

A Century of Cars

Ypsilanti's Automotive History

BY DAVID NOVAK

Automobile companies, automotive part manufacturers, and automotive retail dealerships collectively defined much of Ypsilanti's economy during the twentieth century.

Michigan Crown Fender Company, 1914–16

If there is one building in Ypsilanti that is of utmost importance it is the Ypsilanti Automotive Heritage Museum (YAHM) on the corner of North River and East Cross streets. The oldest portion of the building dates to the late 1860s. Ford Motor Company, in the early years, relied on small “outside” companies to provide various parts and send them to Ford so he could assemble his automobiles and trucks. One of those providers, Michigan Crown Fender, was incorporated in 1914 and occupied a portion of what is now YAHM. The company produced fenders, hoods, running boards and other sheet metal products. The company provided similar products to other automobile and motor truck manufacturers. By 1916, Ford had begun stamping their own sheet metal products and Crown Fender moved out of the building to another facility on Lowell at North Huron and renamed the company United Stove Company.

Commerce Motor Car Company, 1911–26

In 1911, the Commerce Motor Car Company began operations at its plant near Parsons and South River Street. The name of the company is a bit misleading as the company built trucks. The Ypsilanti plant produced four bus chassis and several truck models. Early in 1927, Relay Motors of Wabash, Indiana, bought Commerce and removed all the equipment. By 1929, there were only sixteen Commerce vehicles registered countrywide.

Ace Automobiles, 1919–22

In 1919, Frank Earnest of Seattle, Washington, founded the Apex Motor Car Company

to manufacturer the Ace automobile. Realizing that the Detroit area was the place to be, Earnest found a secure piece of land in Ypsilanti on South River Street. Automobiles were assembled in a one-story wood and stucco building, with final assembly and inspection under a tent. Nearly all the 256 vehicles produced were sent to Seattle for Earnest's dealership. Ace automobile production ended with the 1922 model year, and the company was sold to the American Motor Truck Company of Newark, Ohio.

Saxon Motor Company, 1922

The Saxon Motor Company was founded in Detroit during 1913. The company did well, selling a car that cost less \$500 to compete with the Model T. In 1917, in an effort to expand, Saxon ordered a huge inventory of materials and started construction of a new factory in Detroit. With wartime material shortages, production of cars fell, and the company found itself short of cash. The new factory was sold to General Motors and Saxon Motor Company looked for a new home.

Local businessmen induced Saxon to move into the recently vacated Ace plant. Saxon officials said the choice of Ypsilanti was evidence of the natural assets Ypsilanti had as an industrial city. The move was confirmed on March 25, 1922, and production began on April 3. However, bad market conditions hindered efforts to raise capital. The company went bankrupt and production of the Saxon automobile ended in the fall of 1922.

Ford Motor Company, 1932–2008

During the 1920s, Henry Ford built hydro powered small factories in small southeastern Michigan towns. These were known as Ford's Village Industries. Ypsilanti's Village Industry was established in 1932 with 850 workers and was powered by a Huron River dam on the new Ford Lake. It specialized in manufacturing generators and starters, and it came to be known as the Generator Plant. During World War II, the plant built large generators and starters for airplanes, armored cars, and tanks. After World War II and the death of Henry Ford, the company slowly closed many of the Village Industries and transferred their manufacturing to the Ypsilanti plant. Ypsilanti's Ford plant manufactured many automotive parts and employed 4,089 hourly and 450 salaried workers. The plant closed in 2008 when Ford Motor Company started to outsource part manufacturing.

Motor State Products, 1930–70

In 1910, Alfred Langer arrived in New York City from Germany, and the next year, he opened Golde Patent Manufacturing Company to manufacture of convertible top frames. Cliff Dickey, retired Gene Butman sales manager, remembers conversations with Langer family members. They said:

Alfred went to Dearborn to visit Henry Ford. He saw Henry in the parking lot and told him about his convertible top frame. Henry invited him back to his office where the frame was discussed. Henry was intrigued enough to ask for twelve frames. After testing the frames, Mr. Ford agreed to purchase Langer's frames for Ford roadsters which were the convertibles of the time.

