

## From Henry Ford to Fairmont Ford – A Century of Progress

From Henry Ford to Fairmont Ford, a century of progress is being marked this year in Martin County. In today's world it seems quite unlikely that a small Midwestern community can be called home to any business that has survived, no less prospered, for 100 years. However, Fairmont can boast of two that fit that definition by celebrating 100 years of business in 2009, Fairmont Railway Motors, Inc./Harsco Rail and Fairmont Ford.

Henry Ford incorporated the Ford Motor Company in 1903 and envisioned an automobile for the average person, not merely the wealthy. His vision was accomplished by revolutionizing manufacturing through the utilization of an assembly line and creating the Model T, of which nearly fifteen million were sold in the United States alone.<sup>1</sup>

The heritage of the current Fairmont Ford dealership in Martin County dates back to 1909 when John Grill started selling Ford Flivvers, also known as the Model T, in Sherburn. At that time, the Ford Motor Company had been in existence for a mere six years. Then, in 1914, Grill opened a branch in Fairmont at the corner of Park and Third Streets. Although Fords were not sold in Fairmont until 1914, Henry Beecher Ward was the first Fairmont resident to own a "factory built" car, a Ford that he purchased in 1903. In 1920, Grill moved the dealership to a new building on the corner of Park Street and Blue Earth Avenue where it would remain for over thirty years.

In 1921, Grill sold most of his interest in the dealership to a group of Fairmont residents that included Dr. Lester Webb, Dr. R. H. Zierke, Frank Jones, and Robert Porter. The company was managed by C. W. Dammann and Ray Steelsmith during the 1920s. In 1927, Claus Kloeckner joined Park Motors as office manager. He soon became general manager and eventually became one of the owners. The company took its name, Park Motor Company, Inc., as a result of its location on Park Street and, although previous dealership names carried the managers name, people had trouble both spelling and pronouncing Kloeckner.

Claus Kloeckner, a German immigrant, served the American occupation forces as an interpreter in Koblenz, which was his home town. He became very impressed with America due to his work with American soldiers. Consequently, after attending Business College in Germany and working for an import-export firm, he made the decision that he wanted to go to America. He arrived in 1924 at the age of twenty-two. Upon arriving in America, he was processed through Ellis Island and came to Truman on October 17, 1924. He worked at several different jobs and continued his education at La Salle University in Chicago. While employed as manager of an elevator in Granada, he met Robert Porter. Porter felt Kloeckner would be an asset to the Ford dealership in Fairmont and, consequently, hired him as bookkeeper.

The 1950's ushered in major changes for Park Motor, primarily due to a fire. The November 3, 1952, edition of the *Fairmont Daily Sentinel* reported the Park Motor fire

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<sup>1</sup> <http://inventors.about.com/od/fstartinventors/a/HenryFord.htm>

losses were estimated to be \$200,000.00, the greatest in Fairmont's history up to that time. The article went on to report that it appeared the cause of the fire was a wrecked car that had earlier been towed into the garage. A night clerk at the Augusta Hotel, across the street from Park Motor, was the first to report the fire at 12:20 a.m. Forstrom Oldsmobile allowed Park Motor to use part of their lot to display 1953 model cars and temporary offices were set up in the Augusta Hotel.

In 1953, construction began on their new building at 700 East Blue Earth Avenue. They reopened for business at that location in 1954. In 1956, Robert Kloeckner became the second generation of Kloeckners to work at the dealership.

As the years went by, Robert Kloeckner eventually became the manager of the dealership in 1976, and the third generation of Kloeckners became involved with the business. David Kloeckner joined Park Motor full-time in 1979 and James Kloeckner began working full-time with Park Motor Company in 1990.

In 2003, Park Motor Company changed its name to Fairmont Ford, and the dealership went through an extensive remodeling and renovation project. Also in 2003, as a result of Fairmont Ford being the fourth oldest Ford dealership in the U.S., Robert and Kay Kloeckner were invited to Dearborn, Michigan, during Ford Motor Company's 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary.

Since the day of Henry Ford, an innovator and pioneer in the auto industry, to the Fairmont Ford of today, an evolution of change has taken place as a result of the automobile that has altered the face of our society forever. Undeniably, if Henry Ford were alive today, he would point with pride to Fairmont Ford for surviving and prospering for 100 years, while at the same time providing quality products and service to the residents of the surrounding area. Fairmont and Martin County can be proud to be the home of businesses that have endured and been a lasting benefit to the local economy for 100 years, including Fairmont Ford, which is also noteworthy as being the 4<sup>th</sup> oldest Ford dealership in the U.S.

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For more information about Fairmont Ford, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.