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A Bit of Retrospection

Five Years of the Maxwell-Briscoe Motor Company

By Benjamin Briscoe

Perhaps it would be better to begin this article with an apology for what to the casual reader might appear as a superabundance of personal flavor. Yet it will be impossible for me to give even the semblance of a comprehensive history of the Maxwell-Briscoe Motor Company without dwelling on Mr. Maxwell, the other officers, and myself to an extent that might seem to be not exactly in good taste; but I will take the chance, for, as I say, I see no way of writing the history of the Company without saying a great deal about ourselves and our connection with it. After all, it is with our Company as with most other concerns; for their first few years at least, there must be the hardest kind of personal work, which will continue until the organization is rounded up in such a way as to take the place of individual effort.

The Company was organized by Mr. Maxwell and myself and had its inception in Detroit, Mich., in 1903, although it was not incorporated until the spring of 1904, Mr. Maxwell and myself having operated as a partnership from July, 1903, until the incorporation of the Company.

For some years previous to the formation of the partnership Mr. Maxwell had been mechanical manager and designer for the Northern Manufacturing Company of Detroit. Before his connection with that Company he had been associated with the Olds Motor Works as designer and developer, working in conjunction with Mr. Olds.

I was and had been for several years president of the Briscoe Manufacturing Company of Detroit, which I had organized in 1886, and the business of which had developed into one of considerable importance in manufacturing

sheet metal ware, brass work stampings, galvanizing, etc.

The business of the Briscoe Manufacturing Company was of such a nature and their plant equipment of a kind that it was called upon to do much of the experimental sheet metal work of many of the automobiles then made in Michigan and the neighboring states. The company had, as a consequence, become very well equipped to make various parts for automobiles.

Much time had been spent in the invention and development of radiators, and it was in the summer of 1901 when Mr. Olds and Mr. Maxwell called at the Briscoe Manufacturing Company's office with a sample radiator of the type then used on the Olds Runabout. It was made of 7-8 inch brass tubes, without fins, and with two manifolds.

This radiator was quite a puzzle, I remember, both to myself and my assistants, for none of us were very familiar—in fact, very few people were at that date, outside of some of the pioneer designers—with the radiator question.

At any rate, after making a sample and quoting a price on a lot of 500, for which large quantity, as we thought, we would never get an order, we did not only make the 500 but received additional orders for upward of 3,000 that year.

In the year 1902 we made something over 4,500 and from then on this department of the Briscoe Manufacturing Company's business very rapidly developed.

It was in the development of this branch of the business that I became acquainted with Mr. Maxwell, for it had become a custom for me to look to him

for much technical assistance and advice.

Early in 1903 I concluded to go into the automobile business at the first opportunity that presented itself.

My first experience was with the Buick car. I had known Mr. Buick many years, having done much business for the Buick and Sherwood Manufacturing Company, of which he was senior partner, and which he sold out at about that time to the Sanitary Manufacturing Company, with the intention of devoting his time and capital to the development of automobiles.

Soon after he took up the work I became interested with him and we spent considerable money in the development of the first Buick car.

The first one in the trade whom I informed that I was interested with Mr. Buick was Mr. Maxwell, and I asked him to go with me to the Buick Motor Company's shop to look over the proposition and give me his opinion and advice.

Soon after this Mr. Maxwell came to me with the suggestion that we two become associated together, as he had in mind an automobile which he thought would be very reliable, simple and compact; in fact, much in advance of anything that had been made up to that time.

I was very glad to associate myself with Mr. Maxwell, so I arranged to sell my interest in the Buick and to begin the manufacture of the first Maxwell car.

We began it in July, 1903, as I have said, and ran a car on the road on Christmas day of that year.

In its simplicity of construction and its reliability in operation this car exceeded our own expectations, so that we proceeded without delay to organize the Maxwell-Briscoe Motor Company.

Looking back five years and recalling the experiences we had in the course of our efforts to get capital for our enterprise, the thing that appears now to be the most interesting part of our reminiscences was the apparent

disinclination of many of the capitalists on whom we called to go into the automobile business, on the ground that this field seemed to be overdone.

