

RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Sonoma County Cars in 1909

by John Schubert - 2006

Occasionally when doing research for an article, I have stumbled across a short news story, advertisement, government bulletin or list that will set me off on a chase to run down some tid-bits of information to satisfy the hunger for history. That's what occurred when I was reading, out of curiosity, in a 1909 resource entitled The San Francisco Blue Book - the Fashionable Private Address Directory. In it was a list of 72 pages long in fine print that has all the automobiles registered in .

With the turn of the 20th century, the Industrial Revolution had matured. The mechanical age was coming on strongly, enough so that the dreamers and tinkerers could put their infant ideas to the test of research and development. The most extensive of today's businesses to come from these beginnings is the automobile. By 1905, auto names included Cadillac, Ford, Olds and Packard, as well as lesser knowns like, Duryea. Owners of automobiles had to register their cars with the California Secretary of State, the predecessor of the Department of Motor Vehicles. The state levied a tax on their autos and also assigned them a number.



1905 Cadillac

The first permanent license plates to be attached to cars were not issued until 1914. Drivers' licenses were not issued until 1916, although some counties started the process as far back as 1904. Chauncey A. LeBaron, at age 24, was issued license #58 to ambulate about in his Oldsmobile. By 1909 there were in excess of 18,000 autos registered in the state, an average of one car per 132 people. The state population was 2,377,550. Over 50 percent of the registered autos were located in the Los Angeles/Pasadena area.



On the other hand, some counties had no automobiles registered whatever, although was definitely not among them. In 1909 had a population of 48,400. At the same time, Sonoma County had 262 vehicles listed on the state's rolls, or about one car for every 108 residents. Naturally, a majority of the registered autos were found in and around local towns. (total: 87), Healdsburg (29), Geyserville (11), Cloverdale (16). The remaining 24 autos were sprinkled around the county. While most car owners had only one car, there were several well-to-do families that could afford three or more - W. T. Albertson, Healdsburg; C.W. Savage; Sam Talmadge; H. F. Smith and J. Steger. Among those families 95 years ago are some recognizable names: Burbank, McNear, Casini, Crane, Cnopius, Brainard, LeBaron, Passalacqua, and Nisson.

Not to be left out, there were 12 ladies with autos. They were Shirley D. Burrie, Mrs. John Cnopius, Jr., Mrs. R. C. Rohr, and Mrs. H. Pohlman, Mrs. W. H. Pepper, Mrs. M.C. Erikson, Mrs. A. E. Fennell and

SONOMA COUNTY CARS IN THE EARLY 1900s

Mrs. S. Turner; in Healdsburg Mrs. A. W. Scott, Jr., and Mrs. J. B. Wainwright; and in Graton, Mrs. B. J. Gamsby. Some 14 doctors out of a group of 70 in the county could rattle their way around the countryside on house calls. No known vehicles were owned by any government agency. If there were any emergency vehicles - fire, police, and ambulance - none were registered.

Prior to 1905, pioneer automobile agents in first started out as cyclery shops. The earliest in were George Schelling's Schelling Cyclery on and F. J. Wiseman's Santa Rosa Cycler. Four years later, five more automobile agents were in business: O. O. Houts, J. A. Brown and in Healdsburg; A. L. McFee, J. H. Madison and the Sonoma Garage.

A search reveals that no auto makes of today appeared on the marquees for businesses during this period. In 1909, Schelling sold Maxwell, Rambler and Studebaker's. Wiseman advertised Reo and White autos. Houts sold Reos along with the Stoddard-Dayton.

California began to issue license plates for cars in 1914. The plates were made of heavy gauge metal. The 1914 plate was red with white letters, the 1915 yellow with black letters. Interestingly, the plates were manufactured not in but at the Ingo-Rich Manufacturing Co. This article first appeared in the Sonoma Historian and is reprinted with permission from both the author and the Sonoma County Historical Society.

With The Automobile Came Formal Roads. Henry Ford's introduction of the low-priced, highly efficient Model T in 1908 inspired our formal road system. Remember these were still the days of steel wheels, springboards and other horse drawn transportation. The widespread popularity of the Model T created pressure for the federal government to become more directly involved in road development. Bodega's H. C. McCaughey in 1917 bemoaned the fact that more frequent auto travel was tearing up the roads at an accelerated pace and that members of the Ocean View Club were no longer willing to navigate the sandy road to Salmon Creek.

With rural interests adding to the battle cry of "Get the farmers out of the mud!" Congress passed the Federal-Aid Road Act of 1916. It created the Federal-Aid Highway Program under which funds were to be made available on a continuous basis to state highway agencies to assist in road improvements. Emergency road service for early "automobilists" usually involved a willing farmer, a team of his horses, and the exchange of a few dollars.

