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Car stories piled up with introduction to county

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Car stories piled up with introduction to county

By Wendy Richter
For the Siftings

One hundred years ago, the automobile was becoming increasingly popular. As of 1903, some 50 Arkansans owned vehicles. In fact, a Hot Springs man drove to Arkadelphia that year "on his automobile," creating quite a stir here. It was the first car that most Arkadelphians had ever seen. C.C. Henderson of the city purchased an automobile in 1908, and the local paper remarked that "now our horses will have to take lessons in acrobatic performance." But, a revolution in transportation had begun. By 1910, about 25 Arkadelphians owned automobiles. As more and more autos began to appear, the state began to improve roads to handle

the increased traffic, and actually started assigning official highway numbers in 1917. While commonplace today, automobiles were quite newsworthy in Clark County a century ago, as drivers wrestled with new rules of the road and adapted to a whole new mode of travel.

Arkadelphia's Mayor, W. H. Allison, made this announcement in 1916: "Notice is hereby given to auto owners that the city traffic ordinance will be rigidly enforced, and that the new city marshal, Carl Thompson, will arrest all drivers who violate the law either as to speeding, honking, or driving to the right."

Even with enforcement of new traffic laws, with horses, wagons, pedestrians, and cars all vying for space on the streets of Arkadelphia, collisions

were bound to occur. One 1916 accident was reported this way by Arkadelphia's *Southern Standard* newspaper: "The horse driven by Mr. Shepherd, who lives at Wayside, was frightened by an auto on Main Street Thursday afternoon and started running away. As it turned into 7th street the wheel of the buggy hit another car, overturning both horse and buggy. Although Mr. Shepherd escaped with minor bruises, the horse's shoulder was broken."

A close call on the way to a fire also made the newspaper's front page, soon after the City purchased its first "auto fire truck": "Considerable excitement was caused in our city about 8 o'clock last Friday night when a bonfire was made on the vacant lot at the corner of

12th and Caddo streets, and a genuine fire alarm was given to try out the new auto fire truck just delivered to the city. The truck with several firemen got to the scene in about five minutes, but everyone else was hurrying to the same place and in the rush a serious accident was narrowly averted. Fire Chief Greene, having missed the fire truck, secured the services of Ike Dawson to take him to the fire and in going down Main Street Ike ran into the horse and buggy driven by Miss Rutledge, who was going fast across Main on 9th Street. Only the horse was slightly injured though Ike's jitney was turned over into the ditch. It is requested that hereafter when there is a fire that every vehicle be drawn to the right side of

the street so as to let the fire truck by. The fire truck has the right of way in time of fire."

Accidents were not the only automobile related matters to make the headlines. *The Southern Standard's* editor announced in August of 1916 that he and his wife went to Little Rock and "came back in a new 1917 model Metz touring car." He proclaimed that "the pulling qualities of the car were fully tested on the trip home as there had been a heavy rain just before us all the way, and part of the time we were in it, and roads were worse than we have ever seen them." And, as another example of the automobile's growing popularity, one couple — Mr. and Mrs. J.M. Wilson — even got married in a car in 1916: "The ceremony

was performed in Dr. Townsend's car in front of the home of Joe Becker of this city."

All of these automobile stories from 1916 are told in the forthcoming 2016 edition of the *Clark County Historical Journal*, which will be available in November. Consider the *Journal* as a potential holiday gift for the history buffs in your family! For information on how to obtain your copy of the 2016 *Journal* or for additional information about Clark County history, visit or contact the Clark County Historical Museum (www.clarkcountyhistory.org or 230-1360) or the Clark County Historical Association's Archives at the Ouachita Baptist University Library (www.obu.edu/archives or 245-5332).