



City of San Bernardino Historical and Pioneer Society P.O. Box 875, San Bernardino, CA 92402

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By Richard D. Thompson, Librarian

J. DALE GENTRY'S FORD AGENCY AN EARLY 1900'S SAN BERNARDINO CAR DEALERSHIP

The early 20th Century was a period of great growth for the City of San Bernardino; the population went from about 6,000 in 1900, to 13,000 in 1910, 20,000 in 1920, and 40,000 in 1930. Besides the growth was innovation: water delivered under pressure in underground pipes, gas, electricity, telephones, not to mention indoor toilets (and toilet paper). Also new was the brass-era, or "horseless carriage," automobile.

Along with the population and innovation came the entrepreneur, and San Bernardino seemed to attract a number of these, including J. Dale Gentry. Born in Sedalia, Missouri, in 1884, Gentry was brought to California at the age of 10 when his family moved to the Golden State.

The family lived in Cable Canyon in the San Bernardino foothills, where his father farmed for a living. Gentry later said they were very poor, but there was always food on the table—and it was good food, as his mother was an excellent cook. He especially remembered fondly her puffed balls, or fritters, called *bunuelos*, which the children would punch a hole in so they could fill them with syrup. Dale would take some of these to school and trade with other children. Even at that young age he was a trader, and the trait continued the rest of his life.

After completing school in San Bernardino, Gentry enrolled in Los Angeles Business College and graduated with a degree in business administration. He then held a series of miscellaneous jobs, some out in the desert, some in the mountains, and the work took him all over the area. In 1906 he became engaged in the car business, working as an auto rental agent for Draper & Smith Garage in San Bernardino. Like most young men, he wanted a car of his own, and the first one he bought was a new Kissel Car, painted bright red.



J. Dale Gentry in 1914
Photograph from the December 20,
1914, San Bernardino Daily Sun



Gentry's first automobile was a Kissel Car

At one point Gentry was seen hobbling around town on crutches due to injuries he had received, so one story goes, when he crashed his Kissel Car out on the desert. The townsfolk thought something ought to be done to help him out, so family friend Rex Goodcell, who later became a Superior Court judge, took up a collection and lent some money to Gentry to begin his car dealership business. The year was late 1909 and he was still a young man in his mid-20s, but he took the stake from Goodcell, set up business on a vacant lot behind the Elks Club, and bought a carload of automobiles. His first purchase was six Fords, which was possibly the minimum amount he could buy. Why he came to choose that make is a puzzle, since according to some people he was unhappy with the Ford cars because he thought they would not sell, and he really wanted to be a Chandler dealer.

Whatever circumstances caused Gentry to buy Fords, it was an auspicious choice. The Model T had just been introduced in 1908, and was about to change the world. It was the first mass-produced automobile and was cheap enough to be affordable to the middle class. Henry Ford said of the "T" that it would be built for the great multitude by the best men, using the simplest designs and the best material. This model went on to become known world-wide and is said to be the most influential car of the 20th Century.