Golde Patent moved to Ypsilanti to be closer to the automobile industry. In 1930, they constructed a large manufacturing facility at South River and Parsons. Alfred Langer was president, and August "Gus" Keller was invited from Germany to be Vice-President of Engineering and Design. The management team continued to 1938 when the name was changed to Motor State Products.

"Motor State built tops for the largest percentage of the car industry," Ypsilanti's automotive historian Jack Miller once said. "Other companies built tops and paid a \$5 patent fee per top to Motor State. The Motor State convertible top became the standard for the industry."

Motor State employees went on to invent the hydraulic cylinder that made convertible tops automatic. They also designed and manufactured power window and power seat mechanisms.

Detroit Harvester took over Motor State in 1947. As a corporate division, the Motor State Products name continued. By 1970, most auto companies stopped manufacturing convertibles which resulted in the closing of the Ypsilanti factory.

Ypsilanti Industries, 1946–47



Paul Chapman Pontiac-Cadillac, 15 East Michigan, c. 1956

Joseph Sesi left his home in Mesopotamia and arrived in America in 1923. He came to Detroit where a handful of fellow countrymen had settled and where he began working as a grocery store delivery boy. In the early 1930s, Sesi opened a grocery store in Detroit's Boston Edison neighborhood. It was there that Joe met Henry Ford I, the Fisher Brothers, and other prominent Boston Edison Neighborhood residents. After World War II, Henry Ford I and Ford family members were so impressed with Sesi's work ethic and dedication that they offered him an opportunity to manufacture auto parts. Alan Chapel, husband of Mrs. Ford's niece, partnered with Sesi, and the two men founded Ypsilanti Industries in 1946. Chapel was president and Sesi was vice president, and the two used a vacated building at 20 East Michigan. The two had a contract from Ford to manufacture fifty percent of the roller bearings and synchronizer rings for manual transmissions that Ford needed to start post war auto manufacturing. Borg Warner had a contract for the other fifty percent, although when Borg Warner went on strike, Sesi and Chapel worked twenty-four hours a day to keep production going.

As the demand for cars increased, Ford Motor Company decided to separate the sale of Lincolns and Mercurys from Ford dealerships. On March 14, 1947, Sesi and Chapel opened one of the original twenty-seven Lincoln Mercury dealerships at 20 East Michigan Avenue. In 1965, Sesi Lincoln Mercury moved to Ypsilanti Township. The *Ypsilanti Press* then took over the building ending the sale of new cars at 20 East Michigan.

Tucker, 1948

Without a doubt, the most notable automobile with roots in Ypsilanti is the Tucker. Preston Tucker loved automobiles, and from a young age, he was infatuated with things that went fast. With Henry Ford, he put several race cars into Indianapolis 500 races. After World War II, the public was ready for new car designs, but the Big Three were

slow in transitioning to peacetime production. This opened the door for small automotive companies. Tucker had plans for a new automobile with unique features including a flat-six rear air cooled engine, disc brakes, four-wheel independent suspension, fuel injection, seat belts, and a padded dashboard. His featured trademark was a center turning headlight



Preston Tucker's home at 110 North Park Street and his Tucker 48

that turned with the steering wheel to light the way around corners. Many of these features showed up later on vehicles manufactured by the major automobile companies.

By 1948, Tucker had gathered his team and produced a prototype at a facility in Chicago. Only fifty-one cars were made before the company was forced to declare bankruptcy and cease operations in 1949. The bankruptcy was blamed on negative publicity initiated by news media, a Securities and Exchange Commission investigation, and a heavily publicized stock fraud case. Even though he was found to not be guilty of stock fraud, the damage was done. Preston lived with his in-laws at 110 North Park and did much of his early design work in a barn behind 110 North Park. The 1988 movie *Tucker: The Man and His Dream* is based on the drama surrounding the car's production.

