

George Holley



GEORGE MALVIN HOLLEY. THOUGH his name is synonymous with carburetors that perform well, little is known about the man behind the venturis.

Born in 1876 in Bradford, Pennsylvania, George M. Holley had an instant fascination with all things mechanical. As a teenager, George began racing motorcycles in his hometown. During this time, little else held the interest for him that his motorcycles did. Rebuilding, repairing and modifying them on a regular basis was the reason for his many victories.

At age 19, he and his younger brother Earl set out to build their own automobile, with plans George had drawn himself. Though it was no easy task, it quenched his burning desire for mechanical innovation. Many in his hometown who kept close tabs on his project were skeptical of his results. However, when it was finished, not only was his three-wheeled, single-cylinder vehicle a success, it was rather fast for its time, too, achieving speeds of up to 30 MPH.

It wasn't much later that George and Earl decided to team up and build motorcycle engines to sell. So, in 1899, the

brothers incorporated Holley Motor Co. George was the self-appointed chairman of the board, while Earl, with his strong background in banking, was the company's president. Incoming orders for these engines were very slow, nearly crippling the business. So, the brothers decided to sell complete motorcycles.

In 1902, the Holley brothers were not only selling their motorcycles, but racing them, too. George won the very first Motorcycle Endurance Contest and eventually set numerous motorcycle speed records at the Pan American Exposition in Buffalo, New York.

The following year, the Holleys expanded their business to selling French Longuemare automobile carburetors. During this

time, business was slow in both the motorcycle and carburetor divisions. In their true mechanical spirit, George and Earl built a second automobile, the Holley Motorette. The new horseless carriage, complete with tiller steering and front and rear kerosene lamps, made 5.5hp and sold for \$550. From 1903 until 1906, more than 600 Motorettes were built, giving the brothers much needed capital to get on with their business practices.

While their autos were relatively unknown, they had a reputation within the industry for running well. In 1904, Henry Ford approached George to produce a carburetor for his original Model A. It was then that the brothers decided to forget about motorcycle and automobile production and instead focus on carburetors and ignition systems. Its motorcycle and automobile lines were sold off for pennies on the dollar, and a new company emerged: Holley Brothers Co.

Within a few short years, not only did the long-standing Model T and other Ford products use Holley Brothers carburetors, but many other manufacturers used them, too. With the massive influx

of business, the company packed up and moved to Detroit.

Soon Chevrolet, International Harvester, Buick and many others were using Holley carburetors. They nearly cornered the market, and their business could only increase.

With the country gearing up for war, Holley also had a major part to play. In addition to producing carburetors and ignition systems to aid in World War I, Holley also produced 75mm shells.

By January 1918, it reorganized again as Holley Carburetor Company. By the second decade of the 20th century, millions of its carburetors were built; they could be found on nearly any device with an internal combustion engine. Soon thereafter, Holley began making carburetors with the development of permanent mold casting. In 1926, the company bought another plant in Detroit and began expanding into the new aviation market; they sold carburetors to Curtiss-Wright and virtually all of the other major airplane manufacturing companies.

In 1933, they were making distributors, circuit breakers and fuel pumps. Holley was so huge that, during World War II, more than one half of all carburetors used in the war effort were manufactured by the company. When peace returned, it was business as usual, with civilian carburetors.

The automobile industry celebrated its Golden Jubilee in 1946, the same year that George Holley was inducted into the Automotive Hall of Fame. George, who by this time was 70 years old, turned his half of the business over to his son, George Jr. By 1953, Earl had also retired from the family business. Sadly, he passed away five years later at the age of 76.

By 1960, Holley had facilities in Warren and Clare, Michigan; Paris, Tennessee; and Bowling Green, Kentucky. Three years later, on June 26, 1963, George quietly passed on at the ripe old age of 86. From the time Henry Ford first approached George until shortly after his passing, Holley Carburetor Company had produced more than 100,000,000 carburetors. Today, the legacy lives on in Holley's high-performance automobile, truck and motorcycle components. 