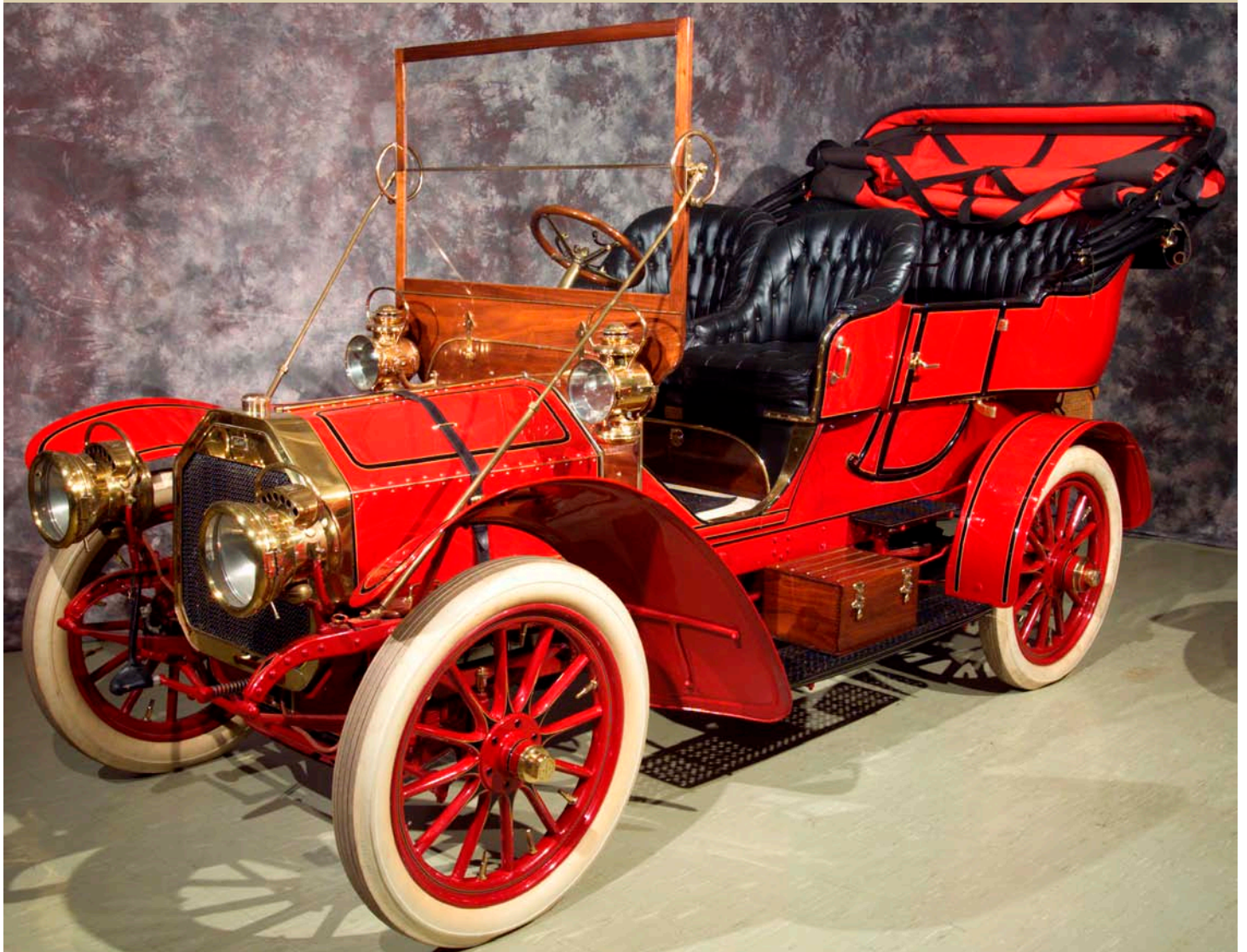


WHEN **CLEVELAND** WAS MOTOWN

*From wringers to luxury cars to beer,
Peerless was a pioneer of reinvention*



Peerless at its peak. The 1905 Touring Car.

Western Reserve Historical Society

By Gregory DL Morris

CLEVELAND WAS THE MOTOR CITY FIRST, before Detroit. And before Duisenberg gave rise to the term “doozie,” Peerless was just that: peerless. In the early days of automobiles the Peerless Motor Car Company set the standard for engineering innovation and for luxury in an era when motoring was much more adventurous than it has become a century later.

But well before and well after its heyday as a car maker, Peerless was an early innovator and pioneer of two more ephemeral essentials in business history: tenacity and reinvention. It was formed out of an alliance between the Mercantile Manufacturing Company of Cleveland and the Peerless Wringer Company of Cincinnati. In 1869 the two companies merged and formed the Peerless Wringer & Manufacturing Company, which produced washing wringers. The company later switched to the manufacture of bicycles, and then, as was typical of the times, began producing automobiles. The company would eventually end up brewing beer.