Kaiser-Frazer, 1947–53

In 1947, Kaiser-Frazer Corporation moved into the old Willow Run plant. The corporation was a partnership between industrialist Henry J. Kaiser and automobile executive Joseph W. Frazer. Kaiser had no automotive marketing experience, but had held various positions at Packard, GM, Chrysler, Willys-Overland, and Graham-Paige. In 1946, Kaiser-Frazer displayed prototypes of two new cars in New York. Because of production costs and development time issues, the 1947 model year Kaiser and Frazer sedans shared their bodies and powertrains.

The market for Kaiser-Frazer products slowed in 1949 due to new designs from the Big Three. Kaiser pushed for more production, creating an oversupply of cars that took until mid-1950 to sell. Kaiser and Frazer had repeated disagreements on how aggressive production should be, until Frazer left the company in 1951. The Frazer nameplate was dropped after a short 10,000 unit production run in 1951. Frazer was replaced by Henry's son, Edgar F. Kaiser.

The '54 Frazer was the first postwar production car to offer a supercharger. A small economy car called the Henry J was introduced in 1950. The Darrin, the first fiberglass sports car in the United States, beat the Corvette to market in 1954. In 1953, Kaiser bought the ailing Willys-Overland company and merged the companies into the Kaiser-Willys Corporation. The decision was then made to exit the passenger car market at the end of the 1953 model year. Some 739,000 cars were produced at the Willow Run facility during the company's short stay.

General Motors acquired the Willow Run facility later in 1953 and built automatic transmissions at the plant until 2009 when the facility closed as part of GM's bankruptcy.

Ypsilanti Automotive Heritage Museum, 1995-present

The Ypsilanti Automotive Heritage Museum sits on the southeast corner of East Cross and North River. The automotive history of the building started in 1917 as a Dodge dealership, became a Willys-Overland dealership in 1927, and finally a Hudson deal-



Ypsilanti Ford Plant, c. 1970

ership owned by Alex Longnecker and Carl Miller in 1933, and Miller alone after 1945. Miller sold new Hudsons until 1958 when the production of the care ended after forty-nine years.

Miller Motors passed from Carl to son Jack who sold used Hudsons and other brands. Jack bought up Hudson parts from closed dealerships and became the source of Hudson parts for Hudson enthusiasts all over the world.

In 1995, Jack Miller had lunch with Peter Fletcher (owner of Ypsilanti Credit Bureau) and Skip Ungrodt (owner of Ideations, a gift shop wholesaler) at the Sidetrack Bar and Grill. The two purchased the Hudson dealership and 112 East Cross to form the Ypsilanti Automotive Heritage Museum. Jack Miller was hired as curator and served as board president of the nonprofit museum until he retired in 2015. In 1999, Skip and Peter united 112 East Cross with the Hudson dealership by funding the construction of a building between them at 106 East Cross.

The original Hudson dealership became the National Hudson Motor Car Museum in 2015. The Ypsilanti Automotive Heritage Museum features Kaiser-Frazer, Chevrolet Corvair, Tucker, and General Motors, all with Ypsilanti connections.

New Car Dealerships

During most of the twentieth century, when Washtenaw County residents were in the market for a new car, they went to Ypsilanti. All of the cars produced by Ford, General Motors, Chrysler, independent manufacturers, tractors, trucks, and many foreign manufacturers were sold in new car dealerships on Michigan Avenue between Huron Street and Prospect.

A Note on Sources

David had a life-long interest in Ypsilanti's automotive history. He used his memory, books, and Ypsilanti Automotive Heritage Museum's resources to write this article. All images are from the Ypsilanti Historical Society Archives.

About the Author

David Novak was a Ypsilanti Automotive Heritage Museum board member. He passed away in 2022 and Bill Nickels helped to complete this essay.