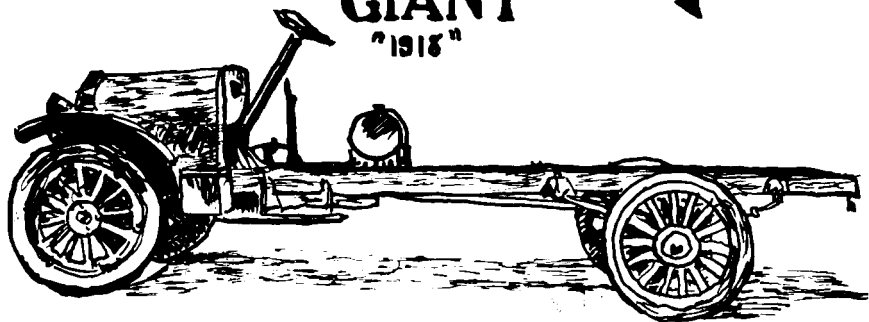


“For a hundred years Lancaster’s Conestoga wagons were the greatest overland freighters the world ever knew. It is but appropriate that Lancaster should now produce their powerful and graceful successor, the Conestoga Motor Truck . . .”

From a 1917 Conestoga Motor Truck Company ad.

1½ TON
CONESTOGA
GIANT
“1918”



A History of the Conestoga Motor Truck Company

by Donald J. Summar

The Conestoga Motor Truck Company was organized in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in the Spring of 1917, to take advantage of the war-time need for trucks. The organizers of the company were: Fletcher Ployd of New York, "the creator of the Conestoga ideal" and president of the company¹; Isaac C. Hartman, of Lancaster, proprietor of the Miller & Hartman Wholesale Grocers Company and secretary-treasurer of the truck company; and C. G. Engle, Charles L. Harner, L. H. Whitaker, and Charles A. Stauffer, directors.² Five key employees of the company were: Howard G. Wagner, President's assistant; W. S. Whitehead, sales manager; Charles A. Stauffer, consulting engineer; Philip Geier, who was listed as "engineer, draftsman, and designer";³ and W. B. Mann, auditor and cost accountant.⁴

The first moves of the new company were to rent an office in the Woolworth Building on North Queen Street in Lancaster⁵ and to purchase the Pontz brick yard property in the northwestern section of the city as a site for a factory.⁶ However, because money was not immediately available for construction of the proposed factory, an old carriage works at 51 South Duke Street was rented as a temporary facility and there construction began on the first Conestoga prototypes.⁷ Company officials claimed that experimental, developmental, and engineering costs required to produce the Conestoga truck were less than \$35,000.⁸

The first model of the Conestoga truck, powered by a four cylinder, 22 horsepower engine,⁹ and having a cargo capacity of 1,200 pounds, was announced in early September. One completed truck was driven on the streets of Lancaster to attract attention and publicity to the budding company.¹⁰ Known as the Model 10, it was an entirely assembled machine. The four cylinder engine, with 3¼ inch x 4½ inch bore and stroke, was made by the Light Manufacturing Company of Pottstown. The truck was equipped with Parrish & Bingham frame, Norwalk tubular driveshaft, Brown-Lipe rear axle, Salisbury front axle, Ditwiler steering gear, Superior springs, Crown fenders, Dyneto starter, Connecticut ignition, Zenith carburetor, and

Grant-Lees transmission.¹¹ The models and their corresponding prices were: \$890 for the chassis,¹² \$975 with express body,¹³ \$990 with steel panel body,¹⁴ and \$1000 with convertible farm body.¹⁵ All models came complete with electric starter and lights and were advertised as "trucks rated at 1200 pounds capacity that can haul 1800 pounds as easily as the empty body."¹⁶

Several Conestoga trucks were displayed at the Lancaster Fair during the last week of September, 1917. F. W. Ployd announced plans had been completed for the Conestoga Motor Truck Factory to be constructed. The factory building was to be 200 feet by 60 feet and was to have been completed by winter. Mr. Ployd optimistically said that by early 1918 as many as 1,500 men would be employed by the company.¹⁷

However no move was made to begin construction of the factory and the old carriage factory was arranged for the assembling of trucks. This production was begun November of 1917. The First National Sales Corporation was set up as sole distributor of Conestoga trucks.

