

Grand Rapids History & Special Collections

Archives

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Finding Aid for the

Austin Automobile Company Collection

Collection # 143

October 2009 Version

Abstract

The Austin Automobile Company of Grand Rapids, Michigan was formed in 1901 by James E. Austin, and his son Walter S. Austin, who was the developer of the car, first produced in 1902. The last Austin was produced in 1918, unable to compete under the hand built process, with Ford's assembly line products.

This small collection of photographs, catalogs, diagrams, articles, and correspondence about the company, 1901-1918, was received from Mrs. Walter S. Austin, Jr. with supplementary materials from George Ferris, an author/researcher on the company. Also in the collection are catalogs and ledgers from the United Motor Products Co., concerning United Trucks from the 1920s-1950s.

The Austin had some unique features and was the subject of a patent infringement suit, which resulted in payment of some \$150,000 by Cadillac to the Austins. Known previous owners of Austins, of note, include William Randolph Hearst, opera star Emma Calve, and Charles B. Judd, general manager of Bissell Carpet Sweeper Company.

In total no more than 500 cars were made (see conflicting information on Wiki site). This collection includes documentation from an Illinois family that still own one continuously working Austin, and parts from a second family Austin of the same generation. Since each auto was hand built and unique, there may be variants and differences in parts from one car to the next even within the same model year.

Austin Automobile Company wiki

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Austin_Automobile_Company

American on the Move

http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthemove/collection/object_205.html

Photos of Walter S. Austin, and Austin owners Mr. & Mrs. Charles B. Judd

<http://www.grpl.org/perl/gallery/display.pl?decade=1900&display=1>

Collection #: 143

Accession #: 00.000 [1989, Museum Transfer] + See UP 1989.113

Donor: Mrs. Walter S. Austin [and George Ferris] ; Additional materials from the Somers family, 2005.053, Added 7/2005.

Span dates: 1902-1989

Original Processing: Scott R. DeYoung, April 1992; Revised, R. Mayne, 2000-2005

Size: 2.21 linear ft. (26.5 inches) Note: Copy negative box no counted.

Related Holdings

- For copy negatives cited on the back of some of the photo prints in Coll. 143, [143.1 to 143.12], see staff. House with copy negs. In separate box marked for Coll. 143.

Coll. 224, Box 34. Advertisement.

Coll. 246, Trade Catalogs. The “Highway King” catalog, also found in Coll. 143.

Coll. 216 Ephemera.

Coll. 054, “Automobiles” folder includes some images of Austin’s owned by former Grand Rapids residents.

Coll. 059, includes another copy of an image of an Austin, for which two prints are available in Coll. 054 above.

Coll. 194, Harrington.

- For unprocessed holdings related to Austin automobiles, see the Archivist. Most of the material on the Austin duplicates that found in Coll. 143, but additional ephemera related to motorized vehicles of various types, usually associated with Grand Rapids, are included here.

Box Summary

Box No.	Description of Contents	Box Description
<hr/>		
Box inventory 9/2009		
1	Documents & Images	slim
2	Oversized photos	gray lid/w 3.5x11.5x17.5
	Ledger Book	
3	Ledger Book	same
Copy Neg. box.	143.1-143.12 copy negs.	4x6 slim
Housed with Copy Negative boxes. Box added 7/12/2005		

History

In 1901 the Austin Auto Co. was formed by James E. Austin and his son Walter S. Austin. But, it was not until 1902 that their first car was on the road, their last in 1918. James E. Austin, a retired lumberman, and his son had long been inventors, inventing a shingle cutting machine, a chainless bicycle, and a hydraulic drive system for cars.

Walter developed the car, although the father took an active role in the company. Two distinguishing features of the cars, starting with the 1913 models, were that both the service and emergency brakes were controlled by foot pedals rather than a hand brake. Another feature was the two-speed axle that was designed for both city and high speed driving.

This was revolutionary for the time, and was the cause of a patent infringement suit. A representative from the Cadillac Motor Co. came and talked to Mr. Austin about the two-speed axle expressing interest in it. Shortly afterward Cadillac introduced a similar axle, Austin sued for patent infringement and was awarded \$500,000. This amount was lowered on appeal by Cadillac and was believed to actually be \$150,000. Mr. Austin was no stranger to the court room, he was constantly brought into court for violating the 15 mph speed law in Grand Rapids.

The cars did not stay around long due to the high cost of the cars and the restrictions on materials during World War I. The first cars in 1902 sold for \$2,000 and by 1914 were sold for \$6,000. "The Highway King", as the car was known, was designed for the elite society. Owners of Austins included; William Randolph Hearst, opera star Emma Calve, and Charles B. Judd, general manager of Bissell Carpet Sweeper Company. In total no more than 500 cars were made.

