

## THE KISSEL MOTOR CAR: KEEPING THE MEMORY ALIVE

By Lynn Kissel

At a recent concours at which I was exhibiting my 1924 Kissel Speedster, a spectator walked up to me and said that he thought Kissel cars were like unicorns, written about, fabled to exist but never actually seen. This, the man told me, was the first Kissel he had ever seen!

At least he had heard of Kissel cars. Based on my interactions with a more general audience, I suspect that less than one in fifty have ever even heard of the marque. When driving one of my two Kissels on public roads, I am invariably asked "What is it?" I come to expect the question but have not developed a good, concise response. I typically say "It's a Kissel!"<sup>1</sup> but from the puzzled looks, frowns or blank stares I'm sure that my answer isn't satisfying or understood. I often follow this with a question of my own, "What's a Kissel?" If they stick around after this, it gives me an opening for a longer discussion; depending on their interest and my energy level, my lecture is of variable length. As many of my friends will tell you, when it comes to Kissels, I'm full of it!

Thanks to automobile organizations like the Classic Car Club of America, the Horseless Carriage Club of America and others, and a small but passionate group of Kissel owners, we are managing to keep the memory of Kissel alive. The KisselKar Klub is a loose-knit organization of Kissel owners with about 200 names on its roster. With the active support of the Wisconsin Automotive Museum,<sup>2</sup> the Klub publishes a newsletter called the *Kisselgraph*<sup>3</sup> and has a meeting once every several years. Our next meeting is scheduled for June 19, 2011, at the museum to celebrate its 25-th anniversary.

The following paragraphs are a modest expansion of my usual "What's a Kissel" sermon. It provides a brief sketch of the founding and history of the Kissel Motor Car Company. If you are interested in more depth, please consult the Kissel histories of Husting,<sup>4</sup> Duerksen,<sup>5</sup> Zahm<sup>6</sup> and Quandt.<sup>7</sup> (Please see the

---

<sup>1</sup> You should try saying "Kissel" across traffic at a light or in a parking lot; it's difficult to enunciate the relatively soft "K" so that it be understood. Many people shout back "Tissel?" or some other variation.

<sup>2</sup> Dale Anderson is the executive director of the KisselKar Klub and of the Wisconsin Automotive Museum, telephone 262-673-7999, website: <http://wisconsinautomuseum.com/>, email: [info@wisconsinautomuseum.com](mailto:info@wisconsinautomuseum.com), address: 147 North Rural Street, Hartford, Wisconsin 53027-1407.

<sup>3</sup> The KisselKar Klub's newsletter has been published since 1961, adopting its current name from a Great War (World War I) newsletter. The original *Kisselgraph* was published in seven issues in 1918. Between the flag and folio of the front page was this dedication, "Edited and printed in Hartford by Hartford Boys in the Kissel Factory for Hartford Boys in cantonments and overseas, fighting the righteous fight for God and Country."

<sup>4</sup> E. E. Husting, "25 year history Kissel," *Antique Automobile* 25, No.5 (1961) 308-24, 354; Gene Husting, "The Kissel Kaper," *Automobile Quarterly* 9, No.3 (1971) 318-41.

<sup>5</sup> Menno Duerksen, "Free Wheeling," *Cars&Parts* 15, No.2 (1971) 71-75; *ibid.* No.3 (1971) 65-77.

sidebar accompanying this article for more information on the Kissel Speedster, the focus of a recent historic gathering in Michigan.)

Part of a wave of German immigrants that came to the US starting in 1848, Conrad Kissel (b.1812, d. 1872) and family emigrated from Alsace to Addison Township in Washington County, Wisconsin, in 1857. His son, Ludwig "Louis" Kissel, moved to Hartford, Wisconsin, in 1883 where he owned a hardware store and farm implement business.<sup>8</sup>

[\[IMG –1890c Kissel hardware store\]](#)

In 1890, Louis created a partnership with his four sons (Adolph P., Otto P., William L. and George A.) and subsequently purchased the Hartford Plow Works, with four large buildings involved in the manufacture and distribution of farm machinery. In addition to distributing engines from other manufacturers, the Kissels developed their own gasoline engine. By 1906, the Louis Kissel family was also involved in home building and sales, with a stone quarry and sand pit and facilities for milling their own finished lumber.

[\[IMG – 1895c Louis Kissel family\]](#)

In 1906, Louis, his four sons and US District Attorney H. K. Butterfield incorporated the Kissel Motor Car Company.<sup>9</sup> The new auto company planned to spend the rest of 1906 perfecting their car and gearing up for full-scale production in 1907.

It was reported in a local newspaper account that Mr. E. A. Savage of Milwaukee, a well known traveling salesman for the Robert Rohn company, bought the first runabout produced by Kissel. He must have been impressed as he later quit his traveling salesman job to become the Kissel representative in Milwaukee.

Kissel soon landed a contract with the McDuffee Automobile Company of Chicago. Under the terms of the agreement, McDuffee would take the entire output of Kissel for 1907 (to be 100 cars or more) and serve as the sole sales agent. McDuffee made no changes to the mechanicals of the car, but the body was manufactured from designs supplied by McDuffee. The first cars (probably demonstrators) were delivered in late December, 1906,<sup>10</sup> with volume deliveries starting in March, 1907.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Karl S. Zahm, "A History of the Classic Kissel," *The Classic Car* 37, No.2 (1989) 36-47.

<sup>7</sup> Val V Quandt., *The Classic Kissel Automobile* (Hartford, WI: Kissel Graph Press, 1990)

<sup>8</sup> My great-great-grandfather Joseph Henry Kissel (b. 1822, d. 1892) emigrated from Alsace to Western New York in 1850. I'm told that a modern Alsatian phone book lists eight families with the Kissel surname, making it likely that I'm a distant relative of the Hartford Kissels. On the other hand, if we go back far enough, you and I are related, too, assuming your family originates on this planet!

