged with United Motors Corp. and Chevrolet, 414–415
  plans new headquarters, 428
  postwar boom, 427
  resignation of Durant, 432–433
Geneva Automobile & Manufacturing Company, 152–153
George III, 2
Gerard, J.W., 93
German-American Bank, 140
Germany, early internal combustion engines, 27, 39–40
“Get a horse,” 67
Gibson, Charles D.P., 23
Gibson, Charles Dana, 200
Gimbel’s, 56
Gleason, the, 155
Glidden, Charles J., 374
Glidden Tours, 353, 374–376
Glide, 415, 409n
Glover, George T., 164
Glugler, O.E., 150
Goelet, Robert, 194
Golden jubilee celebrations, 453
Goodrich, 369
Goodrich, B.F., 375
Goodridge, T.W., 226n
Gordon Bennett Cup, 284, 290
Gordon, A.S., 22
Gore, John, 18
Gormully, R. Philip, 47, 138
Goss, Arnold, 248, 267
Goss, M.L., 167
Gould, Edwin, 65
Gould, George, 65
Goux, Jules, 302
Government Printing Office, 163
Graham Automobile & Launch Company, 166
Graham brothers, 451
Graham, Robert E., 357
Graham, the, 451
Gramm Motor Truck Company, 277
Grant, Harry Fortune, 292
Gray, John S.
  joins Ford Motor Company, 140–141
  death of, 186
  regarding Malcomson, 184–185
  seeks license for Ford, 142–143
Gray Motor Company, 264
Gray Motor Corporation, 436
Gray, the, 450
Gray Wolf, the, 285
Great Arrow, the, 216, 356
Great Eagle, the, 352
Great Smith, the, 180
Great Steam Race, 30–36, 50
Great Western, 362
Green Bay, the, 32–34
Greene, Henry Copley, 210
Grinds, 24 hour, 294–296
Grout Brothers Automobile Company, 110, 224
Grout steamer, 110
Grout, William L., 224
Guaranty Securities Company, 277
Guaranty Security Company, 313
Guardian Frigerator, 427
Gude Company, O.J., 144
Guggenheim, Robert, 256, 257
Gulf Oil, 375
Gyroscope, 155

Hammond, Eugene, 133, photo section
Hardy, Alexander Brunnell Cullen, 304, 305, 314, 427
  becomes president of Oldsmobile, 447
  regarding GM financial woes, 267
  sues A.L.A.M., 259
Hare, Emlen, 426, 439
Hare’s Motors, 426, 439
Harkness, Harry, 152
Harroun, Ray, 302, 303, 381
Hartley Power Supply Company, 64
Hastings, Charles D., 335–336
Hatcher, Bert, 86
Hatcher, William A., 156
Hatfield, 409n
Hatheway, Curtis R., 241
  appointed to GM board, 244
  meeting regarding acquiring Cadillac, 248
Havemeyer, H.O., 283
Havemeyer, William F., 65, 152
Hawkins, Norval, 321, 322, 324, 332, 435, 447, 448
Haynes Automobile Company, 450
Haynes, Bernice, 203
Haynes, Elwood P., 68, 78, 352, 353, 372
  contacts Sloan and Steenstrup, 154
  death of, 450
  ends partnership with Appersons, 112
  first 1,000 mile run, 84–85
  in Glidden Tour, 374
  monument to, 449
Haynes, Elwood P. (continued)

at New York Automobile Show of 1900, 99
after Panic of 1907, 227
partnership with Appersons, 54–55
on tour promoting Lincoln Highway, 381
regarding road rights, 192

Haynes, Frederick, becomes president of Dodge Brothers, 439

H.C.S., the, 440

Headlamps, 265, 336, 356
Headley & Company, 367
Heaney, John Albert, 265
Hearst, William Randolph, 123
Hecker, Frank J., 87
Hémery, Victor, 283, 296
Henderson, 381, 384
Henderson, George A., 156
Henderson, T.J., 154
Henry, David, 361

Henry Ford Company, 102

Horne, 1

Horseless carriage, 1, 2

Horseless Vehicles, Automobiles and Motor Cycles, 156

Horses, 19, 30, 60–61, 198–200, 369–370, 418, 453

Huntington, Edward Ringwood, 94, 194, 207, 357
Hiawatha Manufacturing Company, 149

Hill Climber, 154

Hill Climbing Automobile Manufacturing Company, 154

Hills, Herbert H., 173, 175

Hilton, Hughes & Company, 56
Hiscox, Gardner D., 156
Hitchcock, C.B., 52
Hobbs, Albert, 361
Hodson, A.J., 200
Hoffman, Paul, 205–206
Holland, James P., 210
Holley, George M., 154
Hollingsworth, Jesse, 3

Holtzer, Charles W., 41

Homer, 1

Hoosier tours, 381–382, 387

Hopkins, Claude, 274

Horse wagons, on tracks, 15

Horseless Age. The, 61, 65, 66

Horseless carriage, 1, 2

Horseless Age. The, 61, 65, 66

Horseless carriage, 1, 2

Hotel Ponchartrain, 333–334, 337

Hough, Charles Merrill, 256–257

House, Henry A., 22

House, Joseph, 22

Howard, Charles, 177, 213

Howell, Israel G., 214

Howells, William Dean, 26

Hubbard, Elbert, 380

Hudson, J.L., 346, 403

Hudson Mohawk Railway, 15

Hudson Motor Car Company, 347, 387, 397, 408–409, 443, 454

Hudson, parade of new models, photo section
Hudson, the, 451
Huff, Edward S. “Spider,” 113
   at Grosse Point race, 101
   position at Ford, 230–231
   in world land speed run, 144–145
Huffman, Earl, 424, 430
Huff, the, 424
Huffman, W.L., 424, 430
Hunt, Ormond E., 448
Hupmobile, the, 336, 443
Hupp, Bobby, 335–336
Hupp Motor Car Company, 335, 451
Hupp, the, 451
Hupp-Yeats, the, 336
Huygens, Christian, 26
Hyatt Ball Bearing, 408
Hyatt Roller Bearing Company, 111, 154–155
Hybrid gas-electric car, 367
Hydraulic jack, portable, 19
Hydromotor, the, 368

