

Spaulding of Iowa

Honestly Constructed of Honest Materials

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Best known for the fold-down bed in its novel "Sleeping Car," a 1914 version of the recreational vehicle, the Spaulding Manufacturing Company of Grinnell, Iowa, made other headlines from 1909 to 1916.

The driver of a Spaulding car topped 80 miles per hour at times and rocketed past the Rock Island fast mail train to set a world's dirt-road speed record in a wild Iowa border-to-border race. A Spaulding car turned in a perfect road score during the June 1911 650-mile "Little Glidden" endurance run across Iowa. In a slow-speed stunt better suited to photography, Ernest H. Spaulding took the wheel to drive a loaded Spaulding touring car up the steps of the State Capitol in Des Moines.

San Diego promoters of the Panama-California Exposition of 1915 used a Spaulding touring car to shoot thousands of feet of movie film during a transcontinental mapping tour designed both to publicize the Expo and to promote an ocean-to-ocean highway. "I am writing you to let you know the success we are having with the Spaulding car in plowing through snow from one to three feet deep," a member of the transcontinental mapping crew wrote from Pennsylvania. "Ours was the only automobile that was able to come through. Even

a Packard car could only go part way."

Within the state, the Iowa Publishing Company of Des Moines used a Spaulding 30 to map Iowa highways. Even loaded with nine people, a Spaulding 40 challenged and tamed a homegrown terror, Potato Knoll, a "freak formation in the center of a corn field" near Belmond, Iowa.

In addition to sales agents in Des Moines and across Iowa, the automaker had agents as far away as Fort Worth, Texas, and Los Angeles, where the Spaulding had performed well in a Riverside hill-climbing contest. Grinnell cars were poised to take the West Coast by storm: "300 Spaulding Cars Go to California," cried the headline over an August 1913 *Grinnell Herald* news story, but that turned out to be more fiction than fact.

In the midst of its 1912 model year, the Spaulding adopted an electric self-starter but didn't identify the brand. Likewise, the automaker was tight-lipped about its earliest engine supplier, though it later used Rutenber before a switch to Buda — all 4-cylinder engines. Spaulding used steel bodies, which it made in a new \$150,000 factory constructed in Grinnell for that purpose.

In the best carriage-making tradition, Spauldings were trimmed in leather, and in 1912 the car sported "11-inch Turkish tilted

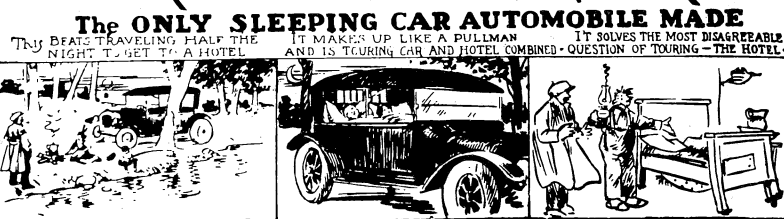
spring cushions, making it ride like a rocking chair." The standard Spaulding color was a deep blue, but various models were painted light blue, green, gray, cream, red, and even orange.

Unlike some other carriage makers, Spaulding Manufacturing Company continued to prosper in its production of carriages and wagons at the same time it was making automobiles. As many as 500 men worked at the Grinnell factory when it was producing both horse-drawn and horseless carriages. Only about 30 were in the motor-car department. In the 1920s, long after it had closed the automobile chapter of its history, the company's woodworking department was busy making truck cabs and bodies for Ford.

"You Pay a Little More But You Pay Less Often" was a Spaulding slogan. The new automobiles supplemented a line of carriages and spring wagons – 10,000 a year by 1909 – that H. W. Spaulding had been making since 1876. By the time the company announced its automotive intentions in 1910, it was transacting \$1.5 million in business annually on sales of carriages and wagons, according to one estimate. The company insisted that its longtime Spaulding diamond logo also "Signifies Motor Car Quality."

