



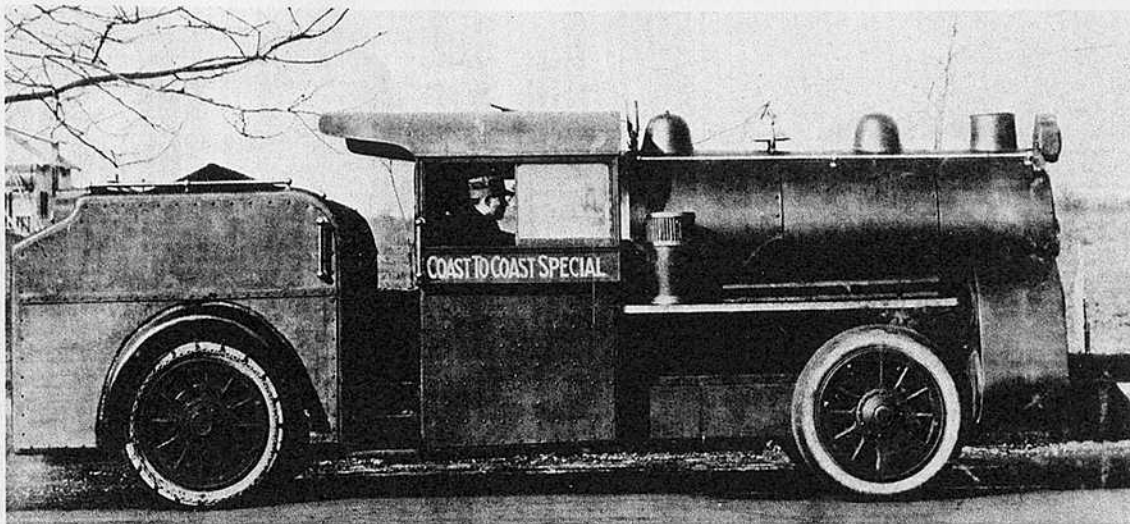
1917 McGee trackless train.

The Trackless Trains of Harry O. McGee

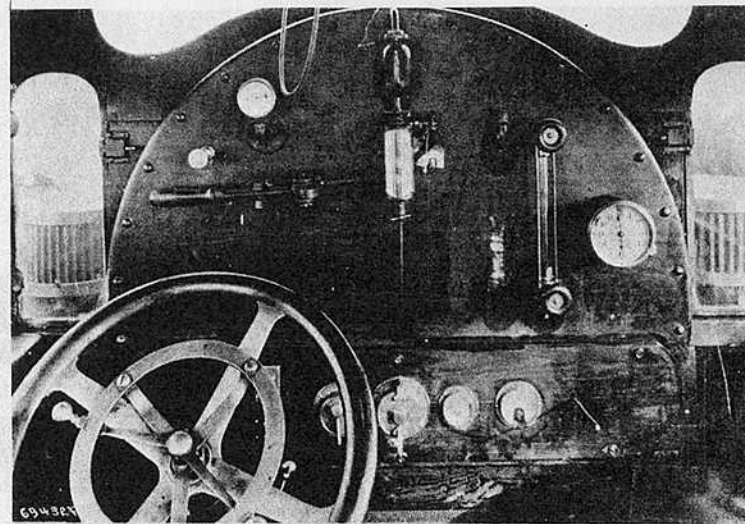
By Hayden R. Shepley

Editor's Note

In the March-April 1975 ANTIQUE AUTOMOBILE, there appeared on page 21, a curious vehicle which was a cross between a railroad locomotive and a motorcar. The odd contraption belongs to O. Clyde Davis of Jacksonville, Florida, who asked readers for any information available concerning the car's



Side view of the 1917 gasoline-powered McGee trackless train.



Cockpit of 1917 vehicle.

background and history.

Thanks to research undertaken by Hayden R. Shepley of Toughkenamon, Pennsylvania and to the McGee family, additional data are here presented on what Shepley calls "The Trackless Trains of Harry O. McGee."

