



History Explorer

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

www.LansingHistory.org

June 2012

Exhibit Opening A Success!

A big thank you to everyone who came out on June 1 & 2 for HSGL's first exhibit, *When Everyone Shopped Downtown!* About 130 people attended the event during the opening weekend! The exhibit will be open again on Sundays July 1, August 5, and September 2 from 1:00-4:00pm, or by appointment by calling (517) 282-0671.

Bidding Farewell

In June, HSGL will bid farewell to three long-term board members who have served our organization faithfully throughout the years, Dick Hathaway, Doug Johnson, and David Votta. Thank you very much, gentlemen, for all that you've done for HSGL!

Evergreen Cemetery Tour

Mark your calendars for HSGL's annual cemetery tour on Sunday, August 19, 2012. This year we'll be going to Evergreen Cemetery, located on Mt. Hope Rd. The tour will run, rain or shine, from 2:00-3:30pm.

Silent Auction

Our annual fall silent auction is scheduled for Saturday, October 6, 2012 from 4:00-7:00pm. We're having it this year in the old Michigan (Strand) Theatre, located at 215 S. Washington Avenue. Look for more information about the auction coming soon!

Lansing Preservation Awards

Do you know of an exterior historic rehabilitation project in the city of Lansing deserving of recognition? Nominate it for a Lansing Preservation award! Preservation Lansing is honoring people who are saving our old buildings. Work done in the last two years may qualify for a heavily publicized nomination and winners will get recognition and a plaque at large event in

October. The nomination form and criteria can be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/PreservationLansing>. Nominations due August 1st. E-mail preservationlansing@gmail.com or call 517-281-5919 with questions.

Annual Meeting

On Saturday, June 16th at 10:30am, the HSGL will have our annual meeting in downtown Lansing. The meeting will consist of a walking tour of Washington Ave. called *Behind the Facades*, in which we'll talk about some of the most prominent facades downtown, the various businesses that have occupied the storefronts over the years, and take a peak at the back of a couple of the buildings too! The tour will meet at the corner of Washington and Michigan Aves. The tour will last 60 – 90 minutes, and is free, though donations will be gratefully accepted.

After the tour we'll have a quick business meeting, where we'll vote on the slate of officers found below, and then enjoy lunch at Michigan Brewing Company. Please note that if you want to stay for lunch, you'll need to call 517-282-0671 or send an e-mail to info@lansinghistory.org to RSVP and reserve a spot. Please RSVP by June 8, 2012. Lunch, which will be ordered individually when we've completed our business, will be paid for by each individual upon the completion of their meal. We hope you can attend!

The proposed slate of officers to be voted on at the Annual Meeting is:

- President: Valerie Marvin
- Vice President: Bill Castanier
- Secretary: Adam Beckwith
- Treasurer: Nathalie Winans
- Trustee 2012 – 2014: Lille Foster
- Trustee 2012 – 2014: Zig Olds
- Trustee 2012 – 2014: Harry Emmons
- Trustee 2012 – 2014: Jesse LaSorda
- Trustee 2012 – 2014: Rep. Joan Bauer

Henry Ford's Letter to R.E. Olds

by Jim Neal

Sometimes it's interesting to note how much history is touched on by one small item. A good example is a letter in the collections of the Forest Park Library & Archives of the Capital Area District Library's downtown Lansing branch. It is a letter dated "9/19/04" from Henry Ford to R. E. Olds. The letter touches on a number of significant happenings in Lansing, Detroit and even national automotive history.

The first noteworthy item is the attractive Ford Motor Company letterhead. Ford is not the president of the company that bears his name. Similarly, R. E. Olds before him joined with a group of Detroit industrialists in 1897 to organize what became the Olds Motor Works, with Olds as a minority shareholder. That arrangement proved unworkable, and in January 1904, Olds departed the company bearing his name. It took Henry Ford another decade to secure complete control of Ford Motor Company.

Also of note is the address: "Works & Office 688-692 Mack Avenue." Founded in 1903, Ford Motor Company initially rented a frame building on Mack Avenue until 1904, when the famed Piquette Avenue plant was completed. Thus, Ford's letter to Olds could have been one of the last written from the Company's Mack Avenue location. On the other hand, maybe the always-thrifty Henry Ford was simply using up the supply of old stationery.

The addressee of the letter is also interesting. The "R. E. Olds Company" was the name of the first automotive company formed by R. E. Olds after his departure from the Olds Motor Works. The R. E. Olds Company was incorporated on August 16, 1904. Getting

wind of this, the Olds Motor Works, which started using the trade name "Oldsmobile" in 1901, threatened to sue if the name "Olds" appeared in any manner in R. E. Olds' new automotive venture. Mr. Olds' tendency toward expediency prevailed, as on September 27, 1904, he changed the name of his company to "The Reo Car Company", and shortly thereafter, to "The Reo Motor Car Company." Reo was not a word but an acronym for its founder's initials, Ransom Eli Olds. Not surprisingly, Henry Ford apparently had not received the news of the name change when he penned his 9/19/04 letter.