Though no great threat to Michigan, Ohio, or Indiana, Iowa was the scene of an active automotive industry. Grinnell, for instance, was already home to a nationally known manufacturer of leather driving gloves. The Meteor Motor Car Company was producing 4-cylinder 50-horsepower Meteor cars in Bettendorf. Fred and August Duesenberg were building 2-cylinder Mason cars in Des Moines, which, after a buyout, became the Maytag of Waterloo. The Colby car was poised to enter the market in Mason City.

The auto-manufacturing centers of the country considered Iowa as just a farm state. But it was the Spaulding car's main sales territory, and the Grinnell manufacturer took advantage of homegrown pride



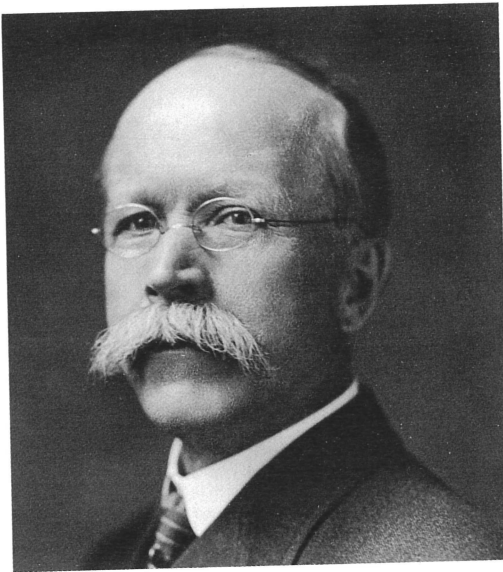
in the state's agricultural might. To promote its display at the 1914 Des Moines auto show, the Grinnell automaker ran a cartoon ad (see fig. 4.1) showing a cigar-chomping, grizzle-faced, grinning Iowan, holding aloft a Spaulding car: "You've seen the kind of corn and pigs I raise, well the auto I make is just as good."

Spaulding Manufacturing added a line of farm and general-delivery trucks in late 1912, its second full year of auto production. The demand for Spaulding cars pushed aside any plans to develop and promote trucks, however.

The company dropped its automobile line in 1916; during and after World War I it made products as varied as wagon parts,

4.1 A 1914 Spaulding ad. (March 8, 1914, *Des Moines Register and Leader*)

4.2 Henry W. Spaulding. (SHSI)



packing crates, and knitting needles. Later, Spaulding Manufacturing made truck cabs and bodies for other car and truck manufacturers, including Henry Ford, who was rebuffed in his attempt to buy out Spaulding. The family-owned Spaulding concern, unincorporated, foundered when Ford and other large automakers began making their own truck bodies. Creditors forced the company to cease operations in the late 1920s.

A Blacksmithing, Carriage-Making Politician

As a blacksmith, carriage maker, mayor, and state senator, Henry W. Spaulding (see fig.4.2) had a reputation for getting things done. Spaulding, a transplanted Vermonter who worked on neighbors' farms as a youth, left school after the eighth grade and by the age of 19 had opened a blacksmith shop in his hometown of Chelsea, making buggies as a sideline.¹

Though a half-dozen biographical accounts of Spaulding's life differ widely in detailing it, all credit the carriage maker with developing the Spaulding "trailing system" of selling buggies. "This system,

