

But driver in 1904 said he wouldn't do it if his hair weren't already grey

By FRANCES HUFF

Probably no invention of Canada's first century altered the lives of its citizens more than the automobile. For Chatham the change got under way in 1904 when two automobiles, ordered by Robert Gray and Dr. George Cornell, arrived in town.

"We have got to be up to date in this town," said Mr. Gray, "and as soon as the roads permit, you will see us out with our autos."

J. T. O'Keefe bought the third automobile in town. He took George S. Heyward, school trustee, for a spin. Mr. Heyward's account of the jaunt reads like a Mack Sennett comedy.

"When he came for me he said he didn't know the first thing about running the machine yet, but he was willing to make a try of it . . . I prepared myself for the worse and jumped in. Everything went alright until we got in front of Dr. McKeough's office. We were whizzing along toward the gas office when a team of horses became frightened . . . I don't blame them very much for I was a little shaky about the thing myself . . . We got through alright but the team ran away and another horse became frightened at them and ran away too. That was how the excitement started and things were kept lively from that on. When we turned the King Street corner, Joe thought he would try a little scorching. The scorching was so hot that it brought the perspiration out all over me. We saw a team ahead of us and I suggested that it might not be an unwise thing to slacken a little before we passed them. Joe thought so too but he couldn't find the right crank and there wasn't much time to look for it. He accidentally touched a secret button or something and the machine came to a sudden dead stop a few yards behind the wagon. We both jumped out about the same time but I think I lit first. After fussing around with a monkey wrench for some time we finally got started again. We had one more adventure before we were through. We were over the creek and started another run-a-way. The only thing I was sorry for, happened here; a lady was thrown out of the rig and slightly injured. Automobile riding is all right but I wouldn't do any of it if my hair were not already gray . . ."

The published account did not deter others. More 'benzine buggies' were pur-

chased and the Planet announced that "Chatham will soon be an automobile town". But it would still be some years before the average citizen could afford to own a car. One owner wrote that even a 'run-about' (that is, a two-seater) would cost twenty to thirty dollars a month to run. A sample garage bill was given — "two hours time adjusting, 1.00; extra spark plug, 4.50; garage, 12.00; gas, 10.00; puncture, 75c; fan belt, 1.50." At about this time the sewer diggers in the city were asking that their wages be raised to two dollars a day and the board of education was being criticized for having agreed to pay the new science master \$1,200.00 a year.

Not only could he not afford such a luxury, Mr. Citizen also had to put up with many nuisances caused by the car. These nuisances soon made new legislation necessary. Ald. Mounter gave notice of a by-law to regulate the speed of autos, to Chatham's council in May of 1904. His action may have been prompted by what seems to have been the first court case in the city involving the automobile. Alex Chaplin was taking J. C. Fleming, Joe Smith and Ed

Massey for a drive on King Street when they met Anthony Edwards driving a horse. The horse became frightened and went through its harness. Mr. Edwards laid a charge. A friend driving in the buggy testified that he had signalled Chaplin to stop but the car had passed them at 15 m.p.h. Mr. Fleming stated that the car was only doing six m.p.h. Asked how he could judge speed, Fleming said he had driven horses and ran foot races. The case was laid over but eventually Chaplin was fined \$6.75.

W. K. Merrifield, a citizen who wrote often to the newspapers, voiced what must have been the sentiments of many — ". . . every day some of these autos travel on Park street at over double (the legal speed). The largest auto in the city — everyone knows its owner — passed up Park street at over double the legal speed last night and it had no number on it. . . . I sometimes wonder if these extraordinary people ever think of the rights and lives of others."

Legislation covering the motorcar soon became a provincial matter. By early 1906 the statute limited the speed, in open coun-

try, to 15 m.p.h.; in cities, towns and villages, to 10 m.p.h. and, in the vicinity of a horse, to seven m.p.h. The owner of the machine, rather than the driver, was to be fully responsible for all damages.