In January of 1918 a 1½ ton model, the Conestoga Giant, was announced. The price was \$1450 including electric starter and electric lights. This truck had a 130 inch wheelbase, 192 inch frame, worm drive, and was advertised as "the most economical, big, heavy, 1½ ton truck ever manufactured." It was constructed with most of the same component parts as the Model 10.¹⁸

On January 20, 1918, the First National Sales Corporation closed a contract with their dealer for Central Pennsylvania for 500 Conestoga trucks to be delivered that year and announced that total production for 1918 would be 5,000 trucks. They also announced negotiations were being conducted through their San Francisco agent with one of the largest Japanese distributors of American touring cars for the sale of Conestoga trucks in Japan.¹⁹

The plan to build 5,000 trucks in 1918 was very unrealistic. The potential production of the old carriage works was low. Although the company had spent \$9,105 on 16 acres and three lots for a factory site, no vestige of the plant was visible.²⁰ The company was also operating on an enforced reduced schedule of production set by the War Industries Board, and was bound by their pledge to sell only to essential users.²¹

In mid-February the price of the Model 10 chassis was raised from \$890 to \$1,050 to cover rising costs of production.²² At the same time production arrangements were completed for using the limited quarters of the carriage works, production equalling 25 trucks per month.²³ Therefore only about 300 trucks could have been built during 1918 and probably fewer than that were actually assembled and sold.

The sale of Conestoga Gold Bonds was announced to finance expansion of the company. The ten-year, six percent Gold Bonds were offered in denominations of \$1000, \$500, and \$100, with a bonus of half a share of Conestoga Motor Truck Company common stock with every \$100 invested.²⁴ This campaign to sell Gold Bonds continued for well over a year without a great deal of success. Prospective investors apparently chose to purchase Liberty Loan bonds or invest in the Rowe Motor Mfg. Company, a truck-building concern that moved to Lancaster in November of 1917 with a ten year reputation and the money to begin the immediate construction of a large factory.²⁵ Rowe's move to Lancaster attracted many local investors away from the Conestoga Company.

In March of 1918 the company purchased the old carriage works on South Duke Street at Vine Street — which they had been renting for nine months — and announced that this building would be used for offices, showroom, and assembly of trucks. By this purchase the company quietly admitted that the large factory planned for the Pontz tract would not soon be constructed.

Dealers for Eastern and Central Pennsylvania were coming to the factory and driving their purchased trucks away under their own power to avoid the tie-ups on the congested railway system. This not only helped speed delivery of Conestoga trucks, but it also provided a prompt return of money to the company.²⁶

Conestoga must have had trouble finding "essential users" to purchase their trucks, for in April of 1918 the company appointed H. F. Butzer agent for Conestoga trucks in Lancaster City and Lancaster County. Butzer's showrooms were in Lititz and at 44 East Chestnut Street, Lancaster.²⁷

The company continued to produce trucks during the remainder of 1918, but after June production was limited to much less than 25 per month. Conestoga, like other truck assemblers who had little or no war work, found themselves unable to secure deliveries of all the component parts needed in their trucks.²⁸ Therefore, production was frequently delayed or halted by lack of necessary components.

After purchasing the carriage works, the company expanded and rebuilt the building to provide more working space. By the end of 1918 the company was able to commence the building of their own frames. The frame they made was of six inch rolled-channel steel, rigidly reinforced with five cross members, large gusset plates and angle sections. All the parts and castings were hot riveted in place.²⁹

To face the increased competition after the armistice and make us of their own frames to best advantage, the company decided to introduce new models for 1919.

In early 1919 the Model 10 and the 1½ ton Giant were replaced by one- and two-ton models powered by Continental four cylinder

engines. Almost all of the components used in the trucks were changed. The new models had Bosch magneto, Zenith carburetor, Fuller clutch and transmission, Columbia front axle, Wisconsin rear axle, Rowland springs, Ross steering gear, English & Messick radiator, Bimel wheels, and Fisk tires.³⁰

The trucks originally sold at \$1850 for the one-ton chassis and \$2150 for the two-ton chassis and were advertised as "standardized on the most successful practice of truck building, combined with units of recognized superiority."³¹

In May, a 1,500 pound delivery truck selling for \$900 with Prest-o-Lite headlights was introduced. It carried a "Victory" nameplate although it was built by Conestoga. This model had Grant-Lees transmission, Borg & Beck clutch, Ditwiler steering gear, Parrish & Bingham frame, Berling magneto, and a special truck engine. Many of the units were apparently left over from the Model 10 production of 1918.³²

The campaign to sell Gold Bonds was revitalized. An ad explained how \$100 invested in such companies as Reo, Hupp, Ford, Vim, Stutz, and Overland had returned huge profits to the investors within just a few years, and implied that the same could be expected by investors who purchased Conestoga Gold Bonds.³³

The company announced that the proceeds from the sale of bonds would be used for increasing factory facilities and production.³⁴ The carriage works had been rebuilt and improved until it was four times its original size but it was crowded and cramped and production was lagging.³⁵ Production had been slowed by the change-over to new models and part suppliers, and by production of three models instead of two.