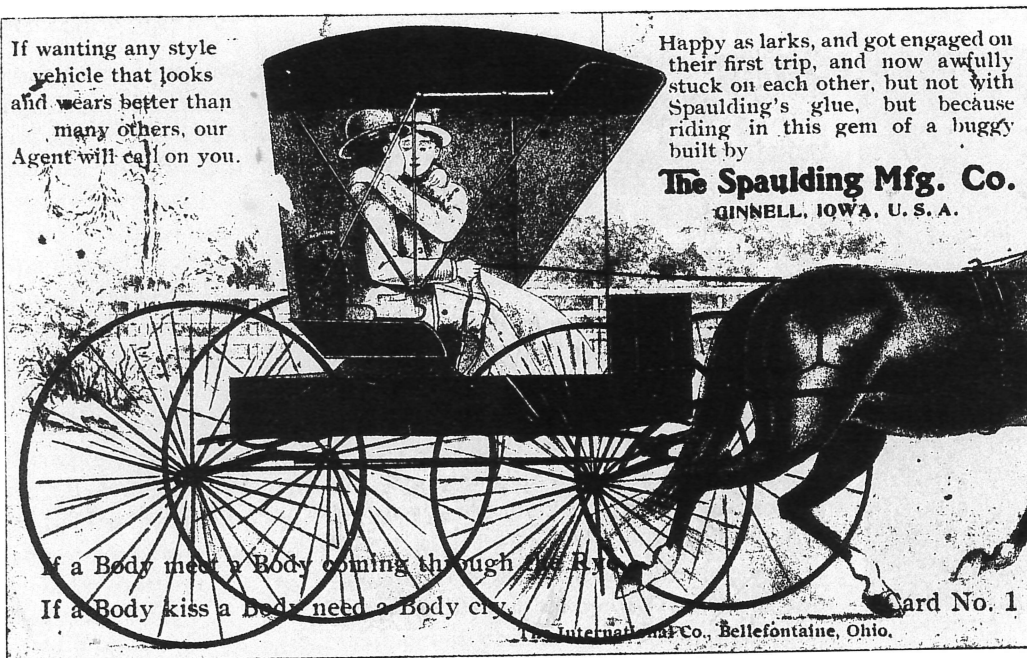
Spaulding once pointed out, was brought about by a case of necessity," according to the version given in the January 21, 1937, *Des Moines Tribune*. "Shortly before coming to Grinnell, he had two or three finished buggies on hand and his creditors were pushing him for the money due on materials. . . . Spaulding promised his creditors he would settle within a few weeks. He hitched up his buggies one behind the other – trailer fashion – and started out to sell them. He did sell them and he returned and paid [*sic*] his debts." The trailer system was what one account called Spaulding's "greatest contribution to the science of selling."

Spaulding later sold his own shop to work as a mechanic in other shops, according to one account. Two versions in Grinnell newspapers suggest that Spaulding then either "traveled for" or "assisted in the manufacture" of organs for a Vermont organ manufacturer. All accounts agree, however, that in 1873 he began a three-year stint selling tools and screw-cutting machines for a Massachusetts wholesale manufacturer. He left that job in 1876 to move to Grinnell, a town he had perhaps visited on a sales trip, according to his granddaughter, Miriam Spaulding Simms.²

In Grinnell, Spaulding divided his time between blacksmithing and building carriages and wagons until 1882, when a devastating tornado destroyed his home – the *Des Moines Tribune* says "his factory was virtually demolished," as well – as was any hope for a career in blacksmithing. Simms says the tornado ripped through Spaulding's home, spun him through the air for "eight or 10 blocks" and set him down only after inflicting a permanent arm injury that prevented him from swinging a heavy blacksmith's hammer.

Despite the tornado and a March 1893 fire that reportedly caused \$60,000 damage to a Spaulding factory building, production increased from 15 vehicles in 1876 to 350 by 1883, 6,000 by 1903, "and in 1909, 10,000 buggies, carriages and spring wagons a

If wanting any style vehicle that looks and wears better than many others, our Agent will call on you.



Happy as larks, and got engaged on their first trip, and now awfully stuck on each other, but not with Spaulding's glue, but because riding in this gem of a buggy built by

The Spaulding Mfg. Co.
GINNELL, IOWA, U. S. A.

