

Denver's Pipedreams, Flintlos, Fritchles and Fords

by Dennis Payton Knight

Denver has had its flirtations with the car making business going back to 1895. "H.H. Carpenter of Denver, Colorado," the advertising read, "presents an electric vehicle of unusually light and pleasing construction, in which a storage battery of his own invention is used. The front wheels are of bicycle build, and the steering is operated by a lever." No one knows if any Carpenters were actually built, even though it was described in detail in a popular magazine of the time, *Horseless Age*.

In 1899, Denver's J.C. Henry announced he had financing to produce and market an electrically powered automobile that would "outclass all others". Again, there is no record of a single Henry ever being produced and it, too, might have been but a pipedream.

Robert Temple, at a machine shop on Wazee Street built a vehicle for Denver's E.J. Cabler, of Denver. The "good, heavy road wagon" was described by *The Denver Evening Post* as being "as handsome as it is possible to make a vehicle of that nature. Silver leaf, gold, dark red and maroon on the body contrast with the yellow and brown of the solid rubber-tired wheels." It could handle up to fourteen passengers or an equivalent weight of cargo. Temple and Cabler test drove it from Denver to the town of Victor in July 1899 with Mrs. Cabler in the back seat, possibly becoming Denver's first back seat driver.

In 1905, Flint and Lomax, a Denver manufacturing partnership, tested the car building business with their Flintlo, a light vehicle powered by a four-cylinder air-cooled engine with three speeds forward optimistically, and, pessimistically, three speeds in reverse. Unfortunately, road tests did not warrant production of another car beyond that prototype.

In 1905 Oliver Fritchle, a local chemist and battery expert, began experimenting with an electric car of his own design. The vehicle he marketed as the "100-mile Fritchle" soon became popular around the country. Molly Brown tooled around Denver in one, and Fritchle even opened an office on Fifth Avenue in New York City. The company made about 198 cars a year until 1914. A shiny Fritchle dazzles visitors today in downtown Denver at History Colorado.

America's electric car industry, which was selling units at about \$1,750 in 1912 was eventually dealt a death blow by Henry Ford's Model-T, which sold wildly in 1912 for only \$650.

Ironically, in 1914, Henry Ford himself built a plant on South Broadway in Denver and produced Model-T's there until 1933. The plant was purchased by the Gates Rubber Company which once employed 5,000 people in Denver producing tires, rubber hoses and belts. Gates makes their products offshore these days, but the original Ford building is still in town and occupied by a data center.

Denver's foray into building cars has been varied, sometimes profitably, and sometimes only pipedreams. But then again, Elon Musk of Tesla fame and a man of our own generation, sometimes has his pipedreams too.