BAS 106 Velie Motors

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

If you needed a new car in 1919, Velie Motors of Butte, at 404 S. Arizona, had what you wanted, if you could afford it.

The Velie Carriage Company of Moline, Illinois, was established in 1902 by Willard Velie, grandson of John Deere. In 1908, the company became the Velie Motor Vehicle Company, and it made cars until 1928. Velie was a mid-priced auto, at around $1,800 compared to the Ford Model T, which cost $345 to $525 in the middle 1910s, and far cheaper than the American Motor Car Company’s “American” car at $3000 in 1906. The Velie could do 70 miles per hour, according to the caption in a 1919 photo in the Anaconda Standard.

Velie’s peak production year was 1920, when they made about 9000 vehicles; they averaged about 5,000 cars a year. Both the founder and his son died, in October 1928 and March 1929, respectively, and the company was out of business. Today, only 230 Velies are known to exist.

The Velie dealer in Butte in 1919 was Northwestern Motor Sales Co. at 404-406 South Arizona, on the east side of the street just below the corner of Porphyry. Their garage had a 26-car capacity and their steam heat was generated by their own boiler. Today, this intersection does not exist; Porphyry Street and the site of Northwestern Motor Sales are part of Silver Bow Homes, built in 1941.

Northwestern Motor’s manager in 1918 was Isaac Wheeler, who lived at 316 N. Excelsior. He was also an insurance agent with an office at 209 West Park Street, a typical Butte businessman who wore two or more hats, job-wise.

In 1918 Butte had 28 businesses listed under “Automobile manufacturers, dealers and repairers.” Probably at least 10 of them were auto dealers as we’d think of it today; some were agents who probably took orders rather than having a real showroom. The first real automobile showroom in Butte was probably the Dodge Brothers at the corner of Park and Idaho, built in 1912 and a wine bar today.

Charles T. Jennings, the photographer who made the photo in the Standard in 1919, worked for the B.E. Calkins Company, dealers in office supplies and picture frames at the southeast corner of Broadway and Main. That building is gone today, burned down in 1969. Benjamin E. Calkins, owner of that office supply business, lived in room 503 at the Mueller Apartments, and Jennings the photographer lived at 522 Franklin Street, a house that is still standing.

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.