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PRESERVING A DIFFERENT TYPE OF HISTORY: A Keller Returns to Huntsville

by
Ron Barnett

Introduction

Ron and Sally Barnett epitomize the collector-couple. Their enthusiasm for two and four wheeled vehicles runs the gamut from a 1923 Cleveland to a 1947 Keller car manufactured in Huntsville. Ron even bought Sally, who actively restores and collects, her very own red fire engine. Children's Librarian for the Huntsville-Madison County Library, Sally used the Keller for the summer reading program and undoubtedly will use the fire truck. When Ron completes restoration of the Keller, he has promised it to the Depot Transportation Museum on long-term loan for Huntsville's enjoyment.

The Keller is an important part of Huntsville's industrial history: a product of the city's only automobile factory. Yet, until Ron Barnett purchased and brought the Keller home, Huntsville was without the auto it birthed. Ron spent over ten years looking for an tracking down his number 22, amassing files of supporting information and documentation.



When I visited the Barnetts at Lone Oak Farm on Brindley Mountain, I was literally transported into another world. Ron and Sally keep their autos and bikes in a fabulously converted Arabian horse stable. It works perfectly. There is a machine shop, paint booth, records room, dirty work area, and memorabilia in every nook. Collectibles show up in every imaginable place. Sally's large metal toy trucks rim the wall, their scads of hats hang like banners. The stable is more than an antique auto barn. It is a folk museum.

The Barnetts have their favorites. "Old Betsy," a '34 Chevrolet has pounded the highways and still gives a solid ride, their '61 Cadillac "Big Red" also tours. My favorite is "Harry" Hudson, a 1911 touring car. It's a beaut. I cannot think of a more accomplished or approachable couple. Their hobby is Huntsville's gain. They share it and their story joyfully.



The Collectors and Their Quest

Ron and Sally Barnett live on a farm on top of Brindlee Mountain. At first glance it is an attractive, but rather conventional horse farm with fenced pasture, a well-tended garden, and a large white barn. Horses graze the pasture and there is no visible evidence that the Barnetts are very involved in the preservation of history, with the lone exception of the 1948 American LaFrance fire truck parked in front of the barn.

Entering the barn, however, provides visitors with a whole different picture. Here one finds a well-equipped automotive restoration shop and displays of automobilia that provide an exciting insight to the history of the automobile. Ron and Sally have a collection of cars, motorcycles, powered bicycles, literature, tools, toys, signs, and gas station

equipment. But Ron is quick to point out that this is really a working shop, not a museum.

They have some vehicles which are primarily for shows such as the 1923 Cleveland motorcycle, 1942 Powerbike, and a variety of mopeds such as the 1938 Norman, 1959 Raleigh, 1948 Aberdale and a 1947 Whizzer which belongs to Ron's dad, Van Barnett. They also like to drive their antique cars, so the collection includes a 1911 Hudson, a 1934 Chevrolet and a 1961 Cadillac (fire engine red, of course) for touring. Ron is now working on a 1904 Cadillac which they will use for the very early one and two cylinder car tours.

The Barnetts are deeply involved in almost all aspects of the antique automotive hobby. Ron is a National Director and Past President of the Antique Automobile Club of America (AACA) and both Ron and Sally are Senior Master Judges in the AACA. They are members of the North Alabama Region, AACA, and participate in numerous local and National Meets during the year. Sally recently served as the Chief Judge at a National Meet in Shelbyville, Tennessee. She is one of only four women in the AACA to hold this position. Ron also serves on the Board of Directors for the AACA Library and Research Center and has been a consultant with the Huntsville Depot Museum.

This interest in automotive history combined with their residence in the Huntsville area naturally led them into researching the Keller automobile. In 1983, Ron had a casual conversation with Paul Hatmon, an automotive journalist from Independence, Missouri. When Ron said he lived in Huntsville, the discussion turned to the Keller. Hatmon said he knew where there was a Keller and that he had been trying to buy it for many years. But the gentleman who owned it refused to sell.