If a Body meet a Body coming through the Rye
If a Body kiss a Body need a Body cry

Card No. 1
The International Co., Bellefontaine, Ohio.

year, employing 300 men," according to the April 1937 edition of *Annals of Iowa* magazine. (See fig. 4.3.) In a 1936 recounting of the Spaulding empire, the *Grinnell Herald-Register* put the peak carriage production at 20,000 annually with 500 employees. In light of such production figures, it's understandable that more Spaulding carriages than cars have survived. The collection of the Grinnell Historical Museum includes a Spaulding surrey and buggy.

"Work Hard, Save, Get a Good Wife"

"Naturally, a man of his driving energy and restless industry was concerned with many other things beside his own business," the *Grinnell Herald-Register* said following Spaulding's death on January 20, 1937, at the age of 90. A city councilman, Spaulding also served two terms as Grinnell mayor before being elected in 1910 for his first of two terms as a state senator. "For many years he was one of the state's most active Republicans," according to the *Des Moines Tribune*. Biographies recount his support for a variety of local causes, including paved city streets for Grinnell.

If he was active in politics, he was even

more so in business. Spaulding was a founder of such local businesses as the Grinnell Washing Machine Company, Colonial Theatre, Citizens National Bank, and others. He helped nationally known aviator Billy Robinson start a Grinnell airplane factory that showed promise until Robinson died in a March 1916 plane crash while trying to set an altitude record.

"He was a hard worker himself so he worked everybody else," said Miriam Simms, who recalls her grandfather working his employees on New Year's Day. "H. W. Spaulding is fairly earning the name of being the most energetic man in Grinnell," the local paper wrote as early as August 1881. "He has built a barn this summer, has made a good addition to his residence, and is now adding a forty-foot rear extension to his brick carriage shop."

As a freshman senator in early 1911, Spaulding revealed his business philosophy to the writer of the *Des Moines Tribune's* "Little Jaunts to the Statehouse" column: "Work twice as hard as you think you ought to, save something out of every piece of money you get, live quietly and regularly, don't buy any thing without seeing it, and get a good wife."

4.3 An undated advertising card for Spaulding carriages. (GHM)

4.4 Fred Spaulding as a young man. (MSS)

4.5 Ernest Spaulding, 1919. (MSS)



Though his company was making annual sales of \$1.5 million, “the canny Senator Spaulding is not saying how much he is worth,” the newspaper said. Its columnist added, however, that “Spaulding was rated in Bradstreet’s fifteen years ago at \$750,000. The company has given out no figures since. In the interim the Spaulding Manufacturing company at Grinnell has grown from a ‘kid’s size’ concern to one of the most complete establishments in Iowa, and one of the largest carriage building concerns in the world. Spaulding has \$300,000 invested outside of the firm.”

Spaulding had three partners in the business at various times after 1876, but by 1903 both his sons had joined him – Frederick E. (see fig. 4.4) as a bookkeeper and Ernest H. (see fig. 4.5) as a carriage salesman. They were all involved in the production of autos, which began with an auspicious announcement in 1909.

“Experiments Are Now Being Conducted”