It did seem as though nearly everybody in Detroit, even in those days, was interested in some sort of an automobile proposition and the vast majority of them were subsisting largely on hope at that time, and were undoubtedly of the opinion that the field for automobiles was limited to what could be manufactured by the then existing companies.

I remember, also, my first experience with a "joy rider." It seems amusing now, but it was one of the most discouraging experiences of the time.

In the course of our rambles up and down Griswold Street and elsewhere in Detroit in search of investors, we came in contact with the representative of a prominent family in Detroit, which family is possessed of what is thought to be an estate of considerable size.

This gentleman immediately became very enthusiastic over our proposition. He was particularly interested in the fact that we had secured an option on the Tarrytown plant, which we had done during the January, 1904, automobile show.

He was very anxious that we should stop soliciting subscriptions for our stock from any one, saying that he would take it all; that he would go down to New York with us and if he found everything as we had described, he would furnish all the money necessary.

We were, of course, very happy, in the belief that we had so rapidly succeeded in raising all the money we should need.

We made immediate preparations to bring him to New York. Before doing so, however, I took the precaution of having him commit himself, which he did; saying: "If things are as you represent them with reference to the Tarrytown plant, I will furnish you all

the money you need."

We brought this gentleman to New York at some expense and came out to the plant, found everything just as we had represented, and then discovered that we were dealing with a man who might well be characterized as the impersonation of disingenuousness.

The fact of the matter was, as we afterwards learned, that our quondam friend had no intention of investing at all, but just desired a "joy ride" to New York.

This disappointment did us considerable harm, and it will be hard for us to forgive this gentleman for the set-back he gave us. A number of Detroiters had contemplated making investments with us. They heard that this gentleman was going to New York to make an investigation and they, of course, afterwards heard that he refused to subscribe after his trip east; therefore, they assumed that he must have found conditions unfavorable.

It hurt us so much, so handicapped us, in fact, in Detroit, that we concluded to come east to get the balance of the capital that we required.

Here again we found that the greatest obstacle in securing subscriptions was the impression that the automobile industry had reached its limit. Nearly every one we talked to seemed firm in the belief that the number of automobiles then made (probably 25,000 per year) were all that the country could possibly purchase.

As all of this promotion work took several weeks, and as we did not begin to try to get any capital until our first car had been run on the road for a month or two, or until we were entirely satisfied with it ourselves, we did not finally incorporate the Company until June, 1904.

The contract that we had made for the rental of the Tarrytown plant was to be in effect in March, yet it seems that there was some misunderstanding on the part of the owner as to just what he had agreed to do, and a situation arose that was fraught with many discouragements with reference to the

factory, and for a time there was much doubt as to whether we would, after all, be able to force the owner to deliver the factory to us in accordance with the terms of the contract.

Our subscriptions had all been made contingent on the securing of the Tarrytown factory, and the attorneys, who were really the attorneys for the subscribers, advised us to make no call for money from the subscribers until everything with reference to the Tarrytown factory had been straightened out.

Mr. Maxwell and I realized—what our attorneys and our subscribers could not understand—the necessity of getting ready as early as possible in order to make cars for that year's market.

We took the bull by the horns, however, took physical possession of the factory, and started to work, trusting that we would be able to straighten out the misunderstandings before long.

Before we got through with the owner, however, it seemed to us that we had taken about the biggest chance that any two individuals had ever taken.

We spent all the money we had and sweat blood before we could finally get the lease which the owner had contracted to give us.

We did, however, finally get it after all kinds of threats of personal violence and other malediction, and our company was organized on June 21st, 1904.

We had the patterns for the first Model H we had made in Detroit, but found many changes desirable, so that we practically had to build a new set of patterns, besides designing the tools, jigs and fixtures with which to begin manufacturing.

The first lot of cars we put through, which were 25 of the Model H design, seemed to us like a large quantity.

