

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, September 4, 2017

M. J. "Jerry" Duryea (ca. 1894–1956): In many ways, Jerry Duryea was "bigger than life." While always somewhat controversial, nevertheless he was a major player in the early years of the antique automobile hobby and made many positive contributions. In the late 1940s, he served, at different times, as president of the Antique Automobile Club of America and the Veteran Motor Car Club of America, then headquartered in Philadelphia and Boston, respectively. He and his wife, Marian, lived well in Longmeadow, a suburb of Springfield, Massachusetts, with a summer home at Stonington, Connecticut.

Jerry's father, Charles E. Duryea, and his uncle, J. Frank Duryea, both claimed to have invented the first American automobile. For the remainder of their lives, they fought each other over this claim. While most evidence pointed to Frank, who was an excellent mechanic, as having the most valid claim, Jerry spent the remainder of his life and the influence he had in the antique car community in substantiating his father's claim. So "officially" Charles E. Duryea was the first to run an American car on the streets of Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1892. He moved to Illinois that year, and his brother Frank claimed that he, Frank, kept working on the little machine until he was able to demonstrate it in Springfield in 1893. We do know that Frank Duryea won an early race from Chicago to Milwaukee on Thanksgiving Day 1895, sponsored by the *Chicago Times-Herald*. He was introduced to those of us on the 1947 Glidden Tour at its initial banquet in Hartford, Connecticut.

The Duryeas were also associated with Reading, Pennsylvania, and Charles built Duryea cars there starting in 1901. The largest production of his Duryea Motor Wagon was 600 cars in 1905. Duryea Drive up Mount Penn is named for him. The Stevens-Duryea was a high-quality car made in Chicopee Falls, Massachusetts, near Springfield, starting in 1901, by Frank Duryea and the Stevens Firearms Company. Ceasing production in 1915, the company was reorganized and high-end cars with this name were manufactured again from 1919 until 1927.

We first encountered Jerry Duryea, a large good-looking man, on the New England Glidden Tour of 1947, which was run by the Veteran Motor Car Club. He was the self-appointed marshal of the tour, who often passed our procession of cars with a megaphone giving orders while driving a big Pierce 48 touring car of about 1918 that he had borrowed from a friend. When we arrived at the New England Inn at Intervale, New Hampshire, we were advised that our reservation for two rooms could not be honored. My dad, who was not impressed by Duryea's directives, thought the latter and his party had taken our rooms, which was not proven. In short, Jerry Duryea was not one of my dad's favorite people in 1947.

Despite a rough start, within a year or so, Jerry Duryea and my father were good friends. Jerry was spending more time with AACA in the Philadelphia area and was elected president of the fast-growing club. He promoted a first-ever Antique Automobile Show to be held in June 1949 in Philadelphia's Convention Hall. Over 100 old cars were displayed (we took either 4 or 5), and catalogs were printed for something like 20,000 people. Galvanized sheet metal oil pans were made and placed under each car on the floor of the hall. The show was open for about four consecutive days. It was a colossal flop. Attendance probably did not exceed 5,000. The Marshall Steam Museum inherited several thousand catalogs and is still using the oil pans from that show under our cars. AACA lost a lot of money, but perhaps some of its loyal members helped out if they could. Duryea was blamed, at least partially, for the debacle, but he bounced back.

Despite his dominating demeanor, Jerry Duryea was a smiling, pleasant man. He took on editorship of the fledgling *Antique Automobile* and, with a limited budget, got each edition out on time. He and Marian usually went on the annual Glidden Tour Revivals, often driving his '23 Cadillac touring car, only roughly restored. Whenever he had a chance to mention it, however, he made certain that everyone knew that his father had invented the first American automobile, and a rendering of that car is used as the logo of the Antique Automobile Club of America.

The Spring Meet of AACA was held at Cornell University in June 1956. Norbert Behrendt accompanied me in my dad's Model 87 as we drove from Auburn Heights to Ithaca. After Saturday night's banquet on the campus, many of us descended the steep hill into town and assembled for coffee in a street-side restaurant. Jerry Duryea sat down with Norbert and me, and we had a very enjoyable discussion. He had not aged in the nine years I had known him. However, before the summer was over, Jerry was dead. In those days, a heart attack, especially in a large person, was often fatal.