

FROM DURYEA TO GOVE: MAKING CARS IN THOROLD

On Saturday, August 7, 1897 the residents of St. Catharines and Thorold beheld a remarkable sight — a horseless carriage being driven through the streets. Very few people would have seen one before, for this was still early days in the evolution of the motor car. The event was reported only briefly in the *St. Catharines Standard* and the *Thorold Post*, and the former did not even get the maker's name right, writing Jurea instead of Duryea. But subsequent issues featured long articles (one in the *Post* complete with a picture of the vehicle chugging along Clairmont Street) about plans to establish a factory in Thorold. This promised to be the very first car factory in Canada and one of the earliest anywhere in North America.



The Duryea Motor Wagon in Thorold

The nineteenth century was a period of intense experimentation in automobile building. Three technologies — steam, electricity and gasoline — vied for supremacy, with the gasoline internal combustion engine eventually winning out. Development proceeded most rapidly in Europe, and by 1890 Germans Gottlieb Daimler and Karl Benz, working independently, had produced the first gas-powered vehicles. Meanwhile various backyard tinkers were at work in the United States, making their own (usually very short-lived) models.

Among the pioneers were the Illinois-born Duryea brothers, Charles and Frank. While they cannot claim to have built the first gas-powered car in America (it is uncertain who deserves credit for this), they were definitely the first to set up a company for the manufacture and sale of such vehicles. This was the Duryea Motor Wagon Company, founded in September 1895.

Early in 1892, when the brothers were in Springfield, Massachusetts, Charles drew up basic plans for a gas-powered car and engaged Frank to construct it. In September Charles returned to Peoria, Illinois, to attend to his other interest, making bicycles. This left Frank to carry on alone, and after a year's work he took the car for its first test drive. Charles would later claim that he had built the first Duryea, but it was Frank who did most of the construction and much of the design. This he made quite clear in his book *America's First Automobile*, published in 1942 in response to a proposal to erect a commemorative plaque to Charles on the State House in Boston.

In 1895 Frank brought out an improved model, and in November took part in a 54-mile race organized by the *Chicago Times-Herald*. There were six entries: three Benz cars from Germany, two electric vehicles and the Duryea. Conditions were appalling, with deep snow and icy temperatures. Only two cars finished — a Benz, and ahead of it the Duryea, which won despite having to stop twice for repairs. Fortunately a blacksmith and a tinsmith were conveniently located en route (though the latter had to be roused from bed). The winning time was over ten hours, including two hours for the pit stops.

In 1896 a newer Duryea won the Cosmopolitan Race in New York City and the inaugural London to Brighton Road Race in England, and it was this Duryea that came to Ontario in 1897. The objective was to find a Canadian factory site. Cars inherited the high tariffs imposed on carriages, which made exporting them to Canada uneconomical. A branch plant would solve this problem and also provide access to the lucrative British Empire market.

The company was granted permission to import a vehicle for three months, so long as it was not put to any commercial use. The brothers were evidently still co-operating at this stage (this ended the following year), for while the car was Frank's from Springfield, the point man was W.P. Williams of the Canda Manufacturing Company of Carteret, New Jersey, with which Charles had become involved.

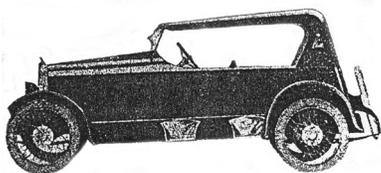
Events moved fast. An application was made for incorporation in Canada, with none other than Timothy Eaton as one of the directors, lists of proposed products were published (among them cars, omnibuses, delivery wagons, motor boats and stationary engines), and in September Frank Duryea himself came to Ontario.

What the prospects were elsewhere is unknown, but a Thorold factory was a distinct possibility. Williams spent a couple of weeks surveying sites in town, and spoke of locating in Welland Mills and the casket factory. The initial labour force would be 200, increasing to 400 if exports to Australia could be secured. Following a presentation to the Town Council, a two-man delegation (Board of Trade members William McCleary MP and William Macartney) was sent on a fact-finding trip to Springfield and Carteret.

Their report was mixed. Springfield had good people, but the workforce was small and cautious about expanding. Carteret had a large factory built to make railway cars which had been adapted for automobile manufacture; none had been made yet, but a motor boat and omnibus were essentially complete. In a sense, the know-how and experience were in Massachusetts with Frank, but the get-go and resources were in New Jersey with Charles.