<sup>9</sup> "New Incorporations," *The Horseless Age* (June 20, 1906) p. 940.

<sup>10</sup> "Minor Mention," *The Horseless Age* (Dec. 26, 1906) p. 941.

#### [IMG – 1907 Kissel Model “C”]

The 1907 KisselKar Model “C” sold for \$1850, f.o.b. Hartford. For an amount claimed to be 2/3 of what other manufactures charged for a vehicle of similar equipment, you could acquire a 2250 lb, 98” wheelbase, 5-passenger touring car with a 30 HP , four-cylinder engine. The 4-1/2”x4-3/4” cylinders were cast in pairs. The car had a three-speed forward, one-speed reverse sliding gear transmission, an open drive shaft, full floating rear axle with internal and external brakes at the rear wheels. These were reasonably aggressive features for a first offering from the young automobile company.

Production for Kissel model year 1908 started in July 1907 as the McDuffee contract was being completed, setting a pattern for future years. This large half-year offset between calendar year and model year is a source of constant confusion for students<sup>12</sup> of the Kissel Motor Car Company.

Kissel was fortunate to have two key personnel in place early in the life of the company. Herman Palmer joined the company as an ordinary laborer in 1906. Trained as an engineer at the University of Cologne, Germany, his talents and inventive genius quickly became evident and he soon became head of engineering.

Of equal importance was the services of J. Frederick “Fritz” Werner, son of a master carriage maker. Fritz trained for seven years as a coachbuilder in Germany. After working at the Opel works in Russelsheim, Germany, then with Studebaker in the US, Werner joined the Kissel staff in 1908.

#### [IMG – 1909c Kissel factory]

#### [IMG – 1909 6-cyl engine]

The fortunes and offerings from Kissel quickly expanded with time. A 60-HP six-cylinder engine was introduced in 1909 and body styles on multiple wheelbases proliferated. A double-drop frame (bump up over axles) in 1911 allowed for lowering the body. In 1912 Kissel offered cars with 30-, 40- and 50-HP four cylinder and 60-HP six cylinder engines, on four wheelbases from 116-132”, in six body styles (5p and 7p touring, semi-touring, semi-racer, coupe, limousine). The Stewart vacuum fuel pump, destined to become ubiquitous in automobiles through the 1920s, was developed by Webb Jay in Kissel shops.

Up until the Great War (World War I) each year’s production was generally an increase from that a year before, peaking at about 1,600 cars per year in 1917.<sup>13</sup>

#### [IMG – 1910 Kissel delivery wagon]

---

<sup>11</sup> “Kissel Motor Car Co.–Kissel Kar,” *Motor Age* (Feb. 7, 2007) p. 58.

<sup>12</sup> Me!

<sup>13</sup> *Standard Catalog of American Cars, 1805-1942*, Beverly Rae Kimes, Henry Austin Clark, Jr., 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Kruse:Iola, 1996)

#### [IMG – 1912 3-ton trucks]

While Kissel produced their first trucks as early as 1908, these initial offerings were special bodies on a car chassis. By 1912, Kissel had expanded to a full line of dedicated truck chassis of up to 156" with ratings of 1500 lb., 1½, 2, 3, 4 and 5 tons. For the Great War, Kissel was awarded two separate contracts to build 2,000 and 1,500 FWD trucks<sup>14</sup> for the U.S. Army. The 1,500-truck contract was cancelled before it could be completed due to the end of the war.

#### [IMG – 1914 en-block six]

#### [IMG – 1915 All-Year Car]

Electric starters were introduced in 1913, one year after the pioneering introduction by Cadillac. In 1914 Kissel converted to left-hand drive and all electric lights. Kissel's early engines were all square (bore equals stroke), or nearly square, with cylinders cast in pairs. This basic design changed in 1914 when Kissel perfected en-bloc casting (cylinder block cast as a single piece) and moved to long-stroke designs. This new six would be refined in subsequent years and was used through 1930.

In 1915, Kissel introduced a practical design for a car with a removable hardtop. Dubbed "The All-Year Car", Kissel would eventually be awarded a patent for this innovation. At a reasonable additional cost, the removable hardtop allowed an owner to combine the desirable attributes of a touring car and sedan in a single vehicle.

#### [IMG – 1918 Silver Special Speedster]

#### [IMG – Kissel radiator emblems]

Several important changes came with the end of the Great War. In 1918 the company dropped the "Kar" from its brand name and became known simply as "Kissel" as the in-your-face Germanic spelling did not set well with the mood of the public. The company logo and trademark radiator emblems now featured the new, simplified brand name over a background featuring the fleet-footed Roman god, Mercury.

An important redesign of the cars would take the company stylistically through 1928. The new styling (horse-collar radiator shell, hood line straight to base of windshield, rolled bicycle-style fenders) was Kissel's interpretation of designs brought to them by New York dealer Conover T. Silver. These changes resulted in very stylish vehicles destined to become Full Classics.™

#### [IMG – 1926 Brougham]

Kissel introduced optional four-wheel hydraulic brakes in 1924, relatively early compared with many other automotive manufacturers. These brakes became standard equipment on their cars in 1925.

---

<sup>14</sup> Trucks designed by the Four Wheel Drive Auto Company, Clintonville, Wisconsin.

In mid 1920s the automotive industry was moving to eight cylinder engines. Kissel responded by introducing eights to their line starting in 1925. While they called it a Kissel engine, their eight cylinder engines were created from a Lycoming block and crankshaft to which Kissel added their own head, Lynite pistons and rods, an oversized oil pump and 12-qt aluminum oil pan. Kissel took great pains to balance the moving components to create smooth running engines.