The sample of the Model L runabout had not even been made up to that time. We went right after it; however, and within a month or two we had it

running on the road; at any rate, had it far enough along to risk the purchase of material for 500. At the same time we increased the order for material for the Model H cars to 300.

A record of the first few months' sales is very interesting to us now, remembering as we do, how proud we were every month as we increased our product over the previous month and when we got up to a car a day it seemed to us that we were doing a very large business.

We delivered our first regularly made cars in November, 1904, delivering in

	H	L
November, 1904.....	3	1
December	2	-4
January, 1905.....	7	6
February	7	17
March	17	34
April	37	55
May	65	57
June	57	64
July	37	62

Altogether, therefore, that year we sold 232 H cars and 300 L cars, a grand total of 532 cars.

This was pretty good, after all, for there are not very many concerns, even to-day, excepting, perhaps, assemblers, who have started in and done as much in their first year.

In 1905-1906 we made 3000 cars; in 1906-1907 4000; in 1907-1908 5000; and at the end of the present season we will have made about 9000 cars.

It was in 1906 that we exercised the option of purchase which we had on our Tarrytown plant, having had this option attached to the lease; for it had become evident during the year 1905 that the facilities at Tarrytown would be inadequate to satisfy the demands for Maxwell cars.

We began looking around for a location for a western plant. This we finally secured at New Castle, Ind., and had a most interesting experience in the negotiations with reference to it.

The citizens of New Castle were very cordial and desirous of having us

locate there. We proposed to them that we would put up a plant which would cost at least \$125,000, and that would employ 1,000 hands.

They finally agreed that such a plant were worth \$100,000 to them and they accordingly made us an offer. The final conference was held November 8th, 1906, and two days later the contract was signed.

Our business had grown so rapidly during the negotiations that we changed our plans, so that our factory at New Castle finally represented a very much larger outlay than we had contracted to make.

On June 22d of the following year the cornerstone of the building was laid by the then Vice-President Fairbanks. The factory, however, was at that time nearly completed, the cornerstone being set into the corner pilaster.

This was accounted for by our plan to have the cornerstone exercises in good weather and our not wanting to delay the building and have the cornerstone laid, as is usually the case, before the building has progressed beyond it.

In the meantime our facilities had become so congested that we were compelled to go outside for machine work.

We accordingly made a contract with a Providence concern to build Model L motors and axles, and it was in the year 1905, also, that we established the Pawtucket plant, the purpose of it being to assemble cars, using the motors and axles which were made for us, in Providence.

This arrangement proved to be a very good one, as it facilitated our deliveries for the New England trade, which has always been very large on Maxwell cars; in fact, our business in New England is such as to have justified us in the recent purchase of one of the finest factories in New England, at Cranston, containing about 4 acres of floor space, the property in all being about 11 acres.

In the meantime, the demand for our four-cylinder cars had greatly out-

grown our facilities at Tarrytown, so we purchased another factory at Tarrytown, the plant formerly occupied by the Rand-Drill Company, the site containing about 16 acres with a floor space of 5 acres.

To keep up with the demand for cars made at New Castle, we are now building there an addition 360 feet wide by 160 feet deep, besides another story on our front building 60 feet in width by 722 feet long.

In the five years of our business experience, therefore, we have grown from the original Tarrytown plant, which was rented, to 4 factories which we now own, comprising a total floor space of about 21 acres.

The land owned by the Company at Providence, Tarrytown and New Castle amounts to 419 acres, including several farms adjacent to our New Castle plant for sub-division into lots to take care of the necessary growth at New Castle.

Our machine equipment represents an outlay of over \$600,000. Our average number of employees is about 3,600 and is increasing weekly.

Our product for 1909-1910 will be close to 20,000 automobiles.

This article would not be complete without a mention of the development of the company's sales organization, which we have been systematically working out on a scheme evolved in 1906.

This system was the result of our realization that we want Maxwell users to be in as close touch with us as possible, so that we may at all times be able to give them proper attention; for not only are we ambitious to sell cars, but we are vastly more anxious to have those cars give the best sort of satisfaction to the user.

