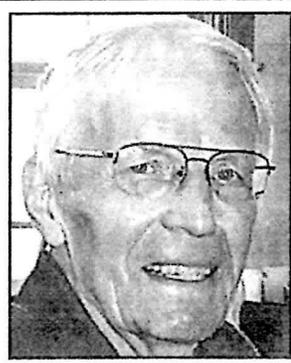


Washburn's automobile culture

After its introduction to Washburn by George Glazier in 1910, automobiles soon became a common sight on the streets of the city and decorated automobiles a feature of holiday parades. In 1914 there were 25 automobiles and 60 by 1916, the number of owners increasing rapidly thereafter. Washburn quickly adapted to the new automobile culture with dealers, garages, and "filling stations." In 1918 there were two automobile dealers in Washburn, the Washburn Garage, selling Overland and Ford automobiles, and the Service Garage, selling Studebakers. By 1924 there were six garages, "auto liveries," tire repair shops, and other automobile service businesses along Bayfield Street, while in 1929 the Washburn Motor Company, a Ford dealership, constructed a building on the southeast corner of Bayfield Street and First Avenue West.

Operating and maintaining these temperamental machines required not only considerable mechanical skill, but the strength needed to crank the balky engines to start them and to change the fragile tires. To educate owners in the mysteries of their new toys, the University Extension Division offered courses in "gasoline automobiles," covering two and four stroke engines, fuels and carburetors, electrical systems and other technical details. While there were



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automobile repair and service facilities in Washburn, except for an occasional garage at a country crossroad, the driver of one of these fragile machines was on his own, if it broke down in a rural area.

A "gasoline filling station," the first of its kind in Washburn, was erected on the northeast corner of Bayfield Street and Fifth Avenue West. The Times reported that the "filling station . . . is a beauty, completely equipped with ladies and men's rest room and comfort station." Two others soon followed: one on the triangle formed by Washington Avenue, Second Avenue West and Bayfield Street by the Northwestern Oil Company, complete with a "comfort station," two gasoline pumps, and a "drain pit," for "crankcase service," the grounds being made into a "real beauty spot;" and a second on the southeast corner of Bayfield Street and Eighth Avenue West, by the B. & M. Oil Company

of Ashland, with three gasoline pumps, a rest room and "other conveniences for the traveling public."

These new filling stations provided a safe solution to one of the significant obstacles to the popularization of the automobile: replenishing the fuel supply. In the early years an owner would purchase a large container of gasoline at a bulk storage facility, then laboriously pour the fuel through a chamois cloth, serving as a filter, into his vehicle's tank, or drive to the bulk storage location, where the same procedure would be followed. Later, gasoline was dispensed by gravity feed from an elevated container through a hose directly into the gas tank. These early gasoline "pumps" were placed on street-side locations outside of garages, grocery stores, and other business establishments, becoming commonplace in cities, villages, and crossroad general stores across the nation. These unsafe street-side pumps were soon banned and the prototype of the modern service station emerged: on off-street building with several pumps that could serve more than one vehicle at a time.

In 1925 a price war, apparently precipitated by cut-rate gasoline "bootleggers," broke out in the Midwest, soon spreading to Ashland and Washburn. In October the price of a gallon at the Standard Oil filling station in Washburn was

reduced from 25 cents to 23 cents, then in November by a further penny to 22 cents. One independent dealer in Ashland reduced his price to 19.4 cents a gallon and did a "land office business," but the major oil companies refused to go below 22 cents in Ashland and Washburn. Prices at Superior were reported to be 17.4 cents a gallon and at Chippewa Falls, as low as 9 cents a gallon. The per gallon price in Washburn remained at 22.4 cents, however, and local automobile owners complained of price discrimination.

As noted in an earlier article, in 1916 Bayfield Street had been paved from first Avenue East to Eighth Avenue West, illuminated from First Avenue East to Third Avenue West by a "white way." Then in 1924 the city council designated Bayfield Street as an arterial highway, with automobiles required to stop before entering the street from the avenues. But the streets and avenues were a different matter entirely. Their red clay roadbeds turned to rock hard ruts in the winter, quagmires of clinging mud in the spring, with clouds of choking dust in the summer. The city graded the streets and spread gravel, which was quickly swallowed up by the clay. It would be many years before these "back streets," as they were collectively called, were paved.