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Finding aid for the Austin Automobile Company collection Collection 143

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Department

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Summary Information

Repository:	Grand Rapids Public Library, Grand Rapids History and Special Collections Department
Title:	Austin Automobile Company collection
ID:	Collection 143
Date [inclusive]:	1902-1989
Physical Description:	2.21 Linear Feet Three boxes
Language of the Material:	English
Abstract:	The Austin Automobile Company operated in Grand Rapids, Michigan from 1901 to 1918. This collection contains photographs, catalogs, diagrams, correspondence and articles about the company. Also in the collection are catalogs and ledgers from the United Motor products Co. concerning United Trucks from the 1920s to 1950s.

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Biographical / Historical

In 1901 the Austin Auto Co. was formed by James E. Austin and his son Walter S. Austin. But, it was not until 1902 that their first car was on the road, their last in 1918. James E. Austin, a retired lumberman, and his son had long been inventors, inventing a shingle cutting machine, a chainless bicycle, and a hydraulic drive system for cars.

Walter developed the car, although the father took an active role in the company. Two distinguishing features of the cars, starting with the 1913 models, were that both the service and emergency brakes were controlled by foot pedals rather than a hand brake. Another feature was the two-speed axle that was designed for both city and high speed driving.

This was revolutionary for the time, and was the cause of a patent infringement suit. A representative from the Cadillac Motor Co. came and talked to Mr. Austin about the two-speed axle expressing interest in it. Shortly afterward Cadillac introduced a similar axle, Austin sued for patent infringement and was awarded \$500,000. This amount was lowered on appeal by Cadillac and was believed to actually be \$150,000. Mr. Austin was no stranger to the court room, he was constantly brought into court for violating the 15 mph speed law in Grand Rapids.

The cars did not stay around long due to their high cost and the restrictions on materials during World War I. The first cars in 1902 sold for \$2,000 and by 1914 were sold for \$6,000. "The Highway King," as

the car was known, was designed for the elite society. Owners of Austins included: William Randolph Hearst, opera star Emma Calve, and Charles B. Judd, general manager of Bissell Carpet Sweeper Company. In total no more than 500 cars were made.

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Scope and Contents

The collection contains photographs, catalogs, diagrams, correspondence and articles about the Austin. Photographs show the interiors and exteriors, as well as engines and axles, of various Austin models. The trade catalog "The Highway King" is included, as are other pieces of advertising and trade literature for Austin models. Correspondence between George Ferris, an author/researcher, with Austin owners, as well as an article by Ferris for *Antique Automobile*, are included. A few additional articles are found in the collection, including one from the *Peninsular Club Magazine*. Also included are a catalog and ledger books from the United Motor Products Co. concerning United Trucks.

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Administrative Information

Publication Statement

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Immediate Source of Acquisition

Mrs. Walter S. Austin [and George Ferris], no accession number (1989, museum transfer). See UP 1989.113.

Additional materials from the Somers family, accession number 2005.053.

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Related Materials

Related Materials

For copy negatives cited on the back of some of the photo prints in Coll. 143, [143.1 to 143.12], see staff. Housed with copy negatives, in separate box marked for Coll. 143.

Coll. 224, Box 34. Advertisement.

Coll. 246, Trade Catalogs. The "Highway King" catalog, also found in Coll. 143.

Coll. 216 Ephemera.

Coll. 054, "Automobiles" folder includes some images of Austin's owned by former Grand Rapids residents.

Coll. 059, includes another copy of an image of an Austin, for which two prints are available in Coll. 054 above.

Coll. 194, Harrington.

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Controlled Access Headings

- Grand Rapids (Mich.) -- History
- Automobile industry and trade -- Michigan -- Grand Rapids
- business records
- United Motor Products Co.
- Austin, Walter S.
- Austin, James E.

Collection Inventory

Series I. Documents

Title/Description	Instances
Biographical & research data. Pending.	Box 1 Folder 0.5

Austin research notes and an articles.