The last vestige of the direct corporate lineage did not cease operations until 1984, which means Peerless, its predecessors and successors did business over 115 years. Peerless automobiles have car clubs and legions of loyal fans, but the company may be the most successful firm that hardly anyone remembers.

The company began manufacturing automobiles and parts in 1901 and was renamed the Peerless Motor Car Company two years later. In 1902 Peerless hired Louis P. Mooers, who designed the first completely original Peerless automobile. By the next year, the Peerless was the costliest vehicle being built in the United States, with a price tag ranging from \$2,800 to \$11,000 (equivalent to \$80,000 to \$320,000 in 2015). And that was at a time when an industrial factory worker made less than \$1,000 a year.

By 1905 the company became known for its high quality, well-built luxury touring vehicles. According to the Peerless Motor Car Club, “Peerless had many firsts in design, such as: an engine under the hood; a drive shaft with floating rear

axle; a stamped steel frame; the first side entrance tounge; a tilting steering wheel; an accelerator pedal; the use of aluminum to save weight; and the first enclosed body. The first starters and electric lights, and the list goes on and on.”

The fact that northeast Ohio in general, and Cleveland in particular, were the hotbed of industrial innovation around the turn of the century should be no surprise. Raw materials, water transportation and large population centers as sources of workers and customers were all readily at hand.

The world’s first commercial oil well had been dug at Petrolia, Ontario, in 1858, and the more famous Drake well drilled at Titusville, Pennsylvania, the next year, both only about 100 miles from Cleveland. Oil was soon discovered in Ohio as well. John D. Rockefeller was a young merchant in Cleveland in the 1880s who noticed both the strong demand for kerosene, and the great variation of quality. He formed a company to refine a reliable, standard grade.

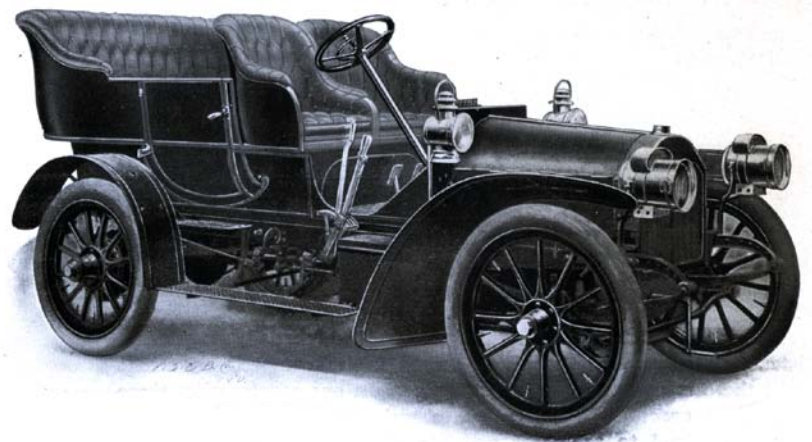
“From 1896 through 1907 Cleveland was the first motor city,” said Derek Moore, curator of transportation at the Western Reserve Historical Society (WRHS) in Cleveland. “There were more vehicles made here than in any other city in the country. Cleveland was already a well-established industrial city. A lot of immigrants with skilled trades came to the area because of the industries. Alexander

Winton, an early automotive pioneer, came here from Scotland. He started trying to fit an internal combustion engine to a bicycle, and then moved to carriages.”

Both Winton and Henry Ford brought out their first models in 1896. Indeed the density in and around Cleveland was part of the reason that Ford—once he had fixed on the low-cost, high-volume assembly line approach—sought space and suzerainty outside the next big industrial city west along the Great Lakes: Detroit.

Throughout the 1910s Peerless produced some of the largest engines to appear in American autos. As the 1920s progressed, the company realized that the market for their large, expensive vehicles was limited and began production of lower priced, medium-size autos. The last year of production for the Peerless Motor Car Company was 1931, at which time it was working on an all-aluminum, V-16 powered prototype sedan. The prototype would be the last vehicle built by a Cleveland-based automobile company. With the end of Prohibition, the Peerless Motor Car Company became the Brewing Corporation of America and began producing Carling beer.

“Peerless is the story of a business trying to stay alive and up to date doing what seemed most in demand,” said Moore. “One modern analogy is Google. It started as a search engine, but now does many other things too. The 1905 model was probably the peak for Peerless. Theirs



Model 9
24 H. P.
Touring Car
Price
\$3,200

1905 ad for the Peerless Touring Car, priced at \$3,200.

