

Doc Zimmerman & His Sears Motor Buggies

By Bill Cuthbert & Mable Frank

The *Bulletin* reported the passing of Doc Zimmerman on October 8, 2008. The obituary mentioned that Doc, who was a Chesapeake Region member for more than thirty years, once owned a Sears. Well, a little research revealed that at one time Doc owned three Sears Motor Buggies. Doc wrote about his Sears cars in the HCCA's *Horseless Carriage Gazette* in a 1995 article about the first Sears automobiles – the Sears Motor Buggy (see box below).

Sears, Roebuck & Company began by selling watches by mail order in 1887. The company expanded to become America's largest retailer – combining both retail stores and mail order – until it dropped the catalog business about one hundred years after the beginning.

At the turn of the 20th century, Sears sold catalog merchandise made by other companies. However, the Motor Buggy manufacturing operation was owned and operated by Sears. They

produced a high wheel, air-cooled, two cylinder gasoline engine powered vehicle – starting in 1909 – that wasn't much different than a horse drawn buggy in appearance. The Motor Buggy was thought to be the perfect vehicle design for traveling over the primitive rural roads of the time.

Sears' catalog customers primarily lived in rural areas and the idea was that the convenience of catalog buying would extend to an automotive purchase. The cars were shipped by rail to customers, and while there was some mechanical set-up required, most people seemed to be able to handle it.

Sears promoted the Motor Buggy with the sales motto:

**We Build Them
We Guarantee Them
We Sell Them To You
Direct From Our Factory**

What better assurance could the early

automobile buyer want?

There were several models, differing in options, ranging from \$370 for a basic, no frills vehicle, to eventually \$495 for one with pneumatic tires and all the options – like fenders and headlamps. Sears even offered a commercial vehicle version. But, only about 3,500 Sears were built in the four years of production.

The primitive high wheel buggy configuration had fast growing competition from the more advanced Ford Model T, which was a rugged vehicle that offered better roadability and power than the Sears. By the end of 1912, Sears stopped offering the Motor Buggy.

Some of this information originally appeared in the March/April 1995 issue of the *Horseless Carriage Gazette*, the bi-monthly publication of the Horseless Carriage Club of America, and is used with permission from the HCCA.

This is a photo of my 1910 Model J Sears taken at Hershey the day it won its Senior Award. I also have an unrestored 1909 Model H, which is very original; even with the original paint. The striping is visible on the chassis and wheels. It even has original grayish solid rubber tires, still soft after 80 years! A completely disassembled 1909 Model K awaits restoration.

I hope the feature on the Sears (in the *Gazette*) clears up a question of authenticity. They were first advertised in the Fall of 1908 and yet, every year, 1905 and 1906 cars are advertised for sale. The vehicles pictured in numerous articles all appear to have many errors. Even the one in *Automobile Quarterly* Fall 1970 has obvious non-authentic faults: painted rather than nickel plated hubcaps and tufted seat cushions.

Most of the Sears vehicles in the larger museums are also poorly restored. There is no evidence that any cars originally had stripes on the bodies. There were only double stripes on the frame, axles and wheels. Since the striping was done by hand – perhaps by different people – there *might* be minor differences. I can furnish anyone with a diagram for one version of correct stripes, as well as plans from an original carpet used on the front floor. I am not an expert, but we need help with authenticity before there are only generic Sears cars.

Loy (Doc) Zimmerman, Baltimore, Maryland



**Doc Zimmerman's 1910 Sears Motor Buggy
Below: the simple engine compartment underneath**