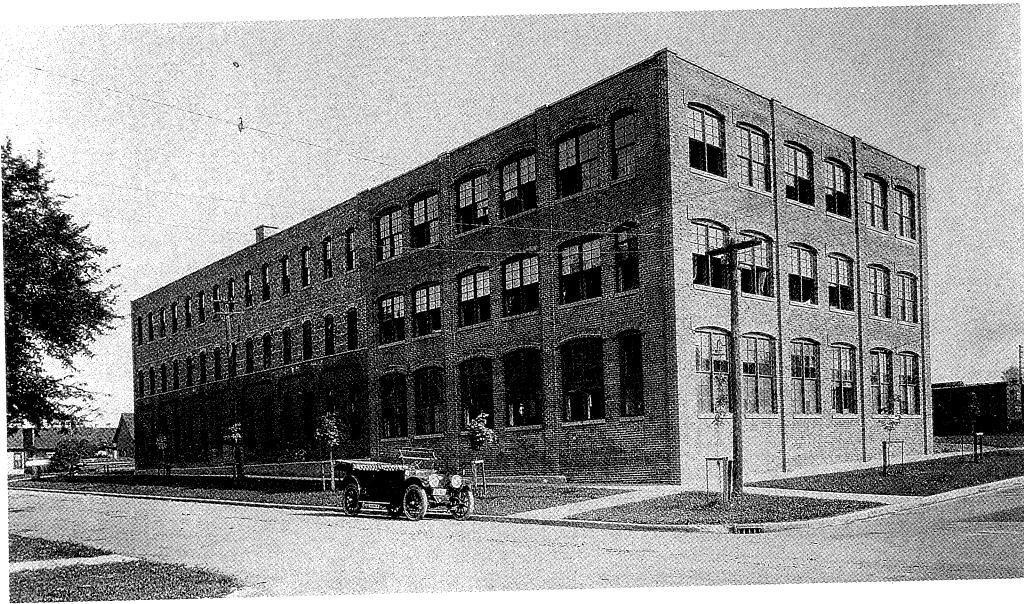
“Spaulding Mfg. Co. May Make Autos,” read the top of a four-deck headline in the June 11, 1909, *Grinnell Herald*, giving the first public hint of what was afoot. “The

firm has been considering such a plan for some time, but not until recently has it appeared feasible,” the article said. “Now, however, a room for experimenting has been fitted up and if all goes well, the Spaulding automobile may be expected to make its appearance on the market in due course of time.”

Just two months later on August 17, the newspaper reported that “experiments are now being conducted at the factory and a model, made up at the Spaulding shops[,] has been seen frequently around the streets. Last Saturday it made a trip to Newburg [five or six miles distant] in fast time.” The company called in an architect to draw up plans for adding a third floor and enlarging a brick building east across the street from the building that housed offices for the Spaulding carriage factory.

“It is planned now to place three different grades of automobiles upon the market; the most expensive, a \$1,500 car with sliding gear [transmission] and 112-inch wheel base; one for \$1,400, which will be a planetary [transmission] touring car[,] and a \$1,250 roadster,” the newspaper said.

Contrasting markedly with the detailed, almost breathless, accounts in the *Grinnell*



Herald's news columns, Ernest Spaulding matter-of-factly broke the news in a two-line letter to the Iowa Secretary of State's office on September 17, 1909: "We are about to manufacture motor cars. What arrangements could be made for numbers for our testers, etc." The company subsequently paid \$10 for a dealer's permit and to receive the demonstration number D-419, which can be seen in the photos of new Spaulding cars being tested on the roads in and around Grinnell.³

Four months after its first article about the Spaulding plans, the October 5, 1909, *Grinnell Herald* reported that workmen were extending the west end and adding a third floor to the building that would "be devoted entirely to the manufacture of the Spaulding automobile." The completed structure would be 158 feet long by 60 feet wide, or about 28,000 square feet. (Fig. 4.6 shows the finished factory.)

Further, C. W. Miller, the new auto department foreman, who "comes from the works of the Carter Motor Car Co., in Pontiac, Mich.," was already in Grinnell to help with the car, which the newspaper called "a combination of the ideas of H. W., F. E. and E. H. Spaulding. All these gentlemen drive

