

The Dodge Brothers: The Men, the Motor Cars, and the Legacy. *By Charles K. Hyde.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005. xvi + 251 pp. Illustrations, photographs, tables, appendix, notes, index. Cloth, \$34.95. ISBN: 0-814-33246-3.

Reviewed by James M. Rubenstein

“Dodge” has been one of the five best-selling nameplates in the United States nearly every year for almost a century. More than one million vehicles named “Dodge” were sold in the United States in 2005, a statistic that has been firmly maintained for every year since 1994.

Few of those millions of Dodge owners can identify the origin of the name. According to an old vaudeville joke, it was picked to save the cost of a horn, because pedestrians jumped out of the way when they saw “Dodge” on the hood. The car was actually named for John and Horace Dodge, universally known as the Dodge Brothers, with a capital “B.”

The Dodge Brothers started making cars bearing their name in 1914, only six years before their deaths. No wonder that the Dodge Brothers are described on both the first page of the book’s introduction and on the next-to-last page of the concluding retrospective as “obscure.” The Dodge nameplate has survived and prospered under the ownership of DaimlerChrysler and its predecessor Chrysler Corporation since 1928.

In reality, no apologies are needed to justify a biography of the Dodge Brothers, but their principal contribution to business history is not as carmakers but as parts makers. Early carmakers relied on independent suppliers for most of their parts, and Dodge Brothers was by far the largest supplier of parts during the first decade of the twentieth century.

The Dodge Brothers opened a machine shop in Detroit in 1900 after gaining experience as bicycle makers across the river in Windsor, Ontario, during the 1890s. Their Detroit shop initially repaired and made replacement parts for typesetting and typography machines, and they designed and built steam engines for yachts. The first motor-vehicle contracts came in 1901, signing them to make engines and transmissions for Oldsmobile, then the best-selling car in the country. Dodge Brothers withdrew from the Olds contract in 1903 to concentrate all its resources on meeting the needs of a newly established competitor, the Ford Motor Company.

The Dodge Brothers’ decade-plus relationship with the Ford Motor Company is the most compelling portion of the story. The Dodges made a fateful decision to put all their eggs in one basket, a new company headed by a man with a track record of business failures. Ford contracted with Dodge Brothers in 1903 to supply 650 sets of “running gear” at \$250 each. “Running gear,” also called a “machine” in the contract, consisted of engine, transmission, and axles, mounted on

a frame. Thus, the Dodge Brothers supplied Ford two-thirds of its parts—all but the wheels, tires, and bodies.

The fates of Ford and Dodge were intertwined over the next decade: Ford assembled half the world's cars, and Dodge made most of Ford's parts. Dodge Brothers worked exclusively for Ford and was the world's leading parts maker by a wide margin during the first two decades of the twentieth century. When Ford was unable to pay the initial parts contract back in 1903, John and Horace Dodge agreed to accept fifty shares each of Ford Motor Company stock in exchange for their notes of \$5,000 each. Had Ford failed, Dodge Brothers would have gone under as well, but when Ford became the world's dominant carmaker, the arrangement made the Dodges very wealthy. Henry Ford bought back the Dodge Brothers shares in 1919 for \$25 million.

The Dodge Brothers stopped making parts for Ford and used their wealth to start making entire vehicles on their own in 1914. The Dodge car quickly gained a reputation for offering good value for money and reliability rather than flashiness, a vehicle suitable for doctors and other professionals. In the heavily Polish Detroit suburb of Hamtramck, Dodge Brothers constructed an enormous factory complex that was demolished in the 1980s.

John and Horace Dodge died of complications from influenza within months of each other in 1920. Their widows sold the car company in 1924 to the investment firm Dillon, Read, which provided poor management and uncompetitive models. Chrysler Corporation in turn acquired Dodge Brothers in 1928, primarily to get the Hamtramck plant. But Chrysler ended up retaining the Dodge nameplate, because it had earned the respect of the buying public.

The reader will be hard pressed to find anything of interest in the book concerning the private lives of the Dodge Brothers. This omission is attributed to lack of information, especially about their childhoods. John Dodge was born in 1864 and Horace in 1868, in Niles, Michigan, sons of a machinist. The family moved to Battle Creek in 1882 and Port Huron in 1884, for unknown reasons, before settling for good in the Detroit-Windsor area in 1887.

The author, however, prefers to shy away even from the Dodge Brothers' better-documented adult lives. Names of siblings, spouses, and children are provided for both brothers, along with dates of birth, marriage, and death, but not much more. Horace was said to have lived a quiet family life, but John was known as a hard drinker at disreputable saloons, with a reputation for a fierce temper that got him into fights; he was married three times, the second time "secretly." These personal traits were mentioned briefly and perfunctorily and described with little color or enthusiasm. Like the Dodge Brothers themselves, the book is happiest inside the factory.

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