“Ideal Tour, The,” 375
Illinois
   automobile industry in, 354–355
   seeking substitute for horses, 30
Imp, the, 309, photo section
Imperial Wheel Company, 176, 177
Import duties, 357, 426
Indiana, automobile industry in, 352–354
Indiana Railway Company, 288
Indianapolis Motor Speedway, 298–300
Industrial Revolution, 2
Indy 500
   bans women drivers, 373
   inaugural race, 300–303
Inflation, postwar, 429–430
Ingersoll, E.P., 61, 66
   in Duryea brothers’ quarrel, 78
   rails against Electric Vehicle
   Company, 89
   regarding auto as means of
   oppression, 189
   regarding Pope and Whitney, 81
   regarding Selden patent valida-
   tion, 257
   regarding swindlers, 162
Instruction
   learning to drive, 203–204
   manuals, 203–204
Insull, Samuel, 80
Integration of the industry, 178
Interchangeability of parts, 247
Internal combustion engines
   arrival of, 25–36
   conception of, 26
   early, 26
   three cylinder, 29
International Federation of Students, 383
International Harvester, 217–218
International Motors, 239, 240
International Workers of the World, 325
Inter-State, 353, 415
Itala, the, 256
Jackson Automobile company, 429
Jackson, Andrew “Old Hickory,” 372
Jackson, H. Nelson, 127–129, 132, 194
Jackson, Roscoe B., 346–347
Jackson, “Shoeless Joe,” 345
Jackson, the, 295, 369
James, William T., 19
Janney, Reynold, 98
Janney, Russell, 98
Jeep, the, 451
Jefferson, Thomas, 8
Jeffery Quad, the, 387
Jeffery, Charles, 138, 258, 360, 396, 399
    joins with Storrow and Nash, 401
    regarding Ford’s Selden patent victory, 274
    survives sinking of Lusitania, 387–388
Jeffery Company, Thomas B., 401
Jeffery, the, 258, 360
Jeffery, Thomas, 47, 360, 396, 399, 451
    attends Selden patent trial, 257
    death of, 258
    erects road signs, 207
    donates to Ford defense fund, 182
    meeting after Panic of 1907, 226
    after Panic of 1907, 228
    place in industry in 1906, 183
    refuses to join associations, 179
    rejects A.L.A.M., 138–139
Jeffries, Jim, 366
Jewett, Harry, 388, 451
John Deere Plow Company, 302
John’s Night Owl Lunch Cart, 334, 337
Johnson, Claude, 426
Johnson, Jack, 297, 366
Johnson, James, 18
Johnson, Nicholas, 18
Johnson, Rastus, 209
Joint Congressional Committee on the Horseless Carriage, 29
Jones, Forrest R., 204
Jones, Joseph W., 154
Jordan Playboy, 424
Jordan, Edward S. “Ned,” 360, 424, 434
Joy, Henry B., 334
    acquisition of Packard company, 130–131
    condemns antiwar activists, 388
    forms Manufacturers’ Mutual Association, 136
    hears Frederic Taylor, 319
    hires Budlong away from A.L.A.M., 258
    joins hunt for Pancho Villa, 399
    joins Lincoln Highway Association, 380, 381
    meeting with Whitney, 136–137
    non-stop 1,000 mile run, 294
    pledges to industry fund for road building, 380
    promotes Lincoln Highway Association, 387
    regarding Lincoln Highway, 385
    regarding quality, 180n
    regarding route of national highway, 382, 383
    treks west, 386–387
    urges A.L.A.M. to sue, 143
Judkin, 444
Kahn, Albert, 131, 318, 347, 358, 411
Kane, Thomas, 53
Kansas City, the, 155
Kansas City Wonder, the, 155
Kappe, William, 63
Kaufman, Louis Graveret, 314–315, 389, 391, 408
Keene, Foxhall, 191–192, 286
Keene Steamobile, 98
Keeton, 385
Keller, E.E., 43
Kellner et Fils, 396
Kelly, William, 340
Kelsey, Cadwallader Washburn, 373, 384
Kent’s Pacemaker, 164
Keworthy, Cloyd Young, 425–426
Keworthy, the, 430
Kerosene, 28
Kettering, Charles Franklin “Boss Ket,” 365, 447–448
Kiblinger, the, 219
Kidder, Wellington P., 151–152
Kimball, C.F., 57
Kimball & Company, C.P., 367
King, Charles B., 335, 453
association with Maxwell, 122
in Chicago Times-Herald race, 57, 59, 60
death of, 455
engineer for Olds Motor Works, 102
first gasoline car built in Detroit, 68–71
named to Automotive Hall of Fame, 454
in New York Cosmopolitan race, 66
Northern Manufacturing Company, 111–112
recreates drive of first Detroit auto, 454
regarding Ford’s Selden patent victory, 274
retirement, 450
King, the, 335
Kipling, Rudyard, 108, 200, 205–206
Kissel, George, 359, 443, 451
Kissel Kar, the, 359
Kissel, Will, 359, 443, 451
Kitto, W.H., 162
Kittredge, Lewis H., 350
Klann, William, 319
Klingensmith, Frank, 328, 393, 402, 404, 435–436, 450
Klink, John F., 150
Knickerbocker, Cholly, 77
Knickerbocker, the, 358
Knickerbocker Trust Company, 220, 237
Knight, Charles Yale, 263, 276
Knight, Frank, 153
Knight, George, 153
Knox Automobile Company, 136–137, 225, 301
Knox, C.B., 84
Knox, Harry, 99
Knudsen, William “Big Bill,” 329, 411, 417–418, 436, 448–449,
photo section
death of, 454
receives award from industry, 454
sets up branch assembly plants, 321–322
streamlines Ford production, 319
suggests new car model, 421
Kohlsaat, Herman H., 49–54, 59
Krarup, Marius C., 131, 215, photo section
Kuser, 20, 301
Labor strikes, 429
Lafayette Motor Company, 427, 430
Lafayette, the, 427, 442
LaFollette, Robert M., 79
Lallement patents, 46
Lambert, 362, 409n, 415
Lambert, John William, 40, 112, 354
Lambkin, Frank, 108–109
Lampton, William, 191
Lancaster-Philadelphia Pike, 14
Lancaster Turnpike Company, 6
Lane brothers, 366
Lang, Charles E.J., 351
Lane Motor Vehicle Company, 169
Index

Langen, Eugen, 27
Lansing Business Men’s Association, 153
Larchmont, the, 358
Larzalere, Harold W., 131
Latrobe, Benjamin Henry, 5
Lauer, John, 68–69
Laurel, 409n
Lawrence, T.E., 419
Laws
child labor, 384
eyearly, 192–195
exclusion from city parks, 192
registration, 371
safety, 384
taxation, 371
workman’s compensation, 384
Lawson, Harry John, 68
Lawsuits
Buick, 258
Charles Duryea vs. Middleby, 225
Dodge vs. Ford, 402–405, 421
Flanders and Studebaker, 342
Ford vs. Chicago Tribune, 402, 446
Whitney patent, 110
Le Matin, 287, 289
Leach Power Plus Six, 425
Leach, 430
Leach, John, 153
Leach, Martin Andrew, 425
Lead Cab Trust, 81
League of American Wheelmen, 47
League of Nations, 422n, 429
Lederer, Catherine, see Durant, Catherine
Lee, Higginson & Company, 269, 389
Lee, John R., 323, 326, 435
Lehr, Harry Symes, 93
Leicher, Al, 243–244
Leland and Faulconer machine shop, 111, 117–118
Leland, Gertrude, 223
Leland, Henry Martyn, 317, photo section
approached by GM, 247–249
death of, 454
at Detroit auto show of 1901, 118
develops V-8 engine, 313
embarks on self-starter, 364–365
Employers Association of Detroit, 384
forming Cadillac Automobile Company, 118–120
forming Cadillac Motor Car Company, 120
forms Lincoln Motor Company, 413
Lincoln in receivership, 444
new model Lincoln fails, 430–431
Panic of 1907, 223
regarding Liberty contract, 417
resigns from Cadillac, 412
resigns from Lincoln, 445
sells out to Ford, 444
sues Ford, 445
supplying engines to Olds, 117–118
tours European industries, 268
Leland, Wilfred, 223, 390
approached by GM, 247–249
at Detroit auto show of 1901, 118
develops V-8 engine, 313
forming Cadillac Automobile Company, 118–120
forming Cadillac Motor Car Company, 120
forms Lincoln Motor Company, 413
Leland, Wilfred (continued)

Lincoln in receivership, 444
new model Lincoln fails, 430–431
proposes airplane engine factory, 410
regarding Liberty contract, 417
resigns from Cadillac, 412
resigns from Lincoln, 445
sells out to Ford, 444
sues Ford, 445
supplying engines to Olds, 117–118
urges bankers to support GM, 268

