BAS 061 Butte’s First Auto Show

Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

There were Cadillacs, Fords, Dodges, and Buicks, but also Velies, Hudsons, REOs, Pierce-Arrows, Chandlers, Franklins, Studebakers, Saxons, Wintons, and Maxwells. The April 1916 Butte Auto Show displayed 8,200 vehicles worth more than $250,000 – and that’s 1916 dollars.

By 1916, with a wartime economy in full force even though the United States hadn’t yet entered World War I, Butte was booming. The week of the auto show, the greatest payroll in Butte’s history to that date was reported: $2,250,000 in a week, and that was just miners, not grocers or schoolteachers or anyone else. The Anaconda Company accounted for $1,407,000 of that.

With at least some disposable income, Butte’s people undoubtedly were interested in the latest thing, and affordable automobiles certainly were on the list. An Overland Roadster, from the Willys-Overland Company in Toledo, could be had for just $595. Charles Fasel marketed the Cole and Studebakers from his showroom at 125 South Main. In 1910, he sold the first Cadillac in Butte.

Miss Velma Fawcett of Anaconda may be an extreme example of auto-mania, but everyone must have seen the onslaught of cars as the modern world arriving on four wheels. Miss Fawcett, on her third day of driving, was “seized with an inclination to see what the car would do on the steepest hill in Anaconda.” That would be Birch Street, reported in 1916 to have a grade of 40% to 50%, and no car had ever made it to the top. Velma’s new car didn’t make it either, but she bested the previous record climb by a car length.

Wartime gasoline prices were also in the news, though the high cost of gas, around 40¢ a gallon (from oil that was $3 a barrel), was offset by falling prices of cars themselves. Many brands were a third or more cheaper than they had been five or six years earlier, and gas mileage was improving. Buick’s Roadster, at $1100, boasted an average mileage of 25.2 miles per gallon.

The auto show was held at the Holland Skating Rink, at Holland Street and South Montana a block below Front Street, where Les Schwab’s tire store is located today, just south of the Safeway store. For the auto show, “thousands of yards of green and white bunting” adorned the hall.

The most expensive car advertised in the special *Anaconda* *Standard* section on the auto show was the Peerless, manufactured in Cleveland from 1900 to 1931. The 1916 model would have run you $1,890. The Studebaker Series 17 4-cylinder, 40-horsepower, 7-passenger touring car was $875, probably about the average of the advertised prices.

Trucks were on the block too, from the $950 KisselKar Truck, from Kissel Motors in Hartford, Wisconsin, to the White Truck, sold by local agents Sherman & Reed (the undertakers, moonlighting as truck salesmen). Butte even had its own tire factory, Montana Vulcanizing Works at 1131-1135 Utah Street, an outlet for Michelin Tires.

As writer Edwin Dobb has said, "Like Concord, Gettysburg, and Wounded Knee, Butte is one of the places America came from." Join us next time for more of Butte, America’s Story.