In early 1908, Philip Bowyer, MPP for Kent, introduced a bill to compel autos to stop when meeting a funeral. He cited an incident from the Chatham area in which an automobile, refusing to stop, started a near panic amongst the horse-drawn funeral procession. During the same session, another member introduced a bill asking that the car be completely forbidden to run in the country. This seemed too far-fetched but another suggestion was that they be allowed to use the country roads only on Saturday, Sunday and Monday, thus "farmer wives could go out safely on other days of the week." The situation was also discussed at Kent's county council. It was no longer possible to take a spirited horse on the county roads, one councillor lamented.

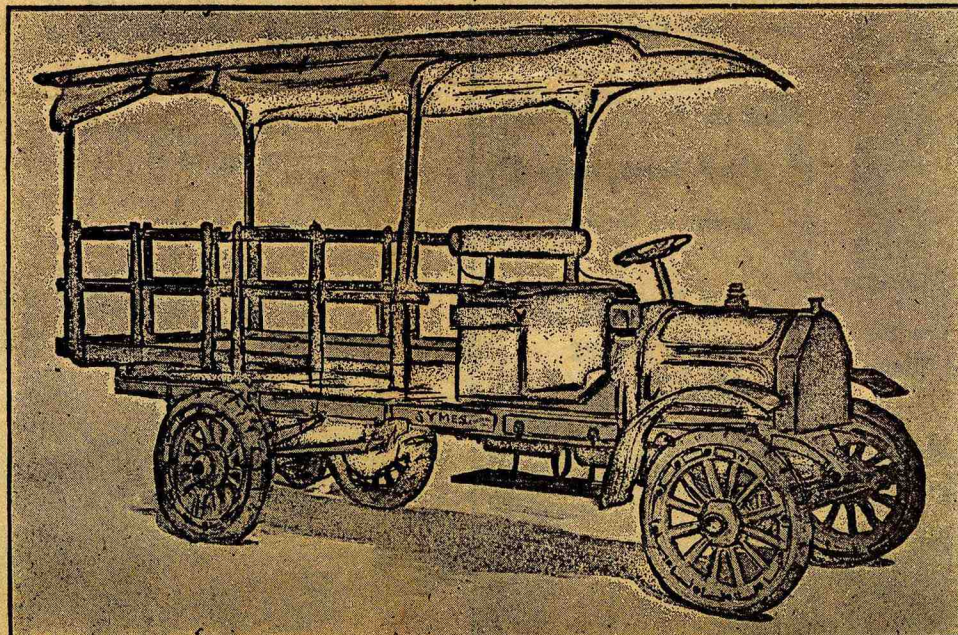
Evidence that the farmer's anger found at least an outlet in hearty guffaws is contained in the suggestion of one owner that direction signs be erected at all cross-roads. Drivers often had to stop and ask directions in the country and "in some cases a few of the farmers can take a special delight in giving the wrong directions and often pleasure seekers are sent a distance out of their way as the result of the actions of the cheap practical joker."