Kissel had been using the advertising slogan “custom built” since at least 1918, and would continue to use it through to the end. They explained this by arguing that their cars were out of the ordinary and were built *as if* one had acquired them from a custom chassis, motor and body builder. No doubt that Kissel was manufacturing exceptional and quite attractive vehicles, and that they were willing to do various customizations as may be requested by a customer. Yet the cars were produced from a standard catalog. Hugo Pfau has written an article arguing that the efforts of Kissel’s body shop was indeed comparable to some of the larger custom body shops of the twenties.<sup>15</sup>

While the period from 1906 to 1918 was one of expansion for Kissel, the 1920s were a continuing struggle. Kissel, like other manufacturers, experienced trouble returning to civilian manufacturing after the war. Severe recessions devastated Kissel production in 1921 (793), 1922 (561) and in 1924 (898). Production was up again in 1925 (1,406) and peaked in 1926 (1,972) than began a continuing and relentless slide towards oblivion.

#### [IMG – 1927 Limousine Ambulance]

Along the way Kissel tried to stem the slide in sales in several ways. One was an increased emphasis on professional vehicles. With a focus in 1927 on a series of quite beautiful and elegant hearses, limousine ambulances, busses and trucks, the company tried in vain to survive. In 1928 Kissel would build elegant National-Kissel funeral cars; in 1929 they began building taxicabs, busses and trucks for Bradfield Motors.

In 1929, Kissel passenger cars were redesigned and a 126-HP eight was introduced. Now called Kissel *White Eagles*, using a name that the company used for a 1928 special trim line, the still lower year-over-year sales of 701 cars and 198 professional cars and trucks must have been a great disappointment.

By 1930, Kissel was also involved in a deal with Moon and New Era Motors to build front-wheel-drive Ruxton cars of which Kissel completed 26. Funding problems for all three companies soon led each to collapse. For Kissel the end came on September 19, 1930, when Kissel ceased production and went into voluntary receivership.

From my vantage point in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it’s clear how difficult it would have been for Kissel to survive. The Great Depression would kill many an auto company as the public bought fewer cars and demanded greater value from the cars they did buy. Kissel was being squeezed from below by mass-produced vehicles and squeezed from above by other luxury makes, some of whom would soon be

---

<sup>15</sup> “Custom Built Kissel,” Hugo Pfau, *Cars&Parts* 18, No.5 (Apr., 1975) p. 122-126.

out of business, themselves. While Kissel could not survive the tsunami that was overtaking the hand-built industry, it still seems sad to me that these craftsmen disappeared from the scene.

Recently, I was standing next to my 1924 Kissel and discussing it with some admiring passersby. They wondered aloud why they didn't build cars like this anymore. Paraphrasing something I heard elsewhere, they didn't stop making them, I said. We stopped buying them, unwilling to pay the high cost for their labor intensive efforts to create exceptionally fine automobiles.



[IMG –1890c Kissel hardware store]



Louis Kissel's hardware store c1890. From the left: William L. Kissel, Wilber Myear, Adolph P. Kissel, Louis Holce, Otto P. Kissel, George A. Kissel and Peter Melius. In about sixteen years, these four Kissel brothers will form the Kissel Motor Car Company with their father, Louis. (Lynn Kissel)

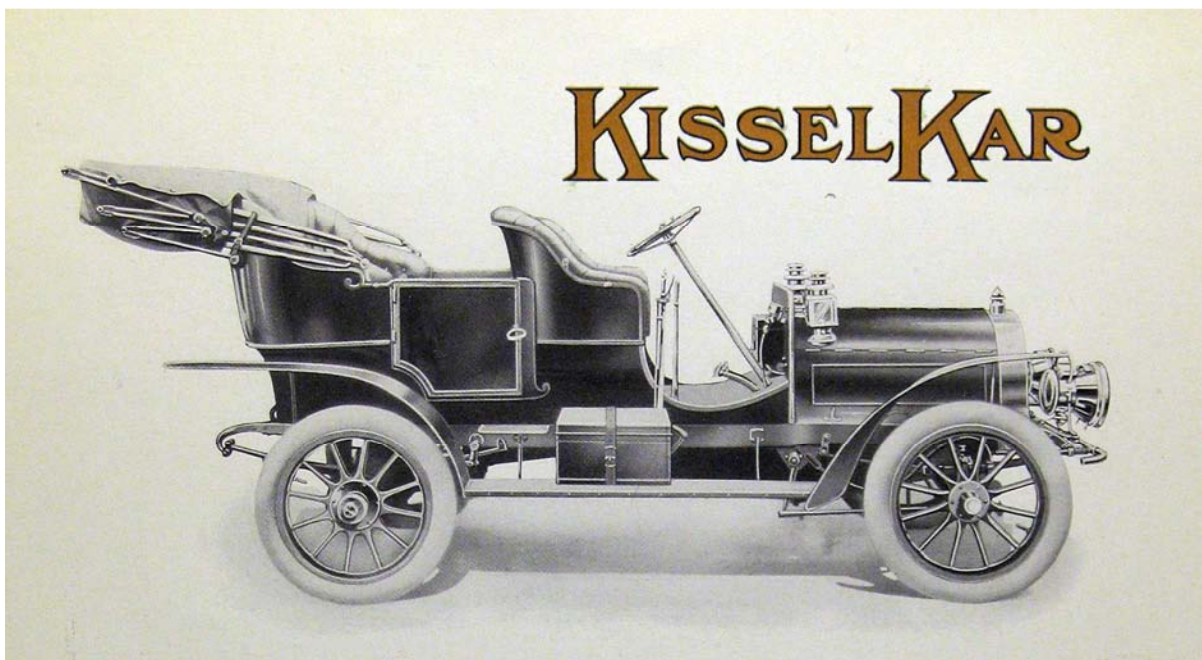
[IMG – 1895c Louis Kissel family]



