

AUTOS

The sleek new 1957 Pilgrim, made in New Albany, might have been on display now in auto showrooms across the country if fate had dealt more kindly with a local industry which tried its luck and failed in the early days of the automobile. Three different makes of cars were manufactured here in the years between 1910 and 1915, but each attempt ended unsuccessfully.

Charlestown Road in the early 1890s was a quiet, rural lane with only an occasional horse-drawn wagon or buggy to break the stillness. But one quiet day about 1890 a sound was heard along Charlestown Road, a sound that marked the beginning of the history of the automobile in New Albany.

Mayor Morris McDonald, driving to town in his buggy from his home on McDonald Lane, heard that noise and stopped in puzzlement. Coming up the road toward him was a vehicle that looked like a buggy but sounded like a steam engine. As the strange sight came nearer he saw young Earl Walker at the controls on New Albany's first automobile – an automobile he had built himself by mounting a small steam engine on a buckboard. The Mayor thought the contraption was interesting, but advised Walker that he couldn't drive it around New Albany unless he sent a man ahead with a flag to give warning to horse-drawn vehicles. Discouraged by this news, Walker put his steam car in storage, but later built another and was a familiar sight in New Albany of the 1890s with his home-made steam car. Using his knowledge gained by this experiment, Walker manufactured and sold nationally a device known as the Walker burner to be used in steam cars to provide the heat to make steam.

Although steam cars were popular for a few years, the gasoline engine soon took the field and in 1910 New Albany's first auto-manufacturing firm was formed – the American Automobile Manufacturing Company which set up shop in the old vacant woolen mills which stood on Vincennes Street on the present site of the New Albany Senior High School. The capital for this enterprise came mostly from Louisville and the firm started manufacturing a car called the Jonz, spelled J-O-N-Z, named for Chester, Carey and Ellsworth Jones, three brothers associated with the company.

The Jonz was hand-assembled with motor, chassis and wheels purchased from other manufacturers. The Kahler company, a New Albany wood-working and furniture plant, was commissioned to build the bodies. After two years the American Automobile Manufacturing Company found itself in financial trouble and the way was paved for New Albany's second auto manufacturing company to take the field. Fred Kahler of the Kahler Company purchased the bankrupt automobile company largely to protect the investment he had made in auto bodies. Kahler formed the Ohio Falls Motor Company and turned out an automobile called the Pilgrim. This venture came closer to success than any of the three attempts to make cars here, but even his company managed to turn out only about 20 completed Pilgrim cars. Discouraged by lack of sales, Kahler closed the plant, but in 1914 found a purchaser – the Crown Motor Company – which had been formed in Louisville to manufacture cars.

When the sale was made, the new company was optimistic with plans to employ 600 men and turn out a car called the Crown. The name of the company was soon changed to the Hercules Motor Car Company, but very few cars – perhaps only one – were manufactured. Soon this company too went the way of the others and the material on hand was auctioned off – eventually going to the Kentucky Wagon Works of Louisville which was planning to go into the manufacture of a car called the Dixie Flyer. So ended the history of

automobile manufacturing in New Albany – although one phase of the auto industry continued until 1926. During those years the Kahler Company, capitalizing on its early experience in auto body building, turned out hundreds of Ford Model T bodies until the advent of the Ford Model A closed the last chapter on New Albany's automotive history.

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