Scope and Content

The collection contains photographs, catalogs, diagrams, correspondence and articles about the Austin. Items of interest in the collection are:

Photographs show the interiors and exteriors, as well as engines and axles, of various Austin models. The trade catalog "The Highway King" is included, as are other pieces of advertising and trade literature for Austin models. Correspondence between George Ferris, an author/researcher, with Austin owners, as well as an article by Ferris for Antique Automobile, are included. A few additional articles are found in the collection, including one from the Peninsular Club Magazine.

Also included are a catalog and ledger books from the United Motor Products Co. concerning United Trucks.

Series Descriptions

Photos are currently filed with other paper-based materials in the collection, though the negatives have now been removed to sit with the archival copy negatives. (7/12/2005)

Series I. Documents

Included in this series are the research articles, correspondence, trade literature, and other paper based ephemera, including some trade literature graphics.

Series II. Images.

Included here are the photographic prints and one printed invitation, which graphically illustrate the collection.

Power Point presentation from the Somers family added here July 2005.

Content

<u>Box</u>	<u>Folder</u>	<u>Description</u>
		Series I. Documents
1	.5	Biographical & research data. Pending. 10/23/2008
1	1	Austin research notes and an articles. <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. 3/13/89. 2 typed pages, unidentified.2. "Only 500 built, the Austin Car of Grand Rapids was Famous", Peninsular Club Magazine, November 1958.3. "Meet Mister Jalopy" / by Bernard W. Crandell. Saturday Evening Post, July 27, 19??. RE Barney J. Pollard, collector.4. "Austin Artifacts donated." Old Cars Weekly, May 4, 1989. pg. 3. RE donation to the GR Public Museum.5. A Most Unique Machine : The Car That John Dolson Built and other Losers. Source unknown. Pgs. 166-169 only.6. "Two Cousins, Two Cars" Biographical information from the Somers family related to the historical purchase and ancestry of their original Austin, still owned by the family in 2005. (2 copies, received from the Somers, 2005.053 Added 7/12/2005 (2 copies)
1	2	Correspondence between George Ferris and Austin owners, 1971-1989.
1	3	Automobile manufacturers of Grand Rapids, n.d. Author unknown. Old photocopy.
1	6	Automobile Related Periodicals <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Antique Automobile. V, 42, no. 2, March/April, 1978. Has: "Austin : the 'Highway King', 1902-1918" / George Ferris. Pg. 6. Original issue.• Bulb Horn / Veteran Motor Car Club of America. V. 45, no.1, Jan.-Mar. 1984. Has: The Auld Austin / story and photos by J.P. Connors. Pg. 8. Color laser copies of issue cover and article pages, only.

Series I. Documents

- 1 7 Austin catalog and advertising, ca. 1914.
Folder has various loose and partial printed items, original and photocopy, plus "Austin, the Highway King" catalog.
- 1 8 Austin catalog and specifications, ca. 1916
Found here 7/11/2005 is a partial flyer in poor condition with evidence of mold. Has a photographic image of people seated in an Austin, superimposed over a landscape (original watercolor in black & white?). The Austin logo is top left on the cover, with a chunk of the publication missing. Includes specifications. 1 sheet folded.
- 1 9 Austin business stationery.
1. Statement form, with 192x date, and address at 226 Pearl St., N.W.
2.-3. Half sheet memo forms, one is pink and the other beige.
4. Envelope for the Highway King, probably for mailing the catalog. See Folder 7 above.
- 1 15 United Motor Products Co. United Trucks research file, n.d.
1. Letter head mailing envelop for the company in poor condition.
2. "Frank T. Hulswit. Photocopied page, including a brief bio and caricature illustrations. From Builders of Greater Grand Rapids in Biographical Caricature. N.d.
3. One page of handwritten notes (photocopy). Frank T. Hulswit ...
4. 1 sheet of yellow lined notebook paper, with a chronology written on it.
- 1 16 United Trucks / United Motors. Literature (4 items, 7/11/2005) ca. 1913.
1. The United line. 1987.087.8
2. United Model "31" 2-ton truck. With stamp for Miami United Truck Co., Miami, Fla."
3. United Trucks, 5 Ton. 1987.087.7.
4. Photocopied page from the Grand Rapids Furniture Record for "Decatur Truck. Grand Rapids Motor Truck Co., Grand Rapids, Mi."
• United Motors ledger book, 1920's.[This item not found here. See Box 3]
- 3 x United Motors Production Co., ledger book, 1920's
2 x Unidentified Ledger book, 1923-1929.