The Louis Kissel family circa 1895. Louis (1839-1908) and Catherine (1852-1943) are seated. Standing behind them are their six children, from the left, William L. (1879-1972), Louis (1870-1901), Emma (1873-1973), Adolph P. (1869-1946), Pauline (1875-1960), Otto P. (1872-1959) and George A. (1881-1942). (Wisconsin Automotive Museum)



[IMG – 1907 Kissel Model “C”]



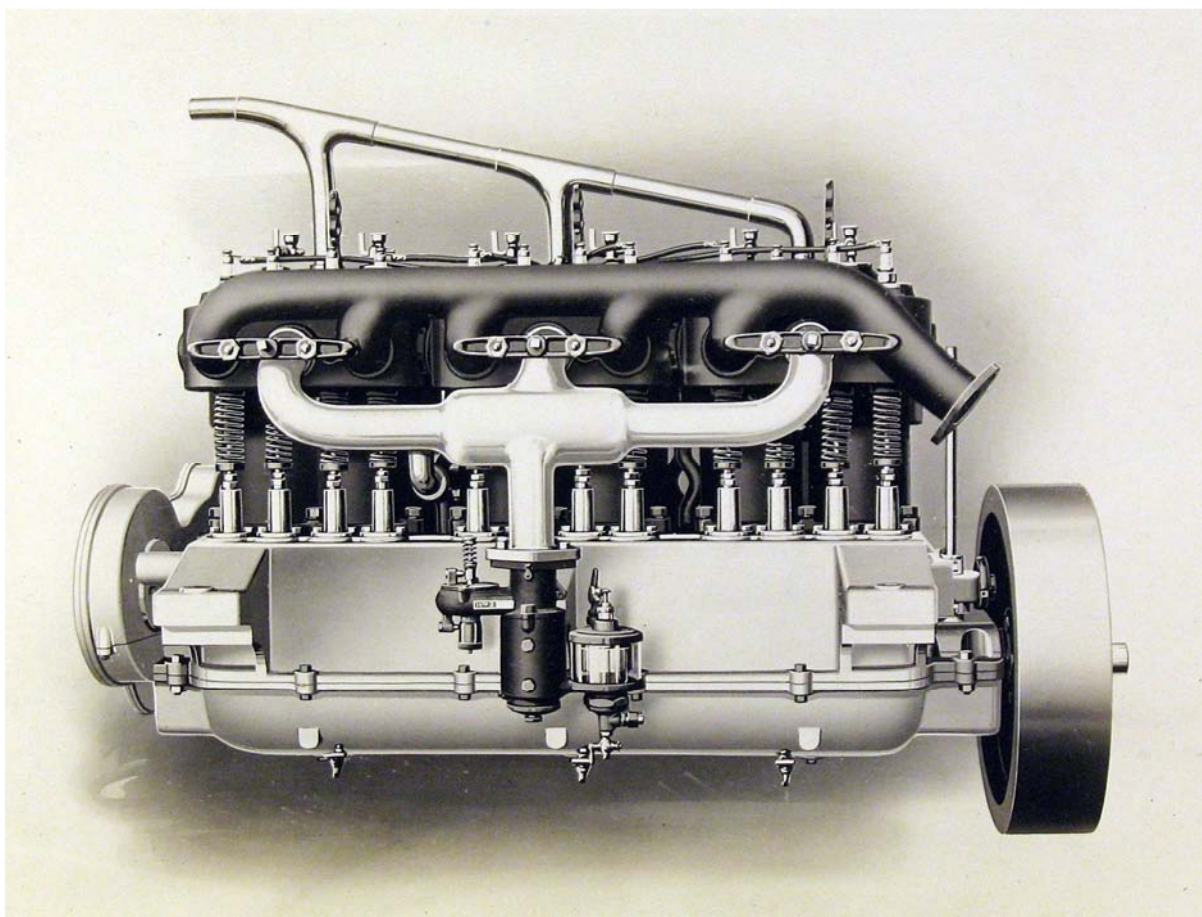
The 1907 KisselKar Model “C.” For \$1850 f.o.b. Hartford, you could acquire this 30 HP, four-cylinder (cast in pairs, 4-1/2” x 4-3/4” bore x stroke), 98” W.B., three-speed, open drive shaft , 2250 lb, 5-passenger motor car with internal and external rear brakes. McDuffee Auto Company, Chicago and Milwaukee, was the sole sales agent. (From a 1907 Kissel sales brochure)

[IMG – 1909c Kissel factory]



The Kissel factory in Hartford, Wisconsin, circa 1909. (Wisconsin Automotive Museum)

