



HISTORY OF THE KEYSTONE GARAGE

BLUE RIDGE SUMMIT, PA

By: Laurean H. Warner, Jr.



A Backward Look

1996 is the 100th year of the automobile - a rather remarkable milestone in engineering and mobility. We who have spent our lives dealing with people have had to make major use of the automobile to take us to the people we served. We have both lauded its virtues and sworn at its shortcomings. It has been a major expense item in our annual budget. Early on, an older minister with whom I was a colleague, told me "You may as well resign yourself to it, you're always going to be paying for an automobile."

My father was somewhat of a pioneer in the automotive business. He was tinkering with cars before most of us in this room were born, and by around 1920 he was an accomplished mechanic. In his early twenties, he had a fling in Florida, driving a "hack" in Miami, working as a stage hand in a movie studio, and fixing cars. But soon he was "back home," where he would stay and make his living for the remainder of his days.

I've been writing a great deal of my remembrances of my father, and perhaps I can share an excerpt from those remembrances which will give you a glimpse of him and his automotive expertise.

Working out of his father's barn, Dad built up an auto repair business. With younger brother Tobe showing interest and sharing in the work, the two young men - four years apart in age - grew even closer. In many ways, they were alike. "Tobe," an unusually handsome fellow, was more dashing and adventuresome. He was excited by speed and flight. Motorcycles, race cars, and yes, airplanes. The age of flight caught his fancy, and before long, Tobe was taking flying lessons. A nasty motorcycle accident laid him up for a time with a broken leg, but it in no way dissuaded him from pursuing his love for speed and excitement.

I am not sure of the sequence of things, but at some point in these early

20s years, Dad was persuaded (in 1922), in all likelihood by his Uncle Rob, to enroll in electrical school. Robley A. Warner could see Mr. Edison's inventions (and now others') as having the potential to revolutionize industry, indeed, every American home. So Dad agreed to try it. And off to New York Electrical School he went, finding a rooming house in Jersey City, from which he commuted to classes each day. How long he was enrolled as a student, and how he fared academically, I don't know. Recently I found his certificate from that institution, stating that he had completed the course in Automotive Electronics. A country boy at heart, rather close to his family, and not enamored by a school regimen, it's likely that he gave it up after learning the rudiments of electricity. His engineering drawing instruments - compass, protractor, and other instruments - were stored away in a special case. Years later my sister and I used them as we played at drawing.

By 1926-27 Dad and Uncle Tobe had built enough of an automotive business that the barn and an outside pit were unable to handle it any longer. A triangular parcel of land at the north end of Grandfather's property, bordered on two sides by the Western Maryland Railway and the main street of our village, became the site for Keystone Garage. A sprawling concrete block structure, designed by Grandfather, was built in '27, and the business flourished. The building was equipped with grease pit and mechanical area, parts department, storage space (for cars; many folk didn't have garages), a tire room, office, and showroom for new cars. In front were gasoline pumps and an air stand. Soon they established a dealership, selling Durant cars - a very spiffy model roadster and sedans of several sizes. The showroom later would house several other brand names - Continental, Auburn and Cord, and lastly, Nash-Lafayette. The most important (to me!) and distinguishing item in my Dad's garage was the tow truck - a powerful 8-cylinder 1931 Packard - painted white, with a convert-

ible-topped cab, and gilt lettering which spelled out "KEYSTONE GARAGE - PHONE 9168-J." That tow car was larger and flashier than that of Dad's competitor, Tracey's Garage, which had a small red Willys wrecker. My uncles (Mother's brothers) loved to tease me about Tracey's tow truck being better than Dad's. I protested vigorously, and that made them laugh. My loyalty was strong!

Father's business grew nicely in those early years. Then came 1929. The Great Depression was hard on everyone's business. Those who had cars were barely able to run or maintain them. Nor were folk buying cars. The Durant ceased to be available. A few less expensive cars came along - hence, the Continental - but not for long. It was 1935 before Auburn and Cord made their appearance; but money was still scarce. Dad took one man with him, riding the Greyhound Bus, to the factory in Indiana; then, driving straight through on U. S. Route 30, he would have two new cars to sell. I remember seeing him wash and polish and vacuum these cars, so they would shine under the lights of the showroom.

But a dark cloud hovered over Dad's business in the winter of 1934. His brother and business partner, Tobe, became gravely ill with pneumonia and died. He had been working hard, responding to many service calls, out in bad weather day and night. A heavy chest cold resulted in the illness which took him. No antibiotics were known at that time, and his death came swiftly. Tobe had been engaged to be married to a lovely woman, Miss Kitty Willard; the wedding had been planned for the summer of '34. He was 30, and he and my father were very close. It was a terrible blow to Dad; he never quite got over it.