Series II. Images

1 4 VOID Negatives for photographs used in the George Ferris article in *Antique Automobile*, V. 42, No. 2, 1978.
NOTE: These copy negatives 143.1 to 143.12, are now housed in an unnumbered box marked for Coll. 143, with the archival copy negatives.

1 5 Austin images. (21 photos + 5 slides)
Note: Two items detected missing from Coll. 033, the Anderson Collection, were found here 7/11/2005, and returned to the Anderson Coll. This did not effect the total count for this folder.

Set of 7 b/w snapshots, taken in Illinois at the Somer home, April. 1977.

The Somers own a continuously working Austin originally purchased by the family, and parts of another of the same generation.

1. Joe (son) and Howard (father) Somers, owners of an original Austin, which was originally purchased by William Ryerson for his son as a wedding gift. Their relatives, the Talbarts, of the same community, also purchased another Austin of the same generation, which was later purchased by the younger Ryerson.
2. Howard Somers seated at the wheel of the Austin, with the rear of his Illinois home behind.
3. View of auto with out driver, near the rear of the Illinois house.
4. View of auto with barns and oil tank behind.
5. Near view of auto with barns and oil tank behind.
6. Another view, with the various out buildings positioned behind and left of the auto.
7. View toward the front & headlights of the auto, with a truck center right, a piece of farm equipment behind and a fence in the background.

3 slides also of the April 1977 visit to the Somer farm.

S1. #18. Color. Auto with barn & silo behind.

S2. #19. Color. View similar to Nos. 4-5 above.

S3. #20. Color. Similar to 2 above, near back of house, but without the driver.

Series II. Images

1 5

Austin images. (21 photos + 5 slides) continued ...

8. Said to be Mrs. Austin seated at the wheel of a Model 50 Austin, 1910-1911. Believed to have been taken in front of a church at the corner of Sheldon and Oakes, near the Austin home at 117 Sheldon. Copy photo.

9. Verso note: #4 Barney Pollard in 1908 model XC Austin on 1953 Glidden Tour. This was one of his favorite cars out of his collection of 1000+. It is now in the Manny Souze Collection in Massachusetts. Image shows Pollard seated at the wheel with a woman beside him, other autos in the background. "10x72" auto license plate on front of car.

10. Unidentified man with a mustache and glasses, seated at the wheel of a auto, inside a garage, with other autos in the background. 8x10 b/w copy photo.

11. Man standing beside an auto in a garage with other autos behind. The setting and auto may be the same as in the 8x10 above. But this is a different man standing with the auto, in this ca. 5x8 print.

12.-13. Near view of the axle(?), the undercarriage of the auto and a tire. (2 copies of same image)

14-18. Probably details of the auto in 10-11 above.

14. View from the front. The car is seen without the motor hood throughout. This view shows the brackets for the missing headlights.

15. Side view of the auto, with the frame for the accordion roof. Other autos in the background.

16. Another view of 15. but darker.

17. View from the rear, show a spare tire, lying between the two back tires.

18. Interior view of the steering wheel and dash board, with the front seat and the gears on the floor.

19. Exterior view of an auto without the hood cover, which is perhaps chained, and perhaps had some rotting of the tires. The front tires are sitting higher than the rear.

20. Pixalated view of a group of kits in an Austin with a man at the wheel. The setting is in front of a large modern garage, with a camper to the right of the garage, and another old auto to the left of the Austin. The front of the auto is facing the camera and "Austin" lettering is seen at the front.

Series II. Images

- 1 5 Austin images. (21 photos + 5 slides) continued ...
21. Another view at the same site above, with both old autos in view. The left auto has “Pierce” instead of “Austin” lettering at the front of the car. Trees at the left, the modern garage in the background.
- S4. n.d. color. Interior view. Side of auto.
S5. n.d. color. Interior View. View toward the from of an auto.
- 1 10 Photo of painting of an Austin automobile, n.d. (2 items, 7/11/2005)
1. Color photo of the framed item hanging on the wall.
 2. Printed invitation with the painting image in b/w printed on the front. Hefner Galleries. Michigan Artists and Midwest Impressionists”. Dec. 7, no year. The specific artist of the paint is not cited, but a list of painters is given in the invitation, perhaps including the painter of the Austin.
- 1 11 Photos of Austin cars, 1902-1914. (6, 7/11/2005)
1. Man with bowler? hat seated in front seat of Austin automobile, ca. 1903-1904?, in front of large building, with broad pedestal-block entrance lamp. “Sample from The Photograph Co. of American, 61 Market St., Chicago, Telephone Main 3852.”—verso note. Neg. 3625.
[Note: this item found in folder 143-1-14, 9/4/2003, and has also been housed in Box 2 at one time. Identification needs confirmation through additional research]
 2. “127-131 Sheldon SE. Austin 1916, Model 66”.—pencil on back of photo. Note: The Grand Rapids City Directory 1912 has the Walter Austins living at 117 Sheldon St. This image shows an auto parked in the center of a brick street, with two large houses in the background.
 3. Royal Photo Co., Grand Rapids. “138 Sheldon. Austin 1909”—pencil note on back of photo. Neg. 2340. Shows a auto standing in the street near a street sign for “Sheldon and ? (Oakes?)” The building behind has a stripped awning at an entrance porch left behind the auto. The Austin family lived on Sheldon at Oakes St., ca. 1912.
 4. “3049”. “1905 Austin”—pencil on back on photo. Damaged original photo with upper right corner missing. Shows the auto photographed with a sheet backing.