Lenoir engine, 27
Lenoir, Jean-Joseph Etienne, 27, 39n
Lenox, the, 226n
Leonardo da Vinci, 1
Leroy, Stuyvesant, 93
Lewis, George W., 54, 60, 64
Lewis, John D. Perry, 41
Lewis Motor Vehicle Company, 64
Lewis, Sinclair, 426
Lewis VI, the, 360
Lewis, William Mitchell, 359
Lewis, William Turnor, 359
Lexington Motor Company, 417
Leyendecker, J.C., 356
Liberty bonds, 422, 429
Liberty engine, 412, 413, 417, photo section
Library of Congress, 163
License plate, 371
Licensing
Selden patent, 135–137
driver, 371–372
Lincoln Highway Association, 381–383, 385–386, 387, 413
Lincoln Memorial, 380
Lincoln Motor Company, 413, 430, 444–445
Lincoln, the, 445
Lion, the, 369

Little Aristocrat, the, 298
Little, the, 304, 305
Little, William H., 304
Lochner, Louis, 393
Locomobile Company of America, 84, 137, 216, 285, 291, 358, 396, 410, 426, 439, 451
development of gas model, 109–110, 125
steamer, 108–109, photo section
Long Island Highway Protective Society, 191–192
Long Island Motor Parkway, 287, 291
Long, George Alexander, 38
Loomis, Gilbert, 155–156
Los Angeles, 335
Los Angeles Speedway, 449
Louisiana, seeking substitute for horses, 30
Lozier, 295, 407–408, 415
Lozier, Harry A., 216, 358–359
Lozier, the, 301, 358
L.P.C. Motor Company, 360
Luck Utility, 385
Lusitania, sinking of, 387–388
Luverne Automobile Company, 244, 360, 361, 409n

Macauley, Alvan, 325, 380–381, 412, 451, photo section
Mack trucks, 357
MacKenzie, 63
Macy’s, 56, 60, 64
Madison, 409n
Madison, Charles, 325
Madsen, L.P., 164
Magnolia, the, 86
Mahoning Motor Car Company, 165
Main Line Philadelphia, 384
Maine Alpaca Company, 151
Malcomson, Alexander Young
establishes Ford & Malcomson Company, 139
establishes Ford Motor Company, 141
Panic of 1907, 224
partnership with Ford, 115
sells out to Ford, 184–186
starts Aerocar Company, 185
Manufacturers’ Mutual Association, 136–137
Maps, 207, 375, 385
Marathon, 385
Marcus, Siegfried, 39n
Marion, 381
Markham, Edwin F., 52
Marlboro, the, 153
Marlborough, Duchess of, 291
Marmon, 413, 434
Marmon, Howard, 302, 353
Marmon, the, 353, 381
Marne, 419
Marquis, Samuel S., 326–327, 394
Marr, Walter L., 178, 241
association with Buick, 121
contracts tuberculosis, 246
spying by lantern light, 283–284
Marriott, Fred, 169, 283
Mars Iron Works, 8, 9
Marshall, George M., 31
Marshall, John, 14
Martin, Karl, 425
Martin, P.E. “Pete,” 319, 324, 328
Martineau, Harriet, 14
Maryland, steam rights given to Evans, 3, 30
Marysville model industrial community, 435
Mason, Arthur C., 303–304, 392
Mass production, 317–321
Masters, Thomas, 4
Matheson Automobile Company, 226–227n, 369
Maxim Company, 227n
Maxim fire engines, 430
Maxim, Hiram Percy, 48, 57, 61, 69, 126
assessing Selden’s patent, 82
death of, 227n
head of Pope vehicle department, 74–75
leaves Electric Vehicle Company, 226
regarding Detroit as motor mecca, 334
regarding Selden patent engine, 181
testifies in lawsuit, 182
Maxwell-Briscoe Motor Company, 122, 237, 251, 263
displays primitive car, 182
joins A.L.A.M. after patent decision, 258
joins A.M.C.M.A., 179
after Panic of 1907, 233
place in industry in 1906, 183
Maxwell-Chalmers, 437
Maxwell, Jonathan D., 55, 440
association with Briscoe, 122–123
association with King, 122
at Grosse Point race, 101
Northern Manufacturing Company, 111–112
after Panic of 1907, 233
reaction to U.S. Motor Company, 263
regarding U.S. Motor Company receivership, 307
testifies in lawsuit, 182
Maxwell Motor Company, 307, 373, 409, 440–441
Maxwell, the, 227–228, 344, 374, 437, 440
Maybury, William C., 86–87
Mayer, Simon, 150
McAdam, John Loudon, 14
McArthur, 63
McClernan, George B., 256
McClench, Frank, 18
McClench, George, 18
McCormick, Robert R., 402
McDonald, Stewart, 423, 423n, 451
McFarlan, the, 354, 381
McHarg, V.A., 156
McIntyre Company, W.H., 309
McKay steamer, 98, 110
McKinley, William, 98, 105, 170
McLaren, Sam, 315
McMillan family, 131
McMillan, James, 87
McMurtry, Alden, 130
McPherson, Frank, 56, 58
Mechanical Branch of A.L.A.M., 180n
Melanowski, Leo, 86, 224
Memorial Sloan-Kettering, 456
Mercedes, 284, 386
Mercedes, the, 357
Mercer, 301, 358, 426, 439, 451
Mercer, the, 304, 426
Merrill, Frank, 153
Merritt, Wesley, 57
Meserve, William Forest, 150
Meteor, 430
Meteor, the, 425
Metropolitan Street Railway Company, 79–80
Metz, 409n
Metz, Charles Herman, 99, 384
Metz, the, 369
Metzger Motor Car Company, 343, 344
Metzger, William E., 96, 450
  Detroit auto show of 1901, 118
  E-M-F, 338–343
  at Grosse Point race, 101
  at New York Automobile Show of 1903, 120
  sales manager for Cadillac, 119–120
  Meyer, Eugene, Jr., 263, 307
  Miami Beach, 387
  Michigan Motor Casing, 177
  Michigan National Guard (M.N.G.), 402
  Michigan Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections, 422n
  Michigan, 335
  Michigan, the, 385
  Middleby, Charles M., 225
  Middleby, the, 225
  Middle-class market, 183, 189–190, 216–217
  Midland, 385
  Milburn Wagon Company, 367
  Miles, Nelson A., 66, 163
  Miller, Charles, 286
  Mills, Isaac, Jr., 30
  Milwaukee Automobile, 169
  Milwaukee steamer, 110
  Mitchell, Henry, 359–360
  Mitchell, the, 349
  Mobile Company of America, 84
  Mobile, the, 84, 96, 108–109
  Model 10 Buick, 234, 245, 303, 311
  Model 20 Oldsmobile, 245
  Model A Ford, named, 141
  Model F Buick, 248
  Model G Buick, 248
  Model K Ford, 184, 187
  Model L Packard, 293–294
  Model L Thomas, 290
  Model N Ford, 184, 187
  Model R Ford, 187
  Model S Ford, 187, 234
  Model T Ford, 229–233, 320–324
    accessories for, 331
    ease of maintenance, 329–330
    factory, photo section
    hand-cranking substitutes for, 366
Model T Ford (continued)
jokes about, 331–332
in New York to Seattle race, 256, 259
owner’s manual, 330
scale model, 310
Moffet, Cleveland, 168
Moline Plow, 431
Monarch, the, 336
Monitor, 409n
Monopolies, 81
Montgomery Ward & Company, 384
Montlezun, Baron de, 14
Montrose Metal Casket company, 222
Mooers, Louis P., 251
Moon, Joseph, 423
Moon Motor Company, 288, 423
Mora, Sam H., 155
Mora, the, 155
Moreland, Watt, 86
Morey, Samuel, 26
Morgan, J. Pierpont, 121, 122, 233,
236, 237, 260, 263, 306–308, 433
Morgan, Louisa Pierpont, 237
Moross, Ernie, 297, 301
Morris, Henry G., 52, 53, 55, 65, 67
Morrison, William, 41, 64
Morse, F.A., 30
Morse, John F., 32, 34, 35
Mort, the, 425
Mortgages, to purchase cars, 215
Morton, W.D., 425
Motor buggies, 218–219
Motor Maintenance Company, 264
Motorbloc, 288
Motorcycle, steam, 48
Motorette, the, 356, 384
Motoring
benefits of, 197–198
clothing for, 200–202
cross-country, 374
dangers of, 197–198
four preparing for the countryside, 205
Mott, Charles Stewart, 177–178
association with GM, 244, 244n
regarding Durant, 234
Mott, T. Bentley, 163
Mueller, Hieronymus, 64
Mueller, Oscar B., 52, 53, 56, 57,
59, 60, 64
Muir, John S., 165
Mulford, Ralph, 295, 358–359
Munsey, Frank, 216
Murdock, William, 27
Murphy, Edward W., 246
Murphy, William H., 87
buys out Detroit Automobile
Company, 100
forming Cadillac Automobile
Company, 119–120
forming Cadillac Motor Car
Company, 120
ouster of Ford from Henry Ford
Company, 113
sale of Henry Ford Company,
117–118
sells Cadillac stock, 249
Murphy, Winfred, 250, 391
“My Mobile Gal,” 109
Myers, Katherine, 352
Myers, Willie Westinghouse Edison,
156
999, the, 115–117
Narragansett Park race, 67, 68
Nash, Charles W., 176, 390, 391,
407, 427, 442, 451, photo section
death of, 455
departs presidency of GM,
399–400
early life, 311
GM presidency, 310–313
Nash, Charles W. (continued)  
joins with Storrow and Jeffery, 401  
named to Automotive Hall of Fame, 454  
regarding Billy Durant, 311  
regarding postwar inflation, 430  
Nash Motors, 401, 427  
Nash, the, 451  
National Association of Automobile Manufacturers, 97  
National Automobile & Electric Company, 98  
National Automobile Chamber of Commerce, 273n, 416, 430  
National Cash Register Company, 344, 365  
National City Bank of New York, 260  
National Electric, 350  
National Good Roads Convention, 377  
National Guard, 401–402  
National League, 345  
National League for Good Roads, 48  
National Master Horseshoers’ Association, 91  
National Motor Vehicle Association, 302  
National Motor Vehicle Company, 298, 387  
National Paving Brick Manufacturers’ Association, 299  
National, the, 302, 353  
Neubauer, Albert C., 144  
Neubauer, Henry, 144  
Neustadt, J.H., 156  
Nevins, Allan, 256  
New Departure Ball Bearing, 408  
New Home Sewing Machine Company, 110  
New Power Company, 165  

