

'A Few of My Favourite Things', Number Seven: Automotive Eye-Candy

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Australians seem to have always been “early adopters” of new technology. By the turn of the 20th century, the automobile craze sweeping Europe and America had made its way to the Antipodes, even to relatively remote Western Australia. The first car to be brought to Perth arrived in 1898. By 1901, there were several local manufacturers. By the same time, motoring advertisements had started to appear in WA publications. Perth even boasted at least one local representative of an American automobile manufacturer.

Our feature cover on this occasion is a 1903 advertising envelope for the Perth office of the grandly titled *American Motor Car & Vehicle Co.* What can I tell you about this firm? Nothing! It is not even mentioned in an apparently exhaustive list of every US car maker, from *Abbott-Detroit* (1909-1915) to *Zip* (1913-1914) [1].

The closest entries there are for the *American*

Motor Carriage Co of Cleveland, Ohio and the *American Motor Vehicle Co* of Lafayette, Indiana. The second can be excluded because it operated only between 1916 and 1920. The first might be what we are looking for, but it produced cars only in 1902 and 1903. Would they really have had an agent in Perth, WA? The internet site has links to maybe 75% of all the listed automobile manufacturers but, most unhelpfully, not the *American Motor Carriage Co* in Ohio. The first of our automotive dead-ends.



It is possible that the *American Motor Car & Vehicle Co.* was a home-grown operation. Back to the internet: dead-end number two!

In any event, the hyperbolic advertising strongly suggests American origins: “Electric, Gasoline & Steam Cars/OF ALL DESCRIPTIONS” is not a claim expected of a usually self-effacing Australian concern. Nor is, “We can supply you with . . . Anything in the . . . MOTOR LINE”. This all smacks of American advertising puffery.

The theme is continued on the reverse, where we learn that “Motor Cycles, Tricycles, Quads [??], Cars, Busses and Delivery Vans” are all “a Specialty”. Our friends must have had massive premises and a huge sales force, to say nothing of the enormous workshop where “Repairs to all makes” are said be another “Specialty”.

Surely there must be some record of such a proud company operating in Perth? And, indeed, there is...sort of. The *Geraldton Advertiser* (1893-1905) of Wednesday 3 December 1902 carried a brief entry headed ‘ESPERANCE MOTOR SERVICE’ that states: “...CW Deane, director in Australia of the *American Motor Car Vehicle Company* [sic], said that it was not necessary that there should be a macadamised road in order to admit of a motor car service being inaugurated between Esperance and the goldfields, so long as there was a tolerably level track...” [2].

From this isolated and scant insertion, we have learned that Mr CW Deane was the company’s director, **in Australia**, which strongly hints that the firm was, indeed, founded in the United States. We have also learned that Deane believed his vehicles could easily traverse tough terrain. Considering the photograph on the reverse of the featured envelope, that should be no surprise.

Atop a mound of large timbers stands a peculiar vehicle, apparently a delivery van. One is encouraged to believe that the van mounted the pile unaided. If it could do that, surely it would have no trouble bounding along on the unformed, heavily rutted ‘road’ from the port of Esperance to the inland mining districts of Coolgardie, Kalgoorlie, and the sparsely inhabited areas of the Murchison and other Gold Fields.

It was hoped that the venue for the photograph might be identifiable from the large grandstand in the background. A search of images on Google has at least provisionally ruled out the Subiaco Oval, the old *Western Australian Cricket Association* ground (the WACA), the Ascot Racecourse and the Claremont Showgrounds. Assistance from readers in Western Australia would be appreciated.

Of course, I did not acquire this item just because it is the most spectacular advertising cover I have ever seen from Western Australia. I wanted it principally for the postal history elements. Covers to America at the UPU-rate of 2½d per half-ounce are relatively common. Those that have been underpaid and taxed are less available, but still not difficult to find. However, such covers that are also compelling eye-candy are scarcer than the proverbial chook’s tooth.

One of my collecting principles is “Common items in uncommon circumstances”. This item certainly qualifies for that mantra. No wonder, then, that it is one of My Favourite Things. The intriguing back-story, more holes than substance, is a marvellous bonus.

References

[1] <https://american-automobiles.com>

[2] <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/252824967?searchTerm=American%20Motor%20Car%20%26%20Vehicle%20Company>

[NB: Geraldton is on the mid-north coast of WA, while Esperance is on the Great Australian Bight, an as-the-crow-flies distance of some 1000km.]