We found it very desirable, therefore, to establish branch houses in the large centers; they in turn to organize such territory as can be properly allotted to them.

We have accordingly established branches in New York, Boston, Buffalo, Pittsburg, Atlanta, Cleveland, De-

troit, Chicago, St. Louis, Kansas City, Minneapolis, Dallas, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Syracuse, Louisville, and will establish several more this fall.

We have nine general sub-divisions of territory. Over each sub-division there is a District Manager working for and representing the Maxwell-Briscoe Motor Company direct, and his duty is to see that every customer has careful and proper attention.

This sub-dividing of the territory and the apportioning of the country into districts has resulted in a remarkable expansion in the Company's sales possibilities. The Company has been fortunate in the selection of its District Managers, for they are recognized to be among the very foremost men in the industry in their respective localities.

Each District Manager is at all times fully alive to his responsibilities and will fight hard for the welfare of his dealers and his district, as there is a commendable rivalry among them all to excel.

In fact, each District Manager believes that his district is practically the whole of the United States, and there is hardly one of them who will not claim that he could sell all the cars we are making in his own district.

It has happened, therefore, that every time we have increased our manufacturing facilities, the Sales Organization has advanced another step beyond those facilities.

The question that confronts the officers of the company has been, therefore, what limit to put upon the company's expansion.

There are many questions involved in this general proposition. The demand for automobiles seemingly cannot be measured by precedents established by other commodities; for a careful analysis of conditions and a close study of the industries most similar to the automobile industry is the only line the management can get upon which to base its judgment.

The burning question always is:

How many automobiles can the country absorb per annum?

In trying to analyze this we take into calculation what the United States absorb of, say, horses and carriages for a year.

Then again there is the question of the comparative life of a carriage and an automobile. There are 1,000,000 horses and carriages for pleasure purposes bought per year. Will there be an ultimate demand for 1,000,000 automobiles? There are 500,000 pianos sold per year. The average life of a piano is 25 years. Does this offer us a comparison?

These are a few of the figures that the automobile manufacturer gathers in order that he may be able to exercise his best judgment as to the limits of expansion. There are many other elements to be taken into consideration.

The automobile industry is, nevertheless, a very young one, indeed so young that we have not the benefit of a long series of years of statistics to guide us.

It has been said that there has been more money lost in the manufacture of automobiles up to date than has been made and I am inclined to think that this is so.

There were many concerns that were considered successful concerns when we went into business, but they have faded into inconsequence.

The year 1903 was a momentous year in the industry, for three

of the concerns that came into existence that year have assumed the leadership and are the largest concerns in the volume of output to-day.

The automobile industry is certainly destined to be an important factor in the industrial development of the country. There are at present over 100,000 hands employed in the automobile industry and in volume of business, eliminating the great staples, it is close up to the top.

The foregoing, then, are the salient facts with reference to our company. We are, of course, proud of its record, but are just as jealous of its reputation.

Our policy has always been to make the best automobiles, in point of reliability, low cost of upkeep, simplicity and value, that can be made.

There have been a few people who have at times criticised our style, but it is our conviction that beauty is as beauty does, whatever the variety of tastes may be; therefore, we believe that there are none who will not say that, based upon this philosophy, Maxwell automobiles are altogether the best motor cars made.

I cannot refrain from expressing our great thanks to our customers for the appreciation they have always expressed of the quality of our goods, and, above all, I must thank the entire organization, all of the departments, for the high degree of co-operation that has at all times existed within the company.

The company has established a branch office in Philadelphia, and the Longstreth Motor Co., which formerly held the Maxwell agency in that city relinquished it on July 3rd. Mr. W. F. Smith, Manager of District No. 3, will have charge of the retail and wholesale business of this new branch, which will be conducted in the same quarters as heretofore—No. 207 North Broad Street.

The Maxwell-Briscoe Chicago Company is erecting a new four-story structure 80 x 160 feet at 18th Street and Michigan Avenue. It is hoped to have the building ready for occupancy by October 1st.