New York  
automobile industry in, 354, 355–356  
Central Park automobilists’ protest, 192  
Cosmopolitan Race, 65–66  
electric car license requirements, 94  
electric cars in, 125  
first taxi service, 77  
Y.M.C.A., automobile school, 210  
New York Automobile Show  
1900, 96–100, photo section  
1903, 120  
1911, 272–273, 376  
1915, 315  
1920, 439  
1924, 452  
New York Central’s No. 999, 43  
New York Penal Code, 192  
New York Times, The, 287  
Newberry, Truman S., 130, 131, 358, 422n, 446  
Newby, Arthur, 298, 302  
Newcomen atmospheric steam engine, 2  
Newton, Isaac, 1–2  
Nieuport 28, 417  
Nitrous oxide, 28  
Nordyke & Marmon Company, 353  
Northern, the, 339  
Northway Motors Corporation, 424, 430  
Northway, Ralph E., 424, 430  
Northway, the, 430  
Norwalk, the, 349  
Noyes, Harry K., 177, 267  
Noyes, Walter, 272
Oakland Motor Car Company, 245–246, 407, 442
Oakman Motor Vehicle Company, 64
Ochs, Adolph, S., 287–288
O’Connor, Jeremiah, 56, 58
Ocotauto, the, 368
Odelot, the, 155
Oelrichs, Mrs. Herman, 93, 94
Ohio Automobile Company, 130, 131
Ohio, automobile industry in, 350–352
OhiO, the, 369
Ohio Trailer Company, 425
Okey, Perry, Panic of 1907, 224
Old Pacific, transcontinental run, 131–133
Oldfield, Berna E. “Barney”
    death of, 454
    moves to Winton, 144
    at Grosse Point race, 116–117
    races the Blitzen Benz, 297
    racing in Florida, 282
    receives award from industry, 454
    returns to racing, 298
Olds, Emory, 275
Olds, Metta, 38, 455
Olds Motor Vehicle Company, 76, 87
Olds Motor Works, 88, 239–240, 241
    becomes part of GM, 245
    backers’ social circles, 183
    closes for race, 101
    destroyed by fire, 103
    engine suppliers for, 117–118
    new gasoline model, 102–103
    Ransom Olds leaves, 145–146
    stops royalties to ALAM, 255
    virtual automotive college, 111
Olds, Ransom Eli, photo section
    death of, 455
first gasoline car, 68
forms company with Smith, 87–88
forms Reo Motor Car Company, 146–147
in Glidden Tour, 374
joins A.L.A.M. after patent decision, 258
joins A.M.C.M.A., 179
leaves Olds Motor Works, 145–146
management-in-absentia, 274–275
meetings with Durant and Briscoe, 236–238
meets with Reeves and Briscoe, 262
meets with Willys, 275
named to Automotive Hall of Fame, 454
at New York to Buffalo run, 106–108
after Panic of 1907, 227
races on Florida beach, 281
start of Olds Motor Vehicle Company, 76
steam car, 38
switch to gasoline model, 102–103
testifies in lawsuit, 182
watches Louis Chevrolet race, 283
Oldsmobile, 102, 313, 407, 442
curved dash phased out, 183
curved dash runabout, 103
curved dash, 110–111
eyear, photo section
Model 20, 245
at New York to Buffalo run, 106–108
place in industry in 1906, 183
transcontinental run, 129, 133
Olin, Q.C., 31
Omar, the, 155
Orient Buckboard, 111
Ormond-Daytona, 281, 284
Ormond racer, 283
Orson, the, 370
Orukter Amphibolos steam dredge, 7–8
Oshkosh, the, 32–34
Oskar II, 393–394
Otis, 357
Otto & Langen engine, 27, 29
Otto engine, 272
Otto, Nicholas, 27
Overland Auto Company, 221
Overland, the, 275, 276, 313, 431
Overman Wheel Company, 109
Owen, Percy, 90, 106
Owen, Ralph R., 108, 350
Owen, Randolph, 350
Owen, Ray M., 108, 275
Owen, R.M., 217
Owosso, 390