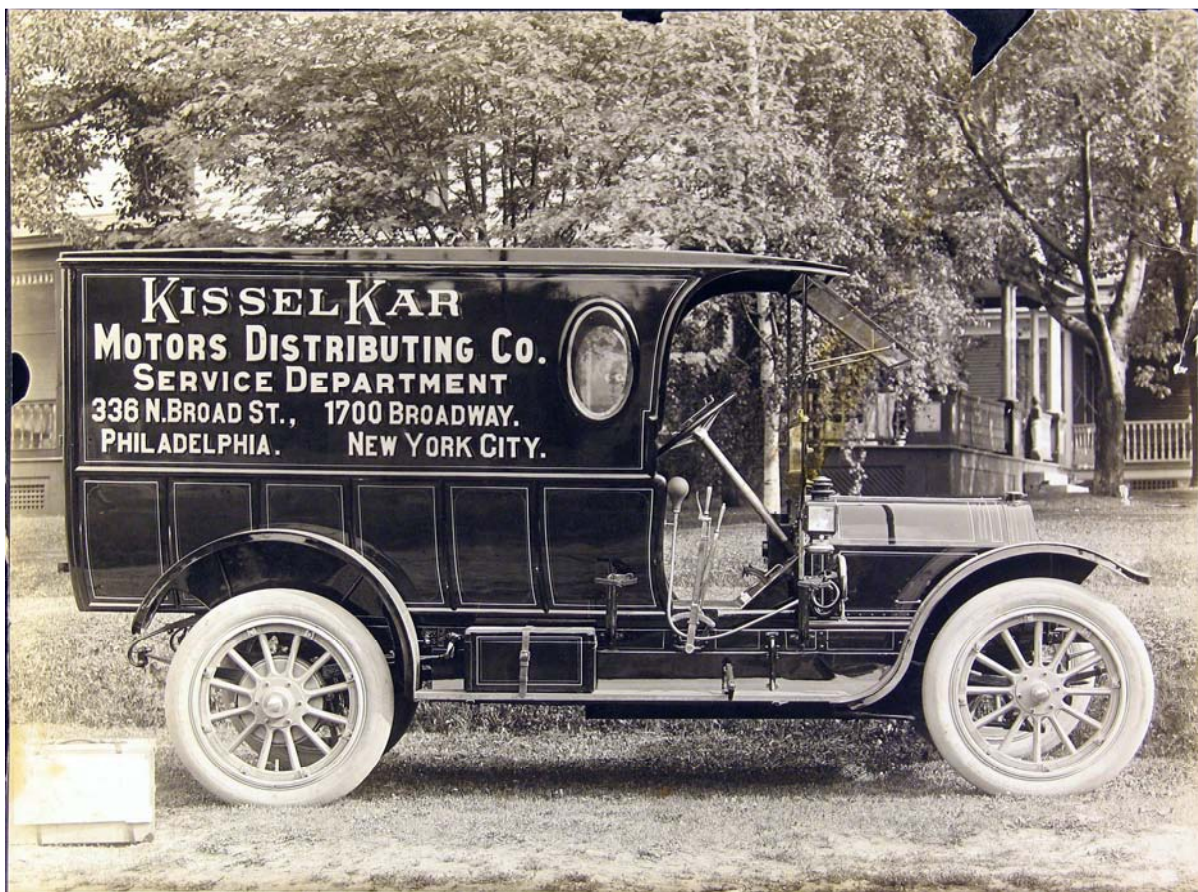
[IMG – 1909 6-cyl engine]



Kissel introduced a 60-HP, six-cylinder engine in 1909. Cylinders were cast in pairs and the engine was square with a bore equal to its stroke of 4-3/4" . (From a 1910 Kissel salesman book)



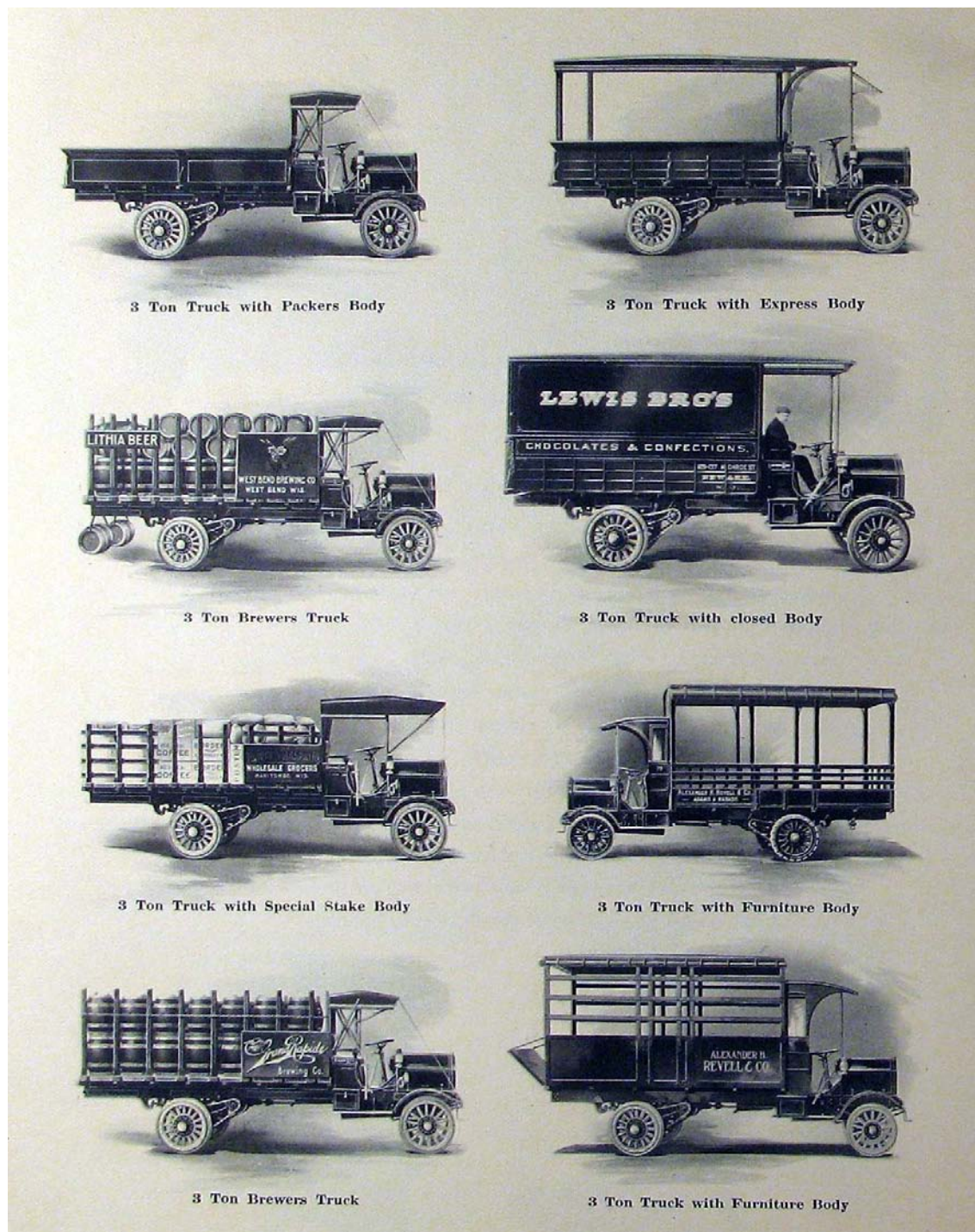
[IMG – 1910 Kissel delivery wagon]