Title/Description	Instances	
1. March 13, 1989. 2 typed pages, unidentified.	Box 1	Folder 1
2. "Only 500 built, the Austin Car of Grand Rapids was Famous," Peninsular Club Magazine, November 1958.	Box 1	Folder 1
3. "Meet Mister Jalopy" / by Bernard W. Crandell. Saturday Evening Post, July 27, 19???. RE Barney J. Pollard, collector.	Box 1	Folder 1
4. "Austin Artifacts donated." Old Cars Weekly, May 4, 1989. pg. 3. RE donation to the GR Public Museum.	Box 1	Folder 1
5. A Most Unique Machine : The Car That John Dolson Built and other Losers. Source unknown. Pgs. 166-169 only.	Box 1	Folder 1
6. "Two Cousins, Two Cars" Biographical information from the Somers family related to the historical purchase and ancestry of their original Austin, still owned by the family in 2005, 2005.053	Box 1	Folder 1
Correspondence between George Ferris and Austin owners, 1971-1989.	Box 1	Folder 2
Automobile manufacturers of Grand Rapids, n.d. Author unknown. Old photocopy.	Box 1	Folder 3

Automobile Related Periodicals

Title/Description	Instances	
Antique Automobile. V, 42, no. 2, March/April, 1978.	Box 1	Folder 6
<p>Scope and Contents</p> <p>Has: "Austin : the 'Highway King', 1902-1918" / George Ferris. Pg. 6. Original issue.</p>		
Bulb Horn / Veteran Motor Car Club of America. V. 45, no.1, Jan.-Mar. 1984.	Box 1	Folder 6
<p>Scope and Contents</p>		
Austin catalog and advertising, ca. 1914. Has "Austin, the Highway King" catalog.	Box 1	Folder 7
Austin catalog and specifications, ca. 1916.	Box 1	Folder 8
<p><u>Abstract</u>: Accompanied by a partial flyer in poor condition with evidence of mold. Has a photographic image of people seated in an Austin, superimposed over a landscape (original watercolor in black & white?). The Austin logo is top left on the cover, with a chunk of the publication missing. Includes specifications. 1 sheet folded.</p>		

Austin business stationery.

Title/Description	Instances	
1. Statement form, with 192x date, and address at 226 Pearl St., N.W.	Box 1	Folder 9
2-3. Half sheet memo forms, one is pink and the other beige.	Box 1	Folder 9
4. Envelope for the Highway King, probably for mailing the catalog.	Box 1	Folder 9

United Motor Products Co. United Trucks research file, n.d.

Title/Description	Instances	
1. Letter head mailing envelop for the company in poor condition.	Box 1	Folder 15
2. "Frank T. Hulswit. Photocopied page, including a brief bio and caricature illustrations. From Builders of Greater Grand Rapids in Biographical Caricature. N.d.	Box 1	Folder 15
3. One page of handwritten notes (photocopy). Frank T. Hulswit ...	Box 1	Folder 15
4. 1 sheet of yellow lined notebook paper, with a chronology written on it.	Box 1	Folder 15

United Trucks / United Motors. Literature, ca. 1913.

Title/Description	Instances	
1. The United line. 1987.087.8	Box 1	Folder 16
2. United Model "31" 2-ton truck. With stamp for Miami United Truck Co., Miami, Fla."	Box 1	Folder 16
3. United Trucks, 5 Ton. 1987.087.7.	Box 1	Folder 16
4. Photocopied page from the Grand Rapids Furniture Record for "Decatur Truck. Grand Rapids Motor Truck Co., Grand Rapids, Mi.."	Box 1	Folder 16
5. United Motors ledger book, 1920's.	Box 3	
United Motors Production Co., ledger book, 1920's	Box 3	
Unidentified Ledger book, 1923-1929.	Box 2	

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Series II. Images

Austin images

Title/Description	Instances
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Negatives for photographs used in the George Ferris article in *Antique Automobile*, V. 42, No. 2, 1978.

Physical Location: These copy negatives 143.1 to 143.12, are now housed in an unnumbered box marked for Coll. 143, with the archival copy negatives.

Set of 7 b/w snapshots, taken in Illinois at the Somer home, April. 1977. The Somers own a continuously working Austin originally purchased by the family, and parts of another of the same generation.	Box 1	Folder 5
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1. Joe (son) and Howard (father) Somers, owners of an original Austin.	Box 1	Folder 5
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Biographical / Historical

Originally purchased by William Ryerson for his son as a wedding gift. Their relatives, the Talbarts, of the same community, also purchased another Austin of the same generation, which was later purchased by the younger Ryerson.