Pabst, Fred, 65
Packard Gray Wolf, 245
Packard, James Ward
  at New York Automobile Show of 1900, 99
  complaints about Winton car, 86
  loses control of company, 129–131
  transcontinental run, 129–130, 131–133
Packard, the, 106, 385, 429
Packard Twin Six, 387
Page, Charles G., 40
Page, 387
Palace Touring, the, 183
Palestine, 419
Palmer, Herman, 359
Palmer-Singer, 385
Palms, Charles L., 339
Panama-Pacific International Exposition, 379, 385, 392
Pan-American Exposition, 105, 152
Panhard et Levassuer, 144
Panhard, 98
Panic of 1907, 220–221, 227–228
Parker, Ralzemond A., 142–143
  involvement in patent appeal, 261
  meeting after Panic of 1907, 226
  regarding judge hearing lawsuit, 256
Parsons, John, 150
Partridge, Bellamy, 207
Patent Office, U.S.
  clerk indicted, 265
  early confusion in, 4
  establishment of, 4
Patent Right Oppression Exposed; or, Knavery Detected, 9
Patents
  first steamboat, 11–12
  Selden’s road vehicle, 37–38
Paterson and Company, W.A., 175
Paterson, the, 335
Paterson, William A., 335
Pathfinder, 381, 415
Pathfinder, the, 353, 376
Patterson, John, 344
Patton, George S., Jr., 398–399
Payne Modern, 156
Peace Ship, 393–394, 398
Pedro, Dom, 30
Peerless Manufacturing Company, 136, 350, 442, 450
Peerless, the, 284, 294, 450
Pelletier, LeRoy, 154
  association with E-M-F, 339, 340, 342
  regarding the self-starter, 363, 364
Pelletier, LeRoy (continued)  
starts Tiffany Electric Car Company, 367
Pence, Harry E., 177
Penfield, Edward, 356
Pennington, Edward Joel  
in Chicago Times-Herald race,  
52–53, 55  
in England, 67  
returns to U.S., 161
People’s Automobile Company, 156
Perkins, George, W., 233–234 238–239
Perlman Rim, 408
Perot, Elliston, 6
Perry, Percival, 328, 411
Perry, Stuart, 26
Pershing, John J. “Black Jack,” 398, 410
Petard, René, 359
Peter Pan, the, 309
Philadelphia  
Centennial Exposition, 25–26  
city of superlatives, 4  
Evans’s steam dredge for, 7  
first highway in the U.S., 6  
first waterworks in the U.S., 4, 5  
hub of stagecoach enterprises, 14
Philbrick, Andrew J., 48
Philion, Achille, 43
Phillips, Ross, 150
Pickens, William H.  
24 hour race, 294, 295  
match race at Sheepshead Bay, 297  
manages Buick race team, 283, 284  
promotes Barney Oldfield, 298
Pickford, Mary, 425
Pierce & Crouch Machine Shop, 66
Pierce Company, George N., 136–137, 374
Pierce, George, 356
Pierce, Percy, 356, 374
Pierce-Arrow Motor Car Company,  
356, 396, 401, 412, 419, 451  
factory, photo section
Pikes Peak, 293
Pilot, 381
Pilot, the, 354
Pinkerton men, 291
Planche, Etienne, 304, 305
Playboy, the, 434
Plumer, Victor, 194
Pneumatic Carriage Company, 165
Pneumatic tire, 48
Political campaigning by car, 372–373
Pollution  
air, 65, 370  
from horses, 198–199
Ponchartrain, Hotel, 333–334, 337
Pontiac Buggy Company, 246, 427
Pope and Whitney  
beginning of, 80  
patent search, 81–82  
purchase of Riker Motor Vehicle Company, 81  
purchase of Selden patent license, 82
Pope, Albert Augustus, photo section  
approached by the Duryea brothers, 49  
at New York Automobile Show of 1900, 99–100  
bicycle manufacturing, 45–47  
company in receivership, 222–223  
death of, 223  
departure from Whitney group, 89  
empire liquidated, 397  
loans man to Edison, 167  
merger with Spalding, 81  
move to gas cars, 125–126
Pope, Edward W., 126
Pioneers, Engineers, and Scoundrels

