

Since I am the "Guest Writer" for this month, and since the name of our Newsletter is the SPARTON NEWS, I thought it would make an interesting story to know the history of the Sparton Corporation, and what the name-sake of our newsletter is all about. The Sparton Corporation is located in Jackson, Michigan, only 30 miles from where I was born, and at the time of my high school graduation, I had several friends who worked there, although I had no idea that Sparton had ever had anything to do with Model A's, or for that matter, horns. My main source of information for this article was Mike Fensler, who is a purchaser in the Jackson plant. Much of the text in this article was written by him, and I am deeply indebted to him. In his writing, Mike referenced. [A History of Sparton](#) written for the 50th anniversary of the company in 1950. Mike is a Model A owner, a 1929 Roadster which he bought in 1974. He is a current member of MARC, and former member of MAFCA. In addition to his Model A, Mike has collected several of the items in the accompanying article, those being; an S.O.S horn, one of the signs posted by the younger Withingtons along the Lincoln Highway, and a recording of the song played by the Bugle horn from 1926.

Sadly, since I first corresponded with Mike in February of this year, a decision has been made to close the Jackson Plant and the London Ontario Plant. Present plans call for leaving the corporate headquarters in Jackson, but even that is questionable in the long run. The company that made the horns for our precious Model A's is struggling, another victim of the current turbulent economy, A sad day for America, I think. -Ed.

## The Sparton Corporation (A Brief History)

By Dan Foulk

The Sparton Corporation was founded in Jackson, Michigan in 1900 as an adjunct to the Withington-Cooley Company. The primary business of the company was making stamped farm tools. The owner of the parent company (*Withington*), had two sons, who he set up in business to supply small stampings to the larger firm. Shortly thereafter, the Withington sons hired William Sparks as a bookkeeper. Sparks was from England, and was working in a grocery store in Jackson at the time. He immediately showed himself as an organizer and super salesman, and in a short time, the new company took on the name of Sparks-Withington. Under Sparks' impetus, the company started looking toward the fairly new automobile industry, and in 1909, started making radiator fans. That business took off and a new building was built in Jackson in 1910, followed by another one in 1912, both still standing on North Street, but looking pretty ragged. An interesting fact is that across the street from these factories is the old Jackson Prison wall, still standing. Sparton, like many firms at the time, used prison labor for some of its work force. By 1912, Sparton (*this name did not become the corporate identity until 1956; Sparton was applied strictly to the products, not the company name. Sparton is based on SPAR from SPARKs, and TON from WithingTON*) designed and started marketing the industry's first electrically operated motor horn. A contract with Hudson and Packard followed, which put Sparton horns on the map. The push to get Packard to use Sparton horns came from William Sparks, who was General Manager of Sparton, the mayor of Jackson, and the President of the Jackson chamber of commerce, all at the same time. By 1917, Sparton was making fans, radiators, vacuum tanks, and horns. During World War I, the factory had many government contracts, including gas-attack alarms, which were hand-cranked. They also stamped out a huge number of steel helmets. After the war, the post-war recession cut into Sparton's financial well-being, but the introduction of the S.O.S. series of horns saved the company. These horns were held in such high regard that car owners would put a Sparton horn on their cars, remove them when they sold or junked the vehicles, and re-install them on their new cars (*see testimonial letter on page 9*). In 1915, a younger generation of Withingtons and Sparks drove across the country in a Model T truck, posting signs along the Lincoln Highway, which said "Safety First - Sound Sparton". These marked dangerous turns, railroad tracks, bridges, hills, and other hazards, for motorists going to and from the San Francisco World's Fair, known as the Pan American Exposition. At this point, quoting from the 50th anniversary book thusly: "After the Hudson and Packard contracts were secured, the list of [horn] customers grew very rapidly and the following names are found in the early horn records: Lincoln, Apperson, Haynes, Stutz, Nordyke-Marmon, Peerless, Jordan, Cleveland, Chandler, Autocar, National, White, Jackson (*built in Jackson under the slogan "No hill too steep, no sand too deep"*), Imperial, Auburn, Mack, Pierce-Arrow, Winton, Buick, Dort, Durrant, Locomobile, Lozier, International Harvester, Paige, Maxwell, Briscoe (*another Jackson product*), Chalmers, Dodge, Moon, Hupmobile, Kissel, and many others". A magazine ad from May 1917 shows several additional makes, such as Mercer, Studebaker, Cole, Pathfinder, Owen Magnetic, and Marion-Handley, all with Sparton horns. In the late teens and early twenties,

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over 42 makes of cars had Sparton motor horns. Although Lincoln is on this list (*presumably before Henry Leland sold the company to Ford*) Ford does not appear - yet. Another nugget from the 1920s. Sparton sold a series of horns called the "Bugle" which played various tunes. A song was written about them (*without, however, mentioning Sparton's name in the lyrics*) called "I'm Wild About Horns on Automobiles That Go Ta-Ta-Ta-Taa". In the record, an actual horn makes the sound. In 1926 Sparton entered the radio business, and in 1927 moved into a much larger building in Jackson.



**Sparton Combination Radio-Phonograph - Year 1930**

That same year, the Model "A" finally enters the picture and quoting from the 50th anniversary publication: "The year 1927 was important to the growth of the Automotive Division, because another famous name was added to the list of our customers". In that year a contract was signed with the Ford Motor Company, covering production of the AF horn for Ford model "A" cars. It has been related that the final selection of the Sparton AF horn was determined by Mr. Henry Ford following an automobile trip which he and Mrs. Ford made to the northern part of Michigan. Several different horns had been mounted on the car, which allowed Mr. Ford to make his own tests. The Sparton horn gave a more adequate warning signal, combined with a pleasing tone, so Mr. Ford made his decision in its favor. This pleasant business relationship still continues (*as of 1950*).