Sale of Gold Bonds was proceeding slowly even though one half of the common stock of the company was held in trust and distributed pro rata among the bondholders as an added inducement to buy.³⁶ An ad stated that "orders are coming in, inquiries are piling up, larger quarters are necessary."³⁷ However, larger quarters were not available. The South Duke Street factory, valued at \$14,000, allowed no further expansion on that site.³⁸

The price of the two-ton model was raised to \$2550 in July and production was further complicated and delayed when component changes were made to Stromberg carburetor, Simms magneto, Shuler front axle, and Silico manganese springs.³⁹ Just why these changes were made is unknown but apparently Ployd and his associates were trying to find a successful combination of components to enable them to market a truck that could compete successfully in the tough post-war truck market.

The year 1919 was bad for small truck producers in general, and for companies like Conestoga in particular. A number of small

companies had begun building trucks in 1916 and 1917 to take advantage of the need for trucks during the war. However, most of these companies had some other line of business to fall back on when sales declined in 1919 with the active return to civilian production by such companies as General Motors, Mack, Republic, and Autocar.⁴⁰ Conestoga had nothing to fall back on. The modest profit that the company had made in 1918 was soon exhausted and the company slipped into debt as 1919 progressed to summer and to fall.

A last effort was made to return the company to solvency by exporting trucks to Sweden, Holland, France, Italy, Japan, and other countries. In late October the company shipped 20 or more trucks to Norway through its export office, located at 290 Broadway in New York City. A newspaper article stated that "from every indication this is the beginning of a large and lucrative business."⁴¹

Such was not to be the case. Debts continued to increase and on November 27, 1919, Isaac C. Hartman, treasurer of the company, went into United States District Court in Philadelphia to ask for a receiver for the company; the company having insufficient capital to pay the bills that were due. The Pontz tract and the building on South Duke Street were heavily encumbered.

F. W. Ployd, who had been president of the company, was appointed receiver and was granted permission to finish the partly built work in the factory.⁴²

The receiver's sale was prepared for, and occurred on, May 24, 1920. Five two-ton trucks, five one-ton trucks, and one 1,500 pound delivery truck were offered for sale, along with office and machine shop equipment.⁴³

The sale went poorly and Mr. Ployd put an ad in the newspaper a few days later which stated: "For sale! Conestoga Motor Trucks at bargain prices. These trucks can be bought at private sale for about 50% off list price."⁴⁴ Still the trucks could not be sold and two weeks later four Conestoga trucks were offered at \$1350 each, "which is about the cost of materials."⁴⁵

The creditors of the Conestoga Motor Truck Company benefitted from several transactions carried on during the summer. The First National Sales Corporation went into receivership on June 11, 1920, at the request of F. W. Ployd. The First National Sales Corporation paid only \$2,337.26 of \$7,998.63 it owed, including \$1,355.95 of the \$4,640.46 it owed to Conestoga.⁴⁶

In July, the Lancaster branch of the Philadelphia Automobile Radiator Repair Company purchased all the radiator cores from the receiver and announced that they could "replace any truck radiator on the market at reasonable price."⁴⁷

On August 31 the truck factory on South Duke Street was sold to the Queen Motor Company, a local Ford dealership, for \$4,000,

plus taking over a \$14,500 mortgage on the property.⁴⁸ The Manheim Township property was sold at a Sheriff's sale, conducted by C. F. Hornsher on September 11, to Jacob Pontz for \$4,000.⁴⁹

Thus, after a brief career as a truck producer, the Conestoga Motor Truck Company passed from the automotive scene, never more than a "tame cat".⁵⁰

And what of the Conestoga truck today? No trucks are known to have survived to the present to be restored and displayed. The factory on South Duke Street has been replaced by an ARCO service station. The Pontz tract, which was near the intersection of the Old Harrisburg Pike and Dillerville Road, has been turned to other industrial uses, including an automobile graveyard. Today in Lancaster there is almost no one still around who remembers that the Conestoga Motor Truck Company ever existed. Never-the-less, the company was one of many important businesses in the Lancaster industrial scene during the World War One period.

Acknowledgement

The research on the history of the Conestoga Motor Truck Company came about almost by "accident". While doing research on the Rowe Motor Manufacturing Company at the Lancaster County Historical Society, I "discovered" the Conestoga Truck as I was reading in back numbers of the local newspapers.

Before this article could be written, I needed help from several sources. I would like to thank Mrs. Laura Lundgren, librarian at the Society, who helped me with map work, tax records, and other aspects of local history. Also, for two magazine articles on the Conestoga Truck received from the Automobile Manufacturers Association in Detroit. I would like to thank Ken Dinger, of Kirkwood, Pa., a senior at Millersville State College, who drew the illustration for this article.

March 4, 1971

D. J. S.

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