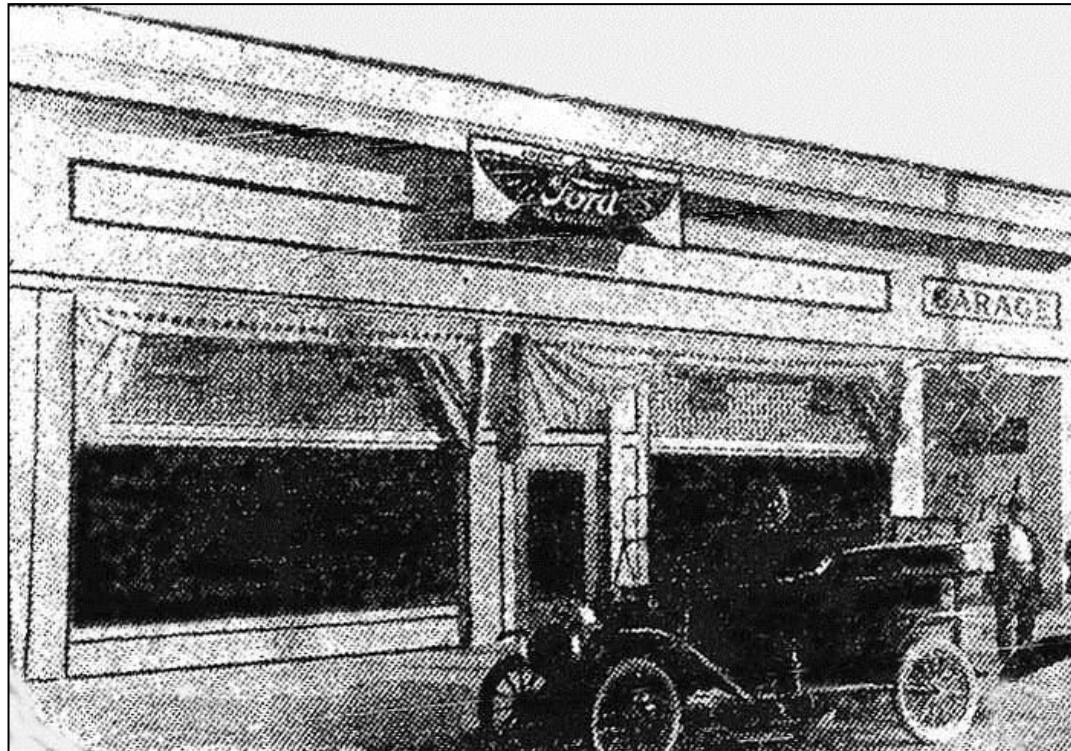


1912 Model T Ford

The San Bernardino *Daily Sun* ran a story on Gentry's progress in its December 20, 1914, issue. The story was so laudatory that it might have been an advertisement, although it was not identified as such. It pointed out that Gentry was experienced, in his fifth year as a Ford dealer, and mentioned that he had been in the business since 1906. The headline ran, "Ford Agency is Great Industry of City." With a gross of \$184,054—exclusive of gas, oil, parts and accessories—and a payroll of \$30,000, Gentry was the leading businessman of San Bernardino.

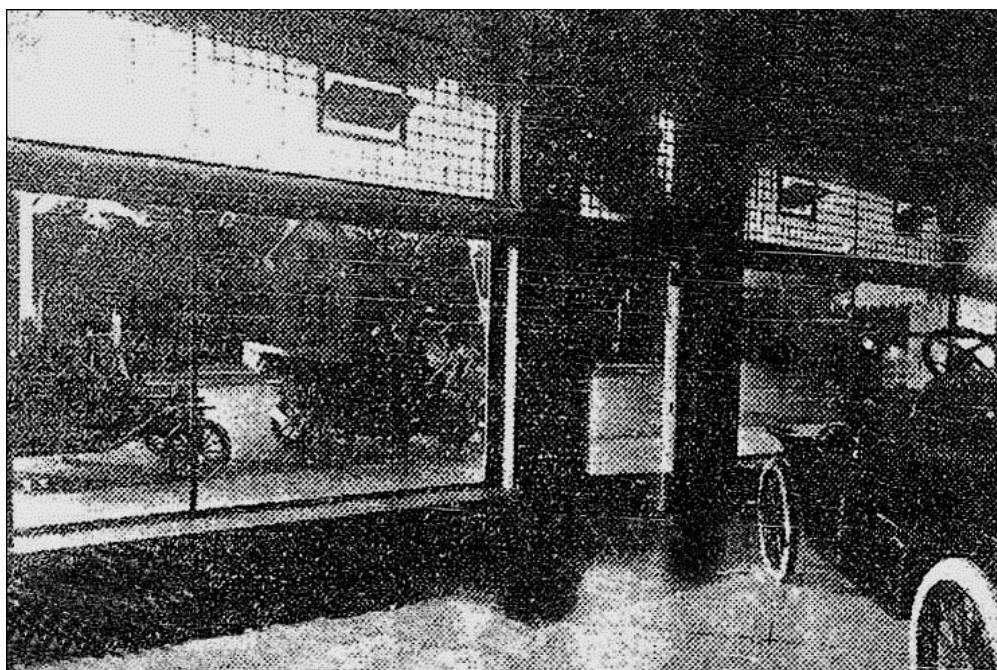
Ford dealers were required to give an estimate of the number of cars they would sell in the upcoming year, and Gentry guessed he would sell eleven. Although he worked harder than he ever had before or since, the best he could do during his first year was eight cars. The second year saw sales of 46 cars, and the third he sold 110. Ford also required their dealers to provide service for their autos, but Gentry did not need any prodding on this line. He knew this was the key to the success of his business, and he directed most of his attention to it. It was said his huge stock of parts was the most complete outside the Ford assembly plant. The model T by this time was hugely popular and called the "universal" car. Gentry sold 306 cars during the fourth year, and although the fifth year was underway at the time of the 1914 news story, it was fairly certain that sales would top one a day.

