

# San Diego Discovers the Automobile

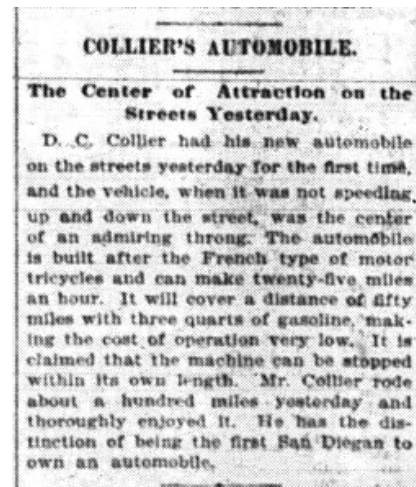
*D. C. Collier had his new automobile on the streets yesterday for the first time and the vehicle, when it was not speeding up and down the street, was the center of an admiring throng. . . He has the distinction of being the first San Diegan to own an automobile.*

--San Diego Union, Feb. 13, 1900

San Diegans marveled at the sight of Charlie Collier's automobile in 1900. His three-wheeled "French design" vehicle could speed up to 25 miles per hour and go 50 miles on three quarts of gasoline. For most San Diegans, it was the first automobile they had ever seen.

Discovering the auto came late to San Diego. Between 1899 and 1902, an estimated 22,000 automobiles had been built by scores of different manufacturers. At the turn of the century there were 8,000 registered vehicle owners in the United States--none in San Diego.

Many San Diegans glimpsed their first automobile from excursionists driving down from Los Angeles. Oliver Lippincott, a famed landscape photographer from L.A. excited the town in April 1900 with his two-seater Locomobile. When he stopped at a farm in Mission Valley to add water to the steam vehicle, the curious "gathered in a circle about the new-fangled machine."



One man, more inquisitive than the rest, inadvertently touched the throttle and "in a twinkling the automobile started up and began turning round in a circle." Lippincott reported that "the men were mowed down like weeds." By the time the vehicle was brought under control the place looked like a battlefield, but remarkably, no one was seriously hurt.

Road trips were still news two years later when the *Union* reported on the successful jaunt of George Nolan and J. E. Wadham, who ventured from San Diego to a Barona ranch in an Oldsmobile, "the first machine of the kind that has been seen so far back in the mountains." The run east took three hours and fifteen minutes, a "particularly good time," the newspaper noted, since there was a 1,400 foot ascent to the ranch.

San Diego's first car owners were the rich and influential—people like Collier, an attorney and real estate developer; E. S. Babcock, president of the Coronado Beach Co. and owner of a battery-charged vehicle; or Albert G. Spalding, the sporting goods magnate, who drove a Locomobile on city streets near his home in Point Loma.

These vehicles were usually bought in Los Angeles and delivered in San Diego by railroad car. Local bicycle shops arranged for the first sales. The shop of Nolan and

Tibbals acquired many of the first autos. They would soon combine with the San Diego Cycle & Arms Co. and prosper at 4<sup>th</sup> and E.

A bicycle mechanic with an eye on the future was 25-year-old George A. Hensley who assembled one of the first locally-built automobiles in 1901. Hensley described his invention in a letter to the trade magazine *Horseless Age* as “a little three-wheeler that I have been putting together in my spare time.” The homemade vehicle weighed 283 pounds and would go up to 12 miles per hour “on a good road.”

Hensley expanded his tinkering into auto repair and opened a shop at 2nd and H Streets. In September 1903, Hensley and his partner Roy Howard became the local sales agents for the Autocar, a Philadelphia-made vehicle that carried five people. Hensley boasted that five of the new cars had recently made the trip from Los Angeles to San Diego “over rough roads without accident.”

The most successful local entrepreneur was John U. Widrin. Claiming sole ownership of the “Automobiles” heading in the 1903 city directory, Widrin advertised repair and rental of cars from his shop at 4<sup>th</sup> and F.

Widrin also began stocking automobiles for sale and claimed credit for the first vehicle sold and driven off the lot in San Diego: a “one-lunger” Olds sold to a physician, Dr. Edward M. Fly of National City. The new auto “coughed like a coffee mill” but a newspaper reported: “Vehicle is driven to National City and returns under its own power without a stop.”

By the summer of 1903 automobiles were becoming less of a novelty. “Nearly every day adds a new automobile to the already good-sized list in San Diego,” the *Union* reported. Nineteen autos were locally owned: “two Wintons, two Knox, six Oldsmobiles, four Cadillacs, three Pierce motorettes and two Orient buckboards.” Cadillacs are the most popular, judged the newspaper, “because they show the greatest improvements on the market.”

Cadillacs were sold exclusively in town by San Diego Cycle and Arms. Their most popular model had seats for four and a top speed of forty miles an hour. It cost \$950 but boasted “all the features of \$2500 machine.”

With the growing number of vehicles, local government began to note potential road hazards. In August, the county supervisors passed an ordinance requiring “any vehicle propelled by their own power must yield the right of way to every ox, horse, or mule they met, the motors being stopped until the skittish ‘critters’ passed by.” Violators were threatened with stiff fines of \$25 to \$100.

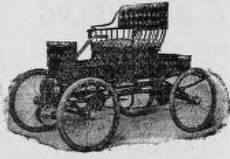
Speed had also become an issue. San Diego Chief of Police Albert A. Thomas announced that an ordinance to limit the speed of autos to eight miles an hour would be strictly enforced. County supervisors prepared their own ordinance to combat runaways caused by “the failure of automobilists to slow down when meeting teams” of horses.

The biggest obstacle to autos was poor roads. A bond issue in 1907 financed hundreds of roads in San Diego and helped pave the way to broad acceptance of automobiles. By 1910, an estimated 1000 cars plied the roads of San Diego County—still only car per 60 people.

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City Directory, 1904

Originally published as "Early autos drove residents wild with wonder," by Richard Crawford, in the San Diego *Union-Tribune*, Aug 30, 2009. p. N.1