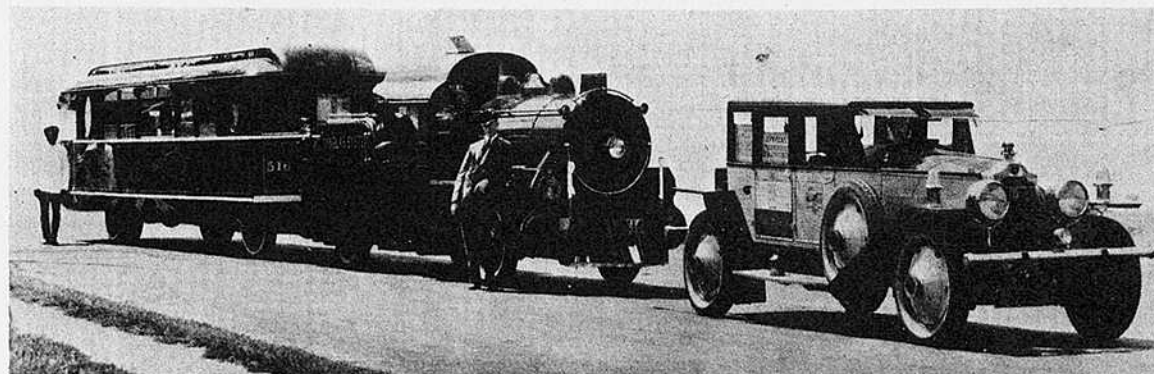
Ever since 1946 when I first saw what I later discovered to be "trackless sound train number one" in a Boston VFW parade, I had wondered who built such a contraption. The vehicle I saw was a limousine of the late twenties with a locomotive type hood in front and an observation platform at the rear. Then in the late sixties, John Bevilacqua of West Gloucester, Massachusetts bought the very car I had seen repeatedly in VFW parades. On the car was a metal plate identifying it

as "sound train number one" built by the McGee Manufacturing Company of Indianapolis.

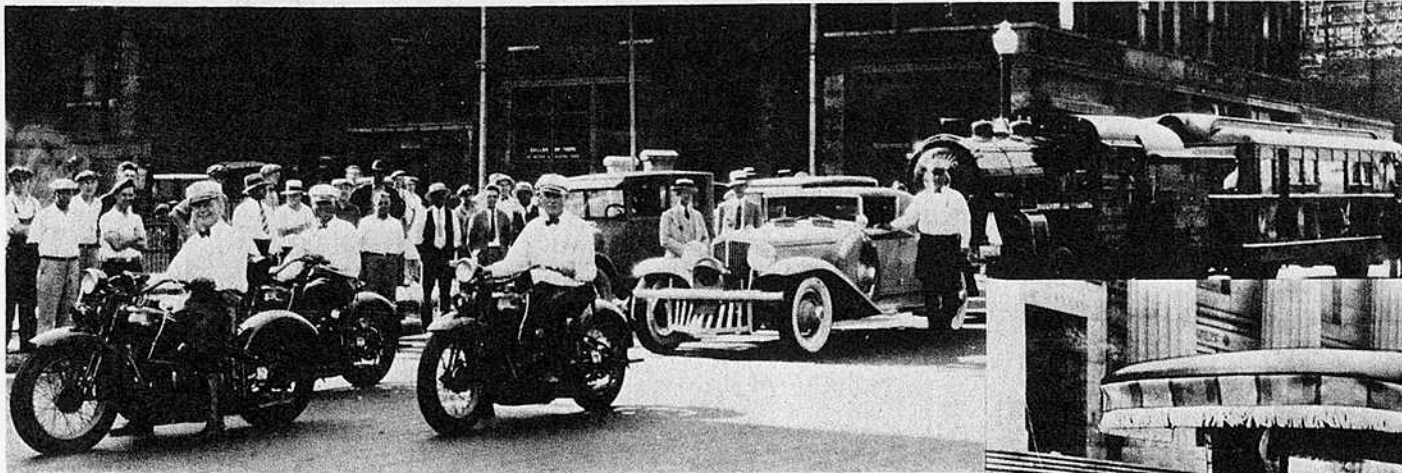
On a trip to that city in 1969 in connection with the American Lancia Club, I stopped in at the library to see

what information could be discovered about the McGee company. Luckily one of the ladies in the library had known the wife of the senior Harry McGee and knew the whereabouts of his son, who lived in Evansville, In-