Early on, Gentry moved from the vacant lot and re-established his business at 437 N. E Street. At this new location, according to the *Daily Sun*, there was a main building measuring 75 by 140 feet, and a shop to the north that was 50 by 100 feet. The shop had heavy machinery especially equipped for the manufacture and rebuilding of car bodies. Gentry brought in a specialist designer, said to be the best on the West Coast, who designed commercial vehicles, including ambulances for the county hospital, a police patrol wagon for the city, plus vehicles for the city water department, the city engineer's office, Oehl's Market, and many other businesses, some of which were enumerated in the news article. Besides the spacious salesroom and machine shop, the dealership also had a large garage for storage, so the facility was able to adequately handle the motoring needs of a growing city.



Gentry Ford dealership at 437 N. E Street
Photograph from the December 20, 1914, *Daily Sun*

Another key to Gentry's success was that Ford's mass-production techniques allowed for price reduction while maintaining, or even increasing, quality. Gentry pointed out that a Ford sold for \$1075 in San Bernardino when he started his business, but a fully-equipped roadster was only \$509 in 1914, and a similarly equipped five-passenger or touring car was \$559. The cost of maintenance had dropped to the point where it was much cheaper to maintain a car than a horse and buggy.



Looking out the window from the showroom floor at Gentry Ford
Photograph from the December 20, 1914, *Daily Sun*

One of Gentry's early employees was Leone Delor, who worked for him in the business office from 1913 to 1919. She saw firsthand the difficulties of getting the new business up and running, and commented on the long hours; she often worked late into the night and through the weekend. After Gentry died, she told the story of how he credited her with his success and promised (this was during her employment) to remember her in his will. True to his word, following his death more than 50 years later she found that he had bequeathed her the sum of \$10,000.

Gentry's success continued, according to his biographical sketch in Brown and Boyd's 1922 publication, *History of San Bernardino and Riverside Counties*, which states that he employed more people in San Bernardino than anybody else except for the Santa Fe Railroad:

While engaged in construction work Mr. Gentry traveled from Mexico to Alaska, but finally decided to return to San Bernardino, and in 1906 established his present business of buying, selling and delivering automobiles. In 1910 he secured the Ford agency, starting with a contract for not less than six cars. His business has so increased that today he is selling 1,200 cars annually. Mr. Gentry also handles the Fordson tractors, carries a full line of accessories, and has a fully-equipped repair department in which he is doing a thriving business. All the year round he employs fifty persons, and his establishment is second to the Santa Fe Railroad in San Bernardino in the number of men employed.

What was not mentioned in the biography is that the six cars were delivered to Los Angeles, and arrangements had to be made to bring them to San Bernardino. It so happened that Gentry had six salesmen, so he had them take the Pacific Electric train (fondly known as the “Big Red Cars”) into town and each drove back in one of the new Fords.



Gentry also sold Fordson tractors

One of the more interesting tales of the Gentry Ford era was his development of an eight-cylinder engine for the Model T. Earl E. Buie wrote about it in his “They Tell Me” column in the September 5, 1960, issue of the San Bernardino *Evening Telegram*. Some of the particulars differ from later recounts of the same events, but since Buie’s story was written while Gentry was still alive and active, it is assumed to be more accurate.

Ford Motor Company brought out a V8 engine for their 1932 Model B, quite an improvement over the four-cylinder engines common at the time. This is considered Henry Ford’s last major innovation, and it put his company ahead of the competition for the next 20 years. However, according to Buie, Gentry had the company beat by 15 years, for it was in 1917 that he and Martin Lewis, who was active in the automobile industry in Los Angeles, joined to produce their own V8 engine. They modified the Model T four-cylinder engine using parts manufactured and assembled in San Bernardino. In other words, both Detroit and San Bernardino were manufacturing car engines during World War I. Judging from this description by Buie, the Gentry-Lewis engine was a great innovation:

The eight-cylinder block was fitted onto the Ford Model T engine crankcase, and used the same crankshaft, camshaft and carburetor. It could be installed in a matter of hours and converted the comparatively rough running four-cylinder motor into a powerful motor of smooth performance and high efficiency. And the cost? A mere \$175.