R & V Knight, 430

Races, runs, and competitions

see also World land speed record

24 hour grinds, 294–296

at country fairs and on dirt tracks, 282

cheating, 286

*Chicago Times-Herald* automobile contest, 50–60

“Climb to the Clouds,” 293

deaths during, 286, 299

Durant’s Buick race team, 283–284

English “emancipation run,” 67

first 1,000 mile run, 84–85

first Ford race car, 100–102

first transcontinental runs, 127–133

first woman transcontinentalist, 373

Glidden Tours, 374–376

Great Steam Race, 30–36, 50

Grosse Point, 100–102, 293

history of, 281–300

Indianapolis Motor Speedway, 299–300

Indy 500, 300–303, 373

Narragansett Park, 67

New York Cosmopolitan, 65–66

New York to Chicago run, 205

New York to Paris via Siberia, 287

New York to Seattle, 256, 259

non-stop 1,000 mile runs, 294

Ormond-Daytona, 281–282, 284

Paris to Rouen, 50

purposes of, 282

reliability events, 374–376

Rhode Island State Fair Association, 67

spring up around country, 285

---

Pope-Hartford, 126, 301, 374, 397

Pope Manufacturing Company, 44, 46, 73–75, 138

in receivership, 222–223

Pope-Robinson, 126, 179

Pope-Toledo, 126

Pope-Tribune, 126, 156, 374

Pope-Waverley, 126

Porter, Finley Robertson, 358, 426

Porter, the, 426

Portland Cement Association, 383

Post, Daisy, 94

Post, Emily, 386

Post, Ned, 386

Prairie Motors, 30

Pratt, George, 443

Pratt-Whitney, 397

Pratt, William, 443

Precision machining, 247

Premier, the, 353, 381

Prescott Automobile Manufacturing Company, 110

Prescott steamer, 162

Prescott, Vivian, 373

Prest-O-Lite Company, 282

Prest-O-Lite Trophy race, 299

Preston, Veryl, 200

Princeton, the, 446n

*Principles of Scientific Management*, 319

Production

adapting to war, 417–418

boom after war, 422–428

Prohibition, 429

Protos, the, 288–290

Providences Engineering Works, 264

Pullman, 409n

Pumpkinvine Pike car, 112

Pyott, L.T., 30

Quartermaster Corps, 387, 418

Queen, the, 155
Races, runs, and competitions (continued)
  steam carriages and horse, 23–24
  stock chassis contest, 292
U.S. Motor Racing Association (U.S.M.R.A.), 294, 295
Vanderbilt Cup, 284, 291–293, 396
Rackham, Horace H., 141
Railroads
  domination in the U.S., 15–16
  war work, 413–414, 415
Rainey, Roy, 108
Rainier Company, 251
Rambler, 47, 138, 451
  after Panic of 1907, 228
  place in industry in 1906, 183
  renamed the Jeffrey, 258
Ramsey, Alice Huyley, 373
Rand McNally, 207
Randall, Charles V., 157
Randall, George N., 150
Randolph Company, 251
Randolph, Edith May, 79
Ranney, Elliott, 204
Rapid Company, 251, 407
Raskob, John Jacob, 389, 391, 414–415, 422, 433
  regarding Durant, 442
  regarding GM postwar boom, 427
Rationing, 415, 416, 422
Rauch & Lang, 367
Rauch, Jacob, 351
Raymond, W. Byrd, 194
RCH, the, 336
Read, Nathan, 11–13
Reading steamer, 98
Real, the, 309
Rebasz, W.M., Jr., 37
Recession of 1913, 383–385, 430
Red Devil, the, 117
Red scare, 429
Redding, William, 256
Reeves, Alfred, 307
  joins forces with Briscoe, 262
  leaves A.M.C.M.A. for A.L.A.M., 258
  tackles A.L.A.M.'s image, 271
  vows to take case to Supreme Court, 273
Reeves, Milton O., 368
Regal, 415
Regas, the, 155
Registration, 371
Reid, Charles, 56, 59
Reid Manufacturing, 149
Reliance Company, 251
Reliance Motor Company, 390, 407
Remington, Philo, 26, 151
Remy Electric, 408
Renault, the, 395
Reo Motor Car Company, 146–147, 275, 396
  joins A.L.A.M. after patent decision, 258
  joins A.M.C.M.A., 179
  after Panic of 1907, 227
  place in industry in 1906, 183
Repairs, 208–209
Republic Motor Company, 425
Rex, the, 155
Rhode Island, automobile festival, 92–94
Rhode Island State Fair Association, 67
Rice, Herbert H., 447
Rice, Isaac L., 77, 80
Rice, Richard Drury, 18–19
Richard, Eugene, 121
Richard, Françoise, 282
Richmond, 409n
Rickenbacker, Eddie, 354, 450
Rickenbacker, the, 450
Riker, Andrew Lawrence, 41, 67, 292, 396, 426
   develops gas model for Locomobile, 109–110
   designing the gas Locomobile, 112
   sells out to Pope and Whitney, 81
Riker Motor Vehicle Company, 81
Riker, the, 396
Ripper Motor Carriage Company, 162
Rishel, Bill, 382
Ritz, the, 309
Rivaz, Isaac de, 26
Riverside Machine Works, 55
Road building, 47–48
   across the Atlantic, 15
   early days of, 14–15
Road signs, 207–208
Roads
   early, condition of, 14, 44
   Lincoln Highway Association, 381–383, 387
   national highway proposed, 379–383
   pressure to build, 47–48
   quality of, 375–377
   state road building, 387
   towns compete for Lincoln Highway, 382–383
Roamer, the, 425
Roberts, Montague, 288, 290, 295
Robertson, George, 285, 286, 291
Robinson & Franklin Brothers Circus, 69
Robinson Motor Vehicle Company, 126
Robinson, John T., 126
Rockefeller, William D., 65, 99
Rodman, Samuel, 57
Roebbling family, 20, 301
Roebbling-Planche, 304
Roger, Emile
   in Chicago Times-Herald race, 56–57, 60
   in New York Cosmopolitan race, 66
   selling Benz cars in France, 40
Rolls-Royce, 396, 425, 426, 451
Romer, Albert J., 424, 430
Romney, George, 453
Ronalds, Reginald, 93
Roosevelt, Alice, 191n
Roosevelt, Franklin D., 288, 411
Roosevelt, Quentin, 417
Roosevelt, Theodore, 81, 163, 220, 274, 372
   attitude toward cars, 191, 191n
   look-alike, 295
Root, Elihu, 163
Root, Orlando J., 430
Roper, Sylvester Hayward, 23, 60n
Rosenberger, Ernest, 368
Rotary engine, 368
Royal Automobile Club, 247
Royal Mail, the, 315
Royal Motor Car and Manufacturing Company, 225
Royal Tourist, 225, 350
Rumsey, James, 4, 12
Rupert, Jacob, 65
Rural free delivery, 372
Russell, Lillian, 191
Rutenber Motor, 355
Ruxton, the, 451
Ryan, Allan A., 440
Ryan, Thomas Fortune, 79, 80, 89
Safety laws, 197, 384
Sager, Frederick, 155
Salom, Pedro G.
   in Chicago Times-Herald race, 52, 53, 55, 60
Salom, Pedro G. (continued)
in Narragansett race, 67
in New York Cosmopolitan race, 65
Sampson, Joseph Stacey, 5
Sampson, the, 264
Samson, the, 427
San Francisco earthquake, 213, photo section
Sangree, Allen, 220, 229
Satterlee, Herbert L., 237, 239
Saxon, the, 345
Sayers & Scovill Company, 351
Scarritt, Winthrop E., 145, 152, 214
Schacht, Gustav, 351
Schacht, William, 351
Schack, Pierce D., 352
Schmidt, Charles, 285, 293
Schomer, Frank, 32, 35
Schultz, Walter W., 150
Schuster, George, 288
Schwab, Charles M., 440
Schwimmer, Rosika, 393, 394
Schwinn, Ignatius, 47, 199
Scorchers, 51, photo section
Scott, Ashley, 153
Scott, Richard, 275
Scott, Semple, 153
Scripps-Booth, James, 336
Scripps-Booth, the, 309, 407, 447
Seaholm, Ernest, 442
Seaman, Body Corporation, 427
Searchmont Automobile Company, 136, 235
Sears, Roebuck, 218, 331, 384
Seedling miles, 383
Seeman, Fred, 329
Seiberling, Frank, 380, 381
Seidell, George, 354
Selden, George B., 28–29
application for patent, 37–38, 59
infringes own patent, 181
licenses patent to Pope & Whitney, 82
in patent car, photo section
regarding loss in patent appeal, 272
sons build patent car, 181–182
Selden Motor Vehicle Company, 181, 385
Selden patent
appeal heard, 272
enforcing, 90
Ford fights, 142–144, 158–159
lawsuit against Winton, 126–127
licensed to Pope and Whitney, 82
licensing negotiations, 135–137
trial and decision, 255–259
Seligman, J. & W., 269
Sellers, the, 349
Seneca, 409n
Sextoauto, the, 368
S.G.V., the, 357–358
Shaler, N.S., 47
Shanks, Charles
on Cleveland to New York run, 85
popularizes word “automobile,” 92
at Grosse Point race, 101
San Francisco run, 127
Sharp, James, 22
Shattuck, Albert R., 105
Shaver, Joseph, 69
Shawmut, the, 256, 259
Sheldon, Robert E., 156
Shelter, Reuben, 274–275
Sheridan, the, 447
Shiland, Harry, 392
Sibley, Hi, 399
Silent Northern, 112, 122
Simplex, 292, 301, 358, 396, 415, 426, 439, 451
Simplex, the, 356
Singer, Charles A., 357
Sintz, Clark, 40
Sintz engine, 55
Sizaire et Naudin, 288
Skelton, Owen, 432, 441
Slauson, George, 31
Sleeve-valve engine, 276
Sloan, Al, regarding Buick, 443
Sloan, Alfred P., Jr., 154–155, 178, 408, 427, 433
assists Billy Durant, 454
death of, 455–456
named to Automotive Hall of Fame, 454
regarding Durant, 427
regarding Hotel Ponchartrain, 334
regarding Leland, 247
reorganizes GM, 442, 447–449
Slogans, 251, 293, 303, 327, 349,
353, 354, 359, 360, 367, 369, 385,
397, 411, 425, 440, 443
Smith & Mabley, 138
Smith, Angus, 87
meeting regarding acquiring Cadillac, 248
meeting with Durant, 240
resigns from Olds, 249
Smith, C.J. “Jimmy,” 231
Smith Company, Morton W., 426
Smith, D.B., 164
Smith, Fred C., 111
Ford requests license, 142
forms Manufacturers’ Mutual Association, 136
meeting regarding acquiring Cadillac, 248
meeting with Durant, 240
meeting with Whitney, 136–137
Panic of 1907, 223
parting with Ransom Olds, 146
regarding A.L.A.M., 179, 180
regarding Detroit as motor mecca, 334
regarding Durant becoming VP of GM, 391–392
regarding Durant, 249–250
regarding licensing Ford, 158, 159
regarding patent lawsuit outcome, 257
resigns from Olds, 249
stops royalties to ALAM, 255
Smith, Frederic, 87
Smith, James, Jr., 441
Smith, John M., 31
Smith, Samuel Latta, 76, 87–88, 248
Smith, the, 180
Smith, Uriah, 200
Smith, William, 31, 240
Smoke bombs, photo section
Snodgrass, Rhey T., 215
Society for the Prevention of Vice, 424
Society of Automotive Engineers, 109, 397, 412
Sorensen, Charles, 187, 328, 436, 445
regarding mass production, 318, 319–320
regarding wage raise, 324
regarding Henry Ford, 259
