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100th anniversary fuels Kissel car homecoming

By PHILLIP HERMANN - GM Today Staff

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HARTFORD - It's a big year and a memorable summer for the Wisconsin Automotive Museum.

Not only will the museum celebrate its 20th anniversary in July, this weekend the tourist attraction will serve as the cornerstone for the 100th anniversary of the founding of Kissel Motor Car Co. in the city.

Museum Executive Director Dale Anderson said both landmarks have significance for the community.

"Kissel was the largest employer in the city until the modern era," Anderson said. "When you're talking about Hartford's development, however, you have to remember the Kissel family was involved in a lot more than just automobile manufacturing. They started a bank and built houses, owned a grocery store. They were pretty much involved in every aspect of day-to-day life in Hartford for many years."

Anderson, who helped found the historic facility, said he never envisioned that the museum would anchor an area that has grown to include the Recreation Department, aquatic center and the Schauer Arts & Activities Center.

"I think it provides a real destination for people who want to come to Hartford and see and do interesting things," Anderson said. "The museum draws people from all over Southeastern Wisconsin and northern Illinois, especially the Chicago, Madison and Green Bay areas."

The museum's main supply of visitors aren't necessarily car collectors.

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"While we're certainly popular with collectors and historians, I think the vast majority of our visitors is the general public," Anderson said. "I mean, people who want to see what kind of car their dad drove or their grandfather drove. People who want to step back and remember the fun they had driving a car when they were in high school."

"I think it's a place where people can get away



Margo Cohn

A 1920 Kissel Model 6-45 is on display at the Wisconsin Automotive Museum.



Margo Cohn

A 1925 Kissel Model 6-55 bears the company's logo.



from modern life for a while and just relax and enjoy the atmosphere we've created that celebrates the history of this particular industry," he said.

Laurie Barz, executive director of the Hartford Area Chamber of Commerce, said she regularly fields phone calls from people who are eager to get a bead on the museum's location.

"I know, personally, that there's a lot of interest in the museum based on the phone calls. I think it's extremely beneficial to the downtown area because it offers something unique. You can't find this type of thing anywhere else - only in Hartford," she said.

Mayor Scott Henke said the museum is an integral part of the downtown mix of commercial ventures and cultural opportunities.

"It's an important part of the downtown because it brings in people from all over who want to see the displays. In turn, those people are introduced to Hartford and what it has to offer in other areas," Henke said. "In a cultural sense, the museum links the city's past with its future because it serves as an historical reminder of the city's heritage while helping keep the downtown area vital and attractive to tourists and those who are interested in automaking history."

At a glance

The Kissel Motor Car Co. was founded in June 1906 after the Kissel family came to Hartford and purchased a plow manufacturing company. Other family members got involved in a general store, bank, real estate developments and many other enterprises.

William and George Kissel wanted to build automobiles after becoming involved with the family steam car.

The first production run was 100 cars sold to a Chicago dealer. None of that production has survived. Out of 35,000 vehicles built, only 200 remain in the world.

On Saturday, the Kissel Kar Klub will gather at the museum for various activities.

On Sunday, the celebration continues and the museum will be open to the general public at a reduced admission rate.

Expected are six to 10 additional Kissel cars to be shown along with the 23 Kissels already on display in the museum.

Source: Dale Anderson, executive director, Wisconsin Automotive Museum

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