In 1988, there was an article in the *Huntsville Times* about a Keller owned by Buzz Howell, the Grandson of Hubert Mitchell, the Executive Vice President of the Keller Motors Corporation. The article claimed that the car was the only

remaining one of the 18 made in the Huntsville plant. This claim increased Barnett's interest in the Independence, Missouri car, and led to additional correspondence between Barnett and Hatmon. But it was not until October 1993 that there was any encouraging news that the car might be for sale.

After returning from the AACA National Fall Meet and Flea Market in Hershey, Pennsylvania, Ron had a letter from Ed McVay, the son of the man who owned the Keller. It was a brief letter and said that if interested, Ron would have to talk to his father, James W. McVay. Ron called and had a very fruitful conversation with the 91 year old man, learning more about the history of this Keller.

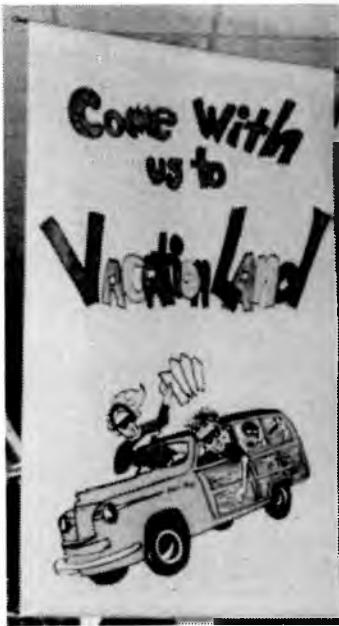
Car #22 was "presented" to Mr. McVay, Kansas City, Missouri, by Mr. and Mrs. Keller at the Huntsville plant sometime in 1949. McVay had been hired to represent Keller to all franchise dealers West of the Mississippi. The car was used to show prospective dealers that Keller could produce a vehicle that would make a lucrative automotive dealership when full production started. A few months later this dream died, but McVay continued to drive his car until he tired of people crawling all over it to figure out what this weird little vehicle was. He put some 45,000 miles on it and then parked



Mr. & Mrs. George Keller giving '47 Keller to J. W. McVay (in center) in front of Building 4471, Redstone Arsenal.

it in a garage in 1951. Sometime in the 1970's he moved it to a trailer van where it resided and collected dust, unobserved by anyone.

A few days after talking to Mr. McVay, Ron went to Independence, still skeptical about the prospects of finding a Keller that could be restored for the city. After a frustrating search for the keys to the trailer van in which the car was stored, Mr. McVay finally approved breaking the locks. When the trailer was opened, there sat a Keller Station Wagon, grimy with years of accumulated dirt and dust, but in amazingly good condition. Barnett and McVay negotiated for a while. Ron was not about to lose the catch he finally had hooked. Soon he was bounding down the highway heading home to Huntsville with #22 safely tucked away on a U-Haul trailer.



Phase I of the restoration started immediately. The objective of this phase was to clean off the dirt, rebuild the engine, drive train, and brakes, and get the car operational. This step is nearly completed. The Keller was displayed at the Huntsville/Madison County Public Library as a part of the Summer Reading Program (Sally's idea), the first time that a Keller had been seen in public in Huntsville in nearly four decades.

Phase II will include complete restoration of the wood and aluminum body. The car will then be placed on display at the



Huntsville Depot Museum on loan by the Barnetts. It will be properly returned to the City of Huntsville as a part of its heritage for all of us to see. Alongside the Keller will be a 1927 Erskine, another car which can claim some relationship with Huntsville, but that is a different story.



History of the Keller Corporation

*M*uch of the recent history and growth of Huntsville is related to the technological developments associated with space travel and military missile systems. So much so, that few remember that in the late 1940's there was a small company here that had a very different dream about Huntsville's future. It wanted to make this city the automobile capital of the South.

The Keller Motors Corporation planned to manufacture and market a compact station wagon just right for American consumers who had been without new cars for all the war years when automotive production was curtailed. The Keller originated in San Diego, California, as the Bobbi-Kar. It was the product of an engineer, John Leifeld, who wanted to get back into the automotive industry after years of working for an aircraft manufacturer, and a "get-rich-quick" promoter, S. A. Williams. A couple of small, rear-engined convertibles were made and attracted the attention of George Keller, a former Vice President of Studebaker, who was hired as consultant.