The 1910 KisselKar Delivery Wagon. Kissel's first trucks appeared in 1908 with specialized bodies on a car chassis. In 1910 Kissel introduced its first trucks on specialized chassis. By 1912 the Kissel truck line extended up to a 5-ton, 156" chassis. (Wisconsin Automotive Museum.)



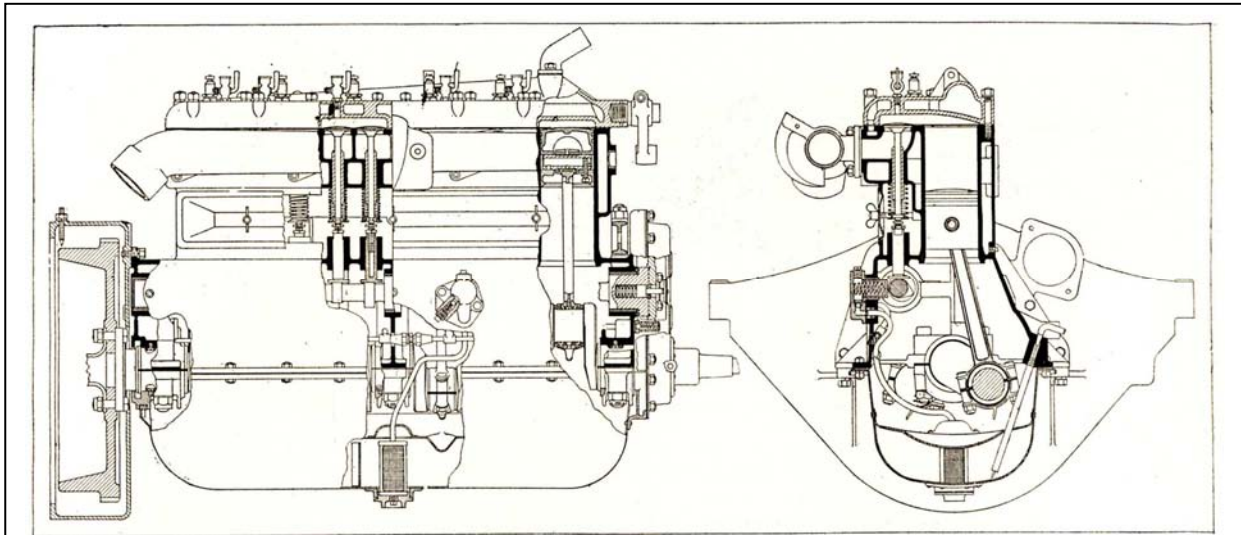
[IMG – 1912 3-ton trucks]



The 1912 KisselKar 3-Ton Trucks. These trucks had a 50 HP, four-cylinder engine (cylinders cast in pairs, 4-7/8" x 5" bore x stroke) and a 4-speed transmission on a 144" wheelbase. (From a 1912 Kissel sales brochure)



[IMG – 1914 en-block six]



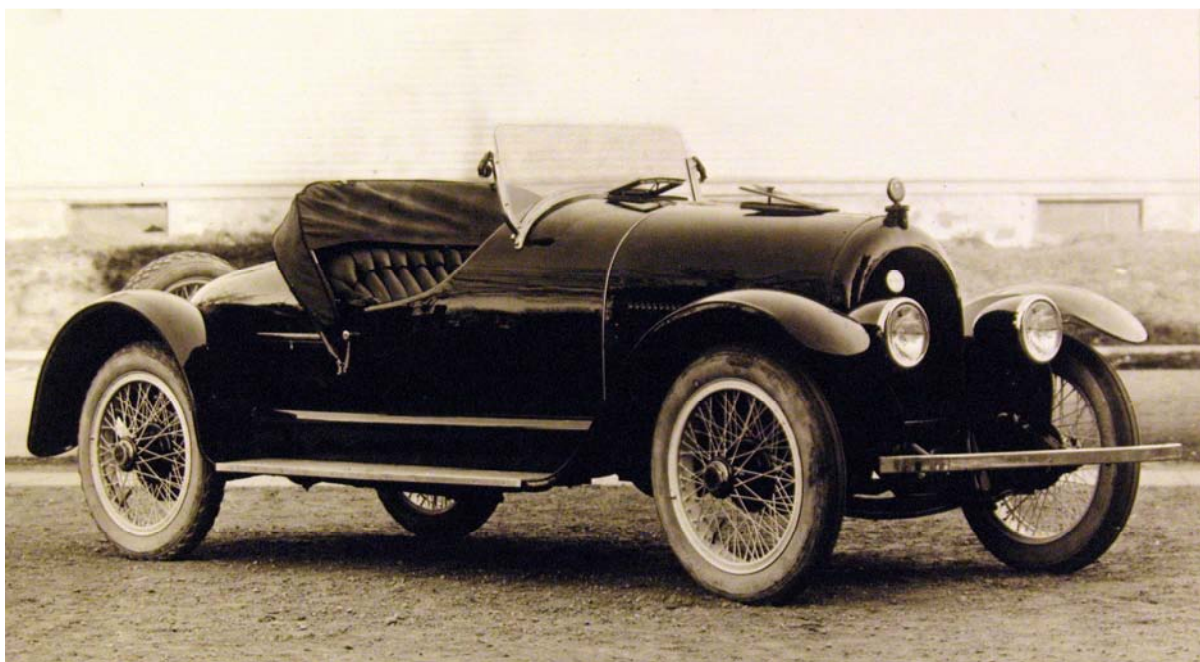
Kissel adopted en-bloc casting and a long-stroke design for the new 6-48 engine introduced in 1914. With refinements over the years, this basic design was used by Kissel through 1930. Pictured is a 3-1/2" x 5" (bore x stroke) 52-HP engine used in the 1917 Kissel "Hundred Point Six." (*The Automobile*, June 22, 1916, p. 1128)