The second paragraph reflects the press coverage of the spectacular news of R. E. Olds re-entering the automobile manufacturing business. Olds' pioneering efforts can be placed in perspective by the following comparison: In the span from 1901 to 1903, as other early builders of horseless carriages, such as Duryea and Winton, were measuring success in terms of building dozens or scores of vehicles, R. E. Olds' output was 425 in 1901; 2,500 in 1902; and 3,976 in 1903. Automobiles had never before been built in such volume. While to some extent Ford's second sentence adopted the courtly letter writing style of the day, still, to some extent, the paragraph might also reflect Ford's deference and respect for the world's premier automobile builder of the day.

Returning to the first paragraph, Ford says his letter was in response to Olds' "favor of the 9th" This probably meant October 9, 1904. If so, that day was in the midst of a very busy time for R. E. Olds and the emerging Reo Motor Car Company. From August through October 1904, Olds and Reo were preoccupied with (i) designing and, on September 5, 1904, ground breaking of an-all new plant on South Washington Avenue; (ii) ordering needed machinery and renting temporary space in the Lansing Pure Food Company's factory; and (iii) designing, building and testing a prototype of Reo's first auto. In fact, the prototype Reo was being tested in October 1904. However, as early as August 29, 1904, attorneys for the Selden Patent had contacted Olds with the threat that any new automobile manufacturing without a license would be a violation of the patent, and Reo would be sued. Thus, it seems likely Olds' October 9, 1904 letter to Ford dealt with the looming threat of the Selden Patent.

Historical Society of Greater Lansing	
P.O. Box 12095 ~ Lansing, MI 48901 www.LansingHistory.org	
<i>Officers & Board Members</i>	
Valerie Marvin - President	Harry Emmons - Trustee
Bill Castanier - Vice President	David Votta - Trustee
Richard Hathaway - Secretary	Lille Foster - Trustee
Doug Johnson - Treasurer	Adam Beckwith - Trustee
Nathalie Winans - Trustee	

ADDRESS ALL COMMUNICATIONS TO THE COMPANY.

Ford Motor Company

JOHN S. GRAY, PRESIDENT.
HENRY FORD, VICE PRES. & GENL. MGR.
ALEX. Y. MALCOMSON, TREASURER.
JAMES COUZENS, SECRETARY & BUSINESS MGR.

AUTOMOBILE MANUFACTURERS.

WORKS & OFFICE,
688-692 MACK AVENUE.

Detroit, Michigan, 9/19/04.

Mr. R. E. Olds,
c/o R. E. Olds Co.,
Lansing, Mich.

Dear Sir:-

I have your favor of the 9th, and beg to state that the reason for the delay in replying to same is that I have been out of the city considerably.

I had noticed from the various news papers and trade papers that you had entered into the automobile manufacturing business again, and I certainly wish you the success you deserve in your new undertaking.

I was not aware of your personal position in regard to the Selden Patent Association. I only of course knew of the position that the Olds Motor Works took. I had supposed that you were intimately acquainted with the workings of this association, and on this account I am more than pleased to know of your position and certainly value your opinion very highly on this account. I am glad to say that our company has not the slightest inclination to be a member of such an association on any basis. The suit is still in progress and out attorneys are now in the East taking testimony in our behalf. I would be very glad, at any time, to talk over the matter personally with you, at which time we can go into matters very much more thoroughly than we can by letter.

Thanking you for the information contained in your letter, and hoping to see you at an early date, I beg to remain
Yours truly,

Henry Ford

George B. Selden (1846-1922) was a patent attorney and inventor who in 1895 was granted a U. S. patent for an automobile consisting of a machine carrying an engine which propelled a four-wheeled vehicle. Selden had a credible argument to have patented the automobile. However, his patented vehicle was powered by the Brayton style engine rather than the Otto Engine being used by most early builders of horseless carriages. Nevertheless, Selden succeeded in coercing a number of early automobile builders into obtaining a patent license. One builder who stubbornly refused to recognize the patent was Henry Ford. He never purchased a license or paid royalties to the holder of the Patent. Those who ignored the patent were sued for patent infringement. Those who caved in and paid royalties, which were substantial, became part of an association called ALAM, the Association of Licensed Automobile Manufacturers. Stated in a modern context, the Selden Patent would be akin to a mid 20th century electronics tinkerer having patented the computer, and then going on to demand a royalty on the sale of each PC or hand-held electronic device.