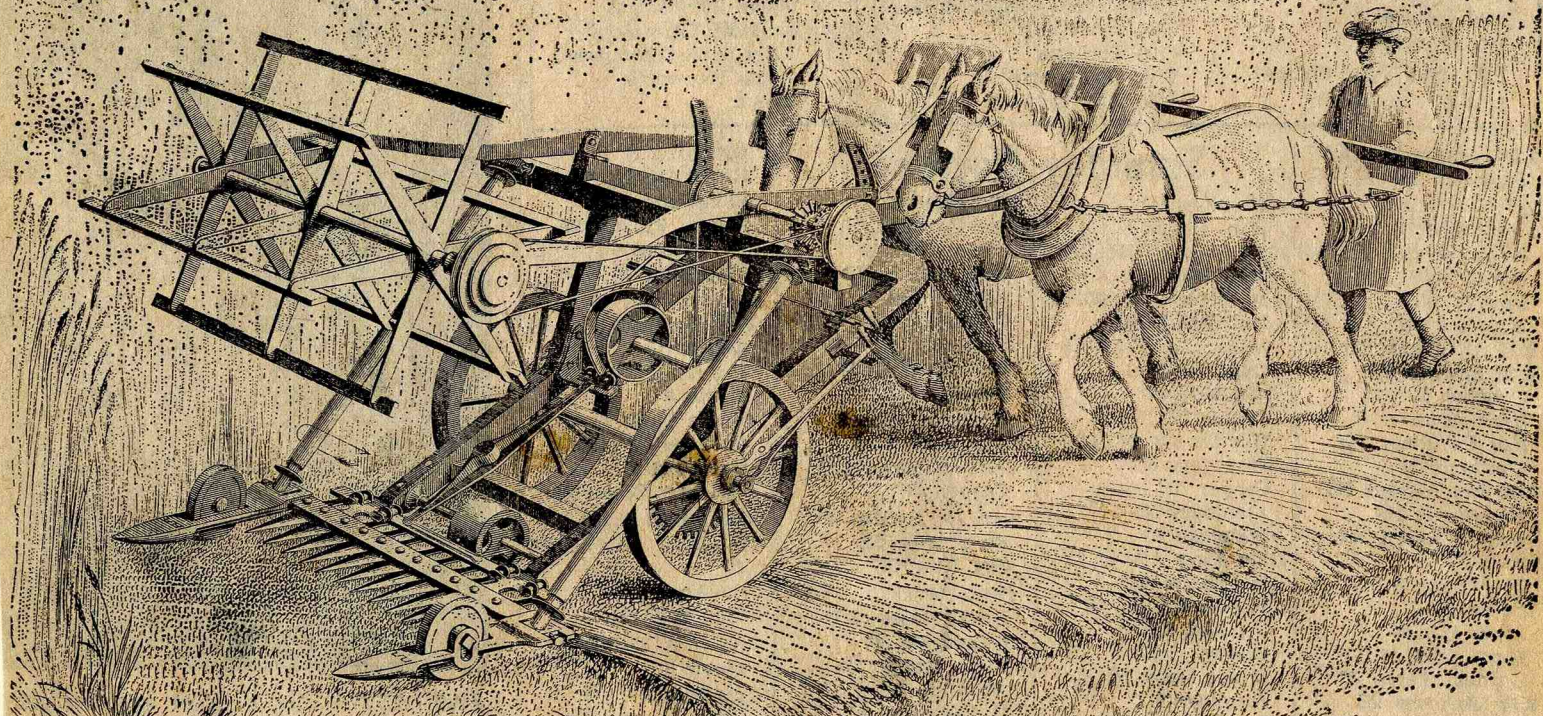
It would seem that Merrifield's condemnation was not merited by most of the Chatham citizens who sported cars. In 1908 they formed an organization the purpose of which was to endeavor to get the co-operation of the farmers and to see that auto rules were obeyed by all drivers.

Youthful drivers quickly caught on to the pleasures of running out of gas when ladies were along. "There is more to be learned about automobiles than the mere running of the machine . . . the new idea is to start out in the morning for a ride in the country . . . regulate the ride so that the gasoline will play out when the party is within perhaps a mile of the city limits . . . if it is a beautiful day a very pleasant social time can be spent while a small boy is running into town for more gasoline." Within only several years the car was sharing with the 'movies' and the paper novel the blame for increasing delinquency amongst young people.

In 1907, H. W. Ball, dry goods merchant, introduced the auto as a delivery van in Chatham. But Chatham's Council was slow to see the possibilities of motorized equipment. The city's expanding streets were served by an inadequate police force. Citizens frequently asked for more police protection — particularly from young people who noisily raced their horses late at night and created other nuisances. At one point the harried police asked to be equipped with two bicycles. The council granted them one. The adequacy of the fire department was also up for discussion. As late as 1914, Chief Pritchard's endorsement of a motorized truck such as the Windsor department had, fell on ears deafened by the fear of raising taxes. The same council, after sending the first group of Chatham's young men off with patriotic oratory, would refuse to put a mill on the tax rate to support the soldiers' families. The world war these volunteers fought in would speed the social revolution caused by the motor vehicle and give this new-fangled invention a large parking lot in the field of history.

CHATHAM, ONTARIO





An early version of the reaping machine invented by Rev. Patrick Bell on his father's farm in Scotland in 1829. Note that the horses pushed the reaper ahead of them.

1973

7
Blazer
49.95



8
Slacks
22.98