

Clarence Spicer

Even after Charles Dana became Managing Director of the Spicer Corporation, Clarence Spicer remained intimately involved with the company he had founded. Dedicated to quality, he once turned down an offer to leave Dana and join General Motors because he wanted to ensure the leadership of the Spicer name. He kept tabs on the competition by installing their equipment in cars and driving his family thousands of miles across the country, stopping every two hundred miles or so to check how the rival equipment was holding up.

As the company's Chief Engineer, Clarence Spicer also worked on many new products. He invented a machine for balancing propeller shafts, and another for producing welded tubing. He also designed a rail-road generator drive and a safety clutch for a generator drive. He was a member of both the American Society of Mechanical Engineers and the Engineers Society of Detroit, and treasurer and president of the Society of Automotive Engineers.

Clarence Spicer died in Miami in November, 1939. A tribute from the Society of Automotive Engineers acclaimed his life as "a beacon of example and inspiration in the engineering profession."

6th vignette

Expansion, Detroit and Toledo

Despite a slump in demand following the end of World War I, by 1920 it was clear the automobile was going to be bigger than anyone had forecast. In 1909, North American vehicle sales had totaled just 123,990. By 1917, they had rocketed to 1,745,792. And by 1929, the number had nearly reached 4 million. The problem for the Dana family was not in sales, but in producing enough to meet demand.

New plants at Pottstown and Reading were not enough, and Spicer Corporation looked to consolidate its manufacturing operations. At the same time, the company needed to deal with another issue that was becoming more and more pressing. Most Spicer customers were no longer on the East Coast. If Spicer wanted to keep its reputation for responsive service, it needed to move its manufacturing facilities. The harsh truth was, New Jersey no longer meant much in the automotive world.

Detroit had taken over.

Why Detroit should have become so dominant in an industry founded in Europe and originally based on the East Coast is not easy to answer. Michigan had abundant raw materials, shipyard and foundries, but it also had the right people at the right time, which was fortunate. Legend has for example, that Henry Leland had originally determined to settle in Chicago, but when he arrived there he was greeted with "pistol shots and flying brickbats," so he bought a ticket on the first train out -- which just happened to take him to Detroit.

Along with Leland, R.E. Olds and Henry Ford were already established in the Detroit area by 1900. William C. Durant acquired Buick of Flint, Michigan, in 1904, and proceeded to build General Motors. Because of the incredible success of these pioneers, suppliers and associated companies gravitated towards Michigan and Ohio. When Walter Chrysler reorganized Maxwell Motor Company as Chrysler in the 1920s, and built it into one of the Big Three, Detroit's domination of the industry was complete.

It was not surprising then that Spicer Corporation determined to relocate. Toledo was preferred Detroit partly because an overnight train service would allow Charles Dana to continue living on the East Coast and still visit the company on a regular basis. In 1928, therefore, land was acquired on Bennett Road in Toledo, and a new plant was erected. In early 1929 manufacturing equipment was moved from South Plainfield. Within two years Brown-Lipe and Salisbury Axles had also relocated to the Toledo plant.