

# RED ROVER: The other car made in Fulton

By Barbara Mask

Late in the fall of 1902, the Red Rover, the vision of A. L. Van Osdol and A. M. Hansen, was created. The two men thought that the new horseless carriage would be successful and focused their design on a lower priced automobile. It was planned that it would sell for about \$700. The partners hired a J. A. Chapman and his son, Burt, of Milwaukee, to build the car. The building and assembling was completed in the Mississippi Stove Company Plant. Van Osdol was the President of that company during its operations in Fulton. He was the mayor and married to Grace Mercereau whose mother owned my house at 715 Tenth Avenue. In October 1900, a fire was reported. "Mayor Van Osdol escaped from the upper apartment with just his clothes on, but no shoes," according to the Fulton Journal.

A. M. Hansen became President of the Northern Illinois College in 1873 and has been credited with the school's success. Later, he headed a military school in the same building which was named the Hansen Military School (1903-1908). He and his wife were honored at a going away party on the college campus for their thirty-eight years of service to the educational programs in Fulton.

From newspaper articles, it appears the car was "a pretty fancy automobile. It had long, sleek lines of a French racing car and was painted red as the name states. There were two small gasoline engines under the seat and the crank was at the side." After many weeks of labor the beautiful car was ready for the road test, but according to an article written by Wayne Bastian, "It wouldn't run."

On January 16, 1903, the inventors took the car out on a trial run, but the wheel cracked and it had to be towed home. A week later, on January 23, a new fly wheel was in place, and then a wrist pin heated and the Red Rover was hauled into the Martin Brothers Livery Stable by a team of horses. Next road test on the 27<sup>th</sup> was taken by the builders, Mr. Chapman and his son, Burt. They drove over the Lyons-Fulton High Bridge and arrived in Clinton, but as they approached the court house, the machine stopped again. Yes, one more time, the sleek, red auto was towed into Leddy's Livery Barn and eventually back home to the former Mississippi Stove Company plant (known as the J. T. Cullen plant in the 1940-1980s).

The promoters of the project made several design changes. "They hoped to do away with irregular vibration and obtain greater power, but this was never accomplished."

On April 14, Oscar Leichti and A. M. Hansen made one more trial run. They negotiated several trips out to the stove factory and back and then tried to climb the 'big hill' (Tenth Avenue). The Red Rover stalled once again. The success of the automobile could have been a boon to our City of Fulton.

The French looking car stood under the big cottonwood trees on the college campus for a long time and eventually was owned by Archie Goble. At a later date, a man from DeWitt bought the car, located the problem, remedied it and used the car to deliver mail from the post office to the depot in DeWitt.

Wayne Bastian wrote about the wooden prototype featured in the photo. He stated that George Walter, a local businessman, had all the wooden patterns for the Red Rover. In the fall of 1957, he was burning them to 'take away the chill.' When Bastian learned of the plight of the patterns, he contacted Walters and rescued the remaining one used for the manufacture of the crank case. He mounted it above the door to his hallway. It was donated to the Fulton Museum along with many other collectibles and treasures of the Wayne Bastian estate.

There were reports of autos appearing in our community in the early 1900s. Cars would arrive. Some were described as driven by be-goggled people attempting a trans-continental trip; a daunting challenge before the Lincoln Highway was created in 1913. One editor wrote, "auto cars and devil wagons are circling and cavorting in our streets." However, Fulton's very own home-town made, the Red Rover, was not among them

The pattern is on permanent display at the Fulton (Martin House) Museum and is all that remains of a Fulton dream.

The City of Fulton Tourism Committee has adopted the Lincoln Highway as a theme for 2013; a century celebration. Future articles and programs will be provided by the Fulton Historical Society. A permanent display of Lincoln Highway memorabilia is available for viewing at the Fulton Museum.



**A wooden pattern of the crank case used in the design stage of the Red Rover; a car made in Fulton in 1903. (Photo from Fulton Museum collection.)**