[IMG – 1915 All-Year Car]



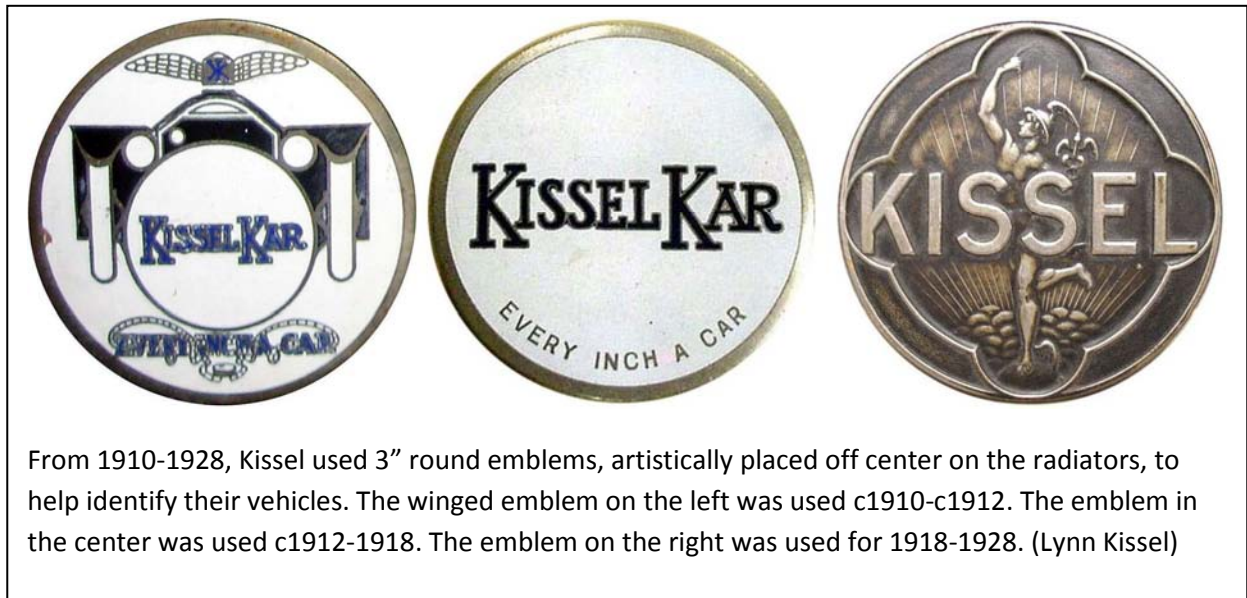
In 1915, Kissel introduced the "All-Year Car." The optional glass encased hardtop converted a touring car to a sedan. (From a 1915 Kissel sales brochure)

[IMG – 1918 Silver Special Speedster]