works closely with Ford, 230
Spalding, Albert Goodwill, 81, 107
Spark, the, 31
Sparks Automobile Company, 162
Sparrow, Edward W., 76
Spaulding, Henry F., 155
Speed bumps, 194
Speed carnivals in Florida, 281–282
Speed, John Gilmore, 199
Speed limits, 193–195
Speed traps, 194–195, 371
Speed Wagon, the, 396
Speedometer, 154
Speedwell Motor Car Company,
156, 351–352
Spencer, Christopher Nimer, 22
Spindletop, 171
Spoerer, 385
Sprague, Frank S., 40
Spring motor, 63
Sprite, the, 309
St. John, Jack, 150
St. Louis Motor Carriage Company, 99
Stafford, the, 385
Stagecoach stops, 14
Standard Motor Vehicle Company, 156
Standard Oil Company, 213
Standard Sanitary Manufacturing, 121
Standardization, 317
Standardization test of Cadillacs, 247
Standards, ALAM Mechanical Branch, 180n
Stanley, Francis E., 77, 109, 110, 171, 194, 366
Stanley, Freelan O., 77, 109, 110, 171, 194, 366
relationship with brother, 83
Stanley Steamer, 77, 83–84
Stanley, Stick-Seat, photo section
Star Automobile Company, 152
Star, the, 446–447
Starter’s arm, 364
Starters
electric, 336
self-, 363–365
State Department, regarding information on foreign laws, 193
State highway departments, 387
Statue of Liberty, 25–26
Staver, 385
Steam Boiler’s Inspector’s Bureau, 94
Steam carriages
Blanchard’s, 17
continued success of, 29–30
Dudgeon’s, 19–21
early sales of, 22
Evans’s, 3–9
first in New York, 19
first repossession of, 22
and horse races, 23–24
Johnson brothers’, 18
later, 38–39
at New York Automobile Show of 1900, 98
official approval of, in Bridgeport, CT, 21
official disapproval of, in New York, 20, 21
Olds’s, photo section
pros and cons of, 169–170
in show business, 22–24
Stanley Steamer, 77, 83–84
wood burning, 18
Steam cars, demise of, 366
Steam dredge, Orukter Amphibolos, 7–8
Steam engines
Corliss, 26
high-pressure, 4–9
Newcomen’s atmospheric, 2
Olds’s, 38
from turnpike to rail, 11–16
Steam motorcycle, 48
Steam tractor, 2
Steam tricycle, 48
Steam wagon, 97
Steamboats, 4, 11–12, 17
Stearns Company, F.B., 350, 396
Stearns, Frank, 350
Stearns-Knight, 350
Stearns, the, 256
Steel tubing, seamless, 73
Steel, vanadium, 229–230
Steenstrup, Peter, 154, 247
Stein, Gertrude, 419
Steinbeck, John, 232, 330
Steinway, William, 44
Stephens Salient Six, the, 431
Sternbergh, Herbert M., 357
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stetson, Francis Lynde</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stevens</td>
<td>357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stevens Arms &amp; Tool Company, J.</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stevens-Duryea</td>
<td>112, 125, 169, 179, 216, 397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stevens, John</td>
<td>12, 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stevenson, Elliott G.</td>
<td>404-405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stevenson, William Yorke</td>
<td>177, 244, 419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stoddard, Charles</td>
<td>263–264, 352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stoddard, John</td>
<td>263–264, 352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stoddard-Dayton</td>
<td>301, 307, 352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stoddard-Dayton, the</td>
<td>263, 349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stoning</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storrow, James J.</td>
<td>310, 311, 399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strang, Lewis</td>
<td>283, 299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strauss, Albert</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strelow, Albert</td>
<td>141, 186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studebaker, Clem Jr.</td>
<td>44, 50, 341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studebaker Corporation</td>
<td>343, 354, 386, 389, 407, 409, 410, 423, 434, 441, 451, 454</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stromberg, Harry</td>
<td>302, 303, 353, 440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburbs</td>
<td>370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success, the</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suffragettes, see Women, emancipation of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sullivan, Mark</td>
<td>393</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sultan, the</td>
<td>357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summers, Leland L.</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday, Billy</td>
<td>394</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweet, Ernest</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylph, the</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taft, William E.</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taft, William Howard</td>
<td>372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxation</td>
<td>371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>first in New York</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of the Marne</td>
<td>395</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pope and Whitney</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rice</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woods Motor Vehicle Company</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor, Frederick “Speedy”</td>
<td>319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone, demonstration of</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telford, Thomas</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terry, Sarah</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas-Detroit, the</td>
<td>287, 345, 346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas, E.R. “Uncle Ed”</td>
<td>138, 190, 205, 285, 344, 346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York to Paris race</td>
<td>287–290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas Flyer</td>
<td>287–290, 295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas Motor Company, E.R.</td>
<td>290, 385</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomson, Anna</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three-cylinder engine</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Musketeers</td>
<td>432, 440, 441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Ps</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiemann, Daniel</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiffany &amp; Company</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiffany Electric Car Company</td>
<td>367, 396</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timken, Henry</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tin Lizzie, see Model T Ford</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Terms</td>
<td>Page Numbers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tincher, 164</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tires, 206–207, 216</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cord, 369</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pneumatic, 48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toklas, Alice B., 419</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom Thumb, 15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tomlinson, Eliza, 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tomlinson, Sarah, <em>see</em> Evans, Sarah</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torpedo Kid, 168</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourist, the, 86n</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tractobile, 156, 161</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tractors, steam, 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transmissions, Cutler-Hammer, 353</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation, early ideas for, 1–2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel bureau, 375</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treidler, Adolph, 356</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trevithick, Richard, 5, 15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tricycle, steam, 48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triumph, the, 364</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trollop, Frances, 14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trucks, use in war, 418</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truman, Harry, 385</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trumbull, Isaac, 387</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trumbull Motor Car Company, 387</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turpentine, 27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twain, Mark, 46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-stroke engines, Otto, 27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typewriter, introduction of, 26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Army, 372, 410</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>first motorized combat, 398</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quartermaster Corps, 387, 418</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. government</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>early car purchases, 