For a time Dad attempted to operate his business by himself. He employed one or two other men - a mechanic and a "front" man (gasoline and oil attendant) - with his own participation moving in all directions: selling, repairing, managing - whatever was required. His main skill was in engine repair and maintenance - that's what he liked best to do. He could overhaul a motor and

make it run like new. He could do body work and paint jobs. He had a gift for listening to an engine and being able to diagnose its problems. People trusted him to do just that. And when they entrusted their car to him for a day or two, they knew it would run well.

Laurean H. Warner tried to be a good judge of talent in hiring help. Occasionally he hired someone who had good mechanical skills, but whose weakness for alcohol or gambling made him unsuitable for Dad's employ. One or two men overstepped the line by taking tools or other items from the garage. Dad did not waste time in giving them their "walking papers."

In 1935 Dad's older brother, my Uncle Andy, was unemployed; and knowing that he had a better "business head," Dad invited him to come in as a partner. It was once again Warner Brothers' Keystone Garage. The depression began to show signs of fading, but not rapidly. Auburn was a fine car, but still more expensive than most folk could afford. My Uncle Jim, Mother's brother, bought one from Dad. It had a "slip stream" back, and rear doors that opened toward the front. Wire wheels gave it a rich appearance. Dad sold quite a few of these cars, but Cord was a car ahead of its time. Low slung, supercharged, with retracting headlights, plus many other features - it had to be priced beyond the pocketbooks of 98% of buyers. My remembrance is that Dad sold only two Cords during the two or three years they were manufactured.

The announcement that Auburn and Cord had gone the way of Durant and Pierce-Arrow and Huppmobile forced Warner Brothers to seek another franchise. It was also time to spruce up Keystone Garage. Uncle Andy saw the need and had the know-how to do it. With Grandfather's architectural knowledge, they re-designed the entire face of their place of business. Relocating the office and creating a drive-through gas pumping area, under cover, and refurbishing the new car showroom were major accomplishments. John Dusing, a gunsmith and plasterer and good friend of Dad's, came to exercise his talent with a new finish

on the showroom walls and ceiling - a new wrinkle whereby with a twist of the brush, the texture of the surface had a swirl to it.

In those earlier years of Dad's business venture, he also sold and serviced radios. This, of course, grew out of his N.Y.E.S. background and training. I recall a shelf full of radios on which he'd be working - tubes, crystals, wiring. One of his standing Atwater-Kents or Kennedys always stood in the showroom, with music playing or a ball game being broadcast via ticker-tape. That's where Dad and his cronies gathered when a championship prize fight came across the airwaves - Louis vs. Schmeling, followed by a string of challengers - Primo Carnera, Billy Conn, Max Baer, "Two-Ton" Tony Galento, and others. As I grew older, they permitted me to stay up and listen to the fight, and to the stories swapped by Dad's friends.

Selling cars had to be a sideline. In a small community car dealers did not have salesmen. It was the owner-franchisee who did the selling. and that had to take a back seat to the day-to-day operation of the total business. Car sales took place if someone came in for gasoline or some other service, and just happened to look at the new stock. Or, Dad would think of someone who, he knew, had a car soon needing to be replaced, and who also had the means to do that. He had a "prospect list." So, if that latter person had a family, Dad would announce to Mother at dinner (which was at midday) that we "might mebbe" want to go with him that evening to such and such a farm to "show" this man a car. That meant we would go. Mother got us washed and clothed in something other than the clothes we'd played in all day, and after supper, off we'd go to "show a car." While Dad told the man the virtues of this new machine, Mother would make the acquaintance of the farmer's wife, and we were soon playing with the children. Dad found things other than the car to talk about, since he had grown up on a farm and still had an interest in it. His reputation as a first-class mechanic and his honesty went ahead of him, too.

These were the factors and the qualities which sold the car. Dad knew the struggles people had, because he had them, too. He would work with them to find the financial arrangement which they could handle. Then, after leaving that information with the prospective buyer, Dad would call us from wherever our host children had led us. Mother bid her good-byes, and Dad's parting words were, "Let me hear from you," and "Much obliged."

Dad had a strange little mannerism in his speech, that of prefacing a statement with "No." As he walked around a car he was showing, he'd run his hand rather lovingly over the fender or the hood, saying, "No, there's not a blemish on her." Cars were always female gender to him. "Start her up," he'd say to the owner who brought a car in for diagnosis by Motor Doctor Warner. "She stalls, does she?" he'd ask. "She doesn't have much pep with these old spark plugs" was sometimes his way of saying, "She needs a tune-up." Then he'd say, "No, I can take care of her for you."

