

# MACK'S SWELL CAR

*Submitted by Village of Richfield Springs Historian Harriett Geywits*

"Miss Lucy Green was society's queen and of beaux she had nearly a score - some were near, some were far, but each had a car, and each day added a few more. Miss Green was a daisy, for motors was crazy, so called the boys to her and said - you all want my hand, so now just understand, the boy with the best car I'll wed."

This was the first verse of a popular 1915 song which was used as a marketing tool by the Maxwell Motor Company. The early 1900s was the time when the idea of retiring the horse as the main form of transportation and using a vehicle for all such needs was introduced. One of several manufacturers of the automobile at that time, Benjamin Briscoe joined Jonathan Dixon Maxwell to form the Maxwell-Briscoe Company in North Tarrytown, NY, beginning in 1904. Due to a fire destroying their plant, the company moved in 1907 to New Castle, Indiana. Later the company had plants in Highland Park, Michigan, and Dayton, Ohio, and was considered one of the three top automobile firms in America along with General Motors and Ford.

People in this area took advantage of this new form of transportation. Some of their purchases of new cars were duly noted in the Mercury as follows: In 1909, Mr. and Mrs. F. Tansen of Fonda, came to Richfield in a Maxwell and lunched at the Earlington. It was reported in 1915 in Exeter that C. V. Coe was a proud new owner of a Maxwell as was Emmet Winters. A big purchase of this car by Mr. and Mrs. Fred Cooke of Springfield Center occurred in 1917. Residents of Cedar Valley were made aware in 1919 that Harry Mathews had purchased a new Maxwell and would be out and about as soon as the local roads became dry, and in 1922, Elmer Atzel of Warren became the proud owner of a new Maxwell. It was reported by the company that by 1914, they had sold 60,000 cars.

The local distributor for what was advertised as 'the good Maxwell' was Williams and House, as noted in an article from April 1922: "One of the new series of Good Maxwell cars was driven by Bob Scharum, the New York State representative, who spent the day in Richfield springs with Williams & House, the local Maxwell dealers. While here, Bob put the car through its paces. Though the car is a stock model and has been driven 9000 miles through country roads in all kinds of weather, it was able to show 55 miles an hour and was able to negotiate Paines Hollow Hill



in high gear. During the demonstration, the car was driven at twenty miles an hour and thrown into reverse without damage to gears or mechanism. This particular stunt has been done on this one car more than 300 times on various demonstrations. The rear end construction is the development of years of study. No test is too severe as it has been proven by the development of years of study. No test is too severe for it, as has been proven by the long list of long list of demonstrations. Other features speak for themselves at every point on the road. The springs on the new Maxwell are built to withstand the hardest usage and at the same time gives the car a perfect balance that insures easy riding. The four-cylinder motor is one of the greatest engineering features of recent years. It is practically noiseless and free from vibration and takes acceleration as easy as a steam engine. The Lynite feather-weight pistons with their natural expansion achieve perfect compression at all times and almost does away with carbonization. The car will throttle down to 3 miles an hour in high gear and will give upward of 20 miles on one gallon of gas going from 589 to 600 miles on a quart of oil."

In May of that year, Everette Williams was allotted territory from Jordanville to Milford for the sale of the Maxwell. At that time, he had delivered three cars and had two more in-route and was always available to do demonstrations.

Business was good and in 1923, Williams leased a barn on Lake Street to use as a showroom to exhibit the new Maxwell touring car.

This was one of the first car companies to market specifically to women. A great deal of publicity was generated in 1909 when they sponsored Alice

Huyler Ramsey (1886-1983) as the first woman to drive coast-to-coast across the United States. She was an early advocate of women drivers. Her husband, Congressman John R. Ramsey, had bought her a new Maxwell runabout in 1908 and she entered the American Automobile Association's endurance race, being one of only two women to participate. She won a bronze medal. Her accomplishments were noted by the publicity department of Maxwell-Briscoe and she was asked to make the coast-to-coast trip. They supplied her with a green, four-cylinder, 30 horsepower, 1909 touring car for the journey along with assistance and parts as needed. At that time, women were not encouraged to drive cars, so this publicity stunt would also fit in with Maxwell's strategy of specifically marketing to women. It took fifty-nine days to cross the country with only 152 miles of the 3,600 traveled, paved. She was accompanied by two older sister-in-laws and a young female friend. None of the others could drive a car. She reported that over the course of the drive, (Manhattan to San Francisco), eleven tires had been changed, spark plugs had been cleaned, repairs made on a broken brake pedal and there had been the need to sleep in the car when it was stuck in the mud. They mostly navigated by following the telephone poles in hopes that they would lead to a town. Between 1909 and 1975, Ramsey drove across the country more than thirty times, writing and publishing the story of her original journey in *Veil, Duster and Tire Iron*.

The promotion of the Maxwell also included the film industry for which they supplied cars. Well-known stars such as comedian Jack Benny owned a Maxwell, which he drove for decades after they

had stopped being manufactured - the joke being that he was too stingy to buy himself a new car as long as his old one still ran.

The variety and prices of car makes increased over the years and Maxwell Motor Company responded by introducing, at \$695, the Model 25. This was a five-seat touring car and was advertised as having a high-tension magneto ignition, electric horn and (optional) electric starter and headlights as well as an innovative shock absorber to protect the radiator.

The company eventually over-extended and went into debt with over half of its production unsold in the post-World War I recession in 1920. Walter P. Chrysler arranged to take a controlling interest in Maxwell motors and set out to correct the faults in the Maxwell, the quality of production having degraded. The improved version of the car was marketed as the 'good Maxwell'. By 1925, Chrysler formed his own company and the Maxwell line was phased out, being absorbed into the Chrysler Corporation. The design for the Maxwell was transformed and used in the creation of the first Plymouth in 1928.

Now, if you care to sing or hum the song "Mack's Swell Car Was A Maxwell", you'll know the background of this company and its contribution to the advancement of the auto industry and women's liberation.

Chorus: "Now Mack's swell car was a Maxwell, so he won this little dear; For his car excelled in the test that they held, and he left all the rest in the rear. They set a fast pace, but Mack won the race, one by one all the poor rivals fell; But Mack went ahead and the girlie he wed, for Mack's swell car was a Maxwell."

