

DODGE AT 100

By Kevin A Wilson

Say Happy Birthday to the Dodge brand. Or maybe it should be happy independence day?

It was July 1, 1914 when the Dodge Brothers, John and Horace, ended their long-standing relationship as a—no, make that *the*—major supplier to Ford and set out to build cars under their own name. Sadly, they wouldn't live to see the Roaring Twenties as individuals, but the company they started 100 years ago thrives today.

The brothers didn't actually build a car until November of that year, and the first one didn't sell until mid-December, so today's company fittingly commemorates the occasion with a few 2015 models, which it showed alongside a fleet of historic vehicles from the Chrysler archives that were made available for the press to drive in Michigan this summer.

You're likely to see a lot of these pre-

served examples over the upcoming auto show and concours season.

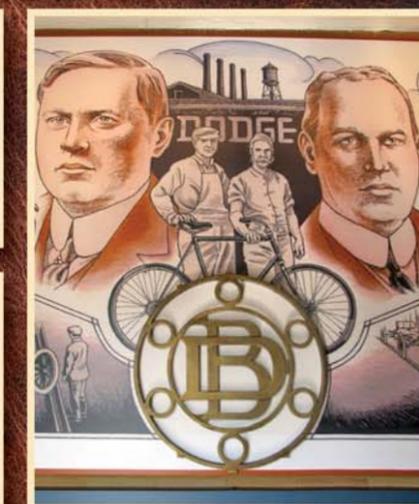
The Dodge Brothers caught an early break when the Oldsmobile factory in Detroit burned down in March, 1901 and Ransom Olds contracted with them to build transmissions.

They supplied many parts, including major elements like engines, transmissions, axles and chassis to several manufacturers, but the tie-in with Ford proved most productive, especially after the Model T arrived in late 1908. Years later, Ford was still building essentially the same car but assembling them more quickly and selling them for less money, creating the mass market.

By mid-1913, though, the Dodges perceived both a danger in over-dependency on their behemoth client, and an opportunity in that they believed technology had advanced enough that a market was growing for a better car. "I'm tired of being in Henry Ford's vest pocket," John purportedly declared. They formally informed Ford that they would stop supplying parts and instead launch their own carmaking operation one year hence.

And so they did. Their first car, the Dodge Model 30, had a steel frame and body when most makers still used wood in their assembly, a stronger four-cylinder engine (35 hp vs Ford's 20), a 12-volt electric system and sliding-gear transmission. It sold for significantly more money than Ford's Model T but found a market ready for a better car, and Dodge ranked second in sales in 1916.

With Henry Ford's finances strained as he developed his giant River Rouge factory complex (where he aimed to have his company build every part of the car itself),



MEADOW BROOK HALL DISPLAYS DODGE BROTHERS' HISTORY

Also marking the occasion was the unveiling of a new historic display telling the Dodge Brothers story at Meadow Brook Hall in Rochester Hills, Michigan. The Meadow Brook mansion was the home of Matilda Dodge Wilson, widow of John Dodge. She and her second husband, lumber baron Alfred Wilson, had it built on the large farm property where the

brothers had planned their automobile. The new display is housed in the former Wilson family garage for now, though there are plans to move it to a more Dodge-appropriate site elsewhere on the property later. It tells how John and Horace were born in Niles, Michigan in 1864 and 1868, became accomplished machinists in that railroad town, and set up Dodge Brothers in Detroit in 1900. (Photos above/below: the author)





he stopped paying dividends to shareholders. The Dodges had accepted stock in Ford's company in lieu of payment for work they'd done early in the relationship and now held nearly 10 percent, so they sued for the dividends of about \$1 million per year. Instead, a settlement gave them a timely \$25 million award.

Helping to grow the Dodge brand's reputation for reliability and durability, young Army lieutenant George S. Patton used three Dodge Model 30s during a raid into Mexico in pursuit of Pancho Villa. General John J. Pershing subsequently ordered Dodge cars for officers to use in Europe in World War I.

The brothers were riding high in the saddle then, when they set out to exhibit at the New York Auto Show in early 1919. In their travels, however, both caught influenza (the pandemic of 1918-1919 was underway) and both developed pneumonia as a result. John died in January; Horace recovered but died of cirrhosis in December. He'd been subjected to some rather punishing medical treatments but it was also said he'd been distraught at the loss of his brother.

The widows ran the company for a time after promoting Frederick Haynes to the presidency. In 1925, they sold the company to Dillon, Read & Co. (the other bidder was General Motors). Three years later, Walter P. Chrysler would acquire the firm and fold it into his growing empire. ■

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