Western Reserve Historical Society



Unique prototype of the Peerless all-aluminum touring sedan, 1932.

were the most-expensive, highest quality cars in the US. They had precision-built engines; the vehicles were durable and did not have a lot of maintenance issues. The luxury market was the only market at the time, and Peerless had the best engines, transmissions and bodies.”

Flush with success, Peerless built a new factory at Quincy Avenue and East 93rd Street, in the neighborhood known as Fairfax. It grew to a huge complex sprawling over many blocks.

The Crash of 1929 and the Great Depression hit the automobile industry hard, and the hardest at the high end. “Through the mid-’20s sales were slumping for Peerless,” said Moore. “They were trying to get down market to a larger customer base by

The Owen Magnetic: A Hybrid Ahead of Its Time

In the broad and deep automobile collection of the Western Reserve Historical Society (WRSH) in Cleveland is a dazzling DeLorean coupe in bright brushed aluminum. It looks fast sitting still with its iconic low, wicked, wedge profile and gull-wing doors. The DeLorean does not have a flux capacitor, but the WRHS does have a real back-to-the-future vehicle in its possession. The power train in this automobile is a gasoline engine that drives a generator, which powers the wheels. It is instantly recognizable today as the basic hybrid drive.

But this is no post-millennial eco-econo-bubble. This sumptuous butter-yellow touring sedan is a 1916 Owen Magnetic. It predated the modern hybrids by almost a century.

It bears mentioning that while gasoline was about 20 cents a gallon in 1916, that is roughly equivalent to \$3 a gallon today, so fuel was not cheaper. If anything, given prevailing wage rates, it was more expensive, but only the wealthy owned automobiles, so the price of gas was hardly a general concern at the time. Even with those fuel prices, the Owen Magnetic was not an effort to economize. It was a classic embodiment—in steel, glass and leather—of a manufacturing company doing its best to survive and adapt the best it knew how.

Experiments in automobiles date to the late 1600s. Steam, the external combustion

engine, was the high technology of the day. Isaac Newton developed a carriage that was propelled by a jet of steam, but it was a novelty. Practical transport in later decades focused on mechanical drive. French and English inventors, including James Watt, crafted working steam carriages in the 1770s and 1780s, about the time of US independence; no small irony there, considering the enduring love Americans have for cars. Steam carriages were common in England by the 1830s.

Vehicles driven by internal combustion engines were developed in the 1860s, about the time of the American Civil War. The contribution of German engineer Gottlieb Daimler was an efficient four-cycle, single-cylinder engine in 1885. He soon developed a V-type two-cylinder engine. Karl Benz was a contemporary, initially working independently. In the US, Charles and Frank Duryea began selling their horseless carriages in the early 1890s. Two enduring names—Alexander Winton and Henry Ford—introduced their first models in 1896.

All through those decades there was a great deal of debate as to whether gasoline, electric or steam power would prove to be the most desirable and effective means of providing propulsion. All three had pronounced advantages and disadvantages, but after the introduction of the electric starter in 1912 gasoline engines

became dominant. No more getting out to crank, risking a broken arm or black eye. But even with smoother starting, shifting gears was a burden. The Owen Magnetic was an attempt to combine the unlimited range of gasoline-powered vehicles with the smoothness of electric vehicles.

In the 1880s Justin Entz, of Philadelphia, patented a design for a gasoline engine to drive a generator with the resulting electrical power sent to a motor which then drove the wheels. In theory the Entz design would combine the quiet, smooth operation of an electric motor with the greater power of a gasoline engine. As there were no gears to shift, operation of the vehicle would be simplified.

In 1912 Walter Baker, of the Baker Motor Vehicle Company in Cleveland, purchased the Entz patent. In 1914 the R.M. Owen Company began producing the Owen Magnetic under license from Baker. The next year Baker merged with the Rauch & Lang Carriage Company, another manufacturer of electric vehicles in Cleveland. The new company, which focused on the electric-gasoline automobile, absorbed the R.M. Owen Company and production of the Owen Magnetic.

The Owen Magnetic had stately styling to appeal to the fashionable set. However, it was very complicated to drive. The appeal of smooth gear shifting could not overcome its drawbacks: it was difficult

offering more affordable vehicles, but it never went very well.”

In 1931 Peerless management made the triage decision to abandon automobiles entirely and shift to something completely different: beer. At that point it was evident to all that Prohibition had been an utter disaster, and repeal was close at hand. Peerless contracted with the Carling Brewing Company of Canada. When the states ratified the 21st Amendment in 1933, what had been Peerless Motor Car Company became the Brewing Company of America. Its first foray, Red Cap ale in 1934, was a flop, but the next offering was Carling’s Black Label, a big seller then that still exists.