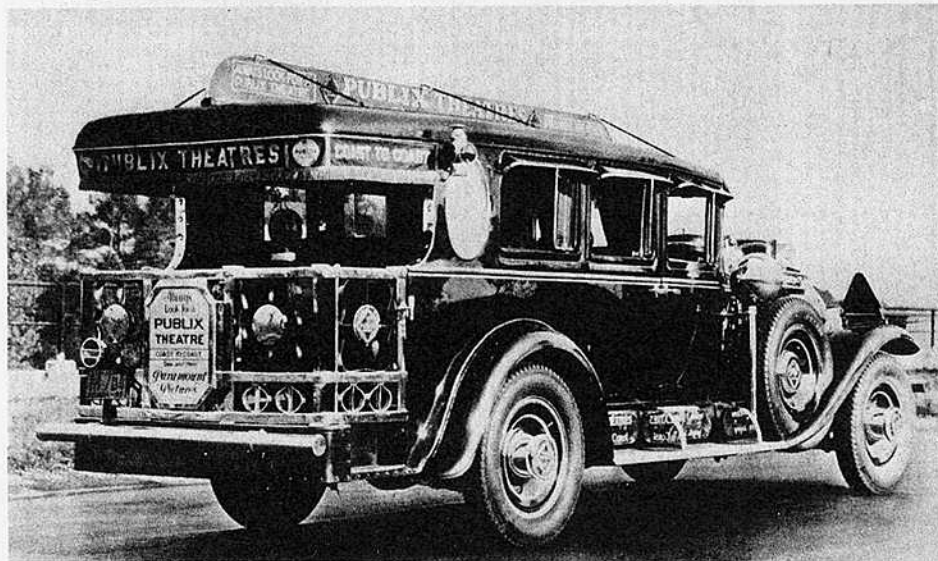
diana. I went there to see Mr. McGee junior and learned from him that he still had his father's photographs, clippings and scrapbooks on the trackless trains. He promised to have copies of all of the material made for me. Unfortunately,



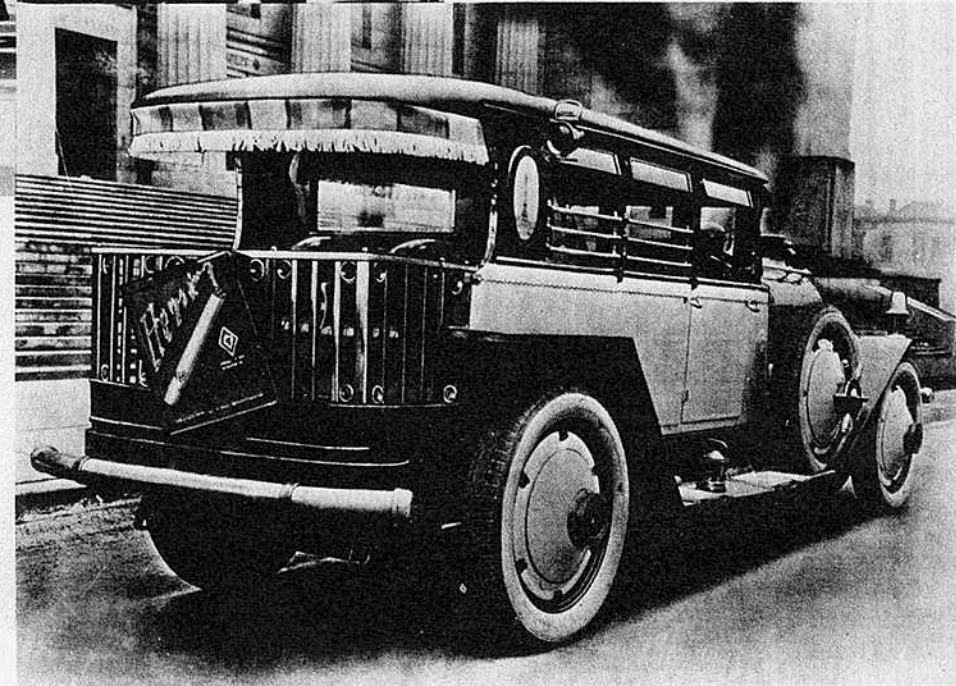
The "locomotive" and club car of the 1924 McGee trackless train which was built to publicize the Lykglas painting system. It is preceded by a 1924 Dagmar.



