

## **Derby represented brief career of automaker** **By Neolle Grosse WDM Artifacts**

In the 1920s, Derby Motor Cars made automobiles that were “Built of the Best.” But the Saskatoon-based company suddenly ran out of gas, leaving investors with few answers.

Records suggest that Derby Motor Cars Ltd. Sold only a few hundred automobiles before folding in 1927. The Saskatoon factory was abandoned with company papers still stacked on the board room table.

Ever since, people have debated whether Derby automobiles were actually manufactured in Saskatoon. What is known is that Derby cars were identical to those of the Davis company in the United States. Davis cars were sent from Indiana to Saskatoon and the nameplates on the front of the radiators were changed for the Canadian market.

But the recollections of Saskatoon residents like C.A. Wheaton support the argument that Derby cars were assembled in Saskatoon, if only briefly.

Wheaton, 90, recalls a boyhood expedition that led him and two friends to the defunct Derby factory on 11th Street, former home of the Marshall Tractor Company and present location of Mitchell’s Gourmet Foods. They “toured” the abandoned warehouse and made some discoveries about the Derby company.

“It was a bright summer day, and we were up on 11th Street,” Wheaton recalls. The trio passed by the Derby factory. Wheaton says he thinks the company has shut down only a few weeks before but the building already looked empty and abandoned.

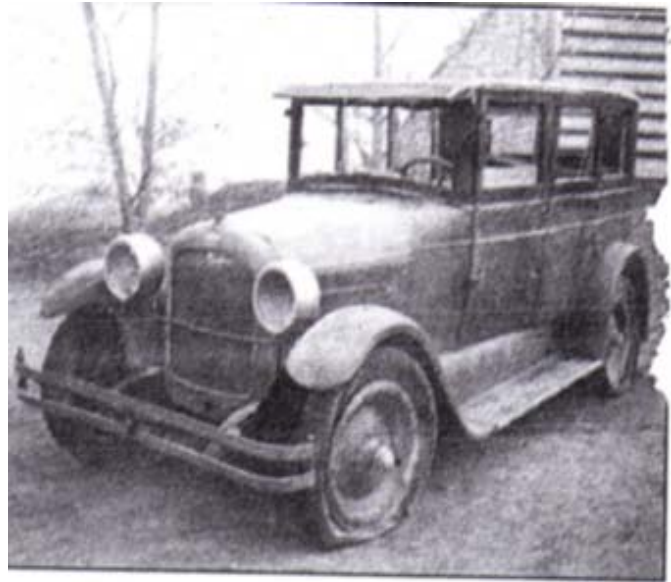
The boys tried the door of the factory. It was unlocked, so they ducked out of the sunlight and into the huge warehouse. “There didn’t appear to be any equipment,” Wheaton says. “All you could see were parts of cars, but there was no evidence of an assembly line.” But along the north wall of the factory were about a dozen Derby car frames, stacked on end and painted black.

The boys ventured upstairs, where they found a scene that Wheaton describes as eerie and sad. The Derby company boardroom was located on the second floor of the factory. “There was a huge table,” Wheaton says. Papers were stacked neatly around the table as if waiting for board members to return. “It looked like they just got up from the meeting, and left,” he says.

The stacks of papers included letters from Saskatchewan people who had invested in the company and were anxious for word on their savings. “I remember one letter from a widow who had invested all her money in the company.” Wheaton says. “She was writing to say that she was expecting dividends and hadn’t received any.” After about two hours of looking around, the boys left the empty building. “We just walked out and pulled the door closed,” says Wheaton. They were likely among the last people to see the Derby factory before it became a meat packing plant.

What is known about Derby Motors Cars is that the company was run by Louis Arsenault in Winnipeg. Arsenault originally manufactured vehicles under the Winnipeg Motor Cars name, but in 1924, he moved the company to the old Marshall tractor factory in Saskatoon. Arsenault adapted American Davis cars by changing the nameplates and adding Derby tire covers. “Derby” was a convenient choice for the name because it had the same number of letters. Derby cars had Red Seal Continental six-cylinder motors, and came in four models: the Series 92 touring phaeton, which sold for \$1995, the Man-o-War roadster, the Legionaire, and the Series 93, which came in sedan, coupe and five-passenger touring models that sold for \$1750. The cars were displayed at local exhibitions and advertised as comfortable, stylish automobiles for Prairie drivers.

Derby Motor Cars tried to raise enough money to enter full-scale vehicle production, but apparently met with little success. Arsenault continued to import car parts from across the border, finally ceasing sales in 1927.



—WDM photo  
**The 1926 Derby Car in the WDM Collection**

Though little is known about the Derby company, a few of its products fortunately still exist. In 1971, the Western Development Museum acquired a Derby sedan with a serial number that matches the 1926 American Davis model 93. It is thought to be one of only about 50 cars of this model that bore the Derby nameplate.

“It’s like Studebaker or Packard-----a lot of cars just disappeared,” Wheaton says of the time. During the early 1900s there was a flourish of activity from small independent automobile companies, but over time, they were increasingly absorbed a few large manufacturers.

Derby Motor Cars was one of the last independent automobile companies on the Prairies, joining other Saskatchewan firms like the Moose Jaw Standard Auto Company in Canadian automotive history.

Grosse is a journalist who has researched a multitude of artifacts in the WDM’s collection and will write about them on an individual basis in a series of artifacts in The Saskatoon Sun.