

When the chapter closes in two years, when the final four tires snake off the final assembly line once and for all, a little town nestled on U.S. 20 between Ashtabula and North Madison will shed a collective tear and force a reluctant smile.

Geneva, Ohio is not celebrated in the same respect as Detroit is for being the birthplace of Henry Ford and the automobile. Or even the way Ellis, Kan. is for being the boyhood home of Walter P. Chrysler.

Located on the southern edge of Lake Erie, and in only a few square kilometres of space, the biggest thing about Geneva is the Annual Grape JamBoree, a fall harvest that's held the last full weekend in September and culminates in the crowning of Miss Grapette.

Only 6,470 live there. One legend once did.

Ransom E. Olds was born in June of 1864, 10 months after Ford. Son of machinist Pliny Olds, Ransom moved his family to Lansing, Mich., and eventually established himself as an automobile pioneer with cars such as the R.E.O. and the Oldsmobile. But not before calling that little Ohio town home; not before taking what he learned in a small part of America and applying it to every car he ever built.

Olds was a common man who would forever consider the common folk when he set out to build affordable transportation for the masses. He was someone who never forgot his roots, no matter how much his dream was realized. And Olds was a dreamer.

The youngest of five children, he signed up for a six-month course at a local business college by 16. By 18, Olds had taken over bookkeeping chores at his father's business. When Olds turned 21, he was so adept, his father made him a partner.

The youngest Olds was a tinkerer, a thinker and an inventor. In his lifetime, he would earn 30 patents, the first for a new type of governor for steam engines. By 22, he would have his first automobile on the road: a three-wheeled steam-powered car. Four years later, he'd build another, a larger model which he sold to a British company for \$400. The car was shipped to India, but it ended up at the bottom of the ocean: the ship sank on the way there.

Ten years later, after toiling around in his father's shop and perfecting a self-propelled carriage that would run better, Olds' business began to roll.

Internal-combustion engines were beginning to flourish and Olds wanted to be on the cutting edge. By 1884, with his third vehicle already built, gas quickly running the world and the Durvea brothers selling their first automobile in America, the Olds Motor Vehicle Company was formed.

Working out of his father's old machine shop, the young automotive wizard was in motion. That year he sold four cars. Soon he would have the first car factory and would become the first to use an auto assembly line. But he needed help.

With the aid of Samuel Smith, a well-off friend, Olds turned the Olds Motor Vehicle Company into Olds Motor Works three years later, moving the business to a plant on East Jefferson Ave., near Detroit's Belle Isle Bridge, becoming the first to manufacture cars in the city that Ford would later make famous.

After several unsuccessful models,

Olds hit it big. But it almost wasn't. In 1901, a fire burned the company to the ground. One prototype was saved, which became the basis of America's first mass-produced vehicle.

After a move back to Lansing, Olds had the idea to make the floor of his new car curve up to form the dashboard. The vehicle, featuring a seven-horsepower, single-cylinder engine with two forward gears and one reverse, would top 20 mph and would be the first to wear the Oldsmobile name.

The Curved-Dash was an immediate hit, the first real success among commercially sold U.S. models. Volume was key, as was the ability to turn out quality product. It would sell for \$625, which would remain the same price for the seven-year life of the car.

Olds sold 425 the first year and, by 1905, more than 6,500 — dramatic numbers for the time. And, using much of that Geneva-learned ingenuity, he would help make these a must-have.

If the fire didn't give Olds enough publicity, he would also dream up musical jingles, hire famous people for promotions and even do some things himself.

His creative ad campaigns were some of the first to use race-car drivers for large-scale promotions. In 1901, he asked driver Roy Chapin to pilot an Olds from Detroit to New York for the auto show. In what would be the longest trip taken by a vehicle to that point, it took Chapin one week to get to Manhattan. Olds was there, in the lobby of the Waldorf-Astoria to meet him with a hug and a smile.

The next year, Olds took the wheel himself, racing against Alexander Winton on the beaches of Daytona, Fla., the first race on what would become a legendary speedway.

Olds and Smith eventually disagreed on the company's direction. Smith wanted luxury cars, Olds wanted everyday vehicles — and by 1904, they had parted company. Smith's luxu-rides would fail, while Olds would be picked up by William C. Durant in 1908 in what would become General Motors.

The rest was history.