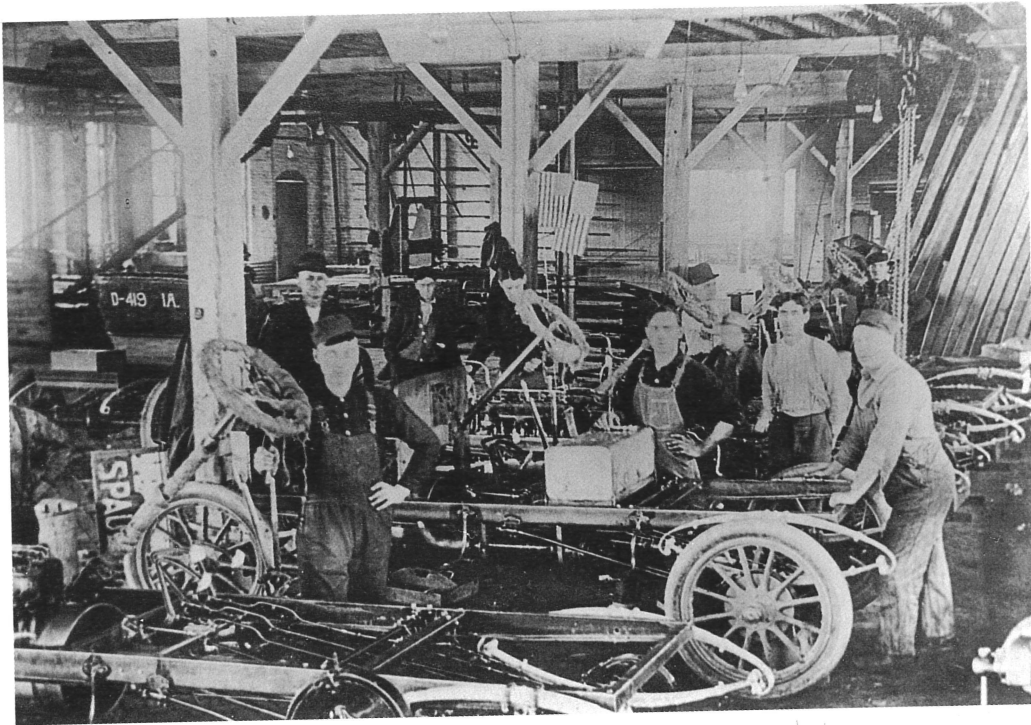
automobiles and all have been studying them for some time. Charles Cratty has given especially valuable aid in the experiments which have finally resulted in the evolution of a 30-horse power car which has surprised everyone who has ridden in it by its marvelous hill climbing ability." A company driver, Cratty drove a Spaulding in the 1911 Iowa Little Glidden tour and helped prepare the 1913 Spaulding cross-state racer.

Glove Factory a Happy Happenstance

Mild weather in January 1910 allowed work to resume on the new brick automobile factory at Fourth Avenue and Spring Street, where "already active manufacturing has been begun. A good sized force of men is now employed in the factory and automobiles in various stages of construction are to be seen there," reported the January 25, 1910, *Grinnell Herald*. Autos would be assembled on the first floor (see fig. 4.7), painted on the third, and stored on the second — a standard arrangement for 1910 — and moved between floors via an elevator on the building's south side. Near the elevator would be a stock room on the first floor

4.6 A 1913 Spaulding 40 is parked on the north side of the Spaulding auto factory. (SHSI)

4.7 Spaulding cars under construction; the right-hand steering means the cars in this undated photo are 1912 or earlier models. (LB)



and a finish stock room on the second floor. Within the coming five years, the Spauldings hoped to add two 6,000-foot “feeder” additions to the south – extending from the east and west ends of the main factory – to boost production to 1,000 autos annually.⁴

As his father’s company geared up to make cars, Ernest Spaulding was already cornering the market on local auto repairs with the purchase of a Grinnell garage. By 1915 he was one of several investors in a Spaulding agency, the Hawkeye Motor Sales Company, which was also selling Davis, Dodge, and Saxon autos. “Daddy [Ernest] has told me so many times that he had to not only sell the car, he had to sell the idea to the customer that they needed a car, because they were still driving horse and buggies,” Miriam Simms said.

Ernest and his brother, Fred, were members of the Grinnell Automobile Club that in March 1910 pledged to support “the proposition for a river to a river road through the state of Iowa, to follow the line of the Rock Island railroad” and to pass

through Grinnell. The resulting River-to-River Road was the route later followed by a Spaulding racer in the car company’s most famous publicity stunt.

