

"WISCONSIN MOTORS"

Did you know that Milwaukee (actually West Allis) was the home of the Wisconsin Motor Manufacturing Company? And that the Wisconsin engine provided the power for the famous Stutz Bear-Cat, the "first American sports car" and, some say, the only true American sports car until the early Thunderbirds and Corvettes?

I have become fascinated with Stutz, first having admired the Stutz automobiles shown in old car magazines, then at Hershey, the Indianapolis 500 museum, etc. Now my interest has been heightened by reading through the just released outstanding book, "The Splendid Stutz," published by the Stutz Club. It seems that when flamboyant auto-entrepreneur Harry Stutz, of Indianapolis, Indiana, decided he would build his first car, and enter it in the inaugural Indianapolis race in 1911, he powered it with a Wisconsin 4 cylinder motor! That first Stutz, running stock in its maiden race, finished the race, and amazingly placed 11th, averaging 68 mph, with thirteen pit stops -- eleven of which were just for tires -- but without any mechanical problems. That was quite a success story, not only for the car but for the Wisconsin engine. The original Wisconsin engine which ran the first Indianapolis 500, which was also used in the Stutz passenger cars, was a 4 cylinder T-head engine of 390 cubic inch displacement, with a 60 horsepower rating.

Wisconsin engines were used in all Stutz cars (racing and street) until about 1916 (Stutz apparently began to produce all its own engines in 1917). Wisconsin engines also were selected by Harry Stutz for the fire trucks manufactured by another of his ventures, the Stutz Fire Engine Co., which continued until the demise of that company in the mid-1920's. This information sent me searching for the history of the Wisconsin Motor Manufacturing Company, also known as Wisconsin Motors, located here in Milwaukee.

My research has barely begun, and I expect to know more by the time this is printed. So far, I've found that Wisconsin Motors was organized in 1909, with its first small shop opening during 1910 in "North Milwaukee" (where could that be?). Real production commenced in January 1911, at its newly built factory located at South 44th and West Burnham Streets. The factory buildings are no longer there, at least I couldn't find any at present day 44th and Burnham. According to two histories of West Allis at the Milwaukee County Historical Society, the factory apparently employed "300 men" before 1920 and 600 in 1927, so it was a significant Milwaukee employer. In the beginning, the factory produced a few gasoline engines per month; by 1927, it was reportedly producing a hefty 75 to 100 engines per day for autos, trucks, fire engines, industrial and farm equipment and boats. The organizer and first President of the Company was Charles H. John and his key employee was A. F. Milbrath, Secretary and the Chief Engineer.

According to the Stutz history, Harry Stutz, in search of more power and racing speed, worked with Mr. Milbrath in developing a new Wisconsin engine for the 1915 racing season. The result (some say it involved a bit of copying of the best of European engine designs from Mercedes, Delage and Peugeot) was a very successful 296 cubic inch overhead cam four cylinder engine, with 16 valves and 8 spark plugs, producing over 130 horsepower at 2,000

r.p.m. (quite a bit for 1915, in a small, relatively light sports/race car). This was about twice the output of the stock 4-cylinder Wisconsin engine. This new engine powered the famous Stutz factory supported race car team known as the "White Squadron." These cars dominated the 1915 racing season, which translated into significant sales of the Stutz regular passenger and sports cars.

I also found at the Historical Society, a 1912 Wisconsin Motors catalogue of 4 and 6 cylinder marine engines produced by the Company, which were based on the street versions of the Wisconsin motor. However, I have not yet found a catalogue for the engines produced for automobiles.

As Robert Stack on the "Unsolved Mysteries" television program implores his viewers, "If you have any information leading to the whereabouts of ..." histories, catalogues, pictures or other facts (or lore) about "Wisconsin Motors" or Wisconsin Motor Manufacturing Company, would you please call me at the number below. I would be very interested in further information, and making copies of relevant material. Possibly, one of your parents or grandparents may have worked at the factory, or you may even have a Wisconsin engine! I'm also seeking information as to what happened to this proud and successful Company. Hopefully, it may have merged with another corporation which still exists, with archives of useful information -- but that may be too much to hope for.

Stay tuned. When I have more precise information, to paraphrase my son's answering machine, "I will get back to you" -- with a further article!

John Haydon
(414) 352-1669

