



Acquiring a Riker Electric at Auction



For Donation to the City of Bridgeport

by Eleanor Riker

Original Henry Ford Museum photo provided by Bridgeport Public Library

Mrs. Riker, of Bridgeport, Connecticut, is the widow of Andrew Lawrence Riker, Jr., whose father built the Riker Electric and later became Vice President

and Chief Engineer of the Locomobile Company of America. Her husband's obituary appeared in the Bulb Horn for January-February 1979.

Late last summer my youngest son Richard telephoned from Oregon to tell me he had bought a catalog from Hudson and Marshall which said that an 1898 Riker Electric Phaeton was to be auctioned on October 18, 1985 in Dearborn, Michigan. This vehicle and many others had been given to the Henry Ford Museum by my father-in-law in 1930. It had been the personal car of my mother-in-law, and she had driven it in Paris in 1900 when the Riker was awarded a gold medal at the *Exposition Universelle Internationale*. Over the years my children had posed for pictures in front of their grandmother's automobile in the museum whenever they visited the Detroit area.

Sentiment immediately created a family project in trying to find a way to preserve this treasure and maintain its place in automotive history. My children didn't have the time, the money or the place to solve the problem, and I had moved into a condominium and had no place to keep it either. I phoned a knowledgeable friend and asked him for advice. He estimated the value of the car, restored and unrestored, and suggested that I not mention it to anyone, friends or museums, lest I draw attention to the auction.

Over the years Larry and I had dealings with David W. Palmquist who is in charge of historical collections for the Bridgeport Public Library. We had donated Locomobile memorabilia to the library, making it the largest collection on the subject in the country. I contacted David and he became enthused about my trying to bid on this historical artifact. Thus began my education on auctions. David sent for a catalog and was pleased to find there was no bidder's fee, no commission and no minimum or reserve prices. I considered an absentee bid but rejected the idea since I did not know the condition of the car. David said if I would attend the auction he would ask the

City of Bridgeport to send him along with me since I had proposed giving the car to the Bridgeport Museum. My accountant gave me a "limit," and knowing that collectors and museums would be my competition I contacted a niece and nephew for financial backing if I should need it. Their kind offer gave me confidence, but I knew it would still be necessary to have David along to do the bidding as he had experience.

David was able to make all necessary arrangements, and we departed from the White Plains airport. He had convinced the city that Newark would be too far for me to ride at my age! My grandson Van, age seventeen, flew into Detroit from Boston to join me for this exciting new experience. Pouring rain made a rental car a necessity in Detroit, and after checking into the Holiday Inn we hurried off to inspect "our car." The grounds behind the museum were a sea of mud, with crowds milling around marking their programs. What a disappointment to see the 1898 electric! It was really unrestored, with the leather fenders missing, the hood (convertible top) folded and tied with twine, the leather seats in shreds and just a faint mark on the body sides where there had been the gold leaf monogram ALR. I didn't see how this car could be worth anything at all and wondered if I should make the investment. I was surprised at its size and height, thinking it might be like a baby carriage from the photo in the catalog. Of course it had to be large to carry two people, and David explained it had to be high off the ground because of ruts in early roads. After viewing other cars of that era I began to get my perspective. We watched other bidders marking their programs. My heart sank on hearing a tall man with "Horseless Carriage Colorado" on the back of his western jacket giving in-

structions to his exquisite wife, knowing they could be stiff competition.

David and Van were attracted to the pool and the sauna at the Inn, so I was left to worry about how much to bid. My children had said if I was supposed to have the car I would get it and not to worry. I had sweet dreams that night, imagining the restoration and how beautiful the car would be.

The auction was to take ten hours, starting with engines and heavy equipment that I couldn't believe anyone would buy. The catalog was one's ticket to get in and included one other person. Since the merchandise would go on the block in numerical sequence and the Riker was number 285, we decided to tour the museum during the morning and send Van to check on progress now and then. The Henry Ford Museum has been redone, and the Riker Tricycle is on display in a place of prominence with the Duryea tricycle and the Riker Torpedo racer.