Hanford Foundry cast the block, head and manifold, and Charles Linderoth’s Machine Works at Rialto and I Streets bored the cylinders. (The foundry is now gone. However, the machine shop building still exists, but most of its tools and other equipment have been removed and it is no longer an active business. Most recently it has been known as Toman’s Machine Works.) The engines were assembled by Gentry’s expert mechanics, four of whom Buie identified by name: W. E. (Slim) Vardy, John Wallace, Johnny Kennedy, and Walter Mapstead.

Twenty or 30 engines were built over a period of about one year. When Ford representatives heard about the Gentry-Lewis engine, they came to inspect it, and were not pleased. They told Gentry that their dealers must limit activities to selling their Fords, and that he must desist from further sales of his engine, which he did. Gentry kept his first engine in storage for about 40 years before loaning it to a Gentry Ford successor, Garner-Muth Ford. Garner put it on display for a while, but it eventually was sent to the Ford Museum in Michigan.

Another clash occurred in 1921 during an extremely sharp recession. At that time, Henry Ford was in debt to Wall Street to the tune of several tens of millions, money which he did not have. What he did have was a large inventory of new cars sitting at the factory. His solution was to send 125,000 of these cars to his dealers across the country, and then bill them for immediate cash payment.



Henry Ford

A lengthy account of the plan was covered in the July 30, 1921, issue of *Literary Digest*. It was hailed as a tremendous success, which it was for Ford. He gained 38 million dollars in a bad year and cleaned up his inventory problem. The article, quoting the *Wall Street Journal*, stated that the “Ford recovery was probably the most inspiring event possible to the motor industry.” To me it does not seem all that inspiring, or imaginative—to transfer the burden to already strapped dealers—but the moneyed interests of Wall Street at the time thought otherwise, and the plan was lauded. Of course, some dealers went broke, some dropped their dealerships, but most of Ford’s 17,000 dealers survived. Fortunately, the recession was a short one; the economy improved and the demand for cars was greater than ever. For Gentry there was no slowdown; he said he was selling all the cars he could get, and the nationwide recession did not touch his agency. Still, he chafed at being told how to run his business.

This independent streak of Gentry’s came to a head in 1926. Ford was pushing its own line of batteries and required that their dealers put them in the front window of the showrooms so that anybody entering the dealership could not help but see them. Gentry thought batteries should go in the back and refused Ford’s instructions. The Ford company stripped Gentry of his dealership and arranged for another San Bernardino businessman, O. L. Cowen, to take over. The company also filed suit in Superior Court and sought an injunction against Gentry, charging him with “pirating” Ford products and asked that he be restrained from promoting himself as a Ford dealer. This dispute made it into the March 28, 1926, San Bernardino *Daily Sun*.

Gentry did not go down without a fight: for the next year or two he bought Fords wholesale from other dealers. He probably wanted to diminish his large inventory of parts and accessories. The Ford company was particularly upset with the Ford sign that Gentry had left in his window, which made it appear that his business was a legitimate Ford dealership. After a year or two, Gentry finally gave in and turned his talents to other pursuits. For those who want to know more about the man, see the biography by *Sun-Telegram* writer Leonard Metz in the June 30, 1974, issue.

O. L. COWEN'S FORD AGENCY

In the same March 28, 1926, issue of the *Daily Sun* that reported Ford's injunction against Gentry, came the announcement of a "road show" of Fords. The "mechanical circus," as the paper also called it, was there "under the auspices of O. L. Cowen, Ford dealer," and it included all models of Ford vehicles—trucks, pleasure and business cars, tractors and farm implements—plus various mechanical devices powered by Ford engines. Mayor Grant Holcomb and other city officials led a parade through downtown, winding up at Fourth and Mt. View, where the vehicles were to remain on display.

Cowen was one of those who used his initials instead of his given name, a common practice of the time. The secret of his name, however, was revealed in the 1930 census, in which he was listed as Oswald L. Cowen. The census also shows he was born in Tennessee, was aged 39, and his occupation was "retail automobile." His draft card, dated June 1917, listed his birth date as 24 August, 1890, and stated he was employed at the Firestone Tire and Rubber Co. in Los Angeles.

