



The Walkerville Wagon Works became the Ford Motor Company in 1904

Henry & The McGregors

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(supplied by Larry Viveash, Windsor)*

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On a chill, late afternoon in January, 1904, three McGregor brothers sat talking in the dimly lit office of the storey-and-a-half frame building of the Walkerville Wagon Works on Sandwich Street East. Gordon, the eldest, was doing most of the talking; Walter chimed in occasionally with a question or two. Donald, barely 19, merely listened with rising excitement. They had stopped in to see Gordon on their way home from their office at the McGregor-Banwell Fence Company, across the CNR spur line.

Almost three years earlier, Gordon had left his bookkeeping post with the Photokrome Company in Detroit to take over management of the wagon works from their father, William, who had been appointed Customs Collector for the Port of Windsor, after 20 years service as MP for Essex North.

Good Steady Business

The wagon works, Gordon was saying, was a good, steady business. But he couldn't see how much future there was in making heavy farm wagons, axles and wheels.

A new era was arriving – the day of the horseless carriage. The way business people in Detroit were talking, the auto was going to make the horse and buggy a thing of the past, within a few years.

(To Donald, who knew Gordon didn't even own a horse and buggy, this sounded like very big talk, indeed, but there was no stopping his older brother's enthusiasm).

"Why, there are men in Detroit, like Henry Ford, who say every farmer will soon be using an automobile," Gordon related. "I don't see why we can't build autos right here; I think I'll have a talk with John Curry." (John Curry, who operated a private bank in Windsor, had helped finance William McGregor's purchase of the wagon works).

This is the first recollection of W. Donald McGregor, chairman of the Windsor Centennial Committee, of hearing that automobiles might soon be made in Canada for the first time – and by his own brother.

Donald, was keenly interested in autos through conversations with his fiancée's relatives. Her father was Frederick Evans, who, with Horace and John Dodge, operated the Evans and Dodge Company in the Typograph building on Medbury Lane alongside the Windsor ferry docks.

They also made the E. & D. bicycle, but sold the business to Canada Cycle and Motors, which, incidentally, made the first recorded purchases of cars produced by Ford of Canada. Later, the Dodge brothers brought out their own car in the U.S.

New Venture No Novelty

New ventures were nothing new to the McGregors. Besides the wagon works, William McGregor and John Curry had bought a large tract of land at Bruce and Elliott streets, and cultivated a big field of hops there. In addition, they acquired a cranberry marsh at Marshfield, near Harrow, Ontario.

“They poured \$100,000 into that venture and never harvested a single cranberry,” Donald McGregor recalls.

To most Windsorites in 1904, the horseless carriage enterprise seemed almost as risky.

Within the next few days, however, Gordon McGregor had had his talk with John Curry and whetted Curry’s interest.

One day late in January, they walked down Sandwich Street from the wagon works, embarked on a ferry and took a streetcar from the Detroit dock to the Piquette plant of Henry Ford.

Later, they talked to Henry A. Leland about the possibilities of assembling Cadillac autos in Windsor. A second talk with Henry Ford proved even more encouraging but some capital would have to be raised in Canada.

Back in Windsor, Gordon McGregor began to expound the merits of the automobiles – and especially the Ford cars – to a few close friends.

Many Were Skeptical

There were many skeptics. Barely a handful shared Gordon’s enthusiasm. But he was able to persuade others to give “the new fad” a chance.

And there were some surprises. Col. S. C. Robinson received a bonus from the Hiram Walker distillery, and agreed to buy shares against the advice of the Walker family. Then C. M. Walker bought shares. Miller the druggist, who operates a shop in the Crown Inn hotel at Devonshire Road and Assumption, had a cheque for \$1,000 but, when Gordon didn’t appear at the proper time, tore it up.

On August 17, the Ford Motor Company of Canada Limited, was chartered to make cars in Canada for the first time.

First Auto Parts

Barely a month later, Donald McGregor recalled, a horse-drawn wagon came off the Walkerville Ferry with the first auto parts to be assembled in the wagon works.

“I tried to drop in every other day or so to see how

they were coming along,” Donald recalls. “One of the first things they did was clear out a number of split wagon wheels which couldn’t be sold. I bought the lot and they made the most beautiful firewood!”

The assembly plant was anything but orderly in those early days. The wagon painters (some of whom remained with Ford to paint cars, while others went to the West Lorne Wagon Company, which purchased the wagon works), had allowed paint drippings to accumulate on the floor, which had become extremely bumpy, while the walls, often used to clean brushes or test paint, looked camouflaged.

Supervised First Assemblies

Frank Hagen and Art Hoffmeister came across the river from the parent company to supervise the first assemblies.

The entire staff of 17 (including Miss Grace Falconer, Gordon McGregor’s secretary, who remained with the company until Wallace Campbell retired as president), and a number of Walkerville and Windsor folk cheered Gordon McGregor as he drove the first car from the rear of the wagon works to Sandwich Street in October, 1904.

But for Donald McGregor, the big day came in the spring of 1905, when, at 20, he was given permission to drive Gordon’s Ford for the first time.

That evening he drove down Sandwich and turned up Ouellette Avenue to stop with a flourish in front of his fiancée’s home. Then, with Lillian Evans in the rear seat, he drove up Ouellette Avenue in the evening darkness.

Get a Horse

Unfortunately, the Model C had no headlights, and Donald drove right into a pile of sand in the middle of the street. The drive chain broke; Donald had to leave the Model C by the side of the road overnight, and escort his fiancée and her parents home – on foot.

But nothing could stop Gordon McGregor and the Ford cars. “I remember going to Gordon’s home some years later,” Donald recalls. “He said he had written to all stockholders offering to repurchase their stock.”

“Now if they don’t accept, the blood is on their head,” Gordon said.

By the end of 1909 shareholders had received dividends totalling \$31 for every \$100 invested, and in 1910, were paid a further \$100.

In six years, the McGregor dream had come true.



“There are men in Detroit like Henry Ford who say every farmer will soon be using an automobile. I don’t see why we can’t build autos right here (in Windsor).”

Gordon McGregor

Gordon Morton McGregor

Born January 18, 1873, Gordon Morton McGregor was the founder and chief executive officer of Ford Motor Company of Canada from 1904 until 1922. The son of William McGregor, a member of Parliament for twenty years, and Jessie Peden McGregor, the family resided on Riverside Drive near Crauford. On November 2, 1898, he married Harriett Dodds, of Detroit, Michigan, and moved to a residence near the corner of Victoria and Wyandotte. At the time of his death on March 11, 1922, he was both treasurer and vice-president of Ford Canada.