I was too nervous to eat lunch and, anyway, I wanted to find a good place at the auction before the transportation section started. As we approached the tent, the music of the auctioneer sounded like a rock concert, and I regretted not having my tape recorder. We sloshed into our seats and envied the people bundled in blankets as if at a football game. The auctioneers from Georgia remarked that they would be in shirt sleeves if they were home. However, they wore red jackets and were placed in strategic spots, occasionally interrupting the rhythm by raising their fists in the air and shouting. I never learned whether this meant they had a higher bid or their customer had finished bidding. It was very dramatic and helped to build up the tension. The merchandise had to be pulled in by flat bed trucks, and some people stood in front of the seated groups looking it over. But the auctioneer seemed fair in giving everyone a chance to bid. After getting me settled,



Photo above shows Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Lawrence Riker in Paris in 1900 on the same Riker Electric Phaeton that is the subject of this story. The photo has been reprinted from the *Bulb Horn* of May-June 1966 which carried eleven pages of Riker material including a history by A.L. Riker, Jr., son of the inventor and the author's late husband. This issue is still available and can be obtained by consulting the order form in the back pages.

David and Van took off for more sightseeing. Enjoying the crowd and the commotion, I sat through Steam Engines (\$2,000 to \$4,000), Portable Steam Engines (\$8,500 to \$9,000) and a threshing machine (\$400). Bicycles and motorcycles ranged from \$2,000 to \$6,500 (all pre-1910), a 1797 fire fighting hand pump went for \$7,500 and an 1886 steam pumper brought \$37,000! Then came horse-drawn vehicles, including a Conestoga wagon for \$6,000 and an 1896 California platform wagon for \$26,500!

Finally, automobiles! Flutter, flutter, my heart! Where are David and Van? At the museum? Jogging? Ah, they arrived with Wendy burgers. The thinning crowd made it possible for us to move to the second row. I thought I would burst with anticipation. David took my bidding card, number 585, as we waited for lot number 285, the Riker electric, to come up. Number 173, a 1910 Paige-Detroit Roadster, went for \$8,200; number 274, a 1909 2-cylinder high wheeler, brought \$6,500. Eleanor, don't scratch your head! 275, a 1904 Stevens-Duryea at \$12,700; 276, a 1905 3-cylinder Duryea \$13,500. Oh dear, am I going to have to go over my \$10,000 limit and ask Charlie and Hop to help me? Is it worth it? 277, 278, 279, 280 (a Bailey *electric* at \$15,000!), 281, 282. The auctioneer shouts! "These cars are history! They are important!" 283, 284, 285: "1898 Riker Phaeton. Given to Henry Ford by Andrew L. Riker in 1930. Serial number 1608. Formerly Mrs. Riker's personal car. Fair condition, unrestored." Nervous? Yes! Excited? Yes! "David, we're losing it." "No, I'm still in there." I wished the bidding would stop. It was getting to my limit. More bidding, and David had to say \$10,000. Say a prayer. "Ten thousand dollars, SOLD!" I guess I was shouting. "Thank goodness. Thank you. I'm Mrs. Riker." Everyone around me clapped. After the few remaining cars were auctioned (including a 1900 Locomobile steamer which did not interest David because it was not original), we went to the tent to pay for the Riker. I was pleased I did not have to use any money but my own and just as happy as if I had purchased a new car.

Van climbed onto the driver's seat. I grabbed the handles to pull myself up next to him but had to have a boost from the rear to make it. The rain had stopped, and I lamented about my appearance, but David said I just looked happy. After snapping pictures David made arrangements to have the car moved to storage, not wanting to leave it on the field overnight. He telephoned the movers and supplied the statistics: dimensions approximately 97" long, 64-1/2" wide and eight feet tall! Weight 2,000 pounds.

Other statistics: Rear wheels 32-1/2" diameter, fronts 28-1/2". Uses 44 batteries. Speed 25 mph on good pavement. Range 25 miles between charges. Steering the car onto the trailer was a new experience for David as he found it steered like a sail boat, the rudder going in the opposite direction.

When we were dining at ten-thirty that night we toasted our success. This is the 100th anniversary of the gasoline automobile, and I hope future generations of Rikers will enjoy seeing this car after it has been restored. I am proud to have been able to help in securing the family name in automotive history ■