2. Howard Somers seated at the wheel of the Austin, with the rear of his Illinois home behind.	Box 1	Folder 5
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3. View of auto with out driver, near the rear of the Illinois house.	Box 1	Folder 5
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4. View of auto with barns and oil tank behind.	Box 1	Folder 5
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5. Near view of auto with barns and oil tank behind.	Box 1	Folder 5
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6. Another view, with the various out buildings positioned behind and left of the auto.	Box 1	Folder 5
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7. View toward the front & headlights of the auto, with a truck center right, a piece of farm equipment behind and a fence in the background.	Box 1	Folder 5
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8. Model 50 Austin, 1910-1911.	Box 1	Folder 5
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Biographical / Historical

Believed to be Mrs. Austin seated at the wheel and to have been taken in front of a church at the corner of Sheldon and Oakes, near the Austin home at 117 Sheldon. Copy photo.

9. Barney Pollard in 1908 model XC Austin on 1953 Glidden Tour.	Box 1	Folder 5
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General

This was one of his favorite cars out of his collection of 1000+. It is now in the Manny Souze Collection in Massachusetts. Image shows Pollard seated at the wheel

with a woman beside him, other autos in the background.
 "10x72" auto license plate on front of car.

10. Unidentified man with a mustache and glasses, seated at the wheel of a auto, inside a garage, with other autos in the background. 8x10 b/w copy photo.	Box 1	Folder 5
11. Man standing beside an auto in a garage with other autos behind.	Box 1	Folder 5
12. Near view of the axle(?), the undercarriage of the auto and a tire. (2 copies of same image)	Box 1	Folder 5
13. Near view of the axle(?), the undercarriage of the auto and a tire. (2 copies of same image)	Box 1	Folder 5
14-18. Probably details of the auto in 10-11 above.	Box 1	Folder 5
14. View from the front. The car is seen without the motor hood throughout. This view shows the brackets for the missing headlights.	Box 1	Folder 5
15. Side view of the auto, with the frame for the accordion roof. Other autos in the background.	Box 1	Folder 5
16. Another view of 15. but darker.	Box 1	Folder 5
17. View from the rear, show a spare tire, lying between the two back tires.	Box 1	Folder 5
18. Interior view of the steering wheel and dash board, with the front seat and the gears on the floor.	Box 1	Folder 5
19. Exterior view of an auto without the hood cover, which is perhaps chained, and perhaps had some rotting of the tires.	Box 1	Folder 5
20. Pixalated view of a group of kits in an Austin with a man at the wheel. In front of a large modern garage, with a camper and another old auto to the left of the Austin.	Box 1	Folder 5
21. Another view at the same site above, with both old autos in view.	Box 1	Folder 5

Slides

General

3 slides also of the April 1977 visit to the Somer farm.

Title/Description	Instances	
S1. #18. Color. Auto with barn & silo behind.	Box 1	Folder 5
S2. #19. Color. View similar to Nos. 4-5 above.	Box 1	Folder 5
S3. #20. Color. Similar to 2 above, near back of house, but without the driver.	Box 1	Folder 5
S4. n.d. color. Interior view. Side of auto.	Box 1	Folder 5

S5. n.d. color. Interior View. View toward the front of an auto. Box 1 Folder 5

Photo of painting of an Austin automobile, n.d.

Title/Description	Instances	
1. Color photo of the framed item hanging on the wall.	Box 1	Folder 10
2. Printed invitation with the painting image in b/w printed on the front. Hefner Galleries. Michigan Artists and Midwest Impressionists." Dec. 7, no year. The specific artist of the paint is not cited, but a list of painters is given in the invitation, perhaps including the painter of the Austin.	Box 1	Folder 10