**Caravan of Trucks led by a Model A, delivering Sparton radios to a Chicago Distributor in 1929**



**Display of Sparton Automotive products Circa 1940**

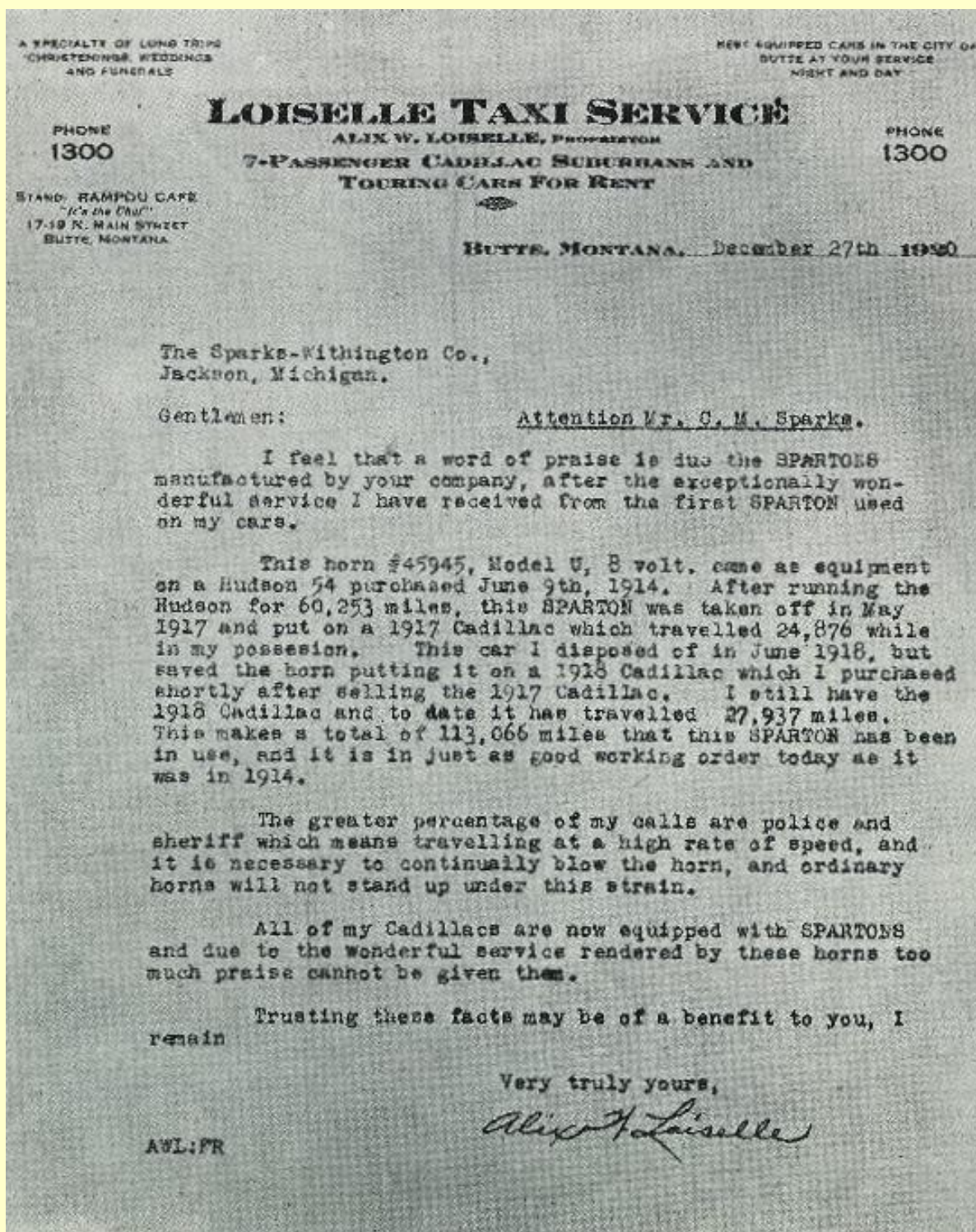
William Sparks died in 1943 at the age of 70 while Sparton was churning out tons of war material. The Sparton radio, TV, and refrigerator, along with the pressing of phonograph records at the Canada plant, all are part of the history of Sparton that has never been adequately told. The company got into sonar devices for the Navy around 1950 and into medical and aerospace contract assembly in 1995. Sparton made an intentional effort to leave the auto business in the mid-1990s (*The horn plant had been moved to Flora, Illinois, sometime in the 1970's*). There were horn contracts with the Big Three and also after-market horns sold through the NAPA auto parts chain. The horn plant was sold off in 1997, but the buyer lost his financing and in effect, Sparton walked away from the Flora plant and took a financial bath. Also, there was a subsidiary called KPI which had small plants around Michigan and Indiana, where pedal hangers, automatic transmission shifters, and other products were made. KPI was shut down and sold in 1997. The sale

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of KPI was pretty much the end of Sparton being in the automobile business in any form. The automotive business which had sustained Sparton for 85 years to that point was a thing of the past.

Sparton has been hit pretty hard by the current recession but still supports a plant in Jackson, one in Canada (See sidebar!), two in Florida, one in Ohio, and one in Vietnam.





Spartons 45 - Millionth Horn Advertisement - circa 1950