Unfortunately for the small company, Mr. Williams' somewhat shady past and brief jail term for fraud also attracted the attention of the California Commissioner of Corporations and the SEC. They refused to permit Williams to sell stock in California, and it became evident that a new home would have to be found for the company.

The Bobbi-Kar was moved to Birmingham, Alabama, and a few more prototypes were made. Again, Williams' reputation became a factor. To save the company, Keller persuaded a group of Alabama investors to buy Williams out and organize the Dixie Motor Car Corporation. One of these



investors was Hubert Mitchell, of Hartselle, Alabama. Mitchell had been manufacturing seats for military aircraft. With the war's end, one of his major customers went out of business. When he heard about the Bobbi-Kar Company, he decided to sell it seats for its cars. He ended up buying the company.

Late in 1947, two major changes were made. Since it was obvious that Keller's stature in the automotive industry would enhance market position, the name of the company was changed to Keller Motors Corporation. The second change was to move the production facilities to a recently emptied building at Huntsville (now Redstone) Arsenal. Two buildings were leased from the United States Government; however, only one was actually used by Keller, the building currently identified as Redstone Arsenal, Building 4471.

Three of the seven prototype cars, including at least one rear-engined convertible, that had been built by the proceeding companies were rapidly modified to look like the car Keller wanted to build. Marketing then became the primary focus for the new company. The cars were shown at major automotive shows across the country. Enthusiasm of potential buyers was enormous. Early plans were to make a Chief and Super Chief in two styles: a convertible, with either front or rear engine, and a "woodie" station wagon.

Meanwhile, production of new prototypes was also started. Keller Motors Corporation made 18 prototype cars in 1948 and 1949 in the Huntsville plant. For a short period they continued to display the Bobbi-Kar/Keller convertible. However, as the company's plans matured, the convertible was dropped, and all of the 18 prototypes were the Super Chief station wagon models. Records preserved by Hubert Mitchell (now in the possession of his Grandson, Buzz Howell) list cars numbered 1 through 27. The first two were the ones built in San Diego by Bobbi-Kar, and cars #3 through #7 were the ones made in Birmingham. Apparently there was some superstition in the Keller Motors Corporation, since there was no car #13.

The frames and bodies were made by Keller. One of the unique features was the “torsilastic suspension” made by B. F. Goodrich, which used rubber moulded between concentric tubes instead of springs. It was advertised as the “cradled in rubber” ride, one that would never squeak. Standard Hercules 1XB-3 engines, found in many other industrial applications, were used for the prototypes; however, a decision was made to use Continental engines in production. The majority of the remaining parts, such as transmission, clutch, differential, instruments, door handles and other hardware were items used on other production cars of the time. This minimized the need to establish a costly supply system for spare parts.

They had hoped to go into full production in 1948. Unfortunately, the SEC was taking a careful look at all of the companies then trying to enter the car market. This included the Tucker, Playboy, Davis and other companies that were trying to break into the market with the major producers. After two years, the Keller finally survived the SEC investigations and a stock sale was approved. By September, 1949, Keller had signed up more than 1,500 dealers and arranged a \$5 million stock sale. Keller executives convened in New York for the sale. They celebrated with a dinner on the evening of October 4, 1949 and a breakfast the next morning. George Keller did not show up for breakfast and was discovered in bed, dead of a heart attack. The stock sale was withdrawn, and dreams of making Huntsville a major automotive manufacturing center died as well.

In February 1950, Keller Motors Corporation was placed in trusteeship in federal district court. The remaining cars were inventoried and distributed to varied individuals who had invested in the company. Unfortunately, the records are not very clear about who actually received most of the cars, and it appears that the last Keller to remain in Huntsville was sold to an individual in Texas in the 1950's. The home of the Keller automobile has not had one since then, certainly a loss to our history. But that loss is now to be corrected.