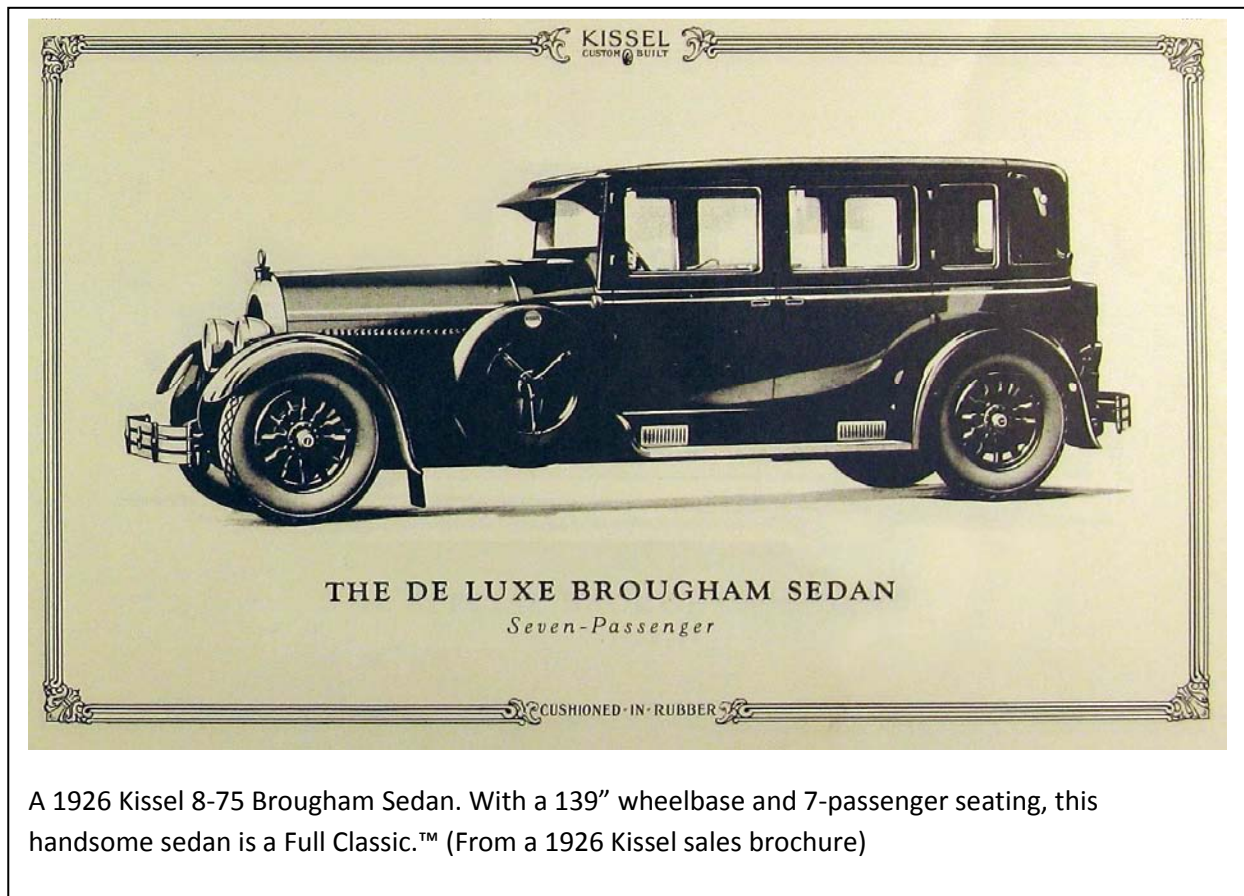
The 1918 Kissel Silver Special Speedster. Popularly known as a “Gold Bug,” the bicycle fenders, straight hood to base of windshield and horse-collar radiator shell would be major Kissel design elements through 1928. (Wisconsin Automotive Museum)

[IMG – 1918 Silver Special Speedster]



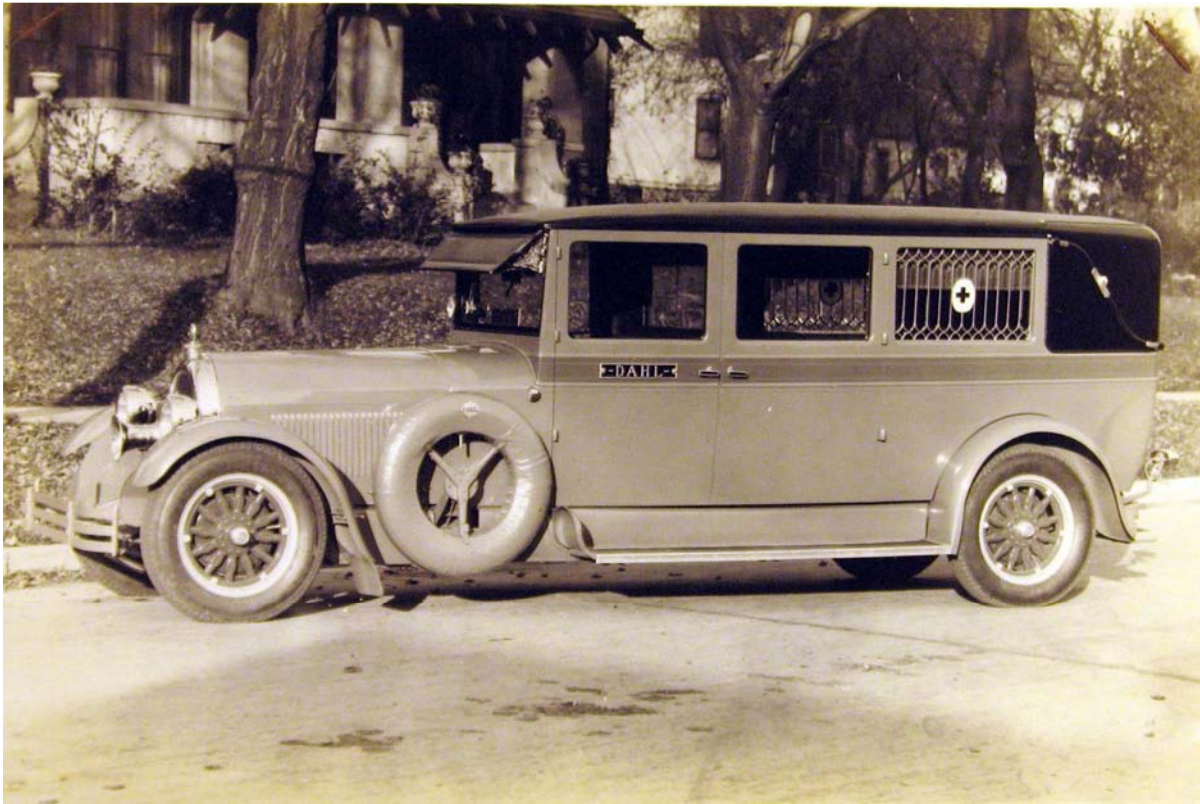


[IMG – 1926 Brougham]





[IMG – 1927 Limousine Ambulance]



Powered with a 71-HP eight, this 1927 Kissel limousine ambulance listed at \$4650, f.o.b. Hartford.  
(From a 1927 Kissel sales brochure)