163–164</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Aid Road Act, 387</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Printing Office, 163</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>payment policies, 415, 429</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rationing, 415, 416</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>war purchases, 397–399</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Long Distance, 138</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Motor Racing Association</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(U.S.M.R.A.), birth of, 294</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Navy, 411</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Post Office, 163–164, 372</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underwood Typewriter Company, 343, 409</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union, the, 112, 354</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Alloy Steel Laboratory, 230</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United International Motors Ltd., 265</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom Motor Company, 265</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Motors, 239</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Motors Corporation, 408, 414–415</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Shirt &amp; Collar Company, 149</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States Carriage Company, 352</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States Motor Company, 352</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>birth of, 262–265</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in receivership, 306–308</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flanders buys, 344</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States Steel, 233, 429</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Steel Company, 230</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used cars, 214–215</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valve-in-head engine, 121</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Van Tine, Frank, 357</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanadium steel, 229–230</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vandenbilt, Alfred G., 94, 282, 387</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanderbilt Cup, 284–285, 291–293, 396</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanderbilt, Gertrude, 94</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanderbilt, Reggie, 336</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>breaks Ford’s speed record, 282, 296</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>creates Long Island Motor Parkways Corporation, 287</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>races in Florida, 282</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>demon at the wheel, 95</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Vanderbilt, William K. “Willie K.,” Jr. (continued)
at New York Automobile Show of 1900, 99
racing in Europe, 105–106
refuses Grosse Point race, 101
retires, 293
Vanderbilt Cup, 284–285, 291–293, 296
Vandervoort, W.H., 430
Vandervort, Leon, 202
Vanell, Frank, 63
Veerac, 153
Vehicle Equipment Company, 152
Veil, motoring, photo section
Velie Motor Car Company, 272
Velie, Will, 302, 355
Velocipede, 46
Ver Linden, Edward, 442, 447
Verdun, 418
Victor, the, 110
Victory, the, 423
Villa, Poncho, 398–399, 401
Vincent, Jesse, 412, 413, 417
Volstead Act, 429
Vulcan, 385
Wagner, Richard, 25
Wahl, 385
Walburn, Thomas, 338
Waldon, Sidney, 216
Walker, John Brisben, 65–66
  acquiring rights to Stanley, 83–84
  at New York Automobile Show of 1900, 98
  retires, 122–123
  steam vs. gas, 169
  “war car,” 163
Walker, Orrin, 153
Wallace, James N., 269
Walshe, M.E., 166
Walter, William, 304
Walterscheid, 150
Waltham Manufacturing Company, 111, 138
Wanamaker, John, 144, 158, 393
Wandersee, John, 230
War
  boom after, 422–428
  hardships of, 407–420
  U.S. enters, 410
War Department, U.S., 51, 397, 413
War Industries Board (W.I.B.), 415–417
War production, 396–397, 408–420
  converting back to civilian production, 421, 429
  government payment policies, 415, 429
Warburton, Barclay, meeting with
  Whitney, 137
War, Hayden & Satterlee, 237, 241
War, Hetty, 9
Ware, Elijah, 22
Warren, Fiske, 41
Warrington, Curtis H., 39, 39n
Wasp, the, 302, 425, 430
Watrous Automobile Company, 165
Watt, James, 2, 4, 5, 27
Waverley Company, 227n
Waverley Electric, 222
Wayne Works, 150
Wayne, the, 339
Wayside inns, 14
Webb, Robert, 22
Webber, Ashley A., 84–85
Weed Sewing Machine Company, 46
Weiss, George, 86, 99
Welch Company, 251
Wells, Henry, 66
Werner, J. Friedrich, 359
Westchester Appliance Company, 264
Westcott, Burton, 351
Westcott Motor Car Company, 303, 351
Western Automobile Company, 153
Westinghouse, 397
Weston-Mott Company, 111, 177–178, 244
Wetmore, Edmund, 261
Wetmore, Gifford & Crisp, 261
Wheeler, E.O., 162
Wheeler, Frank H., 298
Wheeler, O.D., 162
Wheeler-Schebler Carburetor, 298
Whipple, Harlan, 374
White, Albert E.F., 119–120
White, D. McCall, 427, 442
White family, 351
White, Lee Strout, 330
White Motor Company, 366, 371, 396, 399,
place in industry in 1906, 183
White, Rollin, 366
White, Stanford, 84, 136
White steamer, 101, 106, 374
White, the, 288, 374
White, Walter, 366, 374
White, William Allen, 64, 370
White, Windsor, 366
Whiting, James H., 122, 173–174, 176
Whitman, L.L., 133
in a Franklin, photo section
in an Oldsmobile, photo section
Whitney, Flora Payne, 79
Whitney, George Eli, 77, 109–110
Whitney, Harry Payne, 94, 157n, 287
Whitney patent lawsuit, 110
Whitney, William Collins, 79, 80, 94
death of, 157n
Manufacturers’ Mutual Association, 136–137
Wick, Henry, 130, 152
Widener, Peter A.B., 79
Wilde, Oscar, 425
Wilkinson, John, 355
William Salomon & Company, 276
Williams, Harrison, 350
Williams, the, 155
Willis, Harold, death of, 454
Wills, Sainte Claire, the, 435, 451
Wills, Childe Harold, 142, 324, 450–451
cooperates in war production, 413
designs new production tools, 319
joins Ford, 114
leaves Ford, 435
position at Ford, 230
testifies in Dodge lawsuit, 403–404
updates Model T, 328
Willys Corporation, 350, 436, 451
Willys-Durant, 407
Willys, John North, 361, 408, 410
cuts employee work hours, 323
forms Willys Corporation, 431
growth of business, 275–277
ignorance about automobiles, 432
living the good life, 313
meeting with War Industries Board, 415–416
meets with Durant, 277
meets with Olds, 275
Overland Auto Company, 221
pledges to industry fund for road building, 380
reduces workers’ hours, 277
regarding improving business conditions, 443
regarding Walt Chrysler, 431
sacrifices Willys Corporation, 436
skill as salesman, 432
Willys-Knight, 276, 431
Willys-Overland, 276, 313, 389, 408, 416, 431, 434, 436
Wilson Carriage Company, C.R., 111
Wilson, Woodrow, 220, 372, 388, 393, 417, 422n, 429
Winterizing, 202
Winters, 368
Winton, Alexander, 47, 96, 350
approached by U.S. Motor Company, 264
Cleveland to New York run, 85
death of wife, 127
at Grosse Point races, 100–102, 116
hires Oldfield, 144
joins A.L.A.M., 137
moves to left-hand drive, 369
patent lawsuit, 126–127
races on Florida beach, 281
reaction to patent lawsuit outcome, 257
regarding dishonest practices, 362
regarding New York to Buffalo run, 106
regarding the self-starter, 364
rejects electrical starter, 365
San Francisco run, 127
Selden patent lawsuit, 89–90, 99
Winton Bicycle Company, 47
Winton Motor Car, 449, 450
Winton Motor Carriage Company, 75–76, 90, 334, 449
employee turnover, 86
in Gordon Bennett Cup, 284
largest factory complex in U.S., 126
after Panic of 1907, 227
Winton, the, 449
Wisconsin, Great Steam Race, 30–36, 50
Wisner, Charles H., 175
Wolfe, Maurice, 425
Wollering, Max, 338, 342
Women
emancipation of, 46, 363–364, 373, photo section
female automobilists, 373–374
Woodall, Charles J., 141, 186
Woods, Clinton E., 80, 192
Woods, Florence E., 203
Woods, J. Elmer, 48
Woods Mobilette, 309
Woods Motor Vehicle Company, 80, 98, 162, 367, 409n
Woolworth’s, 386
Workman’s compensation, 384
World land speed record
Burman takes, 297–298
Ford takes, 144–145, 296
Stanley Steamer, 169, 296
Vanderbilt breaks Ford’s record, 282, 296
World’s Columbian Exposition, 42–44, 48–49
Wreford, William, 70
Wright, Arthur, 57, photo section
Wright-Martin, 397, 426
Wright, Orville, 46, 352, 417
Wright, Wilbur, 46, 352
Wrigley, William, 443
Writner, William H., 21
Wurster, Frederick W., 209
Wyeth, N.C., 356

Y.M.C.A.
School of Trades, 244n
automobile school, 203, 210
Yale, the, 138
Young Mill-wright and Miller’s Guide, 4–5
Young Steam Engineer’s Guide, 8
Zachow, Otto, 368
Zeder, Fred, 432, 440, 441
Zimmerman, the, *photo section*
Zimmerschied, Karl W., 447, 448
Züst, 288, 289
About the Author

BEVERLY RAE KIMES has been writing about automobile history for more than four decades. Her first subject was Ransom Olds’ curved dash Oldsmobile, for Automobile Quarterly, the magazine she joined after earning her M.A. from Penn State University, which had followed a baccalaureate from the University of Illinois. Both degrees were in journalism, with accompanying minors in history and literature.

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