

Local dealership celebrates 100 years

[Editor's Note: The following story was written by local genealogist Fran Lomas in 1967 about the early history of Craddock Motor Company, which would become Ivey Motor Company, Inc. The Robert Lee Ford Dealership is celebrating their 100th anniversary this year. The Craddocks, Jess and Lela, were Mrs. Lomas' maternal grandparents.]

About 1907, in the midst of a roar and a cloud of dust the first automobile, a Maxwell, came into Coke County. The driver went over a stump near Yellow Wolf Creek and bent the drive gear from which the chain worked. He had someone take him to Jess Craddock, who was working in his father's blacksmith shop. The auto owner asked Jess if he could repair it and he said he thought he could.

"Tom Goss and I decided we'd straighten the running gear and see if we could drive it. We did! That was the first one I ever drove."

Thus the automobile business was started in Coke County – started in the mind of a youth and born out of necessity of the times.

About that time Jess took over the shop where he had helped for sometime, moving to Robert Lee in 1913 and operating the old Tom Cross Blacksmith Shop. The following advertisement appeared in the March 14, 1913, issue of the Robert Lee Observer.

"NEW REPAIRING SHOP. I have purchased the W.E. Brown Blacksmith and Repair Shop and want your patronage. Besides, a general Blacksmithing and Horseshoing Establishment, I am prepared to repair all kinds of machinery. I have also bought the building adjoining the shop, remodeled it and fitted up a FIRST CLASS GARRAGE (sic) ... I expect to keep a full surrply (sic) of gasoline and oils of all kind. Also do all kinds of Auto repair work and take care of the Autos of the traveling public. Give me your patronage. I can please you at a low cost. J.S. Craddock"

After entering the market, cars were given a number upon purchase. The number 10 was given to a 1912 model T originally purchased by Bill Hickman who, at the time, was county sheriff. He could not learn to drive it and thus in the winter of 1913 traded with Jess for a horse, buggy and two hundred dollars. That evening, Jess drove in quite fancy style to Sanco for the weekend. The next morning the car would not start. After repairing it, Jess – accompanied by his sister Lois, who was teaching in Robert Lee, and a Boykin girl –was on his way back home.

The following advertisement appeared in the September 11, 1914, issue of the Robert Lee Observer.

"J.S. Craddock Garage General Gasoline Machinery Repairing. Oils of All Kinds. Service Car anywhere at any

time. Prices reasonable. Salesman for Ford Automobiles."

Craddock Motor Company was the name given to the garage in early 1914. Sub-agencies or sub-dealerships were assigned to smaller areas. R.P. Amacker was Ford Dealer in San Angelo at the time and the sub-agency was placed through him. One car was sold the first year. The purchaser was Mrs. Jake Morrow, sister of the late Bruce Clift. The second year of auto sub-dealership, five cars were sold.

Toward the end of 1914, September 28 to be exact, Jess took a very energetic, vivacious twenty-year old young lady for his wife. Little did either realize how these attributes were to be an asset in their business years. Lela Adaline Morrow, daughter of James Franklin and Lela Ma Westbrook Morrow, pioneer farmers of the area. She shared his interest as well as the labors of the auto world. Many a surprised customer would suddenly find a woman behind the parts counter, and later walk out with a startled expression and a speechless tongue to have found a woman finding and handing out parts as fast as any man.

The main work on the early Model T was in repairing and replacing front springs and rear ends. The springs were nothing more than slightly strengthened buggy springs and they had to take the jolts of chug holes, bumping into rocks, getting over

the country roads and maybe across the ranchman's pasture, for it was not long until the Model T was a work horse in Coke County.

In 1917, a direct dealership was acquired and the business changed locations –to across the street. Between 1917 and 1920, Jess sold one-half interest to Sam Russell.

The first mechanics in Robert Lee were Chism Brown, Lewis Wilson, Frank Smith, Jess Varnadore, Orb Craddock, Freeman Clark, Bud Maxwell and Wilfred Murtishaw.

Each youth who started his career tidying up Craddock Motor Company got his introduction to mechanics by being sent about town to borrow a "left-handed monkey wrench" which suddenly seemed to be in short supply at that time.

There was not any electric power available until Jess bought and installed a Delco battery in 1919. The new auto establishment was the first to install electricity in a place of business in Robert Lee and wore out three batteries before electric power came to town.

Gasoline was dispensed, first from a hand-operated pump attached to pot-bellied barrels, and later from a pump still hand-operated. Automobiles were lined up for a block up the street to await their turn at the gas pump, especially on Saturdays, as it was the only pump in town.

In the fall of 1920, Jess – or Pop as he was soon to be known –sold a Mr. Witte his one-half interest in the business and moved to San Angelo where he was service manager for Amacker Motor Company. Fifteen months later, in the spring of 1923, Jess returned to Robert Lee and regained the business from both Russell and Witte. He was active manager with three-quarters interest and Chism Brown, Freeman Clark and Wilfred Murtishaw owning the remaining fourth. The name, Coke Motor Company, was given to the establishment.

Jess purchased three buildings on the south end of the block in the mid-twenties. One day, a man came in and talked to Lela about renting one of the buildings and had the ready cash available. Without further exchange, she rented one of the buildings to him. A brief time of carpentry work passed before the new store was opened – a liquor store. Needless to say, it was an even shorter time until the building was vacant.

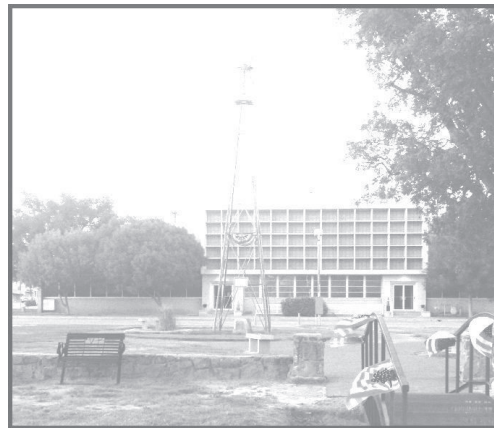
Jess did literally lose his pants in the automobile business. While working with a battery, it burst and acid completely covered him. He went to the vat which was used for testing tires and tubes, and washed the acid from his eyes and face. After removing his shirt, he continued working for some time. While

(Continued on page 18)

Happy Happy Birthday Coke County The Observer/Enterprise & Robert Lee, Texas

From:
VISION WITH A PURPOSE
We wish you the Best!

*Beautification
&
Restoration
of Robert Lee!*



VP The Little Town That Can! **VP**

We're Proud of Coke County ...

Proud to be a Part of Coke County
Proud to Serve its Citizens

*Happy
Birthday
Coke County!*

German & Teresa Pena's

**RED BARN
BARBECUE**

Serving Coke County since 2004!