His strong work ethic pushed Dad to unparalleled lengths during those very difficult "great depression" years. Knowing that he had to provide for his growing family, and finding himself in a relatively young business that carried a heavy mortgage, he worked terribly hard. But hard work was something on which he thrived. Up at daybreak and in "the shop" by seven o'clock, Dad strove to get the most out of his day. In the evening, he could likely be found in one of three areas: trying to sell a car, collect a debt, or work in the garden until he could see no more. Many times I remember tagging along with him as he tried to "scare up a few dollars." As he approached the home of someone who owed him money, he took the statement out of his pocket, glanced at the balance, and then knocked on the door. After politely exchanging pleasantries with whomever answered his knock, he would put it this way: "I was wondering if you could help me out a bit." They knew what lay behind that sentence. If the man owed him \$50, Dad might suggest that he pay \$10. And more often

than not, he'd get it. The person was glad that he hadn't come to demand the entire amount.

Dad always planted what seemed to me an inordinantly large quantity of "spuds." But he knew what it took to feed us over a winter. Before the potato plants blossomed, there were weeds to be pulled. After the blossoms, there were potato bugs. My job, after the weeding, was to knock the bugs into a can of gasoline - a really thankless job. Then it was more weeds. It seemed never to end.

One April evening after school, I had screwed up my courage to stay for baseball practice. I had dreamed of making the school team, but knew I didn't dare ask Father; he wouldn't approve. Too much work to be done. But I stayed, and was thoroughly engrossed in the drill the coach had set out for us when I heard the "OOGA" of a car horn, and looked up to see Dad in his 1930 Buick coupe, motioning with a "come here" index finger. The "jig was up" - the beginning and end of a baseball season in one day. The weeds in the potato patch had won. I hated those weeds!

The Nash dealership from '38 - '42 gave Dad great pleasure, and was by far his greatest success in the new car business. He thoroughly believed in his product. It had at least two features that no other car could boast: a "Weather-Eye" ventilation/heating/cooling system, and a sedan which enabled the back seat/trunk area to convert into a comfortable double bed. Being a hunter, I'm sure Dad could envision taking that car up into the mountains of central Pennsylvania during bear or deer season. And as to the "Weather-Eye" effectiveness, I remember hearing him say that four men could smoke cigars with the windows closed, and no one would be uncomfortable. I always wondered if he hadn't over-stepped a bit with that boast!

Then came the War, and the cessation of automobile production. Just when things were going well. Warner Brothers' Keystone Garage had sold more Nashes than cars of any other franchise they'd had.

The days of World War II challenged Dad's best mechanical ability. Keeping cars running for the duration of the production hiatus, when they might otherwise have been traded for new ones - this tested his maintenance skills. Parts were scarce, tires were almost impossible to come by; everything was rationed. But somehow he kept his customers rolling with ten-to-twenty year old marvels of mechanical ingenuity.

Sometimes I would go with Dad to find parts in junkyards. He would go out in miserably weed-ridden fields of rusting old cars, slide under them and work until he got the part he needed to keep a customer's car in better working order.

The anticipation of seeing new Nashes rolling into his showroom when production resumed was high. Dad thought the good times would soon be underway again. Then came a letter from Kenosha, the manufacturer's base:

Dear Messrs. Warner:

This is to notify you that we have decided to move our point of dealership to Waynesboro [seven miles west and a much larger town]. We are asking you to re-locate your agency to that community, or we will seek another franchisee. We have appreciated our association with you, and we hope it can continue. Please respond promptly regarding your decision.

What a blow! To walk away from a business facility built with his own hands, building a new garage, or even less likely, renting a suitable one, and with only a one-year guarantee of association - Dad could hardly believe what he was reading.

The decision was quick, but was made with a heavy heart. Dad and Uncle Andy fired off a response to those corporate executives out there in Wisconsin, to the effect that "you fellows will beg us to sell your cars before long;" but they never did.

It was a hard pill to swallow. But it did one thing: it enabled Dad to concentrate on what he did best: repair cars and keep engines running well.

And best of all, to continue it all in the place he loved best - his own place, not big, but it was his, and in that he took great pride.

Addendum: After the War and the loss of the Nash franchise, Uncle Andy withdrew from the partnership, and worked as a carpenter, using his best skills. Dad continued with the garage, later welcoming my younger brother, Joe, into the business. Today, Keystone Garage continues, in a different building, with Joe and his son, Joe, Jr. - sixty years of automotive service.

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Keystone Garage
1950-1960