Olds would form the REO Motor Car Company, which would build cars and trucks until 1975. He would also start a power lawnmower business, another invention all his own, and he would dabble in securities and real estate.

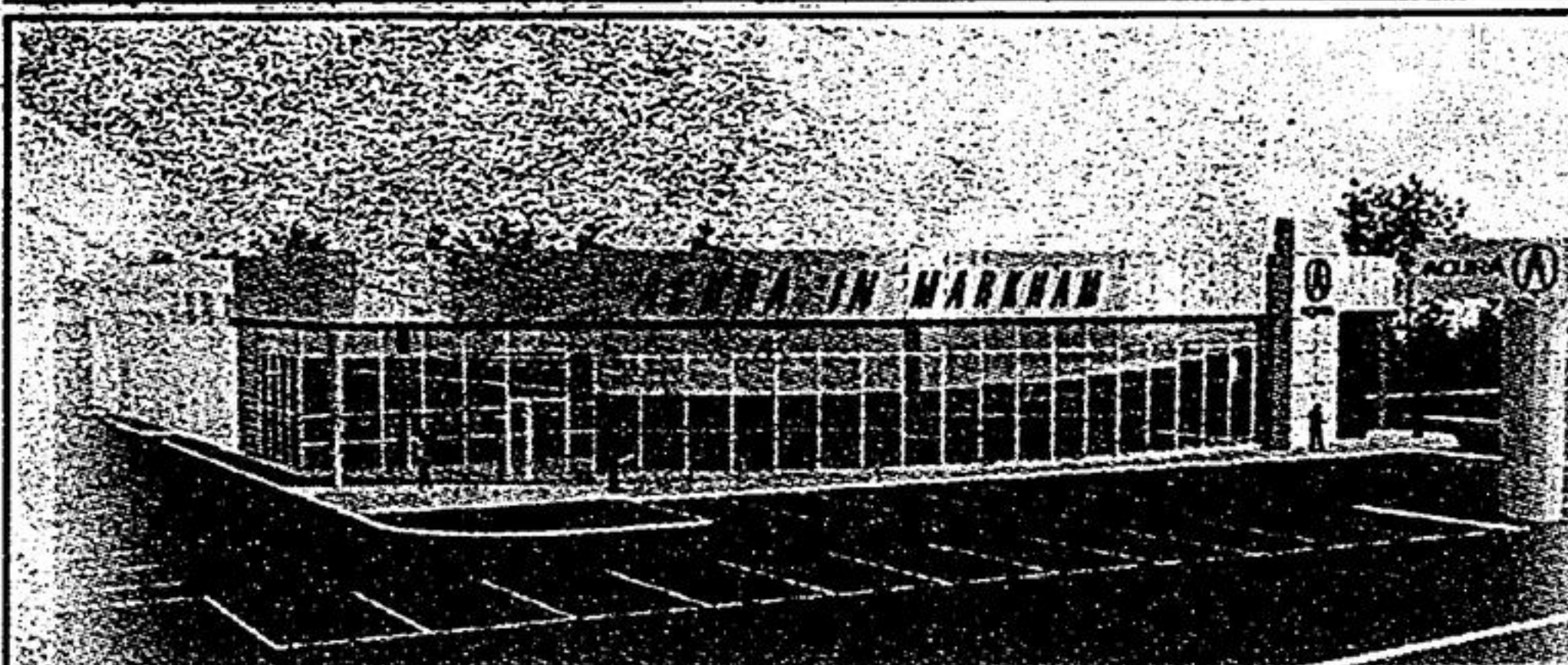
Olds died in 1950 at age 86 — ironically about the time his once-proud product began to turn stale at General Motors. Ultimately, a lack of sales (and a lack of creativity) made the Oldsmobile a dinosaur.

In spite of this seemingly unfitting turnabout, Olds' cars would be the first to have automatic transmissions. They would eventually carry the world's first air bag. And they would have loyal followers, most of whom were offended when GM tried to revive the brand with the 'Not Your Father's Oldsmobile' campaign. Younger buyers didn't get it anyway.

By 2004, the cars of which Olds dreamt will be gone, and so will the tradition of firsts achieved by the quiet inventor from Geneva.










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To earn the title of automotive pioneer, you had to be creative, inventive, business-minded and a visionary — Ransom E. Olds was much more than a pioneer.



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