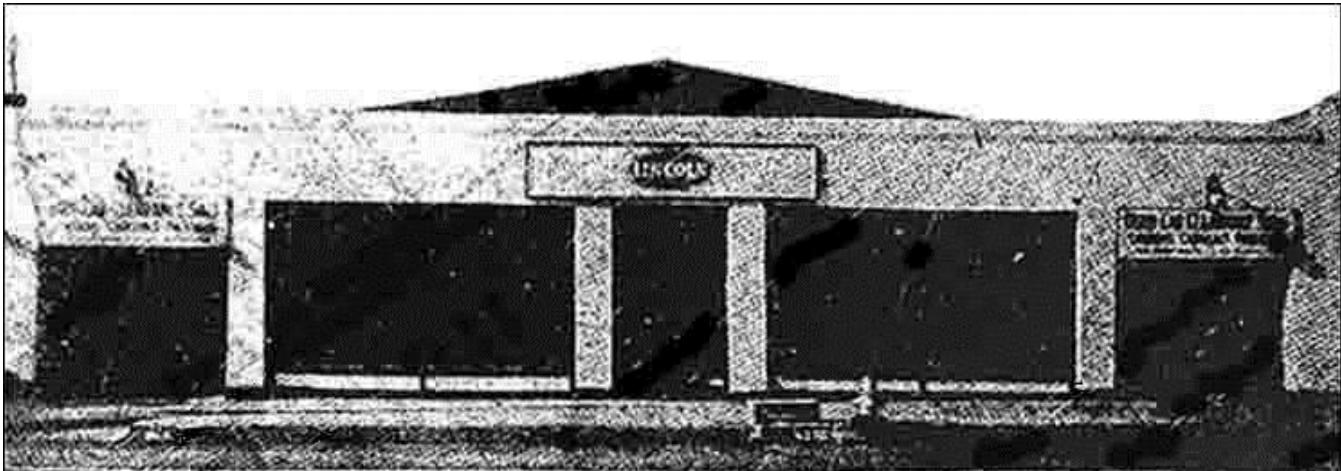


O. L. Cowen

Cowen Ford located at 532 N. D Street, at Fifth and D Streets across from the Post Office. The building and grounds served as the Ford agency in San Bernardino until the 1970s. Cowen also had the Lincoln agency, whose address was 242 N. E Street. He expanded his business and opened a Ford dealership in Rialto and Barstow. The two photographs below are from a Christmas advertisement in the December 25, 1928, issue of the *Daily Sun*.



Cowen Ford at 532 N. D Street



Cowen Lincoln at 242 N. E Street

ROBERT GARNER'S FORD AGENCY

In 1937 Robert Franklin Garner, Jr. (1896-1945) purchased the San Bernardino dealership from O. L. Cowen. The business continued to operate in the same building at Fifth and D Streets. Robert was the grandson of Moses Garner, who came to San Bernardino in 1864. Moses was a successful businessman and community leader. He was elected to the County Board of Supervisors and served from 1883 until 1889. He fathered a large family, including Robert F. Garner, Sr. Many of the Garners had the same entrepreneurial spirit as their patriarch.

Not much is known about Robert Jr.'s reign as the head of Garner Ford. He managed to keep the business going during the Great Depression and throughout World War II. New cars were not produced during the war, so it must have been a holding situation for this period. Robert Jr. died in August 1945, one month before his son Jack (1919-2009) returned from a three-and-a-half year stint in the Army. According to Robert's obituary in the Idyllwild *Town Crier*, Jack "aggressively took over all the family enterprises. Garner Ford became the number one truck dealership in the state." At one point Jack took on a partner and the business became known as Garner-Muth Ford.

Jack disposed of the Ford agency in the 1970s, about the time that Fairway Ford began. At first I thought there was a connection, but news clippings in the California Room at the Feldheim Library show that Fairway Ford purchased Sierra Ford in 1972 out of bankruptcy court. Fairway Ford built a new building at Third and G Streets, next to Interstate 215. It is still in the same location.

What is somewhat striking is the relative youth of the dealers when they undertook such a serious endeavor, one requiring a large amount of capital. J. Dale Gentry was about 25 when he started, O. L. Cowen was 35, Robert F. Garner, Jr., 41, and Jack Garner, 26. Another thing was that they were all connected with the National Orange Show. Gentry was president in 1924, Cowen was president in 1934, and Robert Garner, president in 1941. Jack Garner's obituary states that he was quite active with the Orange Show, but I have not been able to find if he was ever president. All in all, a pretty talented group of businessmen, just a few out of the talent pool of the early 20th Century in San Bernardino.