This trackless train toured the United States in 1930 as the "Majestic Radio Special". It was equipped for broadcasting, as was the Cord convertible (with cow-catcher motif) which precedes it.



Trackless sound train number one was reportedly built in 1928 and is shown here as used for Paramount Pictures publicity. Fourteen others were built in 1929. Following a world tour, the vehicles were garaged in 15 different cities for use by "Publix" theatres in promoting Paramount pictures.



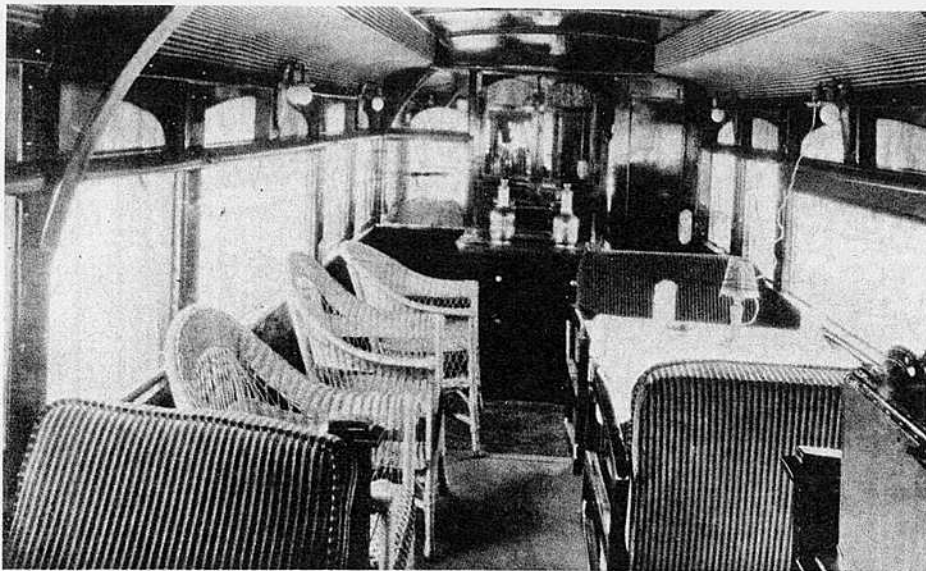
A view of the 1924 McGee-Dagmar vehicle during its stint as an advertiser of cigarettes.

various problems intervened and it was not until 1975 that I was able to obtain Zeroxed copies of news clippings and literature.