In 1954 the company changed its name to the Carling Brewing Co. and eventually

bought or built six other breweries around the country. Carling ceased operations at the Cleveland brewery in 1971, but the old plant soldiered on for C. Schmidt & Sons of Philadelphia until 1984. Through the late ’80s and ’90s the idle complex was demolished in stages. Today it is the site of the Cuyahoga County Juvenile Justice Center, a fitting use for a site that saw more than a century of driving and drinking, though never at the same time.

There is one further irony to the Peerless story. In 1930 and ’31, in a last effort to recapture the innovation that built the company, Peerless engineers designed and built a prototype of an all-aluminum touring sedan, from the engines to the frames, axles, wheels and body panels. When

Peerless ceased car making at the end of 1931, one complete vehicle was assembled, the unique 1932 Peerless, that now sits gleaming in the atrium of the WRHS.

Flash forward 83 years to early 2015. Ford Motor Company, of Detroit, introduced its latest innovation in lightness, strength and durability: the all-aluminum F-150 pick-up truck. \$

Gregory DL Morris is an independent business journalist, principal of Enterprise & Industry Historic Research (www.enterpriseandindustry.com) and an active member of the Museum’s editorial board.

to maintain, heavy and one of the most expensive vehicles made in the United States. During WWI the Baker R&L Company turned to war production and stopped making the Owen Magnetic; it virtually ceased auto production after the war.

The Owen Magnetic lives on in the hearts and minds of engineers and car collectors with its before-its-time innovation. It even had regenerative braking, where the flow of power was reversed,

using the momentum of the car to turn the generator and charge the battery. The drag that produced slows the vehicle. That is an essential part of hybrids today and is also used in some locomotives.

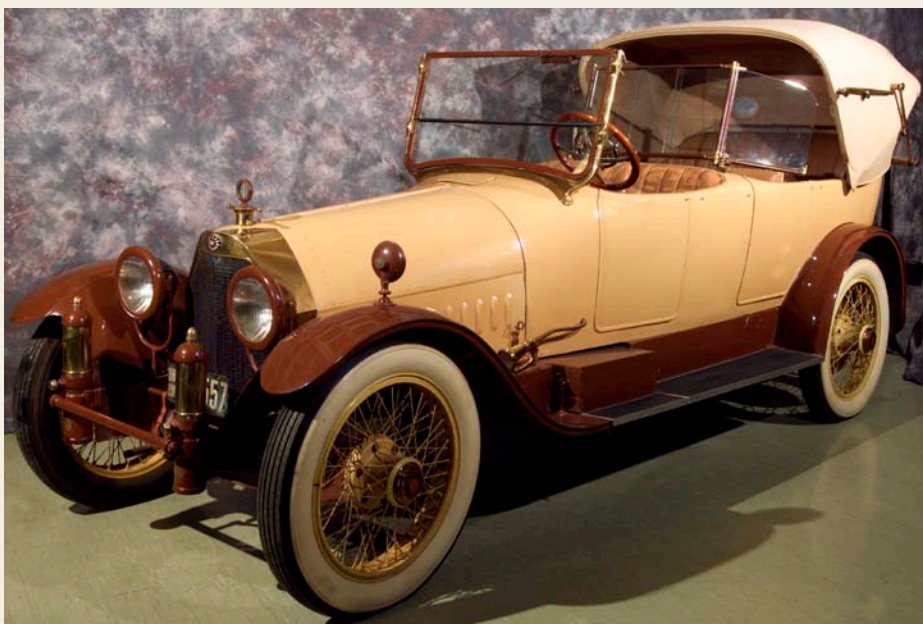
The Owen Magnetic could almost be steampunk, but steam is the one technology it does not use. There are other preserved samples, including an operating model owned by renowned car collector Jay Leno; appropriately enough his is electric blue.

Leno and his Owen Magnetic were profiled in a 2012 issue of *Popular Mechanics*. The article states that only 700 vehicles were produced. “The ads called it the car of a thousand speeds. But as is sometimes the case, being better isn’t always enough. The car had to be competitively priced. A 1917 Ford Model T cost \$360; Cadillacs ran about two grand. An Owen Magnetic started at \$3,700 and went up from there.”

Derek Moore, curator of transportation at the WRHS, put the Owen Magnetic into context: “From a technological standpoint, the Owen Magnetic was more similar to the diesel-electric locomotive of today than the modern hybrid automobiles — they have a more complex drive train and power-transfer system.”

Moore added that while the hybrids of today are designed to save fuel, the Owen Magnetic was intended to save the electric car. “It was the successor to the straight battery-powered electric, a modernization with the application of a gasoline engine up front. But it was not a commercial success.”

At least not for the manufacturers. From an engineering and manufacturing perspective, it was successful at least as a proof of concept. An estimated three million hybrid vehicles were sold in the US between 2000 and 2014. Somewhere, Justin Entz is smiling.



Owen Magnetic, 1916.

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