In the end the Duryea brothers never came to Thorold. What may have killed the venture was their request for a \$20,000 bonus, to be spent on land, buildings, water power and machinery, in return for which the company would remain in Thorold for 20 years and require all employees to live in town. Such an incentive was legal under the Town of Thorold Improvement Act passed in April 1897, which permitted bonuses of up to \$30,000, subject to approval by two-thirds of the ratepayers. The Town Council Minutes and the *Thorold Post* are silent about what happened, but Council evidently did not pursue the matter. Since this was the same Council that refused to spend \$20 to replace the Police Chief's "shabby" uniform and declared itself too "poverty-stricken" to donate even a token amount to the Lieutenant-Governor's Indian Famine Relief Fund, this is perhaps not surprising.

In December 1897 the *Post* reported that W.P. Williams "is now in Toronto superintending the construction of a motor wagon for the T. Eaton Co.," but nothing seems to have come of that either.



The Gove Falcon

Almost a quarter-century later, in May 1921, another car was attracting attention on the streets of Thorold. This was the Falcon, a bright green, five-passenger vehicle made by the Gove Motor Car Company of Brighton, near Detroit. Again the objective was to locate a factory site, and this time the company founder and president H.E. Gove accompanied the car.

The Thorold *Semi-Weekly Post* was cautiously optimistic. Recalling the Duryea, it said that "the first and the last automobile manufactories to look at Canada have been offered to the town of Thorold." On the previous occasion "Thorold cautious ones gave it the once-over and passed it by," wanting "only tried-out and dead-sure things." This time "Let us not turn it down until its merits are thoroughly studied."

The Thorold Automobile Club was enthusiastic, as were the Board of Trade and a number of townspeople. This was important, for the factory's establishment depended on a sufficient number of local citizens buying company stock. Later editions of the paper contained big advertisements soliciting investors. "You live in one of the best little cities in Canada," said one, "and You can help make it one of the largest, and The Gove 'FALCON' is one of the best Light Sixes built, and Thorold will be the Canadian home of the 'Falcon,' which will help you make Thorold one of the leading towns in Canada, and You will make MONEY by having a few shares in Thorold's new enterprise."

Daniel Daverin, acting on behalf of local interests, reported favourably on site visits to Brighton, Michigan and Tilbury, Ontario, where Gove was building a second Canadian factory. (The intention was to build trucks in Tilbury, cars in Thorold and both in Brighton. A fourth factory was also under construction in Reno, Nevada.)

Offices were established on Front Street, Thorold and St. Paul Street, St. Catharines. Land was acquired just outside the Thorold Town boundary in Thorold Township — six acres across the NS&T tracks from the Exolon plant. A by-law providing for a fixed assessment for ten years was passed by the Township Council and easily approved by the ratepayers. (Between 1912 and 1914 they had approved similar by-laws for Exolon, Ontario Paper, Beaver Board and Pilkington Glass, all major employers, so they had every incentive to vote yes.)



Blade of miniature spade presented to Adam Martin

On August 25 a groundbreaking ceremony was held on the factory site. The honour of turning the first sod fell to local businessman Adam Martin Sr.,

who was presented with a miniature sterling silver spade, suitably engraved, to mark the event. He was followed by James Battle, who had played a key role in attracting the other industries to Thorold a decade earlier. Both gentlemen were familiar with the Duryea bid of 1897 — Battle was Treasurer of the Board of Trade at the time, and Martin was the Chief of Police with the shabby uniform.

Three weeks later the concrete foundation for the factory was laid. It measured 80 by 220 feet. But that was all that was ever built.

On September 30 the company announced the resignation of its President, but gave no reasons. Vice-President and General Manager A.A. Lehr put on a brave face, declaring that essentially nothing was changed. But the end was near, and in mid-November the Gove company withdrew from Thorold, and possibly folded completely the following year. The reasons are unknown, but

may be related in part at least to a major economic downturn that occurred in 1921.

Undeterred, the local shareholders in the Gove company resolved to carry on. They immediately announced the formation of Thorold Motors Ltd., with Martin as President and Lehr, described as “a pioneer in the automotive industry” with over twenty years experience, as Managing Director. In 1908 Lehr had made “the first worm-drive motor truck in the United States,” and the company was to manufacture his latest “masterpiece,” called the “Thorold.” Detailed specifications were promised for a future issue of the *Post*, but they never materialised and no record exists of what happened.

Principal Sources (apart from those cited in the text): Durnford and Baechler, *Cars of Canada*; *St. Catharines Standard*, August 1897; *Thorold Post* and *Semi-Weekly Post*, August-December 1897, May-November 1921; Town of Thorold *Minute Book*, 1893-1909.

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