Photos of Austin cars, 1902-1914

Title/Description	Instances	
1. Man with bowler? hat seated in front seat of Austin automobile, ca. 1903-1904?, in front of large building, with broad pedestal-block entrance lamp. "Sample from The Photograph Co. of American, 61 Market St., Chicago, Telephone Main 3852."—verso note. Neg. 3625.	Box 1	Folder 11
2. "127-131 Sheldon SE. Austin 1916, Model 66."—pencil on back of photo.	Box 1	Folder 11
General		
The Grand Rapids City Directory 1912 has the Walter Austins living at 117 Sheldon St. This image shows an auto parked in the center of a brick street, with two large houses in the background.		
3. Royal Photo Co., Grand Rapids. "138 Sheldon. Austin 1909"—pencil note on back of photo. Neg. 2340.	Box 1	Folder 11
4. "3049." "1905 Austin"—pencil on back on photo. Damaged original photo with upper right corner missing. Shows the auto photographed with a sheet backing.	Box 1	Folder 11
5. Linen backed photographic print. "Austin 1913"—pencil on back of paper.	Box 1	Folder 11
6. Photo postcard of the same or similar auto as "Austin 1913" above. This view has a woman and child in the front and two men in the back of the auto, on the street in front of a large building (hotel?), near a body of water(?). Car maker ID: L.N. Pritchard, Photographer. 431 Umatilla St., Grand Rapids, Mich.	Box 1	Folder 11
Austin "Two-Speed" axle. Diagram, Patented Mar. 31, 1914. No. 1090618. Verso note indicates "1917."	Box 1	Folder 12

Photos of Austin engines, 1908-1914

Title/Description	Instances	
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1. Unidentified photo of motor, mounted on brown board, with mold evidence.	Box 1	Folder 13
2. Unidentified photo of motor, mounted on black board, with mold evidence.	Box 1	Folder 13
3. Linen backed photo of moter, with "Austin, 1908," penciled on the back.	Box 1	Folder 13

Photos of Austin cars, 1909-1917

Title/Description	Instances	
1. "Austin 1910"—pencil on back. A fading original photo mounted on board. Auto facing to right.	Box 1	Folder 14
2. Unidentified auto, facing to left. Original fading, mounted on brown board.	Box 1	Folder 14
3. "Austin 45" ID under the image of the vehicle. Damaged original photo, mounted on board. Auto facing to right. "Austin 1910"—pencil on back of photo.	Box 1	Folder 14
4. "Austin 1909"—pencil on back of photo. Auto facing to right.	Box 1	Folder 14
5. "Austin 1916-1917"—pencil on back of unmounted print. This auto is facing left, with a hard top cab, showing a single door behind the drivers seat.	Box 1	Folder 14
6. "Austin 1916-1917"-pencil on back of unmounted print. Sleek convertible open top.	Box 1	Folder 14
7. "Austin 1916 model "66" race about."	Box 1	Folder 14

Oversized Photos

Photos of Austin autos, 1902/03?-1906

Title/Description	Instances
Family in an early auto, in the street, with a girl standing on the porch of a building center right. A verso note suggests this may not be an Austin.	Box 2
50 horse power Austin touring car, with Walter Austin, manufacturer and son of the inventory, at the wheel.	Box 2

General

Georgiana Godfrey in the front passenger seat, and the new owners, Mr. & Mrs. Charles B. Judd, in the back seat. Taken on Park St. at the corner of Library St., with the Ryerson Library building, Grand Rapids

Public Library, in the background. See article in the Evening Press, July 28, 1905, pg. 3.

Loftus Finishing Department photo, of a possible 1902-1903 Austin, standing at the curb in front of an unidentified house. Box 2

General

The house shows the number "63." A man stands leaning on a support post at the front steps. This may be Austin owner Charles B. Judd. Another man in a uniform cap is presumed to be a chauffeur, standing by a tree near the auto. Judd lived at 67 Fountain St. in 1902.

60 H.P. "Austin," Austin Automobile Co., Grand Rapids, Mich. Dickinson Bros. G.R., Mich.--lower right. "1906"--in pencil on verso (2) Box 2

Image identified as above, without the Dickinson information. Box 2

Image similar to the two above, without the Austin company name, but with Dickinson Bros. Lower left. Box 2

"Austin," Grand Rapids, Mich. With the auto facing left. "1905"--verso note. Box 2

Auto Cab for an enclosed vehicle, pointing toward the lower left corner. Box 2

Auto Cab for an enclosed vehicle, pointing toward the upper left corner. Lower left corner of photo board missing. Box 2

CD containing a Microsoft XP generation PowerPoint presentation by the Somers family, relating the story of their family owned Austin, its acquisition and its restoration + unidentified movie clips. 2005.053 Box 1 Folder 17

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