Series II. Images

- 1 11 Photos of Austin cars, 1902-1914. (6, 7/11/2005) continued ...
5. Linen backed photographic print. "Austin 1913"—pencil on back of paper. Evidence of moisture stain on back of print. Image is prints in a frame on the page. Shows the Auto with a city landscape in the backgroud, probably Grand Rapids'.
 6. Photo postcard of the same or similar auto as "Austin 1913" above. This view has a woman and child in the front and two men in the back of the auto, on the street in front of a large building (hotel?), near a body of water(?). Car maker ID: L.N. Pritchard, Photographer. 431 Umatilla St., Grand Rapids, Mich.
- 1 12 Austin "Two-Speed" axle. Diagram, Patented Mar. 31, 1914. No. 1090618 (1, 7/11/2005) Verso note indicates "1917".
- 1 13 Photos of Austin engines, 1908-1914. (3, 7/11/2005)
1. Unidentified photo of motor, mounted on brown board, with mold evidence.
 2. Unidentified photo of motor, mounted on black board, with mold evidence.
 3. Linen backed photo of moter, with "Austin, 1908", penciled on the back.
- 1 14 Photos of Austin cars, 1909-1917. (7 of 8 found, 7/11/2005)
1. "Austin 1910"—pencil on back. A fading original photo mounted on board. Auto facing to right.
 2. Unidentified auto, facing to left. Original fading, mounted on brown board.
 3. "Austin 45" ID under the image of the vehicle. Damaged original photo, mounted on board. Auto facing to right. "Austin 1910"—pencil on back of photo.
 4. "Austin 1909"—pencil on back of photo. Auto facing to right.
 5. "Austin 1916-1917"—pencil on back of unmounted print. This auto is facing left, with a hard top cab, showing a single door behind the drivers seat.
 6. "Austin 1916-1917"—pencil on back of unmounted print. Sleek convertible open top.
 7. "Austin 1916 model "66" race about". The is a published print of the vehicle, which may really belong in Folder 7 above. The auto looks like a racer.

- 2 x
- Series II. Images Oversized**
- Photos of Austin autos, 1902/03?-1906. (10)
- Family in an early auto, in the street, with a girl standing on the porch of a building center right. A verso note suggests this may not be an Austin.
 - 50 horse power Austin touring car, with Walter Austin, manufacturer and son of the inventory, at the wheel. Georgiana Godfrey in the front passenger seat, and the new owners, Mr. & Mrs. Charles B. Judd, in the back seat. Taken on Park St. at the corner of Library St., with the Ryerson Library building, Grand Rapids Public Library, in the background. See article in the Evening Press, July 28, 1905, pg. 3.
<http://www.grpl.org/perl/gallery/display.pl?decade=1900&display=1>
 - Loftus Finishing Department photo, of a possible 1902-1903 Austin, standing at the curb in front of an unidentified house. The house shows the number "63". A man stands leaning on a support post at the front steps. This may be Austin owner Charles B. Judd. Another man in a uniform cap is presumed to be a chauffeur, standing by a tree near the auto. Judd lived at 67 Fountain St. in 1902. Upper left corner of photo board missing to the corner of the photo print.
 - 60 H.P. "Austin", Austin Automobile Co., Grand Rapids, Mich. Dickinson Bros. G.R., Mich.--lower right. "1906"--in pencil on verso (2)
 - Image identified as above, without the Dickinson information.
 - Image similar to the two above, without the Austin company name, but with Dickinson Bros. Lower left.
 - "Austin", Grand Rapids, Mich. With the auto facing left. "1905"--verso note.
 - Auto Cab for an enclosed vehicle, pointing toward the lower left corner.
 - Auto Cab for an enclosed vehicle, pointing toward the upper left corner. Lower left corner of photo board missing.
- 1 17
- CD containing a Microsoft XP generation PowerPoint presentation by the Somers family, relating the story of their family owned Austin, its acquisition and its restoration.
+ unidentified movie clips.
2005.053 Added 7/12/2005