When a pathfinding car for the 1910 Glidden Tour reliability contest passed through Grinnell in early April 1910, a new Spaulding 30 acted as a pilot car for the next 35 miles along the newly designated River-to-River Road. It would be the first of the company’s long string of publicity events. Charles Cratty drove the Spaulding car, and his passengers included two of the three Spaulding men, Henry and Ernest. Cratty was perhaps driving the Spaulding prototype car, since automobile production was two months away.

As the Spauldings prepared to make automobiles in central Iowa, it helped that auto enthusiasts across the United States knew their city as home to Grinnell brand leather driving gloves. Despite their hurry, members of the 1910 Glidden Tour pathfinding crew stopped at the Morrison-Ricker Manufacturing Company on their

way through Grinnell. "Each of the party was fitted out with a pair of the firm's famous automobile gloves," according to the *Grinnell Herald*. "The party were already wearing Grinnell gloves, having purchased them at Dallas, Texas."⁵

"A Joy Unspeakable Forever"

Just a week later in mid-April 1910, Spaulding Manufacturing, "the oldest and largest manufacturers of vehicles west of the Mississippi, announced the debut of the Spaulding '30,' the 1910 model which is now ready for the market," according to the *Grinnell Herald*.⁶ The car had been one year in coming to market, "the first year having been spent in giving the first model exhaustive tests and a thorough tryout," Henry Spaulding said. The 1910 lineup consisted of two models that shared the same chassis and engine but had different transmissions.

According to the *Grinnell Herald*, Model CP was equipped with a 2-speed planetary transmission, which was then fading in popularity, while the Model CS used a more modern 3-speed selective sliding-gear transmission. The three body styles were a five-passenger touring car, a pony tonneau, "and a roadster with a rumble seat mounted on a tool box."

A different model designation is used by both the February 1910 *Motor* magazine and the March 1910 *Cycle and Automobile Trade Journal*. They list a Model C, equipped with the sliding-gear transmission, and a Model D, equipped with the planetary. The journals list the price as \$1,500 for either model.

According to the June 1910 *Motor Print* magazine, "The car has been built with the intention of being particularly adapted for farmers and merchants, the frame and spring suspension construction being such as to meet the requirements of western roads."

Iowa roads of that period were among the worst in the West, according to the first

woman to drive across the United States. The road from Jefferson to Vail in west-central Iowa "had one section composed of a veritable sea of chuck holes of varying sizes, most of them so filled with water that it was difficult to determine their depths," Alice Huyler Ramsey wrote of the 1909 trip she made with three female friends in a Maxwell car. "The people were so eager for us to like their state, to which they had great loyalty. And we really did like it; but — oh, those terrible roads!"⁷

None of this was news to Henry Spaulding, who had known Iowa roads for 35 years. He was undoubtedly very concerned about this aspect of the automobiles that would bear his name. "Particular attention has been given to the spring suspension, and a number of very severe tests, such as only Iowa roads afford," led the company to adopt softer full-scroll elliptic springs on the CP and firmer three-quarter scroll elliptics on the CS model, according to the *Grinnell Herald*. Both new Spaulding models had long, flat, semi-elliptic front springs. "Rubber bumpers set on the rear spring clip spacers preclude the possibility of sudden jolts from road shocks. As a result of this carefully tested spring suspension, there is a notable absence of side sway even at high speed over rough roads and a consequent ease in steering."

All cars came equipped with Rushmore-brand headlamps, Dietz sidelights and tail-lights, a Prest-O-Lite tank of compressed acetylene for the headlamps, horn, foot rail, robe rail, tire-repair outfit, tire pump, and a tool kit. The 30-horsepower 4-cylinder engine had a 4-inch bore and stroke with cylinders cast separately. The company neglected to identify the maker of the engine, which had a splash oiling system, magneto ignition with dry cells in reserve, and a leather-and-cork cone clutch. A driveshaft carried the power from the clutch to the rear axle. Both the planetary and sliding-gear transmissions were bolted to the rear-axle housing, a practice losing favor as