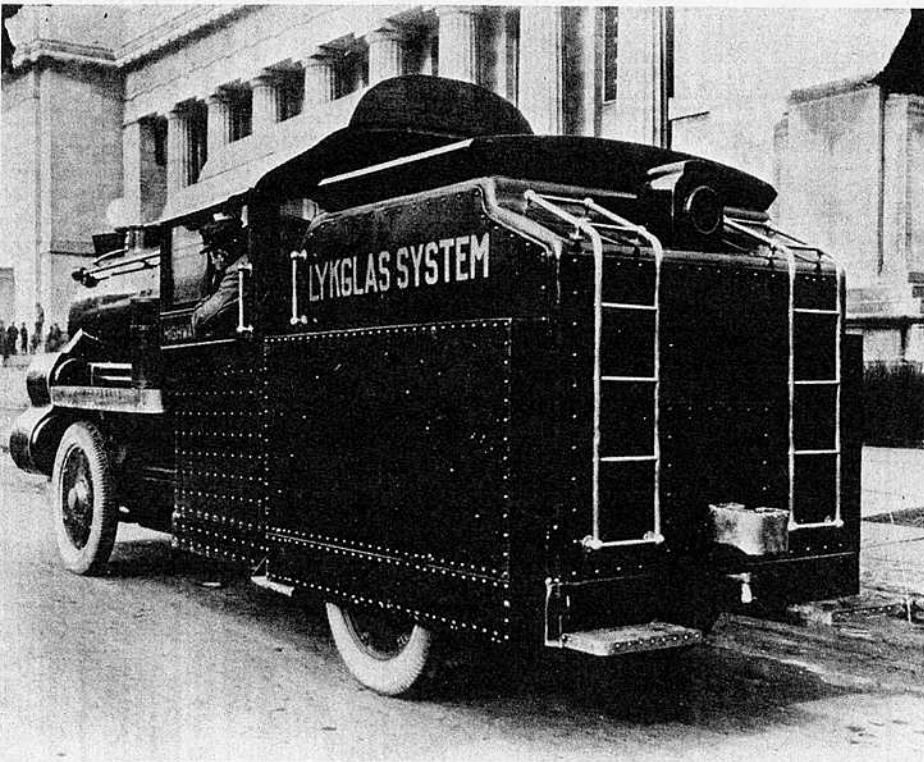
Mr. McGee also entrusted his original photographs to me, with the proviso that they be returned to him after I had copies made locally. Thanks to the surviving material, it was possible to

discover the following information about the unique trackless trains.

According to an Indianapolis newspaper item of more than 40 years ago, the first trackless train was conceived and built in 1917 by Harry O. McGee, who, it was reported, was well known in automobile circles for his unique ideas in connection with auto body



The interior of the club car during the tour of the Majestic Radio Special.

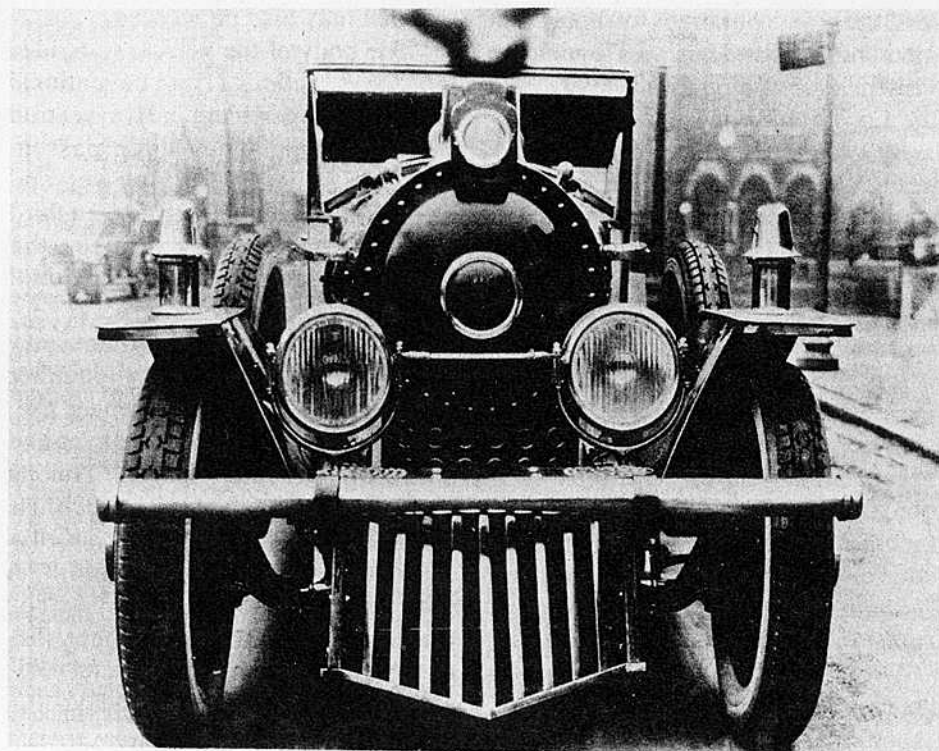


Locomotive unit of 1924 vehicle.

construction. The 1917 model, which is pictured on these pages, was a very lifelike replica of a locomotive, but was driven by an automobile motor. It was used in the latter part of World War I as an aid in recruiting. The vehicle proved such a sensation that it was purchased by a large carnival for use in parades and as a show car.

