

Henry Ford and Soy Beans

by Lynne Belluscio

I just returned from Livonia, Michigan, where I attended the Midwest Open-air Museum Spring Conference. I had been asked to give a talk about Jell-O because there is a connection between Jell-O and the Geer General Store at the Greenmead Historical Park in Livonia.

The Geer Store was moved to the Historical Park in 1976. It originally stood in Newburg, Michigan on the Ann Arbor Trail. A couple of years ago, we received a copy of a black and white photo of the Geer Store which shows a large Jell-O poster tacked on the side. I was asked if I knew what color the poster might have been and I didn't know. But since that time, we acquired two paper posters that appear to be the same size as the one in the photo and I was able to tell them that the poster was bright yellow with black letters. So my Jell-O talk included a history of Jell-O and then I shared the stories of the Jell-O salesmen who traveled the rural roads to places like Newburg where the Geer General Store originally was located.

Livonia is a short distance from Detroit, so on Thursday, Jim Mattson from the Minnesota Historical Society and I joined a group for a behind the scenes tour of the Henry Ford Museum, which also included a quick stop to the archives, where several years ago, I was able to research the story about Henry Ford's speeding ticket in LeRoy. I have never really understood why Ford was so mad about the speeding ticket but I think I discovered something while I was in Detroit.

On August 1, 1922, Ford was on his way back to Detroit after a vacation with Thomas Edison and Harvey Firestone. He and a friend, Dr. R.D. McClure, Surgeon in Chief of the Henry Ford Hospital were riding in the back seat and Ford's chauffeur, George Burns was driving. They were trying to get to Buffalo to take the night boat to Detroit - - at least that's what Ford said after they



were stopped for going 45 miles per hour in a 15 mph zone.

Ford claimed that they were outside the village limits and not under the jurisdiction of the local police department. But that may have been a cover-up for the real issue. Instead of speeding, Ford had actually stopped in LeRoy. Just as they came into the village, he ordered Burns to slow down as they approached the bridge. As they drove over the bridge, Ford leaned out of the car to look down toward the Clay Street bridge. Not seeing what he was looking for, he ordered Burns to do a U turn in front of the Dock (which is where the post office is now. It would be several years before the Dock would be torn down and the new post office erected on the site.)

The car passed over the bridge again and then Ford ordered Burns to drive down Wolcott Street past the new high school and the old stone Staunton Art Conservatory (which was still standing, since it would be several years before it would be torn down and the Woodward Library erected.) They had a clear view of the creek since the Statue of Liberty hadn't been erected yet, but still Ford was unsatisfied. He had come to town to collect specimens for his new museum. He planned to collect American innovations. He was enthralled with the Wright brothers, Thomas Edison, Henry Firestone and George Washington Carver.

He built on the site of his museum, a soybean research center where he developed a type of plastic from soybeans which he used to make knobs and handles for his cars. The soybean mill is still standing in the museum. It houses a collection of farm implements. Ford even had a suit made for himself from soybean fiber. He believed that the soybean held the answer to the source of raw material for many products.

He had thousands of acres of farmland planted with soybeans. So after searching the creek bank to no avail, he turned east and began his search again. He made a U turn in the middle of East Main Street, right in front of Orator Woodward's mansion, Hill-Bar and headed back to town. And there, in the front yard of the superintendent of schools he saw what he had come to town for. "Mr. Burns, pull over to the curb!" And no sooner had the car stopped, Henry Ford jumped out and grabbed what he was looking for and threw it in the trunk. "Mr.

Burns - - Drive us to Buffalo as quickly as you can! I need to be on that boat to Detroit tonight!"

Well the rest is history. Patrolman Dempier caught up with Ford. Henry was willing to pay the \$30 fine for speeding. He really didn't want Dempier to discover the evidence in the trunk because he might have been charged with theft. But once Ford got back to Detroit, he had second thoughts. He had gotten away with stolen

goods and the speeding ticket made him mad, so he fought it. So what did he have in the trunk? Well, it was something he thought he could revolutionize by making it out of soybean plastic. The one he had "borrowed" was made out of cement. In fact, we have the other one in the LeRoy House collection.

Henry Ford had borrowed a cement pink flamingo decoy from the LeRoy House front yard. It was one of the decoys that LeRoyans had placed in their yards with the hope that the flamingoes would once again return to the creek. It was a valiant effort, but all in vain, for the flamingoes have never returned, although on Wednesday, April 1, we will put out all the decoys again. So check the front yard on April 1. Henry Ford never did make soybean plastic flamingoes. The automobile business took all of his attention.

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