The third paragraph touches on the significance of the Selden Patent and the burden it placed on early builders. Ford inquires of Olds, wanting to know what would be his role in the controversy. The Olds Motor Works was among the first to accede to the Patent. In fact, the ALAM was headed by Fred Smith, Olds' long-time nemesis within the Olds Motor Works. Smith seems to have placed the Olds Motor Works in the ALAM camp without Olds' support or approval. Olds did not accept the validity of the Patent and, while forming Reo, ignored ALAM's August 29, 1904 letter warning of the consequences if a license was not obtained. Thus, it seems likely Olds' October 9, 1904 letter informed Ford that he, and Reo, would not assume the Olds Motor Works' position on the Patent. Such a statement would have prompted Ford's response ". . . I am more than pleased to know of your position and certainly value your opinion very highly on this account." Ford knew he would need strong allies in his battle with the Selden Patent, and there could be no better ally than R. E. Olds, who was among the earliest and most successful of the American auto pioneers. Olds began building self-propelled vehicles in 1887, and is considered the only inventor who experimented with three different sources

of motive power: steam, electricity and internal combustion.

Reo production began in early 1905 without a license, with the predictable result of Reo being added as a defendant in the patent infringement suit. However, Olds was content to let Ford lead the defense. The lawsuit progressed at a plodding pace before the Federal District Court. Despite Olds' testimony at trial, in September 1909, the trial court ruled in favor of the Selden Patent. The loss again illustrates Olds' practical nature. Rather than join Ford in an appeal, Olds (together with Packard and a few other major auto companies) promptly caved in and joined the ALAM. In contrast, Henry Ford stood firm against the Patent. Ford's vigorous defense of his position, even after initial defeat in 1909, was foreshadowed by Ford's 9/19/04 letter to Olds, when Ford vowed, "I am glad to say that our company has not the slightest inclination to be a member of such an association on any basis."

In the end, Ford prevailed. The result of Ford's appeal was a reversal of the trial court's ruling. The Court of Appeals ruled in 1911 that the Selden Patent did not apply to the type of gasoline-powered autos being produced by Ford (or by Reo). This had been Olds' belief all along, but it took Ford's determined fight to finally void the Patent.

A few inconsequential but perhaps interesting items are worth noting. Typos have always plagued our correspondence. Mr. Ford's typist had one mistake that modern spell check wouldn't have detected. In the third paragraph, tenth line, the writer almost certainly intended "our attorneys." Secondly, note the strength and clarity of Mr. Ford's signature, almost certainly by his hand. Isn't this unlike many modern signatures that frequently bear more resemblance to modern art or chicken scratchings than to careful cursive? R. E. Olds' signature on other documents is likewise always clear and legible. Lastly, the meaning of the lower right-hand corner boxed "A" or "H" and "X" or "Y" is a mystery.

Henry Ford's letter to R. E. Olds provides interesting and useful insights into a major issue in the early automobile industry, and provides significant insight into the character of the sender and addressee. We are fortunate the letter is preserved in the Forest Park Library & Archives.

HSGL Needs You!

In the year, HSGL has really made some big moves, including holding two fundraisers for a future museum, acquiring a small office/exhibit area in the Creyts home, reviving our efforts to collect Lansing history artifacts, and now launching our first pop-up exhibit! Our board has worked very, very hard to accomplish all of this. In order to keep moving forward, though, we need your help! Please fill out and send in the form inside to and tell us how you can help HSGL in the future. We need volunteers who are willing to help with a variety of events, including our cemetery tour in August, our auction in October, our next pop-up exhibit in November, and other future events.

- I would like to present information at the cemetery tour
- I would like to work at the auction
- I would like to donate an item to the auction
- I would like to help with future exhibits
- I would like to write a newsletter article (1,000-1,200 words)
- I would like to greet people at HSGL events
- I would like to help with the spring house tour
- I would be willing to serve on the board of directors
- I would like to help with fundraising
- Other _____

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ Zip _____

Phone _____

Email _____

Please return this form to:
HSGL, P.O. Box 12095, Lansing, MI 48901
or email your response to:
info@lansinghistory.org



Thank You For Your Support!



Historical Society of Greater Lansing
P.O. Box 12095
Lansing, MI 48901

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

Historical Society of Greater Lansing - Membership Application

Please accept my application for:

- New Membership
- Renewal Membership
- Gift Membership

in the Historical Society of Greater Lansing

I have enclosed:

- \$20 Individual Membership
- \$30 Family Membership
- \$100 Business Membership
- \$_____ Additional Gift to HSGL

Member Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Telephone _____ Email Address _____

- Please Send The Newsletter
Via Email

Make Checks Payable to
Historical Society of Greater Lansing

*The Historical Society of Greater Lansing is a 501 (c) (3) non-profit corporation.
Thank you for your support of our programs and activities.*