A few years went by and, by 1924,

Harry O. McGee and some colleagues had become interested in a revolutionary new system for stripping and re-painting automobiles. Branches to provide the new painting service (called Lykglas) were initially opened in 250 cities. Seeking some outstanding way to exploit the paint service through advertising, McGee thought of his 1917 vehicle. Whereupon he de-



A McGee trackless train photographed in 1927. This one was on a 1924 Dagmar chassis.

signed and built what was called "the world's first trackless transcontinental highway train." It consisted of two units, a "locomotive" and a luxurious club car complete with observation platform. The club car accommodated 15 passengers, and had baggage and dining compartments. The vehicle toured the state of Indiana. Then, in 1925, McGee sold the "train" to the famous motion picture corporation, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, by whom it was used for advertising purposes in almost all parts of the world.

After a coast-to-coast tour of the United States, and a visit to Canada, M.G.M. shipped the trackless train on a tour which included Europe, Central and South America, and Australia. Millions of spectators saw the trackless train and hundreds of entertainment, political and business luminaries visited it, including Henry Ford and the Lord Mayor of London.

By 1928, the H. O. McGee Manufacturing Company of Indianapolis was identifying itself as "Designers and builders of custom automobiles and portable sound equipment" and "Originators of the world's first trackless trains."

It is believed that the company built more than 16 of the motor car trains, all of which varied somewhat in design. Most consisted of a single self-contained vehicle on which the locomotive body was mounted on conventional chassis made by Graham-Paige. On occasion Dagma and Cord chassis were used.

The other type of trackless train was the two-unit version of locomotive and

club car, used for broadcasting. Such a vehicle was reported as being able to travel 35 to 40 miles an hour on the open road; was equipped with two 150 hp gasoline motors, synchronized transmissions and special safety brakes. The cost was \$52,000.

An article in an English magazine included this information about one of the single trackless trains: "The method of expelling smoke through the funnel is to drop crude oil into the exhaust manifold, and the smoke is conveyed by way of a small pipe to the smokestack. In the stack are revolving blades which cause the smoke to be emitted in puffs instead of a steady stream. The operation is controlled from the driver's seat, from which, too, the whistle, wireless apparatus and bell may also be worked.

"The body of the vehicle is divided into three sections (1) a conventional driver's compartment, (2) a section which accommodates three passengers, a wireless receiving set and amplification equipment and (3) a third section which contains the loudspeaker and two additional seats."

Although the trackless trains may have been planned originally for either commercial or private passenger use, they evolved chiefly as advertising and sound broadcasting vehicles. Among the firms which put them to such use were the Lykglas Company, Kelly-Springfield tires, Majestic radio, a brand of cigarettes, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Paramount Pictures. At least four of the unusual vehicles are known to survive today.



Photographs of the M.G.M. "International Beauty Train" during its tour of England.

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THE COVERS

FRONT COVER: Edgar E. Rohr of Manassas, Virginia, is the proud owner of his namesake, a 1933 Röhr. The story of Ed's car and the company that built it begins on page 22.
 INSIDE FRONT COVER: Early photograph of a police department "paddy wagon" is supplied through the courtesy of Robert B. Myers, Mattapah, Massachusetts.
 BACK COVER: A 1919 King 8-cylinder touring owned by Henry Hoiler, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, as photographed at Lake Canandaigua, New York, during the 1975 Glidden Tour. Photograph by Henry Austin Clark, Jr.
 INSIDE BACK COVER: An unusual photograph of an early vehicle manufactured in Nansemond County, Virginia. The Robe was a 6-cylinder vehicle utilizing a factory test body. This rare photograph is taken from the collection of Phillip Marlowe and George Gile of Chesapeake, Virginia.

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