

# Kansas City's automotive history dates back more than 100 years

by Brian Spano

This year, the Kansas City Art Institute hosts the Seventh Annual Art of the Car Concours®, featuring more than 200 vintage vehicles. While the event has grown in scale and in attendance each year, many people familiar with the Concours may not be familiar with the rich automotive history that Kansas City boasts.

At the turn of the 20th century there were fewer than 8,000 automobiles in America, many of them powered by steam or electricity, while others had gasoline engines. An unexpected turnout at the first New York Auto Show in 1900 showed the magnitude of the public's fascination with the automobile. Over the next few years, hundreds of fledgling companies would try to meet the demands of a growing market, and Kansas City found itself more than just a backseat driver in the automobile-manufacturing world.



Cars parked along Brush Creek on the Country Club Plaza during the 1920s

*Credit: Missouri State Archives*

In fact, Henry Ford himself opened an auto assembly plant in Kansas City in 1913, its first outside of the Detroit area. General Motors moved into Kansas City in the 1920s. But even prior to behemoths like Ford and GM coming to town, there were a number of smaller car companies that did their best to cut the mustard around the turn of the 20th century.

Marshall Miller, founder and chairman of KCAI's Art of the Car Concours, provided a peek into the city's car-making history.

"A lot of cities tried to develop vehicle industries around that time," Miller said. "The vehicle business back then was like the software business today, with many entrepreneurs developing apps and software for many uses. Lots of people were starting vehicle production operations, but not many companies lasted more than a year or two. St. Louis had a big industry, as did Chicago, and there were lots of other places, especially in Indiana, Ohio, Michigan and New York, but not much west of Kansas City. So the history from the standpoint of these different businesses was that we had a large number of small entrepreneurs.

"Most of these entrepreneurs could not sell enough cars to be financially successful," Miller said. "You had to get critical mass, and that's where somebody like Henry Ford succeeded by developing the Model T, which sold a large volume of cars."

In 1910, there were several electric car manufacturers in Kansas City, Miller said. In the early years, from about 1900 to about 1915, no one knew what kind of vehicle was going to prevail: gasoline, steam or electric.

## Kansas City's automotive history dates back more than 100 years (continued)

"Electric had a lot going for it because it was simple," said Miller. "You got in the car, turned it on and you went forward immediately. Top speed was not high, hills reduced speed and the maximum range was not high. There was nothing more to do. The problem, which is still the problem today, was the battery. They never solved it then, and it continues to be an issue. Gasoline engines at the time were very difficult. They didn't start easily, you had to crank them, and you could break your arm doing it. It didn't necessarily keep working easily. Steam worked great once it started, but it could take 20 minutes to get it started. Once it started, it was very fast."

One of the better-known smaller car companies originally in Topeka and then based in Kansas City from 1910 to 1915 was the Stafford Motor Car Company, Miller noted.

Terry Stafford, a Topeka man who was a partner in the Smith Automobile Co., founded the company that bore his name when he moved to Kansas City in 1910 to build his own car. A total of 315 Stafford cars were built through 1914, and production ceased in 1915. The shop was at 22nd and Campbell streets, just north of what is now Truman Medical Center.

Harry Truman bought a 1911 Stafford touring car in 1913. "It was an excellent car," Truman wrote, "and would take an awful beating. You can be sure of that, if one lasts me as long as three years." The only remaining Stafford was featured at the Art of the Car Concours in 2009.

In addition to Stafford, there were up to 20 different car companies manufacturing automobiles in Kansas City.

These included Baker & Elberg Electric, Beggs Motor Car Company, The Farmer's Auto-Motor Car Company, Cooper of Kansas City, Croesus Motor Company, The Day Motor Company of Kansas City, E.L. DeCamp Motor Company, The Kansas City Vehicle Company, Front Drive Motor Company, The Hana Motor Manufacturing Company, The Midwest Motor Company of Kansas City, Howey Motor Car Company of Kansas City, Kansas City Motor Car Company, Hummer Motor Car Company, Midwest Motor Company, McClintock Automobile & Engine Company, The W.A. Salter Motor Company, Severin Motor Car Company/Mohawk Motor Company/Metropolitan Motors Corporation and the Thorp-Allen Motor Company.

"With GM and Ford's large manufacturing plants in town, that was a big deal for the Kansas City economy," Miller said. "Their presence created a lot of synergy in Kansas City because a lot of parts suppliers developed around the community. Then, there was a lot of direct communication with Detroit, and there still is today."

Ford and GM emerged as the sole survivors and are currently two of Kansas City's largest employers. In 1953, Ford settled in a former military production plant in Clay County, Mo., where it currently produces the Escape, Escape Hybrid and F-150. The GM plant is located in the former Kansas City, Kan., Fairfax Airport, and the two models produced there are the Chevrolet Malibu and Buick LaCrosse.